

YOUR  
ONE  
LIFE



*Small Group Study*

LANC E WITT



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January 8, 2023

# It's Later Than it's Ever Been

## OVERVIEW OF TODAY'S STUDY

You only get one shot at your ONE and only life. And the clock is ticking. In part, this series has been designed to help you take an honest assessment of how you've been living. Assessments are good. They are a reality check and help us get a clear picture of where we are right now. But assessments are not enough. We also need help in creating a roadmap to our desired destination in life. During these sessions we are going to be examining different components of a rich and meaningful life that is aligned with God's purposes. Your ONE life is a gift from God that He has entrusted to you. It is our hope and prayer that these studies will help you steward well the days you've been given.

## GET READY

- In the book *Your ONE Life* read
  - How to get the most out of this book
  - Introduction
- Read Psalm 90
- If you found out you only had 90 days to live, what would you do that you've never done before?
- Figure out how many days you have lived so far and be prepared to share that number with your group.

## START HERE

There is an old country western song called "Live Like You Were Dying." It is the story of a man who is told he only has a short time to live. And the song talks about all the things he would do knowing that his time on earth was quickly coming to an end.

You see, the truth is that we are all "terminal." We should all live like we are dying... because we are. Ultimately, the death rate at Oakwood will be 100%. None of us are exempt and none of us will escape. Ecclesiastes 8:8a (NLT) says "*None of us can hold back our spirit from departing. None of us has the power to prevent the day of our death...*"

So, the question is not "if", but "when."

When it comes to the number of your days, there is no negotiating, bartering, or borrowing. There are some things in life you just can't borrow. You can't borrow somebody else's relationship with

Christ, you can't borrow somebody else's talents, you can't borrow somebody else's soul, and you can't borrow someone else's days. Your days have been numbered by God and you will not live one second beyond what God has appointed for you.

Based on the authority of God's word, we know that this life is not all there is. The grave does not mark the end of our existence. The Bible says that your soul is immortal. You are going to live somewhere FOREVER. Let that sink in. Compared to eternity, your life on earth is a blip on the screen of time.

James 4:14 (NIV) says, *"Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes."*

The Bible also teaches that choices and decisions I make in this life have a defining impact on my future in eternity. Don't miss this. There is an unbreakable link between this life and eternity. What I do in this life ripples in eternity.

Jesus invaded history and by his death on the cross made it possible for us to have life in heaven on the other side of death. WOW. What an incredible gift. Now, here is the icing on the cake. Jesus not only came to give us eternal life in heaven, but he also came to give us abundant life here and now.

In John 10:10 (KJV) Jesus said, "I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly." The word "abundantly" has in it the idea of "overflowing."

The New Living Translation puts it like this: "My purpose is to give life in all its fullness."

So, consider this question, "What would it look like for you to live abundantly? " To have an "overflowing" life? To live life in all its fullness?

If some of us were honest, we would have to admit that our lives have never been more full, but never less fulfilled. Our lives feel cluttered and confused. We feel overloaded and overwhelmed. We run fast, but we can't outrun the emptiness we feel. We secretly wonder if this is all there is or if this is how life was meant to be lived.

## GO DEEPER

So, where do we start? There is a passage of Scripture written by the apostle Paul that I believe is a wonderful launch pad for this series. It is found in Romans 13.

In verses 11 and 12 Paul says, *"Another reason for right living is that you know how late it is; time is running out. Wake up, for the coming of our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is almost gone; the day of salvation will soon be here. So don't live in darkness. Get rid of your evil deeds. Shed them like dirty clothes. Clothe yourselves with the armor of right living, as those who live in the light."* Romans 13:11-12 (NLT)

Found in these two verses are 3 challenges for us today.

## 1. Live with a sense of urgency

Paul says, “another reason for right living is that you know how late it is; TIME IS RUNNING OUT.” Do you hear the urgency in those words? We know that we only have a limited time here, but we can begin to live and act as if we will be here forever. There was an interesting survey done among college students. They were asked this question: “If you could know the exact date of your death, would you want to know?” 87% said “No.” In most of us there is a kind of denial that doesn’t want to face our mortality.

We can be lulled into self-deceit. There would be nothing sadder than getting to the end of life, looking over your shoulder and wondering “what happened?” So many unfulfilled dreams, so many lost opportunities, so much left undone, so many regrets.

Now, let’s take a moment to clarify something. Living with urgency doesn’t mean living faster or busier. Frantic does not equal urgent. To live with a sense of urgency means to live with an awareness that you aren’t promised “someday.” It means being alert to the fact that the clock is ticking. You see, life is fragile, uncertain, and in so many ways, it is out of your control.

No matter how careful you are; no matter how good your car’s safety equipment is; no matter how much you “play it safe”, there is NO guarantee that you will make it to tomorrow.

Not only is the future uncertain, the past is forever gone. We cannot retrieve it or relive it. We all know people who constantly live in the past. They are always looking in the rearview mirror. As Christ followers, we must learn to let God’s amazing grace and mercy cover our past. Let it go.

The past is gone... tomorrow is an unknown. It is not promised or guaranteed.

One day Jesus was talking about people who constantly fret about “tomorrow.”

In Matthew 6:27-30 (NLT) Jesus said, “*Can all your worries add a single moment to your life? Of course not. And why worry about your clothes? Look at the lilies and how they grow. They don’t work or make their clothing, yet Solomon in all his glory was not dressed as beautifully as they are. And if God cares so wonderfully for flowers that are here today and gone tomorrow, won’t he more surely care for you? You have so little faith!*”

Just as we must let God’s grace and mercy cover the past, we must let God’s care and providence cover our future. He is a good God. He is a loving father. We may not always understand his ways, but we can trust his heart.

So, if your past is covered by God’s grace and your future is covered by God’s care, then where should we live? We should live in the NOW. We should live in the present, because that is really all we can do anything about.

The Psalmist declares in Psalm 118:24 (NLT), “*This is the day the Lord has made. We will rejoice and be glad in it.*”

## LIVE IT OUT

So, the first challenge of this series is to “embrace today.” It is to seize the gift of this day. It is to “live in the moment.” It means not looking past today. It means doing what you can today because tomorrow is not promised.

Let’s make a commitment together. As a group, would you be willing to declare the next 7 days as a “No regret” week? When we gather back here one week from now, let’s look each other in the eye and say “I didn’t live in the past. I didn’t worry about the future. I embraced each day as a gift. I didn’t take life for granted this week. I didn’t take the people in my life for granted this week.” Wouldn’t it be awesome if that was our testimony?

It’s later than it’s ever been. Live with a sense of urgency.

## 2. Live with a sense of eternity

Let’s go back to Romans 13:11b-12. Paul says, *“Wake up, for the coming of our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is almost gone; the day of salvation will soon be here.”*

As much as it is a mistake to take today for granted, it is an even bigger mistake to take eternity for granted. While we need to learn to embrace today, we must never think that “today” is all there is. Even a lot of Christians live like there is nothing beyond the grave. Let’s be honest, most of us are so consumed with pursuing the good life here and now that eternity rarely crosses our mind.

Paul pleads with us to “wake up”, for the coming of our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.”

So, what does Paul mean when he says, “the coming of our salvation is nearer now?”

The Bible talks about our salvation in past, present, and future tense. There was a moment in the past when you personally received Christ as your savior. At that moment of conversion, the Bible says you were “born again.” You were saved. But the Bible also says that you are “being” saved which is present tense. Salvation isn’t just an historical event; it is living and dynamic and active in my life today. But the Bible also talks about my salvation in the future. It is the idea that my salvation will one day be complete when I am in the presence of Jesus, no longer struggling with sin and living in my glorified body.

So, Paul is saying that the full and glorious completion of your salvation is closer today than it was yesterday. Implicit in Paul’s words is a warning. You are rushing headlong toward eternity. You are terminal and what a tragedy it would be for you to not be prepared. It is in this life that you make preparation for eternity. There is no second chance after death.

Hebrews 9:27 (NLT) says, *“And just as each person is destined to die once and after that comes judgment.”*

The Bible is absolutely clear that to be prepared for eternity, you must be born again. You must personally receive the gift of salvation made possible by Jesus' death on the cross. If you have never stepped over the line of faith and asked Jesus to be the savior and CEO of your life, you can do that today.

Paul is also reminding us that, while we ought to live with a sense of urgency in this life, this world isn't our home. The Bible says that we are pilgrims, wanderers, and nomads on this planet.

There is an intriguing story from the life of Winston Churchill. As the Prime Minister was making plans for his funeral, he asked to be laid in state in the heart of London at St. Paul's Cathedral. He requested that his casket be placed under the massive dome in the center of the Cathedral. Churchill then requested two trumpeters be stationed on each side of the balcony that circles the dome. It was his wish that at the close of the service the trumpeter on one side would play taps. When he was finished the trumpeter on the other side was to play reveille, the wakeup call. What a beautiful picture of the reality that when we are laid to rest after this life, we awaken to a life in eternity.

We literally will live happily ever after. We are going home. Every morning when you awake, you can tell yourself "I am one day closer to home."

The apostle Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 4:18 (NIV) "*So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.*"

## LIVE IT OUT

So, what would it look like for you to fix your eyes on the eternal? Are you spending all your time chasing after that which is going to wear out, go out of style, break down, collect dust, and ultimately end up on a garbage heap? Our world makes it hard to focus on eternity. Every commercial or internet ad or the newest model car all fuel my insatiable appetite for "MORE." But it's all just temporal. What would it look like for you to be pre-occupied less with all the temporal stuff of life?

So, Paul challenges us to 1) live with a sense of urgency and embrace today. Live in the moment and see today as a gift from God. And he also challenges us to 2) live with a sense of eternity. Remember that this life is not all there is. I must make preparation in this life for my life in eternity.

There is one final challenge in this passage.

### 3. Live with a sense of priority

If you really only had 90 days left to live, how would your priorities change? How would you spend your last 2,160 hours on this planet?

The first two challenges really inform this challenge to live with a sense of priority. When we live with a kind of bi-focal vision, one eye on eternity and one eye on the gift of "today", then we can



really begin to prioritize our lives and actions. Now we can know WHAT we should do, WHERE we should spend our time, and HOW we should behave.

Paul challenges us in Romans 13:12 with these practical words, “*So don’t live in darkness. Get rid of your evil deeds. Shed them like dirty clothes. Clothe yourselves with the armor of right living, as those who live in the light.*”

The word picture that Paul uses here is one we can all relate to. It is the image of taking off and putting on clothes. In order to live like you were dying, you will have to “take off” wrong living and you will have to “put on” right living. It requires change. It requires adjustment. It requires a decision. It requires effort. It won’t happen by accident.

For a moment, let’s go back to John 10:10. Earlier, we only looked at the last half of the verse where Jesus declared that he came so that we might have life and have it more abundantly. The first part of that verse says, “the thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy.” We could all look back over our lives and identify things that stole the abundant life from us. Mostly it’s the distractions, the lies, the illusions, the misplaced priorities.

In order for us to live the abundant life Jesus promised, we must have clear priorities and we must identify the things that keep us from living for that which is most important.

