

HEALTHY MEMBERS OF CHRIST'S BODY



Vital Signs of Healthy Church Members

TEACHING NOTES

by Phil Awtry

Based on

Nine Marks of a Healthy Church by Mark Dever

What is a Healthy Church Member? by Thabiti Anyabwile

**THINK & DISCUSS**

- In this class we'll be examining the Biblical characteristics that make for healthy churches and healthy church members. What do you think of when you hear the word "healthy"?
- *Healthy plants* – growing, producing fruit, reproducing through seed.
- *Healthy animals* – energetic, well-nourished, strong.
- *Healthy people* – free from illness and disease, physically fit, balanced (not overly thin or obese), emotionally and mentally well.
- *Healthy organizations* – productive, successful, profitable, well-run, motivated employees, visionary leadership.

The term "healthy" refers to something or someone being whole, sound, lively and unhindered. So when we speak of a healthy church or church member, that's what we are looking for. But before we begin exploring what it means to be a healthy church member, we need to get some Biblical perspective on the church. What is the church?

READ & STUDY

- What comes to mind when you hear the word "church"?
 - A building? A group of people? An institution? A movement?
 - *All of the above?*
- Definition of the Church
 - *The church is the community of all true believers for all time.* (Grudem)
 - The church, in Biblical terms, is composed of all people, in all history (past, present, future) who have trusted Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior.
 - *There are some disagreements regarding Grudem's definition, especially as it relates to those in the OT who had faith in the Messiah to come and the faithful in Israel.*
 - *Without getting into these various theologies, we can affirm that the church was inaugurated at Pentecost, and includes all who have trusted Christ since then.*
- The Meaning of "Church"
 - Greek term usually translated as church in the New Testament is *ekklesia*, lit. a called out gathering.
 - *Same Greek word used in the Greek OT (Septuagint) for gatherings of God's people. It always refers to an assembly of the people of God, both in the OT and NT.*
 - It is Jesus who builds His church, by calling His people out of sin and death and gathering them to Himself (Matthew 16:18, Acts 2:47)
 - *Jesus is the One who gathers His church by the proclamation of His gospel and the regeneration of the Holy Spirit.*
- The Church is pictured in the Scriptures as:
 - *Many metaphors, symbols used to describe the church in the NT. Among these:*
 - A family (1 Timothy 5:1-2)
 - *Brothers and sisters in Christ under the Fatherhood of God.*
 - A building (1 Corinthians 3:9)
 - *The church is grown by God as a field of crops, and is built by God as His building.*



- A temple (1 Peter 2:4-8)
 - Individuals in the church called living stones, built into a spiritual house to offer spiritual sacrifices in worship to God.
- A priesthood (1 Peter 2:5)
 - Those who have been set apart (holy) to come before God.
- The body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12-27, Ephesians 1:22-23, etc)
 - Christ being the Head, the Holy Spirit the lifeblood, and believers as individual members of the body, His physical presence on the earth.
- The Nature of the Church:
 - The nature of the church as given in Scripture is many-faceted.
 - The Church is *Invisible*...
 - The invisible church is the church as God sees it.
 - Therefore, the invisible church is composed of true believers in Christ.
 - God and God alone knows those who are His, who have truly received Christ as savior and Lord and therefore are members of this invisible church.
 - The invisible church is invisible to us as humans, but visible to God.
 - Yet *Visible*
 - The visible church is the church as Christians on earth see it.
 - The visible church is the tangible expression of those who claim to be God's people here and now on earth.
 - Examples: Paul's epistles addressed to "the church at..." – 1 Corinthians 1:2, 1 Thessalonians 1:1, Philemon 1-2.
 - The visible church will always include some unbelievers.
 - Consider Jesus' words in the parable of the tares (Matt 13:24-30). We can't always tell the difference between the true and the false, but He can.
 - There is the *True* Church...
 - A true church is a community of believers founded on the true gospel of Christ and the apostles teachings.
 - And the *False* Church
 - A false church is one that is based on some other doctrines or teachings, and therefore not even a church by the Biblical definition.
 - Examples: Mormon (LDS 'church'), 'church' of Scientology, Unitarian Universalist 'church', many more.
 - The Church is *Universal*...
 - The church is presented in Scripture as universal (catholic), a body of all true believers on the earth composing the true church.
 - The universal church is based on the unity of all true believers in Jesus Christ, regardless of their location, specific ecclesiastical tradition, etc.
 - Yet *Local*
 - The church is also presented in Scripture as local, each individual local group of believers being the church.
 - Examples: Romans 16:5, 1 Corinthians 1:2, Acts 9:31
 - The term 'church' is used to describe collections of believers at many levels – local, regional, national, etc. All are referred to as the church in Scripture.



- The local church, as an expression of the universal church in a given location or community, is the **normative model in the New Testament.**

APPLY & PERSONALIZE

- What do you think most people think of when they hear the term “church”? Why?
- Has this brief study of the nature of the church of Jesus Christ changed your understanding of what the church is? In what ways?
- Are you a member of the universal church, through faith in Jesus Christ? You cannot be a healthy church member without actually being a member of the universal church.

**THINK & DISCUSS**

- Some today say that they love Jesus, but they hate the church. What's wrong with this statement? What do you think they really mean?

Jesus gave His life for His church because of His love for her. To say that one loves Him but hates what he loves is a contradiction. Likely most people mean they love Christ, but don't like the experiences they've had with some local churches.

READ & STUDY

- Let's review the nature of the local church from the last lesson.
 - The church is presented in Scripture as **local**, each individual local group of believers being the church.
 - Everywhere the Apostles went, they **preached the gospel**, then **gathered the believers into local assemblies** with structure and leadership.
 - The local church, as an expression of the universal church in a given location or community, is **the normative model in the New Testament**.
- Why is the local church so important?
 - The local church is where Christians are to receive teaching and preaching of the Scriptures to equip them for ministry.
 - **There is a place for 'parachurch' ministries, but the primary place for Christians to be taught the word is in the context of their local church.**
 - The local church is where Christians are joined with other believers so they can carry out the many "one another" commands of the New Testament.
 - **The "one anothers" given repeatedly in the NT assume that believers are in relationship with other Christians.**
 - The local church is where Christians can receive spiritual care, shepherding, oversight and protection from sin and error by their appointed leaders.
 - **Apart from being connected to a local church, believers are like stragglers from the flock who are susceptible to spiritual attack, error, etc. (1 Peter 5:8-9).**
 - The local church is the mobilizing body for the people of God to engage in the work of service and ministry.
 - **It is in the local church where believers are equipped to do the work of ministry, organized to do so most effectively, and unleashed to proclaim the gospel, serve the world in His name, etc.**
 - The local church is where Christians can express their commitment to Jesus Christ, to His people, and to His work.
 - **Affiliation with a local church is a tangible expression of a Christian's commitment to Christ and His people to the unbelieving world around us.**



- What then is the Biblical definition of a “church member”?
 - The word “member” is found repeatedly in the New Testament in reference to the church. Greek *melos*, a limb or other part of a body.
 - Particularly used in the metaphor of the church as Christ's body, with He as the Head and believers as various members of His body (hands, feet, eyes, ears, etc.)
 - By definition, all believers are members of the universal church.
 - Formal, institutional membership is not directly found in Scriptures, but it's implied throughout the New Testament.
 - Many examples of listing counts of who was in a local group of believers, as a membership list (Acts 2:41, 4:4, 1 Timothy 5:9-11).
 - Jesus gives clear commands regarding church discipline and dealing with sin in the church, among members (Matthew 18).
 - The discipline process assumes identifiable members and leaders. Who would be included in “tell it to the church” if there was no defined church membership?
 - Paul gives commands for removal of an unrepentant sinning brother from the membership of the Corinthian church (1 Corinthians 5).
 - How can an unrepentant sinning believer be removed from fellowship in a church if there is no defined membership?
 - Christ writes in Revelation to the members of individual churches.
 - “To the church at, write.”
 - A member of a local church, then, is a believer in Christ who has expressed their commitment to a local church, and has been affirmed by the leadership and the other members in this commitment.
 - Why is local Church Membership so important if it's not expressly taught in the Bible?
 - It's an expression of our commitment to Jesus Christ and to His body.
 - It puts us in a safe place for spiritual protection and accountability by church leaders, protecting us from straying into sin and error. (Hebrews 13:17)
 - It's a means by which the local church can be kept pure, by examining and accepting only true believers (members of the universal church) into the local congregation.
 - It provides stability in ministry and service, by members who are committed to their local church for the long haul.
 - The church of Jesus Christ is primarily not an institution or an organization, but an *organism* consisting of the living, breathing, spiritually alive people of God. And expressed in innumerable local congregations of believers who have committed themselves to Christ and to that community of brothers and sisters.
 - And since the church then is a living thing, there are certain indicators by which the health of the church & her members can be determined, just as there are indicators of health of any living thing. This will be the focus for the rest of our study.
-
-



APPLY & PERSONALIZE

- What do you think about someone who claims to be a Christian, but who says they have “church at home” while watching a television preacher?
- Given the importance placed on being a member of a local church body, what are some reasons some people might not want to do so? Are these valid reasons?
- Have you committed in membership to this local church body? If so, how are you following through on that commitment? If not, why not?



THINK & DISCUSS

- There are many different styles of preaching and teaching. Does it matter how a pastor preaches as long as the Bible is opened?

Are different preaching styles just a matter of preference, or are there some styles that are more true to Biblical teaching than others? It's important to remember that just because the Bible is used or quoted, that doesn't ensure the proper content or quality of what's preached. Even Satan can do this!

READ & STUDY

- What do we mean when we use the term "expositional preaching"?
 - *"This is preaching which expounds what Scripture says in a particular passage, carefully explaining its meaning and applying it to the congregation."* – Mark Dever, Nine Marks of a Healthy Church
 - Expositional preaching seeks to submit to the meaning of a portion of Scripture and communicate that meaning to the hearers, without substituting other ideas or coloring the intended meaning of the passage by promoting specific agendas. It is by definition the most accurate method of communicating the unadulterated content of God's revelation to His people.
 - Substituting other content or methods in preaching (stories, anecdotal speaking, motivational self-esteem building talks, etc.) for exposition of the word may be pleasing to the hearers, but disconnects the flock from the formative and inspired nature of God's word. Even that preaching which uses Bible verses, but which does not submit to their intended meaning, is non-expositional and fails to engage the power of God's word to His people.
- A Biblical example of expositional preaching: **Nehemiah 8:7-8**
 - The **content**: God's revelation, not their own ideas.
 - The **method**: explaining the meaning and significance of a portion of God's Word to God's people.
 - The **effect**: the people understand and obey.
- A Biblical example of non-expositional preaching: **Jeremiah 23:16,18, 21-22**
 - The **content**: from their own imaginations.
 - The **method**: a refusal to stand in God's council to hear and obey His word.
 - The **effect**: fails to turn God's people back to God's ways, but rather leads them into futility.
- Expositional preaching and exegetical teaching is a primary mark of a healthy church because it most effectively feeds and nurtures the people of God with the solid truth of the word of God, which is the means by which He calls His church, builds His church, empowers His church and advances His church.
- What then is the definition of an "Expositional Listener"?
 - *"A church member who listens for the meaning of a passage of Scripture, and accepts that meaning as the main idea to be grasped for understanding and application."*



