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Note to the group:

There is much material in this study of *Habits of Grace*. Do not feel that you must cover all points during the small group gathering. Whatever is not covered during the gathering can be covered by the participants during the week on their own.

Acknowledgement and Information:

The excerpts contained in this small group study guide were taken from ***“Habits of Grace”* by David Mathis.**

A copy of this book is available for purchase in the book store or online.

It is also available for free to download in an electronic format from the following website: <https://document.desiringgod.org/habits-of-grace-en.pdf?1456697851>

Week 1: GRACE GONE WILD

1. What does it mean to enjoy Jesus and some of the ramifications of doing that?

“If you enjoy Jesus more than life (Matt. 10:38), you will live with a radical abandon for Jesus that will make the world wonder. Enjoyment of Jesus is not like icing on the cake; it’s like powder in the shell. Not only is enjoying Jesus explosively transforming in the way we live; it is also essential for making Jesus look great. And that is why we have the Holy Spirit. Jesus said the Spirit came to glorify him (John 16:14). The primary mission of the Spirit—and his people—is to show that Jesus is more glorious than anyone or anything else. It cannot be done by those who find this world more enjoyable than Jesus. They make the world look great. Therefore, the ultimate aim of the Christian life—and the universe—hangs on the people of God enjoying the Son of God.” (page 12)

2. What role does God play in our enjoying Jesus? What role do we play?

“But this (enjoying Jesus) is beyond us. Our hearts default to enjoying the world more than Jesus. This is why the hinge thought—enjoying Jesus—is bracketed on both sides by grace and spiritual. Grace is the free and sovereign work of God to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves, even though we don’t deserve it. Spiritual is the biblical word to describe what has been brought about by the Holy Spirit. “Spiritual” does not mean religious, or mystical, or new-age-like. It means: caused and shaped by God’s Spirit. So the point is this: God almighty, by his grace and by his Spirit, does not leave us to ourselves when it comes to enjoying Jesus. He helps us. He does not say, “Delight yourself in the Lord” (Ps. 37:4), and then merely stand back and watch to see if we can. He makes a covenant with us and says, “I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes” (Ezek. 36:27). He causes what he commands. Enjoying Jesus is not optional. It is a duty. But it is also a gift—spiritual and gracious. But the gift comes through means. This is why Grace is flanked by Habits, and Spiritual is flanked by Disciplines. (pg.13)

3. How do we do this on a daily basis?

The Bible does not say, “God is at work in you to bring about his good purposes, therefore stay in bed.” It says, “Work out your salvation, because God is at work in you” (see Phil. 2:12–13). God’s work does not make our work unnecessary; it makes it possible. “I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me” (1 Cor. 15:10). Grace does not just pardon our failures; it empowers our successes—like successfully enjoying Jesus more than life.

This book is about grace-empowered habits, and Spirit empowered disciplines. These are the means God has given for drinking at the fountain of life. They don't earn the enjoyment. They receive it. They are not payments for pleasure; they are pipelines. The psalmist does not say, "You sell them drink," but, "You give them drink from the river of your delights" (Ps. 36:8). But all of us leak. We all need inspiration and instruction for how to drink—again and again. Habitually." (pg.13)

4. How great is His grace? What is the nature of His grace and how does it affect our lives?

"Before turning our focus to "the means of grace," and the practices ("habits") that ready us to go on receiving God's grace in our lives, this much must be clear from the outset: The grace of God is gloriously beyond our skill and technique. The means of grace are not about earning God's favor, twisting his arm, or controlling his blessing, but readying ourselves for consistent saturation in the roll of his tides. Grace has been on the move since before creation, roaming wild and free. Even before the foundation of the world, it was the untamed grace of God that jumped the bounds of time and space and considered a yet-to-be-created people in connection with his Son, and chose us in him (Eph. 1:4). It was in love—to the praise of his glorious grace—that "he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus" (Eph. 1:5).

Such divine choice was not based on foreseeing anything good in us. He chose us by grace—not "on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace" (Rom. 11:5–6). It was "not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began" (2 Tim. 1:9). With patience, then—through creation, fall, and flood, through Adam, Noah, Abraham, and King David—God prepared the way. Humanity waited and groaned, gathering up the crumbs of his compassion as a foretaste of some feast to come. The prophets "prophesied about the grace that was to be yours" (1 Pet. 1:10). And in the fullness of time, it came. He came. (pg.21-22)

Now "the grace of God has appeared" (Titus 2:11). Grace couldn't be kept from becoming flesh and dwelling among us in the God-man, full of grace and truth (John 1:14). From his fullness we have all received grace upon grace (John 1:16). The law was given through Moses, but grace and truth are here in him (John 1:17). Grace has a face."

5. What does it mean to place oneself in the way of spiritual allurements?

“Zacchaeus may have been a wee little man, but he modeled this big reality by positioning himself along the path of grace. He couldn’t force Jesus’s hand, he couldn’t make grace flow automatically, but he could put himself by faith along the path where Grace was coming (Luke 19:1–10). The same was true of blind Bartimaeus (Luke 18:35–43). He couldn’t earn the restoration of his sight, but he could station himself along the route of grace where Jesus might give the gift as he passed that way. “Think of the Spiritual Disciplines,” says Donald S. Whitney, “as ways we can place ourselves in the path of God’s grace and seek him as Bartimaeus and Zacchaeus placed themselves in Jesus’s path and sought him.” Or as Jonathan Edwards put it, you can “endeavor to promote spiritual appetites by laying yourself in the way of allurements.”

We cannot force Jesus’s hand, but we can put ourselves along the paths of grace where we can be expectant of his blessing. God’s regular channels of grace, as we will see, are his voice, his ear, and his body. He often showers his people with unexpected favor. But typically the grace that sends our roots deepest, truly grows us up in Christ, prepares our soul for a new day, produces lasting spiritual maturity, and increases the current of our joy streams from the ordinary and unspectacular paths of fellowship, prayer, and Bible intake given practical expression in countless forms and habits. While these simple habits of grace may seem as unimpressive as everyday switches and faucets, through them God regularly stands ready to give his true light and the water of life.” (pg. 29)

6. What is the great end of grace and the result of practicing these habits of grace?

“Before we begin to say more about Jesus’s word, his ear, and his church, we need to make clear what is the greatest grace along these paths: Jesus himself. ***The great end of the means is knowing and enjoying him.*** The final joy in any truly Christian discipline or practice or rhythm of life is, in the words of the apostle, “the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” (Phil. 3:8). “This is eternal life,” and this is the goal of the means of grace: “that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (John 17:3). When all is said and done, our hope is not to be a skilled Bible reader, practiced prayer, and faithful churchman, but to be the one who “understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth” (Jer. 9:23–24). And so our heartbeat in the habits we develop for hearing every word, speaking every prayer, and participating in every act of fellowship is Hosea 6:3: “Let us know; let us press on to know the Lord.”

Knowing and enjoying Jesus is the final end of hearing his voice, having his ear, and belonging to his body. The means of grace, and their many good expressions, will serve to make us more like him, but only as our focus returns continually to Christ himself, not our own Christlikeness. It is in “beholding the glory of the Lord” that we “are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another” (2 Cor. 3:18). Spiritual growth is a marvelous effect of such practices, but in a sense it is only a side effect. The heart is knowing and enjoying Jesus. (pg.30)

7. What is meant by the means of grace? What thoughts do you have when you hear the word habits or spiritual disciplines? Are those thoughts from the Spirit or the flesh?

“The means of grace are God’s promised channels of continuing grace, received by faith. Infinite grace is behind us, and infinite grace lies ahead, and through his appointed means of grace, God is pleased to supply ongoing life and energy and health and strength to our souls. The means of grace fill our tank for the pursuit of joy, for the good of others, and for the glory of God. They are spiritual blessings, not the gravely mistimed material blessings promised prematurely in the so-called “prosperity gospel.” And they are blessings—not mere disciplines, but channels through which God gives us spiritual food for our survival, growth, and flourishing in the mission. For more than a generation now, we have seen a renewal of interest among Christians in the spiritual disciplines.

There has been much good in this renewal. But too many have emphasized technique and skill, with the unfortunate diminishing, or neglect, of God’s role as supplier and provider. Too often the stress has been on the individual’s initiative and effort, with little said about the place of the church and the corporate nature of God’s plan. Much has been said in terms of duty, and too little said about joy. And the seeming proliferation of long lists of disciplines can leave young Christians overwhelmed by what they’re not practicing, and in some cases contribute to a low-grade sense of guilt which threatens to keep us from fully engaging with the rest of our everyday lives for which these practices should be preparing us.

My hope in re-shifting the focus from the spiritual disciplines to the means of grace—and then the various personal habits of grace that we develop in light of them—is to keep the gospel and the energy of God at the center, to draw in the essential (and often neglected) corporate aspect, and to simplify the way we think about these practices (as hearing God’s voice, having his ear, and belonging to his body). My prayer is that this approach will help to make the means of grace, and your own habits that develop around them, not just accessible and realistic but truly God’s means of your knowing and enjoying Jesus.”
(pg.32-33)

Week 2: HEAR HIS VOICE (WORD) – Part 1

1. What is revealed by the word of God? Why it is so important to the believer?

“The Christian life, from start to finish, is utterly dependent on the grace of God. Not only do we come into spiritual life by sheer grace (Act 18:27; Rom. 3:24; Eph. 2:5), but it is in divine grace that we continue on (Acts 13:43). It is by God’s grace that our souls survive through many trials (2 Cor. 12:9; Heb. 4:16), are strengthened for everyday life (2 Tim. 2:1; Heb. 13:9), and grow into greater maturity and health (2 Pet. 3:18). And it is God’s grace that enables us to make choices and expend effort to seek more of God (1 Cor. 15:10). It is a gift that we would have the desire for and take action to avail ourselves of the means of God’s grace—his voice (the word), his ear (prayer), and his people (fellowship)—with the most basic principle of grace being the immersing of our lives in his word.

