“Grow: Equipped for Every Good Work”
September 28, 2025
Rev. Andy Call, Lead Pastor

2 Timothy 3:14-17 (NRSVUE)
[14] But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it [15] and how from childhood you have known sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. [16] All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, [17] so that the person of God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

Last week, Rev. Benita Rollins taught on the first of the five practices, Worship, as a sacred responsibility and a divine assignment. It is a divine assignment because God commands us throughout scripture to worship, and to worship God alone. It is a sacred responsibility because worship reflects an awareness of our dependence on God and our gratitude toward God. Worship is a natural response to God’s movement in our lives. If we acknowledge our need for God and God’s grace toward us, we are moved to worship.

In case you missed it – or in the event that a reminder is helpful – let’s review the practice. For each of the five essential practices of faithful discipleship, there is a corporate component and an individual one. Or, to put it another way, there is an external component and an internal one, an outward-facing component and an inward-developing component. Outwardly, we worship together every Sunday we are not sick, traveling, or working. Thanks to the development of our livestreaming ministry, we have essentially removed the exception clause to that practice. Because even if you can’t be here in person, we can still worship together remotely, either in real time or asynchronously.

Individually, we encourage each other to pray at least five times a day. You can pray more if you want; there are no limits to how and when you pray. God is never going to get tired of hearing from you. But we encourage you to pray *at least* five times a day. A simple way to remember is to make it a habit to pray when you wake up in the morning, before you go to bed at night, and before meals: breakfast, lunch, and dinner. If the thought of praying that much in a day sounds too much to you, remember that a prayer doesn’t have to be long to be effective. A simple, “Thank you, God” is a prayer. Making space just to listen for what God is saying to you is a prayer. Like any relationship, our relationship with God improves with communication, and that communication works both ways. If you do make the space to pray five times a day, I think you’ll find that it isn’t as much of a chore as it might sound.

The second essential practice is Grow. It is all about studying and being informed by God's Word. Our purpose at Church of the Saviour is *to grow deeper in faith and pursue God's hope for every life.* While the five essential practices are our method – the *How* of our faith, the second and third practices are directly tied to our purpose – the *Why* of our faith.

Let's begin our exploration of Grow with the individual component. We encourage you to read at least five verses of scripture every day. Let's be clear: you're not *limited* to five verses a day. By all means, read scripture as much and as often as you can. But as a baseline practice that leads to growth, read *at least* five verses a day. That's about the length of most daily devotionals that you can find in print or online through resources like The Upper Room or YouVersion. If you need some guidance with finding the right devotional for you, Rev. Patterson or I are happy to help, or you can ask Curt Campbell, our director of youth and adult discipleship, to point you in the right direction. Let me also make a plug here for our midweek service of Morning Prayer, every Wednesday in the Chapel at 8 a.m. It's a great opportunity to address the first two practices at once: Worship and Grow. If you can shift your morning routine on Wednesdays to accommodate this brief service on your way to work or before you begin your day, I think you'll find it to be time well spent.

Our scripture lesson for this morning is an excerpt from a letter to Timothy, an apprentice to the Apostle Paul who had embarked on his own ministry. This portion of the letter is an encouragement to stay grounded in scripture. The writer offers a series of encouraging reminders to Timothy:

- continue to practice what you have learned
- remember the trustworthy people you learned it from
- you have known since your childhood that sacred writings lead to salvation
- all scripture is God-breathed
- it is useful for teaching, for correction, and for training in character
- studying scripture will equip you for every good work

Charles Spurgeon, a nineteenth century British preacher, said, "A Bible that is falling apart usually belongs to someone who isn't." That statement is overly simplistic, but that doesn't make it untrue. Simply reading the Bible does not guarantee that you will have your life together. But something powerful happens when we immerse ourselves in the study of scripture. We discover that, while our lives may be difficult, we are not the first to have called upon God to help us weather difficult times. We learn the stories of our faith and find our own stories inside them. And, through regular and thoughtful reading of the Bible, we begin to see the narrative arc that is a central part of God's self-revelation. In other words, we come to better understand who God is by reading and meditating on God's Word.

At Church of the Saviour, we believe that regular reading of scripture is vitally important for Christian formation. But it's also important *how* one reads scripture. There are two ways of reading the Bible. Well, there are actually *lots* of ways of reading the Bible. But there are two distinct approaches that lead to very different outcomes. One is reading to instruct us in our faith and point to what is true. The other is to seek to validate what we already believe to be true. In theological instruction, these two ways of readings are named using Greek terms. *Exegesis* is drawing *from* the scripture what it offers. *Eisegesis* is reading our ideas *into* the scripture. Exegesis is the kind of reading we should seek to practice, because it comes from a place of humility and curiosity. The Bible has a great deal to teach us if we let it. (When I was in seminary, I talked a lot about exegesis. Jenn couldn't figure out why I kept saying I wanted to "exit Jesus" when interpreting scripture. We've gotten a lot of mileage out of that joke.)

