

Grace Fellowship Discipleship Journal

At Grace, our aim is for you to meet, follow, and share Jesus. In order to follow Jesus well, we've determined 10 profile elements we believe disciples at Grace should be marked by. In no way is this an exhaustive discipleship list, but it does outline someone who our church would say lives a holistic, Jesus-centered life. You likely have things that come to mind that a "discipled" man or woman does or believes. For the sake of ease, memorability, and focus, we boiled this list down to 10 elements. We hope you will use this profile as a way to gauge the growth, maturity, and needs of yourself and the people you are leading and shepherding.

A JESUS-CENTERED MAN OR WOMAN:

- Practices spiritual disciplines
- Leverages relationships to help others take their next step spiritually
- Dispenses forgiveness quickly
- Rests in the sovereignty of God, especially amidst trial
- Possesses a teachable disposition
- Owns the local church
- Submits to the authority of Scripture
- Lives in biblical community
- Takes sin and its effects seriously
- Is motivated by a sense of gospel urgency

1. PRACTICES SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

A Jesus-centered person is someone who regularly connects with God through spiritual disciplines such as Bible reading (Psalm 119:16), prayer (Matthew 6:1-15), fasting (Matthew 6:16-18), worship (Acts 16:25), journaling (Romans 12:3), solitude (Luke 5:16), giving (Matthew 6:1-4), meditation (Psalm 119:97,99), confession (1 John 1:9), and accountability (James 5:16). While these key practices are not stand-alone measures of maturity, they are the primary methods God uses to inform and form us. A diminishing faith is almost always connected to infrequent, ineffectual, and non-existent spiritual disciplines.

2. LEVERAGES RELATIONSHIPS TO HELP OTHERS TAKE THEIR NEXT STEP SPIRITUALLY

Every Jesus follower became a Christian because they benefited from the investment of someone in their life. God's primary method for reaching people is people (2 Corinthians 5:18-20). Because of this, a person leading a Jesus-centered life wisely and intentionally leverages their relationships for Jesus-centered purposes (Ephesians 5:15-17). Every mature Christian strategically and effectively invests in and engages with non-Christians (Colossians 4:5-6). The general rhythms of a Christian's life include serving others (Galatians 5:13), praying for others (James 5:16), and encouraging others to lead a Jesus-centered life (Hebrews 10:24-25).

3. DISPENSES FORGIVENESS QUICKLY

One key character trait of anyone living a Jesus-centered life is genuine and prompt forgiveness. In many ways, the way that a Christian extends forgiveness is often an informative metric on the quality of their relationships with others and other Christians (Luke 7:47). Jesus makes it clear that how we forgive others is a perfect illustration of how we view our forgiveness (Matthew 18:21-35)!

4. RESTS IN THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD, ESPECIALLY AMIDST TRIAL

A Jesus-centered life is one of confidence, even amidst loss, injustice, and trial (Philippians 1:6). Jesus makes it clear that His followers should not be consumed with the anxieties of everyday life because they recognize that God is ultimately in control (Matthew 6:25-34). The disposition of a mature follower of Jesus is one of patiently waiting on God's timing without grumbling or having a poor attitude (James 5:7-9). A Jesus-centered person recognizes that God uses the bad for our good (Romans 8:28, Genesis 50:20), so we should anticipate trials with resolve, not with surprise (1 Peter 4:12).

5. POSSESSES A TEACHABLE DISPOSITION

One of the marks of a Jesus-centered life is one of humility. Christian maturity can be seen in the life of one who is slow to speak and quick to listen (James 1:19). They recognize that the wise and Godly don't lean on their own understanding (Proverbs 3:5). They are humbled by and are aware that their heart is deceitful, and they diligently examine their own deeply held motivations and assumptions (Jeremiah 17:9). We see in scripture that mature followers heed the instruction of those ahead of them in life and in positions of authority over them (Proverbs 1:8). A Jesus-centered person hungers for the truth from those they trust, even when it is hard to hear because they know it will bless and develop them (Proverbs 27:6).

6. OWNS THE LOCAL CHURCH

A Jesus-centered man or woman does not sit passively as a consumer in the local church. Instead, they passionately participate in the work of God by contributing to and prioritizing their presence at the church (Hebrews 10:23-25). They diligently explore how the Holy Spirit has gifted them with the purpose of building up the church (1 Corinthians 14:12).

7. SUBMITS TO THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE

One of the most significant marks of a Jesus-centered life is a life grounded in the authority of scripture. A mature Christian recognizes that everything they need for life and godliness is found in and through the truth of scripture (2 Timothy 3:16). Through the work of the Holy Spirit, God uses scripture to convict us of sin, lead us to righteousness, and even understand ourselves rightly (Hebrews 4:12-13).

8. LIVES IN BIBLICAL COMMUNITY

Christian faith is personal, but it is not private. Following Jesus is an invitation into the family of God (Ephesians 1:5). Our life in this biblical community is a litmus test for the health of our relationship with God (John 13:34-35). This is the kind of life where we receive and provide each other with encouragement (Hebrews 10:25), fellowship (1 John 1:7), service (Galatians 5:13), kindness (Ephesians 4:32), tolerance (Colossians 3:13), love (1 Peter 4:8), inspiration (Hebrews 1:24), challenge (Colossians 3:16), forgiveness (Ephesians 4:32), and much more. There is no Christianity apart from biblical Christian community.

9. TAKES SIN AND ITS EFFECTS SERIOUSLY

The mature Jesus follower recognizes the danger of sin in the world and in their own life (Genesis 4:7). They are motivated by a desire to honor God with their life because their life was purchased with Christ's sacrifice on the cross (1 Corinthians 6:20). A Jesus-centered person humbly recognizes the ongoing struggle of their sin nature (Romans 7:21-24) and has an urgent desire to pursue obedience and holiness. He grieves the effects of sin in the world, starting with the sin in His own life (1 Timothy 1:16). They are also devoted to living a life that cultivates holy living and fights sinful living (Galatians 5:22-24).

10. MOTIVATED BY A SENSE OF GOSPEL URGENCY

A mature Christian life is a life lived with eternity in mind (Philippians 3:14). They recognize that every part of their lives, every possession, and every relationship should be leveraged for the hope of the gospel (1 Corinthians 7:29-31). They are not content to move in life from one experience to the next; instead, they make the most of every opportunity (Ephesians 5:15-16).

Element 1:

A Disciplined Disciple

“Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives’ tales; rather, 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. This is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance. That is why we labor and strive, because we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Savior of all people, and especially of those who believe.”

TIMOTHY 4:7-10

Being a lifelong, disciplined disciple is hard. It can feel like you’re called to move a mountain, and when you’re nearsighted, it can cause you to pull your hair out for what may seem like a lack of progress. Thankfully, God knows our struggle and hasn’t just written commands on how to live a disciplined life (and what to avoid), but He tells us why a life full of spiritual disciplines is so important.

Responses shaped by our spiritual disciplines produce God-glorifying outcomes. It’s why Paul writes to Timothy about how to train properly for life. He starts in verse 7 by giving frank and quick advice: Stop placing your priorities on the words of man and start placing them on the Word of God. Temporary advice doesn’t usually yield solid eternal outcomes. He then compares his command for spiritual training to the example of physical training. Paul doesn’t diminish physical exercise; he actually says it’s good for the temporary goal of health or competition, but it pales in comparison to the importance of the eternal outcome we’re seeking- God’s glory. The similarity between these two is the exertion required. Every situation we face has a discipline-driven response available to us. Sometimes, those disciplined options show up in the moment, and other times, they are built on past habits. There’s real grit to godliness. It’s worth having. Why? Because godliness is like glitter: it catches your eye, it ends up everywhere, and it’s not coming out. So many things fade in life, but godliness keeps its shine.

