

FIRST





There's something about the turn of a new year that makes us want to turn our lives into active construction zones. We're eager to do the busy work of rebuilding areas in our lives that were left neglected or to forge new habits to live better than we did the year before. To build anything, we need a great blueprint and the right tools and believers can be inspired by an Old Testament reconstructionist named Nehemiah who was the general contractor for a major project that required prayer, fasting, focus and faith to accomplish. With his oversight, people were led to accomplish a great feat of rebuilding a broken wall in just 52 days.

This month, we launch our annual 21 Days of Prayer & Fasting where we align ourselves to build lives through these essential habits that help us grow closer to God. Prayer and fasting help to hammer out self-centered and self-directed focuses causing our hearts to surrender and submit to the goodwill of our Heavenly Father. We are starting our 'First Five' initiative during this time, committing the first five minutes of every day to either prayer, Bible study or worship. If we do this over the next 52 weeks, I can assure you that we'll build something lasting for our families and communities while helping people find real life in Jesus and follow him completely.

Nothing great is ever built alone. And, nothing great is ever built overnight. We need God to build every portion of our lives. I'm looking forward to sharing this time of devotion and looking to our best year yet...

LIVE FOR REAL,

PASTOR WAYNE

WHAT IS A DANIEL FAST?

The Daniel Fast is a totally plant-based way of eating. It's based on the fasting practices of the prophet's fasting experiences as recorded in Daniel 1 and Daniel 10, along with typical Jewish fasting principles. So the fast is centered on whole grains, fruits, vegetables, seeds and good quality oils (i.e. olive and canola). You can also use herbs and seasonings. To learn more about the food lists and check out some recipes, go to <http://Daniel-Fast.com>.

There are no restrictions as to the amount of food you can eat on the Daniel Fast or when you can eat. However, we do want to keep in mind that this is a fast.

The Daniel Fast is a very healthy way to eat and is full of nutritious and healthy foods. However, if you have special dietary needs, you should consult your health professional before you start this fast. You can then modify the fast to meet your specific health needs.

PRAYER

Pastor Wayne Francis, Lead Pastor

“Never Stop Praying”

I love talking. Every day I look forward to talking to my family and friends. Observing the way I use my iPhone and taking a tally of the minutes and text message exchanges I have daily will confirm just how much I enjoy talking. It's rare that I go into a conversation with someone with a time limit on my mind unless it's someone that I don't actually enjoy talking to, but it isn't rare for people to accuse me of not paying attention in conversations. I'm happy with communicating with people that I love or the people I'm trying to get to know better and use different means - text, e-mail, phone calls and face-to-face conversations to convey my thoughts, dreams, frustrations, and goals. I just simultaneously struggle with maintaining focus at times. Prayer is talking to God and Paul, who wrote this verse didn't have an unrealistic expectation for followers of Jesus but wanted to communicate the ease with which we should seek out and practice communicating with God.

Sometimes we approach prayer more like a task rather than an enjoyable conversation with God. Effective prayer is communication with God that balances talking to him about every and anything with the art of listening. The person who prays to God must be the person who listens to God. We do this by setting aside time for contemplation after prayer and by reading and praying through God's word. When we start our time with him, this way we'll discover that we'll grow to love to talk and to listen in our times with him.

There are many different ways for us to communicate with each other. Prayer is talking to God. Today, try a different way to talk to God by journaling your prayer.

Prayer is talking to God and practicing the art of listening. Today, pray using God's word and then take time for contemplation. Write down what you feel has impressed your heart in this journal.

At Authentic, we like to practice having a slot, spot and a strategy in approaching the daily habit of prayer. During this “First Five” initiative, write down a strategy of what you'd like to talk to God about in the first five minutes of your day this week.

TODAY'S SOCIAL MEDIA POST

The person who prays to God must be the person who listens to God.

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FASTING

Hillery Hunter, Element Team Member

“For I know the plans I have for you,” says the Lord. “They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope. In those days when you pray, I will listen. If you look for me wholeheartedly, you will find me.”

For many people, it’s a new year’s resolution to get on a budget – to finally save up for a dream vacation, that coveted new car, or to get out of debt. The last time you saved up for something, you probably had to forego some of life’s little luxuries. You downsized your morning latte, cooked at home on weeknights, or wore last season’s sweaters. All of these deliberate choices took discipline, but at the end of it you had a reward – a flight to see loved ones, a perfect tan on the beach, or a swanky new set of wheels.

When thinking about the spiritual discipline of fasting, many of us are intimidated by the level of commitment required. It can seem overwhelming that God would like us to deprive ourselves – to skip meals, treats, or other precious luxuries as we instead focus on Him for a period of time. I’d like to challenge you to think about whether we’ve got this backwards. What if fasting is actually about getting, not withholding? Getting closer to God, getting insights from scripture, getting our minds blown as we become more aware of His work in us and in the world around us. Just like you do when you’re saving up for something, as you fast with Ac* this January, set a great expectation on what you will get. The Scripture promises that when we seek God, we will find Him, and surely hearing God, gaining His wisdom, or understanding His plan for your life would be way better than lunch or a latte!

1. If you’re honest with yourself, would you be more willing to skip lunch in order to save up for something you wanted, than to skip lunch in order to fast and spend time with God?
2. Read Isaiah 58. What do you think this says about the sincerity of our faith?
3. Does fasting seem boring and somber to you? It’s certainly an activity of discipline and focus, but how could you also make this a time of learning, joy, and expectation?

TODAY’S SOCIAL MEDIA POST

Fasting feeds the soul

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TIME MANAGEMENT

Claudene Francis, Director of Administration

“You have made my life no longer than the width of my hand.
My entire lifetime is just a moment to you;
at best, each of us is but a breath.”

