

Hey. How are we? Okay, great. If you have your Bibles, let's go. Nehemiah, chapter 2, is where we're going to be. I get the opportunity to try to pronounce a lot of names that are no longer in popular vernacular today, so it should be a good time.

Earlier this week, my family (my wife and our three children) went and had dinner with Josh Patterson and his family. Josh Patterson is one of our lead pastors here and honestly one of the most gifted men I know (although it pains me to say that) and also probably easily my closest friend. We went to their house and brought food to their house, not just because it was a random evening but because they had brought home from the hospital their fourth child.

So we went to just celebrate with them new life. You can give that up for Natalie. She did a great job. All right. Josh's role in that was minimal. Natalie did a great job. I brought our three. They now have four. Lily will be 7 next month. Luke is 4. Liv is 2. Lucy was born on February 8. Now I don't know why you would do that to yourself, but that's what they've chosen to do: Lily, Luke, Liv, and Lucy. I confuse my children, and they're Audrey, Reid, and Norah. I'll still yell at one the wrong name, sometimes calling my son my daughter's name. So if you start all of them with an L...

Anyway, we're at this house with a 7-year-old, a 4-year-old, a 2-year-old, and a newborn, thrown in with our 10-year-old, our 7-year-old, and our 3-year-old. There's no other word outside of the word of *anarchy* for what that evening was like. We were trying to eat. If you have been in an environment like that, you've come in hopeful to have some conversation. That's simply not happening. Every couple of minutes, somebody is running in and telling on this other kid who did this.

You start wondering, "Was that smoke? Am I smelling smoke? Who is catching stuff on fire?" It was absolute beautiful chaos. It was just a mess, and it was awesome, because life is kind of messy. So to just kind of enter into the laughter... The petty sorrows of a 4-year-old are so much better than the sorrows of a 40-year-old. So we laughed a lot and disciplined a little and ate decently.

One of the things that struck me as I was there... I guarantee you it was because this was churning in my head. When I'm prepping, I'm kind of just chewing on the message all week. One of the things I noticed is across the spectrum of development, we were all over the map that night. You have little Lucy who is

swaddling. She can do nothing for herself. She can go to the bathroom on herself. She can eat, and she can sleep. Outside of that, she has no skills. That's literally the breadth of her ability.

Now Liv, who is 2, is a little bit further along than that. I mean, she is walking, but it is not a controlled walk. I don't know. Again, if you have kids, you understand what I'm saying. She looks a bit intoxicated as she navigates the rooms and the stairs. You're always nervous about her. "Oh no! Put that down." Then Luke is a little bit further along. He is a bit bolder. He knows how to do some things for himself. The boy can put on his own pants.

Then you move up. Now Lily, who is soon to be 7, is like a gazelle among legless creatures. She can get what she wants. She can do what she wants. She can operate as she wants for the most part. Here we are in this. Then I have my 10-year-old, who is probably trying to steal stuff from the Patterson's house. She has a different kind of development.

What I'm watching here is really everyone is in their place. They're in their right place. What I mean by that is Lucy is doing what Lucy should be doing: sleeping, eating, and sucking on her pacifier. (Unless you hate pacifiers and think that's going to jack up her mouth, and then it wasn't a pacifier; it was something else.) Well, it's not my kid. It *was* a pacifier. JPatterson@thevillagechurch.net.

Now from there, Liv is being exactly what Liv should be. She is 2 years old. She can say some things. A lot of what she says is confusing. You have to kind of pick up on how she says words to figure out what words she is saying. She is growing bolder and more courageous in her abilities. In fact, there's something about that third kid that their belief about their abilities goes well beyond their actual abilities. So Liv is right where she should be.

Luke is running wild around the house and is just all boy, just loving being the boy in a house full of women. Then he has his dad. The bastion of testosterone is daddy in the house. Everything else is pink and "princessy." So you have Luke being a little boy and running around and learning and growing. He picked up soccer this year for the first time. So he is now playing a little sport. It's the suburbs. You have to play soccer, or you can't belong here.

Then from there you have Lily, who already reads at like a... Gosh. I don't know. She is a better reader than I am. She is smart and growing. They're all kind of on the same trajectory. We call that trajectory "maturity." They're maturing. Really we're all on that same track of moving away from infancy and toward adulthood. In fact, if you're a parent in here, if you haven't thought of it this way, let me try to help your child and you.

Your job right now is to train them to not need you. That will make it easier for you to let go when it comes time. Your job is not to coddle them so they never *don't* need you. Your job is literally to train them to no longer need you. An aspect of parenting is participating in this developmental process so they can get out of your house. In the end, I'm thinking that night everybody is in a good spot. Now what I know... Here's something that has to be said. If I was in a different context, I probably wouldn't say this.

