

# Steps To Building A Strong Church



Discovering God's Word  
Bible Study Series

# Steps To Building A Strong Church

Learn the importance of building a strong local church and twelve necessary steps to becoming a strong church

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*Discovering God's Word Bible Study Series*

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Written by Eric Krieg

**About the author:** My name is Eric Krieg. I am a disciple of Jesus, a Bible student, a truth seeker, and an evangelist. My interest is in using the Bible as my only guide in my faith. My desire is to help others understand the message of the Bible and pursue true, New Testament Christianity.

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**My plea:** It is my hope and prayer that you are searching for the truth that is contained in God's word, the Bible. My desire is to help you understand and obey these truths God has revealed in the pages of His word. It is to that end that I write this material. Please observe all of the Scripture references and evaluate whether the conclusions I have drawn are in harmony with God's word. If they are, I ask that you make honest application of those truths to your life and obey God's instructions.

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# Steps To Building A Strong Church

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Steps To Building A Strong Church  
Series

# Introduction: Building A Strong Church

Is the local church you have joined yourself to a *strong church*? Yes or no? Take some time to really contemplate this question and provide an honest answer. Identify some of the strengths of the congregation. Identify some of its weaknesses.

Now, as you consider the local church you are a member of, recognize that the Bible is the guidebook for what a local church ought to be. 2 Timothy 3:16-17 says, “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.” There is nothing that we need to do or need to be that is not revealed in the pages of God’s inspired word! This includes the steps to building a strong church. When you search the Scriptures, you discover some things that are necessary in order for a local church to be pleasing to God. This is the *only* perfect guidebook to building a strong church!

Then, please recognize that building a strong church will be an on-going process. Notice that we are considering the process of building a *strong* church – not a *perfect* church. While the Bible is the perfect “instruction manual” (James 1:25), local churches are composed of fallible people. As such, there will be constant challenges to contend with as a local congregation. Yet, the church can still be strong! Still, building a strong church takes continual work. There is not a point at which (while life exists on this earth) a local church will achieve its goal of

being “strong” and can stop working. It will take continual effort, prayer, watchfulness, etc. Local churches will need to continue to apply these same principles we will be discussing throughout this study on a daily basis!

As we begin this journey of discovering Biblical instructions and principles that will make churches strong, we will focus our study in this lesson on some introductory principles. Our goals in this first lesson are: (1) To understand what a local church is. (2) To understand that not every local church is a strong church. (3) To define what a strong church is and is not. (4) To understand why each church needs to be a strong church. (5) To introduce the steps we will be considering throughout this study.

## What Is A Local Church?

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God has authorized the existence of the local church. In fact, there are many examples of local churches throughout the pages of the Bible (i.e. the church in Antioch, Philadelphia, Philippi, Colossae, Thessalonica, etc.). In order to consider the steps involved in building a strong church, it is first essential for every member to have an accurate understanding of what a local church is (according to the Scriptures). Now, we are not focused on how many people in this world would identify a local church. Instead, we are focused on what God considers a local church to be.

### ***A local church is not...***

It is common for folks to have some misguided views about the true nature of a local church. This is significant to our study because a local church that views its true purpose or nature wrong will be focused on accomplishing the wrong kinds of work! Consider a few misguided ideas as to what a local church really is.

(1) A building where religious people meet together. There are many people who talk about “the church” when they talk about the physical building. Yet, the Bible never calls a physical structure a “church.” For instance, Acts 8:1 speaks of a “great persecution” that “arose against the church which was at Jerusalem.” Now, was this persecution accomplished by folks who were swinging

sledgehammers at a physical structure? No. Instead, the passage says that “they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.” The church was the people.

Verse 3 makes the same point. It says that Saul “made havoc of the church.” How did he do this? The passage continues by saying that he was “entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison.” This passage clearly demonstrates the truth that the church is *not* a physical structure where religious people meet together. Instead, the church referenced a group of people (more on that in just a moment).

(2) A business. Some people view the church as a business. And, it is often run as a business would be run. Those who are in the greatest positions of authority are seen as the CEOs of the organization. They are often left with all of the work to do, while others sit back and await orders “from the top.” Furthermore, these individuals often go beyond their God-given authority and bind decisions on the church that are not in harmony with God’s word. However, this fails to view the organizational structure of the local church properly (as we will consider later in this series).

Then, not only have many people developed a business-styled mindset concerning how the church is organized, but this has also extended to its goals. For instance, many churches have become focused on raising money to the point that they engage in unauthorized practices to raise that money (note that the only God-approved way for a local church to raise funds is a free-will offering of its members, 1 Corinthians 16:1-2). Then, many local churches have put their focus on pleasing their “customers” (members, visitors, etc.) rather than on pleasing God. And, many local churches are focused on mere *numbers* (numbers of members and numbers of visitors). All of these things are similar to the focus and function of a business. But, they are contrary to the true nature and purpose of a local church (as God has designed it).

(3) A humanitarian organization. Some folks view the local church as a not-for-profit charitable organization that is dedicated to helping alleviate the world’s physical problems. So, many churches have food drives, free community meals, clothing drives, etc. Many of them will provide general financial assistance (from their treasury) to those who are not

Christians. Some will use their buildings as shelters in times of need or natural disasters.

Yet, while the church is focused on alleviating mankind’s greatest problem (the problem of sin) by teaching the gospel of Jesus Christ throughout the community, the Bible provides no authority for local churches to provide the kind of assistance we have just identified. God has only given the local church authority and responsibility to financially assist needy Christians (see 1 Corinthians 16:1-4; 2 Corinthians 8:1-4). While individual Christians are given the responsibility to do good to everyone according to their own abilities and opportunities (Galatians 6:10), God has neither authorized nor obligated the local church to perform the functions of a humanitarian organization.

(4) A social club. It is common for local churches today to provide opportunities for its members and visitors from the community to engage with one another socially and recreationally. So, churches often build, maintain, and use kitchens for the purpose of providing common meals. They often build, maintain, and use gymnasiums for athletic events. They often form sports leagues. They often put on theatrical productions. They often have field trips. And, they are often involved in many similar things.

Once again, although these things may be good for individual Christians to engage in (and engage in with others), there is no God-given authority or obligation for a local church to be involved in them. For instance, the apostle Paul (when the church in Corinth had perverted the Lord’s Supper) said, “What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and shame those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you in this? I do not praise you” (1 Corinthians 11:22). Later, he said, “if anyone is hungry, let him eat at home...” (1 Corinthians 11:34). There is simply no command, approved example, or necessary inference that would authorize the local church to engage in the kinds of social and recreational activities that are common today!

(5) A political organization. Many people look for churches today to be voices crying out in the midst of political debates. Some churches will even go so far as endorsing specific candidates who are running for governmental offices. In doing so, many churches have become so focused on political and cultural issues that they have almost altogether

stopped preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ so that they can focus on healing earthly nations.

However, the local church was not established by God for the purpose of being involved in a political process or focusing on cultural issues. Now, local churches *may* have some influence on politics and culture. But, not because they are focused on achieving those goals. Instead, they may have some influence in these areas when they are focused on proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ in the world! Then, local churches must *never* exchange the truth of the gospel of Christ for a politically-correct “gospel” (see Galatians 1:6-12).

(6) A savior. Some people tend to view a local church as the means to obtaining eternal salvation. They tend to view their salvation through the local church. For instance, as long as they are members of a local church (and have a good standing with that local church), they feel comfortable with their salvations.

However, although the local church can be a wonderful asset in helping an individual go to Heaven, the local church is not the savior. Jesus is the Savior! Acts 4:12 says, “Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” If an individual is not in Jesus Christ (and abiding in Jesus Christ), he/she will not be saved! It does not matter whether an individual is a member of the strongest church on earth, he/she will not be saved without Jesus Christ! The Scriptures even present clear examples of individuals who were members of local churches who were not in a saved condition. Consider the man who was living in adultery in 1 Corinthians 5. Consider the divisive man named Diotrophes in 3 John. Consider the woman identified as Jezebel in the church at Thyatira (Revelation 2:18-29).

(7) Others. I am sure there are many other ideas about what a local church is that simply does not match up with what the Scriptures teach. Yet, I am simply trying to challenge your thinking about what makes a local church pleasing to God and strong! A local church that is focused on working and gaining strength in these areas may grow in number and appear to be strong (in man’s eyes). However, they will not be strong in the areas God desires for them to be strong!

## ***A local church is...***

First, please understand that the term “local church” appears nowhere in the Bible. So, why do we use it? The term is simply an accommodative term that differentiates between the one *church* Christ promised to build (the universal church) and the many *churches* of Christ (referred to in the local sense). And, while the term “local church” does not appear in the Bible, the concept certainly does!

Whenever the word “church” is used in this “local” sense, it refers to an assembly/congregation of Christians who have joined themselves together in a local geographic area (i.e. Rome, Thessalonica, Ephesus, Colossae, etc.). While there is only one *church* (in the “universal” sense), the Bible does refer to many different *churches* (i.e. the church in Corinth, the churches of Galatia, the church in Philippi, etc.). These different churches are simply local churches (not different denominations)!

Furthermore, local churches exist for a purpose – according to the Lord’s design! God has provided a blueprint for this local assembly that is given in the New Testament. He has provided a blueprint regarding the organizational structure, work, and worship of the local church. Unlike the “universal” church, the “local” church does have a God-given earthly organizational structure, a God-given work to accomplish, and a God-authorized assembly for worship. We will examine each one of these points in greater detail as we proceed through this series of lessons. Properly fulfilling each one of these is key to building a strong church.