Time! Why does it seem like there is not enough of it? Sometimes I find myself saying certain things like, there’s just not enough time in a day to do everything I need to do, or I just don’t know where time went, or I’ll try to find time, or I’m hard pressed for time at the present.

In our day, when many people are constantly going and coming, most people feel strapped for time. The constant feeling is that there is simply not enough hours in a day. Life with all its demands is far too busy. Time seems as if it’s going faster year by year. With that said, often times I think about how our time on this earth is shorter than we tend to think.

David pointed out in Psalm 39:5, “Each man’s life is but a breath. James also said it like this in James 4:14. “Yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.”

How do we live as God would have us to live with the time that He has allotted to us? Firstly, God’s wants us to live each day with an eternal perspective. Knowing this, we need to give an account to the One who lends us time. This knowledge should motivate us to use time and use it well. There’s no doubt that the responsibilities and pressures of this world screams for our attention on a consistent basis. There are numerous things pulling us in different directions and these make it all too easy for our time to get swallowed up in seemingly more important but lesser matters. To avoid losing focus, we need to prioritize and set goals as well as prioritize our plans. Do what matters first and leave the less important things for last.

Let’s evaluate and see how time should be prioritized.

Plan time for God. Pray and study his word. This should be deliberate, as it is most important in our daily lives.

Plan time for family. Relationships take a commitment of time together.

Plan time for work.

Plan time for health. Eating a balanced diet and getting enough sleep and exercise.

Plan time for household duties. Make your home a little slice of heaven.

Plan time for learning.

Plan time for rest and recreation.

To implement our planned schedule requires constant motivation, focus and persistence.

1. What motivates you to plan wisely?
2. How can we do this on a consistent basis? To choose the truly important items on the list, we must act wisely, not just react to the urgent things that come at us daily.

TODAY’S SOCIAL MEDIA POST

Do what matters first and leave the less important things for last.

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FOCUS ON GOD'S WORD

Mel Orellana, Trustee

“...You have anointed me with the finest oil.”

For most of my Christian walk, I was under the impression that as long as I protected myself from the world by clothing myself with the full Armor of God, as described in Ephesians 6:10-18, that I had nothing to worry about. Life as a Christian, to me, was going to be as easy as a walk in the park. I felt so confident by this scripture that I even had a shield with the verse tattooed on my right shoulder.

After a while, I stopped reading the bible. I was not praying as often as I should and I was not spending much time with God in meditation. I started to wonder and question what Ephesians 6:10-18 really meant. I had read the scripture but I never really understood its meaning. I felt like the full Armor of God I was wearing was losing its power and I no longer felt protected. I started to wonder why I was dealing with so much spiritual warfare. Why was I losing? Where was God in the midst of all this?

My lack of understanding was driving me to lose hope in the spiritual Armor of God I had committed myself to wear. Something was wrong. Even the tattoo on my shoulder was no longer meaningful. I decided to make a U-turn in my spiritual walk with Christ and commit myself to not only read the word of God but to study the word with prayer and meditation. I had a hunger to understand the word and I wanted to use the powerful scripture to its fullest potential.

As I started to study the word, I came across the most impactful scripture of my life, Psalm 92:10. It says, “I shall be anointed with fresh oil.”

As I read this scripture, God revealed to me that the full Armor of God I had committed myself to wear spiritually needed daily maintenance in order to be effective. David, in Psalm 92:10, was asking God to come into his life to refresh his spirit so he would be ready to protect himself from the manifestation of the flesh, as described in Galatians 5:19-21.

I started to study the true meaning of the word “anointing” and I found out that the word “anoint”, as seen in the old and new testament, comes from the Greek word “Chrio” which means “to smear or to run oil or perfume upon an individual”. The motion of rubbing was to assure that the oil penetrated the pores of the skin.

Roman soldiers had shields as part of their arsenals of weapons for battle. These shields were made of many layers of animal skin. Every single day the soldiers would anoint their shields to prevent the shields from becoming brittle and making them vulnerable to spears and arrows. In other words, if that shield was not well “anointed” it would put their lives in great danger.

It was then that I realized that the full Armor of God was my walk with Jesus Christ and that in order for my armor to be effective, I also needed to spend time with Christ to anoint my spirit daily in order to prevent it from being vulnerable to the manifestations of the flesh, as described in Galatians 5:19-21. So how does one prepare the spirit daily? We do this by spending time studying the scripture, spending time in prayer, meditating and acting on what we learn. You have to realize that the spirit that lives in you is the same spirit that raised Jesus from the dead and that the world and the flesh have no authority over it. But we also have to realize that this powerful element living in us requires daily maintenance.

Think about it; how long can you drive a vehicle without maintaining it? Would you buy a house and not give it seasonal maintenance? They will both eventually break down and fall apart.

The difference between the house, the car and the spirit is that the house and the car will remain here, but the spirit will bring you closer to the glory of God.

1. When was the last time you studied the word of God? When was the last time you prayed? When was the last time you acted on the gospel of Jesus Christ?

2. Are you allowing your spirit to become so brittle that anything can penetrate it?

TODAY'S SOCIAL MEDIA POST

Open your heart to God today and allow him to transform your life in a new way.

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LIVING IN COMMUNITY THROUGH LIFE GROUPS

Jim DeGregorio, Life Group Director

“Let us think of ways to motivate one another to acts of love and good works. And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another, especially now that the day of his return is drawing near.”

What is the first thing that comes to mind when you hear the term “Life Group”? Is it “How can I fit that into my busy schedule?” Or, “I have my own problems; the last thing I need is to be worrying about someone else’s.”