Raising kids is not, however, a competitive sport. In regard to development, if your kid is not reading like your neighbor's friend's kid is, there's no need to panic at that and plug your kid into reading camp for the summer. Give it some time. We have different gifts, different abilities, but we're all on the track of development...unless it becomes evident there are developmental issues. Now some developmental issues are nothing at all. They just require a bit more time. Some kids are late bloomers.

Sometimes things click for them maybe a little bit later than other kids, but sometimes there literally are developmental issues. When there are developmental issues, the more serious the developmental issues, the more people get involved. So if there are serious developmental issues, now all of a sudden you maybe have a physical therapist. Maybe you have a speech therapist. Maybe you have doctors who get involved. Where there are significant developmental issues, other people get involved in order to help the maturation process move forward as far as it can move forward.

All of us are actually on this same trajectory. Even now you should be maturing even if you are... Let me not use the word *old*. Let me use the word *vintage*. You should be maturing even if now you are of vintage ilk. If you have lived long, even now there should be maturation occurring. Now this physically lines up and parallels well with what should be happening to us spiritually.

When God said to us via God in the flesh, Jesus Christ, **"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you,"** he didn't say, "Go make converts." The goal isn't just new birth, although new birth is spectacular.

There are few things like going to the hospital to visit a friend who just had a new baby or having a baby of your own. Those are spectacular days. They are strange days and beautiful days. It's not over then, is it? In fact, things are just getting started, are they not? Unfortunately, I believe in large swatches of evangelicalism, the idea is birth is it. You're born. Great! Then you leave the person swaddling, sucking on a paci for the next 40 years, when it is the expectation of God for us to grow and mature.

This is called *discipleship*. Really, the end goal of the Christian faith is for us to be matured into the headship of Jesus Christ, that we will be, from the moment of our birth, ever maturing and ever growing.

Now I want to be honest with you. Most of the time you grow spiritually like you grow physically. What I mean by that is you are unaware you're growing. You're unaware you're growing.

In fact, if you have children, you don't ever see them grow. They just come downstairs one day, and they're like two inches taller. They all of a sudden can't fit into their clothes anymore. You can stare at your kid all day long; you're never going to watch your kid grow. Spiritual growth is a lot like that. You can't really see you're doing it as you're doing it, but there are ways for us to look at ourselves and judge whether or not we are maturing or whether or not we're developing spiritual developmental issues.

One of the reasons I wanted to preach and teach out of the book of Nehemiah is it has these kind of building blocks of development for the Christian faith. There are all these kind of pieces thematically in here for us to kind of look at and go, "Okay, am I maturing, or are there developmental issues?" So even if I could recap where we've already been, we watch that Nehemiah's heart is a heart of empathy and compassion for his brothers and sisters, those who belong to the covenant community of faith with him and alongside of him.

We said that first week, is this *descriptive* (is this simply history), or is this *prescriptive* (is this God's expectation for all of us as believers in Christ)? We saw clearly in the Scriptures it is God's expectation on you and on me that we would interact with one another (especially in regard to our covenant community, our brothers and sisters, our members here at The Village Church) with a great deal of compassion and empathy.

We do not avoid each other's troubles; we enter into each other's troubles. We don't avoid each other's sorrows. We enter into each other's sorrows. Then we saw what he did with that empathy last week as he began to cry out to God and believe God to solve what was causing the weight on his heart, the empathy on his heart, the sorrow on his heart for his brothers and sisters. So we watched Nehemiah pray. We watched him pray in kind of a big block. We watched him pray with these little rifle-shot prayers.

We talked last week if we're going to have a vibrant relationship with God, then it can't just be rifle-shot prayers throughout the day. "God, I think you're great. God, get this guy in the left lane out of the left lane." Lying in bed at night, you're going, "God, you sure were good to me today. I want to spend more time with you tomorrow." It has to be more than that. Your relationship with your spouse or your opposite will not work that way if all you do is give them little rifle-shot lines throughout the day.

He spent good quality time, and we saw that early on in Nehemiah 1 and into 2. He also did the rifle-shot prayers. Both are necessary for vibrancy of relationship with God. You have been called to relationship with God. This is not, when all is said and done, about moral code. This is about being reconciled to God and

having a relationship with God that ultimately transforms how we see and operate in the world around us. We talked about that relationship last week.

So you can see these are kind of elementary ideas, building blocks in the Christian faith. Empathy and compassion, relationship with God. Those are building blocks. Those are new birth developmental type of ideas. Then we move from those two ideas to this idea that we'll spend our time on today, although I will build out all three of these ideas into one kind of laid track or path of maturation. So let's look at Nehemiah, chapter 2. We're going to pick it up in verse 6. Nehemiah has asked the king to go back to Jerusalem and refortify the city. Here's the king's response.

