



## **“Let’s Grow”**

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*Acts 2:42-27; Timothy 3:14-17*  
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Today is the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in our Habitology sermon series, which is highlighting the five fruitful practices of discipleship here at Church of the Saviour. Last week we looked at worship, which also included prayer. You will recall that each of these practices has a community aspect and an individual aspect. Today we are focusing on “Grow,” the second practice of discipleship. Growing in faith is a necessary aspect of the Christian journey. Here at Church of the Saviour we believe this happens in two ways: through reading scripture (an individual practice) and through small groups (a community practice).

I think that sometimes we do one or the other, but not both. Maybe reading scripture is already part of your daily rhythm, but you do not necessarily see a need for being in a small group. Maybe you are regularly part of a small group but feel as though the time you spend with others is enough to get you through the week. In this time we have together this morning I invite you to consider the importance and necessity of both. We need the individual time reading and reflecting on God’s word and we need the time we spend in community, encouraging and learning from one another. We see this modeled in scripture and in Jesus’ own life. We ask, therefore, why is this twofold approach necessary to growing in faith and how do we live it out?

First off: why do we need to read scripture, particularly as individuals? There are lots of books to read, so why the Bible in particular? As Christians, we believe that Scripture is God’s word given to us. The writer of 2 Timothy wrote “Every scripture is inspired by God” (3:16). The original Greek here is *theopneustos*, meaning, God-breathed or God-inspired. This particular verse is used as a proof-text in the debate about the inerrancy of scripture, but that particular debate is not the focal point or emphasis of the writer’s letter or this sermon. Rather, it speaks to the divine origin and inherent authority that Scripture has. In each service, we make a statement of affirmation after the scripture is read “Thank God for the gift of scripture” (9:30) or “This is the word of God for the people of God; thanks be to God” (11:00). We recognize and affirm that scripture comes to us from God.

Scripture, or the Bible, is an important way that God speaks to us. We typically do not hear God audibly, although it can happen. We certainly can hear God internally through the Holy Spirit and this often feels like a nudging, an impression, a thought, something that just rises within us. But sometimes we misunderstand what the Spirit is saying or do not properly discern where these nudgings, thoughts, or insights come from. Sometimes they come from ourselves or from others on the outside. We need to test these things and this is one area that Scripture is particularly helpful. God will never tell us to do something or speak to us in a way that is not consistent with God’s character.

By reading our Bible, we start to know the heart and mind of God more and more. We learn what God is about and what God is not about, who God is and who God is not, what God does and what God does not do. We come to know how God feels about creation, particularly humanity (spoiler alert: God loves God’s creation). We learn the ways that God speaks to us. “In John 10, Jesus describes himself as the Good Shepherd and his followers as the sheep of his flock. Jesus said that a good shepherd, ‘calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought our all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.’”<sup>1</sup> Reading Scripture allows us to recognize God’s voice and follow God’s lead.

We see as we read through the Gospels that Jesus himself read scripture, memorized it, prayed it, and lived it. The early church (which is referenced in our Acts passage today) also read scripture, listened to it, memorized it, and reflected upon their lives in the light of its words.<sup>2</sup> So Scripture is not only a collection of words for us to learn about God, but it is intended for our growth as followers of Christ. We are to take what we read in our Bibles and allow it to shape our lives in the way God desires for us. The writer of 2 Timothy wrote “Every scripture is inspired by God and is

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<sup>1</sup> Adam Hamilton, *The Walk*, p. 42-43.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p. 52

useful for teaching, for showing mistakes, for correcting, and for training character, so that the person who belongs to God can be equipped to do everything that is good.” (3:16-17). Let’s break those down a bit.

Scripture is useful for teaching. We already touched on this, in the sense of learning more about God, but Scripture also serves as the foundation for church doctrines, or official church teachings, as well as church creeds, such as the Apostles’ or Nicene Creed. Scripture is useful for showing mistakes. It helps us to recognize areas of sin in our lives and convicts us of our sin. Scripture is useful for correcting. Once we know that we have sinned, Scripture reveals to us what to do about it. We learn that God restores our hearts and sets us back on the right path. Scripture is also useful for training character. This is transforming our mind so that it is more like the mind of Christ. It is developing godly character and cultivating the fruit of the Spirit. It shapes our thoughts and actions so that they better align with God’s will. All of this is so that we will be equipped to do God’s will, to do that which is good. It might feel like a lot to learn, but with intentional, regular time spent reading scripture and seeking to grow, all of these things will naturally develop within us. God reveals more and more of Godself as we seek God and seek to grow.

Now that we have looked at the importance of reading scripture individually, how do we put that into practice? Perhaps you already have a daily rhythm of reading scripture and meditating on God’s word, and that is fantastic! If you are not yet in that practice, let me encourage you and offer you a starting point. I invite you to start by reading five verses of scripture every day. It is helpful to have a designated time each day. For me, I prefer to have my devotional time of prayer and reading scripture first thing in the morning. It doesn’t always happen that way, but the goal is to read five verses of scripture each day. You might start in one of the Gospels or start reading through the Psalms. The key is developing the practice of reading scripture each day. As you grow in this practice you can expand it to more verses, perhaps aiming to read one chapter each day. I personally love reading through a book of the Bible, one chapter at a time. Right now I am reading the book of Mark as I make my way through the gospels. Before you read your selected passage of scripture ask that God would illuminate the words you are reading so that you can understand them, so that you can learn more about God and yourself, and to show you how to apply the words to your life. It doesn’t do us any good to read verses of the Bible and not allow them to transform our hearts and lives.

