



TRANSFORMATION 101

First steps in faith and faithfulness.

by Keith Andrews

"Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind."

---Romans 12:2

TRANSFORMATION 101

"Be transformed by the renewing of your mind"

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BASICS - PART 1

THE NEED FOR TRANSFORMATION

Here is some good news: God loves you and God is willing to accept you just the way you are. This shouldn't come as a surprise, everybody seems to have heard the verse that says: *"God so loved the world that He gave His one and only son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life."* (John 3:16, NIV). It is important for you to understand, though, that God's love for you and His willingness to accept you doesn't mean that He is willing to leave you the way you are. God's love is a transformative love. Because He loves you He wants to make you better, stronger, wiser, more productive, more fruitful, and more righteous than you ever thought you could be.

There are many who think, "I need to try to be better," or maybe even, "I need to try to be more godly." But listen, friend, you can't make yourself better or godlier. It isn't your job and trying to do it only leads to frustration – putting yourself in charge of yourself is sort of like putting the fox in charge of henhouse security. Transforming your character is God's job. The first big step in living the Christian life is trusting God to make you the person He wants you to be. That's why the Bible says: *"Trust in the LORD with all your heart; do not depend on your own understanding. Seek his will in all you do, and he will show you which path to take"*(Prov. 3:5-6 NLT). Trusting God to do the transforming by His power and according to His wisdom and purpose is one thing that sets Christianity apart from plain old "religion."

Let's think about a few other passages from the Bible.

Eph. 1:4 – *"Even before he made the world, God loved us and chose us in Christ to be holy and without fault in his eyes."*(NLT)

Rom. 8:29 – *"For God knew his people in advance, and he chose them to become like his Son."* (NLT)

1 Cor. 15:49 – *"Just as we have borne the likeness of the earthly man, so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven."* (NIV)

To the reader: There are many Bible passages included in this workbook. It is the author's recommendation that you look them up in your own Bible so you can underline, write notes, and look at the context.

Understanding what these passages mean and, perhaps more importantly, what they have to do with you, takes a little background. First, you need to know that the reason God desires us to be better, stronger, wiser, etc. is because that's the way He designed us to be in the first place. He created mankind to reflect His own character. The Bible says that he made man *"in his own image and likeness."* (Gen. 1:26). Because evil entered into the world through disobedience, that image, God's reflection, has become distorted. God wants to set things straight – to repair the damage that ungodliness has

produced in us; and by "us" I mean you and me and everybody else. Second, you need to know that the model – the perfect example that God uses to transform us – is His Son Jesus.

Look again at Eph. 1:4 on the previous page. Notice that this isn't something God just came up with lately; restoring His image in us has been His plan from the beginning – even before He made the world. So you can be sure that His desire is for you to be holy and without fault. The Romans passage on the previous page says that God wants us to become like His Son. 1 Cor. 15:49 says that we came into this world just like every other person has come into this world – everyone from Adam on. We are all alike – every one of us an "earthly man" in need of God's transformation. But the verse also contains the promise that we will bear the likeness (the image, the reflection) of the man from heaven. And that man from heaven is Jesus.

So, transformation is all about God taking each of us as we are and little by little, hour by hour, day by day, renewing our minds, changing our hearts, correcting our thinking, and purifying our desires. He gradually sets us free from all the things that steal our joy and mess up our relationships and keep us from being the men and women, the sons and daughters, the husbands and wives, the parents and grandparents that we ought to be.

THIS WEEK'S MEMORY VERSE

Romans 12:2 - *"Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect."*

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Are you pretty confident that God loves you? Why or why not?
2. What is the first big step in living the Christian life?
3. What do you think that the word "transform" means in Romans 12:2?
4. What do you think God meant by the words "image" and "likeness"?
5. What is God trying to achieve by transforming us (what is the "big picture")?

BASICS - PART 2

THE INSUFFICIENCY OF SELF

Christians are supposed to be good people, right? Well, think of someone who is mean and despicable. You aren't thinking of yourself are you? Think of someone who is selfish. I know you can come up with lots of people who are more selfish than you! Read the newspaper; the world is full of murders and cheats and child abusers. We all know people who would never even consider for one moment sitting in a class like this, or even setting foot in a church for that matter. And you are here. So . . . what's all this about transformation? By almost every comparison you are already a pretty good person. Isn't God happy that you aren't an evil, lawless, godless, axe-murdering thief? The answer is yes, God IS happy that you aren't all those things. And your good character and relatively positive life-style is commendable. The problem is that God doesn't use the same scale to evaluate character and actions that we use. We find someone who is worse to compare ourselves to so that we look good. God doesn't do that. We judge each other by the words we hear and the behavior we see. God judges by what is in our hearts. And the fact is, when we are evaluated by God's standards we ALL come up with a failing grade.

The Bible makes some pretty amazing statements about God's evaluation of mankind. In Ecclesiastes 7:20 it says: *"There is not a righteous man on earth who does what is right and never sins."* In Psalm 14 we read: *"The LORD looks down from heaven on the entire human race; he looks to see if anyone is truly wise, if anyone seeks God. But no, all have turned away; all have become corrupt. No one does good, not a single one!"* Nobody is righteous. Nobody does right. All are corrupt. Not a single person on all the earth does good! How can even God say such things?

It kind of makes you mad doesn't it? I know I used to be personally insulted by passages like that. But then I began to understand the holiness of God. I began to see that God isn't like us; He is pure. Even a tiny bit of unrighteousness pollutes a person's character. Even a wee bit of selfishness or envy or deceit or anything like that corrupts our actions.

Once, when I had opportunity to speak at a Christian school chapel, I used a crystal pitcher full of water and a pinch of dirt to illustrate this truth. First I showed them the water and talked about how clear and clean it was. They could see that there was nothing in it. Then I took just a little bit of the dirt – I didn't exactly tell them the truth because I told them I had taken it from the kitty's litter box – and dropped it into the water. Their eyes got pretty big as they watched it float down and mix with the clean water. It was just a little bit of dirt . . . just a little. You should have heard them when I offered them a drink.