Before we identify the presence of God’s voice in our lives with the many good habits of taking in his word—whether Bible reading and study, hearing sermons, Scripture meditation and memorization, and more—first let’s see his word as a general principle, rather than the specific practices. Before printing it and binding it and covering it with leather, consider the concept of God’s word. God speaks. He reveals himself to us. He communicates with us. His word, as John Frame says, is “his powerful, authoritative self-expression.” Just as the words of a friend are central in revealing his person to us, so it is with God. The one who created us—and sustains us moment by moment (Col. 1:17; Heb. 1:3)—has expressed himself to us in human words, and it is vital that we listen. The other principal means of his grace (prayer and fellowship), while equally essential, are not as fundamental as this one. Creation (Gen. 1:3) and new creation (2 Cor. 4:6) both begin with the voice of God. He initiates, and does so by speaking. This self-expression of God is so deep and rich and full that it is not just personal, but a person.” (pg.37-38)

2. What does Jesus being the Word of God mean? Why is it important to us?

“The complete and climactic self-revelation of God to man is the God-man, his Son (Heb. 1:1–2). Jesus is “the Word” (John 1:1), and “the Word became flesh” (John 1:14). He is the one who most fully and finally “has made [the Father] known” (John 1:18). Jesus is God’s culminating self-expression, and says without any sham or embellishment, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). Jesus is the Word of God embodied. He is the grace of God incarnate (Titus 2:11). So full and complete is his revealing of God that he is not a word-thing, but a Word-person. He fulfilled the destiny of humanity in his perfect life and sacrificial death (Heb. 2:9), and rose again in triumph over sin and death, and now sits at the Father’s right hand, with all things being put in subjection to him (1 Cor. 15:25–28). He is the divine-human Word our souls need for survival and strength and growth. But how do we access this Word now that he sits in heaven?” (pg.38)

3. Discuss the uses of the “word” in the New Testament and the corresponding power that accompanies it. Also discuss how we can keep ourselves from getting cold toward the revelation of Christ in the Bible.

“The most frequent use of word in the New Testament is in reference to the message of the gospel—the word evangelical we might call it, or the gospel word—the message about Jesus, “the word of Christ” (Col. 3:16). For Paul, the phrases “preach Christ” and “proclaim Christ” and “speak the word” are synonymous (Phil. 1:14–17). The mission of his life, Paul says, is “to testify to the gospel of the grace of God” (Act 20:24), which is “the word of his grace” (Acts 20:32). It is “the word of truth, the gospel” that not only comes to us for conversion but also bears fruit and grows (Col. 1:5). It is “the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation” that changes everything for Christians (Eph. 1:13), and “the word of life” to which we hold fast in the midst of a crooked and perverse society (Phil. 2:15–16). And so, in the Christian fight for joy, John Piper writes, “The central strategy is to preach the gospel to yourself. . . . Hearing the word of the cross, and preaching it to ourselves, is the central strategy for sinners in the fight for joy.” And as this gospel-word passes from mouth to mouth, from person to person, from people to people, from nation to nation, how will the message about Jesus stay on message? What will keep the spoken word faithful and true and life-changing? And how do we keep ourselves from falling into ruts and from defaulting to the same old canned ways of telling the message?” (pg.39)

4. Why it is important to soak our lives in the voice of God? What is meant by the author when he says, “diversifying the portfolio of access points?”

“Having spied the pinnacle of God’s Word in the person and work of Jesus, and the prevalence of God’s word in his gospel, now we come to the essential place, this side of heaven, for God’s word written. Just as crucial as it is for spiritual life that we have God in his Word Jesus, and that we have Jesus in his word the gospel, so we need the Scriptures as God’s inspired, inerrant, and infallible revelation of himself. Without the Bible, we will soon lose the genuine gospel and the real Jesus and the true God. For now, if we are to saturate our lives with the words of life, we must be people of the Book. Which is no necessary prescription to every Christian for the same particular habits. But it is a summons to the principle of soaking our lives in the voice of God and diversifying the portfolio of access points. Before pondering the many and wonderful habits of grace that might be best for you in your context and season of life, put this rock in place: Fashion rhythms of life that help you revolve around having God’s incarnate Word, by God’s gospel word, through God’s written word.” (pg.40)

5. What is meant when the author refers to “preaching to ourselves?”

“Preaching the gospel to ourselves is a habit of grace that is both proactive and reactive. It’s reactive as we encounter temptation and frustration and seek to restock in the moment, or as we reflect back on our sin and circumstances and try to evaluate them with a gospel lens. But it’s also proactive. We go on the offensive when we feed our souls in some regular rhythm before the events and tasks and disappointments of daily life begin streaming our way. There is a difference between merely reminding ourselves of truth and preaching to ourselves the truth of the gospel. It’s true that two plus two equals four. But it does very little to feed our souls. What we need is not just truth, but the truth, the message of the gospel. What preaching the gospel to ourselves requires is pausing, rehearsing some expression of the Father’s and Son’s love and provision of goodness and rescue and joy for us, and consciously seeking to have that truth shape and permeate our reality.

As it relates to Scripture, it is important to note that gospel self-preaching is not the same thing as Bible reading, though the connections and interdependences are profound. The Scriptures, in one sense, provide the material for preaching to ourselves the gospel of grace. They are the content to be taken up and applied to our lives in view of Jesus’s person and work. It will not adequately strengthen our soul, in the long run, just to hear the same canned gospel repeated over and over. Neither will it sustain our spiritual lives to merely take in information without seeing it in light of Jesus, and pressing it into our hearts.” (pg.42)

Week 3: HEAR HIS VOICE (WORD) – Part 2

1. What is the best way to learn the art of reading the Bible for your self?

“Good Bible reading is no mere science; it is an art. The Bible itself is a special compilation of great artistries. And the best way to learn the art of reading the Bible for yourself is this: Read it for yourself.

Ask an old, weathered saint who’s been reading the Scriptures for himself for decades. See if he has a nice, clean formulation for how he goes about his daily reading. Does he have three or four simple, memorable steps he walks through consciously each day? The answer likely will be no; he’s learned over time there’s more art to it than that. Or more generally, just ask, How do you go about reading the Bible? You might see it on his face that it’s a tough question to answer. Not because there aren’t some basic, little “scientific” things, like the basics of reading and comprehension, or the various patterns and methods he’s developed for feeding his own soul over the years, but because he’s learned that so much of good Bible reading is an art. It’s a skill learned in engaging the task, not mainly sitting under formal instruction. And those who have read their Bibles most are the ones who have learned the craft best.” (pg.44)

2. What role and importance does “consistency” play in Bible reading?

“No biblical author gives us any nice, clean acrostic for how to go about daily Bible reading. And you won’t find one in this chapter. That may feel daunting for the beginner who wants assistance, but in the long run it proves wonderfully freeing. It can be a great help to have training wheels for a season, but once you learn to ride the bike, those extra things sticking out the side are terribly constrictive and limiting. At the end of the day, there is simply no replacement for finding a regular time and place, blocking out distractions, putting your nose in the text, and letting your mind and heart be led and captured and thrilled by God himself communicating to us in his objective written words. If you feel uncomfortable in the Scriptures and inadequate in the art of Bible reading, the single most important thing you can do is make a regular habit of reading the Bible for yourself. There is no substitute for a few focused minutes each day in the text. You may be surprised how much the little bits add up over the long haul. As much as we want a quick fix, some fast lesson that makes us near-experts in just a few short minutes, the best of Bible reading isn’t learned overnight or even after a semester of lectures, but day after day, week after week, month after month, and year after year, imbibing the Bible, having God’s words inform our minds, inspire our hearts, instruct our lives. It is then that we slowly see the lights going on everywhere as we walk through life, and keep walking through the texts.” (pg.45)

3. Why is memorizing scripture a great habit to form?

“There is no better tuning fork for harmony in the body of Christ than the members striving together to conform their minds to the mind of Christ, not just with Christian concepts but with the very words of God. Having the mind of Christ will make us catalysts for a community “standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel” (Phil. 1:27), and “being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind” (Phil. 2:2). And such “unity of mind” goes hand in hand with “a humble mind” in 1 Peter 3:8. Few things cultivate humility of mind like submitting our minds to the words of God by memorizing them. And so we become people ready to Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. (Phil. 2:3–4) Hide God’s words in your heart; build an arsenal for fighting temptation. But don’t miss the life-changing power today of memorizing the mind of God.” (pg.71)

4. Five Simple Tips for Scripture Memorization:

a. Diversify Your Picks

You can memorize whole books, or whole chapters (Romans 8 is a great starting point, or Philippians 3), or key sections. My preference over the years has become key sections (say four to seven verses, like Titus 3:1–7) that I come across as I’m moving through a Bible-reading plan. It’s often a section I find so densely rich that meditating on it for just a few minutes feels woefully inadequate. To enjoy more of its goodness, I need to put it to memory. (If you’re looking to get started on a few key sections to memorize, try Col. 1:15–20; John 1:1–14; Heb. 1:1–4; and Phil. 2:5–11.)

b. Take It with You during the Day

Write the passage down or make it prominent and easily accessible on a tablet or phone. I wouldn’t suggest quarantining your memorizing to a certain slot in the day, but unleash it into all of life. Play an audio recording in the car, look at a piece of paper while standing in line. Put a text on your home screen so you see it when you look at your smartphone.

c. Seek to Understand, Feel, and Apply the Text as You Memorize

Resist the urge to see simple memory as the goal. Learning the text “by heart” is secondary; taking the text to heart is primary. Don’t memorize mindlessly, but engage the text and its meaning—not only its implications for your life, but what effects it should have on your emotions.

d. Turn Your Text into Prayer

Personal and corporate prayer times are a great time to exercise what you’re memorizing, and see and feel it from a fresh angle as you turn it god-ward and express its significance for others. There have been times for me when praying some memorized text became the pathway for seeing fresh glories that had been hidden to me until then.

e. Memorize in Light of the Gospel

Finally, let the truth of Colossians 3:16 shape your memorization: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.” The “word of Christ” here, or “message of Christ,” isn’t first and foremost Scripture, but the gospel. So, in other words, memorize in light of the gospel. Memorizing Scripture, in and of itself, isn’t necessarily Christian. Jesus spoke with Jewish leaders who had memorized more of the Old Testament than we ever will, and he said to them, “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life” (John 5:39–40). And Paul spoke about Jews who intimately knew the Scriptures, but their minds were hardened. For to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains un-lifted, because only through Christ is it taken away. Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts. But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. (2 Cor. 3:14–16)

Whether we’re memorizing texts from the Old Testament or the New, this is our need again and again: to turn to the Lord. In our memorizing, whether whole books or chapters or passages or single verses, we always must keep in mind Jesus’s great lessons in Luke 24 about Bible interpretation: “He interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself” (Luke 24:27), and “he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures,” and that “everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled” (Luke 24:44–45).