- Just as the focus from the preachers / teachers point of view in expositional preaching / teaching is the main point and meaning of the Biblical text, so the focus from the hearer's point of view in expositional listening is to hear and understand the main point and meaning of the passage being preached / taught.
 - This is in contrast to those who listen to preaching and teaching looking merely for entertaining presentation, practical "how to" advice, self esteem-building words, calls to social or political action, etc.
 - Expositional listeners are listening primarily for the voice and message of God as revealed in His word.
 - Expositional listening is listening for the meaning of a passage of Scripture, and accepting that meaning as the main idea to be grasped for our personal and corporate lives as Christians.
- What are the health benefits of Expositional Listening?
 - Cultivates a hunger for God's Word.
 - As we listen to His Word, His voice becomes sweet to us (Psalm 119:103-4)
 - Listening to the preaching and teaching of the word this way helps us to become more accustomed to hearing God speak in His word.
 - It gives us ears more attuned to the voice of God, and less attuned to the other distracting voices in our life and world.
 - It trains us to always approach any interaction with Scripture looking and listening first and foremost for what God is saying.
 - Helps us focus on God's will and to follow Him.
 - The only agenda we want to follow is His (John 10:27)
 - If we are to follow Christ in obedience, we first have to hear His voice (John 10:27)
 - Our personal agenda becomes secondary. The preacher / teachers agenda becomes secondary. It's only God's agenda for us as His people that we focus on.
 - Protects the gospel and our lives from corruption.
 - When we're listening for God's voice, our ears don't itch for other voices (2 Timothy 4:3-4)
 - Training our ears, minds and hearts to listen for God's voice in the preaching / teaching of His word keeps us from seeking after messages that are not from God.
 - The lack of this kind of discipline in church members has led to the complete destruction of many churches and denominations. Where church members are not tuned to hearing God and Him alone from His word, all kinds of false teachings which are not of God can and will arise in the church.
 - Encourages faithful pastors.
 - Faithful shepherds are honored by members who desire to receive God's Word (1 Timothy 5:17)



- Pastors and teachers who faithfully exposit the word of God find a ready hearer in expositional listeners, which is a strong encouragement as they see God work through both their faithful teaching and the member's active listening.
 - Faithful preachers / teachers are most discouraged by congregations who are inattentive to God's word. And most emboldened to proclaim the word when their people are hearing God's word and show evidence of being shaped by it.
 - And unfaithful pastors are corrected and discouraged (2 Timothy 4:3-4)
 - This passage indicates that we as church members will receive the kind of preaching and teaching that we listen for and desire. If we are listening for God's voice and not hearing it from a pastor / teacher, that man will be discouraged and hopefully corrected by our inattention to his words as we instead seek God's words from him.
- Unifies the gathered congregation.
 - When everyone is listening for God's voice in His Word, we aren't listening for our own agendas and are unified (1 Corinthians 1:10)
 - A congregation of people listening for the single message of God in the preaching and teaching of His word will not be susceptible to various private interpretations which cause divisions and conflicts. We will be unified around what God has to say to all of us.
- How can church members cultivate the habit of Expositional Listening?
 - Being expositional listeners doesn't just happen. We each have to see the need for this discipline as critical for our spiritual health as an individual and a part of the church, and seek to develop the habits and mindset of listening for God's voice.
 - Meditate on the sermon / study passage during your study times.
 - Read and think through the passage before it's preached or taught.
 - At a minimum we must spend some time before the sermon or class to become familiar with the Scripture passage in focus, and have given its content and meaning some thought. A good commentary can be helpful in this as well.
 - Do your own outline to gain initial understanding, and bring it with you to worship / class.
 - Developing the ability to outline Scripture is a skill that will yield much fruit in both hearing the word expositionally as well as in our own personal study of the Bible.
 - Outlining breaks a passage into its main pieces and helps us understand how each point relates to the others. It keeps us from taking one verse or phrase out of proper context.
 - Talk and pray with others about the sermon / lesson after worship/class.
 - We often spend much time in fellowship and conversation with one another before and after worship or Bible study sessions, but how much do we talk about the sermon or the lesson?



- Keep the message alive by talking with others about how God impacted them through it.
- As God speaks through His word to each of us, we can be sharpened in our understanding as we share with each other what was most meaningful to them from the sermon/lesson. Think together with each other about how the meaning of the word has changed your thinking.
- Pray with brothers and sisters for attentive ears to keep on hearing and not become dull to His voice (Isaiah 6:9-10)
- Join together in asking God for an appetite for the solid food of His word, and not just a taste of milk. Pray together for this for the entire congregation, and each other.
- Listen to and act on the sermon / lesson throughout the week.
 - Don't let the Word be forgotten and ignored immediately (James 1:22-25)
 - Sermons and Bible lessons are too often something we listen to and then simply walk away from and forget. This is warned against by James, and makes the sermon or lesson simply an event we attended rather than a transformational hearing of God's word.
 - Get an audio copy of the sermon and re-listen to it, or re-read the lesson and your notes.
 - Repetition will reinforce the main ideas and points, help us draw out specific things we missed the first time, and gives more time for God to show us more specific ways to put into practice what He has spoken to us in His word.
 - Plan for ways to do this throughout the week – in small groups, in your personal study time, in family worship, etc. Be creative, but plan for it or it will be neglected.
- Address any questions you have about the text itself.
- God has given believers in Christ all we need to understand His word. However, some passages and parts of Scripture are less clear than others and require more diligent study to grasp the meaning. We have to be prepared to get these questions answered if we are to hear all of God's voice in His word.
 - If there are points in the passage you are unclear on or have questions about, follow up with a pastor, elder, teacher, etc.
 - Talk with the pastor or teacher after the sermon / lesson about points you still need more help with. (This is also a great encouragement to teachers / preachers). Other spiritual leaders in the church can help in this too. Don't walk away from hearing God's word with lingering questions about what the passage says. Seek the answers that you need.
- Cultivate humility.
 - Don't become arrogant as you gain understanding of God's Word, or become a "professional sermon listener" (1 Corinthians 1:8)
 - Remember that the objective of listening to the preaching / teaching of God's word is not just accumulation of knowledge, but the transformation of each church member (and the congregation at large) by the meaning and power of God's voice.



- Expository listening humbles us under the authority of God's Word (1 Peter 5:6)
- God's word has authority over us as His people, since it is His word. We are to seek to hear His voice in order to better understand our Master and His directions for us as His servants and slaves. Understanding this leaves no room for pride or arrogance in approaching His word.

APPLY & PERSONALIZE

- Have you experienced examples of non-expository preaching and teaching? What effect did it have on you?
- How would you rate your ability to listen for the meaning of the Word during your personal study? During sermons? During Bible classes?
- How can you strengthen your listening ability to become a healthier expository listener?



THINK & DISCUSS

- The word “theology” often scares people or brings to mind boring academic discussions and books. What do we mean when we use this word?
- Theology = thoughts and ideas about God. Everyone, even the atheist, has thoughts about God. But not all these thoughts about God are true or correct.
- The healthy church member must have thoughts and ideas about God that are based on His revelation of Himself – the Bible. In other words, we must be *Biblical theologians*.

READ & STUDY

- What is the definition of the term “Biblical theology”?
 - Exploring the main lines of the Bible's great story. Examples: *What is God like? Are people basically good or bad? What did Jesus do by dying on the cross?*
 - Biblical theology traces the developing themes of Scriptures in a historical manner, fitting them together into a story of God's overall revelation.
 - Having a Biblical theological understanding doesn't just mean knowing key Christian doctrines like the nature of God, the nature of man, the atonement of Christ, etc – but seeing how all of these doctrines fit together and are explained in the broader story line of Biblical history and revelation.
 - Biblical theology provides a basis for us to understand all the truths taught in the Bible as a whole, and helps us see the Bible with more clarity.
 - Biblical theology vs. Systematic theology – “A line vs. a circle” Geerhardus Vos suggested that whereas Biblical Theology draws a line, Systematic Theology draws a circle.
 - Biblical Theology looks at the Bible “through time.” It treats the Bible as a book with a history. It was revealed and written over time, not all at once. The historical context is of supreme importance in interpreting a text. The dominant question is, “*Where am I on God's timeline as I read this passage?*”
 - Systematic theology treats the Bible as a finished product, as a coherent, logical, unified whole. “*What other texts speak to this particular topic?*” becomes the driving question. When we ask the question, “*What does the Bible teach about _____?*”, we are engaging in systematic theology.
 - Neither of these approaches is fully satisfactory, though both shed light on important aspects of the biblical revelation.
- How does a focus on Biblical theology protect the church from false doctrines, and ensure that unpopular Scriptural truths are taught?
 - Having a Biblical theological foundation in the church ensures that all the counsel of God, including those doctrines that may be offensive or unpopular (God's sovereignty, election, hell, etc) are given their proper place in teaching and preaching. They must be included if we are to see the “big picture.”
 - False doctrines are often based on interpretations of Bible passages isolated from their context and separated from the overall message of the entire word of God. A Biblical theology enables the church to interpret Scripture by Scripture, keeping the whole picture of God's revelation in view so as to guard against these false views.



- Having a Biblical theological focus in a local church equips members to discern whether the gospel being taught is in accordance with the Biblical gospel, or if it is “another gospel” in accordance with other more popular but less faithful teaching (Gal 1:6-9).
- How does Biblical Theology promote health in a church member?
 - Helps us to grow in our reverence for God.
 - We see that God is, was and always will be the same creating, holy, faithful, loving and sovereign God. Example:
 - God’s promise the woman’s Seed would bruise the serpent (Genesis 3:15)
 - God opening barren wombs so the Seed would be preserved (Genesis 17:15-19, 21:1-2, 29:31, 30:22)
 - The birth of the Seed (Matthew 1:20-23)
 - As we better understand this continuity in God’s person and plans, we will be stirred to deeper faith and worship of Him. A superficial knowledge of God will not produce this kind of reverence.
 - Helps us to overcome our wrong ideas.
 - Biblical theology allows us to see how God has consistently spoken the same message to His people in various time and ways (Hebrews 1:1).
 - God’s message of redemption has always been the same, from the earliest parts of the OT to the end of Revelation. It is to exercise trust in Him and to worship and obey. In other words, to exercise faith in Him. (Gen 15:6, Rom 4, Gal 3:6-7)
 - It won’t allow us to ignore or evade verses or passages that displease us.
 - When we’re committed to seeking the whole of Scripture’s teaching on any given point, we are more readily convinced of our wrong ideas, and forced to consider even passages that don’t fit our wrong ideas.
 - Helps to inoculate the church against doctrinal controversies.
 - Biblical theology helps maintain the consistency and continuity of the Bible’s teachings.
 - It’s like having the picture of a completed puzzle, allowing us to separate pieces that don’t fit because they are wrong.
 - Keeping this consistent message in view protects us from “new” or other ideas and teachings that are inconsistent with it. Example: Gal 1:6-9
 - Necessary to fulfill the Great Commission.
 - Jesus commands His followers to observe *all* that He commands (Matthew 28:19-20). How can we do this if we are not clear on all He has commanded?
 - Biblical theology provides the full picture of Christ’s teachings and commands, in their proper context. **Biblical theology includes a commitment to know and understand the complete teachings and commands of Christ, so that we can be fully obedient.**



