**October 27, 2019 Matthew 5:3-12**

 ***Life’s Healing Choices: The Growth Choice***

**Scripture:** Matthew 5:3-12 NRSV

(3)"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (4)"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. (5)"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. (6)"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. (7)"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. (8)"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. (9)"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. (10)"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (11)"Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. (12)Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

**Other Verses:**

*Continue to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. 2 Peter 3:18 (TEV)*

*Now dear children, continue to live in fellowship with Christ. 1 John 2:28*

*Everyone who lives in union with Christ does not continue to sin. 1 John 3:6*

*Continue praying, keeping alert, and always thanking God.* Col. 4:2 (NCV)

*The truly happy people are those who carefully study God's perfect law that makes people free, and they continue to study it. They do not forget what they heard, but they obey what God's teaching says. James 1:25 (NCV)*

*If you continue in my Word then, you are my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free. John 8:31-32*

*I don’t mean that I’m already as God wants me to be. I have not yet reached that goal but I continue trying to reach the goal and make it mine. Christ wants me to do that, which is the reason he made me his. Phil 3:12*

*No, I’m still not all I should be, but I am focusing all my energies on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I strain to reach the end of the race and receive the prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us up to heaven.” Phil. 3:13-14 (TLB)*

*Let us examine our ways and let us test them and return to the Lord. Lam 3:40 (NIV)*

*If we examine ourselves, we will not be examined by God and judged in this way. 1 Corinthians 11:31 (NLT)*

*Be alert. Continue strong in the faith. Have courage, and be strong. 1 Cor 16:13*

*Do not be fooled. Bad companions ruin good character.”*1 Cor. 15:33 (TEV)

*We are confident that God will continue to rescue us, since you are also joining to help us when you pray for us. 2 Cor.1:10-11*

*We should not stop gathering together with other believers, as some of you are doing. Instead, we must continue to encourage each other. Heb. 10:25 (GW)*

*I am sure [I’m certain, I’m confident] that God, who began the good work within you, will continue his work until it is finally finished on that day when Jesus Christ comes back. Philippians 1:6*

*Don’t get tired of doing what is good. Don’t get discouraged and give up, for we will reap a harvest of blessing at the appropriate time! Galatians 6:9*

**Notes:**

**The *Growth* Choice** - I reserve a daily time with God for Bible reading, self-examination, and prayer in order to know God and his will for my life and to gain the power to follow his will.

**HOW TO CONTINUE GROWING**

1. First, I need to fix a ***daily* *time* *with* *God*.**

2.If I’m going to keep on making it to the finish line, I must ***fill my mind with* *Scripture*.**

3. The third thing I do to keep growing is ***focus* *on* *my* *goal***.

F – A faith goal is ***Focused****.*

A – A faith goal is ***Attainable***.

I – A faith goal is an ***Individual*** goal.

T – A faith goal is ***Trackable***.

H – A faith goal is ***Heartfelt***.

4. I ***face*** and ***forsake*** my ***failures*** quickly.

5.I have to ***flee*** ***temptation***, but I don’t fear it.

6.I must ***form******an******ongoing******support******group****.*

7. ***Follow******Christ*** *to the finish line*.

**Transcript:**

Lately I have been thinking about the growth of this church. I have rejoiced at the people who have entered our fellowship and decided to stay and be a part of this church. But I have also given much thought to those who were once part of this church, and the reasons they have left; people who have joined other churches; or stopped attending all together. It made me think of a verse in Galatians.  *“You were running well; who prevented you from obeying the truth?” (Galatians 5:7 NRSV)*

You see there are all sorts of reasons for people to leave a church. I am not going to pretend to understand why people have left. But I will say this; each person who has left this church, whether for good reasons or not so good reasons, has left a gaping hole in my heart. Every time somebody chooses to leave this church, leaves me filled with doubts, hurt, and anguish. I wonder, do you feel the same way? What could we have done to stop them; what could we do to bring them back; is this a sign of my inability to lead or our inability to sustain spiritual growth?