The way those grade schoolers looked at that water is the way the Holy God looks at our goodness. The Bible says: *"All our righteous acts are like filthy rags."* (Isa. 64:6). I

have to remind myself that this passage is about how God views, not the things we are ashamed of, but the things we are proud of. It is about our "righteous" acts.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said: *"You are to be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect."* (Matt. 5:48 NLT).

THE SUFFICIENCY OF CHRIST

So there you have it; every one of us is imperfect, even when we try to do what's right it comes out imperfect, and God's requirement is that we be perfect. Well, that's where Jesus comes in. God wasn't stumped by our dilemma. Nor was He willing to give up having a relationship with those He created and loves. No, He just took it upon Himself to meet our need. It was righteousness that we lacked, so He BECAME our righteousness. About 600 years before the birth of Jesus, the prophet Jeremiah wrote: *"In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called: The LORD Our Righteousness.* These words accurately predict, not only the coming of a Redeemer, but His purpose as well. Jesus came to be for us what we cannot be for ourselves: "perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect."

Hebrews 4:15 says that Jesus, *"has been tempted in every way, just as we are— yet was without sin.* 1 John 3:5 says, *"He appeared so that he might take away our sins. And in him is no sin."* 2 Cor. 5:21 teaches, *"God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."*

People often say that Jesus "died for our sins." This is true of course, but that is not all Jesus did for us. He also lived for us – he yielded his will to that of God the Father and lived a life of perfect obedience. In John 14:31 Jesus explained to his disciples: *"I love the Father and that I do exactly what my Father has commanded me."* We see this again on the night before Jesus' crucifixion as He prayed, *"Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done."*

Christ's righteousness is what we need. And He makes it available to us. All we have to do is believe it, receive it, and trust it.

THIS WEEK'S MEMORY VERSE

Romans 1:17 - *"In the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last."*

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Do you think there is a difference between what people call good and what God calls good?
2. How can Jesus' righteousness become our righteousness?
3. Do you really think that Jesus did enough to make you acceptable to God the Father?

GOD: WHAT IS GOD LIKE?

THE NATURE OF GOD

You hear the word "god" all the time. When people see something that excites them they say, "O my God!" Others use the word "god" or God's name as an expletive; you know what I'm talking about. Of course, people use the word to describe the "gods" of the ancient Greeks or Romans or the god of the volcano or extra-terrestrial astronauts. But we want to know the God of the Bible; who and what is He?

God is Living – The Bible compares the true God to "gods" that are not living. The contrast is particularly clear in Jeremiah 10:5-6, where it says: *"Like a scarecrow in a melon patch, their idols cannot speak; they must be carried because they cannot walk. Do not fear them; they can do no harm nor can they do any good. No one is like you, O LORD; you are great, and your name is mighty in power."* The God of the Bible is not a *thing*; He is a living, responsive, powerful *being* with personality and purpose.

God is Spirit – Jesus said, *"God is spirit . . ."* (John 4:24). But what did He mean by "spirit"? Perhaps it helps to know that the New Testament word "spirit" also means "wind." The implication is that God works invisibly. We can't see the wind but we can see its effects and know that it is real; the same is true of God. A lot of people are, unfortunately, more comfortable with a material god they can see and control; that is the basis of idolatry – something the true and living God despises.

God is Eternal – To say "God is eternal" is simply to say that God had no beginning and will have no end. There never was a time when there was no God and there will be no time when God will cease to exist. Revelation 1:8 describes God this way: *"I am the Alpha and the Omega . . . who is, and who was, and who is to come. . ."*

God is Unchanging – You and I grow and learn; sometimes we change our minds. Children and the adults they become are different in all kinds of ways; that's the way people are. Not so with God. In Malachi 3:6 God says: *"I the LORD do not change."* He is God, He was God, and He will continue to be God.

God is the Source – Isa. 46:6-7 reads: *"I am the LORD, and there is no other. I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the LORD, do all these things."* Think about that for a moment. That is a hugely transformative idea. Most people live with the concept that things "just are," and happen by chance, randomly, and without purpose. But, if you believe what God says, you must believe that behind everything is God's purpose. That, of course, has great implications for you because it means that you too exist to fulfill the purpose of God. Prov. 19:21 adds: *"You can make many plans, but the LORD's purpose will prevail."*

THE PRESENCE OF GOD

God interacts with His creation – There could conceivably be a God who created all things, set the universe in motion, and then just left it alone to run. Some people believe that, but the “watchmaker god” is an idea that is totally contrary to what the Bible teaches us about God. Psalm 135:6-7 for example, says: *"The LORD does whatever pleases him, in the heavens and on the earth, in the seas and all their depths. He makes clouds rise from the ends of the earth; he sends lightning with the rain and brings out the wind from his storehouses."*

God has relationships with people – In the Bible’s second chapter we find God in conversation with Adam, the man He had just created. If we read on we see God continuing to dialogue with people, to direct them, to correct them, and ultimately, to save them. Think about this: *"Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness, and he was called God’s friend"* (James 2:23).

God is transcendent – What is the greatest thing you can think of? God is greater. What is the most powerful thing you can think of? God is more powerful. Who is the wisest person you know? God is wiser, and . . . well, you get the idea. To “transcend” is “to pass beyond the limits of something, to surpass something in intensity or power, or to excel.” God is transcendent because God passes beyond all limits and surpasses everything else in every way. In Isaiah 55:8-9 God says, *"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."*

THE CHARACTER OF GOD

God is Almighty – God can do whatever He wants to do. God is always able. All power is His to use as He pleases.

God is Gracious – God responds to people based on His own love and purpose; He gives to those who do not deserve His gifts and loves those who do not love Him.

God is Holy – God is set apart from all else. He says, *"I am God and there is no other"* (Isa. 45:22).