- Deepens our understanding of and ability with the gospel.
 - Biblical theology shows us the whole story of redemption that culminates in the gospel of Christ.
 - It was pointed to and partially revealed in the Old Testament, and accomplished and fully revealed in the New Testament (Luke 24:27, 44-45).
 - Having an understanding of the full redemptive history that the gospel of Christ is the fulfillment of gives us a deeper knowledge of and appreciation for the gospel, a deeper passion for explaining it to others, and a deeper appreciation towards God for our participation in it.
- How can we grow in being a Biblical Theologian?
 - Study the Scriptures thematically.
 - Supplement your study of the Bible with exploring major themes, such as the revealed character of God, the kingdom of God in the OT and NT, the unity of God's covenant with His people, etc.
 - We should spend most of our time in personal study of the Bible in expositional study of whole books and sections, as we discussed last week. This is the best method to understand and submit to the intended meaning of Scripture.
 - However, adding occasional studies of Bible themes helps reinforce the continuity of God's word. It helps us to link together the deeper truths we find in expositional study, and to put them into their proper historical place.
 - We should spend most of our time in personal study of the Bible in expositional study of whole books and sections, as we discussed last week. This is the best method to understand and submit to the intended meaning of Scripture.
 - However, adding occasional studies of Bible themes helps reinforce the continuity of God's word. It helps us to link together the deeper truths we find in expositional study, and to put them into their proper historical place.
 - Look Back - Adopt the New Testament's attitude toward the Old Testament.
 - Remember that Jesus and the apostles taught of Christ from the OT, since that's all they had. They saw clearly that they were seeing the OT fulfilled in their midst. We should have the same mindset as we approach the OT (Luke 24:27)
 - When studying the New Testament, ask questions like:
 - *How is this passage a fulfillment of a promise in the Old Testament? How is this New Testament idea similar to or different from an Old Testament teaching? How does this passage clarify, unveil or amplify something from the Old Testament?*



- Look Forward - Study the Old Testament with Jesus and the New Testament in view.
 - In the same way, the OT saints and prophets were looking forward to the fulfillment of all God had promised. We should adopt the same mindset as they when we read the OT.
 - When studying the Old Testament, ask questions like:
 - *Where does this passage fit in the timeline of redemptive history? How does this passage point to Jesus? How is this passage foundational for understanding NT Christianity? What NT passages help me answer questions about this passage?*
- Study the books of prophecy in the Old Testament.
 - The OT books of prophecy, especially the 'Minor Prophets', are often neglected, but contain some of the most clear and rich material in all of Scripture about the life, ministry and supremacy of Jesus Christ. Example: Isaiah 53, etc.
 - Remember that many of the prophecies in the OT can be fulfilled:
 - In the prophet's own day,
 - As well as "Christologically",
 - As well as in the future, "eschatologically".
 - Thinking about these prophecies in this way helps us to emphasize the big picture of the Bible and deepen our understanding of God.
- Seek doctrinal unity and avoid needless disputes.
 - Understanding the difference between beliefs that are essential, and beliefs that are non-essential to the integrity of the faith.
 - There are many essentials to Biblical faith (the deity of Christ, the depravity of man, the resurrection of Christ, the exclusivity of the gospel of Christ, justification by faith alone, etc). There are also many more non-essentials that often are the source of arguments and fights in the church.
 - If we are basing our understanding of the Christian faith on Scripture, and the whole teaching of scripture, we will have the understanding to know the difference between the two.
 - When the essentials are threatened we will be equipped to defend them. When there are divisions over non-essentials we will be equipped to seek to reconcile them.

APPLY & PERSONALIZE

- How familiar are you with Biblical theology? Could you explain to a new Christian or a non-Christian how the entire Bible fits together as one book?
- What specific actions can you take to strengthen your knowledge of Biblical theology?



THINK & DISCUSS

- Is the gospel of Jesus Christ mainly a message for unbelievers, or for the church? Why?

Both. As we'll see, the gospel of Christ is God's power to convert the unbelieving, as well as sustain and empower individual Christians and His church.

READ & STUDY

- What is the greatest need in the world today? In the church today?
 - The gospel of Jesus Christ. Without it, men and women are perishing eternally apart from a saving knowledge of God through Christ.
 - The world's greatest need always has been and always will be to be reconciled to their Creator, through faith in Jesus Christ. All other needs are short term, temporal. Only the gospel can give life eternal.
 - The gospel of Jesus Christ. It alone is the message that forms, sustains and energizes the church.
 - Too often we think of the gospel of Christ as something only for unbelievers. We see the gospel as necessary for coming to initial faith in Christ, but then we move on to other more mature teachings and doctrines. This is absolutely un-Biblical!
 - Being completely steeped in and focused on the gospel for every aspect of life is a key to being a healthy Christian and church member. The gospel must inform everything that we are, everything that we do.
 - Ray Ortlund: *"A gospel-centered church preaches a bold message of grace — so bold that it becomes the end of the law for all who believe. Not our performance but Christ's performance for us. Not our sacrifices but his sacrifice for us. Not our superiority but only his worth and prestige. The good news of substitution. The good news that our okayness is not in us but exterior to us in Christ alone. Climbing down from the high moral ground, because only Christ belongs up there. That message, that awareness, that clarity. Every Sunday."*
- What must we do as church members to be "saturated" in the gospel of Jesus Christ?
 - We must *know* the gospel.
 - This sounds elementary, but the reality is that many in today's churches have at best a superficial understanding of the gospel of Christ, because they have responded to a superficial presentation of the gospel. We need to at least have a good understanding of the essential truths of the gospel as a starting point.
 - We must know that the gospel is *not* that: we are okay, God is love, Jesus wants to be our friend, we should live right, all our problems will be fixed by following Jesus, God wants us to be healthy and wealthy, etc.
 - We must recognize that the gospel is "good news".
 - It is *news*, containing facts and truths.
 - It is not just good advice or helpful. It is objective truth that requires a response.
 - It is *good*, providing hope based on God's promises.
 - The gospel of Christ is the ultimate good news in all creation and all eternity.



- A brief summary of the gospel of Jesus Christ:
 - God the Father, who is completely righteous and holy, is righteously angry with sinners and will punish sin. **Romans 1:18**
 - Man, who disobeys the rule of God, is alienated from God and in danger of eternal punishment for that sin at the hands of God. **Ephesians 2:4ff**
 - But God, being rich in mercy, sent His eternal Son to die as a ransom and a substitute for the sin of rebellious people.
 - Through the perfect obedience of the Son and his death on the cross, all who believe in Him and repent of their sin will:
 - Be saved from the wrath to come **Romans 5:9**
 - Be declared righteous before God **Romans 4:5**
 - Have eternal life **John 3:36**
 - Receive the Spirit of God as a foretaste of heavenly glory. **Ephesians 1:13-14**
- Does this brief summary match your understanding of the essentials of the gospel?
- Do you see how these truths are foundational to how we think, live, minister, serve, worship, interact with others, etc.?
- We must desire to hear the gospel, and preach the gospel to ourselves.
 - The gospel is God's power for all stages of salvation (**Romans 1:16**)
 - God's power is at work through His gospel in all stages of our salvation – conversion (*we have been saved*), sanctification (*we are being saved*), glorification (*we will be saved*). Therefore, we need to hear it fresh and often. We need constant reminding and reinforcing of the essentials of the gospel. And we must seek to gain understanding of the gospel and its implications in ever deeper ways. (2 Peter 3:18)
 - We must listen actively for the gospel and gospel implications in sermons and lessons.
 - Example: Paul's statement of his intent to preach the gospel to the Roman church (Romans 1:15). He wasn't speaking in evangelistic terms, but was desiring to preach the gospel to believers, so as to keep them saturated in it.
 - In every sermon we hear, every Bible lesson we hear, we must tune our minds to search for the gospel and gospel implications in it. If we are Biblical theologians (last lesson), we will be able to hear the gospel in every part of Scripture.
 - If we aren't being taught the gospel in sermons and Bible teaching, then we must demand it of our pastors and teachers. We should be like the Greeks in John 12:20-21 – "Sir, we would see Jesus."
 - When we find ourselves dissatisfied, anxious, etc – preach the gospel to ourselves. Read and study it in the Scriptures, memorize its truths, review it in our minds, pray the gospel, sing the gospel.



- When we're not hearing it, or to reinforce the primacy of the gospel, we should preach it to ourselves. Go beyond the basics of the gospel and study the deeper truths and implications in the doctrines of depravity, justification, etc.
- Reminding ourselves constantly of the gospel has huge spiritual implications for us. It will guard us from tendencies towards legalism, condemnation and subjectivity, and will cause us to grow in gratefulness, joy and holiness. (Mahaney's *Cross Centered Life*)
- Take the gospel to its conclusions.
 - Since the gospel of Christ produces salvation, which is a process, there is a future conclusion to the outcome of the gospel in each of our lives. That conclusion is eternity in heaven with God. Never forget that!
 - Reflect on the events and promises of the gospel, and look forward to the conclusion of the gospel.
 - "[The gospel] has come for one great reason: that you might behold forever the glory of God in Christ, and by beholding become the kind of person who delights in God above all things, and by delighting display His supreme beauty and worth with ever-increasing brightness and bliss forever." – John Piper in *God is the Gospel*.
 - Consider not just what God **has done** through the gospel, but what **He is doing now**, and what **He will do**. All as a result of the gospel of Christ.
 - Looking forward to the consummation of all things through the gospel is a great encouragement to persevere. Cf. James 5:7-8.
- Order your life around the gospel.
 - The gospel should impact every area of our lives.
 - It should affect our communication with others, how we encourage and correct others, be central to life decisions like career and relationships, etc.
 - As believers in Christ and ambassadors for Him, we should make life decisions based largely on how they will help or hinder us in living out and proclaiming the gospel. Other considerations must be secondary. This was Paul's attitude in 1 Corinthians 9:23.
 - Consider how to organize your life to allow the most impact of the gospel on yourself and others.
 - Plan for ways to interact with people who don't know Christ so as to gain opportunities to present the life-changing truth of the gospel to them.
- Share the gospel with others.
 - We normally think of sharing the gospel as something exclusively to be done for unbelievers. But there's also a place for reminding other Christians of the truths of the gospel as we live together and serve Christ together.



- Sharing your testimony or living a good Christian life are good, but they are not sharing the gospel.
 - *It is the gospel that God uses to save people. Our testimony and our life lived righteously can be helpful in demonstrating the outcomes of the gospel, but they can never replace the clear communication of the truth of the gospel.*
 - We must lovingly and urgently tell those around us the truth, that they must believe in Christ and repent of their sin.
 - *There is no risk in sharing the gospel, only the reward of faithfulness.*
- Guard the gospel.
 - The responsibility for protecting the integrity of the gospel is placed not just on church leaders, but primarily on church members. (*Galatians 1:8-9, Jude 3*)
 - *Since all believers have been entrusted with the gospel of Christ and are called to pass it on to others and to faithful witnesses who will share it with others, we have primary responsibility for keeping the truths of the gospel pure and uncompromised by error. Cf. 2 Timothy 1:14.*
 - We are to be careful what kind of teaching and preaching we consider. (*2 John 10-11*)
 - *Make it your ambition to be so saturated in the true, unadulterated gospel of Jesus Christ that when you hear teaching that isn't in line with the gospel, you can discern it immediately.*

APPLY & PERSONALIZE

- Why do you think that many Christians feel the gospel of Christ is only for sharing with unbelievers, and not continual preaching to the church?
- Do you have a good understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ, in all of its depth and implications? What steps will you take to increase this understanding?
- What strategies can you put in place in your life to enable you to preach the gospel to yourself?

**THINK & DISCUSS**

- What do you think about people who claim to be Christians but have no evidence of it in their lives? Are they really believers in Christ?

Should we accept someone as a brother or sister in Christ only on the basis of their profession? Or should we look for more authentic evidence?