The truth is, you can find many reasons for not making a Life Group a priority: work demands, family commitments, or even fatigue. But every one of us can look back on our week and find time we intentionally spend doing a hobby like reading books, watching television or even exercising. At the end of the day, we make time for what we value.

The Apostle Paul teaches us in Hebrews 10 verses 24 and 25: “Let us think of ways to motivate one another to acts of love and good works. And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another, especially now that the day of His return is drawing near.” (NLT)

“Acts of love and good works” characterizes true Christian commitment. Read Galatians 5:13. And to “neglect our meeting together” is to evade encouragement from other Christians. We gather together to share our faith and to strengthen and encourage one another in the Lord. Times of difficulties should not be an excuse to neglect meeting together, rather those times should cultivate our values and foster our faithfulness in growing together.

The first church gave us a blueprint for gathering in small groups. They ate together, prayed together and talked about God’s word. The believers formed a community where they were able to motivate and encourage each other through consistent fellowship. Read Acts 2:42-47

1. Life Groups give us the ability to consistently live life with others and Jesus in comfortable size groups and build relationships that encourage and motivate others (and ourselves) to acts of love and good works. Who can’t find value in that type of relationship?
2. What excuses have you made for not making a Life Group part of your life? As you view those excuses now, do they fairly represent the person you want to be?
3. What hobby(s) or interest(s) do you have where you consistently commit at least one hour each week? Would you consider investing that same commitment to a Life Group?
4. How might your life change if you had 4-6 meaningful relationships with individuals that knew what you were going through and took time to encourage, motivate and help you through it?

Resources:

Podcast - North Point Community Church “Preventative Circles”

Holy Bible - NLT Parallel Study Bible

TODAY’S SOCIAL MEDIA POST

At the end of the day, we make time for what we value.

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IT TAKES A VILLAGE

Lori Kairdolf, ac Director*

“Remember your leaders who taught you the word of God. Think of all the good that has come from their lives, and follow the example of their faith.”

Just recently, I had the privilege of serving as a community leader with a plan to facilitate ninety two middle school students in a small group setting. The topic of discussion for the day was the most pressing issue middle schoolers in my community were facing on a daily basis. I was quickly amazed by how brutally honest these eleven and twelve year olds were with an adult they were meeting for the first time. When the students concluded that their most stressing issue was the social and academic pressure they were receiving from their parents, I realized they were probably opening up to me about things they had not even discussed with their own parents. As I sat there and listened to their hearts, I was constantly reminded of the six-year old in my own home and that a time is coming when my children will need other adults in their life besides their dad and I. As a parent, that thought is a hard pill to swallow but this reality is why community is so important.

We are all familiar with the saying, “It takes a village to raise a child”. As parents, we need to be intentional about finding other people besides us to speak God’s truth to our kids with love. One of the things I love about this strategy is you don’t have to be a parent to “parent” and you don’t have to be a young child to need parenting. When our kids grow to an age of independence, and they will, sometimes the voice of a teacher, Sunday team leader, coach, parents of friends, or a Life Group leader is heard a little more clearly.

When we create the right village for our children, we empower them with other influences who will instill the same sense of mission in their hearts that we are trying to grow as parents.

1. As a parent, are we valuing the right community in our own lives so our kids see the direct benefits?
2. What people in the life of your children are already making an impact for the Kingdom of God? What are some of the things you could do to further those relationships?

Pray for your children and for their current village and their future community.

Not a parent? Ask God, “Who has He given you influence over and how can you progress that relationship and make an eternal difference?”

TODAY’S SOCIAL MEDIA POST

It takes a village to raise a child. How healthy is your village?

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SCRIPTURE IS OUR MAP

Hunter Beezley, Element Team Member

“Your word is a lamp to guide my feet and a light for my path.”

Why would anyone actually need to memorize the scripture? Often, it is easy to become antagonistic towards the practice. Memorizing the scripture can still sometimes have that competitive feeling, like you are trying to prove something with your spirituality or win some spiritual medal. This kind of feeling, however, often is a result of how we think of the scripture.

In his book, *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis used an analogy of sailing the Atlantic with a map. He explained that a map does not simply point in what direction the sailor ought to go, but it tells us where others have been. We see how others made it through long dark nights, violent sea storms, or how they marveled at the open seas or explored rocky coasts. We use this collection of experiences to understand where we are, how we got here, and where we're going.

In this Psalm, where the Psalmist equates the scripture with a guiding light, he is writing during a very dark time when Israel was “lost at sea”. It was the Babylonian exile, when many Israelites were taken out of Jerusalem. This resulted in sparse scriptural teaching and left Israelites longing for the day when they could have the guidance of a teacher to shine the light of the scripture. For the Psalmist, torah was not just answers to look for when in darkness, but to not have the torah was to be in darkness. The Scripture was the map Israel didn't have while out in foreign seas.

Often, we can't always see our map. It's not so convenient in the heat of the moment to pull out the bible and see “how this guy responded”. Memorizing the scripture is a way of always keeping the map visible. This way, we can always see where others have gone, what turns they made, or how they even got through the journey.

1. What verse can you commit to memorizing today?
2. How does that verse inform your current situation today?
3. Whose experience in the scriptures can you best identify with?
4. What does their experience tell you about yours?

TODAY'S SOCIAL MEDIA POST

Memorizing the scripture is keeping a constant eye on our map while we sail the open seas.

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INTENTIONAL MARRIAGE

Pastor Russ Cripps, Overseer/Lead Pastor of Acacia Church

“So God created human beings in his own image. In the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. Then God blessed them and said, ‘Be fruitful and multiply. Fill the earth and govern it. Reign over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, and all the animals that scurry along the ground.’”