Spiritual disciplines sharpen and refine a godly life. They’re important because, as Paul says, “our hope [is] in the living God, who is the Savior of all people.” We discipline ourselves not just to draw closer to our savior, but so others draw closer to Him as well. Being disciplined doesn’t always hand us the outcome of comfort and ease, but it will give us the outcome of contentment and fulfillment. Acting with discipline and practicing spiritual disciplines doesn’t mean you have a red-hot burning drive every moment of your life, but it does mean you choose to practice things of eternal value in spite of your temporary attitude. Reflect on these questions this week:

- 1. What spiritual disciplines in your life have you seen provide positive fruit? How?**
- 2. What lack of spiritual disciplines have you seen result in negative outcomes due to their absence? Why?**
- 3. How can you have more present perseverance in your drive for godliness? What self-talk can you have to remind yourself of the importance of spiritual disciplines when you just don’t feel like it?**
- 4. Who do you respect that practices spiritual disciplines well? How can you incorporate some of their habits into your own life?**

VERSES FOR FURTHER STUDY ON ELEMENT 1: Psalms 119:16, Matthew 6:1-15, Matthew 6:16-18, Acts 16:25, Romans 12:3, Luke 5:16, Matthew 6:1-4, Psalms 119:97,99, 1 John 1:9, James 5:16

Element 1:

No Discipline, No Growth

“Whoever disregards discipline comes to poverty and shame, but whoever heeds correction is honored.”

PROVERBS 13:18

Have you ever wondered why exercising can be hard? The answer is simple: weights are heavy, and intense exercise is uncomfortable. Sweating isn't usually someone's first thought of a "good time." Yet, everyone would say exercising is an important discipline for a healthy lifestyle. Some would even claim it's their favorite hobby, but what is equally as important as the exercise itself? How you do it. A person who lifts weights or runs with incorrect form has a high risk of injury. The exercise may cause more harm than good. If you run in flat-soled shoes for a length of time, you're going to destroy your legs. If you squat with a bend in your back, your spine isn't going to be your friend. Being disciplined and correcting areas of your life to remain disciplined are equally important. They're so important that the Bible actually takes time to warn us if we avoid doing so.

Practicing spiritual disciplines comes down to this simple phrase: no discipline, no growth. Unfortunately, comfort isn't the best soil for growth. It would be great if it was, but we must frequently come to a decision on whether we want to put in the hard work to establish and refine disciplines now or face hard times due to the lack of them later. No matter what, there will be hardship, but you get to influence what kind. Those who choose not to be disciplined leave themselves open to, as Proverbs 13:18 states, poverty and shame. Those are some pretty harsh outcomes! Poverty can mean what we'd typically think- struggling financially to pay for what one needs- but it can also mean the lack of something. Someone without discipline can find themselves with a lack of joy, fulfillment, and closeness to Christ. The daily responses a person chooses will either move us towards or away from the abundant life Jesus intended for His followers.

It isn't the craziest thing to think that Jesus would ask His disciples to be disciplined, right? So, what do spiritual disciplines look like in your life this season? I think all of us would say we want the abundant life God offers to those who follow Him, but are we willing to work on those disciplines that produce the fruit of a joyous life? This is not to say we work for God's approval, but out of His approval, we work to know, understand, and love Him more deeply. By doing so, the outcome is a richer connection to God. Ask yourself these questions this week:

- 1. What's a spiritual discipline you find yourself wanting to grow in? How can you take a practical next step to grow in that discipline this month? Over the next year?**
- 2. What events in this season have been a struggle for you? Would your response to these events be shaped differently if your spiritual disciplines were different? How?**
- 3. How can you incorporate community into your spiritual disciplines of prayer, Bible reading, sabbath, fasting, etc.? Are these already regular rhythms for you?**
- 4. What would you want others to say is true about your walk with Christ? What needs to change in your practice of spiritual disciplines to live worthy according to the standard God has called you to?**

VERSES FOR FURTHER STUDY ON ELEMENT 1: Psalms 119:16, Matthew 6:1-15, Matthew 6:16-18, Acts 16:25, Romans 12:3, Luke 5:16, Matthew 6:1-4, Psalms 119:97-99, 1 John 1:9, James 5:16

Element 2: Spending Your Chips

“All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God.”

2 CORINTHIANS 5:18-20

Have you ever played poker? I’m awful because I’m too impulsively aggressive to win. I only play because of the fun colored poker chips, but I end up losing them too quickly to last very long. Granted, I’ve never actually played poker for any real financial gain or loss, which is good because I’ve always had more fun playing with the currency than playing the actual game itself. I say this because, oddly, relationships remind me of poker chips. You build relational chips with people slowly over time, and you can lose a lot of those chips in a single moment if you’re not careful. Throughout life, you gain and lose the trust of others. You have a choice regarding what you say and how you respond to people. Here’s the thing—relationships that push people closer to Christ are genuinely important, far more so than a poker hand. Our duty as Christ followers is to leverage our relational chips for things that truly matter.

As Paul reminds the followers of Christ in Corinthians, God has restored us to harmony with him. Through Jesus, we are now commanded to take part in this new ministry of shepherding others to follow and accept that same message. As relational ambassadors, our work is to share God’s redemption story. These two truths are foundational to living as an ambassador: First, we are foreigners in the current broken places we call home. We’ve transitioned to being citizens of God’s kingdom in a way that blankets over our current residence. Second, as ambassadors, we represent the ideals of an outside party, not our own. That means what we do, where we go, and how we respond directly reflects not just on us personally but on who we’re attached to God. If we’re really ambassadors, we should be thinking about ourselves and others differently.

It’s our job as ambassadors of Christ to gain and spend relational chips in ways that give others the chance to respond to God’s appeal through us. I’m not saying people are poker hands to bid on. On the contrary, people matter so much that we intentionally build our lives around how we can foster better relationships that further their walks with Christ. We spend and gain chips one day, event, and conversation at a time. Work through a few of these questions this week:

- 1. Do you see yourself as an ambassador for Christ? As you remind yourself of that given title, how does that affect the way you respond to events that come up in life?**
- 2. What’s a relationship you currently have in which you can help someone take a spiritual next step?**
- 3. Think about your regular recurring events in life (hobbies, small group, places you spend significant time with your kids, where you eat, who you run into often, etc.). How can you leverage these regular interactions to help others grow in their relationship with Jesus?**
- 4. Where in scripture do you see people leveraging parts of their lives to further others’ spiritual journeys? How could you replicate this in your own life?**

VERSES FOR FURTHER STUDY ON ELEMENT 2: 2 Corinthians 5:18-20, Ephesians 5:15-17, Colossians 4:5-6, Galatians 5:13, James 5:16, Hebrews 10:24-25, Matthew 25:14-30

Element 2:

How You Live

“Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is.”

EPHESIANS 5:15-17

It’s common for us to live life forgetting that our decisions affect other people. The money I spend can affect the businesses I patron. The time I spend with others influences their opinions and decisions. Despite this, we don’t live in a clean cause-and-effect existence. The complexity of humanity and how God works in our world isn’t simply “I do this, so that happens because of it.” The web extends much further. The way you raise your children greatly affects their likes, dislikes, habits, desires, behaviors, mental health, and interactions with others...for life. That’s a scary thought, but do you know what’s even weightier about the Christian’s aim in all their relationships? Eternity. Real souls are walking around, and real outcomes are influenced by how we interact with them.