"And the king said to me (the queen sitting beside him), 'How long will you be gone, and when will you return?' So it pleased the king to send me when I had given him a time. And I said to the king, 'If it pleases the king, let letters be given me to the governors of the province Beyond the River, that they may let me pass through until I come to Judah, and a letter to Asaph, the keeper of the king's forest, that he may give me timber to make beams for the gates of the fortress of the temple, and for the wall of the city, and for the house that I shall occupy.' And the king granted me what I asked, for the good hand of my God was upon me."

That's an understatement in this text. Nehemiah has just asked the reigning king of Persia to not only allow him to go refortify a city that has already been conquered but that the king would actually provide the timber and the tools to refortify a city he had actually already sacked. It wasn't the king of Persia who sacked Jerusalem. That actually occurred before the king of Persia, but it was still in his jurisdiction.

Nehemiah says, "Let me refortify a city under your authority, and will you provide the timber for it?" The king is like, "Sure. How long are you going to be gone?" That's the favor of God. Where did Nehemiah get the boldness? We talked about this last week. He got the boldness in the reality that the Word of God said if the people of God turned their faces back to God, he would reestablish the walls of Jerusalem. So really what brought about confidence in Nehemiah's life are the promises of God in the Word of God toward Nehemiah and toward this task, this end. Now let's pick it up from there.

"Then I came to the governors of the province Beyond the River and gave them the king's letters. Now the king had sent with me officers of the army and horsemen. But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite servant heard this, it displeased them greatly that someone had come to seek the welfare of the people of Israel. So I went to Jerusalem and was there three days."

Then I arose in the night, I and a few men with me. And I told no one what my God had put into my heart to do for Jerusalem. There was no animal with me but the one on which I rode. I went out by

night by the Valley Gate to the Dragon Spring and to the Dung Gate..." Which I'm just guessing is not a popular part of the city. I'm just guessing that's not where you want your house. "Where do you live?" "Over by the Dung Gate." I'm guessing that's not prime real estate in Jerusalem. Just a guess.

I've found nothing in regard to the historicity of that, but by the name, if you live in Dung Town, I'm guessing that's not a popular destination for tourists. Then from there. **"...and I inspected the walls of Jerusalem that were broken down and its gates that had been destroyed by fire. Then I went on to the Fountain Gate and to the King's Pool, but there was no room for the animal that was under me to pass.**

Then I went up in the night by the valley and inspected the wall, and I turned back and entered by the Valley Gate, and so returned. And the officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing, and I had not yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, and the rest who were to do the work. Then I said to them, 'You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer suffer derision.'

And I told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good, and also of the words that the king had spoken to me. And they said, 'Let us rise up and build.' So they strengthened their hands for the good work. But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite servant and Geshem the Arab heard of it, they jeered at us and despised us and said, 'What is this thing that you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?'

Then I replied to them, 'The God of heaven will make us prosper, and we his servants will arise and build, but you have no portion or right or claim in Jerusalem.' Then Eliashib the high priest rose up with his brothers the priests, and they built the Sheep Gate. They consecrated it and set its doors. They consecrated it as far as the Tower of the Hundred, as far as the Tower of Hananel. And next to him the men of Jericho built. And next to them Zaccur the son of Imri built.

The sons of Hassenaah built the Fish Gate. They laid its beams and set its doors, its bolts, and its bars. And next to them Meremoth the son of Uriah, son of Hakkoz repaired. And next to them Meshullam the son of Berechiah, son of Meshezabel repaired. And next to them Zadok the son of Baana repaired. And next to them the Tekoites repaired, but their nobles would not stoop to serve their Lord."

Now if you're not careful, you're going to get lost in a lot of names and a lot of wall building, but here's simply the path I want to build for you, and I want to once again affirm to you that this is not simply descriptive. This is not simply historically speaking, but really it is the expectation of God for you and for

me and really what the path of maturation looks like. You have new birth that leads to compassion and empathy for a brother and sister that leads to prayer wrought and wrung out of the Scriptures that then ultimately leads to action.

We are not people who feel empathy and pray. We are people who act upon the prayers as our confidence builds in our prayers based off of the Word of God. Where action or any part of this starts to break down, you have developmental issues. Where you have to begin is how do you build the type of empathy and the type of compassion for your brothers and sisters in Christ that would lead you to prayerfulness and glad submission into the Scriptures that might ultimately drive you toward action? How do you do that?

Well, I want to answer it very, very simply. The foundation of all discipleship, when all is said and done, is not gathering in a big room like this. The traction of life transformation occurs in smaller rooms, not larger rooms, because you can hide in larger rooms. It's harder to hide in smaller rooms. Can it be done? Yes. Some of you are great, like the Jason Bourne of Christians. Just hide your identity embedded in with people who you walk with day in and day out.