Family is meant to be together. That was the ideal plan from the beginning of time; that’s still the ideal plan in this day and time. If the concept of marriage is so vastly significant, in what ways should a husband and wife be growing together?

Spouses should be growing together physically (in proximity). Without belaboring the obvious details here, Adam and Eve would have a difficult time fulfilling the instruction without being...together. The underlying family concept in Gen. 1:27-28 that must be captured here is physical proximity.

Spouses should be growing together emotionally. When Adam and Eve realized the severity of their sinful decision, shame and guilt consumed them. That’s what happens when crisis hits. But notice how the text (Gen. 3:6-7) presents this; they stayed together. Hugs are hard when someone isn’t there. Band-Aids are difficult to apply to a knee that’s 75 miles away. He wasn’t living in Manhattan and her in Jersey; they were together.

Finally, families should be growing together spiritually. After their mistake, Adam and Eve found themselves not only wrapped in clothing, but even more so wrapped in shame. After the crisis was realized, reconciliation was the next step. They were together spiritually — we read that the Lord covered them both in hopes of reconciliation. The Lord reached out to them both to offer a solution for their shame. Notice the continual language of togetherness as they continued to lean on God (Gen. 3:7). This year, let’s be intentional about our relationship with our spouses and commit to growing together physically, emotionally and spiritually.

1. What are some ways you and your spouse can stay together in proximity?
2. What are some ways you and your spouse can be together emotionally?
3. How can you grow together spiritually?

TODAY’S SOCIAL MEDIA POST

Families should be growing together spiritually.

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PHYSICAL HEALTH

Ozzie Osborn, First Impressions Coordinator

“Don’t you realize that all of you together are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God lives in you?”

Over the past several months I have been on a serious quest. I’ve been on this quest before, but up until recently I had not truly made up my mind to be as serious about it as I have been. What I am talking about is a quest to get fit. Since this summer (we are entering the Thanksgiving and Christmas holiday season as of this writing), I have lost about 40lbs. I’ve run a couple of distance races, and I feel great about it. I won’t brag, but let’s face it, I’m kind of a big deal! I jest of course, as I know that the real story about getting back into shape comes from a Biblical conviction about taking care of my body and holding true to my commitments. In a letter to the early Church, the Apostle Paul asks, “Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?” So, I must find a way to make health and fitness a priority.

Among the various phone app features that I use to track my level of activity, the one that really helps me gauge how well I am doing is the notification letting me know that I have reached 10,000 steps in the day. This popular benchmark has been used by many people as a key indicator for how active we are, and reaching this number gives a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment. As the adage goes, “A journey of [10,000 steps] begins with a single step.” Whether this is a physical step or a spiritual one, the same spirit of adventure, longing, and accomplishment applies. As you consider what your proverbial Next Step is in your walk of Faith with Christ, understand that it is entirely appropriate to consider taking care of your physical body and taking those 10,000 steps also. I have heard our bodies characterized as the container for one’s soul and for the Spirit of God, which gives us an idea of how deeply connected are the conditions of our soul and body. What a tremendous honor and obligation it is to hold both in high regard!

1. Do you prioritize the health and fitness of your body?
2. How well do you steward your time to ensure your physical wellness?
3. How do you think the Bible verse Galatians 6:9 relates to your commitment to health and fitness? (“And let us not grow weary in doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up.”)
4. What relationships do you have with people that may help you maintain a greater fitness level?
5. What is your Next Step toward improved health?

TODAY’S SOCIAL MEDIA POST

Taking physical steps to get physically fit is as important as taking spiritual steps to get spiritually fit. By joining, hosting, or leading an interest-based Life Group at Authentic Church, you can do both!

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SABBATH

Andrew Ghobrial, Production Team Leader

“And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation.”

When it comes to Sabbath or “taking a Sabbath”, I feel like I have rarely ever succeeded in taking one. I know that I constantly talk about it with others and even prescribe it to people who talk about how stressed or tired they are. Life in 2015 doesn’t really seem keen on sharing a day off to Sabbath; we get caught up in all the responsibilities of our lives. In the Bible, when it tells of God creating everything, it ends with Him taking a day and resting, and calling it Sabbath. In the original text, the word Sabbath translates to mean “stop”. Stopping is not something people back then were able to afford and it seems today, even though we have advanced in so much, we have even less ability to afford stopping our lives to be with God. In the Bible, God called His people to rest not just because He thought they weren’t getting enough sleep, but to rest assured that He will take care of them. God has always been in the business of trying to convince us that we can trust Him. Trust that if you and I took one day off from working, catching up on chores, doing errands, filling it up with social events and just focused and meditated what He wants for us, then we would be better off. We would be revitalized. We would be healed even if all we would do is take some time off and pray to Him and spend time with Him! To trust that if we took a day off our world wouldn’t come crashing down. Trust that we could use a break from the stress and anxiety of life. Really, He just wants us to put Him to the test and take some rest.

1. Why do you think our culture does not value rest?
2. How hard is it for you to unplug? Are you able to turn off your phone for a whole day?
3. In what ways should we make Sabbath a special day without loading it up with restrictions?
4. How often do you pray? Now, how often do you make time to pray and do nothing else? It’s easy to pray while we’re driving or walking or running errands, but how often do we simply find a quiet place to be alone with God?

Resources:

Exodus 20:8-11

Ezekiel 20:12

Isaiah 58:13-14

Mark 2:23-27

TODAY’S SOCIAL MEDIA POST

Rest and put Him to the test.

