

Influence Ministries

30-DAY CHURCH CHALLENGE

LESSON 3

TITLE: STEPPING UP TO SPIRITUAL GROWTH.

Welcome to week three of the 30-Day Church Challenge!

Our backdrop for these thirty days is Acts 2:42–47. It reads like a to-do list.

Acts 2:42-47 -NIV

42 The believers studied what the apostles taught. They shared life together. They broke bread and ate together. And they prayed.

43 Everyone felt that God was near. The apostles did many wonders and miraculous signs.

44 All the believers were together. They shared everything they had.

45 They sold what they owned. They gave each other everything they needed.

46 Every day they met together in the temple courtyard. In their homes they broke bread and ate together. Their hearts were glad and honest and true.

47 They praised God. They were respected by all the people. Every day the Lord added to their group those who were being saved.

Two weeks ago, we started our 30-Day Church Challenge and we committed to doing it together! I asked you to commit to coming each week to the worship service during this thirty-day period, to reading the short daily devotional in the 30-Day Church Challenge book, and to consider joining a small group, if you aren't already in one.

Are you enjoying this so far?

If you've heard a report of a positive life change and can get permission to tell the person's story, you might insert it here as a way of raising excitement about what's happening as a result of the 30-Day Challenge in your church.

The objective of our 30-Day Church Challenge is to discover and engage in the five purposes of the church. We are learning how we can take big steps toward reaching our God-given potential, and we are strengthening our relationships with God and one another.

We said that at the end of the thirty days we want a transformation in our thinking about the church, not just viewing it as a place to come to but realizing that it is a vibrant family to belong to.

We want to become the church: A community of faith—powerful, inspirational, and transformational—touching our community and the world with the power of the Gospel!

That is the vision we have for this series, and even after that.

Today we'll learn what our challenge for this week is. It has to do with the third purpose of the church—spiritual growth. Our foundational passage for the 30-Day Church Challenge is found in the book of Acts. So, find a Bible and open Acts 2 now.

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We are learning these days that challenges are a good thing. Challenges by nature are always a challenge, but studies show that when we do them together, success gets easier. So we're doing this one together.

Are you up for the challenge today? If so, say, "I'm up for it!"

All five of our challenges come from the example of the first church, found in Acts 2. So follow as I read from Acts 2:42–47.

[Note to pastor: one key to a successful campaign is retaining your newcomers. We suggest you forecast the title and benefits of your next series now, to get them used to the idea of continuing with the church past the end of the series. Here, at the beginning of the message might be a good place to do that with something like: "Three weeks from now we'll begin a brand new series called _____. What I'm most excited about in this next series is _____. Tell them what they will get out of it and how they'll benefit from being part of it.]

Back to Acts 2, the first church was committed to authentic community. Verse 44 says they "had everything in common." The first church knew how to worship. Verse 47 says they were "praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people."

But they had another important habit they adopted. It's found in verse 42: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching..."

Why did they do that?

Because they wanted to grow!

Today we're going to talk about spiritual growth.

Chances are, when you were little your parents had a special place on the inside of a doorframe or closet where they measured your height every three to four months. Remember that?

Remember how excited you were every time you saw that you had grown? Remember how great it was when you passed your mom's height? (If you did.) And your dad's height? (If you did that.)

Something in us just wants to grow. And we get excited when we see and feel it happening!

Growth is such a part of who we are as humans—the Bible even measures our spiritual height. Turn to 1 John 2:12.

By the time John wrote this letter, he was in his sixties or seventies, which was old back then. So he writes this as a grandfatherly figure writing to younger folks.

He says: [read 1 John 2:12–14].

By John's definition, spiritual children are those who have received Jesus. They've had their sins forgiven by receiving Christ and they know God.

Spiritual young men are strong because they are regularly reading God's word, and they are involved in the cause of Christ, advancing his kingdom and thereby "overcome the evil one."

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Spiritual fathers are those who have a relationship with the Lord deep enough to know God's character personally—he's "eternal," "from the beginning."

That's how God measures spiritual growth. From just coming to Christ to growing and serving to knowing God like you know a great friend.

Life is about growth. And spiritual life is about spiritual growth.

Turn to Colossians 2:6.

Have you noticed that the minute we stop growing up, we start growing out? And we fight that kind of growth for the rest of our lives.

Colossians 2:6 says [read 6 and 7]:

It's a tree analogy. Trees grow until the day they die. Humans do too. Only some of us die inside before we start showing signs of dying on the outside.

How can you tell if someone is dying on the inside? Three signs:

1. They stop learning.
2. They stop maturing.
3. They stop caring.

You can tell when a person has stopped learning because they never share anything new that they read, heard at a seminar, or gleaned from a sermon, podcast, or small group conversation.