By and large, really one of the baselines of maturity is in being known and in knowing others. Really you and I grow and begin to mature when we enter into gospel-centered community. Now what do I mean by that? Because that's kind of a tagline. That can't be a junk drawer for you and me. That can't. When I say "gospel-centered community," when anybody touches this stage and says "gospel-centered community," you can't make that a junk drawer for, "Oh, that's my Home Group," because you can be in a Home Group and have no gospel-centered community whatsoever.

When we're talking about gospel-centered community, it is the lens by which we see our community. Here's what I mean by that. The people of God will always be a gritty group of people to be around. It's always going to be a bit grimy. Let me tell you why. Because you and I, by our nature, rebel against God Almighty. Even upon our salvation, even in our new birth, we will still battle and wrestle with our flesh. The gospel understands that.

Since the baseline of community should be that all have fallen short of the glory of God, now we've been freed up to not pretend. We don't have to pretend we're more than we are, because the gospel message is you're less than you think you are. Since that's the root, then why do I have to strut for you? I don't have to strut for you! God has already said, "This kid is jacked up." God has already declared about you that you have fallen short.

Why would you pretend you have not fallen short when the Scriptures make it painfully clear you have absolutely fallen short? See, if you get this, then I don't have to perform for you. I got to stand up here last

week and go, "Do you know what? My anxiety about my cancer leads me to agitation, and I'm a cruddy husband and dad when I'm agitated." Because I don't have to strut for you. I don't have to impress you. I don't need you to think I'm the greatest or I'm the worst. I get to just be free in the Lord.

Why? Because the gospel is the lens by which I see the world. God has already told you I'm a mess. I don't have to pretend I'm more than a mess for you. See, it frees me up. The gospel frees us up to not pretend, which is why it's baffling to me that so many of us continue to try to pretend to be godly instead of actually pursuing godliness. I mean, isn't that absurd? Surely you yourself have to know that's absurd.

"I'd really like to be godly, but instead I think I'll just pretend to be. I mean, that's exhausting, and I'm always having to kind of rethink things. I'm just regurgitating really beautiful stuff I've never experienced, but at least people think I'm godly." Well, you know you're going to die, right? I mean, I hate to be the bearer... Do you think you're tricking God? Do you think you're going to get to heaven and God is going to be like, "You and I were like *that* down there. You were so legit. I am so lucky you repped me so well. Come on in to your reward."

I mean, do you really believe that's what's happening here? Confession marks the life of a believer because we see through gospel lenses, and our community is built around that we have all fallen short of the glory of God. Yet Christ has delivered us and saved us. So the celebration is Jesus. The celebration isn't us. Because the Christian context is so grimy... I'll tell you some of the things that happen to us here at The Village.

Almost every time we do a baptism weekend, we'll lose a couple of families. We'll lose a couple of families because people bring their 12- or 13-year-old son or daughter into the service, which I think is awesome. I think it's a great thing for them to be a part of this, but then somebody gets in the water and gives their grimy testimony about how they were swingers or used to be a stripper or were strung out on heroin and got involved in all sorts of indecent behaviors.

Then all of a sudden we have folks who are trying to shelter their children who then have to have a conversation with their children that they weren't ready to have with their children. Now there's nothing wrong with sheltering as best you can your children from the weight of the world, but here's what I can guarantee you. They'll eventually feel the full weight of it. They'll eventually feel the full weight of it. This is what I mean by grimy...if the gospel is going out, it's drawing people out of darkness.

Then even upon our conversion, we're still going to wrestle our flesh. In fact, 1 John, chapter 1, says you want to know how Christ lives in you? You want to know how the Holy Spirit is sealed in you? You'll be

aware of your sinfulness. I mean, think about that. You want to know if you're a believer? You're aware of your sinfulness.

Let's look at this. This is 1 John, chapter 1, starting in verse 6. **"If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin."** Listen to this. **"If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us."** So if we're saying, "I have no need of confession," what the Bible just said is the truth is not in you.

What is the mark of having the truth in you? You're aware you need to confess your sins. The gospel says the church of Jesus Christ is a safe place to confess your sins because we see through the lenses of all of us falling short of the glory of God and yet Christ loving us and rescuing us despite us. So then we can enter into group life. We can enter into those smaller rooms, life with men and women in proximity, seeing often, checking in continually.

We can walk into that room and go, "Man, here's what's really been going on in my mind this week. I had just the darkest thought this week. You know, right now I don't like my kids. I mean, I love them. I'm not hitting anybody, but I don't like them. Do you know what? I just need extra grace for my spouse right now. I'm just running on fumes toward him, running on fumes toward her." That safe place to go. "I have questions about how God is working this out. I have doubts. I have concerns."