5. Why is it important to be a lifelong learner of Christ?

“There is indeed something we frontload for the Christian life, and then spend the rest of our days exploring and going deeper in: it is the “word” or “message” about Jesus, God’s incarnate Word. Simply put, the focal point and center of our lifelong learning is the person and work of Christ. All things are in him, through him, and for him (Col. 1:17). When we say “learners,” we don’t mean of mere facts, information, and head knowledge. We mean all that and more. We don’t just learn facts, but we learn a Face. We’re not just learners of principles, but of a Person. We are lifelong learners in relationship with Jesus as we hear his voice in his word and have his ear in prayer, and share in community with his body, all through the power of his Spirit. And one of the chief ways we know his person more is by learning more about his work for us. Not only are we “rooted and grounded” in Christ’s love for us at Calvary, but we press on “to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that [we] may be filled with all the fullness of God” (Eph. 3:17–19).

The heart of lifelong learning that is truly Christian is not merely digging deeper in the seemingly bottomless store of information there is to learn about the world and humanity and history, but plunging into the infinite flood of Christ’s love, and how it all comes back to this, in its boundless breadth and length and height and depth, and seeing everything else in its light. The center of lifelong learning for the Christian is this: knowing and enjoying God himself in Christ through the gospel word and the written word of the Scriptures—in the hearing and reading and study and meditation and memorization of the Bible.”

Week 4: HAVE HIS EAR (PRAYER) – Part 1

“ENJOY THE GIFT OF HAVING GOD’S EAR”

1. What is the wonder of wonders?

“Not only did He choose us before the world began, and give us, and cause us to be born again, but He also sustains the whole of our Christian lives, from day one to that Day, in His matchless grace. He covers our lives with His unexpected kindness through people and circumstances, in good times and bad, and showers us with unforeseen favor in sickness and health, in life and death.

But as we’ve seen, He doesn’t always catch us off guard. Or even usually God has His regular channels- the means of grace- those well-worn pathways along which He is so often pleased to pass and pour out His goodness on those waiting expectantly. The chief thoroughfares are His word, His church and prayer- ***Or His voice, His body, His ear.***

And wonder of wonders, not only does He express Himself and bid us hear His voice, but He wants to hear ours. The speaking God not only has spoken, but He also listens- He stops, He stoops, He wants to hear from you. He stands ready to hear your voice. – Christian, you have the ear of God. We call it prayer.” (pg.94)

2. What is prayer?

Prayer is talking to God. It is relational, it is personal, it is conversing and interacting with God Himself.

“Prayer, for the Christian, is not merely talking to God, but responding to the One who has initiated toward us. He has spoken first. This is not a conversation we start, but a relationship into which we’ve been drawn. His voice breaks the silence, then in prayer, we speak to the God who has spoken. Our asking and pleading and requesting originate not from our emptiness, but His fullness. Prayer doesn’t begin with our needs but with His bounty. Its origin is first in adoration, and only later in asking. Prayer is a reflex to the grace He gives to the sinners He saves. It is soliciting His provision in view of the power He has shown.” (pg.94)

3. What is the great purpose of prayer?

“It shouldn’t surprise us, then, to find that prayer is not finally about getting things from God, but **GETTING GOD!!!** Born in His response to His voice, prayer makes its requests of God, but it is not content only to receive from God. Prayer must have Him! ... The Great purpose of Prayer is to come humbly, expectantly, and – because of Jesus- boldly into the conscious presence of God, to relate to Him, talk with Him, and ultimately enjoy Him as our Great Treasure.__(pg.95)

4. What kind of relationship does prayer draw us into?

“Such a pervasive call to prayer as we see in the New Testament is not the stuff of impersonal achievement and raw discipline, but intimate relationship. It has underneath it not an iron human will, but an extraordinary, attentive divine Father who is eager to “give good things to those who ask Him” Matthew 7:11. Not only is He a Father who reveals His bounty in words, and “knows what you need before you ask Him” Matthew 6:8 but wants you to ask. He wants to hear. He wants to interact. He means to have us not in a hypothetical relationship, but in reality. He is even more ready to hear us that we are to pray.” (pg.96)

5. Whose name do we pray in?

“In Jesus name we pray. All this is possible only through the person and work of God’s Son. Not only did Jesus die for our sins (1 Cor. 15:3), to show God’s love for us (Rom. 5:8), but He rose from the grave and ascended to heaven as “a forerunner on our behalf” (Heb. 6:20), appearing in the very presence of the Father (Heb. 9:24). Jesus is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us” (Rom. 8:34). Having conquered death, the God-man, stationed in His glorified body, “is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them” (Heb. 7:25). Our having God’s ear is as sure as having God’s Son.”

6. Jesus prayed alone. So why is important to have a private prayer life?

“Consider Jesus: He prayed alone and with others. He prayed from the beginning to the end of His earthly ministry and still is praying today.

He had no inadequacies to make up for, and no doubts about His trueness, but He desperately desired fellowship with His Father. And so, again and again He prayed alone. “After He had dismissed the crowds, He went up on the mountain by Himself to pray... He was there alone” (Matt.14:23; also Mark 6:46). Not just once, but as a regular habit, He “would withdraw to desolate places and pray” (Luke 5:16). “Rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, He departed and went out to a desolate place, and there He prayed” (Mark 1:35)

Before selecting His twelve disciples, “He went out to the mountain to pray, and all night He continued in prayer to God” (Luke 6:12). Even in Gethsemane, three times He “went away and prayed” (Matt. 26:36,42,44; Also Mark 14:32-42). From the beginning of His ministry to the eve of His crucifixion, He made the practice of private prayer and essential part of His relationship with the Father.” **And we must too... because we are a follower of Christ.**

7. Six Suggestions for Secret Prayer:

- a. **Have a GO-TO spot** - this will help you be regular in private prayer.
- b. **Begin with the Bible** - prayer is richer and more focused when they are in response to God's word.
- c. **Use the ACTS MODEL:**
 - A**dore - First Adore God with praise for the truth revealed in your reading of and meditation on the Scriptures.
 - C**onfess - Then Confess your own sins and failings and foibles.
 - T**hank - Then give Thanks for His grace and mercy.
 - S**upplicate (Ask) - Petition Him, ask Him- for requests for yourself, your family, your church, and beyond.
- d. **Divulge your Desires and Develop them** (Eph. 1:17-21; Eph. 3:16-19; Phil. 1:9-11; Col. 1:9-12). In private prayer, we are most honest with God and with ourselves. Express your heart to the Father. He knows it already, and He wants to hear it from you. This is an unspeakable privilege.
- e. **Keep it Fresh** - Change it up for a new year, or a new month, or a new season of life .
- f. **Journaling** - "Journaling has the appeal of mingling the motions of our lives with the mind of God. Permeated with prayer and saturated with God's word, it can be a powerful way of hearing God's voice on the Scriptures and making known to Him our requests, Think of it as a sub-discipline of Bible intake, and especially of prayer. Let a spirit of prayer pervade, and let God's word inspire, shape, and direct what you ponder and pen."

8. What is at the heart of the Christian life?

“Prayer is at the very heart of the Christian life. Not only is it obedience to God’s command, but it is a vital means of our receiving His ongoing grace for our spiritual survival and thriving. And the joy of prayer- communing with God- is essential to what it means to be Christian. Without prayer, there is no true relationship with Him, and no deep delight in who He is, but only glimpses from afar. Prayer begins in secret, but God doesn’t mean for it to stay in the closet. Prayer is for all of life, and especially for our life together in community.” (pg.107) ...“And so we have at least two fronts to a healthy life of prayer. We pray personally, in secret and on the move. And we pray corporately, resisting the privatizing of our prayers, not just by asking others to pray for us but especially by having others pray with us. Praying together – Jesus’ communal prayer with His men led to communal prayer in the early church they led. It is explicit at nearly every turn on the book of Acts.”

Acts 1:14, “all these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer.”

Acts 2:24, “they lifted their voices to God,” and the filling of the Holy Spirit fell after they prayed together.” (vs.31)

Acts 6:6, the church chose the seven, and “they prayed and laid their hands on them.”

Acts 12:5, While Peter was in prison, “earnest prayer on his behalf was made to God by the church.” And when he escaped miraculously, he found “many were gathered together and were praying.” (vs12)

Acts 13:3, “after prayer and fasting” the church sent out Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey.

Acts 16:25, Even in jail “Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God.

Acts 20:36; Acts 21:5 After an emotional goodbye to the Ephesian elders, Paul “knelt down and prayed with them all.”

“Praying together remains a vital means of God’s ongoing grace in the Christian life and for our communities.”

Romans 12:12, “Be constant in prayer.”

Colossians 4:2, “continue steadfastly in prayer.”

1 Thessalonians 5:17, “pray without ceasing.”

Ephesians 6:18, “praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication.”

Week 5: HAVE HIS EAR (PRAYER) – Part 2

“SHARPEN YOUR AFFECTIONS WITH FASTING”

1. What goes arm in arm with prayer?

“Fasting walks arm in arm with prayer- as John Piper says, fasting is “the hungry handmaiden of prayer,” who “both reveals and remedies.” “She reveals the measure of God’s mastery over us- or television or computers or whatever we submit to again and again to conceal the weakness of our hunger for God. And she remedies by intensifying the earnestness of our prayer and saying with our whole body what prayer says with the heart: I long to be satisfied in God alone!”

“And the gnawing discomfort of growing hunger is the engine of fasting, generating the reminder to bend our longings for food Godward and inspire intensified longings for Jesus. Fasting, says, Piper, is the physical exclamation point at the end of the sentence, “This much, O God, I want You!”

“Fasting, like the gospel, isn’t for the self-sufficient and those who feel they have it all together. It is for those who are poor in spirit, meek and who hunger and thirst after righteousness... It is a desperate measure, for desperate times, among those who know themselves as desperate for God.”

“We fast from what we can see and taste because we have tasted and see the goodness of the invisible God- and are desperately hungry for more of Him.”

2. Read the following biblical passage and discuss the seven rewards of fasting.

Isaiah 58:5-12

Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for people to humble themselves? Is it only for bowing one’s head like a reed and for lying in sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord? “Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? Then your light shall break forth like the morning, your healing shall spring forth speedily, and your righteousness shall go before you; The glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; You shall cry, and He will say, ‘Here I am....Then your light shall dawn in the darkness, and your darkness shall be as the noonday....The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your soul in drought, and strengthen your bones; You shall be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail. Those from among you shall build the old waste places; You shall raise up the foundations of many generations; And you shall be called the Repairer of the Breach, The Restorer of Streets to Dwell In.

“So if you find yourself in the dark, need physical strength, need guidance, health, are thirsty and need refreshing or you are in need of restoration . . .the Great Physician has given a prescription “a remedy” for what ails you. The above Scripture tells us that **IF** you **Fast** these will be the seven rewards.”

The Seven Rewards of Fasting:

a. Darkness in your life will become light.