God is Just – God always does the right thing. *"His works are perfect, and all his ways are just. . ."* (Deut. 32:4).

God is Merciful – A person is shown mercy when he doesn’t get the punishment he actually deserves. Ps. 103:10 – *"[God] does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities."*

God is Righteous – God is the One who sets the standards for right and wrong, good and evil; and everything God does is right and good. The apostle John, using his favorite analogy described God this way: *"God is light; in him there is no darkness at all"* (1 Jn. 1:5).

God is Sovereign – To say that God is sovereign is to say that God rules and that He can't be overruled. God has the final say about everything all the time. *"Everything I plan will come to pass, for I do whatever I wish"* (Isa. 46:10 NLT).

God is Wise – God knows everything, understands everything, and never gets fooled by anything. Jer. 10:12 says that God *"founded the world by his wisdom and stretched out the heavens by his understanding."* The wonders of the universe – from the greatest things to the smallest things – give testimony to the wisdom of God.

God is Faithful – Everything about God can be trusted. He never breaks His word, His resources never run out, and His love is everlasting. *"Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD his God, the Maker of heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them — the LORD, who remains faithful forever"* (Psalm 146:5-6).

THIS WEEK'S MEMORY VERSE

Psalm 8:1 - *"O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens."*

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. There is a Christian song that was popular a decade or so ago that said "our God is an awesome God." Moses wrote the same thing in Deut. 7:21, *"The LORD your God, who is among you, is a great and awesome God."* In what ways do you think of God as "awesome"?
2. How important is it to you in your life that God is almighty?
3. How important is it to you in your life that God is faithful?
4. Why is it important to you that God is merciful and gracious?
5. How does it make you feel to know that God is just, holy, and righteous?
6. Do you think you can trust God? Why or why not?
7. Do you think idolatry is still practiced in any form today? How about in American culture?

GOD: WHAT IS GOD DOING?

THE RESTORATION OF CREATION

The simple answer to the question is: God is renewing (or restoring) His creation. Creation was perfect. Every single part of it got God's final inspection and was then pronounced good. *"God saw all that he had made, and it was very good"* (Gen. 1:31). But something happened; the man Adam disregarded God's instructions and disobeyed. The consequences of his disobedience were significant.

- Original righteousness was lost.
- Mankind's special spiritual relationship with God was destroyed.
- Adam and Eve began to age and, ultimately, suffer physical death.
- Adam had to labor and toil for his food.
- Eve had to labor in order to bear children.
- Adam and Eve were expelled from the garden of God.
- The deceiving serpent's physical form was changed.
- The tree of life became unavailable.

And it wasn't just man that was affected; according to Paul, all of creation was subject to frustration and in bondage to decay as a result of man's disobedience. (SEE Rom. 8:19-22).

God could have just let it be. He could have been satisfied with the way the world had become. But that is not the way God works. First of all, God's greatest desire was to have personal relationships with people and that people should know Him as God; but, because God is holy, sin separates people from God and makes those relationships impossible. *"Your iniquities have separated you from your God"* (Isa. 59:2). Secondly, God desired that His people should have everlasting life; but, because God is just, sin leads to death. *"The wages of sin is death"* (Rom. 6:23). And thirdly, He created the world to be a perfect place for us to live; but sin has caused it to be a corrupt and an unrighteous place. God will not just "let it be;" that isn't His nature. Transformation has to come! One of the great promises in God's Word is that, by His own power, God will make all things new again; in other words, God has a plan to restore all of His creation.

Isa 65:17 - *"Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind."*

2 Peter 3:13 - *"In keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness."*

Rev. 21:4-5 - *"There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. He who was seated on the throne said, 'I am making everything new!'"*

THE PLAN OF REDEMPTION

Mankind's disobedience produces a lot of problems that God needs to fix; it did in Adam's day and it still does in our day. First, there has to be forgiveness so fellowship between God and man can be restored. Second, our foolish and godless ways leave a trail of broken hearts, wasted effort, and unfulfilled potential that God has to heal and repair. Try to imagine this: there is a young lady who really loves flowers, so every spring she goes out into her yard and scatters seeds . . . the problem is that half of her seeds are flower seeds but the other half produces weeds. She loves the flowers, so she continues to scatter her seeds year after year. Sure, there are some pretty flowers, but the weeds never seem to die. You know as well as I do that before long the situation would become an unmanageable weedy mess. The time would come when she wouldn't even be able to see the flowers because of all the weeds! That's what it is like in this fallen world. A quick look around will make it obvious that we are living in an unmanageable messy weedy place. It is a far cry from God's Eden. And the things we do to try to make the world better just make things worse; it's like planting flower seed mixed with weeds. The effect of sin in this world is cumulative – one generation's foolishness just gets added to the foolishness that was there already.

So, God is transforming our weed patch. He is transforming His people individually, He is perfecting His church as a group, and He is putting the world itself back into order. And He is doing it all through Jesus.

THE GOSPEL OF JESUS

The word "Gospel" means, "good news." You might recall that on the night Jesus was born, an angel appeared to some shepherds and proclaimed to them, "*I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born . . .*" Oh sure, we have all heard that over and over. We know that this good news was delivered to let it be known that Jesus had been born. Well, what was so important about this one birth? What was there about this one child that created such a fuss? Why was His birth such good news? What was God doing?

Through Jesus God was restoring righteousness, restoring fellowship between Himself and His people, turning the certainty of death into the hope of everlasting life, making life a joy again, and beginning the restoration of His perfect creation.

Here is the good news (Gospel) in simple outline form:

THE FACTS

- God loves you – the Bible says "*God is love.*"
- God hates sin – The same Bible says "*the wages of sin is death.*"
- We are all sinners – The Bible says: "There is no one who does good, not even one."

THE PROBLEM

- God loves us but, because He is just, He can't ignore our sin.
- Willful disobedience has created a gulf between God and man – a gulf that sinners can't cross.