See, the life of the Christian... In fact, when Luther started the Protestant Reformation, he said the Christian life is marked by repentance. All of life is repentance for the believer. All of life is being in tune with our hearts and being willing to share that with our brothers and sisters because in gospel-centered community where confession is a key cog, confession leads to accountability. Now we're starting to move down the process of maturation now.

Now I believe the gospel, so I'm able to confess my weaknesses. Now that I've confessed my weaknesses among others who understand the gospel message, now I have accountability. So if a man comes to me and says, "Hey, man. My marriage is not in a good spot right now. I have not put in the hard work of going after my wife's heart, of romancing her, of encouraging her, of edifying her gifting of creating pathways in which she can have time to really grow in how God has gifted her. Man, I need to confess that to you guys. Man, just keep me accountable."

Now that's an invitation, an invitation they will probably regret, because now I'm freed up to call. "Yo, Rico Suave, what are we doing this week? How are we pursuing the queen's heart? What? So you've done nothing for 10 years, and you've planned a getaway to Vail? How about you just write her a letter this week

apologizing and maybe take her to dinner? I mean, I love the whole vacation getaway thing, but 10 years of nothingness shouldn't probably be broken with an over-the-top vacation that puts you in debt. Write her a note. Own your sin, and take her for a nice dinner."

Now all of a sudden there's accountability. Now all of a sudden there's discipleship. Now all of a sudden we're growing. We're moving down that path. So here. I want to be completely fair. Some of you right now just might be raising your hand going, "Do you know what? I call bull. I call bull on the whole thing you're saying, Matt. Man, we've tried to do this gospel-centered community. We've tried groups. We've tried to connect like this. It's messy, Matt. It is not as easy... You are over-romanticizing this reality."

Okay. So I want to be completely fair. Community is unbelievably difficult work. It is not natural. Our culture doesn't even know how to do it. We are a back-porch, private-fence culture, are we not? We are a back-porch, private-fence culture. Not only that, we don't even really know how to enter into actual deep relationships. Let me prove a point to you. I want you to say this after me. I do not have 400 friends. Okay? Say it. "I do not have 400 friends."

Listen to me. Your Facebook friends are not friends. They're not! Really, their encouragement rings a bit empty, and their congratulations have to ring a bit empty. I'll tell you why. Because they're not in the mud with you. When I'm sick, the tears that mean the most to me are the tears that have cried with me the whole time, not the guy I hardly know or I met at a party once and they Facebook friend me, which is impossible because I'm not on Facebook. My preference is *actual* relationships.

So cyberstalking someone is not a relationship. I'm not telling you to get rid of your account. I'm telling you, you don't have 400 friends. So someone who would say, "Congratulations on the new baby" will always ring hollow next to the person who was at the hospital with you in the waiting room who actually walked with you through the pregnancy, who cried with you when you struggled to get pregnant and prayed with you when there were complications of the pregnancy.

This is life on life. This is how transformation begins to occur. Even then, it's messy, and it's hard. Our friend Dietrich Bonhoeffer will help us with this. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German pastor theologian. If you haven't read Metaxas' book called *Bonhoeffer*, his biography on Dietrich, I would strongly recommend it. It's a monster if you're not a reader, so get it on Kindle so you won't realize how thick it is and go to work. It really is a spectacular read.

So Bonhoeffer was a guy who was, in his head, I mean, just unbelievably smart. He came over to the United States, went to an African American church in Harlem, watched them get after the Lord in a way that's celebratory and wheels off. It so stirred his heart that he wanted not just the mind, but he wanted the heart.

Then Dietrich was actually part of an assassination attempt on Hitler during World War II and was killed by the Nazis. A preacher theologian with an inflamed heart who wants to worship boldly, proclaim truthfully, and also kill dictators is my kind of guy, man. I mean, I just feel like this brother and I could be friends.

So Dietrich writes of the Christian community this: "If we do not give thanks daily for the Christian fellowship in which we have been placed, even where there is no great experience, no discoverable riches, but much weakness, small faith, and difficulty; if on the contrary, we only keep complaining to God that everything is so paltry and petty, so far from what we expected, then we hinder God from letting our fellowship grow according to the measure and riches which are there for us all in Jesus Christ."

He is just saying here, "Yes, this is hard. There are a lot of sinners involved. It will, at times, be paltry. It will, at times, be petty. It will, at times, disappoint. You shouldn't be surprised when that happens. You're there. You're a sinner trying to connect with other sinners for the purpose of sanctification. Sanctification is, at times, lovely and, at times, ugly." Iron sharpening iron is the biblical descriptive of how we are sharpened. How do you sharpen a blade? You nick parts off of it, don't you? I mean, isn't that the process of sharpening?