It’s why Paul emphasizes wise living in his letter to the Ephesians. His teaching in these few verses above are black and white in practicality. Live as a wise person and don’t be a fool because we live in a time of evil where brokenness coats everything around us. How do we live as wise people then? Verse 17 reveals the answer: “Understand what the Lord’s will is.” Christians take the time to see how their responses affect other people. Put plainly, our responses are events for others. What you do is either an encouragement or an obstacle a person has to handle. Neutral is not one of the multiple-choice answers we can pick for how we interact with others, even though it seems that way at times. Instead, we take time to search out and understand God’s will. How does He view people? What does He value in them? How do we interact with others when A LOT of the events we experience have brokenness and sin to blame for them? What’s most important in each of my different relationships? How do I make sure my priorities are aligned on a regular basis?

If this seems like a lot of questions, you’re right. There are bound to be a bunch of questions coming into your head if you’re striving to wisely leverage your relationships in a way that spiritually feeds people instead of starving them. Paul’s warning that we live in evil days can feel intense, but it’s why we take our responses seriously. The outcome is that important! Take some time to walk through these questions this week:

- 1. Considering how God has wired you, what comes naturally to you in relationships (hospitality, listening, sharing what you learn, adventurousness, caring, curiosity, etc.) How can you use your personality to impact others toward a God-glorifying outcome?**
- 2. What relationship(s) in your life are you really struggling with right now? Maybe it’s a family member, friend, or coworker. What’s a spiritual next step you can take as you wisely leverage that relationship for God’s glory?**
- 3. What are some tangible ways you can, as verse 17 says, “understand what the Lord’s will is” for taking next steps spiritually with the relationships you have in your life?**
- 4. Do you have any regular recurring rhythms in your relationships that provide positive spiritual outcomes and benefits for you both? What are some of them? Are there any more you could implement?**

VERSES FOR FURTHER STUDY ON ELEMENT 2: 2 Corinthians 5:18-20, Ephesians 5:15-17, Colossians 4:5-6, Galatians 5:13, James 5:16, Hebrews 10:24-25, Matthew 25:14-30

Element 3:

The Parable of Forgiveness

“Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, ‘Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?’ Jesus answered, ‘I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.’”

MATTHEW 18:21-22

We’ve all seen little kids apologize. One boy punches another boy in the ear, or a little girl steps on her classmates’ macaroni craft project. The adult sees the wrongdoing and leads them together in “the apology ceremony” that concludes with the offender saying sorry quickly and quietly with little to no eye contact exchanged. What’s sad is adults behave this way, too. We deeply wound each other, hold grudges, and ever-so-lightly “forgive” one another, harboring feelings we actually *haven’t* resolved that are sure to show up again down the road. Jesus offers His followers a different response for forgiveness that’s not just biblical or right but freeing and life-giving.

Halfway into Matthew chapter 18, Peter asks Jesus a question about forgiveness that ends with Him answering with a parable. Peter’s opinion is that forgiving someone seven times is a pretty generous amount, but Jesus’ response flips the script. He offers a euphemism for forgiving someone not just a handful of times but an unlimited amount of times (seven times seventy-seven). Jesus then explains His parable (which would be beneficial for you to read to the end of the chapter if you can!). We see that a servant is forgiven by his king for a ridiculously large sum of money and then immediately proceeds to, quite literally, choke and throttle a guy over owing him what amounts to pocket change in comparison to what he himself was JUST forgiven of moments before. It’s like your mortgage being miraculously wiped away after a conversation at the bank, and then while walking to your car, you beat up someone for owing you gas money in the parking lot. The scenario is ludicrous on purpose.

Through this parable, Jesus teaches His followers what a proper response should be. Genuine, heartfelt forgiveness is required of those who have been forgiven of much more. No person can possibly offend us more than our sins have offended God, so for us to offer any lesser type of forgiveness is ludicrous. That heavy statement is both true and hard to live out. If Christ’s response of forgiveness is the cross, our response of forgiveness is the uncomfortable, painful, awkward task of forgiving others. Why? Because we follow a God who has forgiven us for much more. In a world of broken people, it isn’t a matter of if you will have to forgive people, but when. So, how have you handled this? How could you seek to grow more Christ-like in this area? Process these questions this week:

- 1. Take some genuine time and think about the things Jesus has forgiven you for. Does this change how you view others? When it comes to forgiveness, what’s true about Jesus that you want to be true about you?**
- 2. Who is hardest for you to forgive? Why? What is your typical default behavior when you are wronged by this person? What would be a more disciplined approach?**
- 3. What events have others forgiven you for? What was their response like? How did that make you feel? What would you replicate about how others have shown you mercy and forgiveness?**
- 4. What do you think genuine forgiveness does for the “forgiven?” What about the “forgiver?”**

VERSES FOR FURTHER STUDY ON ELEMENT 3: Luke 7:47, Matthew 18:21–35, Colossians 3:13

Element 3:

Forgive as the Lord Forgave

“Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.”

COLOSSIANS 3:13

Forgiveness isn't complicated to understand, but it is difficult to do. There are plenty of ways we can respond that seem easier than wading through conflict and practicing forgiveness. We can slide out of our small group without a word, change campuses as we stay sitting in the back row, decide to go to a church down the street instead, choose not to have our kids play at that place anymore, and simply ignore the people who offend us. The issue is not only that we are straying from a biblical command, but that we're robbing ourselves of healing, intimacy, and vulnerability. Listen, we're all messy. Why are we so shocked when messy people produce messes? If we're to have a mindset bent toward forgiveness, what does that actually look like in a messy world?

Paul makes his claim in Colossians 3 that since we are now new creations in Christ, we have a Christ-like response available to us. By verse 13, Paul speaks specifically to how this applies to forgiveness. We are commanded to bear with each other. Another way of saying it is to “put up with” or “endure lovingly.” That's a hard commandment to follow through with on a frequent basis or in extreme moments of pain. However, this is how best friends remain best friends and how husbands and wives stick it out for the long haul. It's how small groups actually grow closer, not further apart. We make the conscious choice and respond by enduring lovingly with others and forgiving them. When it's just so easy to stay in a default mindset, we're commanded to be disciplined in how we respond to those who hurt us. People will both hurt us and annoy us, but we have the option to change things like our self-talk, how we think about others, and how we respond to their choices. The truth of the matter is we don't forgive once it doesn't hurt, we forgive especially when it hurts. Paul gives this instruction because it's bound to happen when sinners are in a space together for any extended period of time.

Not only are we commanded to endure each other lovingly, but we're commanded to forgive “as the Lord has forgiven us.” What does that level of forgiveness look like? It doesn't add stipulations or conditions. It extends grace whether the offender says they're sorry or not. It's given without the assurance that the offender will never do wrong again. It releases the offender from our punishment. Take note that just because these characteristics are true about forgiveness doesn't mean we excuse or tolerate destructive patterns in our lives. At times, boundaries can help to resolve those patterns. We can respond with both truth and love when we mimic how God has forgiven us. Forgiveness is not easy, but it's a gracious gift God has given us, so we give it to others. Go through these questions this week:

- 1. When's the last time you practiced genuine forgiveness? What did you focus on? What was your self-talk like? How were you feeling?**
- 2. Who have you seen endure lovingly with another? What about their responses do you admire?**
- 3. What scriptures come to mind when you think about God's forgiveness? How does this present better detail for the practice?**
- 4. How can you proactively, situationally, or reflectively pause when events that require forgiveness happen? How would this practice yield a better outcome when trying to forgive someone?**

VERSES FOR FURTHER STUDY ON ELEMENT 3: Luke 7:47, Matthew 18:21–35, Colossians 3:13

Element 4:

Don't Worry About It

“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?”