THE SOLUTION

- God decided to step in and do for us what we can't do for ourselves.
- This was accomplished by Jesus, who is God the Son, our Savior.
 - He was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary – He was fully man and fully God.
 - He lived a sinless life in our place – In thought, word, and deed He lived in perfect obedience to God the Father.
 - He willingly went to the cross in our place; suffered, and died there – He paid the penalty for our sin "in full."
 - He rose from the dead to assure us a place in heaven.

OUR RESPONSE

- Faith – Jesus is my Savior
- Repentance – Jesus is my Lord
- Worship – Jesus is my God
- Service – Glorifying Jesus is my purpose

THIS WEEK'S MEMORY VERSE

Revelation 21:5 - *"He who was seated on the throne said, 'I am making everything new!'"*

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. In what ways is the world still a "good place"?
2. In what ways has the world ceased to be "good"?
3. Read Genesis 3:1-19. How did Adam's sin change his relationship with God?
4. How did Adam's sin change the world in which he lived?
5. What is the "Good News?"

LIFE: NEW, ABUNDANT, AND EVERLASTING

MAKING A NEW START

I can remember when I was a kid, if something went wrong in a game we were playing, we would get a "do over." We would go back to a particular point and just start again. As adults it's different, what we mess up pretty much stays messed up; instead of a "do over" we get fired, or go bankrupt, or get sued. Fortunately for us, our relationship with God is more kid-like. Repentance, forgiveness, and salvation are sort of like a divine "do over;" no matter what has gone wrong, no matter where we are, God lets us start again.

You see, we are naturally born into this life without the ability to please God. As we grow we may learn a little bit about God – some parents are more diligent in teaching their children bible lessons than others – but nobody automatically has the indwelling Holy Spirit to help them. And God knows we need the Spirit's help to live in a God-honoring way. So He says: "You gotta be born again – you gotta be born of the Spirit." Well, actually, He put it like this: *"I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit."* (John 3:5-6).

There are two points in this. The first is the spiritual point . . . we have a faulty spiritual component that needs to be replaced. You can trace that one back to Adam. The second is the practical point . . . our way of thinking and acting isn't leading us toward a blessed, hopeful, abundant life. In fact, our ways lead toward death and, ultimately, eternal separation from God. As Prov. 14:12 says, *"There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death."* Bottom line . . . we are all losing at life. But, through faith in Christ, God has given us a brand new life and the means to serve Him faithfully.

LIVING IN ABUNDANCE

In John 10:10 Jesus declares: *"I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."* When Jesus says, *"they,"* He is talking about his "sheep," those who hear his voice and follow him. Here Jesus says that he will provide them with life in *abundance*. The word abundant means: "more than enough," "exceeding expectation," or "extraordinary." You might wonder what it means for Jesus to make your life extraordinary and beyond expectations. You might ask, "How can I have more than enough life?"

When a person entrusts his life to Jesus – joins the sheep – the character and quality of that person's life changes. For one thing, striving and struggling are replaced by just plain living. Here are a few other things that transform that person's life and make it extraordinary:

- He begins to understand God – His wisdom, His authority, His power
- He recognizes God as his source – His unlimited provision, His perfect plan.
- He steps out of self-reliance and into God's grace – God's love and mercy.
- He puts his hope in God's power – God's ability to save and to keep.
- He puts his trust in God's faithfulness – He will never leave nor forsake.
- He finds his joy in God's presence – His relationship with God is real and personal, God hears, God cares.

GOD'S FREE GIFT

Our normal idea of life is that it lasts a while and then ends. We call that end *death*. God says that death is the "*wages of sin*." That idea comes from Romans 6:23. The whole verse reads like this: "*For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*" This is such an important verse that we really need to examine it carefully.

The most critical word in the verse is the little word "but," because that word lets us know that there are things being contrasted with each other. In this case, *wages* and *gift* are contrasted. Wages are earnings. We work for our wages and we expect to get what we have earned. Gifts are unearned. We don't work for them and we have no reason to expect them. You have to put out some effort to earn your wages, but gifts are simply received. We deserve our wages. God graciously gives us His gift.

The wage that we earn through all our work is death. The unearned and undeserved gift we receive from God is life . . . ETERNAL, everlasting, unending life. Now that is abundance! But we must not make the mistake of leaving Jesus out of the picture. This new, abundant, everlasting life is found in Jesus Christ. He came so that we might have it and it is through Him that we receive it.

THIS WEEK'S MEMORY VERSE

John 10:10 - "*I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.*"

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How do you understand the biblical phrase "born again?"
2. Have you been born of the Spirit?
3. What kind of transformation have you already seen in your life since you first heard and began to follow Jesus?
4. How does Rom. 6:23 help you understand God's grace?

FAITH, FAITHFULNESS, AND FRUITFULNESS

THE THREE ESSENTIALS

At times I speak or write about the "Three Fs." When I do that I am thinking of faith, faithfulness, and fruitfulness. These are the essential ingredients of the authentic Christian life. If any one element is missing, then God's full purpose remains unfulfilled.

FAITH

Biblical faith could be defined as "An unwavering trust in the purpose, the power, and the faithfulness of God." The Bible makes it very clear that *"without faith it is impossible to please God."* Faith is, therefore, the starting place in the Christian life. It is faith that motivates faithfulness and enables fruitfulness.

One could ask the question: "faith in what?" This is an important question because people put their hope and trust lots of things; some spiritual and some material. Some trust in their strength to keep them safe. Some trust their jobs or their government to make them secure.

Many hope that their own efforts and good intentions will make them eternally safe. Others depend on their sacrifices to appease their deity. Jesus made God's position abundantly clear in

"Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the LORD our God. They are brought to their knees and fall, but we rise up and stand firm." (Ps. 20:7-8)

John 6:29. The people came to him asking about God's requirements. Jesus told them that God requires them to *"believe in the one he has sent."* When Jesus said "believe" He was talking about faith. And Jesus was, of course, talking about himself; He IS the one who was sent.