You might also think about the local church as a family and as a source of fellowship and strength that is greater than the individual Christian. Certainly, all Christians are members of God’s spiritual family (see Romans 8:14-17). They are all brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ. Therefore, a local church that interacts with one another on a regular basis ought to certainly provide the help, support, and encouragement of a family. The local church truly should function as a family and support group to aid each other in their road to eternal life in Heaven. It should be a support group for recovering sinners (similar to the way *Alcoholics Anonymous* is a support group for people trying to recover from Alcoholic addiction or *Weight Watchers* is a support group for people who are trying to lose weight or maintain a healthy weight).

# Not Every Local Church Is A Strong Church

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With an understanding of the true nature the local church (as God has designed it), we can plainly observe from the Scriptures that the mere existence of a local church does not make it strong. There are many local churches you can read about in the pages of the New Testament. Some of them were strong. Some of them were weak. Perhaps no passage is clearer in demonstrating this truth than Revelation chapters 2 and 3. Let's spend some time in these two chapters simply observing these seven churches that existed in Asia Minor in the first century. Of the seven, two were pleasing to God and were not rebuked. However, the other five received some rebuke from Jesus. I encourage you to read these two chapters until you are very familiar with them. For the purposes of this lesson, we will summarize some observations from each of these congregations.

## ***Church at Ephesus (Revelation 2:1-7)***

The church in Ephesus was involved in some good things. Jesus told them, "I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars; and you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name's sake and have not become weary" (verses 2-3). In verse 6, Jesus continues commending this congregation, saying, "this you have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate." Therefore, this was a local church that was engaged in many good things in working for the Lord and standing for what is true.

Yet, Jesus had some things against them. "Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love" (verse 4). Although they were doing all of these good things, they did not have the right love and fervor for the Lord that they once had. You see, this example of the Ephesian congregation demonstrates that it is possible for a local church to be doing all of the right things – and still fail to please God. Perhaps this congregation was just "going through the motions" of serving God. Perhaps they were doing all of the right things. Yet, they were evidently not filled with zeal and love for God as they served Him.

Then, verse 5 identifies how God viewed this local church and what He instructed them to do. Jesus said, "Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place – unless you repent." Notice that Jesus considered them to have "fallen." And, they would be rejected by Christ if they failed to repent and do the first works. Now, about 30 years prior to Jesus addressing the Ephesians in the book of Revelation, Paul wrote the letter of Ephesians. In that letter, they were pictured as a very strong church. However, they had evidently lost their fervor for the Lord quickly. They needed to turn away from their error and return to zealously following the Lord. Therefore, even congregations that are strong at one time can relatively quickly lose their strength and be displeasing to God.

Finally, in verse 7, Jesus promised them that they could still overcome! If they would do as Jesus had prescribed, they could overcome and "eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God."

## ***Church at Smyrna (Revelation 2:8-11)***

The church in Smyrna was a congregation that pleased God. As Jesus spoke concerning them, He said, "I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich); and I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan" (verse 9). Though we are not given a great deal of information about these individuals, we can see that they were faithfully serving Jesus Christ through their poverty and trials. Jesus knew the things they had been doing and their perseverance!

One of the most notable things in Jesus' instruction to the church in Smyrna is the absence of a rebuke. Rather than rebuking the congregation for something they were failing to do, Jesus simply encouraged them to continue in their faithfulness – as they were about to face some severe persecution in their service of God. Verse 10 says, "Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life."

These Christians had been faithful through tribulations up to that point. Now, they needed to

continue to persevere (as the devil was going to bring about even more hardships for them). Yet, if this church would remain faithful to Christ through these times of difficulty, God would give them the “crown of life” in Heaven He has promised to the faithful. If they would obey these instructions and overcome, Jesus promised that they would “not be hurt by the second death” (verse 11).

### ***Church at Pergamos (Revelation 2:12-17)***

The church at Pergamos also pleased God in some respects. Jesus said, “I know your works, and where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is. And you hold fast to My name, and did not deny My faith even in the days in which Antipas was My faithful martyr, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells” (verse 13). They were being faithful in a place Satan (evidently) had a great deal of influence (described as being “where Satan’s throne is”). They held fast to the name of Jesus Christ – and would not deny Him even when Antipas was killed (though the Scriptures do not record this event in any other passage, it was clearly a significant event for them and presented an obstacle for their faithfulness).

Yet, despite their faithfulness in these areas, Christ had “a few things” against them. Verses 14-15 explain. “But I have a few things against you, because you have there those who hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality. Thus you also have those who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate.” Though we are lacking in specifics regarding these doctrines, they were two doctrines that Jesus was not pleased with them holding. Unlike the Ephesians and Jesus Christ, the church in Pergamos did not hate the doctrine of the Nicolaitans. Thus, they compromised the true gospel of Jesus Christ.

Therefore, even though a church may be faithful in most areas, a departure from the true doctrine of Christ will make that congregation displeasing to Christ! Listen to Jesus’ warning in verse 16: “Repent, or else I will come to you quickly and will fight against them with the sword of My mouth.” If they did not turn from these wicked and false doctrines (and practices that stemmed from them), they would face the vengeance of God!

However, Jesus did not leave them with just this warning of impending destruction. Instead, He told them that if they would listen to Him and turn away from their wicked ways, they could overcome and could eat of the “hidden manna... And I will give him a white stone, and on the stone a new name written which no one knows except him who receives it” (verse 17).

### ***Church at Thyatira (Revelation 2:18-29)***

Similar to what we have observed, the church at Thyatira also was involved in some good things. Jesus said, “I know your works, love, service, faith, and your patience; and as for your works, the last are more than the first” (verse 19). These are all wonderful things that contribute to a strong congregation. And, not only did they possess these characteristics; but they were growing in them! Jesus said that the “last are more than the first.”

Yet, verse 20 begins, “Nevertheless I have a few things against you...” Namely, there was a woman identified as “Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess” who was being permitted by the congregation to teach and seduce those who were Christians to “commit sexual immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols” (verse 20). Although God had given her time to repent, she would not. Yet, even though the entire congregation had not followed her sinful ways, observe that the congregation was rebuked for allowing her to work in this way.

While this woman and those who were involved with her needed to repent, Jesus instructed those Christians who had not been involved in this doctrine (those who “do not have this doctrine, who have not known the depths of Satan,” verse 24) to “hold fast” what they had till He would come. Jesus said He would put “no other burden” on them other than holding fast. If they would do so and overcome (keeping His works to the end), Jesus said they would be given “power over the nations” (verse 26).

### ***Church at Sardis (Revelation 3:1-6)***

Unlike the other congregations we have been studying, there was only a very small element of the church at Sardis that was pleasing to God. Generally speaking, the church in Sardis was identified by Jesus as being a “dead” church. He told them, “I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead” (verse 1). Their name was deceptive. Others would (evidently) think that they



were spiritually alive. However, as Jesus considered their works, He saw very little that was pleasing to Him. They were dead in their trespasses and sins – just as those who were not Christians (see Ephesians 2:1-3).

Still, even though most of the congregation was dead, Jesus said there was a small element that still had some life in them. He said, “Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works perfect before God” (verse 2). In verse 4, He said, “You have a few names even in Sardis who have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with Me in white, for they are worthy.” Therefore, even in a congregation in which most of the members are spiritually dead, it is possible to be alive. This church needed to act quickly to strengthen this element – lest it should also die.

Those who had become spiritually dead were exhorted by Jesus to: “Remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent. Therefore if you will not watch, I will come upon you as a thief, and you will not know what hour I will come upon you” (verse 3). And, He encouraged them that if they would overcome, they would “be clothed in white garments,” and their names would not be blotted out from the Book of Life. Instead, Jesus would confess them before His Father and the angels of God (verse 5).

### ***Church at Philadelphia (Revelation 3:7-13)***

Along with the church at Smyrna, the church at Philadelphia was faithful to the Lord. Jesus told them, “I know your works. See, I have set before you an open door, and no one can shut it; for you have a little strength, have kept My word, and have not denied My name” (verse 8). In verse 10, He said, “Because you have kept My command to persevere, I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth.” Clearly, these individuals had been steadfast in their service to the Lord – even persevering through difficult times!

Once again (as with the church in Smyrna), noticeably absent from this passage is any kind of rebuke given to this local church. Instead, Jesus encouraged them – by promising to keep them from a time of trial and promising that those who would overcome would be made a “pillar in the temple” of

God and have the name of God, the name of the city of God, and a new name written on Him (verse 12).

Notice, then, what was required of them in order to have this wonderful blessing. Jesus said, “Behold, I am coming quickly! Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown” (verse 11). So, even this faithful and strong local church that was pleasing to God could not rest on its past successes in serving God. It could have the crown of life taken away if it was not faithful to God!

### ***Church at Laodicea (Revelation 3:14-22)***

Finally, unlike all the other congregations, which had some positive element, the church at Laodicea was not commended in any way. Instead, Jesus rebuked them for their lukewarmness (that they were neither all the way for Jesus nor all the way against Him). He said, “I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth” (verses 15-16).

In fact, Jesus went on to describe the fact that they thought they were self-sufficient (being physically wealthy). However, they did not see that they were in a miserable spiritual condition. They needed what Jesus would provide them in order to truly be rich (spiritually speaking).

Since God demands more than just a lukewarm devotion to Him, Jesus commanded, “As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent” (verse 19). Though they were living in this lukewarm condition, Jesus was giving them opportunity to make the necessary corrections to their lives. He said, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me. To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne” (verses 20-21). These individuals needed to humble themselves, see their need for God, and give Him complete control over their lives!