MATTHEW 6:25-27

We're a society that's worried. Really worried. We use a myriad of things to help alleviate those worries and create a sense of safety for ourselves. Some are good, others are bad. Physically, we purchase warranties and insurances for everything from our houses to our dogs. We have cameras in and around our houses. They're on our doorbells now. We own a safe or two and add alarm systems to our property. We click our car lock three times even though it works the first time. Digitally, we have passwords for everything we use (even though most of us just use the same password). Mentally, we've developed coping mechanisms for when we incur stress. We have a perpetual sense of hurry to keep up. Once again, some of these are good, some are bad. However, in all the facets of life we experience, what is the biblical response we are commanded to have? Don't worry about it.

This can seem like a pretty insensitive response. It's like telling a diabetic to just ask his pancreas to do a better job and everything would work out fine. Yet, this is the command Matthew pens as he writes down Jesus' words from the Sermon on the Mount. Stop worrying so much. Verse 25 lets us know Jesus understands there are true concerns in life, but most of the ones we have aren't typically of the highest priority. It's why He writes, “is life not more than food and the body more than clothes?” Certainly there's much more to life than worrying about a good meal and the latest fashion. However, this command doesn't just apply to the little things but the big things, too. What about our large, legitimate worries? How do I raise my kids? What about my spouse? How do I provide for my family? How do I avoid wasting my life? Breathe. Take a pointer from the birds. Notice in verse 26 that the birds don't worry, but they do work. We aren't sitting around with our mouths open waiting for God's metaphorical worms. We have God-given confidence to live unparalyzed, free, God-glorifying lives through our responses and our attitudes. We get to choose to live and believe that God is truly in control and cares about our concerns. Jesus has actually equipped us to do this through the Holy Spirit! Perhaps a good evangelistic reminder for us is asking, “What's a behavior that's really captivating to the non-Christian?” I'd venture to say a person who doesn't get worked up about moments, matters, and mishaps. How can that be? As hard as it is in action, it's simple in idea: I know my God's got it. Take a look at these questions:

- 1. When you're worried, how do you feel, and what's your self-talk like? Are there default-driven or disciplined-driven responses that usually come after a time of worry? How can you tangibly change those patterns for the better?**
- 2. What do you find yourself worrying about often? Are they recurring events? Look for biblical promises God makes related to the subject you have concern over. How can this be an encouragement to you?**
- 3. Where is it hardest for you to trust God? What worries are linked to this? What do you need to remind yourself of as you push to make a more God-glorifying response?**
- 4. We can often remain worried because we don't look to see God regularly working and caring around us. So, when's a time you were worried and God unexpectedly came through? Do you have any examples from others in your life?**

VERSES FOR FURTHER STUDY ON ELEMENT 4: Philippians 1:6, Matthew 6:25-34, James 5:7-9, Romans 8:28, Genesis 50:20, 1 Peter 4:12, John 14:16

Element 4: Sovereign Patience in a Suffering World

“Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord’s coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains. You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord’s coming is near. Don’t grumble against one another, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!”

JAMES 5:7-9

I am impatient with the seasons. I’m always looking forward to what the next season brings while I’m still in the middle of the previous one. Christmas is over. Let’s see the spring flowers. I saw the 4th of July fireworks. I’m ready for the flannels and bonfires. Many of us have felt the frustration of our current season, not just in the weather or the activities, but in our season of life. We’re frustrated with the job. Trying to parent our kids well has worn us thin. There’s an ongoing affliction in our life that seems like a painful scab that keeps getting broken open again and again. We see brokenness around us, and we wonder when this will finally turn out for good. James has something to say in our struggle with patience and God’s sovereignty.

“Be patient...until the Lord’s coming.” What a response to how we should live and respond to life’s events! We wait and work with patience (even in dry or confusing seasons) because we believe our present events and outcomes are known by a sovereign God who gives us the ability to respond in the middle of them. A large part of maturing in our relationship with Christ comes from continual acknowledgment that we aren’t in control, and we transfer trust to the one who is.

Many of us ask, “What if I’m patiently waiting for God to change a circumstance or affliction and He never does?” That’s a great question. I think far too often, we want God’s will to result in changing our trial rather than changing us through the trial. We are commanded in verse 8 to “be patient and stand firm, because the Lord’s coming is near.” That promise of God’s return doesn’t always mean our momentary pain will be solved in short order, but it does mean God’s going to work it out in the end. So in the meantime, as verse 9 says, stop bickering with each other! This communal command is given because life is going to be hard. There’s nothing that tears a community down quicker than blaming, complaining, and defending. There’s nothing more helpful than a united community that comes alongside you when you’re struggling. Listen, God is so ridiculously patient with His people that it should drive us to respond with a patient understanding of His sovereignty at work (even in others). I often wonder - when God fulfills His promised return for all eternity, will we feel a little embarrassed for feeling weary about waiting on Him? I promise you it’s worth it.

- 1. What’s a recurring event in life to which you respond patiently? What compels you to be patient during those times?**
- 2. When do you find yourself feeling impatient? Why? What are you focusing on? How can you reorient yourself to respond better when those events happen?**
- 3. Spend time thinking over all the ways God has been patient with you. How does this affect the way you view God’s command for us to be patient?**
- 4. How’s your speech when it comes to your brothers and sisters in Christ? Where can you make a change towards a more God-glorifying outcome?**

VERSES FOR FURTHER STUDY ON ELEMENT 4: Philippians 1:6, Matthew 6:25-34, James 5:7-9, Romans 8:28, Genesis 50:20, 1 Peter 4:12, John 14:16

Element 5:

An Everyday Command

“My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.”

JAMES 1:9

There is a fair amount of phrases most people would say sound like they're from the Bible. A good example of this is John 3:16. It's been on everything from different campaigns and billboards to bumper stickers and t-shirts. You don't need to know much about Jesus or Christianity to recognize it, even in our postmodern culture. A bad example linked to the Bible is the phrase “godliness is next to cleanliness.” That phrase is NOT in the Bible at all (it's actually just a generic ancient proverb). I will, however, make this claim: Having good hygiene is a GREAT idea. Whether someone is familiar with the Bible or not, when someone says we should be “quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry,” that sounds like something God would say is a good idea. It seems like good general advice from anyone, really. Yet, as Christians, we're almost so familiar with this sentence we ignore its significance and wisdom as we navigate life.

This verse in James cuts a deep, dividing line between someone responding in a self-centered way or an others-centered way. If you're self-centered, you struggle to listen, speak quicker than you should, and have a loose grip on your emotions. Being others-centered is the direct opposite. When you're others-focused, you begin to hear the hard things you need in the hard seasons you'll have. You have a heart bent towards servanthood instead of self-gain. Mature believers should be incredibly open to listening to those who have learned things by going before them, but this isn't going to happen if we go guns blazing into life events. So why is taking this verse to heart so hard? For one, we're naturally sinful and selfish. It's easier to blame anything other than ourselves to defend our position, never perceiving we may be wrong. Secondly, it can be exceedingly difficult to have a teachable disposition all the time. Sure, we respect a select couple of people or at least ponder what Grandpa said, but it's hard to learn from people we don't respect, situations that sting in the moment, or when we're just flat out running on “empty.” The command doesn't have an asterisk of *when you're up for it. As Christians, we should have a lifestyle that reflects that this command is true of us. At times, we can even take this command out of order and hope it still goes well for us. We're trying not to be mad, but we sure aren't listening in the process. We're loading up our talking points in our minds while someone across from us is moving their lips. If we press pause and truly listen first, we'll find it's much easier to produce a beneficial response than if we didn't listen. It's harder for your emotions to take control of your response because emotions often dismiss good advice. It's why we choose to press pause. All in all, it's an easy command to understand, but man, can it be hard to do regularly. As Christians maturing in our faith, we strive to make this command true in our lives.