Well today I want to share a message about how to finish the race, how to overcome the adversity you will encounter and continue spiritual growth your entire life. Life is not a sprint, it’s a marathon. “*Be on your guard, so that you do not lose what we have worked for,**but may receive a full reward.” (2 John 1:8 NRSV)* That is my prayer for each of you, because I love you. I don’t want you to lose what you’ve gained spiritually. I do not want to see anybody lose what they have worked for.

If you’ve ever been to a marathon race, you know there is a crowd at the start but it thins out rather quickly towards the end. Many start off great in life; but fizzle out, and many never finish the race. You don’t get a prize for starting the race. You only get a prize for finishing it. As your friend and pastor, I want so much for you to finish well.

For 56 years I have been a part of this church. I was one of the children who benefited from the children’s ministries here. For a time, I was one of the prodigals who had stopped attending because I wanted more excitement; but I came back. I served this church to the best of my ability as Sunday school teacher, Sunday school board, Sunday school/SDMI President, Treasurer, Trustee, Worship Leader, Board member, Associate Pastor, interim pastor, and now the Pastor. I’ve seen people come and go. In our membership records, I see names of people who have not been here for more than thirty years. Yet their names still are attached to this church. Some still live in the area and attend elsewhere; but others are no longer faithful to the Lord. They burned out, they quit, and they’re no longer in the race. Today I want to talk to you about how to finish the race. That’s the seventh choice; the ***Growth*** ***Choice***: **“I reserve a daily time with God for Bible reading, self-examination and prayer in order** t**o know God** **and his will for my life** **and to gain the power** **to follow his will.”**

Spiritual growth is a choice. Spiritual growth is intentional. Are you going to be more spiritually mature a year from today? If you respond, “I don’t know.” then you won’t; because growth is intentional. You have to choose to say, “I’m going to be different by next year.” You must choose to continue growing.

If you’re not growing, you’re dying. If you are not moving forward then you are moving backward. Nothing is stagnant, it is constantly moving forward and backward. 2 Peter 3:18 *“****Continue******to******grow*** *in grace and the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”* How do I do continue my growth, and maintain the momentum I started? How do I complete the course, finish the race and get the prize? The Bible tells us there are seven things we need to do to continue growing in the faith.

*1. First, I need to fix a* ***daily******time******with******God****.*

Set a time and place; this is going to be my date with Jesus on a daily basis. Scripture teaches us to connect with God so we may have the life of God within. Growing up we had a grapevine; if the grapes were not connected to the vine, they didn’t grow, they won’t bear fruit. Jesus said, *“I am the vine and you are the branch. You cannot bear fruit apart from me.”* You cannot bear fruit in your life if you’re not connected to Jesus on a regular basis.

Let’s get a little more practical in relational purposes. If you don’t spend time with your spouse, you’re going to drift apart. Jan and I have discovered this; when we don’t spend time together, we start feeling distant, disconnected. We don’t feel close, we don’t feel intimate. If your marriage is dry, no love there, no joy, it’s because you’re not spending time together, you are not focused and working on your relationship. You must do what you did when you first fell in love; spend time together. If you don’t spend time with them, you’re not going to be close to them. This truth is the same with God. It’s true with any relationship. You have to spend time with God in order to be close to him, to feel his love, to sense his presence in your life. *“Now dear children,* ***continue*** *to live* *in fellowship with Christ.” 1 John 2:28*

The hardest thing in my life; is to be consistent in my daily time with God; everything fights against it. Why? Because Satan knows if he can keep you disconnected, you’re worthless, powerless, defenseless. You have no strength against his temptations. He doesn’t care what you do as long as you don’t spend time with God. If you’re too busy for God, it’s real simple – you’re too busy. Because you’re putting everything else in front of the number one commandment – *Love God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength.* Satan fights your relationship with God because it gives you power. The Bible says in 1 John 3:6 *“Everyone who lives in union with Christ does not* ***continue*** *to sin.”* It means when I’m connected with Christ, he gives me the power, the ability, the effort, the desire and everything I need to do what’s right.