You take a stone, and you take that knife. You run that knife over that whetstone. Do you know what you're doing? You're literally shaving pieces of metal off of the knife to sharpen the blade. It's not a gentle process. If it could feel pleasant... It is the nicking off of rough edges to sharpen. That's what discipleship is. Dietrich here is saying if all you're ever going to do is complain about it, you really inhibit the Lord's ability to sharpen you and mature you. What you now have are developmental issues. So right away, we can tell out of the gate...

Here's what I know about The Village. Many of you are plugged in and doing life deeply with one another. I'm in a group myself. We meet as best we can every Sunday night, sometimes with the whole family. That's wheels off. You have Brad Payne. I think he has 13 kids or something. Then the Pattersons have four. I mean, between our Home Group, we could be a TLC show. All right? So we have all these kids running wild. We're still trying to catch up and talk about what the Lord is doing in each other's lives and hold each other accountable and track things down later and encourage later on in the week.

Some of you do this well, but here's what I know. A lot of you are mere participants here. You go here, but you do not belong here. You rob only you of what Christ has for you. You're here because you either like the music or you like the way I preach. Look at me. Those will not sustain you on the day of trouble. They won't! They won't. What you'll need in that moment is a room full of people who know you and you know them. The words that come out of their mouths will not be empty because they will have bled with you. They will have cried with you. They will feel the weight.

See, when you do life like this, when you walk... How easy is empathy if cancer isn't *this* person out there, but cancer is *this* person you meet with every week, you follow up with with cups of coffee? You're doing life deeply with one another. You know their weaknesses; they know yours. When their kid goes wayward, that breaks your heart. When their marriage is on the rocks, that is devastating. That leads you to pray. That leads you to search the Scriptures. That leads you to encourage.

If you're detached and this is all you know, do you know what type of impotent, weak, pathetic version of Christianity you're living out? It's not the one in the Bible. It will not sustain on the day of trouble. Oh, that you would pay the price to enter into. "Well, we're just looking for people we get along with." Really, the more homogenized your group is, I think the less you'll actually be sanctified and grow. The more diverse you can get in regard to socioeconomics, personality, ethnicity, backgrounds, the better shot you have at growing in grace, growing in understanding, and growing in compassion.

Look right at me. So what you're looking for are not people just like you. If someone gets on your nerves in group, that's a sanctifying experience. I'm guessing they're probably not big fans of yours either. You see how sanctification begins to occur? Because iron is striking iron. So what happens now with this as our base is we're able to enter in empathetically with one another. We're able to enter into sorrows. When we are known and know others, we're able to rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn.

So when I'm in the hospital after my surgery, Josh Patterson, Michael Bleecker, Jason Holleman, Brian Miller, several other guys are out in the waiting room. They're crying, and they're praying. They're asking God to spare my life. That same group was at the hospital just a few weeks ago to celebrate the birth of Lucy Patterson. We mourn together, and we celebrate together. The dynamics... We're different guys, man. We really are.

Now we're a bunch of white dudes. We probably need to change that, but when all is said and done, we come from different backgrounds. We come from different backgrounds. We were saved at different periods of life, and yet the Lord has created a kind of dynamic community where we're able to argue. We're able to confront. We don't call it "arguing." We call it "robust dialogue." We're able to really press one another and hold one another accountable.

There's a lot of confession that goes on, a lot of life that goes on there. This is what God has called you to also. Now at this moment, now watch what happens. When I know and am known and then from there am compelled out of that compassion to pray and believe the Word of God for those I love and for myself, that will almost always then lead me to action. So the compassion I feel, the sorrow I feel, the gladness I feel

for those I am doing life with deeply moves from simple prayer into answering some of those prayers by obedience to the Word of God as God reveals himself to me in the Scriptures.

So let's take a couple of case studies. If you are born again, you begin to become compelled by the Scriptures that those outside of the gospel message are perishing, then you begin to feel the weight of what it means to have lost men and women around you. So you what? You begin to pray. "God, save my dad. God, save my mother. Okay, I see here in Isaiah 59 your arms are not too short to save, God. You say you can save. I see you rescued Paul. He is far more hardened than my dad is. I believe you can save. He is far more disinterested than my child is. I believe you can save him."

We begin to pray, and then that leads us to action. I don't know if you've ever thought about this, but really in the area of encouragement, often times you will be the answer to your prayer for the encouragement of those you love. Right after my conversion, I just really freaked out. I mean, the idea of God loving me like he did really blew me up. I mean, I just immediately got a white tee shirt that said, "I (heart) Jesus." I had the little bracelets. I don't know if many of you remember that, but it was black for sin and red for the blood that washes you white as snow. Blue was for baptism, and gold was the streets of gold.