READ & STUDY

- What does the Bible mean by the term “conversion”?
 - Example: Matthew 18:3. Converted, Greek *strephe* – to turn, to change.
 - Closely related to the Greek *metanoia*, to turn, to change one’s mind. Always translated in the NT as *repent*.
 - Biblical conversion includes both trust and belief in Christ (a change of belief), and a turning from sin to spiritual fruitfulness (a change of behavior).
 - A Biblical understanding of conversion makes no room for the popular but wrong view that a person can profess Christ as Savior but reject Him as Lord. The word is clear that true saving faith in Jesus Christ will always produce a change in actions.
- How are some of today’s popular views of Christian conversion inconsistent with the Biblical definition of conversion given by Jesus and the apostles?
 - Modern evangelism often focuses on making a ‘decision’ or a ‘commitment’ to Christ or ‘accepting Christ’ without communicating the extent of what following Christ truly means.
 - Walking an aisle, signing a card, praying a prayer, etc. are often accepted as signs of true belief, with no mention of repentance.
 - This view of conversion is found nowhere in the Scriptures, and tends to produce superficial church members who are not genuinely converted to Christ.
 - Read *The Gospel According to Jesus*, pg 37.
 - Our modern evangelical tendency to push for a ‘commitment’ or ‘decision’ without clearly communicating all that is entailed in trusting and following Christ is at the root of much of the superficiality of the church today, as churches are filled with people who have not been truly converted.
- Why is being genuinely converted essential to being a healthy church member?
 - Apart from being truly converted as a believer in Jesus Christ, a person cannot be a member of the universal, invisible church. And therefore, cannot truly be a member of a local church.
 - Accepting any profession of faith in Christ, regardless of anything in a person’s life to authenticate that faith, is really accepting unbelievers into the fellowship of the church.
 - An unconverted person is not a Christian, and therefore can have no spiritual health, growth, fruit or life.
- Let’s explore the Biblical understanding of conversion a bit deeper.
 - Our understanding of true Biblical conversion must start with a Biblical understanding of the nature of man apart from Christ.



- All men are by nature fallen and sinful. We commit sin because it is our nature. (**Ephesians 2:1-3**). As such we are naturally alienated from and hostile towards God. (**Romans 8:5-8**)
- In this state of spiritual deadness, we are unable to please God, or to respond to Him. We must be radically changed by God's Spirit. (**Ephesians 2:4-7**)
- This radical change is *conversion*. It is the *turn* from an enslaved life of pursuing sin to a free life of pursuing and worshipping God. (**Acts 26:18**)
- **Conversion is a change of life, not merely a decision, self help, behavior modification, etc.**
- True conversion cannot be accomplished by human will, but only by the power of God, through His gospel, enabled by His Spirit, resulting in faith in His Son and obedience to His word. (**John 3:3-8**)
- Conversion then involves God granting to the sinner *repentance* (conviction of sin that leads to turning around) and *faith* (relying on Jesus Christ alone for salvation).
- **Both of these are a result of God's gracious work, and both are necessary for a person to be truly converted to faith in Christ in the Biblical sense.**
- Is it Biblical to look at ourselves to make sure we are truly converted?
- **We often seek to give new professed believers assurance in their salvation, but without any real basis for it. New believer or old, we are commanded repeatedly to continue to examine ourselves to look for evidence of true conversion to Christ.**
 - **Yes.** The apostles repeatedly exhort us to do so. Consider:
 - **2 Corinthians 13:5 - Paul commands the Corinthians to examine themselves to look for evidence that "Jesus Christ is in you". The "test" here refers to being approved, demonstrating the genuineness of their faith.**
 - **Philippians 2:12 - We are to work out our salvation, to see to it that we are seeking to be obedient to Christ, as He is at work in us. What He has worked in us, we are to cooperate with Him in working it out in our lives as evidence that we belong to Him.**
 - **2 Peter 1:5-11 - Peter gives a series of characteristics that we are to be diligent in pursuing, as a means to make sure our calling from God to true salvation and repentance. If these attributes are evident in our lives, then we can be sure that our conversion is genuine and we will persevere in Him ("never stumble") all the way to eternity.**
 - These are not calls to *doubting* our salvation, but rather establishing the *certainty* of it. We are commanded to know our own soul and the condition of it.
 - **We should not doubt our salvation if in fact there is evidence that our faith is indeed genuine. But we also should not be assured in our salvation if in fact there is no evidence of repentance. Such assurance is false. And the only way to see such evidence (or lack of it) is to examine ourselves, our hearts, our lives, in light of Biblical truth.**



- What are some questions we should ask to Biblically examine ourselves to ensure we are truly converted?
 - Are we trusting in the finished work of Jesus Christ and Him alone for our salvation?
 - If we're trusting in anything or anyone else (including ourselves) for our eternal destiny, we are not truly converted.
 - Our faith cannot be in Christ and anything else, like a ritual (baptism, altar call, etc), our own good deeds, the mediation of another person (priest, pastor, etc).
 - Are we growing in the grace and knowledge of Christ? (2 Peter 3:18)
 - The genuinely converted person will exhibit growth in both knowledge of Christ (relational, experiential and Biblical knowledge), and in evidence of His grace in their life.
 - Is the fruit of His Spirit evident in our lives? (Galatians 5:22-23)
 - It is impossible to be truly converted and have the Holy Spirit dwelling within us and not to have some external evidence of His presence and work. We must examine our spiritual fruitfulness.
 - Are we walking in the light or in the darkness? (1 John 1:6-7)
 - Truly converted persons grieve at their sin, and seek to turn from it rather than deny it (1 John 1:8-10)
 - Truly converted persons cannot habitually and unrepentantly continue in sin. (1 John 3:5)
 - Genuinely converted Christians are not sinless, but cannot live a life characterized by sin as a long term pattern. The popular concept of the "carnal Christian" who trusts Jesus as Savior but rejects Him as Lord and continues in sin is completely un-Biblical, and is in fact damnable heresy.
 - Do we love God the Father?
 - We cannot think of Jesus as a God of love and tolerance but view God the Father as a God of wrath.
 - We can't be genuinely converted and have a love for the Son, but not for the Father as well. They are the same God.
 - Love for the God the Father is a test of genuine faith and conversion. (1 John 2:22-23)
 - Love for God the Father and the things of the world cannot coexist in a truly converted person. (1 John 2:15)
 - Where our affections are tells us much about our spiritual state. If we love this life, this world, our comfort and the now more than God, this will say much about our lack of being genuinely converted.
 - Do we love other Christians?
 - Jesus stated clearly that others would know that we belong to Him not by our profession of faith or any other creedal statement, but rather by our evident love for one another as Christians.
 - Love for our brothers and sisters in Christ is a primary mark of being converted. (1 John 4:7, 4:20, 5:1)



- Hatred for our brother or sister is a sign of lack of spiritual life. (1 John 3:14-15)
- John expresses this test of genuine conversion both positively and negatively. If we don't have a true, Christ-like love for God's people, we have no evidence that we are one of them.
- Do we have the testimony of God that we are His children?
 - God has adopted us as His children by His Spirit (Romans 8:15; Galatians 4:6) and declares to our inward spirit that we are His children. (Romans 8:16)
 - The position of every true believer in Christ is that of adopted child of God the Father. This is an eternal spiritual relationship. Paul says that we will have the inner testimony of God's Spirit to our spirit that He is our Father and we His child. We must examine ourselves for this evidence of our relationship with Him.
 - As His children, we will not be popular with the world. (1 John 3:1)
 - If the world loves us, it may be an indicator that we really aren't in God's family. We need to examine ourselves along these lines.
- Are we persevering in the faith?
 - A truly converted Christian is one who overcomes and perseveres to the end. (1 John 5:4-5)
 - Those who believe and continue to believe are those who overcome the world by faith. Genuine faith is a *persevering* faith. (Revelation 2:7, 2:11, 2:17, 2:26, 3:5, 3:12, 3:21)
 - Jesus promises the blessings of eternal life not to the one who simply professes faith in Him, but to the one who by their perseverance in that faith and their ongoing reliance on Him overcomes all obstacles and proves the genuineness of that faith.
- What are the implications for evangelism that a Biblical understanding of conversion might have?
 - The healthy church member will understand that it is God who converts the sinner.
 - We will understand that the unbeliever is spiritually dead and incapable of responding to the gospel apart from God granting faith and repentance.
 - Evangelism then is not a matter of clever presentation or technique, but of God's Spirit at work through His gospel to convict the sinner, bring about new birth, repentance and faith.
 - A Biblical view of conversion will free us to proclaim the gospel to any and all we have opportunity to, and to leave the results to God, since conversion is wholly His work.
 - Example: Acts 13:48. Those appointed to eternal life believed, were converted.
 - Likewise, when someone responds to our sharing of the gospel, we will not blindly accept their profession of faith in Christ but will help them to understand the true nature of conversion, and to seek their assurance of salvation in examining their life for the Biblical evidences of genuine conversion.



APPLY & PERSONALIZE

- Has this lesson affected your understanding of what it means for a person to be converted to faith in Christ? In what ways?
- The tests given here to examine ourselves to ensure we are genuinely converted should be pursued with a group of mature Christians to provide perspective. Consider getting together with a few brothers or sisters and discussing these questions.

**THINK & DISCUSS**

- Who does the Bible say the task of evangelism has been given to?
Evangelism is not the work of those with special gifts or positions, but of every believer in Christ in the church. Therefore, we must have a Biblical understanding of what evangelism is (and isn't) to be healthy members of His body in doing this work.
-

READ & STUDY

- Based on our last two lessons, how does a Biblical understanding of the *gospel* and a Biblical understanding of *conversion* impact our understanding of *evangelism*?
 - Without a solid and accurate Biblical understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ, we have nothing of eternal consequence to share with others or to testify about.
 - *Evangelism is by definition proclaiming the evangel, the good news, the gospel of Christ. A wrong or poor understanding of the gospel undermines any evangelism we may engage in. A Biblical understanding of the gospel impacts the **content** of our evangelism.*
 - Without a Biblical understanding of authentic conversion, which includes both a change of belief and a change of behavior, we are in danger of miscommunicating the marks of true faith and repentance, and giving assurance of salvation where none is warranted.
 - *A Biblical understanding of conversion impacts the **objective** of our evangelism. We seek to see God make *converted disciples*, not simply professions of faith.*
 - Biblical evangelism is only possible based on a Biblical gospel motivated by a desire to see people Biblically converted to faith in Christ.
 - *"Apart from a Biblical understanding of conversion and evangelism, a church member will be most unhelpful in completing the churches mission of making disciples." – Thabiti Anyabwile*
 - How does a Biblical view of evangelism affect our own personal evangelistic efforts?
 - We realize that evangelism is not dependent on eloquence, proper mood setting, emotional stories and songs, high pressure sales pitches, or other pragmatic gimmicks.
 - *A Biblical understanding of evangelism, based on a Biblical understanding of the gospel and conversion, tells us that salvation is God's work and His alone. It is only by His power that people are converted to Christ. (Romans 1:16) The fruit of evangelism depends entirely on Him, not on us.*
 - We are then freed to:
 - Simply trust in the gospel as the power of God to salvation to produce the fruit He desires (**Romans 1:17**).
 - Allow God to make His plea to sinners **through** us, as His **ambassadors** and fellow laborers (**1 Corinthians 3:9; 2 Corinthians 5:20, 6:1**).
-



- Realize that His Spirit will not allow His word to be of no effect (**Isaiah 55:11**).
- Plant and water faithfully, confidently trusting God to bring the fruit (**1 Corinthians 3:7**).
- What is the main thing that Biblical evangelism requires of us?
 - That we be **faithful** to communicate the good news of Jesus Christ with the people God places us in contact with (**1 Corinthians 4:1-2**).
 - **We are not capable of saving people, that's why God never commands us to do so. But He does command us to be faithful stewards of the gospel He's entrusted to us. And that means faithfully declaring the gospel to others.**
 - This faithful evangelism includes:
 - Being '**content specific**', presenting the truth about Who God is, Who men are, What sin is, Who Jesus is, What Jesus has done about our sin, What we must do about what Jesus has done.
 - **Note the systematic progression of these points of content. Faithful gospel witness must include all of these truths in some form.**
 - Clearly presenting the truth that Christ is the **exclusive** way of salvation.
 - **John 14:6, Acts 4:12**
 - **Faithfulness requires not allowing the claims of the gospel to be seen as simply an alternative religious system, to be evaluated against others.**
 - Calling the hearer to repentance and faith in Christ.
 - **Faithful evangelism cannot stop with declaring the truths of the gospel, but must also include a call for a response to those truths. And what that response looks like (true faith and repentance) must be clearly explained.**
- What are some essentials, then, for Biblically doing the work of an evangelist?
 - Tell people **honestly** that if they repent and believe they will be saved – but it will be **costly**. (**Luke 14:26-33**)
 - Communicate the gospel in terms that focus on deeds, not simply words; a change of life, not simply a change of belief.
 - Avoid using the language of **decisionism** (just believe, ask Jesus into your heart, accept Jesus) in favor of the more Biblical language of **conversion** (surrender to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, turn from sin and trust Christ for forgiveness and live a life of obedience).
 - **Evangelism that calls for faith and belief but that doesn't include repentance and obedience to Christ is not faithful evangelism.**
 - Tell people **urgently** that if they repent and believe they will be saved – but they must do so **now**. (**2 Corinthians 6:2; Hebrews 3:14-15**)
 - We must declare the gospel and call for a response from people with a sense of urgency since their life could be over at any time.