Another important thing to keep in mind is selecting a translation of the Bible that works for you. It needs to have language that you can easily understand. The concepts in scripture might be hard to understand, but that is a different issue. In a former congregation, there was a woman in her 80s who had only used the King James version her whole life, but she never fully understood it. I recall her joy and the freedom she found in selecting a different, more modern translation. Do not miss out on the fullness of God’s word by using a translation that doesn’t work for you. Two of the translations we use here during worship at COTS are the Common English Bible (CEB) and the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). Both are good options to consider, along with many others. If you need help determining a good starting point for your daily scripture reading or selecting a translation of the Bible, reach out to someone on our pastoral team at COTS. We are happy to help you get started in this process.

Reading scripture everyday is just one half of the twofold approach to growing in faith. We have highlighted the importance of reading scripture individually, but what about the community aspect? How do we grow in community? We grow through small groups. And when I say small groups here, I am specifically referring to growth groups or accountability groups. We recognize that affinity groups and Bible studies are also types of small groups and are necessary and serve an important purpose. I am not pitting them against each other. Rather, I am highlighting growth and accountability groups because these are the small groups where transformation occurs. A small group is a group of individuals who are committed to growing in faith together.

Our Acts passage today gives some insight into how the early church operated. They were committed to studying the apostles’ teaching and scripture together, they were committed to each other, they were devoted to breaking bread together and sharing meals, and they were devoted to prayer with one another. They were united and shared with each other, both material possessions and of themselves. They met together every day in the temple. They praised God together and demonstrated God’s goodness to everyone. What a beautiful picture of life in community! Just as the Three Persons of the Trinity are united in eternal community and oneness, we are made to exist in community.

Last week we highlighted the importance of worship and how that is an important community aspect in our walk with Christ. However, we are not able to make those in-depth connections that we need on the Christian journey in the hour or so that we spend in worship. That is where small groups come into play! Small groups are crucial to our growth. For one, we are not called to journey alone. Jesus himself did not journey through his earthly ministry alone. This walk we take is too hard to do by ourselves. We need other people to come alongside us to support us, encourage us, and

keep us accountable. A small group is a safe place to explore the questions of faith, to work through our doubts, and to find rest for our souls. The collective faith of a small group can be a place to stand and be sustained when your own faith is faltering or you encounter difficulties in life.

I personally have experience with both of the types of small groups I lifted up earlier, the growth group and the accountability group. I have been transformed and changed by my experiences in both. I have referred before to the women's small group I was part of a few years ago at a previous church. I was serving in leadership in that church as a lay person and I encountered a difficult season in ministry. It was a season filled with pain, challenge, and questioning my ability as a leader. But those Thursday nights were a time of relief and rest. I can remember the ladies in my group praying for me and over me. They were able to see my current situation but remind me the hope that is found in Christ and the possibility of a different future. And you know what? Eventually that season ended, eventually God healed the hurt and brokenness and brought me to a new beginning. I give credit to those women for seeing what I could not at the time and covering me in prayer. I am eternally grateful for them. In addition, I joined a Wesleyan band last year with two of my seminary friends. We are all female, UMC clergy, and have young children. Wesleyan bands are a form of accountability group and an opportunity to confess our sin and be received in love. Let me tell you, you become much more mindful of your sin and do what you can to avoid it when you realize you will have to confess it to other people! Sharing things like this is vulnerable, but when you are in a safe, committed group, it helps you to grow and become who God created you to be. We are transformed and grow deeper in our faith.

Now that you are convinced of the importance of small groups, how do you make that a reality in your life? Perhaps you are already involved in a growth group and you are already doing life together with a committed group of people. Maybe you are in an accountability group, going even deeper into the life of faith together. Great! But for those not already in an established group of people committed to doing life together, where do you start? We do have some existing groups here at COTS and we try to establish new groups on an on-going basis. But you do not need our permission to start a group. I am not the gatekeeper of small group membership, but I am happy to help resource you and get you involved. Think about your circle of friends or the circles you are part of. Are you a dad with younger children? Are there other dads with younger children that you could start meeting with on a regular basis? Are you a mom with a student in the youth group? Are there other moms with students in the youth group you could start meeting with? Are you a retiree? Are there other retirees in your career field you could start meeting with? Are you a teacher? Are there other teachers you could start meeting with? I listed just a few ideas here, and you are not limited to only meeting with people in your exact same career field or place in life. The point is gathering together with a group of people who are committed to growing in faith together. And when I say group, I mean at least 3 people. If you are not part of a small group, I encourage you this week to think of at least 2 people you could enter into this sort of relationship with. We need to be in community, especially right now.

Growing in faith is an necessary aspect of the Christian journey. It is not something that just happens to us; we have an active role in growing. We must seek to grow in faith and deepen our relationship with God. We do this through reading scripture and through small groups. These are life-giving and life-affirming habits and practices of the Christian life. I invite you to incorporate reading scripture (5 verses/day as a starting point) into your daily rhythm this week and to consider becoming part of a small group that will help you grow in faith. May these habits transform you as you walk with Christ. Amen.