- 1. How are you with the three aspects of this command (listening, self-control of speech, and emotional control)? Which are you best at? Which are you worst at?**
- 2. What's your default, “knee-jerk” response when you don't do so well with this- blaming, complaining, defending? What's an action step you can implement to improve on that this week?**
- 3. What benefits us as Christ followers when we choose to follow this command well?**
- 4. How does living out this behavior show Christ to those around us?**

VERSES FOR FURTHER STUDY ON ELEMENT 5: James 1:19, Proverbs 3:5, Jeremiah 17:9, Proverbs 1:8, Proverbs 27:6

Element 5:

True Humility

“In the same way, you who are younger, submit yourselves to your elders. All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, ‘God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble. Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time.’”

1 PETER 5:5-6

The rise of the internet allowed the common “humble brag” to float to the surface so that we could address it and point out why it’s so ridiculous. A humble brag is when someone makes a seemingly modest or self-deprecating statement to draw attention to something the person is actually proud of. I’ll give an example. Shelly tweets, “Listening to my voice again on the news, and I hate how it sounds. Does it always sound like that?” Shelly is proud that she’s on TV, but she presents it in a way that’s dismissive to make her pride more palatable. Here’s another: “I’m glad I was able to do something selfless and genuine. I’m sure my generosity meant a lot to the person I helped today.” This person wants you to know that they’re giving instead of just being a giving person. I think we’re more concerned with having the moral appearance of being humble, so we can use it as a prideful tool than truly being humble. We’ve all seen false humility, whether it’s your boss, family member, neighbor, or maybe even yourself. It’s pretty easy to spot, despite how hard we try to hide it. Human behavior and response have always been the same. It’s why the behavior and attitude that Peter speaks of in his letter transcends culture and time.

After addressing leaders (elders) at the beginning of chapter 5, Peter addresses the youth. This, however, is very short-lived. The next sentence switches right back to including all of us. God has appointed authority to elders, but he’s given clothes of humility to all of us. Unfortunately, some people choose to leave that particular article of clothing at the bottom of their dresser drawer. The mature Christian holds humility closely because it’s an essential way of living the Christian life. How can we grow if we aren’t teachable? How can we look more like Christ if we aren’t a servant? We can’t. I dare to say if it’s a struggle for someone to submit, serve, and learn from those they can see around them, it’s probably an extreme struggle to do this with a God they can’t. Humility is something that, when done genuinely, is seen rather than spoken about. If we’re able to humble ourselves in such a way that our daily responses are open-handed to God and the people He’s brought into our lives, we can hold on to the promise that He both “favors” us and “lifts us up in due time.” Discuss these questions this week:

- 1. How’s your humility lately? Think back on the past week or two and examine your behavior. Is there a particular group or person you have less humility or teachability for/from? Why do you think this is?**
- 2. Where/who in whom have you seen humility best displayed? What about that person’s attitude and behavior did you admire?**
- 3. Would you view yourself as a teachable person? Would others? Who in your life has been willing to give you tough advice even when it was hard to hear?**
- 4. Where does a prideful response show up for you? How can you work on addressing a default behavior of pride and changing it to a disciplined behavior of humility?**

VERSES FOR FURTHER STUDY ON ELEMENT 5: James 1:19, Proverbs 3:5, Jeremiah 17:9, Proverbs 1:8, Proverbs 27:6

Element 6:

Persevere Together

“Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”

HEBREWS 10:23-25

Have you ever experienced a difficult event, but you were able to go through it alongside someone else? Have you moved recently? I'm sure you're extremely grateful for every person who showed up to chip in. If your relationship with a person remains intact after the frustration of moving a home's worth of items or even just a couch, that is a lifelong relationship worth keeping. What about doing something hard with someone who's extremely skilled or talented? My father worked in the home construction field for decades. I watched with wonder when it came to him installing the plumbing in my family's bathroom renovation. I know as much about that subject as I do biophysics, which is to say next to nothing. Yet, his work inspired me to finish my part in the remodel. God gives us each other to get through life together. The Christian walk was not meant to be done alone. Let's face it, some of life's seasons seem like we're moving against the current, but some of God's greatest gifts have a face attached to them.

The author of Hebrews explains in the latter half of chapter 10 that because of Christ's sacrifice for us, we can persevere in faith together to the very end. God has given us the gift of one another. Some of us haven't even taken the wrapping off yet. We need each other not just to break out of a slump but to call us out, shepherd us, nudge us in the right direction, celebrate, and remind ourselves of a faithful God when we forget (all too often). Some of us think we're able to take on life's events without a community as guardrails around us. That's a dangerous game to play. So what are we commanded to do then? As the author writes, “Not giving up meeting together.” Contextually that means our priorities lie in things like getting our butt to church on a regular basis, serving alongside our brothers and sisters, and diving deep into our small group community. These sound like really simple things, but let me ask, if those are so simple, are we responding in ways that say they're our highest priorities? Are we fighting tooth and nail to keep community and encourage one another? I think most of us are more worried about our kids' travel sports schedules, how our stuff looks next to our neighbor's, and making sure we finish off the show we've been bingeing over the past few weeks. Owning our local church isn't just a good idea, it's the best idea for setting the stage for biblical growth in our lives. We persevere through life linked arm in arm to others. It's the most fertile ground available to implement other discipleship elements. The church body is nothing short of a blessing. Take hold of it!

- 1. What's the next step you can take in owning your local church?**
- 2. What's an event in your life that was significantly impacted by biblical community? Why?**
- 3. Take some time to reflect on what you're thankful for in your church community.**
- 4. What are the outcomes for someone who chooses to make owning their local church a priority?**

VERSES FOR FURTHER STUDY ON ELEMENT 6: Hebrews 10:23-25, 1 Corinthians 14:12, Ephesians 4:1-16, 2 Corinthians 9:6-15, Galatians 6:9

Element 6:

Communal Unity

“As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.”

EPHESIANS 4:1-3

Christians get a bad rap as a bunch of Bible thumping fuddy-duddies. I’ve heard many non-Christians give the opinion that they can’t understand why we’d want to follow a bunch of out-of-date and unconventional rules for life. Independence is king, and it seems like a waste of time to be “shackled” by God’s Word. Let’s face it, we’re beyond old news to the secular world. Christianity sounds like an unnecessary prison sentence to them. What’s the benefit of living out a lifestyle dictated by scriptural commands, and why would I ever want to do this in a community bound to have conflict?

The unexpressed truth is we’re all slaves to something. Freedom with zero restrictions or accountabilities isn’t a real concept someone can live by. We can be controlled or “a prisoner” to a whole slew of things: ourselves, our careers, addictions, culture, spouse, kid(s), agendas, opinions, etc. So if you’re going to hitch your wagon to something, wouldn’t you want it to be a Creator and Savior who wants the best for you? As Christians, we’re prisoners for the Lord, and that’s a good thing! We’ve been called as followers of Jesus to a standard of living that’s worth striving for.