Paul doesn’t give us a lot of specifics in this passage. So, let’s look at a couple of specific ideas that will be helpful for those of us living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### ***Take off your frantic pace of life***

Hurry is a devious enemy of the abundant life. In our rush to accomplish and achieve and live life to the fullest, we rob ourselves of some of life’s richest moments. This insatiable need for speed sets us up for a monumental struggle.

We live in an age of continuous activity which consumes all our time and attention, but which cannot satisfy the deepest longings of our souls. The badge of busyness is one that we wear with honor, but in reality, it is a curse to the health of our souls and relationships and priorities.

Busyness is not so much about the length of our to do list or the number of meetings on our calendar. It has morphed into a state of mind and disposition of the soul. We have a hurried spirit.

If we knew we were dying, we wouldn’t speed up, but rather we would slow down. We would “put off” some things that clutter our lives. We would slow down to enjoy, savor, linger, and relish those things that really matter. For example, when someone in our family is hospitalized, we find the ability to push the pause button on everything else.

Psalm 46:10 is an indictment on the frantic pace of our lives. The Psalmist says, “Be STILL and know that I am God.” You cannot follow Jesus at a sprint. And speed is the enemy of intimacy; both intimacy with God and the people we love.

That is why, as part of God's top ten list, he gave us the command to observe a Sabbath. God built us for a rhythm of life that includes a day of rest every 7 days. Sabbath is a time to cease from work and our frantic busyness. In the uncluttered practice of Sabbath there is room to pay attention to the still small voice of God. It was not just something for followers of God in the Old Testament. It is desperately needed for fatigued and frazzled believers today.

## LIVE IT OUT

So, how about it? Slow down. Walk slower. Drive slower. Don't constantly look at your smart-phone. Don't fill every minute on your calendar. What could you jettison out of your weekly schedule? What is "robbing" time and life from you? Take a hard look at the pace of your life. In order to steward well your ONE life, you will have to ruthlessly eliminate the unimportant.

### *Put on more time for relationships*

Slowing down allows you to pay attention, especially to relationships. After all, people are eternal and your relationship with God is eternal. So, if you are going to focus on that which outlasts this life, focus on your relationship with God and your relationships with others.

Jesus was such a great example of this. He spent large blocks of time nurturing his relationship with his Heavenly Father and he paid attention to the people in his world.

No one has ever had the kind of personal laser vision that Jesus had. He noticed an inconspicuous tax collector sitting in a Sycamore tree. He saw a blind man sitting by the side of the road. He paid attention when a diseased woman desperate for healing reached out and just touched his robe. He saw and embraced the children that everyone else ignored.

There are all kinds of people just waiting to be noticed, to have someone just pay attention to them. Every day you pass people who smile, shake your hand, and make small talk, but inside they are dying for someone to pay attention to them. Here is the saddest part; some of those people are the people in our family. We walk past them dozens of times a week.

If we knew we were dying, we would certainly make time for some longer and deeper conversations with people we love. There are some things we would want to make sure didn't go unsaid. Some of us have reduced communication in our marriage to managing tasks and schedules. Who will pick up the dry cleaning? What time will we meet for dinner? Who is taking the kids to soccer practice? You don't know how much time you have. Don't miss the chance to sit down with your daughter and let her know how you feel about her. Don't miss the chance to sit down with your aging parents and spend time enjoying them.

## LIVE IT OUT

In the spirit of "living with a sense of urgency", take this challenge. **THIS WEEK**, make relationships a greater priority. Who do you need to get with for an unhurried lunch? Don't let your good intentions turn to painful regrets.

You see, getting clear about your priorities is the most liberating way to live. You are free to stop chasing after all the stuff that doesn't matter. You are free to stop living for the approval of others. You are free to not conform. Because you are living with an eternal perspective, and you are clear about God's purposes for your life.

To live the life we long to live, we must make it...

More about today, less about tomorrow.

More about people, less about possessions.

More about God's priorities, less about my preferences.

More about the eternal, less about the temporal.

The clock is ticking. You don't get a second shot at today. It's later than it has ever been. So, let's commit to living a "no regret week."

January 15, 2023

# You Are Ridiculously in Charge of Your LIFE

## OVERVIEW OF TODAY'S STUDY

Are you really living the life you long to live? Seriously, take a moment to do an honest assessment. What's working? What's not? What's missing? Are you living out your stated priorities? It is easy for us to get busy and never give any thought to where our life is headed. We can click off days, weeks, months, and even years without really examining our lives and making mid-course adjustments. During this week's lesson we will take steps to ensure that we are leading ourselves well and not squandering the one and only life we will ever have.

## GET READY

- ▶ In the book *Your ONE Life* read chapters 1-5 on "Crafting the Life You Long to Live"
- ▶ Read Psalm 90:10-12 and Philippians 3:8-14
- ▶ On a scale of 1-10 (with 1 being low and 10 being high), how would you rate your current level of satisfaction with your life? Why did you give yourself that number?
- ▶ Complete the following statement. Someday, I hope to....
- ▶ If your life ended this month, what would you regret?

## START HERE

Everybody loves a winner!! Unbelievable effort and resources are poured into creating winners in our culture.

### Discussion Question

What are some words that describe what it takes to become an Olympic gold medalist?

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If that much effort is poured into creating winners for temporal, fading rewards, then how much more significant is it to invest our efforts in being a spiritual champion.

It is an obvious adrenaline rush to perform in front of a stadium full of people and to have your efforts applauded. How much greater to stand in front of the God of the universe and have him look you in the eye and say “You were a good servant. I am so pleased with you.”

The apostle Paul, a master of word pictures, gives us a very poignant word picture to help us understand how to be spiritual winners in life. He draws his picture from the realm of athletics.

He compares the Christian life to a race. This would immediately conjure visual images of the Isthmian games. They were held every other year on the Isthmus of Corinth and were similar to the Olympic games.

Paul’s primary thought is this: what is true for athletes in a race is true for Christians in the race of life. This requires good self-leadership. The Bible is very clear that we can’t live the Christian life successfully on our own. We need the power of the Holy Spirit, the guidance of God’s Word and the support of other believers.

But you aren’t passive when it comes to your life. You are responsible for your life; you’re the steward of your life. You will someday give an account to God for your one and only life. You have limitless options for what you could do with your life—what you think about, what you spend your time doing, what you spend your money on, what you choose to love, what matters to you, and what decisions you’ll make. It’s easy for us to get distracted and swept along in the current of everyday life. We can click through our days without really taking the time to ask where we’re going and how we’re living.

John Kotter said, “Most people don’t lead their own lives—they accept their lives.” Kotter is saying that rather than exerting good self-leadership, most people get caught up in the current of everyday life and passively get swept along to an unwanted destination.

In the words of Henry Cloud, we are ridiculously in charge of our lives. Others can support, care, encourage, instruct, challenge, rebuke, and mentor us, but we must lead ourselves.

## GO DEEPER

The apostle Paul gives us some great instruction on how we can lead ourselves well and craft the life we really long to live.

*In Philippians 3:8-14 (NLT), Paul says, Yes, everything else is worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage, so that I could gain Christ and become one with him. I no longer count on my own righteousness through obeying the law; rather, I become righteous through faith in Christ. For God’s way of making us right with himself depends on faith. I want to know Christ and experience the mighty power that raised him from the dead. I want to suffer with him, sharing in his death, so that one way or another I will experience the resurrection from the dead! I don’t mean to say that I have already achieved these things or that I have already reached perfection. But I press on to possess that perfection for which Christ Jesus first possessed me. No, dear brothers and sisters, I have not achieved it, but I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and look-*

*ing forward to what lies ahead, I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us.*

## 1. Focus on life's highest priority

Paul says in v. 8 that everything else in life is worthless compared with the unbelievable privilege of knowing Christ. And, he says that he has jettisoned everything else so that it doesn't distract him and weight him down.

A few years ago, in a London Marathon a man recorded the slowest marathon in history. Lloyd Scott finished in five days, eight hours, twenty-nine minutes and forty-six seconds. Unlike other runners who were wearing running shoes, nylon shorts and a tank top, Lloyd was wearing a deep-sea diver's suit with a heavy metal helmet. What a poignant picture of many of us in the race of the Christian life. We are trudging along, weighted down with a lot of unnecessary baggage.

### Discussion Question

What are some things that end up distracting and weighing down Christians living in the 21st century?

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In our spiritual journey, we must learn that speed and intimacy do not make good partners. While life is like a race, you cannot develop spiritual intimacy on the run. The pace of life in our culture continues to accelerate, and we are addicted to speed. We cram every hour full and try to do more quicker.

This insatiable need for speed sets us up for a monumental spiritual struggle. Our bodies are over-stimulated, but our souls are undernourished. Speed, hurry, activity, and LIFE drain our souls. It might be true that the pace of life is doing more to shatter our souls than anything else. When you study the life of Jesus you soon discover that he was never in a hurry. Jesus took time and he took his time. One of the things he regularly took time for was time alone with his Father. These carefully guarded moments with his Father were spiritually energizing and replenishing.

Now, here's a truth you can't afford to miss. God speaks in the margins. To hear God and know God you must create space in your life. You must create margin moments in your day when you can, symbolically speaking, sit at the feet of Jesus. These times will not only help you grow, they will replenish and nourish your soul.

There is an old Christian song that captures this point. It says, "Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in his wonderful face, and the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace"

Paul knew that the ultimate target in life was a personal, intimate, growing, ongoing relationship with Jesus. When Paul talks about "knowing" Christ, he uses an interesting word. It is the Greek word "gi-

nosko” and means to know by experience. In other words, Paul doesn’t mean “knowing about” Christ, but rather knowing him experientially.

Do you realize that your highest and holiest calling in life is to know Christ?

The goal of life is not just raising good kids.

The goal of life is not to have a million-dollar retirement portfolio.

The goal of life is not to have your own business.

The goal of life is not to travel the world.

The goal of life is not the acquisition of fame.

The goal of life is not even to be a productive worker for Christ.

Jesus said it like this in Matthew 22:37-40 (NLT) *“Jesus replied, ‘You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. A second is equally important: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the other commandments and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments.”*

### Discussion Question

If you only had a short time to live, how might your relationship with God change?

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Maybe one reason there is so much restlessness among Christians is that we aren’t really clear what the goal is. We receive many competing messages. So, we live life with a sense of ambiguity. Just wandering and meandering our way through life, going from one paycheck to the next, one year to the next and not knowing what is the north star of our life.

One reason there is so much pettiness among Christians and in churches is that we have lost sight of our purpose. Petty things become unimportant when people become focused on the purpose of knowing and loving God.

Someone has said “if you don’t know what you’re aiming at, you’ll hit it every time.”

Your highest calling in life is a love relationship with Jesus!!! There is so much to know of Christ. You can spend your whole life pursuing him and never fully comprehend or exhaust all there is to know of him.

In verse 9 Paul talks about the starting line of the Christian life. He says, *“I no longer count on my own goodness or my ability to obey God’s law, but I trust Christ to save me. For God’s way of making us right with himself depends on faith.”*

Earlier in this chapter, Paul reviews his very impressive resume. Yet, in v. 9 he says he isn’t counting

on his good deeds for salvation. He is counting on a faith relationship with Christ. And now that he is saved, he is going to spend the rest of his days deepening that relationship with Christ.

Paul elaborates by saying that He also wants to experience the power of Christ's resurrection. Isn't it an awesome thought to imagine the dynamite power that raised Jesus from the dead activated in your everyday life?