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LIVING ON MISSION

Pastor Brian McMillan, Lead Pastor of CenterPoint Church

“For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

When I was growing up, I was taught about the importance of evangelism. Evangelism is the act of sharing the salvation of Jesus to people who don't know him. In the church, we were given tools to do this and took courses in apologetics so we could explain how our faith is grounded in reason. We were then sent out to tell people about Jesus. We went to the boardwalk or to the mall. We used a spiritual survey as an ice breaker, shared the gospel and, when the conversation ended, went on to the next person.

Occasionally, someone took a step of faith. Even fewer joined the church. To say that all this effort didn't bear much fruit would be an understatement. People don't trust strangers talking about God! Long Islanders would rather get financial advice from a homeless person than listen to a well-meaning random Christian tell them about Jesus.

I'm not knocking street evangelism; I think some are called to it. But I don't think that's what Jesus had in mind when he told us to go and make disciples. Our calling is higher than simply sharing our faith with strangers and walking away. The New Testament pattern requires sharing our lives with those estranged from God. Being missional means being truly invested in people's lives so they see your faith as you live it, in word and deed. It's befriending someone. It's truly caring about someone's joy, pain, dreams, struggles and desires. Jesus befriended sinners. Paul went to foreign towns and lived among those far from God.

People need to experience the love and grace Jesus has and understand that God has a plan for or the need to know what it really means to follow Jesus. But for that to happen, they need to know you! Not form a distance, but up close. They need to be a part of your life.

1. What are the circles in your life that have nothing to do with church?
2. When people look at your life, do you think they see Jesus at work in you?
3. Write the names of three to five people you know who are far from God. Spend time praying for them every day.

TODAY'S SOCIAL MEDIA POST

“For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” - Romans 10:13

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DISCOVERING YOUR PURPOSE

Pastor Ricky Fay, Associate Pastor

“Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it.”

For Christians, the question that’s most often asked is, “What is my purpose in life” or “What’s God’s will for my life?” Before you continue reading, I want you to know that I truly believe God has a plan for every person, even if you aren’t sure what it is yet.

When we look at the life of Jesus, he was the role model for someone that had a purpose. He knew his purpose. Even when he was just a kid, he told others, “I must be about my Father’s business.” Then at the end of his life, he said, “It is finished”. He knew exactly what he was supposed to accomplish.

Jesus knew his purpose because he knew this one simple truth, “Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and he will give you everything you need.” When we think about our life’s purpose, we usually think about our career, education, relationships, and our finances. These are all important; they come from God and they are good. However, if you are a Christ follower, God comes first in your life. When we put God first, everything else will fall in line.

I’ve heard people say, “I’m just trying to find myself”. The truth is that when you try to find yourself you’ll never find purpose. Jesus tells us, “Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it.” Pastor Rick Warren wrote one of the best-selling books of all time titled, “Purpose Driven Life”. The very first words of his book are, “It’s not about you.” Our culture tells us to find purpose by focusing on ourselves. God tells us to find purpose by focusing on him. When you do that, not only will you have a closer relationship with God, but your life will also have purpose. You’ll live a fulfilling life by focusing on God and not yourself.

1. What does a successful life look like to you?
2. Does your version of a successful life match the words of Jesus?
3. In what way can you begin to focus on God instead of yourself?

TODAY’S SOCIAL MEDIA POST

We find life when we lose our life.

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HAPPY TO HELP

Pastor Mark Johnston, Lead Pastor of The Journey

“God has given each of you a gift from his great variety of spiritual gifts. Use them well to serve one another.”

Like me, you have a question rattling around deep in your soul that at some point must be answered. It's true whether you're a CEO, grad student, bank teller, or stay-at-home parent... a longtime follower of Jesus, brand new to faith, or still trying to figure it all out. For us to find real happiness, we all need to know: “Does what I have to offer matter?”

Peter was one of Jesus' closest friends – first among the disciples to grasp who Jesus was and what he came to accomplish. When he wrote to people who looked to him as a spiritual leader, he let them (and us) know five things that can help us answer this question with a resounding “yes”:

1. God has given. God is a generous God. That may be hard to accept if you've had a bad experience with religion, but Peter wanted us to know that God is not out to get us... he's out to give to us.
2. Each of you is a gift. There's no such thing as someone who believes in God but hasn't been given a gift by him. Even if you don't consider yourself a “believer” yet, God created you with the capacity for a gift that will honor him.
3. From his great variety of spiritual gifts. We don't need to compete with our gifts, because each bears a unique fingerprint drawn from our distinct personality, experiences, and relationship with God. The work of God on the earth is incomplete without your contribution! So...
4. Use them well. God didn't give you a unique gift so it could sit on a shelf and gather dust. He gave it to you to put to use. Your gifts are not collector's items; they're tools with which you carve out a meaningful life.
5. To serve one another. Not only has God given you gifts, he's provided the perfect context in which to use them consistently: your local church. The faith family he's placed you in is the primary arena of service to which he's called you.
Does what you have to offer matter? It does when you recognize that it comes from God, is unique to you, and that you've been called to put it into play by using it well to serve the people around you.

We all have a question that needs to be answered. Serving – consistently, in the area of our giftedness – is how we answer it.

1. What gift or gifts has God given you? Have you thanked him lately?
2. What makes your gift unique? Even if the gift is similar to someone else's, what one of a kind fingerprint can you put on it?
3. Are you using your gift well? If not, why not?
4. Do you see the purpose of your gift as the service of others or the service of self? How can you change your priorities to serve others more consistently?

TODAY'S SOCIAL MEDIA POST

God has given each of us unique gifts for his glory.

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GOD IN YOUR COMMUNITY

Pastor Logan Gentry, Overseer/Executive Pastor, Apostles NYC

“Now all glory to God, who is able, through his mighty power at work within us, to accomplish infinitely more than we might ask or think. Glory to him in the church and in Christ Jesus through all generations forever and ever! Amen.”