So the answer to the question, "faith in what?" is: faith in the sufficiency of what Jesus Christ has done for you. If you trust Christ alone – His life, death, and resurrection; not your good works or good intentions – to make you acceptable to God, then you have the kind of faith God requires – that is God-pleasing saving faith.

Here are some passages where the Bible teaches us about faith:

Acts 15:9 – *"He cleansed their hearts through faith."*

Rom. 1:7 – *"The righteous will live by faith."*

Rom. 3:28 – *"A man is justified by faith."*

2 Cor. 5:7 – *"We live by faith, not by sight."*

Gal. 3:14 – *"We who are believers . . . receive the promised Holy Spirit through faith."*

FAITHFULNESS

Faithfulness is sometimes called "steadfastness" in the Bible. That implies a continuing trust. It also points toward a godly life-style pattern - continually seeking to live according to the direction of God's Word and Spirit. The idea is that, once our life is turned in a God-ward direction, we need to keep going and not give up. This is what Jesus was talking about when he said: *"I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing"* (Jn. 15:5). No one would expect a branch to continue to produce fruit after it has been cut off from the tree. Not only will the branch not produce fruit, it will quickly die. So it is with our relationship to Jesus. We have to trust Him and keep on trusting. We have to follow Him and keep on following. We need to serve Him and keep on serving Him. Why? Because He is the source of our new life. If we fail to remain – if we become detached – then our life source is cut off.

In Matt. 25:14-30 we find Jesus' *Parable of the Talents*. Jesus told this story to teach his followers what it means to be faithful. In the story a man goes on a trip. But before he leaves, he calls three of his servants and gives each an assignment to manage some of his money. When he returned, he called them back in to make a report of what they had accomplished. Two of the men had good news. They had made wise investments and had produced a nice profit. The other man did not do so well. He had failed to do anything with what his master had entrusted to him. It is interesting that we tend to focus on this third man; the failure. But the story is to encourage us to be like the other two. If you read the story you will see that they were not equally successful; one earned much more than the other. But the master called them both "faithful." And they were both rewarded, not for their accomplishment, but for their faithfulness.

If we are to be the kind of servants that please the master we have to be faithful to our commitments, loyal to Christ Himself, actively involved in worship, and strong supporters of those things that advance Gospel.

FRUITFULNESS

Let's think again about what Jesus said in Jn. 15:5 - *"I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit. . ."* What do you think of when you think about Christ-followers "bearing fruit"? Obviously Jesus wasn't literally talking about grapes or apples. I believe there are two correct ways to think about fruitfulness in the Christian's life.

THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT - As a person learns to live according to the Bible's

"The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness

teaching and to walk according to the Spirit the Holy Spirit, little by little, changes who we are on the inside. His purpose is to make us more and more like Jesus – He brings our character into harmony with his character. Those changes produce love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness,

faithfulness, gentleness, and self control. We don't make these changes, the Holy Spirit makes them in us. The great promise for us is that Jesus promises us "much fruit;" lots of love, joy, peace, etc.

THE FRUIT OF MINISTRY

Php. 2:1-4 says: *"If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others."* You see, Christians don't live their new life in a vacuum. We become united with Christ's people and we assume the mission that Jesus gave all of his disciples – to go and make disciples. The help and encouragement that we bring to our fellow Christians, the work that we do to build up the church, and the opportunities that we take to share who Christ is with those who don't know Him is a different kind of fruit, it is the fruit of ministry.

THIS WEEK'S MEMORY VERSE

John 15:16 - *"You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit— fruit that will last."*

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What is faith and why is it so important?
2. What is faithfulness? Is faithfulness required in the secular world? How is faithfulness in your work or friendships or your marriage the same or different from being faithful to Christ?
3. Do you ever see the "fruit of the Spirit" in other Christians? When, where, how do you recognize it?
4. What kind of fruit do you think Jesus chose you to produce?
5. Can a person be faithful to Christ without having authentic faith in Christ? Why or why not?
6. How do you think a person's faith relates to their fruitfulness?

GROWING SPIRITUALLY: READING AND STUDYING GOD'S WORD

Studying the Bible is, in some ways, like any other kind of study. Achievement requires both diligence and intelligence. There are several ways, though, that Bible study is unique. First, the subject is unique. We are studying the inspired and infallible Word of God. We do not, therefore, have to determine its validity or credibility; God's Word is truth (Jn. 17:17). Second, it has an inherent spiritual aspect. We have the aid of the Holy Spirit, who gives us understanding of the Word that He inspired.

Above all, as we discovered in week 5, we must always approach the Scripture with respect and with prayer.

READING CONSISTENTLY & THOROUGHLY

It is very important that Christians read the Bible – it is through the Bible that God reveals His character, His power, and His purpose, and His requirements to you. It is important that that they read it regularly, and that they read it all. People do this in various ways. Some just start in the beginning and read straight through from Genesis to Revelation. Fifteen to twenty minutes of reading a day will enable you to read the entire Bible in about a year. Young Christians or people reading the Bible for the first time find this approach difficult. First of all, it takes a long time to get to the New Testament. Secondly, there are portions of the Old Testament that are difficult to understand and apply without a little background and help.

"All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right. God uses it to prepare and equip his people to do every good work." ---2 Tim. 3:16 (NLT).

Others use a One-Year Bible (available in several versions) or a yearly Bible Reading Guide. The plan for these is essentially the same; using a reading guide simply allows the reader to use his regular Bible. The normal plan includes a reading from the Old Testament, a reading from Psalms or Proverbs, and a reading from the New Testament. Using a One-Year Bible or yearly reading guide will enable you fulfill both objectives – to read consistently and to read thoroughly. I highly recommend them.

I suggest that first-timers begin by reading John, then Romans, then the Psalms. Don't make it a race. Read for understanding. Don't be afraid to go back and read something again. Underline things you want to remember. Jot notes in your margin or make a list of questions you want to get help with. When you have finished that you are ready to start a One-year reading program. Don't worry about the dates – just start.