The reason why I fall into sins and personal weakness is because I don’t spend time with God. Scripture says, *“****Continue*** *praying, keeping alert, and always thanking God. Col 4:2”* What does it mean to “continue praying.” It means you don’t just do it in your quiet time. You talk to God all the time. You don’t have to use a bunch fancy words. You just talk to him just like I’m talking to you. I’ve talked to him for many years. But you need to set a special time daily just for God. Forget all the others if you don’t do that one.

**2. If I’m going to keep on making it to the finish line, I must *fill my mind with Scripture*.**

If you go without food you start feel weak; your mind starts getting a little groggy. If you go even longer without food you get lethargic. The same is true with God’s Word. It is the food for your soul. “*Man shall not live by bread alone – but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.”*  God’s Word is as necessary to your soul as food is to your body. If you don’t get His Word, you’re going to start feeling lethargic and weak.

I know you come to church every week. But you need to be fed every day. You don’t eat a banquet on Sunday and starve the next six days. If the only spiritual input you get in your life is the weekend message, you’re having a banquet once a week and fast the rest of the week. No wonder you’re spiritually lethargic. You’ve got to have the Word of God in your heart. Whatever you put into your body and into your mind is what’s going to come out; computer experts call that GIGO – garbage in, garbage out. A computer only works as well as the programming.

The same is true in your heart and mind. You put garbage in your mind that’s what’s going to come out in your life. If you put soul food in your mind, that’s what’s going to come out in your life and personality. There’s a lot of stuff to fill your mind with. You can poison it with violence, pornography and all kinds of evil things. Or you can put in God’s word that develops your mind.

Do you believe everything you watch on television? Do you believe everything you hear on talk radio? I hope not. How many of you believe everything you read in the Bible? Why do we spend more time listening and reading what we don’t believe than what we do believe? Where’s the logic in that? You’ve got to fill your mind with the Word of God. *The truly happy people are those who* ***carefully******study*** *God's perfect law that makes people free, and they continue to* ***study******it****. They do not forget what they heard, but they obey what God's teaching says.” James 1:25 (NCV)*

There are two benefits of filling my mind with the Word of God? Jesus said *“If you* ***continue*** ***in******my******Word*** *then,* (a) *you are my disciples;* (b) *and you will know the truth, and the truth will* ***make******you******free****.” John 8:31-32.* You experience freedom in your heart and you experience heaven for eternity if you continue in God’s Word. It proves you are a disciple. If you continue studying the Word of God, it fills your mind with God’s Word; removing sinful ideas and attitudes that separate you from Christ.

**3. The third thing I have to do to keep on growing is *focus* *on* *my* *goal*, not my habit.**

When I say habit, I’m talking about hurts, hang-ups, sins, weaknesses, and failures; things in your life that you don’t like. To grow you have to focus on what you want, not what you don’t want.

Have you ever heard of the law of attention? The law of attention states that whatever you focus on, whatever gets your attention, pulls you. There’s a natural pulling when you focus on something. If you stand on a cliff or a tall building and look over; all of a sudden you felt like you’re being pulled over? That’s the law of attraction. That’s the law of attention. Whatever gets your attention, you tend to move towards. Obviously you don’t move toward things that don’t have your attention. Then you need to choose to make sure your attention is toward good things, not bad things. You’ve got to change your mind.

Jan will on occasion make desserts. Chocolate chip cookies, chocolate cake with peanut butter icing, apple crisp, and when I hear her stirring around the kitchen and catch a whiff of what she is preparing, I am drawn out of location and into the kitchen. I walk out and stand there waiting for her to say something. After I can stand it no longer I ask, “What are you doing?” *Making peanut butter icing. What are you doing?* “Watching.” She knows I didn’t come to watch. I came to stick my finger in and get a big gob of what’s in the bowl, and if I time it correctly, I get to lick the beaters clean when she is done.