### ***Some observations....***

Before we proceed in this study, let’s consider these seven examples and make some brief observations. First, the Lord knows the works of every congregation (and every member of those congregations). Each of the examples in Revelation

2-3 illustrate that this is true. The simple, yet powerful, phrase, “I know your works” is found in all seven examples.

Second, not every congregation is alive and pleasing to God. Even congregations that are considered “alive” by other churches can be spiritually dead (as demonstrated by the church at Sardis). Therefore, name and reputation alone are not the appropriate standard for determining whether a church is pleasing to God.

Third, every congregation must be watchful. There is a point at which a congregation falls out of God’s favor. Each congregation (as demonstrated in these examples) must exercise diligence in holding fast to the things that are right in God’s sight and repent of those things that are sinful.

## The Definition Of A Strong Church

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Throughout this series, we are studying about how the members of a local church can work together to build a strong church. But, in order to accomplish this goal, all the members need to have a good understanding of what a strong church actually looks like. Just as every worker on a construction crew must have an accurate understanding of the jobs they are doing to build the house the architects have designed, every member of the Lord’s church needs to know what a strong church really is – and is not.

### ***A strong church is not...***

There are a number of measurements that are commonly used in identifying churches that are strong. However, the problem with many of these measurements is that they rely on human wisdom or values rather than on what God’s word teaches. As I identify some things a strong church is *not*, understand that you can search the Scriptures and never find any evidence to support any of the following as God-given characteristics of a strong church.

A strong church is *not* determined by the number of members. A strong church is *not* determined by the number of young people. A strong church is *not* determined by the amount of its

financial contributions. A strong church is *not* determined by the preacher. A strong church is *not* determined by the size of the building. A strong church is *not* determined by a brotherhood label that is placed on the congregation.

Though it is good to have large numbers of people who are dedicated to serving the Lord, a large amount of financial contributions, a preacher who is dedicated to the work of God, a nice building, a good reputation among other congregations, etc., these things alone do not reflect the strength of a congregation! Certainly, these are not the areas God puts His emphasis for a local church.

### ***A strong church is...***

So, if these kinds of things fail as the true measurement for whether a church is a strong church, what kinds of things can we look to evaluate in order to determine the strength of a congregation? Namely, a strong church is a church that is committed to accomplishing the will of God. Like the church in Philadelphia, a strong church is a congregation that is faithful to God and is persevering through the trials, temptations, and persecutions of life on this earth.

Therefore, a strong church is determined by the growth and commitment of individual members to serving Christ (since the local church is a collection of individual Christians). A strong church is determined by whether it is being actively obedient in the work God has given it to accomplish – teaching the lost, edifying the saved, and helping needy Christians. A strong church is determined by whether it is holding fast to the pattern of sound words God has revealed in the pages of the New Testament. A strong church is determined by whether it is zealous in doing good works. A strong church is determined by whether it is truly dedicated to worshiping God. A strong church is determined by whether it is Scripturally organized. A strong church is determined by whether there is active participation from its members in serving Christ. A strong church is determined by whether it is demonstrating the love of Christ to others. A strong church is determined by whether or not it is keeping itself pure and free from fellowship with sin.

Throughout this series of lessons, we will be focusing on these (and other) issues that all contribute to the strength of a congregation. We will be considering some of the various elements God

desires to be present within a local congregation, recognizing that a church will only be a strong church if it meets His criteria!

## Why Every Church Needs To Be A Strong Church

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Now, as we look forward to this series of studies focused on building strong local churches, let's understand some practical points concerning why every church should even desire to put forth the effort so that it can be a strong church.

### ***Because of what it is if it is not a strong church***

Think back to the seven churches in Asia Minor we have already studied about during this lesson. They were certainly not all considered to be "strong" churches. In fact, most of them needed to repent – or else they would be punished by God!

Now, I would encourage you to think back through those seven congregations. Which ones were strong? Then, consider what other kind of label the Scriptures put on the rest. Dead. Lukewarm. Compromising. Loveless. Corrupt. These are some of the words that would apply.

So, if the congregation you are a member of is not a strong church in its faithfulness to Jesus Christ, how would you describe it? Even better: If Jesus was going to send the church you are a member of a letter, how would He describe it?

### ***Because of the spiritual consequences if it is not a strong church***

Failing to be a strong church is not something that is to be taken lightly! It carries significant spiritual consequences – because those who are not strong churches are not being faithful and pleasing to God in at least *one* area!

First, failing to be a strong church has spiritual consequences for every member of the congregation. Though it is possible to keep yourself pure and alive when others around you are dead (see Revelation 3:1-6), it is very difficult. When you have joined yourself to brethren who are not dedicated to being what God would have them to be, it is an added

source of temptation to become lax in your service to God – rather than serving as an encouragement for you to serve God.

Second, failing to be a strong church has spiritual consequences for every member of the community. The church of Christ is responsible for holding up God's truth in this world (1 Timothy 3:15). The local church, then, is responsible for holding up God's truth in a local community (and everywhere it has opportunity to do so). Yet, if a local church is not dedicated to being what it ought to be, how will the lost hear and obey God's word (see Romans 10:13-18)?

### ***Because of the spiritual benefits if it is a strong church***

In contrast, a strong church (one that is faithfully serving God) will leave a positive influence on everything it touches. It will be pleasing to God. It will point everyone involved to the salvation that is found in Jesus Christ. And, it will be a beacon of light that shines through the darkness of sin.

First, a strong church will provide spiritual benefits to those who are Christians. Every member of the local church will benefit from being members of one another. They will be a source of great encouragement to one another. They will be dedicated to engaging in true worship with one another. They will fulfill their individual responsibilities toward one another. They will provoke one another to serve the Lord more effectively in the future than they have served Him in the past.

Second, a strong church will provide spiritual benefits to those who are not Christians. The local church that is faithful to the Lord will be working diligently to warn those who are not Christians about the dangers of sin. For instance, consider what was said concerning the church in Thessalonica. "For from you the word of the Lord has sounded forth, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place. Your faith toward God has gone out, so that we do not need to say anything" (1 Thessalonians 1:8).

# Steps To Building A Strong Church

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I have entitled this series of lessons, “Steps To Building A Strong Church.” We will focus on 12 during this course of this series. Now, before I identify the 12 steps we will be focusing on, let me say that I have placed these in an order that I believe will be conducive for our study. However, they are not in a specific necessary sequence. That is, God’s word does not specify this order we will discuss these issues in. And, I am sure that others could even be added to this list.

The twelve “steps” are: (1) Be dedicated to accomplishing the Lord’s will, (2) Grow individually, (3) Active participation, (4) Be united in sound doctrine, (5) Love one another, (6) Engage in Bible fellowship, (7) Be Scripturally organized, (8) Keep the church pure, (9) Be dedicated to worshiping God, (10) Be zealous for good works, (11) Be faithful stewards, and (12) Be steadfast.

## Conclusion

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Neglect in any one of these areas will prove costly. Though working to build a strong church is not an easy task, it is rewarding and beneficial to everyone who is touched by the local church! It is a challenge that I hope you will take seriously and consider prayerfully – and encourage others to do the same. Let us rise and build!

## Study Questions

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Is the local church you have joined yourself to a strong church? Explain your answer.

### 1. What Is A Local Church?

Identify some common misconceptions of the local church and explain why they are misconceptions.

What is the local church?

### 2. Not Every Local Church Is A Strong Church

What did Jesus say about the church at Ephesus (Revelation 2:1-7)?

What did Jesus say about the church at Smyrna (Revelation 2:8-11)?

What did Jesus say about the church at Pergamos (Revelation 2:12-17)?

What did Jesus say about the church at Thyatira (Revelation 2:18-29)?

What did Jesus say about the church at Sardis (Revelation 3:1-6)?

What did Jesus say about the church at Philadelphia (Revelation 3:7-13)?

What are some spiritual benefits if a church is a strong church?

What did Jesus say about the church at Laodicea (Revelation 3:14-22)?

### **5. Steps To Building A Strong Church**

List some essential steps to building a strong church.

Provide some general observations from Revelation 2-3.

### **3. The Definition Of A Strong Church**

Identify some things that do not make a church strong.

Identify some things that do make a church strong.

### **4. Why Every Church Needs To Be A Strong Church**

What is the church if it is not a strong church?

What are some of the spiritual consequences if a church is not a strong church?

Steps To Building A Strong Church  
Series

# Step #1: Be Dedicated to Accomplishing the Lord's Will

God wants every local church to be a strong church. But, in order for a church to be a strong church it must recognize that God has given it a specific work that is to be accomplished – and it must be fully committed to accomplishing that work!

As we consider how a local church must be dedicated to accomplishing the Lord's will, we can learn a great deal from the account of Nehemiah and the restoration of the wall around the city of Jerusalem. This story is an inspirational story that demonstrates restoration. In context, the Jews had been taken into captivity (namely, the story of Nehemiah focuses on Judah and their return from Babylonian captivity). There were three groups that returned from this captivity. The first group came under the leadership of Zerubbabel, the second under Ezra, and the third under Nehemiah.

As Nehemiah had become aware of the destruction that had come upon the city of Jerusalem, he was sad and requested permission from the king to go to Jerusalem and rebuild the city. Then, whenever Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem, he surveyed the extent of the damage that had been done to the city (particularly to the wall around the city). As he saw that the wall around Jerusalem and its gates were broken down and burned with fire (thus making Jerusalem vulnerable to its enemies), Nehemiah set his mind to do the work needing to be done to rebuild the wall.