As we come to know Christ and are conformed to his image, his power is released in us. That is what it means to walk in the Spirit.

Most of us would read the first part of verse 10 and say, "Sign me up!."

But Paul isn't finished. In the last part of verse 10 he states, "*I want to know him in the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings.*"

Paul knew that there were many things he could not learn about Christ except through pain. We want the power but spare us the pain. Maybe we need to embrace the old saying "No pain, no gain."

One of the most critical means of deeply knowing Christ is through the regular, authentic practice of spiritual disciplines.

It is important to be very clear about the "why" of spiritual practices/disciplines. When we became Christ followers, most of us were taught about the importance of spiritual disciplines and spending time with God. Many of us were taught to have a daily "quiet time" where we would spend time in prayer and God's Word. But usually, we don't really give much thought to the goal or desired result. We just know that good Christians have a regular "quiet time."

"Spiritual disciplines are like garden tools." They prepare the soil and remove the impediments so that the soil of our souls is in a place where God can shape and refine us into the likeness of Jesus. In other words, we don't measure our spirituality by how many times this week we had our quiet time. Rather, the measuring stick is the slow, incremental progress toward Christlikeness.

Paul says it like this in 1 Timothy, "*train yourself to be godly. For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.*" 1 Timothy 4:7b-8 NIV

The goal of the Christian life isn't to become an expert in spiritual practices or become knowledgeable about the Bible. The goal is to become like Jesus.

There are two tracks on which spiritual transformation runs. Sustained spiritual growth requires both HABIT AND HEART. It takes consistent spiritual practices and genuine heart desire for true spiritual growth to take place. Spiritual practices (habits) without heart lead to hypocrisy and legalism. Think Pharisees. On the other hand, heart without habit leads to inconsistent growth and dependence on shallow emotionalism. It is in the convergence of heart and habit where true spiritual transformation takes place.



## LIVE IT OUT

So, what would it look like for you to be more focused in your pursuit of knowing God? What do you do now that helps you to stay connected to Jesus? (See John 15:5-8). The point of spiritual disciplines is to help you know Christ better, not simply fulfill a spiritual obligation. What new spiritual discipline might you engage to help you know Jesus more intimately? (Unhurried prayer, fasting, silence, solitude, personal retreat, memorizing scripture, meditating on Scripture, or practicing Sabbath.)

## 2. Develop a holy discontent

As Paul moves to verse 12 and the first part of verse 13, he says, *“I don’t mean to say that I have already achieved these things or that I have already reached perfection! But I keep working toward that day when I will finally be all that Christ Jesus saved me for and wants me to be. No, dear brothers and sisters, I am still not all I should be...”*

Now, this is the apostle Paul talking. He is one of the greatest Christians to ever walk this planet. It would have been easy for Paul, after having been a Christian 30 years and looking at all his accomplishments, to just sit back and coast. And, yet his honest confession is “I haven’t arrived.” “I’m not satisfied.” It is so refreshing for someone like Paul to honestly confess “I don’t live perfectly. I still struggle.”

### Discussion Question

When you think about your life, is there some area where you have stopped growing and started coasting?

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It is doubtful that any of us would look at our lives and conclude “Well, I’ve experienced all there is of life, and I’ve gone about as far as I can in my Christian life.”

NO! That wouldn’t be our attitude. Paul recognized that he was still in “process”—And we are still in the process of “knowing Christ.”

Too many Christ followers get complacent and stop growing. Make it your ambition to “finish well” and stay faithful until the very last day of your journey.

### Discussion Question

When you think about finishing well, what does that look like for you personally?

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Acts 20:24 (NIV) says, *“However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me--the task of testifying to the gospel of God’s grace.”*

So, Paul focused on life’s highest priority, and he refused to just coast and be satisfied with where he was. He had a holy discontent.

### 3. Leave behind the past

In v. 13-14 Paul says, *“but I am focusing all my energies on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I strain to reach the end of the race and receive the prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us up to heaven.”*

“Forgetting the past”—We need to have a biblical understanding of the word “forget.” It doesn’t mean to do some kind of mental gymnastics to erase it from your memory banks. It means to no longer be influenced by or affected by the past.

Many people live their lives always looking in the rearview mirror.

Some of the unhappiest people we know live life always looking over their shoulder at past disappointments and regrets.

#### Discussion Question

What are some common things that keep people tied to the past?

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For many believers, they are in bondage to their past.

With God’s help, we can get past our past!! We have a response-ability—we cannot blame circumstances, family background, failures, and the hurtful actions of others. By the power of God in my life, I can choose to not be held hostage to my past.

Take encouragement today from Paul’s words. He had some really dark things in his past, and yet by God’s grace, he found forgiveness and the ability to move forward.

### 4. Lunge into the future

He not only forgets what lies behind, but he also looks forward to what lies ahead and strains to reach the end of the race.

Paul probably has in mind the picture of the chariot races. Imagine a close chariot race and the driver leaning forward and straining with every fiber of his being to win.

Clarence Jordan puts that dream into words when he says “It is difficult to be indifferent to a wide-awake Christian, a real live person of God. It is even more difficult to be indifferent to a whole body of Christians like this.”

The truth is none of us know for sure how much more time we have on this earth. There are no guarantees. It could be 30 days or 30 months... maybe 30 years. But whatever days you have left, they are a gift from God. Don't take them from granted. Lean into your future and begin to craft the life you long to live.

### Discussion Questions

As you think about your future, what excites you? These days, what purpose are you living for?

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A.W. Tozer says it like this: People who are passionately committed to God

- are facing only one direction
- can never turn back
- no longer have plans of their own

And the great news is that it is never too late to start living for God's purposes. Declare a new day and a new way of living. Start now! There's an old Chinese proverb that says, “The best day to plant an oak tree was twenty years ago. The second-best day is today.”

### LIVE IT OUT

One way to bring focus and greater purpose to your life is to write out a Life Purpose Statement. In Lance's book *Your ONE Life*, there is an exercise to help guide you through crafting your own life purpose statement (p.61-66). It can sound daunting to create a statement that captures the purpose of my entire life. But it can be incredibly fulfilling and clarifying. Give it a shot. You'll be glad you did.

January 22, 2023

# Who Are You Really?

## OVERVIEW OF TODAY'S STUDY

If I asked you to explain what a “soul” is, what would you say? It is a word that we throw around a lot in Christian circles, but most of us would struggle to give a clear definition of the word “soul.” In this week’s lesson we are going to explore this very important biblical idea of your soul. And we are also going to discover that having a healthy soul means having a healthy sense of who we are in Christ.

## GET READY

- In the book *Your ONE Life* read chapters 6-10 on “Life’s Operating System: A Healthy Soul”
- When you hear the word “soul”, what comes to mind?
- Read Matthew 3:17 and Romans 8:15-17
- How would you answer the identity question “Who are you?”

## START HERE

Your life is a lot like an iceberg. The part of your life that sits above the waterline is the “doing”, external, visible part of your life. It is there for everyone to see. But a massive part of your life is underneath the waterline. It is the “being”, internal, invisible part of your life. It is your soul.

### Discussion Question

The word “soul” is a word that we throw around a lot in Christian circles. If you were asked what a soul is, what would you say?

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Another analogy that might be helpful is to think of an auditorium that has a frontstage and a backstage. We all have a frontstage life and a backstage life. Front stage is our public, external world. It’s where we’re noticed, where the spotlight is on us, where people applaud and affirm us. On the front stage everything is orderly and neatly in its place. Frontstage is all about *doing*. For most of us, how we live on the frontstage (our actions) is where we find our sense of identity and worth.

But we also have a backstage life, and the two are connected. If we neglect the backstage, eventually the frontstage will fall apart. While the frontstage is our public world, the backstage is our private

world. The backstage is not only private but is also dark and usually messy. The audience isn't allowed there. Backstage has no spotlight and no glory. What happens backstage facilitates and what takes place on the frontstage. Backstage is all about being. It is the place of the soul.

We are very comfortable with frontstage conversations. We can easily engage conversations about weather, sports, economy, politics, careers and family. But backstage conversations are more uncomfortable.

When John Wesley started small groups, they had a set of questions they talked through weekly. The first question they asked each other every week was "How is it with your soul?" Most Christians would struggle to answer such a question. Most of us don't have conversations about what is going on inside of us at the level of our emotions and soul.

It is helpful for us to be reminded that our soul is the unseen, eternal, essence of our existence. Your soul is the "real" you. As Dallas Willard has said "Your soul is not just something that lives on after your body dies. It's the most important thing about you. It is your life."

Genesis 2:7 (NIV) says, *Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.* The Hebrew word for "being" is literally the word soul. God created man's body, but it wasn't until God breathed life into him that he became a living soul.

The Bible describes your body as the container for your soul. Someday your body is going to wear out and die, but that is not the end of you. The Bible is clear that the real you (your soul) continues to live on after your body has died.

2 Corinthians 5:1 (NLT) says, *For we know that when this earthly tent we live in is taken down (that is, when we die and leave this earthly body), we will have a house in heaven, an eternal body made for us by God himself and not by human hands.*

Again, Dallas Willard says, "You are not just a self; you are a soul. You're a soul made by God, made for God, and made to need God, which means you were not made to be self-sufficient."

### Discussion Question

What do you think Dallas Willard means when he says, "you are not just a self; you are a soul?"

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On your smartphone you have a bunch of apps which are the programs you have chosen to use. But running in the background on your phone is an operating system. You can't see it, but it allows all of the apps to function and work. Your soul is like the operating system of your life. And when we are living from a healthy soul that loves Jesus and is living for kingdom priorities, life is incredibly fulfilling.

## GO DEEPER

It is not enough to know you have a soul. We must learn how to pay attention to our soul and heart. Jesus often criticized the pharisees for only focusing on externals and neglecting matters of the heart and soul.

For most of us, when we got saved, our church's attempt to disciple us was mostly about the externals. It is fair to describe many churches discipleship programs as mostly "behavior modification." Stop saying certain words. Start reading your Bible. Stop going certain places. Start volunteering in the church. Stop chasing materialism. Start tithing. We learn how to "do" the right things and stop "doing" the wrong things.

### Discussion Question

What is the problem with an approach to discipleship that only focuses on "doing" (externals)?

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And while there is an external (doing) part of our discipleship, what doesn't get much airtime is the transformation that needs to happen in our inner life (being). We don't talk much about emotions or what might be driving our lives under the surface of our actions. But if we are going to become mature followers of Jesus, we have to address some of the backstage (soul) issues that can keep us unhealthy.

One of those issues that is critical for a healthy soul is the issue of your identity.

In the movie *Avatar*, Marine Jake Sully is a paraplegic whose military assignment is to gather intel by using an "avatar" identity. Even though his body was broken, the avatar he lived through virtually was strong, powerful and whole. The avatar everyone saw was radically different than the Jake Sully no one saw. Many of us in the church feel the need to assume an "avatar" identity.

The truth is that none of us are exactly what we appear to be. We all carry around a backpack full of stuff that we keep hidden from others. Past secrets, old wounds, destructive self-talk, secret addictions, emotional struggles, and angry attitudes. Most of us learn how to function in spite of these things. We project a well-adjusted, happy-go-lucky, confident, normal exterior... because that's what is expected of us. That's what good Christians "do".