GROUP STUDIES

It is often helpful to get involved in a Bible study group. By doing so you not only get a teacher to help you understand of the Bible, you also get instruction in making practical application of what you learn. And, as an added benefit, you get the opportunity to interact with other Christians.

At GPC we make it a point to offer good Bible study classes during the Sunday School hour. We also have separate studies for men and women on Wednesday evenings. It is strongly recommended that you take advantage of both of these group study opportunities.

STUDY RESOURCES

There are a number of helpful study resources in the church library. They are there for your use, so feel free to make use of them. There are also a number of really good online study helps. The best of these are *Bible Gateway* (<http://www.biblegateway.com>), which lets you look up a verse in many MANY versions of the Bible. And *Bible Study Tools* (<http://www.biblestudytools.com>) which features Commentaries, Bible Dictionaries, and Bible Encyclopedias. If you forget where they are, there are links to both on the GPC website "Helpful Links" page.

THIS WEEK'S MEMORY VERSE

John 17-17 - *"Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth."*

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How does Bible study differ from studying math or American History? In what ways is it the same?
2. Do you think it is important to read the Bible? Why?
3. Do you think it is important to read the whole Bible? Why?
4. How might study groups or Bible classes be of help to you?
5. Would you consider hosting a study group in your home? If so, talk to the pastor about it.

GROWING SPIRITUALLY: THE ROLE OF PRAYER

THE NEED TO PRAY

One of the unchangeable characteristics of God's nature is that He is responsive to the prayers of His people. Prayers of all kinds are acceptable to God if they are offered to Him in faith and if they are offered in accordance with His Word. Psalm 145:18-19 says: *"The LORD is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth. He fulfills the desires of those who fear him; he hears their cry and saves them."* In 1 Jn. 5:14 Jesus says: *"If we ask anything according to his will, he hears us."* Christians should pray in all circumstances. Php. 4:6 instructs us: *"Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God."*

Prayer, in the simplest sense of the word, is communication with God. It takes various forms that include prayers of praise, thanksgiving, confession, supplication and dedication. A time of prayer should include both talking to God and waiting upon God. We should not forget that pray changes us! We cannot spend time with God and come away unchanged. The purpose of prayer is not to bring God into conformity with our thoughts, but to bring us into conformity with His. Prayer is, therefore, a worshipful and transformative activity.

THE WAY TO PRAY

Our prayers should be honest (*"When you pray, don't be like the hypocrites who love to pray publicly on street corners and in the synagogues where everyone can see them,"* Matt. 6:5.) and direct (*"When you pray, don't babble on and on as people of other religions do,"* Matt. 6:7.); they should be prayed in faith (*"Whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours,"* Mk 11:24.); fervently (*"The earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power and produces wonderful results,"* Jas. 5:16b.), and without doubting God's ability to do what He has promised (*"But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt,"* Jas. 1:6). Corporate prayers should be prayed in unity of mind and spirit (*"If two of you agree here on earth concerning anything you ask, my Father in heaven will do it for you,"* Matt. 18:19).

Many people find the Lord's Prayer helpful to use as a model for their own prayers. It should be noted that Jesus did not teach the prayer in response to a request that He teach his disciples *what to pray*. The request was simply: *"Teach us to pray."*

"One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray.'" Lk. 11:1

The prayer itself is found in two forms in the Bible, one seems to have simple statements (Lk, 11:2-4), the other has the same statements with additional explanation (Matt. 6:9-13). Interestingly, neither has the common

"Our Father in heaven, may your name be kept holy. May your Kingdom come soon. May your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven. Give us today the food we need, and forgive us our sins, as we have forgiven those who sin against us. And don't let us yield to temptation, but rescue us from the evil one," (Matt. 6:9-13 NLT)

closing doxology: ". . . for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever." This phrase must have been added by the church at a later time.

The common breakdown of the form of the prayer is: INVOCATION, PETITION, DOXOLOGY. This is a practical pattern for our prayers.

Another good pattern for personal prayer is based on the word ACTS -- Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication.

ADORATION

The idea is to begin our prayer by focusing on who God is rather than on what we need. This helps us to keep our prayer worshipful and Christ-centered. We are instructed to "come confidently" into God's presence (Heb. 4:16). But that does not mean that we should fail to remember that God is God. We must come with full acknowledgement of the awesome privilege of speaking to the Lord of the universe.

CONFESSION

As we focus on the greatness and majesty and holiness of our God, it brings into clearer focus who we are. If we are to come honestly, we must admit that we are undeserving recipients of His grace who stand in great need of His forgiveness.

This is a good time to join the psalmist in praying:

"Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting," (Ps. 139:23-24).

"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." (1 Jn. 1:9)

THANKSGIVING

Thanksgiving differs from adoration in one basic way. Adoration comes as a result of acknowledging who God is. Thanksgiving comes as a result of acknowledging what God has done. It is humbling to consider all that God has done for us and how willing He is to meet our needs today. Gratitude is an appropriate response.

SUPPLICATION

Psalm 37:4 says: *"Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart."*

Supplication is simply asking for what you desire.

You should pray for the needs of others – this is called *intercession*. You can pray about world issues or national issues. You should pray for your leaders in both church and government.

And you should not neglect to pray for your own needs, spiritual and material.

"Pray in the Spirit at all times and on every occasion. Stay alert and be persistent in your prayers for all believers everywhere." (Eph. 6:18)

THIS WEEK'S MEMORY VERSE

Heb 4:16 - *"Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need."*

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What is prayer?
2. How often do you think a person should pray?
3. Should prayers be formal or informal, silent or spoken, private or public? Explain your answers.
4. Why do you think the ACTS pattern puts praying for your own needs last?
5. Some say that God responds to our prayers in one of three ways: 1-He says "yes," 2-He says "no," or 3-He says "wait." What is your experience with God's answers to your prayers?