I don't know if you did that. I'm just outing myself here as an uberdork, not that that needed to happen. From there, man, I went into my history class. This was my senior year of high school. I was sharing the gospel with a couple of guys there. I just got worked over. Here's what I got worked over about. A lot of the guys who went to the same church as me were getting drunk and getting high and sleeping around just like everyone else. I had no answer for that.

So I'm getting worked over about my own faith. I'm getting called out for my own faith. Then really I felt all alone in that moment. I was having a real kind of dark, proud moment, kind of like Elijah on Mount Carmel. I was like, "I'm the only one who hasn't bent my knee." The Lord wasn't going to have that, but I had really left that class and gone to my locker carrying my little blue student Bible. I had rigged up my locker just to open it. You know, you didn't have to put the combination in.

I opened it up and threw my Bible in there and shut it. I really thought I was just done. As I turned, a guy named Rodney grabbed me in a headlock and gave me a noogie, which before Christ would have gotten you knocked out. (Probably not, but I would have swung.) From there, he just said, "Hey, the Holy Spirit of God put you on my heart today. I just want you to know I pray for you. I love you, and God is using you in this school and in the lives of people." I opened up my locker, grabbed my Bible...

Now what happened? What happened was Rodney did not, prompted by the Holy Spirit of God, go, "God, please encourage Matt today. Please send someone to encourage him." Right? I mean, are you tracking

with me? Somebody is in your group, someone is in your life, who is really struggling. Are you really just praying, "God, would you please encourage them? Would you please just let someone go and tell them today that you love them and you're there and you hear them? Lord, will you send someone? I don't know who, Lord, but will you send someone?"

I have to believe the Lord is like, "Hey, man. There's a reason I'm putting this on your heart right now. You're about to have lunch with them. I should not have to put these pieces together like this for you at this point." Right? It moves us to action. Let's look at development. If you're not walking with people that deeply, then that's a developmental issue, and you should not be surprised that you struggle with sin like you do, that you feel distant from God like you do, that you don't know the Scriptures like you would like to, because if you want to learn the Scriptures, get in a group of people who value the Scriptures.

If you want to learn them, get around people who love them. You shouldn't be surprised if you're not walking deeply with others that you still wrestle with your flesh like you do, that you have the marital issues that you do, that you have the loneliness of heart, that you have the doubt... It shouldn't surprise you. You're still in diapers. Get out of diapers.

Then if that getting to know people hasn't led you to compassion for them while you're praying and considering the Scriptures for them and for yourself, then more than likely what happens is that community you're in is not being honest about where they are, and you're knowing people at a surface level rather than a deeper level. It will always take one courageous person in a group of friends to be the first to go, "I'm struggling."

You will be surprised how much better your weaknesses compel people to godliness than your strengths. What we all want to be known for is the man who memorizes books of the Bible. We want to be known as the woman who has it all together and is "super wife" and "super mom" or "super single woman," who doesn't need a man or, "I want a man, but not until I'm content." We want to be known as these kind of fake mirages instead of who we really are.

When we enter into who we really are, then all of a sudden the group has a shot at genuine empathy and compassion, because there's no reason to have empathy and compassion when everyone is awesome. So no way does everyone being awesome lead you to prayer and the Word of God. Then from there, we move into action. Now you are not always the answer to your prayers for people. Single guys, you are not always the answer to prayers you're praying for others. "Lord, I just pray you'd bring that fine girl a husband. Pastor Matt said..." You're not the answer.

So gospel-centered community leads to empathy and compassion that leads to prayerfulness and a seriousness about the Word of God that then leads to action. Look at me. This is happening in the covenant community of faith. If you don't know what I'm talking about when I say that... I mean within the membership of The Village Church, this is how we are to interact. This is what we are to be fighting for. As this works itself out, it grows, spills over the walls and to the ends of the earth. Let me show you a little bit of that now.

[Video]

Female: I have had the opportunity to lead a Home Group for about five months now. In the beginning, the girls and I decided to support Jen LaGrone, who is a missionary in Ethiopia from our church body. Essentially all that means is she is not on our "to do" list. We don't check her off every week. "Yes, we prayed for Jen."

It's really a continuation of a friendship that's just long-distance, whether that is us celebrating joy in her life or walking alongside her on hard days where she is struggling and just getting to seek the Lord on her behalf. To get to see that from the States and really have Jen as a mouthpiece of what the Lord is doing there has been a huge encouragement to our group. Supporting her has been one of the best things that has grown our group together and to learn more about who Christ is.