But often it isn't the real us. It is a false self. And, what we project for people to see isn't what we are feeling and experiencing inside. As they say in Texas, we can be a "hot mess". We hear about the abundant life that Christ wants us to have... and we want that to be our experience. But, the voices from our past keep us defeated. Voices of shame, guilt, condemnation, anxiety, doubt, fear, and worthlessness.

But God wants to change all of that. In the Old Testament, on special occasions, people would speak a blessing into someone else's life. They were words of encouragement, hope, faith, and affirmation. The blessing was a way of saying "This is what I see in you." Or "Here is how I see God working in you and through you".

At the baptism of Jesus, God speaks a blessing out of heaven. Matthew 3:17 (NIV) says, *And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."*

Even Jesus needed his Father's blessing and affirmation.

## LIVE IT OUT

This week, commit to being a person who speaks words of blessing into the lives of others. Right now, identify at least one person that you will encourage this coming week.

May today's lesson be words of blessing into your life and may you forever settle exactly what God thinks of you. Some of us have never had the blessing of our earthly father, and we need the blessing of our heavenly Father.

## Discussion Questions

When you were growing up, did you feel like you had your parents "blessing"? What words or phrases did you hear a lot growing up?

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You may have never felt good enough. You may feel like you were a disappointment. You have lived with unanswered questions your whole life... "why was I abandoned?" "why didn't they want me?" For some, you felt like you had to earn your parents love and approval. And for some of you, it's been years since you lived at home, but those feelings are still raw. Certainly, some of us grew up in homes where love and blessing was spoken to us regularly. If that describes you, you are indeed blessed.

Even though God says, "the moment you receive Christ, you are a new person," it is not always easy to believe and feel that truth.

We still live in a sinful world, and we still have our flesh which is very capable of sin and wrong thinking. We have an enemy, called the devil, who would love to keep us defeated. And, we have all been deeply marked by our past.

One reason the blessing is so important is that many, if not most of us, don't see ourselves as God sees us. We carry around distorted views of ourselves and as a result, our souls are unhealthy.

It's like the funny mirrors at the circus. They distort reality. As we gaze into the mirror, we indeed see ourselves, but we don't see accurately.

Even though God has come to set us free from old patterns of behavior and old ways of thinking, we still see the old us. We still hear the voices of our past telling us what we were rather than listening to God as he tells us what we are.

One of the greatest chapters in all the Bible is Romans 8. In chapter 7 Paul has described this great battle that rages inside of him. As a believer, you want to do right. You want to follow God. Yet, you find yourself still struggling with old sin patterns. In fact, near the very end of chapter 7, Paul blurts out, "O wretched man that I am."

If we are honest, each of us can fully relate to Paul's words. Even as a Christian trying to live for God's purposes, there is still a struggle. Many biblical scholars believe Paul is not writing about his condition prior to knowing Christ and he is not talking about a time in his life when as a Christian he had strayed. NO! He is writing as a mature Christian who is sensitized to the struggle of sin in his own heart.

Those of us who have walked with Jesus a long time can relate to Paul's struggle. We can still struggle with misdirected motives and selfishness. We can posture and manipulate a conversation to put ourselves in a good light. Our words can be vicious. Our anger can spark easily, and we can lash out at the people we love the most.

The next chapter in Romans makes a dramatic shift. In chapter 8 Paul describes the victory we can have in Christ. We don't have to live a life of defeat and bondage to our past. We really can experience power over sin and the flesh. There is a phrase in Romans 8 that is the key that unlocks the chains of spiritual bondage. It is a phrase about our spiritual identity. It is the phrase "in Christ".

Chapter 8 of Romans begins "in Christ" (v.1) and ends "in Christ" (v.39). There is no condemnation in Christ, and nothing can separate us from the love that is in Christ.

Your spiritual address is "In Christ"

That little phrase "in Christ" is the treasury of your identity and value. It is found 130 times in the New Testament.

So, what puts you "in Christ"? Entering a personal relationship with him. Once you become a Christian, you are "in Christ" and God now sees you differently, because he sees you "in Christ". In Romans 8 we discover many facets of this new identity, but we want to look at 4 markers of your new identity.

## 4 Markers of Your New Identity

Romans 8:15-17 (NIV) says, *"For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father.'" The Spirit himself testi-*



*fies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs--heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory."*

That is what God thinks of you. But some of us are like Lazarus in the New Testament. Jesus had a good friend named Lazarus who died suddenly. The Bible says Jesus went to the tomb where Lazarus had been buried and ordered that the stone in front of the tomb be rolled back. He looked up toward heaven, prayed to his heavenly Father, and then in a loud voice cried "Lazarus, come out". Verse 44 of John 11 says that Lazarus came out, but he was still wrapped in his grave clothes.

This is a vivid picture of many Christians. Spiritually speaking, they have been brought to life, but they are still hindered and restricted by their old life. The life of God is in them, but they need to be set free.

### ***1. We are no longer slaves. We are sons and daughters. (v.15)***

*"For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship"*

You are in the family. Your worth is not based on what you know or own, but who knows you and owns you. Beginning to truly believe this helps you live from a healthy soul.

Ephesians 1:5 (NLT) says, *"His unchanging plan has always been to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ. And this gave him great pleasure."*

There is a huge difference between a slave and a son. Our children have privileges of safety, security, provision, acceptance, guidance, support, and love. Those are automatic because they are our kids.

Our kids don't have to try to get us to like them (at least most of the time) or manipulate us to love them. Many of us know that we are saved by grace, but we have spent our entire Christian lives trying to get God to love us.

You are God's child. Let that sink in. You are unconditionally loved and accepted. That is your forever identity.

The second marker of our identity is this.

### ***2. We no longer see God as distant, but we see him as daddy. (v.15b)***

*"And by him we cry, "Abba, Father."*

The word "abba" is an Aramaic word which is an intimate familiar term for father. The English word "daddy" probably best captures the spirit of the word "abba."

## Discussion Question

Do you struggle to think of God in such a familiar term as “daddy”?

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The notion of calling God your father is not big news to us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. However, this would have been front page news to every Jew in the first century. They thought of God in many ways, but “daddy” would not have been one of them.

In the Old Testament, only the high priest ever went directly into the presence of God. And, he only went once a year, on the day of Atonement. They held the holiness and name of God in such reverence, that they wouldn’t even say the word YHWH. It was too holy to even pronounce out loud.

For those of us who grew up with a view of God that is stern and detached, it can feel irreverent to view God as “daddy.” But it’s not... it is simply an indicator of the kind of intimate relationship God wants with us.

As our heavenly Father, he sees you as forgiven and perfectly redeemed. And he loves you unconditionally. For some of us, we have been searching our entire lives for a father who would love us just as we are.

This intimacy we enjoy with God is also underscored by the fact that he calls us his friends. He not only loves you, he likes you and calls you his friend. In John 15:15 (NLT) Jesus says, *“I no longer call you servants, because a master doesn’t confide in his servants. Now you are my friends, since I have told you everything the Father told me.”*

### **3. We are no longer confused, but we are confident in our spiritual identity. (v.16)**

*“The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children”*

Even though this battle rages in our soul between right and wrong, and even though we still struggle with sin, once we are “in Christ”, we are the children of God. And, the Spirit of God whispers to our spirit and confirms that we belong to the family. Our sonship (and daughtership) does not depend on how good we are or how little we sin; it depends on whether or not we are “in Christ”.

But sometimes we forget, and we need to be reminded that we are in the family.

In Scripture there are something like 36 different things that happened to you when you made the choice to follow Christ. You were justified, made a new creation, made spiritually alive, made holy, called a saint, forgiven, made at peace with God, reconciled, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, adopted, made co-heirs with Christ, and given eternal life. And that is just the beginning.

For some of us, the biggest step toward living from a healthy soul is to start listening to the voice of God’s Spirit telling us that we are loved, and we are family.

## LIVE IT OUT

Do a search on the internet or in a Bible program for Bible verses about your identity in Christ. Then, write out 3 of those verses on 3x5 cards and review those 3 verses every day for the next week.

Whether or not you are a child of God does not depend on how you feel. It depends on God.

Ephesians 1:13-14 (NLT) says, *And when you believed in Christ, he identified you as his own by giving you the Holy Spirit...The Spirit is God's guarantee that he will give us everything he promised and that he has purchased us to be his own people.*

The Greek word for “guarantee” is *arabon* and was also the word used for an engagement ring. The *arabon* indicated that you were spoken for and had entered into a covenant relationship with someone. The Holy Spirit is God's engagement ring letting you know of His commitment to you and love for you.

### **4. We are no longer spiritually poor, but now we are rich. (v.17)**

*And since we are his children, we will share his treasures—for everything God gives to his Son, Christ, is ours, too. But if we are to share his glory, we must also share his suffering.*

Paul ends Romans 7 with the statement “O wretched man that I am”. And just 17 verses later he says we are co-heirs with Christ to all that God has. We share in his spiritual wealth and treasures.

Ephesians 1:3 says, *How we praise God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms because we belong to Christ.*

Let that sink in. You can't fully understand how rich you are in Christ until you understand how wretched you are in yourself. The light of grace shines brightest against the backdrop of my own darkness.

## Discussion Question

What are some of the spiritual blessings that are ours in Christ?

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As we wrap up this lesson, let's go back to where we started. You have a soul. It's the “real” you. It is your invisible, internal world. And part of having a healthy soul means understanding and believing that your core identity is that you are a child of God. You are “in Christ” and nothing can ever change that. May the words of Zephaniah 3:17 (NIV) ring in your ears this week.

***“The Lord your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing.”***

January 29, 2023

# Just Stop It

## OVERVIEW OF TODAY'S STUDY

Our lives have never been fuller and faster. Everywhere you go these days you hear people wishing for a simpler life, a slower pace, and a calendar with more breathing room. It seems like everybody is frazzled and exhausted. The speed of life just continues to accelerate. We have 24/7 access to everything, and we are addicted to our smartphones. So, the big question for this week's lesson is "Does God care?" Does He care about the pace of our lives, and does he have anything to say about it?

## GET READY

- In the book *Your ONE Life* read chapters 11-15 in the section called, "It's About Time!"
- How would you describe the pace of your life these days?
- What is it, that when you actually do it, replenishes you?
- When you hear the word "Sabbath", what comes to your mind?

## START HERE

You have probably never heard the name Erich Brenn. But in February 1969 he appeared on the Ed Sullivan variety show. He was so popular that he would appear seven more times on the show. His claim to fame was "plate spinning."

Brenn's routine consisted of spinning five glass bowls on sticks that were four feet in length. While spinning the bowls, he would also start spinning 8 dinner plates. The idea was to keep everything spinning without letting anything crash to the ground. Just as a bowl began to wobble and look as if it would drop, Brenn would frantically run over and get it spinning again. It was both intriguing and stressful to watch.

Plate spinning is a great metaphor for how many of us live our lives. We frantically move through our week trying to keep all of the plates in our life from dropping. It can be exhilarating and exhausting at the same time.

These days, a life of balance seems like a "pipe dream", something that just isn't realistic or attainable. Maybe we should adopt the word "rhythm" as our goal. The word rhythm portrays something very different. Rhythm allows for busy seasons and the unexpected. Rhythm acknowledges that life can be intense at times and isn't always orderly.