What can God do? “Anything,” we would say, but do we believe this? Do our thoughts and our prayers reflect that? Think of the last thing you asked God to do. Was it massive or was it minor? Does God hear our prayers and think they are too small? No, but yes. There is no prayer too small for God — He literally desires for every aspect of your life, every minor detail to be brought under His good will. But He invites us to dream, imagine, and ask things that only He can do.

What have you stopped dreaming that God can do in and through you, your community, and your neighborhood? This passage in Ephesians is a prayer that His presence — His Spirit within us — would be our source of strength, a power that can accomplish all things for God’s glory and our good.

It’s time to begin to dream again about what God can do in and through your community. Imagine it and then ask for the salvation of your neighborhood, for the multiplication of your community to saturate your city, and for the healing of the brokenness that you see all around you.

Let your expectations of God be great, dreaming and asking Him to do far more abundantly than you can imagine. Long for His presence over your preferences and see the source of true strength that will provide you the power you need to accomplish great things for God’s name.

1. How do your prayers need to change in light of seeing God’s great power?
2. What is your “far more” prayer that only God can do?
3. How can your community be regularly praying for this to happen?

TODAY’S SOCIAL MEDIA POST

Our prayers should reflect God’s great power.

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WORSHIP

Phil Sanford, Worship Team Director

“I cried out to him with my mouth, His praise was on my tongue. If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened; but God has surely listened and has heard my prayer. Praise be to God who has not rejected my prayer or withheld his love from me.”

Why do we ‘bother’ to worship God? Is it in our vanity to think that we could sing words and bring praises that He hasn’t received before? Are we conceited enough to think our song is that much sweeter than those of the past? Perhaps, our worshipful tithe is greater than any worldly gift that has been offered to our Heavenly Father in the centuries prior to us?

Of course not. To worship is not to tell or show God something he doesn’t already know. Worship is meant for us to help aim our own hearts toward Jesus. It is an outward expression of the Grace our God has put inside us.

Our worship is important because it outlines, and even defines, our own pursuit of Christ’s heart. No song we sing is new to God’s ears, but it is new to our own hearts. The weight of the truth in worship lyrics and hymns falls afresh on us just like His grace each morning. No gift we give can compare to what little God needs to do His work, but rather the sacrifice in our own eyes – and our detachment of what the world says we need. We don’t need anything, except the faith that our God is in command.

I enjoy leading brothers and sisters in Christ each week in our efforts to worship our God. It is special to play even the smallest part in corporate adoration of our King. As amazing as each week is, recently while traveling, I had an opportunity to attend a worship gathering at a different church – with no commitments or role to play. It was simply me, my heart, and my Jesus. Isn’t it amazing how intimate a crowded theater can feel? How we can be surrounded by people but be alone with God? That feeling, that recognition of God’s power is why we worship. We sing “How he loves us,” but He already knows. We sing “Forever He is glorified,” but He already knows. He has paid the price and earned that right.

Do we believe and live that truth? It is our commission to live how we are commanded, and the easiest way to live like Jesus is to fall in love with Him every day. So, sing songs for the 100th time, but linger on each lyric so that it is not only coming from your mouth, but cycling back into your heart. Give your time and resources to a God who already has it all, not because he needs you but because you need Him.

Above all else, worship Him with abandonment, unashamed, and with the confidence that we serve a Living God who hears us.

1. Why do we ‘bother’ to worship God? Why do you?
2. Isn’t it amazing how intimate a crowded theater can feel? How can we be surrounded by people but be alone with God? Why do you think that is?
3. Do we believe and live the truth? Do we believe what we sing?

TODAY’S SOCIAL MEDIA POST

I worship God not because he needs it, but because I need him.

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LIVING WITH INTEGRITY

Pastor Mike Leahy, Pastor of Campuses, Liquid Church

“The guards lit a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat around it, and Peter joined them there. A servant girl noticed him in the firelight and began staring at him. Finally she said, “This man was one of Jesus’ followers!” But Peter denied it. “Woman,” he said, “I don’t even know him!” After a while someone else looked at him and said, “You must be one of them!” “No, man, I’m not!” Peter retorted. About an hour later someone else insisted, “This must be one of them, because he is a Galilean, too.” But Peter said, “Man, I don’t know what you are talking about.” And immediately, while he was still speaking, the rooster crowed.”

When Jesus renamed Simon (meaning grass-like) to Peter (literally translated “rock”), He was making a statement not only to Peter but to the world. Jesus’ ministry was going to be built on Peter’s integrity and character, on his eventual rock-solid faith, even though he had flaws like the rest of us.

We’ve all had that moment (whether we want to admit it or not) where we absolutely blew our integrity and so we can identify with Peter here in Luke 22. So the question is, can you still be used by God when you’ve blown it tremendously and feel like a massive screw-up?

One of the beautiful things about the scripture is that God, in his infinite wisdom, uses incredibly broken, imperfect people, to communicate a perfect Gospel. But it’s up to us how we respond. Peter knew the wrong he did and when Jesus returned, did not hide from Jesus. He gleefully jumped off his boat and swam ashore to greet him. Peter had denied Jesus three times around a charcoal fire in a courtyard. Now, in John 21:15-17, in response to Jesus’ questioning, he affirms his love for Jesus three times around a charcoal fire.

It was like bringing him back to the scene of the crime, except this time, he got it right. Peter faced Jesus in all his embarrassment and shame, waiting for the “I told you so” moment, but Jesus never shamed him. He redeemed him as He always does. And if we allow Jesus to bring us back to our place of failure, He will redeem us too.