Whatever you resist persists. So whatever you want to change in your life, don’t focus on. What you focus on, you end up going towards. Much of today’s answers for getting over your hurts and hang-ups is looking at the past. You could go to a counselor and spend two, three years reliving the pain in your past. But, Your past is past. Your past influences you, but it does not define you. I especially like the scene in the lion king movie from way back. Simba is dealing with his past and debating whether he should return to the pride, Let’s take a look.

Insert video <https://youtu.be/dZfGTL2PY3E>

What matters today is not your past. What matters today is the direction your feet are headed right now. I don’t care what you’ve done, who you did it with, or how long you did it. That’s not you. Satan will tell you it is, but that’s a lie. You are headed in the direction your feet are pointing. Stop focusing on your past. It’s not going to change, but it’s over. If you want to grow, focus on the future. Focus on what you want, not what you didn’t want.

You’ve got to focus on something else. This is what Paul talked about in Philippians. *“I don’t mean that I’m already as God wants me to be. I have not yet reached that* ***goal*** *but I* ***continue*** *trying to reach the goal and make it mine. Christ wants me to do that, which is the reason he made me his.” Philippians 3:12* How many of you would agree with Paul – I have not yet reached that goal. Now notice the rest of this verse: “*No, I’m still not all I should be, but I am* ***focusing******all******my******energies*** *on this one thing:* ***Forgetting******the******past*** *and* ***looking forward*** *to what lies ahead, I strain to reach the end of the race and receive the prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us up to heaven.” Phil 3:13-14 (TLB)*

None of us are as we should be. Take notice to Paul’s words; he is purpose driven and focused on where he wants to be. He is pursuing that prize; I want to get that prize too, how about you? Focus on what you want to happen. You want to finish the race. It’s the daily time with God; fill your mind with God’s Word, and focus on his goal for your life.

Do you have goals? God always operates in your life by faith. And a goal is a statement of faith. A goal says I believe God wants me to accomplish such and such by this date. If you don’t have a date, it’s not a goal. It’s a wish. But wishes are a dime a dozen. They’re worthless. The only thing that will change your life is setting a goal. Not a wish. You have got to have a goal and a deadline. A faith goal – according to your faith it will be done unto you – has five characteristics. **FAITH.**

**F – it’s Focused.** That means it is specific, not vague. A faith goal is focused. You’re very specific about it and say, “I want to accomplish such and such by this date.” If you use the word “more” or “less”, it’s not a focused goal. “I want to be more like Jesus. I want to be less angry…” How do you measure that? You can’t. It’s got to be very specific.

**A – Attainable.** A faith goal is attainable. If you set an unrealistic goal, it’s just going to discourage you. If you say, “I’m going to pray three hours a day.” You’ll make that one day…. Maybe. Don’t set an unattainable goal, it’s worthless. Set one that stretches you, but you think in faith you’re going to accomplish with God’s help. An attainable goal is possible, it’s practical. “I know I can do this…” You set a goal and you ask God to help you in that goal.

**I – Individual.** A faith goal is an individual goal, it’s personal. You can’t set goals for other people because you can’t control them. You can’t set goals for your children, your husband. You can only set goals for you, because you control you. You can have a family goal by changing you, because when you change it changes everybody else. The only way you can change other people is by changing yourself. But you set an individual goal. Not “We need to …” but “I need to do this.”
 **T – Trackable.** A faith goal is trackable. That means you can measure it. It’s verifiable. You set a date and say, By November 30th I will have accomplished this and by December 30th I will have accomplished this and by January 30th I will have accomplished this. You set a date and it’s trackable and you can measure it.