“Then your light shall break forth like the morning,” Isaiah 58:8

If you want the clouds to roll back, start pouring out your life for other people.

b. Physical Strength

*“Your healing shall spring forth speedily, ... And strengthen your bones;”
Isaiah 58:8,11*

Much strength is not received because one hasn't followed the prescription. To get physical strength we must pour into weaker vessels. “We are made to mediate the glory of God's face to others. For there is strength when we think that all is spent.”

c. God will be in front of us and behind us, in our midst, with righteousness and glory and He will be there when you call.

And your righteousness shall go before you; The glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; You shall cry, and He will say, ‘Here I am.’ Isaiah 58:8-9

“Whenever you call the roll of helpers, God always says, **“HERE, I AM”**. When you are busy doing what His Son did, namely, “becoming poor that others might become rich” (2 Corinthians 8:9), and doing it “in the power that God supplies” (1 Peter 4:11), then God moves in behind us and in front of us and surrounds us with omnipotent love and help and protection and care. Isaiah 58:9 says, **“THEN** you will call, and the **LORD WILL ANSWER.” WHEN? THEN-** when you join the forces of love to minister to those who are poor physically and spiritually.

d. And the Lord will continually guide you.

“The Lord will guide you continually,” Isaiah 58:11

It seems that the Lord gives His most intimate guidance to those bent on giving themselves to the needs of others. How many times we might pray, “Lord I don’t know the solution here, please grant me Your guidance.” He answers, “make yourself available, even for situations of need beyond your ability, and I will continually guide you.”

e. He will satisfy your soul.

“And satisfy your soul in drought,” Isaiah 58:11

Our souls are meant to be satisfied in God. But we have learned again and again that this satisfaction in God comes to consummation when we extend our satisfaction in Him to others. Pouring out ourselves for the poor is the path of deepest satisfaction.

f. God will make you a watered garden with springs that do not fail.

You shall be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail. Isaiah 58:11

Watered and the power to water others (a spring). It is a paradoxical spiritual principle in Scripture: as you pour yourself out, you become full. As you give away, you get more. ... But there is an assumption that the well has been dug and is kept unclogged. He who believes in Me [who cleaves to and trusts in and relies on Me] as the Scripture has said, From his innermost being shall flow [continuously] springs and rivers of living water.- (a spring of water that does not fail) John 7:38

g. God will restore the ruins of His city and His people.

“Those from among you, shall build the old waste places; You shall raise up the foundations of many generations; And you shall be called the Repairer of the Breach, The Restorer of Streets to Dwell In.” Isaiah 58:12

How many ruined things may be repaired by the fasting of God’s people for the sake of the others! Who knows what miseries, what dysfunctions, what breaches, what afflictions, and oppressions may be healed and restores by the beautiful fasting of Isaiah 58. Ours is not to predict what the city or the church or the family or society might look like. Ours is to trust and obey. (Taken from John Piper’s Book- Hungering after God)

3. Why will we not need to fast when Jesus returns?

“When Jesus returns, fasting will be done. It is a temporary measure, for this life and age, to enrich our joy in Jesus and prepare our hearts for the next, and for seeing Him face to face. When He returns, He will not call a fast but throw a **FEAST!** Then all holy abstinence will have served its glorious purpose, and be seen by all for what a gift it was. But until then, we will fast.”

4. What is an important overlooked habit of grace?

RESTING!

“You need a break from the chaos, from the noise and the crowds, more than you may think... You need the spiritual disciplines of SILENCE AND SOLITUDE.”

“We are humans, not machines. We were made for rhythms of silence and noise, community and solitude. It is unhealthy to always have people around, and unhealthy to rarely want them. God made us for cycles and seasons, for routines and cadences.”
...“From our time of rest, silence and solitude... “we want to come back better.” We want to find new clarity, resolve, and initiative, or return primed to redouble our efforts, by faith, in our callings in the home, among friends, at work, and in the body of Christ.”

Week 6: HAVE HIS EAR (PRAYER) – Part 3 **“PRAYING IN YOUR HEAVENLY PRAYER LANGUAGE”**

- 1. Read the following paragraph and discuss how our world will be changed and the role praying in our heavenly language on a consistent basis plays in it.**

In our Christian walk we develop rhythms of private prayer and corporate prayer that become “Habits of Grace” in our daily lives. But there is so much more than praying in our natural language. Being baptized with the Holy Spirit “releases the power to change our world. God is the same yesterday, today and forever, and He is going to move again mightily through the power of His Spirit. He wants a people who have a desire inside them that says, “Lord I want to see Your Spirit move I our city and in our world.”... The Baptism with the Holy Spirit is the empowering of the Holy Spirit as He comes and equips us to live the kind of life that Jesus lived. (Holy Spirit the Promise One- Pastor Frank Bailey)

- 2. What does God equips us with to live a supernatural life?**

Our Heavenly Prayer Language.

On the day of Pentecost we see a very unusual gift initiated. As the disciples began to experience the outpouring of God’s presence, they all found themselves speaking in an unusual language. They were speaking languages unknown to themselves as they yielded to the power of God being poured out. Some were speaking in languages understood by some of the crowd that was rapidly gathering. Acts 2:11 says, “We do hear them speak in our tongues the wonderful works of God.”

The Lord is still pouring out this unusual, precious gift. The natural man can sometimes be ashamed of the supernatural demonstrations of God. Some try to minimize the importance of our prayer language, treating it as insignificant and something to be hidden away in some back room. I believe this is a very serious mistake and robs the church of its supernatural heritage. We desperately need the power (*dunamis*) of God in this generation. Praying in tongues is the doorway into this supernatural realm. (FB)

3. Read the paragraphs below and discuss the difference between receiving the Holy Spirit when we are born again and the baptism with the Holy Spirit.

John 20:19-22 refers to the day when Jesus rose from the dead. He is in the Upper Room with His disciples and He breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit." They received the Spirit of God into their lives, becoming born again of the Spirit, or the dwelling place of God Most High. Some forty days after this, Jesus told them to wait in Jerusalem to receive the Baptism with the Holy Spirit. Acts 1:4-5

Although the eleven disciples received the Spirit of God into their lives, they were told by Jesus, "There's something else you need, power to preach the Gospel and touch the world in which you live. Don't leave Jerusalem until the power of the Holy Spirit comes upon you." (see John 4:13-14; 7:37-39).

The disciples did just that, they waited in the upper room and on the day of Pentecost, they were baptized with the Holy Spirit with the evidence of speaking in other tongues. (In Acts 10:44-47 we see the Gentiles receiving the Baptism of the Holy Spirit with the evidence of speaking in other tongues).

It must be stressed that while the baptism with the Holy Spirit is evidenced by speaking in other tongues, tongues is only a part of it. An incredible power source is made available through the baptism of the Holy Spirit. This power source is crucial for us as believers in order to change this generation for God. God wants us to tap into this source as the church, and as the people of God.

4. Jesus was baptized with the Holy Spirit. What does that mean for us?

If you study the ministry and life of Jesus, you will see that the power did not begin until His experience of being baptized with the Holy Spirit. He didn't do miracles as a little boy because He didn't have the anointing of the Holy Spirit yet. ... God was indeed His Father and He was the Son of God, but until He received the baptism, He was just like you and me, only without sin.

However, it was when He received something supernatural in Matt. 3:16 that He was clothed with "Power from on high" and His miracle ministry was birthed. This power or anointing is what equipped Jesus to minister the last three years before going to be with the Father. Signs, and wonders, healings and miracles took place.

If Jesus needed the power of the Holy Spirit upon Him to minister to the sick, how much more do you and I need it? How much more does the church need it? We need to be endowed with God's power flowing out of us to effectively minister to this world.

5. Read and discuss the following 16 reasons why we should speak in tongues. Look up the verses as needed.

- a. It is restoration of divine communication with God. (1 Cor. 14:2,14,15)
- b. Tongues join us together and makes us walk in unity and fellowship. (Jude 20,21; Gen 11:6; Acts 1:14; 2:1)
- c. To build ourselves up on our most holy faith. (Jude 20)
- d. It edifies us. (1 Cor. 14:4)
- e. When we speak in tongues, God will come on the scene and help see you through any weakness you may be fighting. He will bring you to victory in that area through the power of His Spirit. (Rom. 8:26-28)
- f. Because many times we don't know what we ought to pray. (Rom. 8:26; 1 Cor. 14:15)
- g. When we pray in the Spirit we pray for others. (Rom. 8:27)
- h. Tongues help us pray according to God's will. (Rom. 8:27)
- i. You will see that God is working everything together for His plan, to those who are praying according to His will. (Rom. 8:28)
- j. It plugs us into the wisdom of God. (1 Cor. 2:9-13; 1 Cor. 2:10-11)
- k. It is a sign for the non-Christian world. (1 Cor. 14:21-22; Acts 2:15)
- l. Praying is therapeutic.
- m. Tongues brings God's anointing on the scene and His anointing breaks the devil's power. (Isaiah 10:27; Zechariah 4:6; Ephesians 6:14-18)
- n. It opens the door into the supernatural world of God. (Acts 3:7,8)
- o. Jesus' prayers are being released through us when we pray in the Holy Ghost. (Rom. 8:34)
- p. The sixteenth reason why we should speak in tongues has to do with the tongue itself. (James 3:2-5)

(Taken from Pastor Frank Bailey's book- Another Helper)

Week 7: BELONG TO HIS BODY (FELLOWSHIP)–

Part 1

1. What does being a part of the local church or fellowship mean to you?

“It’s a shame the word “fellowship” has fallen on hard times in some circles, and is dying the death of domestication and triviality. It is an electric reality in the New Testament, an indispensable ingredient in the Christian faith, and one of God’s chief means of grace in our lives. The “koinonia”—Greek for commonality, partnership, fellowship—that the first Christians shared wasn’t anchored in a common love for pizza, pop, and a nice clean evening of fun among the fellow “churchified.” Its essence was in their common Christ, and their common life-or-death mission together in his summons to take the faith worldwide in the face of impending persecution. Rightly did Tolkien call his nine “the Fellowship of the Ring.” This is no chummy hobnob with apps and drinks and a game on the tube. It is an all-in, life-or-death collective venture in the face of great evil and overwhelming opposition. True fellowship is less like friends gathered to watch the Super Bowl and more like players on the field in blood, sweat, and tears, huddled in the backfield only in preparation for the next down. True fellowship, in this age, is more the invading troops side by side on the beach at Normandy than it is the gleeful revelers in the street on V-E Day.” (pg.145)