You can tell when a person has stopped maturing because their character hasn't changed. They aren't becoming more thoughtful or patient. They don't do anything more helpful around the house, neighborhood, at work, or at church than they did a few years ago.

You can tell when a person has stopped caring because ... they don't care. They don't care anymore deeply today about children starving around the world or local injustice than they did a few years ago.

These types of people are Growth-stuntedness can happen to anyone, but God never intends for us to stop growing.

Write this down:

1. Life is about growing (Col. 2:7).

Birds grow, bees grow, plants grow, trees grow. Viruses, germs, microbes, and fungi grow. Everything that's living is growing.

Over the past few years, most of us have learned that we've got to grow just to stay where we are. Because those who aren't growing in their job skills and their ability to enhance the company are laid off.

Every computer application you own, whether it's a Mac or PC gets updated every few months or years, and you have to learn to use the new features or risk falling behind. Some people struggle to use Facebook and smart phones, to text, and use tablet computer apps because they didn't grow up with them and didn't realize they would have to learn all of this in order to just keep up with the culture they're a part of.

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Say this after me: “Life is about growing.” (Life is about growing.)

Say, “You have to grow just to keep up.” (You have to grow just to keep up.)

Say, “You’re either growing forward, or you’re becoming out-grown.” (You’re either growing forward, or you’re becoming out-grown.)

Life is about growing. You and I ought to be getting better until the day we die.

Now turn to Romans 12:2.

Last week we looked at Romans 12:1, where Paul says, “Based on all the incredible things God has done for you, present your bodies (your whole selves) to him as living sacrifices. That’s your true and proper worship.”

Then, in this next verse (verse 12) he says: [read Romans 12:2].

Life is about growing and growing is about transformation. It’s about moving from something we’re not to something we should be.

2. Growing is about transformation (Rom. 12:2).

So what is it we should be when we’re all grown up?

Well, first of all, we’ll never be all grown up.

But Paul says in Romans 8:29 that we’re supposed to be “conformed to the image of God’s son.” “Conformed.” In Romans 12, he says we’re supposed to be “transformed.”

Follow me:

To be transformed is to have our form changed. Trans means “change.”

To be conformed is to have our form changed with another. “Con” means “with.” The goal of our growth is to be changed to “conform” to the shape of God’s son—to think and act like Jesus.

What was Jesus like? He was a man on a mission. He thought like one sent from God. He acted like the servant of all.

That’s what we’re supposed to be growing toward.

When you grow as a football player, you learn to run better, tackle better, read defenses better. When you grow as a Christian, you learn to believe better, hope better, and love better. As you are transformed by the renewing of your mind, you believe less of what Oprah says and more of what God says. You become less of a taker and more of a giver. Your life becomes less about you and more about others.

None of this happens overnight. It’s a process—an on-going process. This is why Paul says, “be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” Not “renewed,” but “renewing.” Not one-time, but all the time, by what you put into your mind. What you see, read, hear, and talk about. Be transformed by the on-going renewal of your mind.

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Nudge your neighbor and say,
“You need to be renewed.” (You need to be renewed.)

Say, “And so do I.” (And so do I.)

You and I need to be renewed and renewed and renewed and renewed. (And just so we’re clear on what I’m saying, I’m saying “renewed,” r-e-n-e-w-e-d, not “renude” r-e-n-u-d-e.)

Renewal is a process that happens one step at a time. The more steps you take, the more progress you make.

Your goal is to step up to spiritual growth by committing to taking one spiritual step at a time. It all starts with renewing your mind. Throughout history, Christians have discovered that certain habits, practiced repeatedly over time, lead to spiritual transformation.

We learned last week that the most fundamental of these is weekly worship. Coming to church every week resets your mental and spiritual clock by reminding you of what’s really important.

The second-most fundamental step is daily Bible reading. This book (the Bible) contains pure truth. It’s not like Sports Illustrated or Cosmopolitan magazine, which contain some truth and some distortions of the truth. This book is all true. Everything it says about God is true. Everything it says about life is true. Everything it says about you is true. So when you read this book, it helps you to think more accurately, see the world more precisely, and understand God’s will more clearly. The more accurate, precise, and clear your thinking is, the more mature you’ll be.

There are many more steps to take as you mature. Prayer helps renew your mind. So does being in a small group. Sharing your faith forces your mind to be renewed because you have to be clear on what’s true in order to share it with others. All of these practices are part of our 30-Day Challenge. By the end of this, we’re all going to be practicing the habits that will make us spiritual giants one day!

Your challenge this week is to grow. Your 30-Day Church Challenge book will give you small, simple steps to take each day. But the major weekly challenge I want you to take on, starting today, is to commit to spending time with God every day. Part of spending time with God is reading the Bible. The second part of spending time with God is prayer. God speaks to you while you’re reading the Bible. You speak to God when you pray.