Paul begins to list some of those standards starting in verse 2 above, but the command we’re focusing on is keeping the unity. To do this requires other people. Paul assumes “commUNITY” for the believer, and when you’re in community, inevitable wrongs happen between brothers and sisters. Sinners will sin (which includes ourselves), but Christ followers can remain unified. We best own our part in the local church body by the way we properly respond to the unity of that body. We can’t control all the events that happen in our church community, but we can control our responses. Thankfully, we aren’t in charge of creating unity; we’re only responsible for our response in keeping it. The Spirit produces deep bonds between believers. Our deep unity with one another comes from the compulsion for God to be known and glorified, not the love of hobbies, good food, or common interests. From personal experience, I’ve seen myself become close with fellow believers I don’t share a lot of common interests with, but it started with the commonality of Christ. The benefit of these unifying commands is the fulfillment in serving our Creator together rather than chasing after the things of life alone that will leave us empty. Perhaps equally as important, unity is the greatest witness to the unbeliever. Our unity displays Christ to others in life-altering ways.

- 1. Which of the behaviors listed above (v. 2-3) do you think you’re doing well? Which do you do poorly?**
- 2. What unifying responses have you seen/experienced despite conflict?**
- 3. Where do you see the church (large scale) struggle to unify? Where do you see yourself struggling in unity?**
- 4. In scripture, what ways do we see Jesus as an example of unity? How does that affect how we respond?**

VERSES FOR FURTHER STUDY ON ELEMENT 6: Hebrews 10:23-25, 1 Corinthians 14:12, Ephesians 4:1-16, 2 Corinthians 9:6-15, Galatians 6:9

Element 7:

Trust Through Submission

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.”

PROVERBS 3:5-6

One of the least attractive words in our culture today is the word “submit.” It makes people grit their teeth and cringe as soon as they hear it. Many have seen submission as a forceful and wrongful way for someone to exert control over someone else. Personally, I’m more reminded of a WWE wrestler “forcing” their opponent into a pretzel than I am a proper act of worship aimed at a holy God. We all have a bias towards the word, but the true Webster definition is “to accept or yield to a superior force, authority, or will of another person.” However, our problem isn’t usually in understanding what the word means, it’s in doing what the word says. We don’t want to submit to anyone. We don’t trust authorities above us. We want to control our own lives. To give control to anything other than ourselves feels scary and unnatural, but as Christians, when we claim Jesus as our Lord, we willfully declare His title of authority.

Proverbs tells us that the way to make our path straight is NOT found in trusting ourselves, leaning on our own understanding, or refusing to submit to authority. The Disney saying of “following your heart” is actually terrible advice. The book of Jeremiah directly states that the human heart is deceitful above all things. So instead we put away our own understanding and trust God with all our hearts. How do we do this? By honoring and acknowledging Him in everything we do. Our response is found in our conscious choice to invite God into our normal lives and conduct. It’s found in the real effort to practice the presence of God in our regular and sometimes mundane rhythms that happen every day. This is how we submit to the authority of Scripture, even if our feelings might differ. We look at our lives, and then we use the lens of God’s word, rather than our compulsions, to provide solutions to whatever we face. This is easy to say and really hard to live out. There are times I’ve read through the Bible and thought, “I don’t like the sound of that,” or “I don’t know if I want to follow that command completely.” Yet if trust is to be true, it’s also complete. When we feel conviction, confusion, or a need to own up to the fact that we might be wrong, we face the decision to trust God in His word or forge our own path. Lucky for us, Proverbs is pretty blatant about what makes a man’s path crooked or straight: we just have to choose who we declare is in authority. I get how this feels in real life. Who wants to be wrong? We’re defensive people. Yet, how much we trust God instead of our being motivated by our desires greatly shapes how we will respond. We act differently depending on what we believe, so take some time to think about these questions this week:

- 1. What areas of your life are easy to submit to God? What areas are hard? Why?**
- 2. How can you take a practical next step to invite God into your everyday life?**
- 3. For practice: think of an event where you have to weigh your response by using either your own opinion/feelings or the authority of Scripture. What outcomes would these different responses offer?**
- 4. How would your life look different if every area of your life was submitted to the authority of Scripture?**

VERSES FOR FURTHER STUDY ON ELEMENT 7: 2 Timothy 3:16, Hebrews 4:12-13, Jeremiah 17:9, Proverbs 3:5-6, Romans 12:1-2

Element 7:

Persevere Together

“For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.”

HEBREW 4:12-13

Having surgery can be a scary business. There’s a lot that goes into a procedure that can make us feel uncomfortable, from things as important as the outcome of the surgery itself to just the temperature of the operating room (they’re usually ice cold). For many of us, what begins to calm our nerves is the trust we have in the surgeon. We know we’re going under their temporary professional care to improve our lives. We have faith that the multiple years of experience on their end will translate to a successful procedure on our end. We trust that they understand our disease or injury and have the best resolution to fix what’s wrong with us. Here’s the issue: There are a lot of us who are more comfortable following the doctor’s orders than the directions for life in God’s Word. The Bible is an incredibly precise surgeon who never leaves the table, yet we’ve never left the waiting room.

The author of Hebrews gives a beautiful description of the depth and intentionality of scripture. At a glance, the blatant point we see is how clearly scripture provides truth in a way that divides sin and holiness. It performs surgery on our hearts perfectly, but if the Bible speaks about itself as an absolute provider of truth, then the only question left is whether we believe that’s actually true. We aren’t allowed to play the game where we’re all for a God who forgives our sins, but we don’t have any interest in following what he says. As Christians, when we claim the authority of God as our savior, we simultaneously claim the authority of His instruction over our lives. Be reminded, He does this for our good. God loves us right where we’re at, but He loves us far too much to allow us to stay there. It’s crucial for us to remember our responses are greatly dictated by how much we’ve allowed scripture to work on us. You can tell when someone hasn’t had critical surgery. We wouldn’t expect a baseball pitcher to throw the same after tearing a ligament, just like we shouldn’t be surprised if someone fails to lead a biblical life if they haven’t regularly learned and practiced biblical principles. We all have sin and brokenness that needs repaired. Yes, Jesus does offer forgiveness of sin, but through the power of the Holy Spirit, we as Christians are also working towards a life that resembles Christ more and more as we walk in step with Him. When we truly believe that the Bible has the abilities that Hebrews says it does, I’m confident our lives will look different when we choose to engage in what it says.

- 1. How comfortable are you reading the Bible? What helped you get to where you’re at? What next steps can you take this week to improve your time in God’s Word?**
- 2. What area of your life does not align with Scripture? What can you do to realign? Be specific.**
- 3. What voices do you listen to that drive the way you live life? How loud is the Bible?**
- 4. Be honest. Are there any commands or truths in the Bible that make you uncomfortable? Why? What steps are necessary for you to properly submit to the authority of Scripture?**

VERSES FOR FURTHER STUDY ON ELEMENT 7: 2 Timothy 3:16, Hebrews 4:12-13, Jeremiah 17:9, Proverbs 3:5-6, Romans 12:1-2

Element 8:

Love One Another

“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

JOHN 13:34-35

Fair-weather fans aren't fans at all. I've seen plenty of people wear New York Yankees gear who couldn't name a single current player (no, Babe Ruth does not currently play). I understand the Yankees are "America's team" just as much as the colors red, white, and blue, but I don't think you really have a love for that team if you don't know anything about them. Going to a Yankees game doesn't even make you a fan. Maybe there's an argument for a season ticket holder, but I only begin to think someone's a true fan by the way they talk about their team. I know they love who they root for when they're invested in what's going on or when they bond with other fans over their same love. They put time in. They reminisce about the good old memories of that team (unless it's the Cleveland Browns, from which there are no good memories to reminisce about). What's different about followers of Christ is they don't wear a team jersey. Love is the identifying mark for the Christian. People aren't attracted to whether we go to church regularly or slap our church logo on the back of our car. They are amazed by how we treat one another because it should be radically different from any other community on earth. True biblical love catches the eye.