In this study, I want us to use the story of Nehemiah to help us accomplish God's will for every local church. Our goals in this lesson are: (1) To recognize the work that needs done. (2) To determine to rise and build. (3) To work together as a team in accomplishing the work. (4) To learn to persevere through the difficult times that will certainly be experienced. (5) To finish the work that we set our minds on accomplishing.

## Recognize The Work That Needs Done

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Before any work can be accomplished, an individual must first recognize the work that needs to be done. Nehemiah needed to recognize that there was work to be accomplished in order to rebuild the wall around Jerusalem. And, we must recognize that there is a work to accomplish with regard to the local church.

### *Learning from Nehemiah*

The wall around the city of Jerusalem had been destroyed by King Nebuchadnezzar's army. This was significant because of the role that walls had in the safety of ancient cities. A wall around a city was its first line of defense against attacks from the enemy. Therefore, a city that was without a wall would be an easy target for an enemy.

Prior to Nehemiah's return to Jerusalem, some of the Jews had already returned to Jerusalem from captivity. These sent word to Nehemiah, telling him of the situation they found. Consider Nehemiah 1:3: "And they said to me, 'The survivors who are left from the captivity in the province are there in great distress and reproach. The wall of Jerusalem is also broken down, and its gates are burned with fire.'" The issue of the wall being broken down and the gates burned with fire was not just a problem for what the city looked like. Instead, this situation put the people of Jerusalem in real danger.

Verse 4 begins to record Nehemiah's response to this news. "So it was, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned for many days; I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven." In verses 5-11, Nehemiah proceeded to pray to God, repenting of the wickedness that had

been committed by the Jewish people and requesting that God remember the word He had spoken to Moses (promising to gather together those who had been scattered). Following his petition to God, Nehemiah made request of King Artaxerxes to allow him to return to Jerusalem – and to make some provisions for him to pass through certain territories and to use some timber from the king’s forest (see Nehemiah 2:1-10). Consider, specifically, Nehemiah’s request of the king in Nehemiah 2:5. “If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor in your sight, I ask that you send me to Judah, to the city of my father’s tombs, that I may rebuild it.”

Then, upon Nehemiah’s arrival in Jerusalem, he proceeded to survey the extent of the damage that had been done. Consider Nehemiah 2:11-16. “So I came to Jerusalem and was there three days. Then I arose in the night, I and a few men with me; I told no one what my God had put in my heart to do at Jerusalem; nor was there any animal with me, except the one on which I rode. And I went out by night through the Valley Gate to the Serpent Well and the Refuse Gate, and viewed the walls of Jerusalem which were broken down and its gates which were burned with fire. Then I went on to the Fountain Gate and to the King’s Pool, but there was no room for the animal under me to pass. So I went up in the night by the valley, and viewed the wall; then 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 had done; I had not yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, or the others who did the work.”

Nehemiah, upon evaluating the extent of the damage, could see that something needed to be changed. He was able to conclude that the current situation of the wall around the city would not be sufficient for the people of Jerusalem to survive. Though others had also recognized this same truth (as demonstrated in 1:3), recognizing the work that needed to be done was a necessary first step in the work that we will see was accomplished.

### ***Our work***

Learning from the example of Nehemiah, I want you to survey the local church you have joined yourself to. You need to consider the fact that God has given the local church certain responsibilities it must be carrying out. He has created it to exist for a

very specific purpose. So, like Nehemiah, you must survey the local church in comparison with the purpose God has created the local church to fulfill. And, you need to make a careful evaluation as to whether or not the local church is accomplishing that purpose.

Understand that there is a God-given pattern for local churches in the pages of the Scriptures. 2 Timothy 1:13 contains the following instruction from Paul to Timothy: “Hold fast the pattern of sound words which you have heard from me, in faith and love which are in Christ Jesus.” There is a pattern that is revealed throughout the pages of the New Testament concerning the doctrines we must believe, the kind of lives we are to live, the kind of worship we are to offer to God, etc. And, as you search the pages of the New Testament, there is also a pattern for the local church to follow – if it desires to please God and accomplish its God-given purpose.

Much of this God-given purpose can be understood by considering the work that God has given the local church to accomplish. When you consider each one of these works, you should (like Nehemiah) make careful evaluation as to whether or not the local church you have joined yourself to is accomplishing its God-given purpose.

First, God has given the local church the work of evangelism (spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ to those who are lost). 1 Timothy 3:15 identifies God’s people (the church) as the “pillar and ground [support] of the truth.” Though this is true of all of God’s people, this is also true concerning the local church. The local church has the responsibility to hold up God’s saving message within its local community (and anywhere it has opportunity) in order to point people to the salvation that is in Jesus Christ. The local church in Thessalonica is a wonderful model for considering this work. 1 Thessalonians 1:8 says, “For from you the word of the Lord has sounded forth, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place. Your faith in God has gone out, so that we do not need to say anything.” So, not only had this local church accomplished its God-given work to teach the gospel in their local area, but the word of God had even been spread by them beyond that local region.

Local churches can accomplish this work through several authorized means. First, each individual Christian should be dedicated to fulfilling their own God-given responsibilities to preach the

gospel to those outside of Jesus Christ (apart from the collective work of the local church, see Acts 8:4). Second, local churches teach the gospel of Christ as part of their regular assemblies, offering those who are not Christians the opportunity to come and hear the word of God (see 1 Corinthians 14:22-25). Third, local churches are authorized to both support and send gospel preachers who will be focused on spreading the gospel (see Acts 11:22; 2 Corinthians 11:8; Philippians 4:15-16). Fourth, local churches are authorized (by the generic authority to teach the gospel) to utilize other means of publishing God's message in their communities and throughout the world. Sometimes local churches will utilize mass media for communicating the message of the gospel (i.e. television, radio, newspaper, internet, etc.), sometimes they will print and distribute study material through the mail or door-to-door, sometimes they will have a presence during public events (i.e. booths at fairs), etc.

Second, God has given the local church the work of edification. "Edification" refers to building others up in the faith of the gospel. Though the local church must be concerned about edification with regard to those who are not Christians, that point was covered under the previous discussion about evangelism. Particularly, we are focused now on making those who are Christians stronger in the faith of the gospel of Christ. Ephesians 4:16, for instance, pictures the church as a body and says that when every part of the body supplies what it is capable of providing (doing its share), the result will be growth of the body "for the edifying of itself in love."

Local churches can accomplish this edification through a few authorized means. First, individual Christians should be dedicated to edifying their Christian brothers and sisters every day (apart from the collective work of the local church) – as seen in Hebrews 3:12-13. Second, local churches work to edify through the God-given organizational structure of the local church. As we will discuss in a future lesson, God has authorized for local churches to be organized with elders, deacons, and saints (see Philippians 1:1). Helping all Christians to be strengthened in the faith and live pleasing to God is a main purpose of this organizational structure. Third, local churches provide edification through their assemblies. God has authorized local churches to assemble together (see 1 Corinthians 14:23, 26). And, along with the purposes of worshiping God and teaching the gospel of Christ, a main purpose in these

assemblies is edification. 1 Corinthians 14:26 says that whenever the local church assembles together, all things are to "be done for edification."

Third, God has given the local church the work of showing benevolence (generosity) toward needy Christians. The local church has been authorized to financially assist those who are needy Christians from the funds that have been collected by the church. However, please recognize that God has *only* given the local church the responsibility to financially assist those who are needy *Christians* from the collective treasury. There is no authority for the local church to provide financial assistance to those who are not Christians (though individual Christians *should* be helping both Christians and non-Christians, see Galatians 6:10 and James 1:27).

There are a number of examples in the Scriptures concerning the financial assistance Christians provided other Christians with. But, particularly consider Paul's instructions to the church in Corinth concerning this kind of benevolent work in 1 Corinthians 16:1-2. "Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given orders to the churches of Galatia, so you must do also: On the first day of the week let each one of you lay something aside, storing up as he may prosper, that there be no collections when I come." This local church was to gather funds on the first day of the week – and this was a "collection for the saints" (i.e. to help needy Christians, see also Romans 15:25-27 and 2 Corinthians 8:1-5).

In every aspect of the work and purpose God has designed the local church to fulfill, you must recognize that God is to be glorified in all things. He is the one who is to be worshiped in the assemblies of the local church and He is the one who is to be served. Ephesians 3:20-21 says, "Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen."

### ***Do you recognize the work that needs done?***

Nehemiah recognized the work that needed to be accomplished in the city of Jerusalem. Now, after briefly studying the work and mission God has given the local church to accomplish, can you evaluate the local church you have joined yourself to according to this pattern – and recognize the areas in



which that local church needs to be improving and becoming stronger?

## Rise And Build

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Certainly, after Nehemiah considered the extent of the damage that had been done to the wall around the city of Jerusalem, he could recognize that there was a great work that needed to be accomplished. But, other people recognized the same thing (Nehemiah 1:3). For some reason, they were not accomplishing the work that they recognized needed to be done. Yet, as we will see, whenever Nehemiah surveyed the work that needed to be done, he set his mind on accomplishing the work – and on inspiring others to accomplish the work with him. In the same way, many people recognize the work local churches of Christ have been given to accomplish. However, they simply do not get to the work. Therefore, God expects more from His people than just recognizing the work that needs to be done. He wants His people (like Nehemiah) to rise and build!

### ***Learning from Nehemiah***

After surveying the damage, consider Nehemiah's words to the people of Jerusalem. "You see the distress that we are in, how Jerusalem lies waste, and its gates are burned with fire. Come and let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer be a reproach" (Nehemiah 2:17). And, he proceeded to tell the people how the hand of God had been good to him as well as concerning the king's words.