So, here are your options before I teach you one more thing about spiritual growth:

Option 1: If you’re new to reading the Bible, your challenge for this week is to commit to reading the Bible at least five minutes a day for the next twenty-one days. It takes twenty-one days to build a habit, so hopefully if you do that, you’ll continue. And either before or after reading the Bible, spend two minutes talking to God in prayer. Your prayers don’t have to be elaborate, just tell God what you’re thinking and how you’d like his help during your day.

If you have never read the whole Bible before, I encourage you to start with the book of Luke. It’s the third book in the New Testament, and it and the book that follows, which is the book of John, will give you almost all of the stories of Jesus. Start with Luke and keep reading through the end of the New Testament. Five minutes a day. You won’t get through the whole thing in twenty-one days, but commit to reading for at least the next twenty-one days. Are you up for this challenge?

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When you start an exercise program, you don't start with two hours of weight lifting. If you do that on the first day, you won't come back for the second. So just start with seven minutes a day. Five minutes reading, and when you come to something in the text that strikes you, stop and pray about it for two minutes. If you come to a place where you say, "I want to be more like what I see there." Pray: "Lord, would you make me more like that."

If you come to a place that causes you to want to do something, write down the thing you want to do, and then pray, "Lord, help me to do this."

Get it?
(Got it!)
Good!

If you're already in the habit of reading the Bible, your assignment is to go deeper. Read not for five minutes a day, but go for ten minutes, with five minutes of prayer. And when you've finished your reading, write down one sentence describing the point of the reading. (This is called, "meditating," which is just a fancy word for "thinking deeper.") Writing down the point of the passage will force your mind to go deeper into the Scriptures. And while you're writing it down, you can be pray, "Lord, use this in my life to grow me."

Those of you who are already Bible readers, are you up for this challenge? (Yes!)

One more principle: As you're growing, what's the purpose of growth?

The purpose of all growth is reproduction. John said the highest form of spirituality is a spiritual father. You can't be a father unless you have children.

Turn to John 15:5.

A mature tree produces fruit that will produce another tree. A mature rabbit produces more rabbits. A mature banana slug produces more banana slugs.

In John 15, Jesus says: [read 15:5–8].

Write this down:

3. We were born to reproduce.

Jesus calls it "bearing fruit." And he says we can only bear fruit if we remain in him. This means, if we spend time with him by reading what he's written to us (the Bible), listening to him, and talking with him through prayer.

God gets glory when we bear fruit.

Jesus was the ultimate fruit-bearer. Every one of us, and all the other two billion followers of his today, are his fruit. Fruit that came from him inviting someone to be a follower, and that person inviting someone to be a follower, and that person inviting someone else to be a follower ... until someone came and invited you to be a follower.

We'll talk more in-depth about this two weeks from now.

Picture this for a minute in your mind: Imagine your body overweight. You're feeling flabby and are always out of breath. Most of us have probably felt that way at one time or another in our lives.

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Now picture your body as trim and buff. You've grown rippling biceps and six-pack abs. You can run a 5k with no effort or work all day in the yard. You are in shape and everybody admires your physique.

Which feels better, physically flabby or fit?

Now transfer that to the spiritual realm. Imagine yourself as not caring a whole bunch about God ... or about people. You're self-centered, lazy, you don't value telling the truth, keeping your word, or helping others.

Now flip that picture and imagine yourself as a spiritual giant. You are trustworthy and others-centered. People admire you for your character because you tell the truth, you are patient with kids, you are self-controlled, and you actually enjoy helping others become better people as well.

Which feels better, spiritually flabby or fit?

You can become that person. To get there will take one step and then another and another and another. You really can grow to be like Jesus when he was here on the earth. To be that way you'll need to think that way, which is why Paul says to be "transformed by the renewing of your mind." So read God's thoughts. And spend seven or fifteen minutes a day letting Him talk to you as well as talking with him. Combine that with the other challenges we're taking during these thirty days, and you're on the road to rippling "spiritual" biceps and six-pack "spiritual" abs.

Turn to your neighbor and say, "You could be a spiritual stud!" (You could be a spiritual stud!)

This is God's teaching for today. Do you receive this?

Great!

And, if you don't have a book yet, pick one up at _____ [place where you're selling them]. As an added incentive to those of you who are brand new, if you'll bring your filled-out Connection Card so that we can affirm that you're new among us, to the _____ [place where you're selling books], we will give you a free copy of the the 30-Day Church Challenge book for each adult member of your family. It's our way of saying, "We're glad you're joining us, welcome to the community."

And if you're not already in a small group, I hope you'll join one this week by [describe how a newcomer can join a group this week].

Repeat after me:

Lord Jesus,

I want to grow!

This week ... ("This week," etc.)

I will renew my mind

More than I ever have before.

I will attend a small group ...

I will spend time with you

In the Bible,

And in prayer,

And I will show up here next week

And worship you well.

In Jesus' name ... Amen.