After just finishing up the humbling act of scrubbing His friends' toes in John chapter 13, Jesus tells His followers what He wants them to do first and foremost: love each other. Let's note that love for the world was not first. We're commanded to love our neighbor, but we're also commanded to love our Christian brothers and sisters first and foremost. This commandment wasn't new in content, it was new in extent. The disciples shouldn't be surprised by Jesus' command, but I'm sure they were amazed at how far He was willing to go to love those he cared for. He died on a cross for them! This is one of God's main prescriptives for evangelizing to a lost world, the beauty of unity in a biblical community. Across different cultures, ages, interests, careers, and more, healthy biblical communities gather together and love each other deeply. Who doesn't want to be a part of something like that? God's love is attractational, and as His followers, we get to replicate that, but you can't display God's love fully if you aren't in Christian community. Whether in hard seasons or joyous seasons, when it's convenient or when it isn't, whether you get along with everyone or there's some friction, there is no Christian life outside of the biblical community. We will fall apart on our own. Our response to our biblical community, for better or worse, will have a direct correlation to the health of our faith in Christ. Praise God we don't pursue the Christian walk alone!

- 1. What does your involvement in biblical community look like? What are strengths and weaknesses you see in your community?**
- 2. How does your response make biblical community better? How can you implement a change in your response?**
- 3. What have you experienced in biblical community that is attractive to you?**
- 4. Who is one person in your biblical community you can have a better response towards? How can you proactively prepare your response before a situation happens?**

VERSES FOR FURTHER STUDY ON ELEMENT 8: Ephesians 1:5, John 13:34-35, Hebrews 10:25, 1 John 1:7, Galatians 5:13, Ephesians 4:32, Colossians 3:13, 1 Peter 4:8, Hebrews 1:24, Colossians 3:16, Ephesians 4:32, Acts 2:46

Element 8:

Bigger Than Yourself

“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”

ACTS 2:42-47

It stirs the soul to be a part of something bigger than yourself. I’ve been to live sporting events that have gone down to the wire. The electrifying experience of being physically present in those moments pales in comparison to watching the same moment on TV. The experience of a live concert is completely different than listening to your favorite band in the car. I’ve attended church gatherings where you can sense the Holy Spirit in the room in a way you just wouldn’t have grasped if you watched a recording later. Embracing the local church and being part of a biblical community yields benefits for the believer that go beyond themselves. The Christian can’t healthily live without it. When you integrate into something so life-giving, you’ll quickly see how much it affects who you are.

If you want to learn about the beginning of the Christian church, Acts 2 is usually the go-to starting point. We see the events of Pentecost, Peter’s message to the crowd, and thousands of conversions in a short period of time. By the end of the chapter, we move past the forming of the church and start seeing the function of the church. The very first verb in verse 42 describes the behavior that the entire body of believers responded with—they were devoted. They put time in. They held on. They got their hands dirty. They studied. They cared for one another, and they simply spent quality time together. Devotion was the attitude they had for the actions they did. So, what do we see as the effect of this behavior? Verse 47 tells us, “The Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.” This wasn’t a reward for the group’s positive behavior but rather the natural fruit that occurs when the body behaves as God directs them to. A healthy body of Christians naturally produces more healthy Christians. So where is your fit personally in the church body? Understandably, the church in Acts isn’t completely replicable today, but how closely does your life resemble the behaviors in these verses? We often disconnect the two, but being a part of biblical community is the litmus test for the health of our personal relationship with God. What would the test show? Take some time to go through these questions this week:

- 1. How can your responses in biblical community mirror the church of Acts 2?**
- 2. What are some benefits of biblical community you can’t find anywhere else? How can you play your part in those benefits for others?**
- 3. What has God taught you as you’ve spent time in and around the body of Christ?**
- 4. How does biblical community affect your personal walk with Christ?**

VERSES FOR FURTHER STUDY ON ELEMENT 8: Ephesians 1:5, John 13:34–35, Hebrews 10:25, 1 John 1:7, Galatians 5:13, Ephesians 4:32, Colossians 3:13, 1 Peter 4:8, Hebrews 1:24, Colossians 3:16, Ephesians 4:32, Acts 2:46

Element 9:

Fight for Holy Living

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.”

GALATIANS 5:22-25

There are a lot of things people take way too seriously: youth t-ball games, what celebrities are up to, whether an Android or Iphone is better. Conversely, there are a lot of things we don't take seriously at all. We pay little to no attention to our finances because they're too scary to even begin to look at. We treat the speed limit as more of a suggestion than a law. We think RSVPing for anything holds no consequence nowadays. The problem is many of us have this same attitude when it comes to the human condition of sin. We have a “what's the big deal attitude.” We treat sin like a harmless pet. We let it hang around far too long. We act like some sin is cute, even though it will grow up to destroy us. We ignore sin, along with the truth that it took the death and resurrection of Jesus to free us from its penalty. Let's be honest - sometimes we don't take sin seriously enough.

Paul relays the fruit of the Spirit in the book of Galatians as a reminder of the freedom we have in Christ. The temptation of the flesh, both in us and in our world, can seem completely overwhelming, but God changes everything with the presence of His Spirit. In Jesus, we can regularly respond with discipline towards our temptations. We're able to take sin seriously because, in Christ, we're able to do something about it.

Sin should convict the Christian because it's placing a wedge between us and God, who has already made the ultimate sacrifice to free us of that separation. On top of this freedom, we've been named worthy to uphold a new holy standard as God walks alongside us. Paul continues on to talk about these qualities, saying, “Against these things, there is no law.” This is ironic because, of course, no one is being tossed into prison for gentle or kind behavior. Even more ironically, if a person holds these qualities to the fullest, they don't even need the Law; they would have already fulfilled it anyway!

Although our Christian walk won't be perfect in upholding God's commands, it would be a waste not to acknowledge the gift of the Holy Spirit in our daily walk. In Him, we are both convicted of our sin and able to overcome it. We too often forget the power we have in Christ, and if our identity is truly rooted in Him, our responses are different. It's not that we lack the tools or ability to combat sin, we must simply discipline ourselves to take the consequences of sin seriously in our lives. A mature follower of Christ fights tooth and nail, not to earn God's favor through our moral actions, but to look more like Him because it's an outflowing of our relationship with Him. Sin is serious, but God is just as serious in laying out His promises to help us combat and overcome sin in our everyday lives.

1. How do you respond to sin in your own lives?

2. How can you cultivate holy living and fight sinful living this week?

3. Pick one fruit of the Spirit you can intentionally be aware of this week. How could you best practice growing in this attribute?

4. Write out a few common recurring events in your life you have the temptation to respond to in a default (old nature) way. How can you better prepare to respond with discipline when those events come up?

VERSES FOR FURTHER STUDY ON ELEMENT 9: Genesis 4:7, 1 Corinthians 6:20, Romans 7:21-24, 1 Timothy 1:16, Galatians 5:22-24, Galatians 6:7, John 16:8

Element 9:

The Sin Struggle

“So I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God’s law; but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!”

ROMANS 7:21-25

No one argues that humans are perfect. People fail us. We fail other people. We don’t even hit the goals we set for ourselves, much less live up to the standard God calls us to. C.S. Lewis said it best when he wrote, “No man knows how bad he is until he has tried to be good.” For some, this despair slowly takes over their entire life. If people aren’t perfect and we’re destined to fail, then what’s the point in anything, really? In Christ and because of Christ, we have a much brighter picture than that. Thankfully, one of the most recognizable sections of scripture on this dilemma does not leave the Christian in despair but rather full of hope.