1. We all can immediately think of our Peter moment very quickly. I’m sure you’ve done that as you’ve read this. The biggest question is not if, but how are you responding to that the way that Peter did?
2. And how are you actively allowing the failure of your own personal integrity to be used by God in His Kingdom?
3. What’s one thing that you can do right now or maybe today that can take a step towards God’s redemption in the brokenness of your failed integrity?

TODAY’S SOCIAL MEDIA POST

God uses broken, imperfect people to communicate a perfect Gospel.

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GLOBAL MISSIONS

Trista Fay, Events Coordinator

“Jesus came and told his disciples, ‘I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age.’”

I grew up in a Christian family and went to church every Sunday. Many times even twice on Sundays! The preacher would often say words like, “Jesus is the only way”. Taken from John 14:6, Jesus says that He is the way, the truth, and the life. This was a little tough for me to digest because I often thought of all the people around the world that were not raised in the same circumstances as me. What about the people that have never come into contact with someone that knew about Jesus? How would they learn that Jesus is the Light?

If we believe the words of Jesus to be true, then this means the entire world needs Him. In Jesus’ last words to His disciples, He shares what we know as The Great Commission. If you are a Christ follower, sharing the good news of Jesus is your priority. We have to share the news with All nations and All people. Just like the people of our country need to hear about Jesus, the people of Syria, North Korea, and even Mauritania (it’s a real place, look it up) need Jesus too. This is quite the task and definitely cannot be left up to just a select group of people. We know the cure for the deepest needs of mankind and we have to share it not just to our neighbors, but to the entire world.

It’s great when you know what God’s calling you to do with your life. But perhaps you’re like me and you aren’t quite sure what that looks like. Do you feel God calling you to move to another country? Even if we aren’t called, we are obligated to support the cause of foreign missions. This is the only way we can share the Light with the whole world. God gives us opportunities to further the name of Christ even if we are not living abroad. We can take short-term mission trips, support current initiatives through financial support, and we can be a supporter by lifting those that are overseas up in our prayers. In these ways we are all missionaries.

1. If God has not called you to move to another country and share the Gospel, what else can you do to support His mission around the world?
2. What scares you about sharing the Gospel?
3. What gives you courage when reading the words of Jesus in the Great Commission?

Resources:

John 14:6

www.ghanavillageoflife.org

TODAY’S SOCIAL MEDIA POST

My heart should mirror God’s heart for this world.

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LET FREEDOM WRING

Mark Merritt, Trustee

“Honor the Lord with your wealth and with the best part of everything you produce. Then he will fill your barns with grain, and your vats will overflow with good wine.”

Debt. It's all around us. You probably have some. You may have too much. Your credit cards may even be suffering a hangover from Christmas. Add up what you owe. Go ahead – do it.

Now think of how many paychecks it will take to pay that off. Depressing? It gets worse. The amount you owe is accruing interest and growing each and every day.

You're not alone. The average American family's debt load has increased 12 times that which it held 50 years ago! (Source: Federal Reserve Bank). Advertisers convince us to buy, buy, buy. And we do buy ... with credit cards or other loans. As a result, our families dive deeper into debt and become more enslaved. The money remaining from our paycheck after servicing the debt becomes smaller and smaller. And we learn what Proverbs 22:7 teaches us: “Just as the rich rule the poor, so the borrower is slave to the lender.”

But there is hope. There is a way to Freedom. Proverbs 3:9-10 encapsulates the financial Freedom taught throughout the Bible. Here's a couple of those principles of Freedom:

Let Freedom Wring You From Debt

Romans 13:8 tells us to “owe nothing to anyone, except for your obligation to love one another.” And Proverbs 6:1-5 tells us to run from debt as if our life depends on it (v5). “Honoring the Lord with your wealth” in Prov 3:9 includes wringing debt from your life – making God first, not Visa. So make a plan. Pay off your debt and commit not to return to debt's death spiral.

Let Freedom Bring You To Worship

Giving brings you to worship our Creator. Honoring the Lord FIRST with your paycheck establishes values in your family's life that will change what you do with the remaining portion of your paycheck. When you do something seemingly illogical as tithing (particularly when you “can't afford it”), you honor God and become completely dependent on Him. And guess what? He shows up. In Malachi 3:10 God tells us to “Test me in this and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it.” How do we experience this joy? Just do it. Give. And let that Freedom bring you to worship.

1. What is my plan to become debt-free and loose the chains that bind me?
2. What is my plan to give? Will I honor God first? Will I trust Him to provide? When will I start?

Resources:

Read through the Book of Proverbs – one chapter a day for one month. Proverbs provides many financial principles. Or if you prefer, here's a list to get you started: <https://www.evernote.com/pub/dmarker/proverbsspeaksnotinoney>

Need more help? Ac* is committed to make you a good resource manager of the time, talent and treasure with which God has entrusted to you. Contact the Ac* Lead Team at info@authenticchurch.com.

TODAY'S SOCIAL MEDIA POST

Let Freedom wring you from debt. Let Freedom bring you to worship.

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CONTENTMENT

Pastor Ricky Fay, Associate Pastor

“Not that I was ever in need, for I have learned how to be content with whatever I have. I know how to live on almost nothing or with everything. I have learned the secret of living in every situation, whether it is with a full stomach or empty, with plenty or little. For I can do everything through Christ, who gives me strength.”