You see, Nehemiah recognized that the city of Jerusalem could not be left in the situation he saw that it was in. To leave it in that condition would spell destruction in the future. Therefore, he determined that the appropriate course of action for the people would be to work together to build the wall of Jerusalem.

Now, consider the response of the people when they heard of Nehemiah's assessment and his proposed solution. "So they said, 'Let us rise up and build.' Then they set their hands to this good work" (Nehemiah 2:18). They were not going to allow the current situation concerning the wall around Jerusalem to remain. They were going to make the appropriate changes, under Nehemiah's leadership.

Certainly, they could have chosen to leave the work undone. They could have made all kinds of excuses as to why they should not do the work. They could have considered the fact that they were not the ones responsible for the destruction of the city – and wait for someone else to rebuild it. They could have considered the work as being too big of a task for them to accomplish. They could have been afraid of their enemies. They could have claimed that they did not know how to accomplish such a great task. Yet, Nehemiah 4:6 reveals something about them that contributed to their decision to rise and build. It says that "the people had a mind to work" – and they actually set their hands to the work (Nehemiah 2:18)!

### ***Let us "rise and build"***

We must make this same determination whenever we survey the work that God has given the local church to accomplish. All-too-often, this work has not been fulfilled. Thus, like the wall around the city of Jerusalem that had been destroyed, many local churches are "shells" of what God wants them to be. Many are like the churches of Asia Minor we studied about in Revelation 2-3. Some are just going through the motions, like the church in Ephesus. Some have a name as if they are pleasing to God but are actually not doing the things that please God, like the church in Sardis. Some are occasionally doing the things that please God but are not doing them consistently, like the church in Laodicea.

Many local churches give "lip service" to the work and mission of the local church – and even do some things that are in harmony with their God-given mission. However, these things are not accomplished to the degree God wants them accomplished. For instance, it is common for local churches to have regularly scheduled assembly times that are used to teach the gospel. However, some churches make very few efforts to teach the gospel besides these! Furthermore, unlike the work Nehemiah and the Jews accomplished in rebuilding the wall around Jerusalem, the work of the local church is a work that continues for as long as life continues on this earth!

Like Nehemiah and the people he spoke with, we need to step up and declare, "Let us rise up and build" (Nehemiah 2:18)! And, like them, we need to have minds that are focused on accomplishing the work God has given us to accomplish. We need to set our hands to accomplishing the work. This work will certainly *not* be accomplished just by talking about

the work that needs to be done. This work will not be accomplished just because a church has good intentions. And, this work is not accomplished just because a church has been involved in working in the past. Instead, this work is just that – *work!* It takes effort. It takes diligence. And, it will not always be easy.

### ***Will you rise and build?***

The work of rebuilding the wall around the city of Jerusalem began with one man observing the work that needed to be done and encouraging others, “Come and let us build the wall of Jerusalem” (Nehemiah 2:17). Similarly, you can help the local church you have joined yourself to begin to be more dedicated to accomplishing the Lord’s will by observing the work that needs to be done and encouraging others to join with you in accomplishing the work. Don’t be content with leaving things just the way they are. Don’t be afraid of making the changes God requires you and the church to make. Don’t make excuses for why you and the church are not doing the things He has desired to be done. Simply rise and build according to the blueprint in the New Testament! Consider, if you don’t rise and build – who will? If you don’t rise and build *now* – when will it happen? So, rise and build!

## **Teamwork**

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As we saw from the introductory study in this series, a local church is a collection of Christians who have joined themselves together to work and worship in a local geographic area. Therefore, though you can be instrumental in accomplishing your own God-given work and in encouraging others to serve God acceptably, the task of building a strong church and accomplishing its God-given purpose is something that will take teamwork. For instance, the church at Sardis was described as a dead church – even though there were a “few” in Sardis who had lived to please God (see Revelation 3:1-6).

### ***Learning from Nehemiah***

It would have been very difficult (if not impossible) for Nehemiah to accomplish the work of rebuilding the wall around Jerusalem by himself. Therefore, as we have already seen, he worked to inspire others to recognize the need for the work and

to help him accomplish it. In fact, Nehemiah chapter 3 demonstrates the great amount of teamwork that was required to accomplish the work that needed to be done. Glance through the chapter and consider all of the individuals who took part in rebuilding the wall.

Consider how each one accomplished only a small part of the wall. Yet, by working together, they were able to accomplish the goal of rebuilding it. By Nehemiah 4:6, the record says, “So we build the wall, and the entire wall was joined together up to half its height, for the people had a mind to work.” As the work continued, the contributions from all who were involved were made even more clear – and all of these contributions were valuable to getting the job done.

Consider Nehemiah 4:15-18. “And it happened, when our enemies heard that it was known to us, and that God had brought their plot to nothing, that all of us returned to the wall, everyone to his work. So it was, from that time on, that half of my servants worked at construction, while the other half held the spears, the shields, the bows, and wore armor; and the leaders were behind all the house of Judah. Those who built on the wall, and those who carried burdens, loaded themselves so that with one hand they worked at construction, and with the other held a weapon. Every one of the builders had his sword girded at his side as he built. And the one who sounded the trumpet was beside me.”

### ***We must work together as we build***

Since the local church (like a body) is composed of many members (1 Corinthians 12:14), all the members of the church must work together in unity to accomplish their collective, God-given mission as a local church! Certainly, there is work for every member to accomplish – and no one is unimportant to the work God has given the local church to accomplish. In Matthew 9:37, Jesus said that the “harvest truly is plentiful, but the laborers are few.”

Passages like 1 Corinthians 12:12-27 and Ephesians 4:11-16 illustrate the truth that every single member of the local church is valuable and has something to contribute. It is like a team that competes in athletic contests. A football team, for instance, is often composed of more than 50 players – each with different roles, positions, and functions.

Some play defense, some play offense, and some play on “special teams.” Some fulfill multiple roles. Some are specially designated for one role. Yet, they are all important to achieve the goal of winning football games. Now, just consider what would happen if some members of the team stopped working hard to contribute the most they could contribute. What if some of the team members failed to fulfill their responsibilities, thinking that they were unnecessary or thinking that the other members would compensate for their lack of development? What if the team captain treated players with lesser roles with contempt? Instead, the entire concept of a “team” is: **T**ogether **E**veryone **A**chieves **M**ore! The same is true with regard to the local church. Together, we can accomplish greater things in the Lord’s service than we are capable of accomplishing individually!

### ***Are you doing your part in building?***

Nehemiah needed the assistance of all those who were in Jerusalem in building the wall around the city. In the same way, the local church you have joined yourself to needs your contribution to fulfill its God-given purpose to its greatest ability. In order for every local church to function at full strength, every member of that church must give 100%. If every member does not contribute in this way, something will be lacking and the Lord’s work will suffer in some way – and the other members will have to try to pick up the slack in these areas. Therefore, recognize that if you are not helping the local church, you are hurting it. Determine that you will not allow God’s work to suffer because of your unwillingness to do your part!

## **Persevere**

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As a local church works to diligently accomplish the Lord’s work, it will experience difficulties. And, as local churches face these times of great difficulty, they will be tested as to whether they are truly dedicated to accomplishing their God-given work or not. Therefore, every member of local churches must be devoted to doing their parts in accomplishing the Lord’s will – even during these times.

### *Learning from Nehemiah*

The work Nehemiah and the Jews were attempting to accomplish was met with difficult situations. They had enemies who wanted to stop them from accomplishing their work. For instance, Nehemiah 4:1-11 describes the opposition of Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites, and the Ashdodites to the work of the Jews in Jerusalem. They conspired together to attack Jerusalem and create confusion. Yet, Nehemiah and the Jews in Jerusalem petitioned God for help and watched for their opposition night and day. The rest of Nehemiah chapter 4 even describes how that each of the workers on the wall would work together to watch out for this opposition – and still accomplish the work that needed done. Half of the people worked at construction, while half of them held the spears, shields, bows, and wore armor. Verse 17 even says that those who built on the wall and those who “carried burdens” loaded themselves so that they worked at construction with one hand and held a weapon in the other hand. Then, verse 18 says that all the builders had swords on their sides and were ready for the trumpet to sound.

In chapter 5, Nehemiah even dealt with difficulties in the relationships between the Jewish people. Some of the Jewish people borrowed money from their Jewish brethren out of necessity – and were being charged interest on that money. And, this became more than they could bear. So, Nehemiah called an assembly and condemned the practice of charging one’s Jewish brethren with such interest. Instead, those who had loaned the money were to restore the things they had collected and require nothing from their brethren.

### ***Our work will require perseverance***

These are just a couple examples of the opposition and struggles Nehemiah and Jewish people faced. Yet, they demonstrate that difficult times will be experienced whenever good works are being done. And, it will take perseverance to accomplish the work rather than giving up and becoming discouraged.

The same is true concerning the church that is dedicated to accomplishing the Lord’s will. Satan will try to bring opposition against the work that a local church tries to accomplish. Sometimes, this

opposition will be brought from outside of the local church (like Nehemiah experienced from Sandballat, Tobiah, etc.). However, sometimes there will be opposition raised even from within the local church itself (like Nehemiah experienced in the difficulty involving the Jews charging each other interest). Yet, regardless of where the difficulties come from, God's work will only be accomplished if the local church is determined to overcome/persevere all these points of difficulty and do the work God wants to be done!

### ***Will you endure the trials that come?***

As a member of the local church, will you do everything within your ability to overcome the obstacles that are experienced by the local church? And, will you do everything within your ability to make sure that you are not contributing to any of the obstacles that will be experienced by the local church? Determine that you will work with your brethren to persevere trials and obstacles in order to accomplish the will of the Lord!