In this section of Romans, Paul pens a very personal and introspective look into his struggle with sin. In perhaps the best example of what it looks like to live out our Christian faith tangibly, Paul reveals that his old default ways of life don’t vanish after his salvation. The same is true for us. Rest assured, our salvation is a secure one-time act. Nothing we can do earns it, and nothing we can do allows us to lose it. However, we are also called to put off our old self and put on our new self (see Ephesians 4). We now live out the rest of our lives submitting to the transformative power of the Holy Spirit, who makes us more like Christ each day. Our greatest challenge as Christians isn’t to kill the flesh or the old me’s dilemmas. That person is already dead! The challenge is to replace those old ways and live like the new person God has originally created us to be. So, like Paul, with this attitude in mind, we start “waging war against the law of [our] mind.”

A disciple of Jesus has a disciplined life, especially towards his sin. Paul’s sin got under his skin. You can sense his loathing in verse 24 as he proclaims, “What a wretched man I am!” If our sin doesn’t bother us, there’s a larger problem at play. Conviction to the Christian is a blessing, not a curse. Because of the Holy Spirit, we have a helper to overcome sin by responding in God-glorifying ways. So, just like Paul demonstrates in these verses, we fight for awareness of our sin, we acknowledge the ugliness of our sin, and then we acknowledge God for who he is. The result is that we see our brokenness, we repent of it, and then replace it with the behaviors of God. Is this a foolproof process every time? No. We are sinners, after all! Will we ever perfectly get rid of our sin in this life? No. But, it is something in which we can experience incredible growth. The marathon progression of God shaping us to look more like His son is a worthy life endeavor. In fact, it’s the most fulfilling way to live. In the end, we should not lose hope because of awareness of the “old me,” but we should have deep hope because of God’s gift in delivering us to be the “new me.”

- 1. What personal sins convict you quickly? What personal sins do you struggle to see as a big deal? Why do you think this is the case?**
- 2. What’s a step you can implement this week to be more aware of combating your sin?**
- 3. What do practical responses to sin look like?**
- 4. Sin loves company, but it hates accountability! How can you help be accountable to those in your group?**

VERSES FOR FURTHER STUDY ON ELEMENT 9: Genesis 4:7, 1 Corinthians 6:20, Romans 7:21–24, 1 Timothy 1:16, Galatians 5:22–24, Galatians 6:7, John 16:8

Element 10:

Leverage Your Life

“What I mean, brothers and sisters, is that the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they do not; those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not; those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep; those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away.”

1 CORINTHIANS 7:29-31

Francis Chan wrote, “Our greatest fear should not be of failure, but of succeeding at things that don’t really matter.” We live in a world where every social media system and advertising campaign is vying for our attention and focus. Our natural inclination (or “default” mode) guides us into giving up far more time than we want, and what’s the usual outcome? Wasted time trapped in never-ending doom scrolling. If we don’t intentionally decide what we set out to do, then we will continue to get the same outcomes that most people in our culture are experiencing: emptiness and purposelessness.

Our purpose as followers of Christ is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. So, how do we have that outcome? One way is to leverage our lives to make the most of the gospel message in us, as well as how we let it flow out of us. The scripture listed above contains some interesting language regarding the Christian life that can seem confusing at first glance, so let’s break it down.

Paul writes that “the time is short,” and he’s right. Even taking away the importance of Christ’s return for the sake of the argument, time is still pretty short. Compare human existence alone with a single person’s life; it’s a blip on the radar. This is why our earthly, daily responses should take note of eternal, lifelong outcomes. Paul is not saying to act like a bachelor without your wedding ring on, sit stone-faced at the next funeral, or refuse to smile as you watch your children discover life. His examples are used to state that, comparatively to our pursuit of Jesus, the most important outcomes of our lives shouldn’t be dictated by wasted responses to the events we experience.

Note that the opposite of improper urgency isn’t anxiety, it’s awareness. God isn’t calling us to hurry up and do more stuff with our lives. He’s asking us to do the right stuff with our lives. Attention, the exact thing the whole world is vying for from you, is one of your best tools to make a tangible gospel difference. So, take some time to assess your eternal awareness in your life this week by going over these questions:

- 1. What are easy distractors from the eternal goal of leveraging your life toward Godly outcomes?**
- 2. How can you set your focus on more God-glorifying outcomes? What are great personal motivators towards godly choices?**
- 3. What are normal habits and hobbies that could be replaced to produce greater eternal outcomes in the life of yourself, your family, and others?**
- 4. What emotions do you have that influence your responses to life events? How can you make changes to move toward more Christ-like behavior and responses?**

VERSES FOR FURTHER STUDY ON ELEMENT 10: Philippians 3:14, 1 Corinthians 7:29–31, Ephesians 5:15–16, 2 Corinthians 5:20, 2 Timothy 1:8, Acts 18:6, Romans 9:1–3

Element 10:

Keep Pushing

“Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.”

PHILIPPIANS 3:12-14

My friends, we haven't stepped over the finish line yet. All too often, the American dream describes its final steps as reaching the age of 65, retiring, spending the rest of our days watching Wheel of Fortune, taking extravagant vacations we couldn't do in our younger years, and using our senior discounts until we ride off (most likely in a motorized cart) into the sunset. That's it. That's the cultural prize of life. Yet, Christ has called those who follow Him to much more than an eventual 20% off at Rite Aid. The Christian's sense of gospel urgency does not cease in the present until they are met with eternity. What do I mean by that? The mature follower of Christ always takes responsibility for having eternal, God-glorifying outcomes in mind so that they can respond well to their present life events.

When we look at what Paul is claiming in Philippians, it's pretty astounding. He writes he has not yet "arrived at his goal." If there was ONE person we would think has achieved most of their goals in life, it's this guy. So what hope do "average Joe" followers of Jesus have then? Well, let's keep going. Paul chose to continually press on towards kingdom impact in life because God never stopped pressing on towards him (just like he has for us). Paul chose not to live in the past or the future but right in his present. It's important for us to understand the value of our present because it's where we can touch eternity now. Don't let the things in front of or behind you affect the eternally significant response available to you today. God's people are gradually built and transformed by His Spirit through the thousands of different responses they make over their lifetimes, but all of those choices are made in their particular presence. Nowhere else.

So what's the prize for those who are called by Christ? The call itself! The ultimate prize is the glorious gift of running the race of life with God alongside you. We don't press on for the benefits God will give us; we press on because God is with us. He has equipped us with the Holy Spirit to respond to events in ways that deeply affect the lives of those around us. That's a fulfilling goal! So what can we do to make sure this mindset is a regular rhythm of our lives? Consider these questions:

- 1. Are you truly motivated to shape your life to have an eternal impact? What can hinder or distract you from doing so?**
- 2. What are some of your life goals that have eternity-minded outcomes in them? What responses can you have in the present to further these goals?**
- 3. Think of some regularly recurring events in your life that seem "normal" (dinner, putting the kids to bed, your morning routine). How can you use these "normal" events in life to have eternal, God-glorifying outcomes?**
- 4. We all know life isn't a sprint, but a marathon, so what are good recurring personal motivators when you face hard events in life? How can you make sure what motivates you to pursue Christ isn't easily forgotten?**

VERSES FOR FURTHER STUDY ON ELEMENT 10: Philippians 3:14, 1 Corinthians 7:29–31, Ephesians 5:15–16, 2 Corinthians 5:20, 2 Timothy 1:8, Acts 18:6, Romans 9:1–3