- But we must temper this urgency so as not to push too hard for a 'decision' apart from a clear understanding of repentance and belief.
 - **There is a balance here. We should communicate the urgency of the need for salvation, not the urgency of some decision or prayer or other ritual.**
- Tell people *joyfully* that if they repent and believe they will be saved, and regardless of how difficult it may be, it is *infinitely worth it*.
 - Avoid giving the impression that the gospel is therapeutic, that trusting Christ will solve their life problems or address their felt needs.
- Tell people *authoritatively* that if they repent and believe they will be saved – based on the *truth of the Bible*.
 - Focus on a serious Biblical view of sin and guilt, rather than as an abstract concept.
 - **Sin has to be seen as a personal offense against God, as represented in Scripture.**
 - Refer to the Scriptures to clearly show that the gospel of Christ is God's plan for salvation, and not based in the religion or wisdom of man.
 - **Using the Bible and letting God speak the gospel truths through His word reinforces the fact that the gospel is God's authoritative message of salvation, not ours. When we appeal to the Scriptures, we are appealing to the authority of God Himself.**
- Remember to *pray*.
 - Since conversion is wholly an act of God, He is the one we must ask to bring the sinner to repentance and faith.
 - We can and should pray for the right words in witnessing, accuracy in sharing the gospel, etc. But we should pray even more for God to do His saving work in the hearts of those we evangelize.
 - **Remember that apart from God intervening in the heart of the sinner, none of our best efforts at evangelism will have any effect or fruit.**
- What role does the local church play in our evangelism?
 - A healthy local church can be central to healthy church members' evangelistic efforts.
 - A church where the word of God and the gospel is clearly preached and taught each week is a great resource to bring unsaved people to hear the gospel.
 - **The preaching of the gospel in the church can be a great reinforcement to our own personal sharing of the gospel.**
 - A church filled with healthy Christians gives unbelievers an opportunity to see the gospel of Christ 'fleshed out' and lived in community with one another, and demonstrates the kind of life the believer is called to live.
 - **Since conversion to Christ is a call to a radically changed life, which unbelievers can't even imagine, exposing unbelievers to the local church allows them to see what the result of the gospel is, and what real repentance and faith looks like lived out by His people.**



- Unbelievers can be exposed to literally hundreds of other Christians besides ourselves who can share their unique experiences of God's saving grace and power as a testimony.
- Cf. 1 Corinthians 3:5-6. Each of us can do our part in planting the gospel in an unbeliever's mind and heart, watering and nurturing it, so that ultimately God can use it.
- What would you say is the number one reason Christians fail to engage in doing the work of an evangelist?
 - Fear of rejection? Lack of knowledge? Indifference? Others?
 - The main reason is that **we do not believe the truth of Romans 1:16**. We do not have **confidence** in the gospel because we fail to believe that it is *God's power to salvation*.
 - **Do we really have confidence that God saves sinners by the power of His gospel? Or do we unconsciously believe more in our poor evangelistic abilities, or the hardness or 'free will' of the sinner?**
 - **If we are convinced that the gospel is God's power to save His elect, then we will have confidence in His ability and His desire to save them, by making His appeal through us (2 Cor 5:20) and working His saving work in them.**

APPLY & PERSONALIZE

- When was the last time you communicated the gospel of Christ to someone? How did you share Christ with them?
- Does the way you speak to others about Jesus include all the essential ideas of the gospel? How can you be more clear and faithful in this?
- Does the way you speak to others about Jesus demonstrate confidence in the gospel message, that it is the power of God for salvation? How can you grow in your confidence in the gospel?



THINK & DISCUSS

- Why does it seem so many people today have an issue with commitment to anything? Does this affect the life of the church?

Our society is largely self-centered and selfish, and therefore devalues having a sense of commitment to anyone or anything. This can be seen in all kinds of relationships.

Unfortunately, this attitude can be carried over into the church as well.

READ & STUDY

- Many Christians today seem to view membership in the local church as optional, even detrimental to their spiritual well-being. What may be some reasons for this view?
 - *Indifference* – they can take it or leave it, it just doesn't matter to them.
 - *Ignorance* – they've never been taught or considered the Bible's view of the local church.
 - *Indecisive* – they can't make up their mind about joining so they don't.
 - *Independent* – they don't want to be saddled with the burdens of church membership.
 - *Inverted affections* – they are still attached to a 'home church' they grew up in.
 - Others?
- What's at the root of all these views of local church membership?
 - They fail to understand or take seriously God's purpose for the local church to be central to the life of His people.
 - *Everywhere in the NT the people of Christ are seen not merely as individuals but as members one of another, connected to and committed to one another in local churches.*
 - Commitment to a local church is how God intends His people to live out the faith and experience Christian love.
 - *The Christian life is not a "lone ranger" experience, but God-ordained to be lived out in committed community with one another.*
- Formal institutional church membership isn't directly found in the Bible. However, it's implied throughout the New Testament in the following areas:
 - Church Leadership:
 - Qualifications given for local church leaders (*1 Timothy 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9*)
 - Commands given for leaders to shepherd the flock, and for Christians to submit to their leaders (*Hebrews 13:17*)
 - Implies leadership of a defined group of believers, and that group of believers committed as a group and submissive to those leaders.
 - *Commands concerning church leaders roles and qualifications, and commands for believers to submit to their leaders make no sense apart from an identifiable, committed group of Christians in a local church.*



- Church Discipline:
 - Paul gives commands for removal of an unrepentant sinning brother from the membership of the Corinthian church (1 Corinthians 5)
 - Unless there's an identifiable membership in the local church, it's impossible to "remove [someone] from your midst" as Paul commands.
 - Jesus gives clear commands regarding church discipline and dealing with sin in the church, among members (Matthew 18:15-17)
 - "Tell it to the church" implies that there's a defined group of members in the local assembly.
 - This teaching is intended to make a clear distinction between who belongs to the church and who does not (1 Corinthians 5:9-13)
 - Paul refers to those who are "inside" and those who are "outside", referring to identifiable church members.

- Keeping Lists and Voting:
 - Many examples of listing counts of who was in a local group of believers, as a membership list (Acts 2:41, 4:4, 1 Tim 5:9-11)
 - A majority voted to remove the man from membership in the church at Corinth (2 Corinthians 2:6) A "majority" implies a defined group of believers who came together to decide this matter.
 - Implies a defined group of believers, recognized by church leaders and functioning as a local body.

- It's clear from the NT that some form of membership was practiced and seen as vital to the early church. And it is still so today.

- There are some who say today that the idea of membership in a local church is not a Biblical concept, but rather one that has been culturally developed over time. The evidence is clear, however, that this is not the case, and that early believers gathered together in local assemblies and committed themselves to those assemblies, just as the Jews had done for centuries in their local synagogues.

- What then is the essential mark of membership in a local church?
 - Jesus specified one defining mark for His disciples: love for one another (John 13:34-35).
 - A healthy Christian is committed to expressing this kind of love to other believers – and the best place to do so is in the assembly of Christians in the local church.
 - A committed church member is first and foremost committed to Jesus Christ as the head of the church, and then committed to the brothers and sisters in Christ in the local church.
 - This is seen in the commands of Hebrews 10:24-25 – stir one another up to love and good deeds, by continuing to gather together.
 - Love for Christ and for the brethren is the hallmark of committed church membership. But how does this love express itself? Let's examine this further...



- What does a committed church member look like?
 - Attends regularly
 - Being present, being known and being active are necessary to make Christian love possible. (**Hebrews 10:24-25**) **The first and most important ministry for every Christian**
 - **Commitment requires presence. One cannot express and live out love for the brethren if one is not present and active among the rest of the church membership.**
 - **Committed membership goes far beyond a name on a roll.**
 - Seeks peace
 - Committed members are committed to maintaining peace in the congregation. (**Romans 14:19; Ephesians 4:1-3**)
 - **The local church, being made up of redeemed sinful people, is always in danger of strife and division. Committed members understand this and seek to maintain unity and peace in the church, for its wellbeing and Christ's glory.**
 - Edifies others
 - The goal of the public meeting of the local church is mutual edification, the building up of one another in the faith. (**1 Corinthians 12; Ephesians 4:11-16**)
 - Healthy church members seek to *serve*, not to *be served*; seek to *provide*, not merely be a *consumer*.
 - **Committed members know that the local church is not just a place to be ministered to, but more importantly to minister to others. They avoid the consumer mindset so rampant in today's culture, and far too often in today's churches.**
 - Warns and admonishes others
 - A committed member is committed to speaking the truth in love to brothers and sisters in Christ, for their good. (**Ephesians 4:15**)
 - Committed to fellow members' growth in holiness, avoidance of sin and error, and spiritual growth.
 - **A primary expression of having Christian love for one another – seeking the best for others in the church in their spiritual lives.**
 - Pursues reconciliation
 - As those who have been reconciled to God in Christ (**2 Corinthians 5:18-20**), committed members seek to repair issues with fellow Christians as quickly as possible (**Matthew 5:23-24**).
 - **Committed members will not allow relationship problems between themselves and others in the church to remain, deepen, fester and become bitter. They will rather pursue resolution and forgiveness immediately, even before engaging in corporate worship (Matthew 5:23...)**
 - **Committed members also will exercise patience with one another so as not to take offense where none is warranted. This involves bearing with one another in the love of Christ.**



- Prepares for the ordinances
 - Christ has given members of His church the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's table as visible proclamations of His gospel.
 - These ordinances are given for His glory and for our benefit as a means of grace in our Christian lives. We dare not take them lightly or disregard their value to us or to Him.
 - Committed church members rejoice at the baptism of new believers in the church, and examine themselves in preparation for approaching the communion table.
 - A committed member takes seriously the commands to be baptized as a public testimony to their identification with Christ. They also take seriously the commands to not approach the Lord's table in an unworthy manner and so bring judgment upon themselves and the church.

- Supports the work of the ministry
 - Committed church members give resources, time and talent to furthering the gospel in the local church.
 - A tangible expression of commitment to Christ and the church is in the giving of the resources God has provided (whatever they may be) in the context of the local church for the work of the ministry God has given that church.
 - This includes exercising the spiritual gifts God has provided (Romans 12:6-8), and joyfully and sacrificially giving of their finances (2 Corinthians 8-9).
 - A church is incomplete without each member committed to employ the spiritual gifts God has given to do the work of ministry. And joyful, generous and sacrificial financial giving flows out of this commitment as well, as seen in the example of the Macedonians.

APPLY & PERSONALIZE

- Some religious traditions place too much focus on membership, one that is un-Biblical and implies salvation is through membership in their church. How can this warp people's understanding of church membership?
- Does your local church give appropriate attention and priority to church membership? How is that displayed?
- On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you rate your level of commitment to membership in your local church? If it's not a 10, why not?