GROWING SPIRITUALLY: THE IMPORTANCE OF CORPORATE WORSHIP

WHAT IS WORSHIP

It is the outworking of one's devotion to something or someone. Worship is a reflection of what one thinks is important. Martin Luther, one of the leaders of the Protestant Reformation, made this remark, "Whatever your heart clings to and relies upon is your god." The plain fact is that all people worship, but they don't all worship the true and living God! If a person's sole desire is to have a sporty and fast car, for example, and that person pours his life into the business of acquiring it, then it would be correct to say that he "worships" that car because it is the most important thing in his life.

Biblical worship, of course, is not directed toward cars or houses or friends or family or anything earthly. Such worship is idolatry. True Biblical worship can only be directed toward God. It has as its foundational principle that our relationship with God is our life's priority. Our whole purpose of living is tied up in "glorifying God and enjoying Him forever." Worship is our way of saying, "There is nothing in my life more important than You, O Lord. I am Yours."

"You must not make for yourself an idol of any kind or an image of anything in the heavens or on the earth or in the sea. You must not bow down to them or worship them, for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God who will not tolerate your affection for any other gods." -- Ex. 20:4-5 (NLT)

The Scripture uses several different words that are translated "worship" in the English Bible. These can be separated into two groups. One group means, "to acknowledge the worthiness of another," or "to give honor." The other group means, "to act, to work, or to serve." It is quite clear that the acts of worship are done for the purpose of honoring God. Relationship leads the way to response.

WORSHIPPING TOGETHER

When the church gathers to worship the Lord it is called "corporate worship." It is important to understand that even when we come together, worship remains personal. No one can worship God *for you* – your worship is your response to your own relationship with God. Others can, however, worship God *with you*.

It is the church's natural condition and desire to be assembled together. The church gathers for the purposes of praise, prayer, biblical instruction, sharing of gifts, and participation in the sacraments. It is through such assemblies that the individual members of the body of Christ are built up spiritually, encouraged, and equipped for the work of ministry. The gathering of the church is not a means of salvation. Being part of Christ's church is, however, a product of salvation; those who have learned to love

Christ also learn to love His people. As they worship together, the members of the church should be growing in faith, faithfulness, and fruitfulness.

"Jesus replied . . . I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it."

--- Matt. 16:18

"Where two or three come together in my name, there am I [Jesus] with them."

--- Matt. 18:20

"The church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord." --- Acts 9:31

One question that young Christians often ask is: "How do I know if I am going to the right church?" Here are some questions to ask as you attempt to evaluate the "rightness" of a particular congregation:

- 1) Is Christ central in both worship and teaching?
- 2) Is the true gospel being consistently proclaimed?
- 3) Is the Bible considered inspired, infallible, and authoritative?
- 4) Is a theology of grace consistently evident?
- 5) Are the ministries of the church balanced and real?
- 6) Is the present power of God to change lives acknowledged?

If the answer to each of these questions is "yes" then you have found a good church.

BEING THE CHURCH

Worship is honoring God. That is not something that has to wait for Sunday. Nor does it have to wait till you get to the church building. The church is the church whether it is gathered or not. We can worship God all the time everywhere. As worshipers we should live in such a way that our very lives bring honor to Him. No matter where we are we can encourage one another, live in peace with our neighbors, and be blameless in our relationships with those outside the faith.

One final thought: Please, remember that the church is not a building; the church is people! The church is Christ's body – it consists of all those who have been born again by His Spirit, who have put their trust in Him, and who live their lives for His glory. Jesus Himself is head over everything for the church.

THIS WEEK'S MEMORY VERSE

Heb. 10:25 - *"Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another--and all the more as you see the Day approaching."*

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What does "worship" mean?
2. Can a person worship without going to a "worship service"? How?
3. What has to happen in corporate worship? What normally happens in corporate worship?
4. Who makes up the true church? Who is the church builder?
5. What is the difference between going to church and being the church?

GROWING SPIRITUALLY: THE RESPONSIBILITY OF COMMITTED STEWARDSHIP

WHAT REALLY BELONGS TO GOD?

"The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it." Psalm 24:1

The answer to the question, "What really belongs to God" is: everything belongs to God. God created everything that exists and He did it for His own good pleasure and purpose. We, on the other hand, can't create anything. So . . . all that

we have and all we are comes to us from God. Think about time for a moment. Your life consists of moments and minutes and hours and days and years. How did you come to have that amount of time? Do you have the ability to extend the number of days of life that you have on this earth? No, that number is determined by God; and let's face it, any number above zero is a gift from Him. How about your talent, you have some you know. Did you invent it or create it yourself? Clearly not. Oh, study and practice can enhance your *skills*, but the talent was "born in." It came from God. And treasure is much the same. In Deuteronomy 8:18 God gives His people this reminder: *"Remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth."* The idea of the "self-made man" is a hoax. The truth is that all we are and all we have belongs to God. If it weren't for His grace, we'd have nothing at all.

In churches we often talk about stewardship. I'm not sure why we use such an obscure word for a simple idea, but we do. A steward is a person who looks after another person's property; he's sort of a manager. The idea is that, since our time, talent, and treasure all belong to God, we are accountable to Him for what we do with it. If our time really belongs to God then we have to think about how He wants us to spend it. If God gave us our talents then we have to think about how he wants us to use them. If our treasure – our material possessions – are actually just on loan from Him, then we have to consider how He would have them invested.

LOVE FOR GOD / LOVE FOR THINGS

Some people have the idea that material things are innately ungodly. I'm sure you have heard somebody somewhere say: "money is the root of all evil." Did you know that the Bible doesn't say that. It says that "the love of money" is the root of all evil. That is something entirely different. Many of the greatest heroes of the Bible were men of means. Abraham was clearly a very wealthy man. The same goes for David, and certainly so for Solomon.