2. What ways is our church in a partnership for the Gospel?

“Not only did the first Christians devote themselves to the word (the apostles’ teaching) and to prayer, but also to “fellowship” (Acts 1:14; 2:42). Foremost, their fellowship was in Jesus (1 Cor. 1:9) and in his Spirit (2 Cor. 13:14). In Christ, they had become fellow heirs of the divine inheritance (Rom. 8:17; Eph. 3:6), soon they shared “all things in common” (Acts 2:44; 4:32), and even Jew and Gentile now were fellow citizens (Eph. 2:19). From top to bottom, the gospel creates community like no other. But this fellowship is no isolated commune or static, mutual admiration society. It is a “partnership in the gospel” (Phil. 1:5), among those giving their everything to “advance the gospel” (1:12), knit together for “progress and joy in the faith” (1:25). It is the fellowship in which, as Paul says to Christians, “you are all partakers with me of grace ... in the defense and confirmation of the gospel” (1:7). In such a partnership as this, we need not worry too much that we will forget the lost and sequester the gospel. Real fellowship will do precisely the opposite. It must. The same Jesus who joins us commissions us. The medium of our relationship is the message of salvation. When the fellowship is true, the depth of love for each other is not a symptom of in-growth, but the final apologetic: “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35).” (pg.146)

3. Discuss the role relationships play in a biblical church experience.

“But true fellowship not only labors to win the lost, but serves to keep fellow saints saved. The relational iceberg, lying just beneath the surface of the Scriptures, is especially close to sea level in Hebrews. Here rise the twin texts of Christian fellowship, stationed as guardians of the heart of the epistle, lest we try to access grace as isolated individuals. Perhaps the better known is Hebrews 10:24–25:

Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

The remarkable thing here is not the summons to keep meeting together, but the instruction that when you do, look past your own nose to the needs of others. There’s no “how” here in the original language. A literal translation is: “Consider each other for love and good deeds.” Know each other. Get close. Stay close. Go deep. And consider particular persons, and interact with them, such that you exhort and inspire them to love and good deeds specifically fitting to their mix. Here we taste how potent, and personal, is fellowship as a means of grace. As partners under God’s word and in prayer, a brother who knows me as me, and not generic humanity, speaks the truth in love (Eph. 4:15) into my life, and gives me a word “such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear” (Eph. 4:29). This is an inestimable grace.”

4. What role does accountability play in the church, why it’s important, and if it’s biblical?

“The twin, then, is Hebrews 3:12–13:

Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day . . . that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

Here the charge lands not on the drifting saint to get himself back on the path, but on the others in the community—to have enough proximity to him, awareness of him, and regularity with him to spot the drift and war with him, for him, against the sin. This means of grace, then, in such a circumstance, has a unique function in the Christian life. It is not laid on the spiritually weak to muster their will and do the discipline, but it is for the body to take up discipline on behalf of the wanderer, to mediate grace to the struggler, to preempt apostasy by putting words of truth and grace into his open ear hole and praying for the Spirit to make them live.”

5. What is meant when the author calls the church “an invaluable backstop” and how the church is a means of grace in the life of a believer?

“Fellowship may be the often forgotten middle child of the spiritual disciplines, but she may save your life in the dark night of your soul. As you pass through the valley of the shadow of death, and the Shepherd comforts you with his staff, you will discover that he has fashioned his people to act as his rod of rescue. When the desire to avail yourself of hearing his voice (in the word) has dried up, and when your spiritual energy is gone to speak into his ear (in prayer), God sends his body to bring you back. It is typically not the wanderer’s own efforts that prompt his return to the fold, but his brothers’ (James 5:19–20), being to him a priceless means of God’s grace—the invaluable backstop. It is not only God’s word and prayer that are the means of his ongoing grace, but true fellowship among those who have in common the one who is Grace incarnate (Titus 2:11). The grace of God cannot be quarantined to individuals. The healthy Christian, introverted or not, of whatever temperament, in whatever season, seeks not to minimize relationships with his fellows in Christ but maximize them. God has given us each other in the church, not just for company and co-belligerency, not just to chase away loneliness and lethargy, but to be to each other an indispensable means of his divine favor. We are for each other an essential element of the good work God has begun in us and promises to bring to completion (Phil. 1:6). Such is the true fellowship.” (pg.148-149)

6. Discuss the importance of commitment in the local church. Be sure to discuss various ways commitment is expressed in the local church. (Weekly church attendance, serving others, discipleship, accountability, praying, tithing, giving offerings, small group involvement, shuts down gossip, witnessing, etc. There are more ways. These were just a few to jump start the discussion.)

“One thing to make explicit here at the end of this first chapter on fellowship, and the beginning of part 3 on the means of grace in the church, is that the deepest, most durable form of fellowship is covenantal—in other words, it is between parties that have made formal commitments to each other. This is not only true in the partnership of marriage, but also in the local church. When we make vows and promises to each other in covenanting together in a local church as “members” or “partners” (or whatever term a church uses), we don’t inhibit the true life of the church, but give the truest conditions for its growth and flourishing. When our fellowship is not simply a network of loose Christian relationships, but anchored in a particular “covenant community” as committed members together in a local outpost of Christ’s kingdom, we come closest to experiencing what those first Christians did, when people didn’t just drift in and out of the community, but were either in or out—and those who were in were pledged to be the church for each other through thick and thin. Covenant community is like Christian marriage in that it is within the framework of stated commitments and promised allegiances that life in relationship is guarded, nourished, and encouraged most to thrive.”

Week 8: BELONG TO HIS BODY (FELLOWSHIP) – Part 2

1. Why is corporate worship one of the most important means of grace?

“Corporate worship is the single most important means of grace and our greatest weapon in the fight for joy, because like no other means, corporate worship combines all three principles of God’s ongoing grace: his word, prayer, and fellowship. It is corporate worship, with its preaching and sacraments and collective praises, confessions, petitions, and thanksgivings, which most acutely brings together the gifts of God’s voice, his ear, and his body. And so, according to Donald S. Whitney, “There’s an element of worship and Christianity that cannot be experienced in private worship or by watching worship. There are some graces and blessings that God gives only in ‘meeting together’ with other believers.” Perhaps your own experience of corporate worship as a means of grace has, at times, echoed that of Martin Luther: ‘At home, in my own house, there is no warmth or vigor in me, but in the church when the multitude is gathered together, a fire is kindled in my heart and it breaks its way through.’” (Pg. 156-157)

2. “Five Benefits of Corporate Worship”:

I don’t want to leave you in the dark about what some of those “graces and blessings” of corporate worship might be. Surely many more could be given, but here are five such blessings that we experience uniquely in the context of corporate worship.

a. Awakening

Often we come into corporate worship feeling a sense of spiritual fog. During the rough-and-tumble of the week, the hard knocks of real life in the fallen world can disorient us to ultimate reality and what’s truly important. We need to clear our heads, recalibrate our spirits, and jump-start our slow hearts.

We mentioned above how Martin Luther found corporate worship powerful in awakening his spiritual fire: “At home, in my own house, there is no warmth or vigor in me, but in the church when the multitude is gathered together, a fire is kindled in my heart and it breaks its way through.” Better than Luther, though, is the experience of the inspired psalmist. In Psalm 73, he begins by despairing over the prosperity of his wicked peers (vv. 2–15). But the fog clears as he comes consciously into the presence of God: “When I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task, until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end” (Ps. 73:16–17). He was embattled. The spiritual haze was thick. But the breakthrough came in the context of worship, which then led to this climactic expression of praise: “Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but

God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever” (Ps. 73:25–26). I’ve found this to be true for me more times than I can count. Instead of staying away from corporate worship when we sense ourselves to be spiritually lethargic, precisely what we need more than ever is the awakening of worship. When our hearts feel it least is when we need most to remind our souls, “For me it is good to be near God” (Ps. 73:28).

b. Assurance

A second benefit is the community dynamic—which means not only meeting our good desires for belonging and shared mission (fellowship), but also providing a catalyst for our assurance. While we may admire figures like Athanasius and Luther who seemingly stood alone *contra mundum* (“against the world”), we must remember God has said it is not good for us to be alone (Gen. 2:18). Such heroes were the product of dire days, and inevitably their stories have been thinned in the collective memory of distant history. Neither Athanasius nor Luther truly stood alone, but were part of faithful communities that fostered and strengthened their otherwise unpopular beliefs. And so it is with us. We were not made to stand solo with no fellows. Even in times as troubling as Elijah’s, God gave him seven thousand who hadn’t abandoned the truth (1 Kings 19:18). God made us for community—and named her “the church”—and being part of this great local and global community plays an important role in assuring us not only that we are not deceiving ourselves in pretending our profession is credible, but also that we truly know whom we have believed (2 Tim. 1:12). And worship in the local church points us to the worship of the universal church, and that Jesus has a people from many nations, and one day will include every nation (Rev. 7:9).

c. Advance

Corporate worship also plays an indispensable part in our sanctification—our progressive growth in being conformed to the image of Jesus (Rom. 8:29). Corporate worship is for our general “up-building and encouragement and consolation” (1 Cor. 14:3), but also in beholding Jesus together, “we all . . . are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another” (2 Cor. 3:18). Christian growth is not just something that we take away as sermon application and then work into our lives that week. As Tim Keller says, sanctification can happen “on the spot” as we sit under gospel preaching and engage in corporate worship. There are times—may God make them many—when the Holy Spirit takes the Scripture read, the prayer spoken, the chorus sung, or the truth preached and presses it right to the point of our need. Corporate worship does not merely inform our Christian walk, but heals us or transforms us in that moment. When we join in corporate worship, God loves not only to change our minds, but to irrevocably change our hearts right then and there.

d. Accepting Another's Leading

One important distinction between public worship and the “private worship” of personal Bible intake and prayer is the place of our initiative. Corporate worship reminds us that our faith is fundamentally receptive, not of our own initiative. In private devotions, we lead ourselves in some sense. In corporate worship, we’re made to receive the leading of others. In private worship, we’re in the driver’s seat, in some sense. We decide what passage to read, when to pray, what to pray, how long to linger in Bible reading and meditation, what songs to listen to or sing, what gospel truths to preach to ourselves, and what applications to consider. But in corporate worship, we respond. We follow.