There is a God-ordained rhythm that will allow us to live and lead from a healthy soul.

That rhythm is...

- Work... then rest
- Produce... then recover
- Go hard... then stop
- Exert energy... then replenish energy
- Empty our bucket... then fill our bucket

Noah benShea writes, “It’s the space between the notes that makes the music.” The same is true of life. We must have space (rhythm) between the notes of busyness to make life work as God designed it. Yet, we live in a world that is unfriendly to a healthy rhythm of life.

### Discussion Question

What word or two would you use to describe the pace of your life over the last 3 months?

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## GO DEEPER

### 1. God created rhythm

#### ► God hard-wired rhythm into the universe

We live in a universe defined by rhythm. Right now, you are breathing in rhythm. The average person inhales and exhales 15-16 times per minute. Your heart beats with a very predictable rhythm. When you get an EKG done, it is to measure the electrical rhythm of your heart. The tide comes in and goes out with a sense of rhythm. Much of the beauty of music is tied to rhythm. Farmers have a rhythm of planting and growing and harvesting.

In Leviticus 25 God gave the command that even the land was to be given a Sabbath every seven years. Even the physical dirt needed a break. Nothing was made to constantly produce. Everything God ever created needs rest and restoration. That includes you.

#### ► A life of rhythm is a deliberate choice

As you well know, there is always more that can be done and needs to be done. But you can choose a rhythm that declares even though there is still more to do, you can stop to rest and restore.

Jesus regularly took time to live in the spaces between the notes. He often withdrew from the demands of life to be alone and to be with his Father, even in the midst of overwhelming needs.

In Mark 1 Jesus is in Capernaum, and he has an incredibly busy day of ministry. He is the guest preacher in the synagogue that morning. During the service that day he is confronted by demons. Not only does he preach and deal with demons, but he also heals people. After church that day, Jesus goes over to Peter’s house for lunch. While there he heals Peter’s mother-in-law. And before he wraps up his day of ministry, the Bible says they brought everybody in town who was sick and demon-possessed to Jesus’ door. So, before he puts his head on the pillow that night, he heals more people and casts out more demons. That is a full day!

Mark 1:35a (NIV) says, *Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house...*

If you just read the first part of the verse you might think to yourself “Well, he is the son of God. So, he probably should get up earlier than everyone else. And he only has three years to launch this revolutionary movement called Christianity. So, he is probably heading off to another full day of preaching and healing.

But the last part of verse 35 says he *went off to a solitary place, where he prayed*. He deliberately chose a rhythm that allowed for space and quiet and time just to be with His Father.

Jesus not only embraced this for himself, but also helped the disciples embrace the idea of rhythm.

We read in Mark 6:31 (NLT) Then Jesus said, *“Let’s go off by ourselves to a quiet place and rest awhile.” He said this because there were so many people coming and going that Jesus and his apostles didn’t even have time to eat.*

And unlike you, Jesus lived at a time in history when “slow” was built in the fabric of daily life. Think about how much slower life was in those days. When the Bible says in Mark 10:46 that they came to Jericho, it wasn’t a 15-minute car ride. It was an all-day trip spent walking along the dusty road. The lack of technology and transportation forced life to be slower. The lack of cars, planes, e-mail, and smart phones made life less frenetic. We live in a very different world; therefore, we must be even more intentional about a life of rhythm that allows for space and rest.

### Discussion Question

What word or two would you use to describe the pace of your life over the last 3 months?

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#### LIVE IT OUT

This week consider having a candid discussion with your family or with a good friend about the rhythm of your life. In your conversation, answer the following question... “What would it take for me to have a healthier rhythm of life?”

## 2. God gave us a practical strategy for a healthy rhythm

God has actually given us a very practical strategy for helping us live a life of rhythm. And that strategy is called Sabbath.

### Discussion Questions

When you hear the word Sabbath what comes to mind? What, if anything, were you taught about Sabbath in your younger years?

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Many of us grew up in churches where Sabbath was a non-issue. We might have known it was one of the Ten Commandments, but we just assumed it was one of those Old Testament things that we didn't do anymore. We would have certainly believed that the other 9 Commandments were still valid, but somehow, we were led to believe the one about Sabbath didn't count anymore.

The concept of Sabbath traces its roots all the way back to creation. After God completed the work of creating the universe, he rested on the seventh day. He moved from creation to reflection. He certainly didn't rest because he was worn out from six straight days of creating. He rested to model for us this principle of rhythm.

This seventh day, the day of rest, was so important that God blessed it and declared it holy. Did you know that the first thing the Bible ever declared holy was not an object or a place or a person, but a "time," a twenty-four-hour period called Sabbath.

#### ► The ten commandments and Sabbath

Exodus 20:8-10a (NLT) says, *"Remember to observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. You have six days each week for your ordinary work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath day of rest dedicated to the Lord your God"*

Notice that God does put value on work. Six days are for working hard and being productive. Unless you are working hard and being fruitful you can't really appreciate the value of God replenishing you through the practice of Sabbath.

The word Sabbath is not a particularly deep or spiritual word. It simply means to "stop" or to "cease." In verse eleven of Exodus 20, the Lord anchors the command of Sabbath in creation. God says, "In my creation of the universe I modeled for you this principle of rhythm. Work, then rest. Produce, then stop."

Exodus 20:11 (NLT) says, *For in six days the Lord made the heavens, the earth, the sea, and everything in them; but on the seventh day he rested. That is why the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and set it apart as holy.*

Verse eleven says that God blessed the Sabbath day. It is not just holy and sacred, it is blessed. God infused the Sabbath day with blessings.

In Deuteronomy 5 the Ten Commandments are listed again. But this time there is a subtle change when the Lord talks about Sabbath. Deuteronomy 5:15 (NLT) says, *Remember that you were once slaves in Egypt, but the Lord your God brought you out with his strong hand and powerful arm. That is why the Lord your God has commanded you to rest on the Sabbath day.*

So, what does Sabbath keeping have to do with the Israelites being slaves in Egypt? There is actually a very powerful truth in this verse. Instead of anchoring Sabbath in creation, now the Lord anchors it in their sonship. Sabbath is meant to be a distinguishing characteristic for the people of God. One of the things that makes God's people different is they stop. They rest. When the Israelites were slaves in Egypt there was no day off, no rest, no vacation, and no down time. But now, as God delivers them and they are under his rulership and not the tyranny of Pharaoh, He wants them to know that rest is part of His divine design.

I think there is an even deeper lesson God was wanting them to learn. Their value to Him was not just in what they could produce. Their value was in relationship. Let that sink in! Even when you are resting on a Sabbath, you are just as valuable to God as when you are working.

### ► **Jesus and Sabbath**

Some of you are saying, "OK, I get it. The Sabbath made God's Top Ten list. But what does the New Testament teach about Sabbath? In fact, it seems like Jesus is always getting in trouble for violating the Sabbath."

The Jews had gone to great lengths to try and interpret the command of Sabbath. And so, to help God out, they established all kinds of specific laws to define what was "work" and what wasn't "work". So, when you read the stories found in the gospels, Jesus wasn't really violating the spirit of Sabbath but rather all these arbitrary rules the religious leaders had established.

The book of Luke says that it was Jesus' custom to observe the Sabbath and attend the synagogue. And nowhere in the gospels do we ever read that Jesus took the 10 Commandments down to the 9 Commandments.

The primary teaching of Jesus regarding the Sabbath is in Mark 2. Jesus and his disciples were walking through the field and began to pick some heads of grain. The legalistic Pharisees see this and come unglued. "*Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?*" Mark 2:24 (NIV)

What Jesus was doing was only unlawful to the manmade laws established by the Pharisees. Jesus responds by giving them an example from the life of David and then makes this declaration, "*The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.*" Mark 2:27 (NIV)

Jesus is basically saying, "God gave you the Sabbath as a gift. And you guys have totally hijacked it. You took what God intended as a blessing and you have turned it into a religious burden."



## Discussion Question

In what ways is Sabbath a gift to us?

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If you are hearing Sabbath as just another obligation you need to add to your schedule, you are missing the very point Jesus made in Mark 2. Sabbath is not a “have to”, it is a “get to.”

### Your ONE Life and Sabbath

If you don't have a biblical and theological conviction about the practice of Sabbath, the gravitational pull towards busyness will always win. So, discover for yourself what the Bible teaches about Sabbath.

Having time to rest and restore sounded like a great idea to most of us. But Sabbath is much more than a way to make sure you get the rest you need. Sabbath is one means of God insuring that we get quality time with Him. If you are married, it's just like your relationship with your spouse. In the midst of a busy week, you may have brief conversations, check in by phone during the day, or exchange text messages. It keeps you connected but that is no substitute for unhurried, quality time together.

Psalm 46:10 has only eight words and twenty-four letters, but it stands as an indictment to contemporary life: *“BE STILL, AND KNOW THAT I AM GOD.”*

Like Charles Spurgeon said, “Rest time is not waste time. It is economy to gather fresh strength. It is wisdom to take an occasional furlough. In the long run, we shall do more by sometimes doing less.”

The Jews have a wonderful tradition that symbolizes the practical impact of Sabbath. It is called Havdalah. At the beginning of the Sabbath, you would light a candle, and that candle is a reminder that this day is different than the other six days. This is a day that is not about work and productivity, but it is about rest and relationship (with God and with others). When the 24 hours of Sabbath was completed, the Jews would take the candle and extinguish it in a cup of wine. And then they would pour a little wine from the cup into a saucer. This symbolic act was to portray the truth that if you practice Sabbath well it will spill over into the rest of your week, and you will be a better person the other six days because you practiced Sabbath on the seventh day.

As we learn to slow down (externally and internally), this incredible gift from God allows us to rest, reflect, restore, and replenish. During Sabbath God whispers, “I've got this. I've given you permission to take off the next twenty-four hours.” The core issue is about trust. Sabbath challenges me to ask the question, “Can I really trust God to handle the world... and my world?”

Sabbath keeping also helps us embrace our limits and release control. God is God and we are not. Sabbath is a weekly reminder of our place in the universe. He is the creator, and we are

the creatures. We can't do it all or carry it all. But Sabbath reminds us that we are not as indispensable as we think.

When we practice Sabbath, we find that we are more aware and attentive. Slowing down our rpm's helps us be more attentive to ourselves, to God, and to the people in our life. We notice more. We feel more grateful. Joy comes a little easier. Stress diminishes.

Sabbath can also be huge in helping us with what we talked about in the last lesson... our sense of identity. Sabbath can be instrumental in helping us to be at rest as nothing more and nothing less than being a beloved child of God. On Sabbath, you are not the business owner, the spouse, the parent, the volunteer at Oakwood, or the financial provider for your family. That is a very humbling thought. But slowly, little by little, on Sabbath we can begin to believe it is "enough" to simply be a beloved son or daughter of the Heavenly King.

### 3. A framework for practicing Sabbath

What does observing Sabbath look like practically in 2023? Even if you are convinced biblically and theologically, you need a game plan. With the pace of life these days, you won't drift into a weekly observance of Sabbath. Unless you put a stake in the ground, the swirl of life will keep pulling you into an unhealthy rhythm.