God knows that we need money to live. He doesn't ask us to live in poverty and want; God just wants us to put Him first; we can have stuff as long as we love and depend on

God. Read what Jesus said in Matt. 6:25-33: *"I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."*

PUTTING IT TO PRACTICE

So what does biblical stewardship look like? What exactly does God expect us to do with our time, talent, and treasure?

As far as time goes, God expects us to use a portion of it to worship Him, communicate with Him in prayer, read and study His Word, seek to glorify Him where we live, learn, work, or play. How much time? Well, we certainly want to devote the Lord's Day to Him. I recommend, however, that you set aside a portion of every day to get alone with God. But remember, whatever you do, do it for the glory of God.

If we remember that our talents were given to us by God it makes it easier to use them to serve others and glorify Him. The Puritans had a saying: "Honest work honors God."

"Work willingly at whatever you do, as though you were working for the Lord rather than for people. Remember that the Lord will give you an inheritance as your reward, and that the Master you are serving is Christ." ---Col. 3:23-24

One of the Reformers talked about the two conversions that God requires of every Christian; the first is the conversion of the heart, the second is the conversion of the purse. For many, the second is much more difficult than the first!

"Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse. . . Test me in this," says the LORD Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it." ---Mal. 3:10

The Bible talks about giving tithe and offerings. The word "tithe" means a tenth portion. Although some debate the issue, it seems pretty clear that the tithe belongs to God and is to be given to the local church. An offering is an amount that one gives to God that is over and above the tithe. It is

important to remember that time, talent, or treasure, we can only give what we have first received. God is your source, and you will never be able to out-give Him!

THIS WEEK'S MEMORY VERSE

Psalm 24:1 - *"The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it."*

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What is "stewardship"?
2. Why do we think of it in terms of time, talent, and treasure?
3. How can you be a good steward of your time?
4. How can you be a good steward of your talent?
5. How can you be a good steward of your treasure?
6. What does the word "tithe" mean?
7. What is an "offering"?
8. How does your level of stewardship relate to your level of faith in God?

GROWING SPIRITUALLY: THE NEED FOR GODLY RELATIONSHIPS

ESTABLISHING A GODLY HOME

In the animal kingdom there are some species whose young are virtually independent from the moment of their birth. Those animal parents take neither responsibility for nor interest in the survival of their offspring. This is clearly not God's plan for mankind. A baby is not able to provide for itself and, if left on its own for even a short period of time, will not survive. It takes well over a decade of care and nurturing before a child's behavior can be expected to even resemble that of an adult. Even at that age, however, it would be the rare child who could fend for himself. The family is God's provision for bringing a baby to adulthood.

In Malachi 2:13-15 we see God's purpose for marriage. Most husbands and wives think that marriage exists for their personal happiness. God says something different. Here is what he says: "*Has not the LORD made them one? In flesh and spirit they are his. And why one? Because he was seeking godly offspring.*" God's plan for the family is perfect. It consists of loving parents who raise their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord; and who work together to provide all of their children's physical, emotional and spiritual needs. If our children are to become everything that God desires them to be, we must provide them with a godly home. That is a Christian parent's primary responsibility.

"Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up." ---Deut. 6:4-6

DEVELOPING GODLY FRIENDSHIPS

In Romans 12:5 Paul writes: "*In Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.*" If we try to live the Christian life on our own, we soon begin to suffer from a "low spiritual battery charge." We tend to fall back into worldly ways of thinking about things. We tend to worry more and pray less. We tend to fall back into old habits and patterns of life. Like the battery in your car which needs constant recharging, we need to have our spiritual batteries recharged. We need to

"Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." ---Acts 2:41-42

feed on the Word, on praise, and on fellowship with other believers.

Actually, from its very beginning, the church recognized the need develop

relationships between its members. The word used for fellowship in the original text in Acts 2:42 is *koinonia*. It means "partnership," "communion," or "communication."

Partnership provides believers with the support and encouragement of others who are worshipping and serving Christ.

Communion is the celebration of our oneness in Christ. Every time we gather we have communion with Christ and with one another – *"Where two or three gather together as my followers, I am there among them"* (Matt. 18:20).

Communication is the open and honest sharing of our lives--our joys, our pains, our troubles.

The first century church saw themselves as one large family. We know from history that the early church was not "communal" in the modern sense; but they did feel such a close bond with one another that they were willing to share their resources to help one another. *"And each day the Lord added to their fellowship those who were being saved."* --Acts 2:47b.

FINDING A PLACE FOR MINISTRY

There are several things necessary for a healthy life. A person needs good nourishment. A person needs a sufficient amount of rest. For mental health a person needs to have a sense of purpose and significance. A person also needs a fair amount of exercise. Without it the person grows weaker rather than stronger, flabbier rather than more powerful. In our culture, the "couch potato" has almost become the national norm.

I assure you, Jesus has not called you to be a spiritual couch potato. Your relationship with Him is not just about coming to church, getting fed, and then going home to wait for the next feeding. Jesus said: *"I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last."* --John 15:16. Believe it or not, Christ has set aside a particular place for you in His kingdom. He has called you and He has equipped you for a specific function in His body. You need to faithfully exercise the talents and the spiritual gifts He has given you.

"Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise them..."
---Rom. 12:6

THIS WEEK'S MEMORY VERSE

Php. 2:1-2 - *"Is there any encouragement from belonging to Christ? Any comfort from his love? Any fellowship together in the Spirit? Are your hearts tender and compassionate? Then make me truly happy by agreeing wholeheartedly with each other, loving one another, and working together with one mind and purpose."*

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Describe what you think are the essential elements of a "godly home."
2. What is the husband's role?
3. What is the wife's role?
4. How do children fit in?
5. Are most of your friends Christians or non-Christians? What do you see as the up-side of having a lot of Christian friends? What do you see as the up-side of having a lot of non-Christian friends?
6. What is Christian "fellowship"?
7. Do you believe in the "ministry of every member"? Why or why not?