Others preach and pray and select the songs and choose how long to linger in each element. We’re positioned to receive. It is a wonderful thing in our personal devotions to make such choices, but it is also good for us to practice engaging with God when someone other than ourselves is making the calls. Corporate worship demands that we discipline ourselves to respond, and not only pursue God on our own terms. It is an opportunity to embrace being led, and not always taking the lead.

e. Accentuated Joy

Last, but not least, is the heightened experience of worship in the corporate context. Our own awe is accentuated, our own adoration increased, our own joy doubled when we worship Jesus together. As the Swedish proverb says, a shared joy is a double joy. In corporate worship, the “graces and benefits” we uniquely enjoy are not only awakening, assurance, advance, and accepting others’ leadership, but also the accentuated joy of deeper and richer and greater adoration and awe, since our delight in Jesus expands as we magnify him together with others. The secret of joy in corporate worship is not only self-forgetfulness—or to put it positively, preoccupation with Jesus and his glory—but also the happy awareness that we are not alone in having our souls satisfied in him.”

3. Why is the preaching of the word important in the local church?

“Few practices will energize and affect your Christian life as much as sitting attentively under faithful preaching. While corporate worship as a whole may be the single most important means of God’s grace, as we said in chapter 14, hearing the fresh preaching of the gospel from the Scriptures is the climactic grace of that gathering. It is that moment among the assembled church when God speaks in monologue most clearly and completely. The other elements of the gathering follow the rhythm of receiving from him and responding back to him, but in preaching we move into the posture of simply receiving, whether it’s a full half hour or just a tight twenty minutes. The weekly priority of preaching in worship points to the importance of our not just interacting with God as friends and sharing at his Table as family, but also submitting to his word in the message

of his herald, the preacher. Time abounds elsewhere to ask questions and respond, and seasons multiply to converse and dialogue. But preaching is that one half hour each week when the assembly of the redeemed closes her collective mouth, opens her ears and heart, and hears the uninterrupted voice of her husband, through his appointed mouthpiece, fallible though the messenger be.”

4. What is at the center of good preaching?

“A Preoccupation with Jesus”

Jesus didn't just display the importance of preaching in his life, but he is the focal point of all faithful preaching in the church. Just as our focus together in the whole of corporate worship is the crucified and risen Christ and the incomparable excellencies of his person and work, so also is the focus of our preaching. The best of preaching serves the worshiper in the joy of self-forgetfulness, and preacher-forgetfulness. Preaching that goes on and on about the preacher himself, or is always angling at how the hearer should apply this or that to daily life, does so at the expense of tapping into the very power of preaching, namely, a preoccupation with Jesus. True Christian preaching swallows up the listener again and again not with self or the speaker, but with Jesus and his manifold perfections. There is a place for the preacher's self-disclosure and for making the plain connections to practical application, but not at the expense of Jesus and his gospel as the sermon's crescendo and culmination. The waters of good preaching are always running downhill to the stream of Christ, who he is, and how he has loved us.” (pg. 167)

Week 9: THE COMMISSION

1. Discuss personal examples of how serving others result in personal growth?

“We will only go so deep with Jesus until we start yearning to reach out. When our life in him is healthy and vibrant, we not only ache to keep sinking our roots down deep in him, but we also want to stretch out our branches and extend his goodness to others. But not only does going deep with Jesus soon lead us to reach out to others, but also reaching out leads us deeper with him. In other words, getting on board with Jesus’s mission to disciple the nations may be the very thing he uses to push through your spiritual lethargy and jump-start your stalled sanctification.

One veteran pastor writes, ‘Often I meet Christians who are in spiritual malaise, holding on to their faith but not advancing it much. Bible study has become a chore; prayer is a dry routine. The miracle of their own conversion, once recounted with great passion, is now a distant, fading memory. And going to church is—well, it’s something they just do. Mechanically and halfheartedly, these people trudge along through the drudgery of quarantined Christianity. But when these lethargic believers break out of spiritual isolation and meet some spiritual seekers, something incredible starts to happen. As they experience the high stakes conversations that tend to happen with unchurched people, they begin to notice a sort of inner renewal taking place. Areas long ignored suddenly come alive with fresh significance. . . . Isn’t it incredible how elevating our efforts to reach others can be a catalyst for personal growth?’” (pg.198)

2. What role does disciple-making play in your lives?

“Disciple-making is the process in which a maturing believer invests himself, for a particular period of time, in one or just a few younger believers, in order to help their growth in the faith—including helping them also to invest in others who will invest in others. Such was the lion’s share of Jesus’s ministry, from the time he called to only twelve, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men” (Matt. 4:19), until he sent them out, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:19). It’s not surprising that we typically think of disciple-making as one-sided. The “older,” more mature Christian is giving of his time and energy to intentionally invest in a younger believer. The discipler’s own enjoyment of the means of grace (word, prayer, and fellowship) serves to fuel him spiritually for pouring out into others. However, disciple-making is the very stuff of Christian fellowship, and every believer, indwelt by God’s Spirit, can be a channel of God’s grace to anyone else. This means good disciple-making is always a two-way street. The “disciple” and the “discipler” are most fundamentally disciples of Jesus. And so, as Stephen Smallman says, “Our involvement in making disciples will be one of the most significant things we can do for our own growth as disciples.” It’s like any subject; we get it better ourselves when we teach it to others.” (pg.199)

3. Read and discuss the following four ways, among many, that making disciples is a means of God's ongoing grace in the life of the one doing the discipling.

a. Disciple-making Shows Us Our Smallness and God's Bigness

“Actively making disciples helps us see our lives in better proportion—not with ourselves at the center, doing the big things, but situated happily on the periphery, doing our small part in a big and glorious God-sized plan. It is astonishing that Jesus says “the nations.” Disciple the nations. The vision is huge—as big as it could be. And yet our part is small. One memorable refrain I’ve heard over and over again in Campus Outreach circles is “think big, start small, go deep.” Think big: God’s global glory, among all the nations. Start small: focus on a few, like Jesus did. Go deep: invest at depth in those few, so deeply that they will be equipped and prepared to do the same in the lives of others. Disciple-making is as massive as the Great Commission and as minute and seemingly menial as everyday life. The Christian life not only connects our little lives with God’s global purposes, but it also translates the bigness of the mission into the smallness of our daily actions.

Disciple-making is a major way—and the only way expressly in the Commission—in which our minor, local lives connect to God’s major, global plan. Here there is a place for the Christian’s almost heroic, big picture, world-changing impulse. But such vision is fleshed out in the uncelebrated, unsexy normalcy of everyday life. Think big, start small, go deep. Envision big, global, many. Act small, local, few. As Robert Coleman writes, “One cannot transform a world except as individuals in the world are transformed.” (pg. 201-203)

b. Disciple-making Challenges Us to Be Holistic Christians

“As we invest in younger believers toward their balanced, overall spiritual growth, we ourselves are reminded of, and encouraged toward, holistic health in the faith. Good disciple-making requires both intentionality and relationality. It means being strategic and being social. Most of us are bent one way or the other. We’re naturally relational, but lacking in intentionality. Or we find it easy to be intentional, but not relational. We typically tip (or sometimes lean) one way or the other as we begin the disciple-making process. But tipping and leaning won’t cover the full picture of what life-on-life disciple-making requires. It’s not just friend-to-friend, and it’s not just teacher-to-student. It’s both. There is the sharing of ordinary life (relationship) and seeking to initiate and make the most of teachable moments (intentionality). There are the long walks through Galilee and the sermons on the mount. Disciple-making is both organic and engineered, relational and intentional, with shared context and shared content, quality and quantity time.”

c. Disciple-making Makes Us More Aware of Our Sin

“Disciple-making is more than mere truth-speaking; it is also life-sharing, as Paul writes to the Thessalonians: “We were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves” (1 Thess. 2:8). Whenever Paul says “not only the gospel,” sit up and take notice. This is important stuff. Sharing your own self with someone means getting close— not just sharing information, but sharing life, sharing space. And the closer sinners get, the more sin comes out (which is why marriage can be such a matrix for sanctification as two sinners get increasingly close). In good disciple-making we are able to demonstrate for the ones we’re investing in something that Jesus’s disciples never saw in him: how to repent. Those who are looking to our lives and seeking to imitate our faith need to see us be honest and forthright about our sins, hear our confessions, witness our repentance, and watch us earnestly pursue change.”

“To get more specific, disciple-making requires that we die to selfishness— selfishness with our time and with our space. To get even more specific, it means dying to much of our precious privacy. Most of us do life alone so much more than is necessary. But in disciple-making, we ask, How can we live the Christian life together? How can I give this younger Christian access to my real life, not some triumphal facade I put on once a week? It marks the death to much of our privacy. We bring that one or few in whom we are investing into the process and mess of our sanctification as we enter into theirs. We have to “be with them” (Mark 3:14) to have the kind of effect Jesus had on his men: “Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus” (Acts 4:13). And as we do so, new manifestations of sin will be exposed in us, and we’ll find ourselves all the more in need of God’s ongoing grace.”

d. Disciple-making Teaches Us to Lean Heavier on Jesus

“Disciple-making is often messy, difficult work. You will see your weaknesses and failures and inadequacies like never before, and with God’s help, it will teach you all the more to lean on Jesus. Good disciplers must learn, in reliance on the Spirit, how to deal well with failure. And the Christian way to deal well with failure is take it to the cross. As simple as disciple-making may sound, it will not be easy, and if you are honest with yourself, it will not be without failure. Failures in our love. Failures in initiating. Failures to share the gospel with clarity and boldness. Failures to share our own selves because of selfishness. Failures to follow through, and sufficiently equip, and pray without ceasing, and walk in patience.”

“Disciple-making hems us in, exposes our failures, and teaches us to draw our daily strength not from ourselves but from Jesus and the gospel, which are the essence of disciple-making. The gospel is the baton to be passed. This is the content, “the deposit” (1 Tim. 6:20; 2 Tim. 1:14) passed from one spiritual generation to the next. This is the treasure in us we work to build into other jars of clay (2 Cor. 4:7). We disciple not to clone ourselves, not to reproduce our idiosyncrasies and personal hobbyhorses. Rather, we make disciples to pass on the gospel. We don’t center on ourselves, but on Jesus, who is not only the great model but also the content of disciple-making. We baptize in Jesus’s name, not ours. And we teach others to observe everything that he has commanded, not what we personally would advise. But Jesus and his gospel are not only the main content of disciple-making.”

“Jesus is also the flawed and failing discipler’s Great Comfort, who frees us from having to be the perfect discipler. There has already been one—and he was perfect all the way from the shores of Galilee to the cross of Calvary, where he took our sins and failures. We need not imitate his perfection in disciple-making. We cannot. But we can take great comfort that in him our failures are covered, and that the sovereign One who promises to build his church and be with us always as we carry out his Commission loves to sanctify half-baked, substandard disciple-making and make himself look good by showing himself, not the underling discipler, to be the great power source behind it.”