#### Discussion Question

What are some possible roadblocks to consistently practicing Sabbath?

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But before we get into the nuts and bolts of observing Sabbath, it is important to clarify that Sabbath is not just another term for "day off". For the majority of us, a day off is just a different kind of work. Or worse, it's simply a day to recover and "veg out" because we are so depleted from the rigorous schedule of the week. But usually, it's the day we catch up on all the things we didn't get done during the week. But Sabbath is quite different than a day filled with chores, errands, and home projects.

Here is a framework for thinking about how you might observe Sabbath.

#### Discussion Question

If you had a day to do anything you wanted, what would an ideal Sabbath look like for you?

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## 1. Prepare

There is some work involved in getting ready to not work. For most of us, our lives are pretty scheduled, and it takes some advance planning to actually carve out time for a Sabbath.

That means that there are some chores and tasks that might need to be done on other days or at different times so that you can truly observe Sabbath.

Maybe one of the most important steps in preparing for Sabbath is to put it on your calendar. More important than having Sabbath on the same day every week is having one day in seven that you observe Sabbath.

It also helps me to call it Sabbath on our calendar. That communicates something very different than just reserving it as a day off.

### LIVE IT OUT

This coming week, sit down with a calendar (either paper or electronic) and do an honest evaluation of the last 60 days. Was the pace of your life out of control? Then, take a look at the next 60 days. Is there anything you need to adjust to have a healthier rhythm of life?

## 2. Stop

What does it look like for you to “stop” from working for 24 hours? What would that mean for your responsibilities? For your phone, email and social media?

If it drains life and energy, try to stay away from it on Sabbath. This implies that you and I need to be self-aware enough and attentive to our souls enough to know what puts life in us and what drains life out of us. For example, if you work indoors most of the time and spend a lot of time in meetings or on your computer, you might love to get outdoors on your Sabbath. Sabbath doesn't necessarily imply inactivity being passive. But it is a day where you rest and stop from “working” and having to be productive.

## 3. Rest

For some of us, the most spiritual thing we could do is take a nap! Or perhaps get a decent night's sleep. Certainly, the practice of Sabbath involves physical rest, but it is more than just taking a nap. It also involves “being at rest”, having a restful soul.

To take this seriously, you might need to have a discussion with your family about how your family is doing life. If every day is overscheduled and you drop into bed every night exhausted, you might desperately be in need of rest. If your kids are in half a dozen extracurricular activities, and you spend every day frenetically chauffeuring them around, you might desperately be in need of rest. If you work all the time and you're incessantly connected to your smartphone, you might desperately be in need of rest.

Listen to the invitation of Psalm 116:7 (NIV) *Return to your rest, my soul, for the Lord has been good to you.*

## 4. Delight

Isaiah 58:13 (NIV) speaks of calling the Sabbath a “delight”. It is not drudgery or religious obligation.

So, what is it you enjoy? Or what is it that is life-giving to you? Most Christians are delight deficient.

God gave us our five senses, not just for functional reasons, but as a means of pleasure and enjoyment.

- Beautiful music to hear
- Majestic creation to see
- Sweet delicacies to taste
- Colorful flowers to smell
- Soft hands to touch and hold

### LIVE IT OUT

At the end of this lesson is an exercise called The Replenishment Cycle. It is designed to help you know what fills your tank and what keeps you healthy. If you don't take the time to do this exercise during this week's lesson, be sure and do it sometime this week. Remember, self-care is not selfish, it is good stewardship... of your ONE life.

## 5. Worship

Exodus 20 says that the seventh day is a “Sabbath to the Lord your God.”

So, Sabbath is a day for unhurried, quality time with God. A Sabbath should be a time where our love and affection for God increase. It might include time participating in a worship service at Oakwood. It could also include listening to some of your favorite worship songs. It might include a leisurely walk for reflection and gratitude. It might include lingering over a rich passage of Scripture.

## Replenishment Cycle Instructions

The purpose of this exercise is to identify the things/activities that fill your tank and keep you healthy. In life, there are all kinds of things that suck/drain the life out of us. But to stay healthy, we need to have a few things that put life in us.

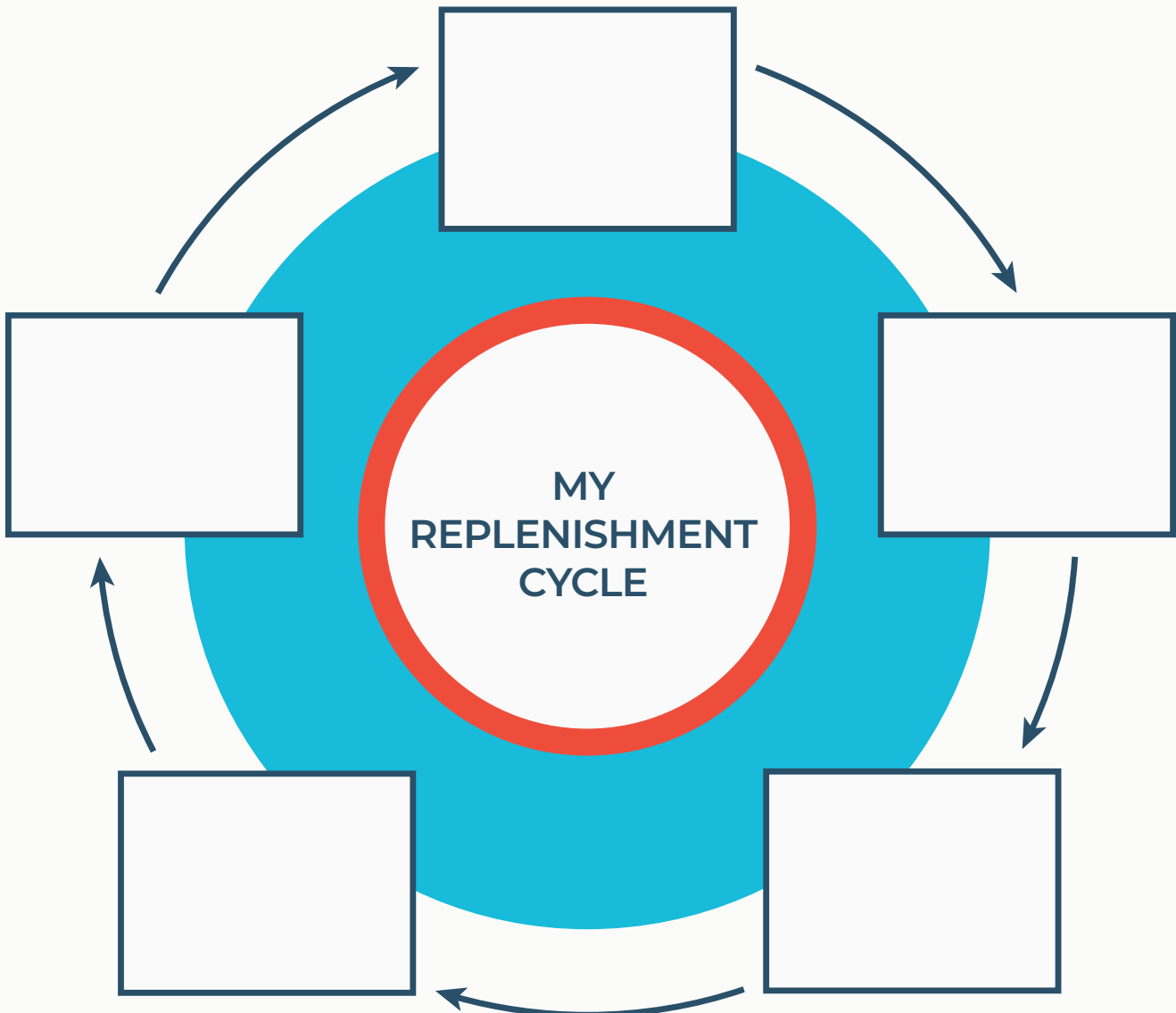
**1.** In each of the 5 rectangles on the next page, write down an activity that is bucket filling for you. Think about this for a moment. What is it, that when you do, it fills you. It could be alone time in the morning, or a date night with your spouse, or working out, or dinner with friends, or being in nature, or painting, or something else.

2. Now, either in the box or next to it, I want you to write down how often you need this ideally. If there are things in your rectangles that you can't do at least once a quarter, I would find something else to put in the box. So, for each of these... is it something that you ideally need daily, weekly, monthly, twice a month, etc.?

3. Now, in each box I want you to write one of three letters... R, Y, or G. The letter stands for red, yellow, green. This is to indicate the current status of the activity you have written in the box. Use the last 3 months as the time frame to determine which letter to put in each box. If it's green, that means its flourishing and thriving in your life right now. Yellow means it's not terrible, but it's not great. Red means it is almost nonexistent in your life right now.

4. Next, circle the one that is most critical to you staying in a healthy place. In other words, it is most important for keeping you replenished.

5. If you are married, I would encourage you to have your spouse fill out this sheet as well and then talk about it together.



February 5, 2023

# Shock and Awe

## OVERVIEW OF TODAY'S STUDY

Dallas Willard has said, “You must arrange your days so that you are experiencing deep contentment, joy, and confidence in your everyday life with God.” Christianity is not just about living life FOR God. It is also about doing life WITH God. It is about a growing relationship with your heavenly Father. To do life WITH God means that, like any relationship, we must work on communication. As believers, we call that communication prayer. Most Christians would say they feel very inadequate when it comes to their prayer life. We secretly wonder, “Does prayer really make a difference?” Today we are going to look at a biblical story that might just revolutionize your view of prayer.

## GET READY

- In the book *Your ONE Life*, read chapters 16–20 in the section called “Enjoying Life with God.”
- What three words would you use to describe your current relationship/connection to God?
- When in your life did you feel closest to God?
- How would you say you are doing these days with “enjoying” life with God?

## START HERE

Today's lesson is about a spiritual practice that is a key to you having a deep connection with God and spiritual power in your life. But it is a practice that is anemic in most churches and the individual lives of most Christians. If you grew up in a Baptist Church, you might remember Wednesday night prayer meeting. For many, it was the most boring hour of the week. It was usually just a handful of people. Most of the hour was spent sharing prayer requests and most of those were for people's physical ailments. A lot of prayer was directed toward broken hips and sprained ankles. When the group finally got around to praying, there was usually about 10 minutes left for actual praying.

There didn't seem to be any real passion or fervor in those prayer meetings. And the prayers were anything but faith-filled and bold. It doesn't seem like we actually expected anything to happen as a result of our prayers. Our prayers came more from a place of duty than delight. It's no wonder that so few people showed up.

Even though we know it is not true biblically or theologically, it can feel like prayer is passive. We can wonder if our prayers matter, and it can feel as though we're not really DOING anything.

## Discussion Question

What is a word or phrase that would describe your current prayer life?

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But there is a biblical story that stands in stark contrast to that Wednesday prayer meeting and the prayer experience of most individual Christians. This story is definitely not boring. It is filled with faith and boldness and can inspire us to radically alter our approach to prayer.

*One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples." Then Jesus said to them, "Suppose you have a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have no food to offer him.' And suppose the one inside answers, 'Don't bother me. The door is already locked, and my children and I are in bed. I can't get up and give you anything.' I tell you, even though he will not get up and give you the bread because of friendship, yet because of your shameless audacity he will surely get up and give you as much as you need. Luke 11:1,5-8 (NIV)*

## Discussion Question

What most stands out to you from this story?