Male: I've been leading a Home Group for about six months now, and in that time, we've been able to support both a missionary family in Ethiopia as well as a single girl who is serving as a missionary off the coast of Africa. It's been a real joy for me to see our group take community not only outside of Dallas and Texas but outside of the United States to these other countries. A couple of great things that have happened recently...

We pray for our missionaries during the day, and we've literally seen God answer prayers overnight to where we've been praying for something, and a couple of our missionaries who were struggling with something or going through something, when they wake up in Africa, the prayer has been answered. So that's been just an incredible thing to see as we try to encourage and bless the missionaries who have been sent out from our Home Group.

The last thing is we're actually going to be able to send one of our Home Group members over to visit one of our missionaries in Africa and to take letters and to take gifts and just to take the joy we have for them over to them in Africa to help support them and bless their lives.

Male: One of the things we've really traditionally struggled with is the multiplication aspect, the reproduction aspect of Home Groups. Through this, we began to wrestle with, "How are we going to do what God has called us to do in Berlin if we're not really able to do it here?" So we began praying, diligently seeking the Lord and asking him to raise up workers. He began to put them in our place, to raise up people who were already there. In this past year, I believe we've seen six or seven groups come out of that group within a very short time.

Female: I got plugged into The Village Church a little over a year ago and jumped into a Home Group. Our Home Group has been involved in many aspects of the ministry I work for, Christian Community Action, including Bible study, having barbecue fellowships, and most importantly, discipleship. There's one story that sticks out in my mind of a gentleman who our Home Group walked with.

He was at a rough point. He started coming with us weekly to The Village Church. We gave him his first Bible, and even if he didn't understand all the sermons, he felt the love that was all surrounding him and began to understand what a relationship with Jesus Christ is all about. We've seen him grow, and he now is able to minister to his four children who don't really know the Lord.

Male: For our group, gospel-centered multiplication really came as a result of realizing in the parable about the farmer, Jesus tells us to sow abundantly. Then just a few chapters later, he teaches us to go and make disciples amongst all the nations. That includes where we live. So as a group, we sat down and prayerfully and individually made a list of those we know are far from God with whom we have regular interaction.

We prayed through those names and asked God to bring us opportunities to engage them. So we just share with them what we're learning in Home Group, how the gospel has changed our lives, and the fact that God wants to do that for them, that he sent Jesus to make a way for them to know him. We continue to pursue that in hopes that the Spirit will move.

[End of video]

We organized that video very purposefully. Here's how we wanted to organize it. Really, discipleship in this little linear line I drew is not programmatic for the most part. What I mean by that is I'm not trying to add anything to your life. It's not, "Go here. Go here. Go here." It's, "Connect with a group of believers and do

life deeply with one another." Everything flows out of that. So really the Christian life is one of faithful presence.

So when I'm talking about rebuilding with action and we're looking at action flow out of our relationship with God, we're not necessarily talking about going somewhere and doing something as much as we're talking about just being faithful where we are. So if you're a stay-at-home mom, that means being faithful to your children and to your husband and be, as best the grace of God covers you, the type of mom and type of wife God would have you to be and to fight for that along with other men and women who can encourage you that way.

If you're a businessman or a businesswoman or you are a teacher or wherever you are, that you would just be faithful to the gospel where you are. More than you need to be in a thousand things, you need to be in one really serious thing. It is not a win for you to be in 7 accountability groups and 22 Bible studies. It's simply not a win.

A win is for you to be deeply rooted with a group of people for an extended period of time who are serious about the Word of God. That's going to rub, and it's going to create some things I think your heart really desires that may have been elusive to you more than likely because we have had some developmental delays because of our lack of seriousness about belonging, probably because maybe we've been shell-shocked before.

Maybe we've been betrayed before, or maybe we're just lazy and think we're awesome and don't need it. So what I want to push you to today is to be very serious about connecting at this level. If The Village isn't for you, I promise before God Almighty, I don't have a problem with that. Find a place that does work that you do connect well in and belong for the good of your own soul and for the glory of God's gospel.

So my hope honestly is that you be motivated by what Christ has done for you. He has purchased for us not just reconciliation unto himself but reconciliation one to another. So really our celebration even in these things today is about the broken body and shed blood of Jesus Christ. So I'm going to pray for us, and then we're just going to celebrate Jesus.

Father, thank you for these men and women. You've brought them into this place. You are good to do that. I pray whether it be getting into GroupConnect or reestablishing commitment to the group we're in or, for the first time, being serious about plugging in deeply, maybe you've struck it in the hearts of many the need to confess some things that are actually going on.

Maybe we've begun to pretend we're godly in areas we're not. God, I pray you would melt away the façade, and that we might be able to be honest and open with one another in the hopes that confession will lead to accountability that will lead to life transformation. You're good, and you do good. We believe this, Lord. Amen.

Love you guys.

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