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## **Finish The Work**

Getting started on a good work is not enough. There are many times people and local churches start to do things that please God. However, they often fail to exercise the needed discipline to finish the work. Yet, whatever work is worth doing is also worth completing!

### ***Learning from Nehemiah***

The task of rebuilding the wall around Jerusalem began by recognizing the work. They determined to rise and build. They worked together as a team to do the work. They persevered through the difficult times in order to accomplish the work. And, they did not stop short of the goal. For instance, Nehemiah 4:6 described the fact that the entire wall was joined together and it was built half as high as it needed to be. Still, they continued to press toward the completion of the goal. Then, Nehemiah 6:15 says, "So the wall was finished on the twenty-fifth day of Elul, in fifty-two days."

In just 52 days, working together with much urgency and focus, the people accomplished the large task of rebuilding the wall! They accomplished it with the help of God and because they had minds and

hands set on the work. Nehemiah 6:16 says, "And it happened, when all our enemies heard of it, and all the nations around us saw these things, that they were very disheartened in their own eyes; for they perceived that this work was done by our God." Despite the obstacles, the work was completed. Therefore, the enemies of God were disheartened!

### ***We must complete our work***

The work that God has given us to do (both individually and collectively) can be accomplished. This is because He has only given us as much work as we are capable of accomplishing – no more and no less! But, the work will take dedication and persistence. We must not stop short of the goal and become satisfied with something less than what God desires us to accomplish! And, let's learn from Nehemiah to recognize that great tasks can be accomplished quickly – when everyone is working together to accomplish the same task!

Then, whenever we do work together to accomplish the will of God, those who stand in opposition to the work of God will be disheartened. They will see that they cannot be victorious in their attempts to thwart the work of God. This is because God can accomplish great things through ordinary people (like Nehemiah) who dedicate themselves to fulfilling the work He has given them to do!

### ***Will you be committed to finishing the work?***

Will you see the work God has given you to accomplish through to its completion? Or, will you become satisfied with what you have already done and stop short of what God would have you to accomplish? Yes, there will necessarily be sacrifice and determination required to accomplish the work. But, it will all be worth it one day – when you (and all those who had been faithful to Christ) spend eternity with God in Heaven!

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## **Conclusion**

How dedicated are you to accomplishing the Lord's will? Do you recognize the work that needs to be accomplished in your own life – and in the local church? If so, have you determined to rise and build, setting your mind and hands to accomplishing the

work? Will you contribute in any way you can contribute and persevere through the difficult times in order to accomplish the work God has given to be accomplished? Just like Nehemiah and the Jews in Jerusalem needed to be dedicated to accomplishing the Lord's will, the work of building a strong church requires that we be dedicated to accomplishing God's purpose for the local church!

What should you determine to do once you recognize the work God has given the local church to do?

Will you rise and build?

## Study Questions

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What is the central theme of the book of Nehemiah?

### 3. Teamwork

What contribution did each of the Jews in Jerusalem make to rebuilding the wall?

### 1. Recognize The Work That Needs Done

What did Nehemiah and the Jews in Jerusalem recognize about the work that needed done with the walls of Jerusalem?

Why is it important to work together in the local church?

What is the work God has given to the local church?

Are you doing your part in building?

Do you recognize the work that needs done?

### 4. Persevere

What kinds of obstacles did Nehemiah and the Jews in Jerusalem face?

### 2. Rise And Build

What did Nehemiah and the Jews in Jerusalem determine to do once they recognized the work that needed done?

What kinds of obstacles will the local church face?

Will you endure the trials that come?

## **5. Finish The Work**

Was the wall around Jerusalem completed? Explain.

Why must every local church complete its work?

Will you be committed to finishing the work?

## Steps To Building A Strong Church Series

# Step #2: Grow Individually

God wants every local church to be a strong church. But, in order for a church to be a strong church it must be composed of members who are each (individually) growing stronger and stronger in the faith of the gospel of Jesus Christ and in their commitments to serve Him.

Recall (from the introductory lesson) that a local church is composed of individual Christians. The local church, like a body, is not just one member – but many (as many as have joined themselves together in this way). 1 Corinthians 12:27, for instance, says, “Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually.”

Now, consider what would need to be done if your doctor told you that your body was weak – and needed to be stronger. Though you may have a strong member or two in your body, you would surely recognize your need to strengthen every part of your body you could possibly strengthen. You would recognize that overall physical strength is not defined by just one strong member (or a few). But, strength in your body is when all of the members of your physical body are growing and becoming stronger in order to accomplish the purposes of your body.

Similarly, local churches often have a few members who are strong and have dedicated themselves to growing in the ways God would approve. However, weak and dying churches tend to have a large percentage of members who are not devoted to growing in Christ and becoming stronger and more mature Christians. As a result, everything the local church attempts to do is negatively affected. Little work gets accomplished. Sin is often permitted to remain in the church. The Holy Spirit is given little

opportunity to develop elders and deacons. New members are not shown examples of what it means to grow in Christ. Young children are not shown what it means to grow in Christ. There are repercussions that touch every aspect of the local church. Overall, there will be a climate of stagnation and spiritual decline.

In this study, I want us to consider some specific areas of growth that members of the local church should be focused on. And, as we discuss these things, you should first apply them to your own life – determining to grow in these areas and to encourage others to do the same. For, if you fail to grow in your own life, you will negatively impact the strength of the entire local church. Our goals in this lesson are: (1) To learn about increasing your love for God. (2) To learn about increasing your faith. (3) To learn about increasing your love for others. (4) To learn about increasing your knowledge. (5) To learn about increasing your fruit. And, (6) To learn about increasing your holiness.

## Increase Your Love For God

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Having a love for God is the catalyst that will stimulate a local church to be strong in every area. However, a love for God has to be developed on an individual level. Each member must be devoted to increasing in their love for God throughout the course of their lives.

### *He first loved you*

The love of God begins by recognizing the love that God has demonstrated toward each one of us. 1 John 4:19 says, “We love Him because He first loved us.” Without the love God has demonstrated toward mankind, we would not know what true love even looks like!

Certainly, there are many ways that God has demonstrated His love toward mankind. However, there has never been a greater demonstration of love than the love God demonstrated when He sent His only begotten Son to die on the cross for the sins of the world. 1 John 3:16 says that it is by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ that we “know love.” John 3:16 tells us that God loved the world so much that He

willingly sent Jesus (His only begotten Son) to this earth to die on the cross so that we would not have to perish in our sins, but that we could have the opportunity to be eternally saved in Heaven!

### **What it means to love God**

When some people think about loving God, they think only about being thankful for what God has done for them and claiming to love and follow Him. However, the Scriptures demonstrate that there is much more involved in loving God than just this. To begin, understand that Jesus identified loving God as the greatest commandment. Now, He did not do this because He wanted people to claim to love God. Instead, He recognized loving God as the greatest commandment because it would impact every aspect of living to please God. In Matthew 22:37-38, Jesus answered the question about the greatest commandment in the law by saying, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment.”

So, Jesus wants your entire being to be consumed by love for God. And, Jesus said, “If you love Me, keep My commandments” (John 14:15). Jesus knew that those who truly love Him will want to do what He had instructed of them. After all, the love that God had for mankind was not love in word only. He did not have great love for us by just telling us over and over again how much He loves us. Instead, He demonstrated His love for us by doing what was in our best interests – and what we desperately needed Him to do so that we could be saved from the eternal consequences of our sins. And, He did this willingly rather than grudgingly!

Likewise, listen to 1 John 5:3. “For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome.” Again notice that keeping God’s commandments go hand-in-hand with loving God. But, also observe that John states true love for God does not view obedience to God’s commandments as a burdensome thing. So, true love for God does not just keep *some* of God’s commandments – picking and choosing which commandments will be obeyed. True love for God strives to keep *all* of God’s commandments. Then, true love for God does not complain and grumble about keeping God’s commandments. Instead, true love for God has a burning desire to do what God has

said – in recognition of the love that God has demonstrated willingly for you!

### **How to increase your love for God**

Hopefully you recognize the need for every member of the local church (including yourself) to be filled with the love for God. Now, you should recognize that there is a continual need to be increasing in your love for God. But, how can you do this? Consider two points.

First, you must allow the love of Christ to control you. As I have already mentioned, the love that you must have in your life for God begins with the love God has demonstrated toward you in sending Jesus to die on the cross so that you can have the opportunity to be saved eternally from your sins. Listen, then, to 2 Corinthians 5:14-15. “For the love of Christ compels us, because we judge thus: that if One died for all, then all died; and He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again.”

The idea of this verse is that if you truly recognize the love that God has shown for you, your decisions will be made in such a way that will reflect His love for you. You will, consequently, willingly give your life to serve, honor, glorify, worship, and obey the one who gave His life to save you. So, every day, you should be focused more and more on the love that God has shown for you and consider how you can act in the same self-sacrificing kind of way.

Second, based on the recognition of how God has demonstrated His love for you, you should seek to find joy in demonstrating your love for Him – even when it means suffering for Him. Just as Christ did not die for you in a begrudging kind of way, you should not be serving Christ by despising the things He wants you to do to serve Him. For instance, when the apostles had been threatened and beaten for preaching in the name of Jesus Christ, they rejoiced “that they were counted worthy to suffer shame” for the name of Christ and continued preaching every day whenever and wherever they had opportunity (see Acts 5:40-42).