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## GO DEEPER

Luke 11 opens with the most general, vague, non-descript statement maybe anywhere in Scripture. "One day Jesus was praying in a certain place."

- One day... the passage doesn't tell us which day.
- Jesus was praying... the passage doesn't tell us whether he was standing or sitting or kneeling. It doesn't tell us the words he was speaking or whether his eyes were closed or how long he prayed.
- in a certain place... the passage doesn't tell us where he was praying. We don't know if he was inside or outside.

Even though the description is generic, there must have been something gripping about watching Jesus pray. Because when he is done, one of the disciples says to him "Lord, teach us to pray."

The only thing the disciples ever asked Jesus to teach them was how to pray.

Jesus then launches into the well-known Lord's prayer. Although this is a little different from Matthew's version, it is basically the same. Jesus gives the disciples and us a model for the kinds of themes that ought to dominate our prayers.

This is about the "what" of prayer... the content of prayer. Most of us are familiar with the "what" of prayer and could probably recite from memory The Lord's Prayer.

But Jesus knows that there is another fundamental issue and that is our attitude toward prayer. Prayer is not just about saying the right words or speaking prayers that are simply theologically correct.

So, Jesus launches into a story to teach us about the attitude and posture of prayer. This passage also gives us a glimpse into the "divine side" of prayer. It helps us see God's attitude and response to our prayers.

To truly understand this story, you have to grasp the 1<sup>st</sup> century context for such a story. Remember that there were no cell phones and there was no email. And it was before the days of Hilton and Marriott. There is one other cultural reality that you have to understand. Hospitality was not just a nice gesture; it was a cultural obligation. You HAD to open your home not only to family and friends but also to strangers.

Because of the lack of communication ability, it was not uncommon for people to show up unannounced. In this story, you have a friend who shows up at your house unannounced and it's late at night. You are glad to see him and welcome him into your home. The problem is that you have no food to offer him.

Remember that this is also before the days of refrigerators. Kenmore and Frigidaire aren't going to arrive on the scene for another 1900 years. So, there really wasn't a technology that allowed you to store food. And there wasn't an HEB down the street.

So, you have a huge dilemma. You have unexpected guests that show up to your home and you are obligated to provide for them. But you don't have any food on hand to offer them.

Finally, you decide there is only one viable option. Even though it is midnight, and everybody is asleep, you are going to have to walk next door to your neighbor's house. You are going to have to ask to borrow some bread and lunchmeat so you can make a few sandwiches.

There was no late-night TV, so everyone in the house is down for the night. When your neighbor hears the knock on his door, he is grumpy and irritated. Basically, his response is "You've got to be kidding. It's midnight and the family is asleep. I'm not going to wake up everyone just to get you some bread."

You don't want to be the high maintenance neighbor. It's an awkward situation, but you can't blow off your obligation of hospitality for your guests.

You just can't take "no" for an answer. You knock again and say, "I'm really sorry, but I need to borrow a couple of loaves of bread... and I need it now."



Then, the punch line of the story comes in v. 8... *I tell you, even though he will not get up and give you the bread because of friendship, yet because of your shameless audacity he will surely get up and give you as much as you need.*

It wasn't friendship that got the neighbor out of bed and throwing loaves of bread out the front door. No, it was your boldness and "shameless audacity" that won the day.

The Greek word for shameless audacity means lack of sensitivity to what's proper. It is a compound word which means no respect or no modesty.

When you are desperate, you don't worry about good manners or protocol or policy. You don't care about image or what people will think.

Remember that this is a teaching about prayer. Notice that the man who went and knocked on his neighbor's door had a real need, and he was desperate.

God blesses "holy desperation." And he always has.

In his book *Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire* Jim Cymbala says, "I discovered an astonishing truth: God is attracted to weakness. He can't resist those who humbly and honestly admit how desperately they need him. Our weakness, in fact, makes room for his power."

**Discussion Question**

When it comes to prayer, what turns God off? See Matthew 6:5-8 and Luke 18:9-14 and James 4:3

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**1. We are invited to come to God with shameless audacity.**

That statement might sound a little presumptuous and aggressive. Maybe you're thinking "I thought we were supposed to approach God humbly".

There is a difference in coming to God boldly and coming to God arrogantly.

Hebrews 4:16 (NLT) says, *So let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive his mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it most.*

Hebrews 4 portrays a very different attitude than how most Christians pray. We pray sheepishly... "God, if it's your will and you have time and you don't mind, if you could potentially, maybe, possibly hear my prayer..."

## Discussion Question

There is a tension in prayer. On one hand we are invited to pray with boldness and on the other hand we are to submit to God's will. How do you reconcile that tension?

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This story that Jesus tells invites us to come boldly and with shameless audacity. When you are desperate, you don't worry about good manners or protocol or policy. You don't care about image or what people will think.

There is a little prayer that captures well the spirit of this story in Luke 11. "Lord, I crawled across the barrenness to you with my empty cup, uncertain of asking for any small drop of refreshment. If only I had known you better, I would have come running with a bucket."

That's the invitation of Jesus to you.

## 2. Make prayer our first response, not our last resort.

It is implied in the passage that the first thing this guy does is go to his neighbor and start knocking on his door. He didn't ponder his dilemma overnight. He didn't have a brainstorming meeting. No, he immediately went to where he thought he could find help and provision.

### LIVE IT OUT

Start learning to pray "with" people, not just "for" people. We often glibly tell people that we will pray for them and then move on with our day and forget our promise. When someone shares a need or a prayer request, stop and pray for them right then.

Right after this story, in v. 9-10 of Luke 11, Jesus says, "*So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.*"

Jesus says, just like the man who went to his neighbor, you can come to God boldly and with shameless audacity. You are not bothering him, disturbing him or annoying him. So, don't be bashful, hesitant or fearful.

Let this sink in. Our great and majestic and holy and all-powerful God graciously invites us to boldly bring our needs before him.

All three of the key words in verses 9 and 10 are present imperatives in the Greek. As an imperative, it is a command, and it is ongoing. The words could be translated "ask and keep on asking;" "seek and keep on seeking;" "knock and keep on knocking."

God is inviting you to pound on heaven's door. And in v. 10, God promises to respond. He who ask receives. He who seeks finds, and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.

### Discussion Question

For you personally, what are barriers or roadblocks to prayer?

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The Bible is also clear about the power of persistence. Luke 18:1 (NIV) says, *Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up.*

Jesus then launches into a story about a cold-hearted judge and a relentless widow. She keeps going to him day after day pleading for justice. And day after day he refuses her request. But every day, she gets up, goes down to the courthouse and gets in line to see the judge.

The punch line of the story comes in verses 4-5 when the judge says to himself, "Even though I don't fear God or care what people think, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice..."

Her persistence won the day. The obvious contrast is that our God is a loving, responsive Father, not a disinterested, cold-hearted judge.

What have you given up on? Who have you given up on? Maybe today you just need to get back in line and boldly bring your request to God.

### Discussion Question

Is there something you have given up praying for that you need to start taking to God again?

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Samuel Chadwick has written, "There is no power like that of prevailing prayer....It turns ordinary mortals into men of power. It brings power. It brings fire. It brings rain. It brings life. It brings God."

### 3. Our shameless audacity is based on God's character.

Our coming with "audacity" is not just based on our desperate need, it is also rooted in God's character.

Luke 11:11-12 (NIV) says, “Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion?”

Those of you who are parents or grandparents can relate to the logic of Jesus. No decent mother or father would want to do harm to their kids. Good parents are always looking out for what is best for their kids.

Here’s his point; if we can trust the sinful, fallen, nature of an earthly parent, how much more can we have confidence in the holy, righteous, and loving character of our heavenly father.

### LIVE IT OUT

When you gather as a class or group, spend more time praying than just sharing prayer requests. During your prayer times, make it your habit to talk to God more than talking to each other.

As Jesus wraps up this teaching in v. 13, he throws us a bit of a curve ball.

## 4. The Holy Spirit is God’s gift to us in prayer.

He says, “if you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him.” Is that how the verse reads? NO!

That’s what we might expect the verse to say. That would be logical. But Jesus says something quite different.

v. 13 says, “If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”

The almighty God of the universe says, “I invite you to come to me with shameless audacity. And the reason is because I am a good father and I desire to hear your needs and meet them. And, because you don’t always know how to pray, I am going to give you the gift of the Holy Spirit to help you as you pray.”

The Holy Spirit is God’s gift to us in prayer. Our God is a good God, and he wants to give us good and helpful gifts. And, when it comes to prayer, he gives us the 3rd person of the trinity.

You ask for the gift; God provides the giver.

You ask for a drink of water; God gives you a well.

You ask for money; God gives you a bank.

You ask for a cookbook and God gives you Bobby Flay.

Paul elaborates on this in Romans 8:26 (NIV) when he says, *In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans.*

The truth is, sometimes we don't know how to pray. We don't know God's will. We don't have the words. So, the Holy Spirit intercedes for us. He knows what we don't know and brings our needs before the Father.

As you pray this coming week, hear God's gracious invitation to knock on heaven's door. And come to God with boldness and "shameless audacity". He is not like a grumpy neighbor who reluctantly grants our request. He is a good and perfect Father who delights to respond to our needs.

February 12, 2023

# Love is Messy

## OVERVIEW OF TODAY'S STUDY

Generally speaking, life's most exhilarating, heart pounding highs and life's most gut wrenching, painful lows come from relationships. When you walk into somebody's home and look at the photographs hanging on the wall or a fireplace mantle, they are NOT photos of houses, cars, jewelry or a bank. They are photos of people. It is a vivid reminder that life's meaning is largely derived from relationships. But loving people well is not easy. It takes skill and time and unselfishness and sacrifice. But it is so worth it; it is what gives our life richness and meaning. In today's lesson we are going to explore how we can "love well" the people in our sphere of influence.

## GET READY

- ▶ In the book *Your ONE Life* read chapters 21-25 and the conclusion in the section called "Practicing the Presence of People".
- ▶ On a scale of 1-10, rate your satisfaction with your relationships. Put an X on the line that reflects your level of satisfaction.

Very Unsatisfied

Extremely Satisfied



- ▶ Who is someone that has added value to your life? Consider dropping them a note this week to express your gratitude to them.
- ▶ What is one relationship that you need to work on? What is one practical step you could take to invest in that relationship?

## START HERE

In Romans 12:10 (NIV), the apostle Paul says *Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves.* Those words are a mandate to every Christ-follower. We are to be committed to one another. According to Paul, our devotion isn't only to Christ, but also to each other. In many ways, it is much easier to love God because He is perfect, just, loving, and always consistent. But people are needy, manipulative, insecure, and unpredictable.

The last part of Romans 12:10 challenges us to honor one another above ourselves. What does it look like practically for us to honor others above ourselves? The English Standard Version translates this phrase "outdo one another in showing honor." Normally, when we compete, we do so to show that we are the best. But, Paul, flips the script. He basically says that if you want to be competitive, compete in showing honor to others.

## Discussion Question

What are some practical ways that your group could be “devoted to one another in love”?

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## GO DEEPER

### 1. Relationships are in the DNA of creation

In the genetic code of how God created the universe is the DNA of relationships.