**THINK & DISCUSS**

- What comes to mind when you hear the word “discipline”?
We tend to think of discipline in generally negative terms, similar to punishment. Were conditioned to expect disciplinary action when we do something wrong at school, work, home and even in the church. Or we think of discipline as something needed to succeed at athletics, academics, etc – diligence and hard work. So how close are these ideas to the Biblical use of this term? Let's see!

READ & STUDY

- What is the real definition of the term “discipline”?
 - The term discipline (Greek *paideia*, rearing of a child, training) comes from the same Latin root as *disciple* (Greek *mathetes*, a learner).
 - A disciple studies a certain discipline to learn a profession, etc, and has their life ordered according to the principles of that discipline.
 - Discipline, then, refers to *order*.
- How does this definition of discipline apply to the church and the church member?
 - Scripture commands that everything in the church be done with order, not chaos (1 Corinthians 14:40). This order in the church is necessary for edification.
 - There was obviously a great deal of disorder in the gathering of the Corinthian church, and Paul commands them to reorder their assembly for the building up of the body. They needed discipline!
 - Order in the form of habits, patterns, routines and boundaries is also needed for growth in the life of the individual Christian. These are commonly referred to as spiritual disciplines.
 - Discipline in the life of the congregation and in the healthy church member provides the atmosphere for spiritual growth and development.
 - Just as fruitful plants won't flourish in a garden that's not well ordered and kept that way, so too spiritual growth and fruit will be diminished in the life of individual Christians and churches that are not characterized by discipline.
- What does discipline look like in the life of a healthy church member?
 - All spiritual discipline has its source and basis in the word of God (2 Timothy 3:16). Two forms of discipline are described here:
 - We commonly focus on the inspired nature of Scripture expressed in this passage. But it also clearly tells us how the word of God applies to the matter of discipline.
 - Formative discipline
 - “profitable for teaching”, “training in righteousness”
 - Training = Greek *paideia*. Discipline.
 - Refers to the shaping and molding of the Christian by the Scriptures as they are preached, studied, and applied.
 - The vast majority of discipline in a healthy church is formative.



- This is to be the normal pattern in the life of the believer – being taught the truths of Scripture, and being trained by them. This is the making of Christian disciples.
- **Corrective** discipline
 - "for reproof, for correction"
 - Loving correction applied to a brother or sister in Christ who is in sin.
 - These terms refer to restoring a fellow believer to the orderly and right path.
 - Scripture provides the pattern and boundaries for holy living, that discipline seeks to restore the Christian to.
 - It's the word that defines those boundaries of the righteous path, and that therefore is the key to correcting erring Christians to that path.
 - Many situations described in the Bible where corrective discipline is needed:
 - A Christian sins against a fellow believer (**Matthew 18:15-17**)
 - A believer in the church in sin (**1 Corinthians 5**)
 - Even less severe sins like laziness (**2 Thessalonians 3:6, 11**), false teaching (**Titus 3:10**)
 - Corrective discipline is explicitly and implicitly described throughout the NT as being necessary in the church of Jesus Christ.
 - Unfortunately, this Biblical practice of corrective discipline to maintain the health of the church and individual members is ignored in many if not most churches today. Our modern focus on individual rights and choices has made this practice seem archaic and barbaric. It's even resulted in lawsuits.
 - But the church that fails to practice Scriptural corrective discipline is a church that fails to love Christ and His holiness, and ultimately that fails to love its members.
- The healthy church member understands the need for order in the Christian life, and embraces both formative and corrective discipline as a means of grace.
- Is that true of you? Do you see how discipline in both forms is in fact unmerited favor from God for the good of His people and His church? It's not a power play by Christ or His church leaders, but a means by which He favors us for our good, and His glory.
- How does the healthy church member joyfully seek discipline? How do we cultivate a desire for both formative and corrective discipline in our Christian lives?
 - Our natural self chafes against the idea of discipline in the spiritual realm, both formative and corrective. We must take actions to be healthy believers who seek and embrace discipline as a means of joy and growth in our Christian life.
 - Receive the word of God with meekness (**James 1:21**)



- We must be humble and lowly before the Scriptures, recognizing their authority over us and the need for our submission to what God says.
 - God's word is *God's words*. By virtue of their source, they have divine authority. And by virtue of our relationship to Him as Lord, they are our Master's voice.
 - We must recognize the word of God as the source of salvation, and the key to godly living.
 - There is no other path to salvation apart from the gospel expressed in the Scriptures. And there's no other resource for a God-glorifying life but His word. We have no resources on our own to grow in spiritual maturity and holiness. Unless we are submissive to God's word, we will refuse to allow the Scriptures to train us and reprove us. We will remain undisciplined.
 - Some questions to consider:
 - *Am I looking to the Scriptures for information, or formation, trusting that God speaks through His word?*
 - *Do I look to the preaching/teaching of the Scriptures to have my needs met, or to understand and apply what God says?*
 - *Is my first reaction to the word "How does this make me feel?", or is it "Do I accept this as true?"*
 - *Is my listening posture to preaching/teaching defensive or combative, as if to say "prove it to me"?*
 - *Do I judge other philosophies or viewpoints by the Scriptures, or the other way around?*
 - We must accept the Bible as true, as the only sufficient authority for shaping our lives, that it must govern how we think and feel, in order to be prepared for the Scripture's formative discipline.
 - This submission to the Scriptures is a first and foremost step in seeking discipline in our spiritual lives.
- Learn to recognize chastisement as evidence of God's love.
- God Himself is a loving Father who disciplines His children (**Hebrews 12:5-7**).
 - Discipline from God, through His word or elsewhere, is an act of love on His part towards us. It's a natural act of a perfect loving Father towards His children.
 - God's discipline of us is a source of assurance that we are indeed His children (**Hebrews 12:8**).
 - If we are never corrected or reprovved by God, we should wonder if in fact He truly is our Father.
 - Remember that God often will use consequences of our sin as a means of disciplining us. But when He does so, He never punishes us for our sin, since we are free from condemnation for our sin in Christ alone (**Romans 8:1**).
 - God's goal in His discipline is to protect our lives and conform us to His holiness (**Hebrews 12:9-10**).



- Why do parents discipline their children? To protect them from harm and to train them in character. God's discipline is the same – to keep us from evil that would harm us, and to train us to grow in holiness. To conforms us to His image more fully.
- Humbly accept correction from others.
 - God's correction often comes through others in the church.
 - This is one of the hardest aspects of being a healthy discipline seeker – opening ourselves up to and accepting correction and reproof from others.
 - Biblical correction from a brother or sister is an act of faithful love (Proverbs 27:5-6).
 - Reproof from a faithful fellow Christian, based on the Scriptures and with pure motives, is a strong act of love.
 - It's a sign of maturity and spiritual health to seek and accept the loving rebuke and correction of others (Proverbs 1:7).
 - It's foolish of us to reject or despise loving and faithful correction from fellow believers. We harm only ourselves.
- Take seriously our responsibility to discipline others.
 - We are commanded to show love one to another through our warning and admonishing others when needed (Colossians 3:16).
 - Admonishing: Greek *noutheteo*, to put in mind, to warn gently. Our responsibility is to remind one another of Scriptural truths as a means of warning against sin.
 - Cf. Col 3:14 – the context of this command is based in the love that we as believers are to have for one another.
 - The classic Biblical passages on dealing with unrepentant sin (Matthew 18, 1 Corinthians 5) *end* with the congregation taking responsibility for discipline. But the process *begins* with an individual responsibility.
 - Example: Matt 18:15 – individual discipline, one-on-one, in private.
 - And we are to engage in this responsibility with an attitude of humility and self-examination. Matthew 7:1-5 – to do otherwise is to engage in hypocrisy.
- Don't forget to rejoice!
 - It's normal to think of discipline in terms of grief and sorrow (e.g. 1 Corinthians 5:2). But the whole process is a reason for joy as the end goal is repentance and restoration (2 Corinthians 2:6).
 - Never forget that the objective in discipline (both formative and corrective) is spiritual health, growth and reconciliation to God and to fellow believers. This is a reason for great joy in the process.

APPLY & PERSONALIZE

- Discipline, both formative and especially corrective, is often not practiced in churches today. Why do you think this is?
- Consider the questions listed above regarding receiving the word with meekness to evaluate your health in this area.
- Consider how you can more Biblically and more intentionally be one who takes seriously our responsibility to seek and provide loving Christian discipline.



THINK & DISCUSS

- Since so much Biblical teaching about living the Christian life is focused on growing as disciples, why is this mark of health so far down on this list?
- Growing in the knowledge and grace of the Lord as His disciple is the calling and duty of each believer, and is a main part of the mission of the church. However, discipleship and growth flow out the healthy church practices we've looked at so far – expositional preaching and teaching, Biblical theology, Biblical understandings of the gospel and conversion and evangelism, and a commitment to the church in membership.
- Discipleship can't truly happen apart from these essentials. Focusing on discipleship and growth without these other church health marks will not produce true Biblical disciples of Christ who are growing in Him.

READ & STUDY

- Why is spiritual growth an important indicator of the health of a church member?
 - Growth in the physical sense is an indicator of the health of the animal, plant, person, etc. It's a sign that there is life present, and that life is producing growth.
 - If you look at a plant or animal that never shows any sign of growth, you have to wonder if there's any actual life in it. That which is alive and healthy will grow and produce some evidence of that life and health.
 - In the same way, spiritual growth is an indicator that spiritual life is present in a person, and that the life is bearing fruit in spiritual growth.
- Is spiritual growth to be a normal experience in the life of a Christian?
 - Yes. All through the Bible, advancement in the knowledge and the likeness of Jesus Christ are presented as normal for the believer in Him.
 - Consider John 15:16, where Jesus states that He has appointed His disciples to go and bear fruit, the kind of fruit that would remain, have lasting effect and evidence.
 - A growing disciple is one who is being trained and shaped by formative and corrective discipline (last lesson).
 - Example: Hebrews 5:12-6:2, where the writer chastises believers for still being babies and requiring "milk", rather than growing and maturing as they should have.
 - "For by this time you ought to be teachers" – The writer points out that they've had plenty of time for growth to occur in the Christian lives, even to the point where they should have been mature enough to be teaching and discipling others – but they have failed to do so. The implication is clear: this is not to be so.
- What then do we mean by the term "spiritual growth"?
- We spend a lot of time as Christians talking about the need for spiritual growth, and various ways to promote growth as Jesus' disciples, and what kind of church programs and ministries will grow believers to maturity. But we also often fail to take time to define what we mean by spiritual growth, and therefore have confused ideas about what it looks like.



- Jesus' teaching in **Luke 18:9-14** shows three *wrong* attitudes that hinder true spiritual growth.
 - Equating "performance" with spiritual growth.
 - The Pharisee based his view of his righteousness and spiritual maturity on his religious performance, outward acts (**Luke 18:12**).
 - The Pharisee was reciting his performance numbers to God in an attempt to show how spiritual, righteous and mature he was (in his sight).
 - We too can seek to evaluate our spiritual growth based on "numbers" – how many quiet times we have, how many times we share the gospel, how many Bible studies we attend, etc.
 - There are so many things in our modern cultural Christianity that drive us toward this kind of thinking. So many programs, books, etc that focus on these kind of measures of spiritual growth.
 - None of these things are wrong, but they are merely external acts that may have no connection to the inward reality (as in the case of this Pharisee.)
 - Spiritual growth is not primarily a matter of outward performance, by rather of inward transformation that expresses itself in a life of true godly character and righteousness.
 - Judging by the wrong standard.
 - The Pharisee was evaluating his righteousness in comparison with others (**Luke 18:11**), even the tax collector praying next to him.
 - He was using a relative standard of his righteousness, measuring himself against others. Others of his own choosing whom he thought to be less righteous than himself.
 - We are not to judge our spiritual growth relative to others, but rather in comparison with the perfect standard of godliness in Jesus Christ.
 - We are each individuals and will grow, mature and bear spiritual fruit based on our individual rate of progression in the faith and as God works individually in each of us (**Matthew 13:8**). Therefore comparisons with others are useless, and ultimately self-deceiving.
 - Comparing ourselves with others shows an attitude of spiritual pride, which is in opposition to God and the formation of His character in us.
 - Or it can also result in an attitude of spiritual defeat, thinking that others are so much more advanced in the faith that we are and causing us to despair of our own growth. Neither is right!