So, to increase your love for Christ, you must find joy in the things He has instructed you to be doing. Just as the apostle Paul found joy in sacrificing his life for Christ, you should also recognize that giving your entire life over to God’s control is only appropriate for the one who gave His



life for you! In Galatians 2:20, for instance, Paul said, “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.”

## Increase Your Faith

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Faith in God is also central to having a local church that is strong in every area. However, faith in God is something that each member of the local church must work diligently to develop. So, in order for a local church to grow stronger, each member must be devoted to increasing their faiths throughout their lives.

### ***The nature of true faith***

“Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1). Faith is the essential element in Christianity that provides all the reason we need for devoting our lives entirely to God. Faith provides complete confidence and assurance of all the things we hope for as Christians – even when we cannot see them. Yet, we do not doubt that they will happen just as God has said.

This faith is absolutely essential to living in a way that pleases God. Hebrews 11:6 says, “But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.” You will never be able to please God in your life if you are not absolutely convinced that He exists and that He will reward you if you diligently seek Him while you live on this earth. Without this kind of trust, there will never be any reason to use your life to serve God rather than serving your own physical pleasures and desires.

Consider how both of these can be seen in the life of Noah – and how Noah demonstrated his faith. Hebrews 11:7 says, “By faith Noah, being divinely warned of things not yet seen, moved with godly fear, prepared an ark for the saving of his household, by which he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness which is according to faith.” Noah was absolutely convinced that God existed and that God would do as He had promised relative to destroying the world by a flood and saving his family

and himself by an ark. Then, because he was convinced of this, Noah built the ark and obeyed all that God had commanded.

So, true faith is not just a mental acknowledgement that certain facts are true. Instead, true faith is put into action in every aspect of an individual’s life! It is a way of life. True faith is manifested in every decision and action that a person makes and does. True faith mentally accepts the truth that God has revealed – and *acts* like it believes in these things!

### ***Putting faith into action in your life***

Every aspect of living in the way God wants us to live requires true faith (both in our individual lives and as a local church). Consider a few examples of areas in an individual’s life that requires faith.

First, faith is required in prayer. Prayer is a tremendous blessing God has provided for those who are His people. Prayer is the avenue God has provided for mankind to cast all his cares and anxieties upon the Lord (see Philippians 4:6-7 and 1 Peter 5:7). Surely, as James says, prayer has tremendous power to accomplish much good when a righteous person prays (James 5:16). But, James also teaches that prayer will be ineffective without faith (James 1:5-8). Such a one who fails to ask God in faith should not “suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord.”

Second, faith is necessary to live a life of steadfastness. There will certainly be many obstacles that arise in the life of a Christian. This can come in the form of sickness, persecution for the sake of Christ, temptation, financial burdens, deaths, etc. And, without the proper degree of faith in God and His promises, an individual can easily lose heart and cease to follow Jesus Christ. Listen to 1 Corinthians 15:58. “Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.” Recognize the connection, then, between being steadfast, immovable, and always abounding in God’s work with the confident assurance (faith) that doing so will not be in vain!

Third, faith is necessary in order to do all the things God requires a Christian to do. Certainly, living for Christ will not always be easy and requires complete sacrifice. Again, 1 Corinthians 15:58 instructs that the Christian always be abounding in the work God wants from him/her – being fully

convinced that this dedication to do God's will is not worthless. So, the faith God desires each Christian to have is faith that will go wherever God says to go and do whatever God says to do – regardless of the physical consequences that may be involved.

### ***How to increase your faith***

Hopefully you recognize the need for every member of the local church (including yourself) to be full of faith. Now, you should recognize that there is a continual need to be increasing in your faith. But, how can you do this? Consider two points.

First, you increase your faith in God (primarily) through studying His word. Romans 10:17 says, "So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God." If you want to develop the kind of faith that is pleasing to God and will result in the salvation of your soul, you must spend time studying God's word (the Bible). When you do, you will be learning about the nature of God, the promises He has made to you, and examples that demonstrate God's ability to fulfill those promises!

Second, in addition to studying the word of God, you can also petition God for help in increasing your faith. In Luke 17:5, the apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith." God will help everyone who desires to have greater faith achieve that goal. However, recognize that you must be willing to accept how He will increase your faith. For one, understand that He does not miraculously give you a greater faith against your will. Instead, understand that He will still be primarily trying to increase your faith through the study of His revealed will. So, as you work to study the Bible, God will be helping your faith to increase!

## **Increase Your Love For Others**

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Loving others is central to the responsibilities God has given individual Christians and the local church to fulfill. However, this love for others is something that each member of the local church must work diligently to develop. So, in order for a local church to grow stronger, each member must be devoted to increasing their love for others.

### ***What it means to love others***

Recall that loving God was not just about claiming to love Him. So it is with loving others also. God does not want His people to just give "lip service" in claiming to love others. Instead, He wants His people to demonstrate their love for others through the things they do. Whereas loving God was the first greatest commandment, Jesus said, "And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" (Matthew 22:39).

Love for others is learned from the love God has shown each one of us through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. 1 John 3:16 says, "By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren." Then, verse 18 says that we must not "love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth." This is further demonstrated in Jesus' parable of the good Samaritan. In Luke 10:25-37, Jesus taught this parable in response to a question from a man who asked about loving his neighbor. Through this parable about a man willing to sacrifice and do good for a complete stranger who was in need, Jesus taught us what it really means to love other people. It requires that we conduct ourselves in their best interests – just like God acted in our best interest when He sent Jesus to die for us.

### ***Who you must love***

As you search the Scriptures, you discover that your love ought to be demonstrated for all mankind you have the opportunity to demonstrate it toward. In fact, in Matthew 5:43-48, Jesus taught that this love must even be shown toward those who are your enemies! "But I say to you, love your enemies bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you" (verse 44). So, the Bible's instruction for you to love extends to your enemies, to your family members, to your Christian brothers and sisters, to those who are not Christians, etc.

In fact, whenever Jesus taught the parable of the good Samaritan, He demonstrated that the command to love your neighbor as yourself applies to loving anyone you have the opportunity and ability to help. There is no indication that the good Samaritan had any prior contact with the man who was wounded by thieves. Yet, Jesus teaches that the

Samaritan had responsibility to show his love for this stranger.

And, this love that you have the responsibility to demonstrate is both physical and spiritual. Whenever there is a physical need that you have the opportunity and ability to address, you have the responsibility to address it. And, whenever there is a spiritual need that you have the opportunity and ability to address, you also have the responsibility to address it. In fact, the greater love we can show to our fellow man is to have enough concern about their spiritual well-being that we will do what is in their best interest to help them be saved from sin!

### ***How to increase your love for others***

Hopefully you recognize the need for every member of the local church (including yourself) to be full of love for others. Now, you should recognize that there is a continual need to be increasing in your love for others. But, how can you do this? Consider three points.

First, you must remember the love that God has shown toward you. God loved you enough to give His Son to die for you. Now, in allowing the love of God to take control of your life, He asks you to demonstrate love for your fellow man. So, increasing in your love for God will also enable you to increase your love for others.

Second, you must recognize that God has shown the same love toward all men that He has shown toward you. Therefore, every person on earth is worth demonstrating your love toward so much that God died for every one of them! So, in Romans 14 (for instance), God wants Christians to remember that Jesus died for their Christian brethren – and this fact ought to influence how Christians act toward one another (see verse 15).

Third, you must empty yourself of selfishness in order to focus on others. This is what the good Samaritan had to do. In order to help the man, he had to change his plans, give up his animal so that the wounded man could ride on it, sacrifice some of his time, and even spend some of his money to do what the man needed. So, Paul instructed Christians: “Let nothing be done through selfish ambitions or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others” (Philippians 2:3-4).

## **Increase Your Knowledge**

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A knowledge of God’s word is essential to pleasing God (both in your own Christian life and as a local church). However, this increased knowledge of God’s word is something that each member of the local church must work diligently to develop. So, in order for a local church to grow stronger, each member must be devoted to increasing in knowledge of what God’s word teaches.

### ***God expects your knowledge to increase***

2 Peter 3:18 plainly instructs Christians to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” In fact, God’s word condemns those who are not making progress in learning more about His word. Listen to Hebrews 5:12-14. “For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.”

The Christian’s knowledge of the Scriptures is, thus, compared to a newborn baby. Whenever he/she first becomes a Christian, he/she may only have a basic knowledge of God’s word. In fact, it is difficult for this new Christian to fully understand the more complex teachings of the Bible. He/she is like a newborn baby who can only handle milk. However, just as a newborn baby should grow and progress from a diet that is full of milk to one that can tolerate meat, the Christian should always be increasing in his/her understanding of the Scriptures and become more and more mature in the faith of the gospel. In fact, just like there is a problem if a child does not grow and mature, there are serious problems if the Christian is not advancing in his/her knowledge of the Scriptures.

### ***What an increasing knowledge of God’s word will accomplish***

There are a few main reasons the Christian should be increasing in his/her knowledge of the Scriptures. First, a knowledge of God’s word is the only way that an individual will be able to do what

## Increase Your Fruit

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pleases God. 2 Timothy 3:16-17 identifies the fact that the Scriptures equip us to believe all the right things, to make all the right changes in our lives, and to live entirely in a way that pleases God. So, without an increasing knowledge of God's word, we are intentionally failing to learn what God wants from our lives.

Second, learning God's word will keep us away from sin. The psalmist said, "Your word I have hidden in my heart, That I might not sin against You" (Psalm 119:11). Since sin occurs whenever we violate God's law, it is only reasonable to expect that we will sin less whenever we learn more about God's word (as long as we obey the things we learn).