**H – Heartfelt.** It’s got to be heartfelt. If you don’t feel it, don’t set it. A passionless goal you’ll never reach. Nothing is accomplished without passion. If you don’t have a deep desire to do it, don’t set it. You’re not going to accomplish it.

I want to encourage you to set one goal today. One spiritual goal in your life. Maybe your goal is to have a quiet time every day between now and Christmas. It’s a FAITH goal. I’m going to have a quiet time with God five minutes a day. I’m going sit out in the back yard and say, “God, is there anything you want to say to me today?” And be quiet for 5 minutes. I’ll talk to him in prayer and I’ll read his Word and let him talk to me. That’s a measurable goal.

Let me explain to you that spiritual growth is not an unbroken string of successes. Nobody goes through life with no struggle, no suffering, no sin. Growth is a curvy road. The road to wholeness, health, and spiritual maturity has a lot of twists and turns and often means three steps forward, two steps back. Relapse is part of the process; don’t beat yourself up when it happens. Relapse is when you fall back into an area that you used to be into. Whatever your common area of weakness, you’re probably going to struggle with it the rest of your life. It doesn’t mean you won’t have victory over it, but you will be tempted. When those temptations come to you, you might be intimidated; stay strong.

The Bible doesn’t promise a temptation-free life. It promises a victorious life, in Galatians we find, *“Those who walk in the Spirit will not fulfill the lust of the flesh.”*  That doesn’t mean we don’t have the lust of the flesh. It means we don’t fulfill it. If I have a natural attraction towards something, that may be wrong, it doesn’t mean that I’m wrong. It means it’s a natural attraction to me; I just don’t give in to it. Realize you are struggling with old ways, learn how to deal with relapses. How do you do that? The fourth step.

**4. I *face* and *forsake* my *failures* quickly.**

Let’s face it, we stumble in life. The key is to face and forsake my failures quickly; don’t cover them up and don’t blame others and don’t excuse them and own up to it. I’ve never met anybody who didn’t want to be successful. The Bible says this in Proverbs 28:13 *“People who cover over their sins will not prosper****.*** *But if they confess and forsake them, they will receive mercy.” Proverbs 28:13*

People who cover over their sins will not prosper. Why? Because you’ve pushed God outside.Here’s the problem. It’s easy to confess a sin from five years ago. It’s hard to confess and forsake what I just did. If I am in an argument with you and I just blew it, I don’t want to confess it right away. That’s our ego. but the key to spiritual growth is let it go quickly, don’t let sins pile up in life. Keep short accounts with God; take out the garbage on a daily basis. And when you stumble, admit it, don’t cover it up; confess it and forsake it quickly. The quicker the better. That’s how to deal with relapses. Don’t be ashamed; realize, your on the road to recovery, to development.

How do you do that? By personal self-examination. There are three ways to examine yourself. Spot check, how am I feeling right now? Daily examination, at the end of the day you ask, how did I do today? In my steps, in my recovery and in my growth. Finally there’s an annual checkup, where you do a spring-cleaning. The Bible talks about the value of personal examination. *“Let us* ***examine******our******ways*** *and let us test them and return to the Lord.” Lamentations 3:40 (NIV)* If you don’t ever examine yourself, you’re not going to grow. *“If we* ***examine*** *ourselves, we will not be* ***examined*** *by God and judged in this way.”* 1 Corinthians 11:31 (NLT) God says either you can judge yourself or I’ll judge you. Which would you rather do? You can judge your own sin or you God can judge them. God says judge your own sins and own up to it right away and don’t cover it up, admit it to God. That’s part of the growth process. Don’t beat yourself up, don’t tear yourself down; thank God you are not the way you used to be. Look for ways you have improved and focus on the future and not the past. And when I come to God with relapses; He doesn’t criticize, He never tires of forgiveness. He’s waiting on you.