- Depending on self-effort for spiritual growth.
 - The Pharisee presented his own efforts and works to God as evidence of his spiritual maturity and righteousness (**Luke 18:11-12**).
 - Key repeated term in the Pharisee's prayer: "I". His claim to spiritual maturity is based 100% on his own effort and works.
 - Spiritual growth requires the work of God's Spirit to achieve, and cannot be attained by mere human effort.
 - Spiritual growth is by nature spiritual (duh) and therefore is achieved by spiritual means, by the working of God Himself in the person of His Spirit. Self-effort may produce religious progress, but cannot result in real spiritual growth.
 - Example: **Hebrews 6:1,3** indicating that God is the one who will bring about maturity. We are commanded repeatedly to grow in spiritual maturity, but always with a dependence on God. Also **Philippians 2:12-13**.
 - **Philippians: work out our salvation (grow in practice of our position in Christ), because it is God who is the one at work in us to accomplish His good pleasure in maturing us for His glory.**
- Spiritual growth is growth in godliness and holiness. It's an expression of our sanctification. (**2 Peter 3:18**)
- It's a growth both in grace (the presence and work of Christ's grace in our lives) and knowledge (a deepening understanding of the truth of Christ and a corresponding growth in practice of that truth).
- Growing disciples look more and more like Jesus in attitudes of heart, thought, speech and actions.
- **Romans 8:29 – God has fore-ordained that His people whom he has saved through Christ will be conformed to the image of their Savior – Jesus Christ.**
- What are some ways that healthy church members can cultivate spiritual growth?
 - While it's true that growing as a disciple of Christ is to be normal for the believer, it's also true that it is not an automatic occurrence. Healthy church members have to take steps to develop patterns that will enable them to grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ.
 - Abide in Christ
 - The key to growth in godliness is remaining in and abiding in Christ, the True Vine (**John 15:5-8**).
 - Note Jesus' conditional statement: "*if* you remain in Me, and my words remain in you..."
 - Remaining in Christ means clinging dependently to Him like a branch to a vine as the source of life.
 - The picture is of a living branch on a grape vine. Not passively or independently existing, but keeping a vital and life-giving connection to the vine, the source of life, growth and fruitfulness.



- Christ's words remaining in us means His commands and teachings are not superficially received, but taken deep within and kept there with obedience and trust.
 - Jesus' words are the transforming, growth-producing 'sap' that is received submissively by us as branches.
 - Abiding in Christ and remaining in His word is essential to Christian discipleship and growth. Apart from this there can be no growth.
 - Note Jesus' words about those who do not abide in Him (i.e. those who have no connection to the True Vine, unbelievers). There is no life, no growth, no fruit, only barrenness and ultimately destruction.
- Use the ordinary means of grace.
 - Too often we look for some special event, conference, book, spiritual experience, etc that will catapult our growth. But it's the ongoing, ordinary means of God's grace to us that cause sustained spiritual growth.
 - Our culture reinforces this focus on and fascination with the spectacular, the event or experience or product that will solve our problems. And our modern evangelical culture feeds this focus too. *"While the sensational and extraordinary can and often does lead people astray, the Word properly taught and understood never will."* – Anyabwile.
 - These means of grace include the study of His word, participation with the church in the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's table, and prayer.
 - Receiving the teaching of the Word is the means by which we receive God's grace in learning Christ. And in the ordinances we receive ongoing grace to see and picture Christ's death, burial, resurrection and life for us and our salvation.
 - God has given us these means of receiving His grace to train us in holiness and righteousness (Titus 2:11-12).
 - The ongoing reception of God's grace is what trains us and transforms us into His image. Growth most often and most sustainably occurs in a slow, consistent progression as God's grace empowers it.
 - Participate in the local church.
 - Neglecting to participate in the corporate life of the church or failing to serve and be served is a certain way to limit our spiritual growth.
 - The Christian life is meant to be lived out and experienced in community. If we separate ourselves from the corporate life of the local church, we cut ourselves off from the God-given means of spiritual formation, accountability, admonishment, correction and other growth resources.
 - Ephesians 4:11-16 indicates that participation in the church is the main way that Christ strengthens and matures His people.
 - God has given the local church all it needs for the equipping and maturing of the Christian.



- Look forward to Christ's return.
- Most of the NT letters indicate a strong focus on the imminence of Jesus' return, that we seem to have lost. This can and should be a motivation for growth.
 - Many of the New Testament exhortations to grow in holiness are connected with anticipation of Christ's return. Examples:
 - Matthew 25, Jesus teaches about His return and gives parables about living faithfully in light of His returning.
 - The 10 virgins who weren't prepared for the bridegroom's return. The unfaithful slave who wasn't prepared for his master's return. The description of Christ's return in judgment, separating those who knew Him and had obediently served Him, and those who had not.
 - Titus 2:11-14, commands to pursue righteousness and godliness and to be a pure people are centered on the blessed hope of Christ's return (v. 13).
 - 1 John 3:2-3, the hope we have as Christians of seeing Jesus face to face at His return causes us to live pure lives.
 - Our yearning to be *with* Jesus and to see Jesus is intended by God to make us more *like* Jesus in holiness.
 - Keeping the return of Christ at any time in our minds is a strong motivation to live faithfully and grow in maturity in expectance of standing before Him.

APPLY & PERSONALIZE

- Are there any wrong ways or ideas you may have in thinking about or measuring your spiritual growth and maturity? If so, what are they? What needs to change in your thinking?
- Looking back on your life as a believer in Jesus Christ, at what times has your spiritual growth been the greatest? The least?
- Which of the strategies for spiritual growth we discussed are most needed in your life right now?



THINK & DISCUSS

- Does our society and culture value the ideas of submission to leaders and those in authority over us? Why or why not? How might this affect the Christian's view of church leadership?

Our postmodern individualistic society tends to view leadership with suspicion. And to be sure, there have been many leaders in many areas of society who have proven to be less than trustworthy. But God has clearly established a pattern of Biblical leadership in His church that is necessary for church health.

READ & STUDY

- Before we discuss being a humble follower, let's look at the two primary offices in the Biblical model of church leadership:
 - Elders – the spiritual overseers of the church
 - 1 Timothy 3:1, 8, 14-15
 - The Biblical role of elder is to be a shepherd of the flock, those who are responsible and accountable for the souls of the church. This includes the tasks of pasturing, preaching, teaching, providing vision, etc.
 - The Biblical model always includes multiple elders (a plurality), not a single man in charge.
 - Elders are to be selected in a healthy church not due to special popularity or skills or position or any other worldly measures, but instead by the Biblical qualifications given in the NT. Churches who ignore these qualifications will not be led in a Biblically healthy manner.
 - Deacons – the physical stewards of the church
 - Acts 6:1-6
 - The office of deacon is intended to deal with the physical needs of the members of the church, ministering as needs arise and doing so with a focus on spiritual needs as well.
 - The role of deacon may be expressed in many different ways in a local church, but the function must be present for a church to have healthy leadership.
- Why is being a humble follower of church leaders so important to the health of individual church members?
 - Our attitude toward the authority of our church leaders can and does affect and reflect our attitude toward God's authority over us.
 - God Himself models good authority and submission within the trinity in the persons of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And God makes clear that He has authority over all creation and particularly over His people, as we call Him Lord.
 - We are commanded to submit, obey, respect and honor those whom God has placed in spiritual leadership over us. To do otherwise is to disobey and rebel against Christ.
 - Rejecting the leaders God has placed over us in His church is rejecting His authority over us. A very unhealthy attitude for the believer in Christ.
 - Examples: 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13; Hebrews 13:7, 17



- What attitudes do healthy church members exhibit toward their church leadership?
 - The attitudes that we have toward church leadership are the place to start in examining our health as Christians in this area, since attitudes always reflect our hearts, and will determine our actions,
 - Honors the elders.
 - Several specifics are given in **1 Timothy 5:17-19**:
 - Those who labor in the preaching and teaching of the word of God are to be given double honor (**v. 17**).
 - Double honor refers to first honoring the person of the elder/pastor. Then also seeing that their needs are met (next point).
 - This honor includes seeing that their financial and physical needs are met (**v. 18**).
 - It is dishonoring and in fact rebellious for a church to withhold adequate compensation, etc to full time shepherds who labor on their behalf.
 - It also includes protecting the reputation of elders and pastors (**v. 19**).
 - The person in a position of elder / pastor is always at risk of being accused of wrongdoing, attacks from critics, etc. This is one way Satan seeks to undermine leadership and divide the church. A healthy church member understands this and seeks to ensure Biblical processes are followed in these cases.
 - Healthy church members also honor the elder's office, valuing the role and being thankful to God for it. (**Ephesians 4:11-12**)
 - Our view of the honor due to an individual elder / pastor will reflect to a large degree our understanding of the value of the position in the church. Do we see these positions as from God, valuable to us and the church, and give thanks for them?
 - Shows open-hearted love to the elders.
 - The honor and respect shown to church leaders isn't to be the formal, cold respect of a soldier to a military officer, but rather based on love. (**2 Corinthians 6:11-13**)
 - Just as leaders in the church are commanded to be shepherds and servant leaders based on love for Christ and His people (**Matthew 20:25-28**), so the honor returned to them is to be motivated by love for them and their role in serving us.
 - A healthy church member will never want to hear their pastor or elder plead for their love and affection as Paul had to do to the Corinthian church. (**2 Corinthians 7:2-3**)
 - We must not submit to and follow church leaders because we are required to, but because we love and trust them and willingly want to follow them.



- Is teachable.
 - A teachable spirit is evidence of humility and a desire to grow in Christ.
 - Being a humble follower means I admit that I need to learn more of Christ and seek to be taught and shaped by Him and His word, through His shepherds.
 - Since a pastor or elder's main role is to teach, unteachable church members can be a great burden on leaders.
 - Nearly everything an elder / pastor does in relation to the congregation is geared toward teaching and shaping them through the Word. Not necessarily direct teaching and preaching, but individual discipling, correcting, counseling, etc.
 - The most discouraging thing for a teacher is a student who will not be taught. If a large segment of a church body have this resistant attitude, a pastor's entire ministry can be undermined.
 - Paul's instructions to pastors (2 Timothy 2:24-26) contains good instructions for church members as well:
 - The pastor's teaching is to be gentle and patient. We should see this attitude as a call to repentance. We should never see it as a weakness to be exploited.
 - We should consider how we may be opposing or resisting the pastor's teaching. Self-examination as to our willingness to be taught and shaped by God's Word through the pastor's teaching is a necessary, ongoing discipline.
 - We should pray for knowledge of the truth through the pastor's teaching, and for protection from the schemes of the evil one. Satan desires us to be deceived in this and cause us to resist our leaders. We must be aware of these schemes of his, and instead ask for God to impart truth to us through the teaching.
- Based on these healthy attitudes towards church leaders, what are some healthy actions church members should take regarding pastors and elders?
 - Patiently participate in the selection of leaders.
 - Selection of leaders is one of the most important decisions a church body makes.
 - It's ultimately God who appoints the leaders in the church, but He does so through the willing submission of His people to His guidance.
 - Leaders are to be selected based on spiritual qualities and maturity. (Acts 6:1-6; 1 Timothy 3)
 - Leaders in the church should never be selected based on their popularity, status in the community, personal charisma, management skills, etc. This is adopting the values of the world, not of God. A spiritual body must be led by men with spiritual leadership abilities.
 - Selection of leaders is to be done with patience and prayer. (1 Timothy 5:22)
 - It takes time to determine the spiritual qualities and maturity of those being considered for leadership positions.