Week 10: THE DOLLAR

1. What did Jesus demonstrate in coming to buy us back?

“For the Christian, the issue is not just that we give, but how. “God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Cor. 9:7). And giving gladly rests on the great why of Christian generosity: that Christ himself—our Savior, Lord, and greatest treasure—demonstrated the ultimate in ***generosity*** in coming to buy us back. “Though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich” (2 Cor. 8:9). If Jesus is in us, then increasingly such an open-handed tendency will be in us as well. One of the effects of the gospel going deeper into our souls is that it frees our fingers to loosen their grasp on our goods. Generosity is one of the great evidences of truly being a Christian. Not only is it Jesus himself who speaks most often, and warns us more severely, about the danger of greed, but he is also the one who so strongly appeals to our joy and says, “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35).” (pg. 207)

2. Five Truths Regarding Money:

a. Money Is a Tool

“Money itself is not evil. It is not wealth per se that is sinful, but the “desire to be rich” (1 Tim. 6:9). It is not money, but “the love of money” that is “a root of all kinds of evils” (1 Tim. 6:10), from which we should keep our lives free (Heb. 13:5). It is “this craving” (1 Tim. 6:10) in our sinful hearts which is so dangerous. With all the strong warnings in the Bible about how we orient toward money (like the condemnation of luxury and self-indulgence in James 5:1–6), it can be easy to forget that the problem isn’t money, but our hearts. Finances, salaries, and budgets are an important part of the world our Lord created and entered into as a creature, with all its limitations of space, time, and finitude. When Jesus’s opponents asked about taxes to Caesar, he didn’t decry the evils of money, but relativized its role in relation to God (Matt. 22:21). When they came looking for his temple tax, he made (miraculous) provision for both himself and Peter (Matt. 17:27). He even commended, in the face of Judas’s objections, Mary’s lavish display of love in anointing his feet with expensive ointment (worth more than a year’s wages). Jesus would even have us go so far as to “make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings” (Luke 16:9). In other words, money is a tool that can be used for long-term godward goals, not just short-term selfish purposes. And tools are made to be used. Holding onto money will not satisfy our souls or meet the needs of others.”

b. How We Use Money Reveals Our Hearts

“Matthew 6:21 holds an important reminder: “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Hoarding our money says something: that we fear not having sufficient funds at some point in the future. Parsimony betrays our unbelief in the provision of our heavenly Father (Matt. 6:26) and his promise to “supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:19). Giving it away also speaks. It is an opportunity to show, and reinforce, the place of faith and love in our hearts. It’s a chance to gladly pursue the first and second greatest commandments through our giving, and to cultivate the mind of Christ through our spending: “Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others” (Phil. 2:4). It’s telling that Paul would couple “lovers of money” with “lovers of self” (2 Tim. 3:2). But the greatest test of our treasure is not whether we’re willing to spend it, but whom and what we spend it on. Generosity is an occasion to look past the small joys of self-oriented spending, and pursue the greater pleasures of spending on others. And so a good instinct to develop on the threshold of significant purchases is to ask what this expenditure reveals about our heart. What desire am I trying to fulfill? Is this for private comfort, or gospel advance, or expressing love to a friend or family member?”

c. Sacrifice Varies from Person to Person

“But hoarding and giving aren’t the only options. For most of us, the vast majority of our spending goes to meet our own needs and the needs of our families. That kind of spending is inevitable and necessary. It is a good thing. God provides us with income for those purposes. And to many of us, he gives resources beyond our needs and enables us to join him in the joy of giving to others. This raises the question of how much is enough for “our needs.” Is it simply food, clothing, and shelter in meager proportions? Where is the line between righteous and unrighteous spending on ourselves? Are there any standards to help us know how much to keep and how much to let go to others in generosity? Augustine offers a standard in “the needs of this life,” which is summarized by Rebecca DeYoung:

. . . not just what is necessary for bare subsistence, but also what is necessary for living a life “becoming” or appropriate to human beings. The point is not to live on crusts of bread with bare walls and threadbare clothes. The point is that a fully human life is lived in a way free from being enslaved to our stuff. Our possessions are meant to serve our needs and our humanness, rather than our lives being centered around service to our possessions and our desires for them.

No doubt, discerning what is, and is not, “a fully human life . . . free from being enslaved to our stuff” will vary from place to place and person to person. “Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Cor. 9:7). When it comes to finances, we all do well to be critical of ourselves, rather than others—and to remind ourselves how prone we are to be easy on ourselves and hard on others. It’s difficult, and probably unwise, to prescribe particulars here, but we can create some helpful categories, and describe errors to avoid, like “being enslaved to our stuff.” One thing to note is that “a fully human life” is not a static existence. God made us for rhythms and cadences, for feasting and fasting, for noise and crowds and silence and solitude. There is some help, even if minimal, in identifying and naming the extremes of sustained opulence and austerity. We need a place for both financial feasting and fasting. We should abhor the so-called “prosperity gospel,” and not be snookered by stinginess masquerading as Christian stewardship, and beware that running up large credit-card debt is likely giving beyond our means.

While discerning precisely what’s too little or too much from person to person is no easy task, John Piper wisely observes, “The impossibility of drawing a line between night and day doesn’t mean you can’t know it’s midnight.” A final thing to note in terms of standard is the test of sacrifice. Do you ever abstain from something you’d otherwise think of as “the needs of life” in order to give to others? Nothing shows our hearts like sacrifice. When we are willing not only to give from our excess, but to embrace some personal loss or disadvantage for the sake of showing generosity toward others, we say loudly and clearly, even if only to our own souls, that we have a greater love than ourselves and our comforts.”

d. Generosity Is a Means of Grace

“Such sacrifice raises the question that has been under the surface all along in addressing the subject of giving: Is there any reward for generosity and sacrifice—whether we’re giving Christmas presents or year-end donations or a meal to a friend or stranger—other than our own existential release and sense of joy from an act of selflessness? Is giving to others, in God’s economy, a channel for our own receipt of grace from above? While the New Testament does not promise physical rewards in this lifetime for our giving, it does teach that generosity is a means of grace for our souls, and that God stands ready to bless those who give from faith. “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35). And the promise is even stronger in 2 Corinthians 9:

• *Verse 6: “Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.”*

• *Verse 8: “God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work.”*

• Verses 10–11: “He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way to be generous in every way, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God.”

It is the grace of God that frees a soul from selfishness and empowers not just generosity, but sacrifice. And such sacrifice God will not overlook. In faith, our giving to meet others’ needs becomes an occasion for more divine grace to flood our souls.”

e. God Is the Most Cheerful Giver

“In the end, as cheerfully as we may give, we cannot out-give the truly cheerful Giver. Willingly, he gave his own Son (John 3:16; Rom. 8:32), as he had decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, but with joy. And Jesus himself was willing from the heart, offering himself in his own eternal spirit (Heb. 9:14) and sacrificing the truest of riches to meet our greatest need. “You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich” (2 Cor. 8:9). God loves a cheerful giver because he is one, the consummate one. And every gift we give in Christ is simply an echo of what we have already received, and the immeasurable riches to come (Eph. 2:7).”

Week 11: THE CLOCK

1. Why is your time more precious than money?

“You are always on the clock. There’s no avoiding it. Every human, in every place on the planet, whatever the culture, is subject to the incessant passing of time. The sands are always falling. No matter how much we neglect it, suppress it, or stress about it, there is nothing we can do to stem the onslaught. Ignore the rush to your own peril. Or walk the path of wisdom in stewarding your short and few days as gifts from God. The first thing to say about being intentional with our time is that Scripture commends it. Giving attention to better time management isn’t a secular creation. The recent glut of business books on the topic is long preceded by the teaching of the Bible. Not only does the apostle Paul give us the charter, “Look carefully then how you walk . . . making the best use of the time” (Eph. 5:15–16), but even a millennium and a half earlier, the Prayer of Moses asked for God’s help “to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom” (Ps. 90:12). The Scriptures have plenty to say about stewarding our money, and it doesn’t take much to see that the clock is even more precious than the dollar. As Donald S. Whitney reasons, “If people threw away their money as thoughtlessly as they throw away their time, we would think them insane. Yet time is infinitely more precious than money because money can’t buy time.”

2. What is the biblical perspective concerning time management?

“But the Bible not only commends time management; it also cautions it. Yes, neglect is a frequent danger, but the opposite pitfall is nearly epidemic in our day. Whether the root sin is anxiety, selfishness, or simple pride and arrogance, the answer to neglect isn’t a pendulum swing to our being consumed by our calendars. The god of time management will fail us quickly in the place of Christ and his providence and prerogatives. James takes the lead voice in chastising, or at least sanctifying, our scheduling. Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit”—yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.” As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil. (James 4:13–16) James echoes the counsel of Proverbs 27:1, “Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring.” We can forecast, but we don’t know what the next hour will hold, much less the next week. As much as our time may seem like our own, every clock is ultimately God’s. He may carry us into old age and gray hairs (Isa. 46:4), or he may say, without warning, “Fool! This night your soul is required of you” (Luke 12:20). The hands of the clock are ever in the hands of God. It is arrogant to plan without planning for God.” (pg.212)

3. What is meant by the apostle Paul when he says, “Your time is not your own?”

“Surely, too many are negligent with their time, but we live in a day in which time management is in vogue. At least in the West, we may be more aware of the clock, and how fleeting it is, than ever before. Your local bookstore now offers more new titles on productivity and time management than philosophy and religion. “Productivity porn” has ensnared myriads in its web of ever-improving systems. Today, the experts tell us to take charge of our daily routine before someone else does, that the biggest problem we face is “reactionary workflow,” and that we must vigilantly guard our sacred schedule from the invasions of others’ needs and priorities. Perhaps more than ever, we need to hear from our loving Father the hard but happy reminder of 1 Corinthians 6:19–20 tailored to our planning: Your time is not your own. You were bought with a price. So glorify me in your schedule. But then what? If our time is ultimately not our own, but his, how will faith direct the time we are stewarding on loan?” (pg.213)

4. What role does faith play in time management?

“One key principle in making our time management Christian is this: Let love for others be the driver of your disciplined, intentional planning. It is love for others that fulfills God’s law (Rom. 13:8, 10). Sanctifying our time godward will mean spending it on others in the manifold acts of love. Good works glorify God not by meeting his needs (he doesn’t have any, Acts 17:25), but through serving others. As Martin Luther so memorably said, it is not God who needs your good works, but your neighbor. When we ask that God teach us to count our days, this is the lesson we learn time and again. One way to make it practical is to schedule the time both for proactive good in the calling God has given us and reactive good that responds to the urgent needs of others.