Psalms 103 says, *“He forgives all my sins and heals all my diseases. He keeps me from the grave and blesses me with love and mercy.”* God gives me what I need, not what I deserve. If you’ve been stumbling on things you had a natural attraction to do, come to God and say, “Lord. I need your forgiveness.” That’s the starting point. *“God is the healer of the brokenhearted.”* God says, I’m here for you. God is our healer if we come to him.

There are three more steps. If I’m going to make it to the finish line, if I’m going to be all God wants me to be, I have to fix a daily time with God, I have to fill my mind with his Word, I have to focus on the future, and what I want, I have to forsake and forgive and face my failures instantly, quickly.

**5. I have to *flee* *temptation*, but I don’t fear it.**

Many people are intimidated by their temptations; as if you shouldn’t be tempted. It is not a sin to be tempted; it’s a sin to give in to temptation. “*Jesus was tempted in all points like as we, yet he sinned not.”* Jesus experienced every temptation known to man, but he didn’t act on them. Have you ever had a sinful thought come to your mind? Where did that come from? I’ll tell you where it came from; Satan.

When God gives you an idea, we call it inspiration; when Satan gives you an idea, its temptation. What you do with these ideas determines whether it’s good or bad, right or wrong. Don’t be intimidated by temptation. When Satan reminds you of your past; remind him of his future. He doesn’t have one; but you do. Martin Luther said, “You can’t keep the birds from flying over your head but you can keep them from building a nest in your hair.”

We are attracted by many things; let me explain the difference between lust and attraction. Attraction is not a sin; lust is. It’s normal for both men and women to be attracted to beauty. A woman sees a good-looking guy – he’s a hunk! Attraction is not lust. It’s what you do with it. If a good-looking woman comes by and a guy thinks, wow she’s good looking. That’s not lust. That’s attraction. God wired men to be attracted to women, and women to be attracted to men. If you start undressing them in your mind, if you dwell on the idea of sex with them, that’s lust! But attraction is not lust.

Sometimes attractions get messed up; women attracted to women; men are attracted to men. What does it mean? It means we live in a broken world. What makes these attractions wrong is how we act on it or if I dwell on it all the time. Maturity is knowing not to act on my attraction, but act on my commitments. God calls us all to act on our commitments. You don’t always get to do what you feel like doing. That’s called maturity.

So flee temptation, but don’t fear it. When temptations comes to mind, don’t be intimidated; know where it comes from. Some people are actually shamed, “I’ve been a Christian twenty years. Why would I have that temptation?” I’ll let you in on a little secret; the closer you get to God, the harder Satan fights you. If you’re not close with God, Satan won’t mess with you, you’re messing up your own life. But if you get close to God, he’s going to throw everything he has at you.

Scripture says we need to flee temptation, in 1 Corinthians 16:13 *“****Be alert****.* ***Continue*** *strong in the faith. Have courage, and be strong.”* You need to know what tempts you and stay away from it. There are two things to stay away from: tempting situations and tempting associations. Tempting situations – stay away from circumstances that may lower your guard; and tempting associations – stay away from people that tempt you. To keep from being stung you stay away from the bees. If you run with the wolves, you howl with the wolves, it’s true. If you have a problem with alcohol, don’t go to a bar, stay away from it. You need to know what tempts you; when it tempts you; where it tempts you; who tempts you and stay away from those situations. If your tempted by airport bookstores, don’t go to airport bookstores. If your tempted by a certain channel, block that channel. If you want me to come over and set the password, I can. Avoid tempting situations, and tempting associations.

*“****Don’t be fooled. Bad companions ruin good character****.”* There may be people from your past you need to stop associating with, it’s always easier for them to pull you down than for you to pull them up. If they’re leading you from Christ, they’re not friends. Bad company corrupts good character.