- Relationships are hard-wired into the trinity

The original small group was the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. From eternity past, they have lived in community. They are three distinct personalities, but they live in perfect harmony and interdependence. Even in the Godhead, the value of relationship is demonstrated.

- Relationships are hard-wired into us personally

In Genesis 2, for the very first time, God looks at something he made and said “It is NOT good”.

*And the Lord God said, It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a companion who will help him. Genesis 2:18 (NLT)*

This isn’t just a verse about marriage. It is about the universal need of all humans for companionship. We all long to belong and it is hard-wired into us. You can’t help it. Even when people come and visit Oakwood, they are quietly asking... “Will I fit here? Will I be accepted? Is this a place where I can make friends?”.

- Relationships are hard-wired into the church

When you were born again, you were given a family called the body of Christ, the church. Your immediate spiritual family is the congregation at Oakwood and your small group. Hopefully you can say that you “belong” here and that you are in relationship with a few people at Oakwood.

Listen to these words that describe how the early church functioned when it exploded on to the scene in Acts 2.

*They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer...Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, Acts 2:42,46 (NIV)*

They met for corporate worship where there was praise and prayer and teaching. They met together in large groups for inspiration and instruction.

But the body life of the church was lived out in small groups as they met from home to home. They didn't just meet for an hour on Sunday and then scatter to the winds only to return next Sunday for another hour. They did life together. They spent time together. They were involved in each other's lives.

It was in the homes that people developed a sense of community and belonging. It was in the small groups that people learned to pray. It was in the small groups that people ministered to one another and supported one another. It was up close and personal. You see, these small group experiences were like the laboratory of the Christian life.

### Discussion Questions

What are the qualities of a life-giving small group? What do you enjoy most about your group?

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It is hard for us to visualize what early Christianity was like. Certainly it was very different from the Christianity we know today.

- There were no big buildings.
- There were no denominations
- There were no theological seminaries.
- There were no Christian colleges.
- There were no Christian radio stations and bookstores.
- There were no choirs or Christian concerts.
- There were only small families of believers.
- There were only small fellowships.

All they had was the Holy Spirit and God's word and each other... and it was ENOUGH.

So, in Acts 2 we have this model of how the early church did life together in authentic community. When you go to Romans 12, we get the mandate from the apostle Paul.

*And since we are all one body in Christ, we belong to each other, and each of us needs all the others.* Romans 12:5b (NLT)

### Discussion Questions

What do you think Paul means when he says we belong to each other? What does that look like practically?

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As North Americans, we pride ourselves on our spirit of independence and rugged individualism. We even brag about “self-made” men and women. Sometimes you will hear Christians say “Religion is private. What I do is only between me and God.” That is very North American, but very unbiblical. The truth is you can’t live the Christian life on your own. Your faith is PERSONAL, but it is NOT PRIVATE.

### **“God alone is not enough.”**

That statement may sound odd... even wrong... and heretical. But it is absolutely biblical.

When God made humans, he could have engineered us so that we only needed a relationship with Him. He could have created us as adults and made us so that we didn’t “NEED” anything else more than our relationship with him.

But he didn’t—he made us to need people. In fact, it is not a stretch to say that you wouldn’t have survived as an infant if it were not for other people. Yet, as a society and as Christians, we are struggling to feel connected in relationships. People are lonely and many are choosing isolation over relationship.

## **2. Relationships are the laboratory of the Christian life**

Relationships are messy and often hurtful. There are probably some in your group who right now are navigating a dysfunctional and painful relationship.

And the reality is, along life’s journey, we will all experience the pain of broken relationships. C.S. Lewis said, “To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one.”

While there is risk in relationships, it is relationships that make life worth living. Let’s explore some practical ways that we can love people well in our sphere of influence.

- See people as God sees them.

One way you can do that is to put a “10” on everybody’s forehead. This is about training ourselves to see every person as Jesus sees them. If we are going to be like Christ, we have to learn to value EVERY person.

One of the marks of real Christian love is that it is made available to all. Everyone you meet is made in the image of God. You never look eyes with another person that doesn’t matter to God. You never shake hands with someone who wasn’t made in the image of God. You never walk by anyone that Jesus didn’t die for.

As Christ followers, we appreciate the beauty of diversity. This is beautifully illustrated in 1 Corinthians 12:21-23 (NIV). *The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I don’t need you!’ And the head cannot say to the feet, ‘I don’t need you!’ On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor.*

### Discussion Question

Take a few moments to share what you see in somebody else in the group. What role do they play and how do they make the group better?

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Paul says that those in prominent positions should take special care to show appreciation and honor to those who hold less prominent positions in the body. Prominence does not equal significance, and visible doesn’t mean more valuable. Any sensible person is more concerned with their heart than their hair. In a loving church, the most visible people aren’t any more important than the least visible person.

Paul says that we treat people with value *so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other* (1 Corinthians 12:25 NIV). When we love people well, it maximizes unity and minimizes division.

- Pay attention and be “present”

*When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.* Matthew 9:36 (NIV)

Jesus noticed. He was moved by their need. He slowed down long enough to pay attention.

One of the great miracles of life is that God pays attention to us. *When I look at the night sky and see the work of your fingers— the moon and the stars you set in place— what are mere mortals that you should think about them, human beings that you should care for them?* Psalm 8:3-4 (NLT)

Earlier in the Old Testament, in Numbers 6:24-26, we read *the Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious; the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace.*

To turn your face toward someone is to give that person your complete, undivided, interested attention.

### Discussion Question

What is your biggest distraction from being able to pay attention and be “present” with others?

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There are all kinds of people just waiting to be noticed, to have someone just pay attention to them. Every day you pass people who stand up straight, smile, shake your hand, and make small talk, but inside they are wondering if anyone really cares about them. They often try to hide it, but inside they are dying for someone to pay attention to them. They have put up walls, but in their loneliness and quiet desperation, they long to be noticed, to be loved.

You must slow down to really see people. Jesus never seems to be in a hurry. Have you ever noticed that you can't pay attention in a hurry. When you are moving fast, you miss the details. Think of it this way. If someone was standing on the side of the road, would you notice more if you flew by them at 75MPH or if you walked by them on the sidewalk? The speed of our lives causes us to miss many people who God wants us to notice.

## LIVE IT OUT

One of the biggest barriers to us being “present” is the constant distraction of smartphones. Have a conversation with someone this week about what you can do to be less distracted and more “present.”

### ► Speak words of blessing

Blessing is all about how we talk “to” people. This practice is about the words that flow from us into the lives of others. Here's the great news. Anybody can be great at blessing. It doesn't require a certain level of skill or education. And it's not dependent on your title or position in the church. The ROI (return on investment) on this is huge. For minimal investment, there is amazing return.

Luke 24 records the final moments that Jesus spends on earth. He has been crucified, resurrected, and is now ready to return to His rightful place in heaven. It is not surprising that he is spending these final hours with his band of brothers.

Jesus obviously knows that His ascension is imminent. If you were Jesus, and this was your final time to be with the disciples, what would you share with them? Perhaps Jesus will give them his three-year strategic plan for his global vision. There had regularly been infighting and jockeying for position among the disciples, so perhaps he will hand out an org chart so the disciples would have clarity on lines of authority. Since the church would be launched soon at Pentecost, perhaps it would be wise for Jesus to pass out bylaws for how the church should function and be governed.

As important as each of those things might be, that is not what we find Jesus doing in these final moments on earth. Verse 51 of Luke 24 says, *While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven.* The very last words from the lips of Jesus on this planet were words of blessing.

Every one of us can remember occasions where somebody spoke blessing into our life. They affirmed us, believed in us, encouraged us, and it gave us confidence and hope. Words of blessing have great power. That's why Solomon said, *The tongue has the power of life and death.* Proverbs 18:21a NIV

## Discussion Questions

Who has been a great encourager in your life? Who in your world needs encouragement from you right now?

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Don't underestimate the power of your words. Your words have staying power. They stick in people's soul. Your words have the power to breathe life and grace and hope and love, or they have the power to cut and slice and poison and destroy. That's why it's so important that life-giving words flow freely and frequently from our lips.

Mother Teresa once said, "Kind words can be short and easy to speak but their echoes are truly endless."

In a world where people are beat up and put down, we have the unbelievable privilege of looking them in the eye and saying to them, "you matter, your life counts, God loves you, you are valuable, and the God of the universe is intimately interested in you."

So, how are you doing at speaking blessing? What kind of grade would you give yourself? How are you doing at speaking blessing to people in your family, at work, in your community? And how are you doing at speaking life-giving words to those in this group? Take the challenge to consistently make deposits in people's emotional bank accounts through words of blessing.

### LIVE IT OUT

Make it your goal this week to intentionally encourage five people

Here is a short list of practical ways that you can bless people.

- listen attentively
- be fully present in a conversation
- ask people to share their personal story
- be interested in people's family
- celebrate someone's success victory
- see the good and God in them
- notice the little things
- personally care for them in a crisis

Which one of these are you doing well? Maybe consider circling the one that you want to work on in this coming week.

## LIVE IT OUT

Pick one of the items from the list above and commit to put it into practice this coming week.

Hebrews 3:13 (NIV) is a timely challenge for all of us. *But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.*

➤ Seize the moment

One of the major themes of the book *Your ONE Life* is that we have no guarantees about our future. None of us know how many more days we have on this planet. So, we must seize the moments that God gives us today to love well the people around us.

There is a beautiful picture in the Old Testament of loving someone well. One day king David remembers a conversation he had twenty years earlier with his good friend Jonathan. In that conversation they promised they would always show kindness to each other and each other's families. But Jonathan had been tragically killed in battle years earlier, and in those days any remaining family members of a deposed king were quickly executed to put down any chance of an uprising.

After Jonathan's death, everyone in the palace had begun to flee, fearing for their lives. A nurse picked up Jonathan's five-year-old son Mephibosheth and tried to run out of the palace. However, in the confusion and panic, she fell, and young Mephibosheth was crippled for life (2 Samuel 4:4).

On that fateful day of his father's death, this little boy's entire destiny changed. One day he was running around the palace like any other five-year-old. The next day he was an orphan and a fugitive who was now crippled for life.

Twenty years later David finds Mephibosheth and has him brought to the palace. Mephibosheth is terrified. Before David can say anything, Mephibosheth falls to the floor and says, "I am your servant." But David's first words to him are filled with grace, "Don't be afraid." Then David surprises him with lavish grace.

But it still doesn't add up. So, Mephibosheth says, "What is your servant, that you should notice a dead dog like me?" This unexpected display of honor has left him reeling. It's surreal. He is a nobody. He is a fugitive. He is crippled. He has absolutely nothing to offer.

David tells him he will always be provided for, and that Mephibosheth will always eat at the king's table. Mephibosheth, a crippled fugitive, is now being included in the royal family.

Imagine this scene a few months later. The dinner bell rings through the king's palace and David comes to the head of the table and sits down. Each family member quickly takes their seat. But there is still an empty seat. They wait. They hear the shuffling of the feet, the slow movement of crutches. It is Mephibosheth slowly making his way to the table. He awkwardly slips into his seat and eats as one of the king's children. Mephibosheth knew what it was to be lavished with grace and unconditionally loved.







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