Learning to let love inspire and drive our planning likely will mean fairly rigid blocks for our proactive labors, along with generous margin and planned flexibility to regularly meet the unplanned needs of others. Perhaps there’s a whole theology of time management just below the surface at the end of Paul’s short letter to his protégé Titus. “Let our people learn to devote themselves to good works,” he writes, “so as to help cases of urgent need, and not be unfruitful” (Titus 3:14). Fruitfulness (productivity) means meeting others’ needs with “good works”—expenditures of our time, energy, and money in the service of love—which will be both proactive and reactive. Without scheduling, we will falter at the proactive; without flexibility, we’ll be unavailable for the reactive.”

5. What should be a proper attitude when we discover we have not been good stewards of the time the Lord has given us?

“But even when we aim intentionally to let love drive our schedules, none of us will execute perfectly, or even adequately. Sinners are chronic time-wasters and regularly fall prey to bouts of lovelessness. Even the most disciplined time-managers are vulnerable to substantive missteps every day. So what do we do with regret over all the time we’ve squandered? God holds out this hope as we learn to love by managing our time: Redeem your wasted days, weeks, and years by letting them drive you to Jesus, and inspire you, by faith, to more carefully count the days still ahead. When the gospel floods our soul, and our schedules, and we know deeply that “Christ Jesus has made me his own,” then, in all our imperfections and indiscretions—but alive in faith, powered by the Spirit, and driven by love—we’re able to “press on to make it my own” and “forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead . . . press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3:12–14). You may always be on the clock, but the mercies of Christ are new every morning. Even every hour.”

6. Four Lessons in Fruitful Time Management:

a. Consider Your Calling

God has gifted each of us for the common good (1 Cor. 12:7). He empowers a variety of gifts, services, and activities among his people (12:4–6). In terms of our professional “calling,” often we find it easier to identify what it is God might be moving us toward in the future, rather than what he has presently called us to today. For instance, it can be difficult for the business student, sensing a “call” to one day do business for the glory of God, to realize that his present calling is that of a student, even as he moves toward his perceived future call in business. Our professional calling—that regular endeavor for which God has designed our head, heart, and hands for some particular season of life—flows not only from our own aspirations and the affirmations of others, but also from a tangible opportunity. One of us might feel the call to some new profession, and have the happy approval of those who know us best, but until some specific door swings open and we have the live opportunity to begin operating in that field, that calling remains future—and we neglect our previous charge to the detriment of our joy and the good of others.

b. Plan with Big Stones

Next, in light of God’s calling on us today, identify the key priorities that make up that calling. Typically, these priorities will be considerably compromised, if not abandoned altogether, if we don’t plan for them with some intentionality. Some have called these “the big stones.” The little pebbles are the smaller things to which we regularly give time but don’t contribute directly to the main priorities of our calling. If we put the big stones first into the jar of our schedule, we’ll be able to fill the cracks with a good many pebbles. But if we put the pebbles in first, the big stones likely will not fit.

c. Make the Most of Your Mornings

Learn a lesson from the psalmists (Pss. 5:3; 30:5; 46:5; 59:16; 88:13; 90:5–6, 14; 92:2; 143:8), and from Jesus himself (Mark 1:35), and from many of the “greats” in the church’s history, and make the most of your mornings. Study after study confirms the importance of the first hours of the day for fulfilling the most important (and often most intensive) aspects of our calling. In the morning, we’re typically our sharpest and have the largest store of energy to work creatively and proactively. Also, in the morning we’re less likely to be sidelined by interruptions and the urgencies that arise as the day wears on. How we regularly invest our mornings can be telling. How many of us have found it true that where our morning is, there our heart will be also?

When our top priority each day is reorienting toward Jesus and hearing his voice in the Scriptures, we’ll be more likely to create space for that early, and less likely to leave it to chance that something won’t drown it out later in the day. Then, vocationally, how we spend those first few hours on the clock can be critical. As difficult as it can be to resist procrastinating on our most intensive and demanding tasks (“the big stones”), the most strategic time to tackle them is first thing in the morning. As to how guarding our mornings like this might be driven by love, think of it this way: In defending the light of our early mornings from trifles, we free ourselves to go on the offensive to beat back the darkness with flexibility for unscheduled acts of love later in the day. This leads to a fourth and final lesson.

d. Create Flexibility for Meeting Others’ Needs

So far, we’ve been mostly implicit about how these broad time management lessons function in the service of love. Now let’s get explicit. On the one hand, our careful consideration of calling, and planning in light of key priorities, and making the most of the day’s first hours all function in the service of love as the proactive output of our vocation to serve and bless others. This is, after all, what our calling is in its truest and deepest sense: how God has prepared for us, with our particular abilities, in a certain season of life, to regularly expend time and energy for the good of others. That’s the proactive dimension to our calling. But on the other hand, knowing our giftings and attending to our priorities and tackling them first thing in the morning also unleashes us to be reactive as the day unfolds, able to respond to the unplanned needs of others, whether big or small, obvious or subtle. Love both plans for fixed blocks to push forward our proactive labors of love as well as allows margin and flexibility to attend to others’ unplanned needs as they arise. (pg. 215-218)

Week 12: COMMUNING WITH CHRIST **ON A CRAZY DAY**

1. How do we commune with Christ when crazy days occur?

“Hopefully you are developing your regular routine and go-to “habits of grace,” your own when and where and how’s for seeking daily communion with God. Perhaps you’ve been at this long enough that when the alarm goes off on a normal day, you have your emerging patterns and rhythms for how getting up and getting breakfast and getting ready all come together in relation to some short but substantive season of “getting in the Word,” to reset your mind and refill your heart and recalibrate your perspective before diving into the day. But then comes those crazy days. And they seem to pop up more frequently than we’re expecting. It may be the late night conversation, important but tiring, that has you hitting the snooze over and over the next morning. Or maybe it’s staying over with relatives, or having them squatting at your place. Or for young parents, it’s the child (or the children) who was up during the night, or rolled out of bed way too early wanting breakfast and your attention. Or maybe it’s just this season of life, and honestly every morning seems to have its own craziness. The Enemy seems to have some new, creative scheme with each new day to keep you from finding any focused “time alone with God.” Whatever the circumstances that throw a wrench into your routine, your crazy mornings raise the question, How should you think about, and engage in (if at all), the means of grace of Bible meditation and prayer when God’s good, but often inconvenient, sovereignty has you reeling without your routine?” (pg.219)

2. Five Ways we can Commune with Christ when Crazy Days Occur:

a. Remember What Your “Habits of Grace” Are About

“A good place to begin is with the big picture about your morning spiritual routines. Bible meditation is not about checking boxes, but communion with the risen Christ in and through his word. Walking in his grace today is not dependent on you going through your full devotional routine, or any routine for that matter. It is the regular pattern of communion with Christ that is vital, not extended time on one particular day. You could read all the passages, give time to extensive journaling in meditation and prayer, work at length on memorizing Scripture, and easily move right into a day of walking in your own strength and not dying to selfish interests to anticipate and act to meet the needs of others. In fact, it is likely the days when you feel strongest personally, and most spiritually accomplished, that you’re most prone to walk in your own strength, rather than by the strength that God supplies (1 Pet. 4:11).”

b. Consider the Path of Love

“It is loving (to others) to regularly commune with God. There are good horizontal effects to having our souls established and flourishing vertically. You will be a better spouse and parent and friend and cousin and child and neighbor if your soul is being routinely shaped and sustained by a real relationship with God in his word and prayer. Sometimes, the most loving thing we can do is get away from people for a few minutes, feed our souls on God and his goodness, and come back to our families and communities reenergized for anticipating and meeting others’ needs. But at other times, the path of love is dying to our desires for personal time alone—even in such good things as Bible meditation and prayer—to give attention to the toddler who is sick or woke up early, or to prepare and serve breakfast to family from out of town, or to assist a spouse or friend who is having his own crazy morning.”

c. Develop a Morning Routine That Is Adaptable

“Taking the crazy mornings into account, knowing that they will come and trying to be ready for them, may mean that you develop morning habits that are flexible. Try to create a routine that can expand into more than an hour if you have it, or collapse into just ten minutes, or even less, when love requires it. For example, you might consider a simple pattern like the one we’ve been moving toward in this book: Begin with Bible reading, move into meditation, polish with prayer. On days when you have extended time, you can read and meditate longer, and include journaling, and take time to put some rich passage to memory, and linger in prayer, from adoration to confession to thanksgiving to supplication. But on a crazy morning, you can get through the reading-meditation-prayer sequence in just a few brief minutes if needed. Instead of reading all the assigned passages in your Bible reading plan, just take one short psalm or little Gospel account or small section of an epistle.

Look for one manifestation of God’s goodness in the passage, and meditate on that goodness being for you in Jesus and try to press the truth into your heart. Then pray that truth in light of your day and the needs at hand, along with any other spontaneous requests on your mind that morning. If time is really tight, at least pause briefly to pray, and seek to carry a spirit of prayer and dependence into the day. Christ can meet you on the move. Express to God that it seems circumstances and the call of love are leading you right into life today. Acknowledge that you can’t earn his help with a long season of meditation and prayer, and ask that he would show himself strong today by being your strength when you feel spiritually weak. Actually, it’s often the crazy days when we feel most dependent, and our sense of weakness is good for God showing us his strength. “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9).”

d. Look for God's Provision through Others

“The means of grace aren't simply personal. They are profoundly corporate. Even our personal Bible meditation and prayer are deeply shaped by our lives in community, and by those who have taught us intentionally. Personal Bible intake and prayer can be powerful—and they are habits of grace worth pursuing daily—but so can a reminder of God's grace from a spouse or friend or fellow believer. Don't neglect the power of fellowship as a means of God's grace. If time alone with Jesus just isn't happening on this crazy morning, be on special lookout for some morsel of gospel food from conversation with someone who loves Jesus. If it's a crazy day for both of you, perhaps some quick conversation, pointing each other to Christ and his goodness toward us, would produce some food for you both that you otherwise wouldn't have had.”

e. Evaluate Later What You Might Learn for Next Time

“When the crazy morning and day has passed, seek to learn how you can grow in anticipating and tackling these in the future. If you stayed up too late to watch some show or movie needlessly, the lesson may be, very simply, to plan ahead better next time. Though often there's nothing to learn. This is just life in this age. The crazy days will come. And there are seasons of life, like with a newborn at home, where all bets are off and it's just a crazy season. But with a little intentionality, and with a modest plan in place, you can learn to navigate these days, and even walk with greater dependence on God, knowing full well that it's not the ideal execution of our morning habits of grace that secures his favor and blessing. You can commune with Christ in the crazy days.”