Think about this, our entire culture is based on us being discontent. Think about the TVs. There were regular TVs, but then they came out with the flat screen HDTVs and you weren't content with the regular TVs. So you needed a HDTV. Now HDTV isn't clear enough and they are coming with those 4K TVs. So soon you will not be content with 4K. You know which company does this best? Apple. A few years ago when the iPad came out, I received one as a gift and it was awesome! It changed my life. I was content with it. That is until the next iPad came out. Soon my 1st generation iPad seemed outdated. The screen was fuzzy and it felt a little heavier. My scores in Angry Birds were lower. I felt like I needed this new iPad and I was not content until I had it! But you can probably see the cycle here. We are told to be dependent on our circumstances and we are constantly stuck in a cycle of trying to change the things around us so that we can live a content life.

In the New Testament, a man named Paul lived a pretty crazy life. His story is not necessarily the story you would see made in to a blockbuster movie. He had it all; he was a young guy. He was rising in the ranks of his occupation; he had money and respect. He had a bright future, but throws it all away after he had a religious experience. And his story does not end with him as a mega pastor riding in expensive jets around the Roman Empire to preach at his next event. He actually exchanges some good circumstances for really bad circumstances. He finds himself in jail multiple times. He was beaten, he went days without food or shelter and even at the end of his life, his circumstances didn't get better. Church tradition says that he was eventually killed. Even through all of this though, he tells his readers in Roma that he has learned the secret to living in every situation - to live a life of contentment.

The secret is that we can do everything through Christ who gives us strength. You see, contentment can only come through Christ. We'll never be satisfied with new electronics, relationships, and more money. Paul is telling us that Jesus is enough. You want to live a more fulfilled life? Be happier? Put your hope in Christ. The things of this world will let us down because our situations and circumstances are always changing. Jesus never changes and we can live a life of contentment in Him.

1. Are you thankful for what you have? How do you show your appreciation?
2. Are you going through a tough situation? How can you show contentment through your experience?

TODAY'S SOCIAL MEDIA POST

Contentment only comes from Christ.

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LIVE FOR REAL

Pastor Wayne Francis, Lead Pastor

“For to me, living means living for Christ, and dying is even better.”

Many people have resonated with our mantra, “Live for real”. At first, it seems like a bold call just to be whoever you are and to remain who you are. But this mantra is rooted in a very fundamental ideology and that is that real life is found only in Jesus Christ. Living for real means living for him, by him and like him, bringing to reality the life he lived in our day-to-day actions with our neighbors who are far from God but close to us. Living for real means that each day Jesus bids for us to come and follow him completely by relinquishing all of our impulses to gain significance, security, and affirmation outside of him. Living for real means maintaining our faith during times of difficulty and despair. It means you and me learning to forgive people that hurt us despite the nagging voice in our heads that tell us we are justified in distancing ourselves from those who cause us pain. It’s about acknowledging that the best versions of ourselves are made visible by becoming who we desire to be more like; Jesus. It’s celebrating progress as we look to who is perfect. Put simply, living for real means making Jesus recognizable in a culture that prefers a camouflaged Christianity. This noticeability through our flaws and failures to an onlooking world has life-giving ramifications. To embrace this, to live like him, now that’s living for real.

1. An onlooking world is tired of watching people hold to a faith that professes but don’t practice. What are some practical ways that you can live out your faith this month that can be attraction to people that are far from God but close to you?
2. We have a cultural saying in our leadership team at Authentic - “Fake is over”. We use this for moments of being confessional to each other and to God. In what area of your life do you need to ‘break the fake’ by admitting a fault or failure?
3. List some areas in which you need to grow spiritually. What is Jesus bidding you to sacrifice to follow him completely?

TODAY’S SOCIAL MEDIA POST

A life that gives into being seduced by the culture will be life reduced by the culture. Living for real is raising a better culture through the recognizable actions of Jesus.

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DEVOTED TO PRAYER

Pastor Brian McMillan, Lead Pastor of CenterPoint Church

“Devote yourselves to prayer with an alert mind and a thankful heart.”

Pastor Bill Hybels has a book whose title always grabs me. It’s called *Too Busy NOT to Pray*. It’s a reminder that in our busy lives we need to be intentional to carve out time that we spend with God in prayer.

If prayer is communicating to God, then we should want to do our part in reaching out to him every day. Philippians 4:6 says, “Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.” We are challenged to maintain a posture of prayer in every situation. Clearly, prayer is meant to be a priority in our lives.

Oswald Chambers wrote, “Prayer does not fit us for the greater work; prayer is the greater work.” Prayer isn’t simply something we do, it’s what we are. As Christians we should be a people of prayer.

Yet the intentional posture of prayer often escapes us. In the midst of our hectic day, many of us throw out a quick “Hail Mary” prayer: “God, get me through this day!” And then we move on. But our prayer lives must be so much more if we are to know God!

Many would believe that pastors spend much of their time reading the Bible and praying. I wish that were true. If I may share with you a confession, this often is not the case with me. Between counseling, overseeing staff, ADD, message preparation, emails, phone calls, ADD, building repair, ADD, church finances, board meetings, and all of the other thousands of tasks that pop up, I struggle to find the time to pray.

Our fast-paced lives become an excuse for not praying. Yet it is in these busy, anxious, stressed moments of life that we need God most! We need God’s peace. We need his wisdom (James 1:5). We need his power. And we gain these through prayer.

Friends, we can’t allow busyness to be the reason that we don’t pray or practice any of the spiritual disciplines. The more responsibilities we have, the more we need God. As life becomes more hectic, we should become more persistent in finding time to pray.

You wouldn’t unplug your computer when the battery is low. And so we must not unplug from God when life gets busy. It is only through prayer that we will be able to make it!

1. What would a life devoted to prayer look like to you?
2. What does Paul say that prayer can accomplish?

TODAY’S SOCIAL MEDIA POST

My busyness should not be an excuse for not praying, but rather, I should seek prayer more when I get busy.

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