Let me give you two real common areas you need to flee from. One of them is sexual temptation. It says in 1 Corinthians 6:18 “*Saunter away from sexual sin*.” It doesn’t say walk. It says Run! When Joseph was tempted by a woman in the Old Testament, he left his coat and run. Don’t put yourself in a situation where there’s a chance, and if you find yourself there, get out. Get away from it. Run.

The second area to flee is money. It says in 1 Timothy 6 *“People who want to get rich fall into a temptation and a trap, and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge them into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil.*” That’s one of the most misquoted verses in the Bible. It doesn’t say money is the root of evil; but the love of money is. The passage continues, *“Some people eager for money have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.* *But you, man of God, flee from these things*. Flee from the desire to make money a priority in your life.] *pursue righteousness, goodness, faith, love, endurance.”* Don’t fight it, flee it; go after the good stuff in life.

**6. In order to finish the race and grow spiritually, I must *form an ongoing support group*.**

That is what small groups are all about. Every group that meets, whether Sunday morning, Sunday evening, Wednesday evening or some other day of the week, this is where you find your support. There are two reasons why you need to be in a small group. First, is prayer, second encouragement. *“We are confident that God will* ***continue*** *to rescue us, since you are also joining to help us* ***when******you******pray******for******us****.”* This means he’s going renew us and revive us. God wired us to need each other. That’s why you have to be in a small group and have other people praying for you. You will not get well on your own, you need other people in your life.

Who is praying for you, and who are you praying for? If you don’t have a small group praying for you, you’re out here on your own. You are helpless when you don’t have anybody giving you prayer support. I know when people are praying for me, I can feel it. Do you know why I am standing here today …people are praying for me, some of them every day. You need people praying for you, a small group to support you in the things that you need prayer for, and you need to pray for others.

You also need encouragement. *“We should not stop* ***gathering******together*** *with other believers, as some of you are doing.*  *Instead, we must* ***continue*** *to* ***encourage*** *each other…”*  In other words, don’t give up on your small group, don’t give up on your church family. You need their encouragement and they need your encouragement.

Some may say, I tried a group but didn’t really like it. Just because a group doesn’t work for you once doesn’t mean you give up. It’s like going to a doctor. “I didn’t like that doctor so I’m never going to go to a doctor again.” You keep looking until you find one that suits your needs.

If you don’t like your small group, maybe it’s the wrong group, maybe the wrong person. Maybe the wrong day, or something else. But you need to be in a group. Because you’re not going to grow without it. You say, “I just need a different time.” Fine. All I need you to do is let me know “I need a new group.” If we cannot find one for you, we can look into starting a new group if necessary

If you want to start a new group, fine but get in a group. Maybe during this series you’ve discovered something you never really dealt with before and say, I don’t want to carry this into a new year. A year from today I want to be through with it. Don’t carry it into another year. Find a suppost system and close the door on that past and get healed. Take the steps – face and forsake failures, flee temptation, be part of a group and then there’s one other thing you need to do.

**7. *Follow Christ to the finish line*.**

One of the great promises of the Bible is Philippians 1:6 *“I am sure* [I’m certain, I’m confident] *that God, who began the good work within you, will* ***continue*** *his work until it is finally* ***finished*** *on that day when Jesus Christ comes back.”* What God starts he finishes.

You may be feeling a little discouraged right now, but I have a verse for you, Galatians 6:9 *“Don’t get tired of doing what is good. Don’t get discouraged and give up, for we will* ***reap*** *a* ***harvest*** *of* ***blessing*** *at the appropriate time!”*  God brought you here today to say this to you, “Don’t give up.” He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion on the day of Jesus Christ. Many of us started out on this path with only our faith and this verse to hold on to. “*He who begins a good work in you will be faithful to complete it*.” I don’t know what you’re going through, but God is not finished with you. He will be faithful to complete it.

May the grace of Jesus Christ, may the love of the Father, may the power of the Holy Spirit bless you this week, as you seek to continue to live for him. As you take these steps, may he bless you in every area of your life, in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

God bless you everybody!