We see daily the dangers of eisegesis all around us. People have become very adept at quoting scripture to suit their own ends. The reality is that you can probably find something somewhere in the Bible to justify almost anything. That is why it is so important not to read selectively, but to study passages of scripture in context. The Bible contains passages that speak of slavery, prostitution, rape, incest, genocide, fratricide, infanticide, greed, lust, exploitation, misogyny, racism, homophobia, xenophobia, you name it. There are passages of scripture I have never preached on, passages I likely never *will* preach on, because of the harm they can cause when taken out of context (in some cases, even *in* context). It takes a longer time and a different environment to unpack and wrestle with some of the more problematic passages from the Bible. The Bible is a powerful collection of writings, but it is not always a safe one.

Adam Hamilton, senior pastor of the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, Kansas, where several of our staff and leaders are headed this week for a conference, tells a story about a presentation he made to fellow clergy in the Great Plains Conference. He had addressed passages that deal with women in leadership, becoming a more racially diverse church, and eliminating restrictions and harmful language toward people who identify as LGBTQ. He read a few passages that are often quoted to justify an exclusively white, male, straight leadership, but then read a series of other passages that call us to be compassionate, generous, open, and welcoming of leadership in other forms. After the talk, a young man approached Hamilton and tried to engage him in a debate. Each time he offered a point, Hamilton gently but firmly offered a scriptural response. After a few minutes of this, the young man said, "I think you're just picking and choosing which parts of scripture you want to follow."

Now having been accused of scriptural infidelity, Hamilton countered, "Let me ask you a few questions. Do you have a bank account? You're a pastor, right? Do you have a pension fund through the church?" Of course, he answered yes. "Then, what part of 'Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth' do you not understand?" Hamilton concedes that, when it comes to reading scripture, we all pick and choose. The key is to choose the right things.

That's why, when it comes to reading the Bible, it is helpful to have two things: a *reliable guide* and *trusted partners*. A guide can come in the form of a daily devotional like the ones I mentioned earlier. If you want something more in-depth, I recommend The Upper Room *Disciplines*, a more expansive set of daily readings than the bimonthly publication. You may be ambitious enough to covenant to read the entire Bible in a year. I've done that myself and found it both edifying and satisfying. Some ways of doing that are more accessible than others. United Methodist pastor Magrey DeVega published a daily guide that strikes a good balance of following the narrative and not getting bogged down in some of the more tedious passages.

Trusted partners can also come in many forms. Last week, Rev. Rollins pointed out that "Worship is not a spectator sport." In a similar fashion, discipleship is not a solo act. We were not meant to be lone rangers in our faith, but to gather in community for support, encouragement, and discernment. For that reason, at Church of the Saviour, our collective practice of Grow is to *participate regularly in a small group*. That small group can be a Sunday school class, a midweek prayer group, or a covenant Bible study. It can be in person or online. Before COVID, I'm not sure I would have been a proponent of online small groups. But now, I have seen examples of deep connection happening in online spaces at Church of the Saviour, and I hear from participants how transformative it has been in their lives.

Why do we place so much emphasis on small group ministry? Because staff and leaders know first-hand the value of being part of a small group. Just about a year after we were married, Jenn and I joined a Disciple I Bible Study at Westlake United Methodist Church. We both were longing for a deeper foundation, and we wanted to grow together in our faith and in our marriage. That experience changed our lives. We read the Bible with greater intention and structure. We shared ideas and understandings with people who often read the Bible differently than we did. We wrestled with hard things and considered together how they applied to our lives. We also formed a deep bond with others in the group, sharing our hopes and fears with one another, sometimes trusting one another with things we hadn't shared with anyone else. When we went through a miscarriage, our Disciple group were the first people we told. They prayed for us, comforted us, and offered the support we needed.

I have participated in many other groups since, and have led more than a dozen Bible studies. Over and over, I have seen lives transformed as minds have expanded and hearts have broken open, including my own. I have never led or participated in a group that didn't cause me to grow my faith. I hope and expect that will always be true.

There is another distinct advantage to small group ministry. We are living in a time when we are more divided than ever. There are few spaces left where people can meaningfully engage with others who might not agree with them. And that division is contributing to an epidemic of loneliness. We were made to be in relationship. Without the personal contact we need, we turn to

our smartphones or even less healthy sources to try to fill that void, ultimately leading to even more isolation. As a church, we're just old school enough to push for actual, genuine, human interaction. A significant portion of our congregation participates regularly in a small group for study, prayer, support, and accountability, though that number is nowhere near 100 percent. If you're not currently practicing your faith this way, why not? What can you commit to doing in the coming weeks to make space to join a small group?

The *Grow* practice isn't complicated, but it isn't simple, either. *Grow – participate regularly in a small group to grow in faith and read at least five verses of scripture a day.* Our scripture today reminds us that "All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that the person of God may be proficient, equipped for every good work." To be *equipped for every good work* is a great goal.
Again, as a congregation, we understand our purpose is to *grow deeper in faith so we can pursue God's hope for every life*. Friends, let's commit ourselves to growing in faith, trusting in the Word of God to form us and *trans*form us, so that we may be equipped for every good work.
May it be so. Amen.

CHURCH of the SAVIOUR

2537 Lee Rd., Cleveland Heights, OH, 44118 | 216-321-8880 | cotsumc.org