- Healthy church members don't overlook the importance of this responsibility.
- In a church with a congregational polity, it's every members responsibility to examine the testimony and readiness of potential leaders. Example: HP's elder affirmation process, pastoral search teams.
- Obey and submit to leaders.
 - We are directly commanded in Scripture to obey our church leaders and to submit to their authority. (Hebrews 13:17)
 - This is not optional for the healthy church member. Submitting to pastors / elders is submitting to Christ.
 - We are to joyfully, eagerly and completely submit to our leaders for our good, their good, the good of the entire body, and the glory of Christ.
 - If our submission to leadership is done grudgingly or unwillingly, we need to go back and examine our heart attitudes.
- Follow the leaders example.
 - One reason for leaders in the church is to provide a living example of faithful, godly living to the congregation. (1 Timothy 4:12; 1 Peter 5:3)
 - Mature spiritual leaders show us what godly living looks like "fleshed out."
 - We are to imitate these men and pattern our lives after them. (Philippians 3:17)
 - We are to follow them as they follow Christ.
 - We aren't to blindly and cultishly follow "celebrity pastors", but to imitate those leaders God has appointed over us who exhibit genuine godliness.
 - This is a failing of modern evangelicalism, which has adopted the worldly celebrity and superstar mentality.
- Pray for leaders.
 - Even the apostle Paul repeatedly asked those in churches he planted and pastured to pray for him. (Examples: Colossians 4:2-4; Ephesians 6:19-20)
 - Godly pastors and elders strongly desire our prayer. And as we pray for our leaders, God changes our hearts to increase our love and thankfulness for them.
 - We should pray for our leaders' boldness, clarity, and consistency with the gospel. This is what Paul asked his church members to pray for, and it's what we should pray for our leaders.
- Support leader's outside ministry and interaction.
 - Healthy church members understand that it's essential for the health of pastors and elders to be refreshed by interacting with other leaders and participating in ministries outside the church.
 - Too often church members can get a "he's our pastor" attitude and exhibit selfishness in not wanting to "share" their leaders with others. This is a sure-fire way to discourage and burn out a pastor.



- Church leaders need time away for reflection, training, expressing their ministry gifts in other contexts, etc. Examples at HP are conferences, participating in EFCA ministry groups, preaching/teaching partnerships with other churches (SCB).
- This focus is healthy for church members too, since they will desire to see the gospel of Christ advanced through other churches and ministries, and will seek to share their leaders in support of this goal.
- A healthy church member understands that no one local church can do it all, and will have a broader perspective on the mission of Christ's church as a whole.

APPLY & PERSONALIZE

- Consider the instruction to church members given in Hebrews 13. In what ways have you been blessed or benefitted by your submission to church leaders?
- In what specific ways can you pray for your church leaders?
- How can you encourage other church members to place greater trust in our church's leaders as they follow Christ?



THINK & DISCUSS

- What do you think is the most talked about but least practiced of all spiritual disciplines? Why?
- **Prayer. We talk about it, teach about the need for it, read books about it, but most Christians would likely say they have a less than vibrant prayer life. Perhaps we don't understand the true nature of prayer, or perhaps we don't really believe God will answer our prayer. Neither of these is healthy.**

READ & STUDY

- Why is prayer considered to be a mark of a healthy church?
 - The Bible is clear that the church is to be a house of prayer.
 - It was prophesied through Isaiah (**Isaiah 56:7**).
 - **Isaiah's prophecy has multiple fulfillments, both in Israel, the church and the end times. But God's message was clear – His assembly was to be an assembly of prayer.**
 - It was reiterated by Jesus (**Matthew 31:13**).
 - **When Jesus quoted this promise, He was cleaning out the thieves and traders who had defiled the intended purpose of God's gathering. He was reasserting that this was and is God's plan for His people – to be an assembly of prayer.**
 - The early church was marked by a fervent devotion to prayer.
 - The infant church constantly were gathered for prayer (**Acts 1:14**).
 - **Note that they were unified, "with one accord" in prayer. It was their normal thing to do as they gathered.**
 - Even after the Spirit had come, the church continued devoting themselves to prayer (**Acts 2:42**).
 - **The growing church was marked by continual devotion to four things: the apostle's teaching (instruction in doctrine), the fellowship (each other as the local body), the breaking of bread (sharing the Lord's table), and prayer. These were the essentials of the Acts 2 church. And they still are to be today.**
 - Prayer is the only reason given for husbands and wives to abstain from intimacy for a time (**1 Corinthians 7:5**).
 - **Note the context of Paul's teaching here – mutual intimate submission of the husband and wife to each other to keep from sexual temptation. Yet he commands that for the purposes of prayer, if agreed upon, this should be the case.**
- If prayer is such a vital indicator of spiritual health, then why does prayer seem for so many believers to be a difficult task, a duty without joy?
 - Prayer is a spiritual discipline that requires cultivation.
 - **A vibrant prayer life is not an automatic thing. We must train ourselves to engage in it. It is a discipline that we are easily distracted from, and that doesn't seem to have immediate detrimental effects to us from. If it didn't require cultivation, why are we so often commanded to pray in Scripture?**



- We may have wrong ideas about prayer, like:
 - Unless we pray, God cannot act. This idea has been promoted by some Christian fiction, etc. It warps our motivation for prayer.
 - God's already decided everything; He's sovereign, so why pray? This is a wrong understanding of God's sovereignty. If there was no reason to pray, why would God put such a focus on it, and command us to pray?
 - God's too busy to listen to my prayers. Reflects a lack of understanding of God's omnipotence, and of our special position before Him as His children.
 - Others?
- We need to develop a Biblical understanding of what prayer is, a **gospel-centered** understanding of prayer.
- As with everything else in the Christian life, the gospel of Jesus Christ is foundational to understanding what prayer is, and why it's important.
- How does an understanding of the gospel inform our understanding of prayer?
 - Through believing the gospel of Christ, our status changes from outsiders to insiders in the family of God. We are adopted through faith in Jesus Christ as sons and daughters of God the Father.
 - This position before God as adopted, eternal children is essential to understanding the privilege of speaking to Him that we, and only we as believers, have.
 - On the basis of this relationship, we may speak to God as His redeemed children.
 - God as our eternal Father delights in the prayers of His children. He takes joy in us coming to Him in prayer to commune with Him.
 - The gospel of Christ informs our understanding of prayer in this: we come in prayer to the Father, through the Son, and enabled by the Holy Spirit. The gospel is central to being Biblical prayer warriors.
- With the gospel shaping our understanding of prayer, then how and when should we pray as healthy Christians?
 - We are to pray **constantly**.
 - Paul told the Thessalonians to pray without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5:17). Without ceasing = without stopping or giving up. Not losing heart or trust in the privilege of prayer, but continuing in it always.
 - He commanded the church at Rome to constantly pray (Romans 12:12). Devoted = attend to constantly. Refers to perseverance and endurance in praying, being diligent in praying.
 - And he exhorted the Colossians to be steadfast in prayer (Colossians 4:2). Same word used here as in Romans. And an added exhortation to stay alert in our prayer, lit. staying awake or being watchful. Praying constantly means always being alert to prayer needs, prayer answers, etc.
 - We are to pray **in the Spirit**.
 - This command can and is often misunderstood by Christians who attribute some special experience or sign that accompanies "praying in the Spirit." But we need to look at the simple plain emphasis of what the Scriptures mean by this.



- Praying in the Spirit simply means allowing the Holy Spirit to control and direct your prayer life. Much the same as being “filled with the Spirit” (Ephesians 5).
 - Prayer controlled and led by the Spirit will always be according to the will of God. (Romans 8:14) If we are children of God through faith in Christ, then we will be led by His Spirit, in prayer and in life. And His Spirit will always lead us to pray in His will.
 - The Spirit helps us to pray when we don’t know how. (Romans 8:26-27) Since prayer is such an unnatural thing to us, that we must struggle to cultivate in our lives, this is an incredible promise. God’s Spirit will engage in praying for us from our innermost being when we don’t have the words to even know what or how to pray. When we’re lit. too feeble to pray, His Spirit prays the unspeakable. And note v. 27 – He intercedes for us in prayer according to the will of God.
 - It is this kind of prayer by which we engage in spiritual battle. (Ephesians 6:18) Note that this is Paul’s summary command at the end of his list of how to be armed with the full armor of God against the attacks of the evil one. Constant prayer in the Spirit is what appropriates God’s armor in the battle.
- For what and for whom should we pray?
 - Pray for *laborers and shepherds*.
 - Jesus commanded His disciples to pray for God to send laborers to the harvest. (Matthew 9:37-38)
 - The reason He commanded this was because he saw people as lost sheep with no spiritual shepherds to lead them to Him and to pastor them. (v. 36)
 - We should pray then for both workers to take the gospel to those in need of it, but also for shepherds to lead the church in the making of disciples.
 - Praying in this way is really praying for God’s people to be gathered into His church, and for those gathered sheep to be nurtured and fed and grown. Both require God to raise up faithful workers and shepherds.
 - Pray for *all the saints*.
 - Praying for fellow brothers and sisters in Christ is an act of Christian love toward them. (Ephesians 6:18)
 - Praying for all the saints means not just those I know and love in my own local church, but *all* of God’s people in Christ, wherever they may be. It’s an expression of love for the body of Christ. Some specific things we are commanded to pray in love for them are:
 - We should pray for our fellow church members sanctification. (1 Thessalonians 4:3)
 - We should pray against temptation and for their watchfulness. (Matthew 26:41)



- We should pray that they be filled with the Spirit. (**Galatians 5:16-25**)
- We should pray for **anything the Bible commends for Christians** – endurance, faithfulness, holiness, joy, etc.
- **If Jesus wants it and commands it for us as His people, we then should pray for it in the lives of our fellow believers.**
- Pray for ***those in authority***.
- We talked last lesson about praying for those in church leadership. Here we refer to praying for all those in authority.
 - Paul commanded Timothy to pray for all those in authority. (**1 Timothy 2:1-3**)
 - All authorities are ordained by God – from government leaders (**Romans 13:1-2**) to parents (**Ephesians 6:1-3**).
 - **God establishes all authorities of all kinds, and he does so for our good. So when we pray for them to be godly leaders and to accomplish His purposes, we're praying for ourselves and all others.**
 - When we pray for those in authority, we are really praying for God's blessings through them to us.
- Pray for ***those who abuse and persecute you***.
 - Jesus commands us to pray for those who curse and abuse us. (**Luke 6:28**)
 - **This is extremely counter-cultural to us, as it was to the people of Israel when Christ commanded it. Just go read some of the imprecatory Psalms! But as redeemed people, we are to be different. We recognize that even our worst enemies or abusers may be redeemed by Christ as well, and we should therefore intercede for them.**
 - The love of Christ compels us to pray for these people. (**Matthew 5:46-47**)
 - This kind of prayer gives evidence that we are children of God. (**v. 45**)

APPLY & PERSONALIZE

- On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you rate the vitality of your prayer life? Why?
- Do you have a specific plan for prayer? Consider making a prayer plan that includes the following:
 - Private and group / public times of prayer.
 - Times and places of prayer.
 - Specific individuals and groups of people to pray for.
 - Gospel and church concerns.
 - Passages of Scripture you find encouraging in prayer.
- How can we in this small group encourage one another to be more faithful prayer warriors?