Third, a knowledge of God's word will equip us to teach other people the saving message of the gospel. 1 Timothy 4:15-16 says, "Meditate on these things; give yourself entirely to them, that your progress may be evident to all. Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you."

### ***How to increase your knowledge***

Hopefully you recognize the need for every member of the local church (including yourself) to know God's word. Now, you should recognize that there is a continual need to be increasing in your knowledge of the Scriptures. But, how can you do this? Consider two points.

First, study His word. You will never be able to know or increase your knowledge of the Bible unless you commit yourself to studying what it says. So, your desire ought to be like the people of Berea, who searched the Scriptures every day to know whether they were being taught the truth or not (Acts 17:11). Commit yourself to daily Bible study and your knowledge of God's word will increase.

Second, meditate on His word. The psalmist said, "Oh, how I love Your law! It is my meditation all the day" (Psalm 119:97). You should be devoted to thinking on the teachings of God's word throughout your day – even when you do not have the Scriptures in front of you to read. Meditate on the passages you have read. Meditate on what God has said in them. Meditate on the applications you should make from them.

Producing spiritual fruit is necessary to please God (both in your own Christian life and in the local church). However, producing spiritual fruit is something that each member of the local church must work diligently to develop. So, in order for a local church to grow stronger, each member must be devoted to increasing in the amount and quality of fruit he/she produces.

### ***God expects you to produce fruit***

In John 15:1-8, Jesus compares His Father, Himself, and His disciples to a vinedresser, a vine, and branches on that vine. The vinedresser prunes the branches on the vine that are fruitful so that they will produce even more fruit. And, the vinedresser will take away all of the fruitless branches so that they will be gathered and burned. The vine is the life-giving source that supplies all the nutrients necessary for the branches to produce the fruit that will please the vinedresser. And, the branches have the work of producing fruit.

Jesus' main point in this passage appears to be one concerning the need for God's people to bear spiritual fruit. It is not enough for individuals just to claim allegiance with Jesus Christ. Instead, a true disciple of Christ will be producing the kind of fruit that necessarily results from union with Christ. Verse 8 says, "By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples."

### ***Fruit your life must produce***

Every person will produce some kind of fruit in his/her life. For instance, Galatians 5:19-23 demonstrates two different kinds of fruit that can be produced. Those who are focused on the things of this world will be producing the fruits of living for themselves and for the world (things like fornication, idolatry, drunkenness, hatred, envy, etc.). However, those who are focused on doing the will of God will produce fruit in their lives that is fitting with how God's word tells them to live (things like love, joy, peace, patience, etc.).

So, whenever the Christian is devoted to learning God's word and putting it into practice, his/her life will be producing the things God desires. This will include things like serving other people,

teaching the gospel to the lost, showing hospitality, worshiping God, encouraging others to serve God in their lives, denying oneself of fleshly desires, etc.

### ***How to increase your fruit***

Hopefully you recognize the need for every member of the local church (including yourself) to produce fruit. Now, you should recognize that there is a continual need to be increasing in your spiritual fruit. But, how can you do this? Consider three points.

First, be a doer of God's word. James 1:22-25 teaches that an individual who only hears what God wants from him/her and is not a doer of the word deceives himself/herself. This individual is like a man who looks into a mirror and then does not make any corrections to his/her appearance. Only those who study God's word and then boldly apply it to their lives will produce the kind of fruit that pleases God.

Second, as a doer of the word, you must be looking out for and taking advantage of opportunities that come along to serve God and produce fruit. Perhaps you have an opportunity to teach the gospel. The only way you can produce that fruit is to actually take advantage of that opportunity and teach! Perhaps you have an opportunity to do good to someone who is in physical need. Again, the only way you will produce that fruit is to actually do the good deed you have opportunity to do.

Third, the closer you get to God and the more you learn from Christ, the more fruit you will produce in your life. Remember, the nourishment to produce this fruit comes from Christ. So, if you learn from and imitate Him, it only stands to reason that your fruit will also increase!

## **Increase Your Holiness**

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God is a holy God who desires for His church to be holy. However, holiness is the work of each individual Christian. So, in order for a local church to grow stronger, each member must be devoted to increasing in holiness.

### ***God expects you to be holy***

Listen to 1 Peter 1:13-16. "Therefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and rest your hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ; as obedient children, not conforming yourselves to the former lusts, as in your ignorance; but as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, 'Be holy, for I am holy.'"

The Christian's life is expected to be different from the life he/she lived prior to becoming a Christian and from the sinful ways of this world. In fact, God desires for His people to be as separated from sin as He is. And, 1 John 1:5 demonstrates that God is as separate from sin as light is separate from darkness!

### ***Areas in which you must be holy***

Look back at what Peter wrote. God's people are not just to be separate from sin in certain areas of their lives they determine to be separate in. Instead, God's people are to be holy in all their conduct – imitating the holiness of God in every area of their lives. This applies to the Christian's thoughts, words, and conduct.

This is significant for both the individual Christian and for the church to be pleasing to God. Since God is as separate from sin as light is separate from darkness, God cannot be in fellowship with anything that is evil (see Isaiah 59:1-2 and 1 John 1:5-7).

### ***How to increase your holiness***

Hopefully you recognize the need for every member of the local church (including yourself) to be holy. Now, you should recognize that there is a continual need to be increasing in your holiness. But, how can you do this? Consider three points.

First, increase in your knowledge of God's word. As we have already discussed, since God's word will lead you perfectly into the righteous ways of God, increasing in your knowledge will result in you increasing in your holiness (if you apply what is written). Remember, the psalmist hid God's word in his heart so he would not sin against God (Psalm 119:11). Allow God's word to be like a lamp that illuminates the right ways in your life (see Psalm 119:105).

Second, you must imitate God and Christ. Both are identified as your responsibility as a Christian (see 1 Corinthians 11:1 and Ephesians 5:1). You can be particularly aided in your pursuit of holiness by imitating the life of Jesus Christ (who committed no sin, though He lived on this earth and experienced temptation – see Hebrews 4:15). By looking to the perfect example of Jesus, the ways of holiness should become clearer as you make your decisions.

Third, you must abhor what is evil and cling to the good. Romans 12:9 instructs, “Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil. Cling to what is good.” God wants you to recognize the spiritual consequences of living for sin and be fearful of it. Therefore, you must determine to put all of the sinful earthly desires away from you. Crucify your flesh, like Paul had determined to do (Galatians 2:20 and Galatians 5:24)! Then, determine only to cling to the ways that are holy and good. Evaluate every area of your life to see whether they are holy or not (1 Thessalonians 5:21-22).

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## Conclusion

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Are you growing in each one of these areas? Although this lesson has only overviewed each one of these points, I want to emphasize the fact that a strong church will be a growing church. No, this growth will not necessarily be in the number of people associated with the church. Instead, this necessary growth is in each individual member of the church. Then, as every member of the local body of Christ becomes stronger and more pleasing to God, there will be additional strength offered for the entire body. But, if you are not growing in these ways, you are contributing to a weaker congregation. So, you must determine to do your part as an individual member of the body of Christ and be dedicated to personal spiritual growth – and encouraging your brethren to do the same!

## Study Questions

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What connection does growing individually have on a congregation becoming stronger?

### 1. Increase Your Love For God

Why should you love God?

What does it mean to love God?

How can you increase your love for God?

### 2. Increase Your Faith

What is faith?

What areas of your life do you need faith in?

How can you increase your faith?

### 3. Increase Your Love For Others

What does it mean to love others?

How can you increase your fruit?

Who must you love?

#### **6. Increase Your Holiness**

Does God expect you to be holy? What does it mean to be holy?

How can you increase your love for others?

What areas of your life does God expect you to be holy in?

#### **4. Increase Your Knowledge**

Does God expect your knowledge to increase? Explain.

How can you increase your holiness?

What will an increasing knowledge of God's word accomplish?

How can you increase your knowledge of God's word?

#### **5. Increase Your Fruit**

Does God expect you to produce fruit? Explain.

What kind of fruit does God expect your life to produce?

Steps To Building A Strong Church  
Series

# Step #3: Active Participation

God wants every local church to be a strong church. But, in order for a church to be a strong church it must be composed of members who are each (individually) dedicated to actively participating in the God-given work of the church.

You must continue to recognize that a local church cannot and will not accomplish its God-given mission without the active participation of its members. Unfortunately, one of the reasons that many local churches of Christ are dying spiritually is because of the lack of active participation from their members. It is common for local congregations to have a “core” group of people who are responsible for the overwhelming majority of the work that is accomplished by the church, while others remain largely uncommitted to the work.

However, in order for congregations to function at their maximum capacities, 100% of the members need to be giving 100% of what they can contribute. Whenever all the members are not giving all that they are capable of contributing (and working to grow in the same), the work of the church and its strength will not be what it should be. Although every member is not capable of doing the same (i.e. some are capable of more than others), every member must be contributing all that they are capable.

In this study, I want us to consider the importance of every member being actively involved in the work of the local church. And, as we discuss these truths, you should first make application of them to your own life. Then, after you have done this, please consider how you can work to encourage others to do the same. As we study this lesson, please understand that it is designed to be a challenging

lesson that encourages us all to do better. Our goals in this lesson are: (1) To learn about church membership. (2) To understand that there is something that you can contribute. (3) To identify areas in which you must actively participate. (4) To recognize the problem of lukewarm members.

## What Is Church Membership?

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In the introductory lesson to this series, we spent some time trying to understand what the church is and is not (specifically with regard to the local church). I want to build on that foundation at this point in our study (note that it may be profitable to go back and review the points made in that lesson). Understanding what it is you are a member of is essential to being actively involved in its work.

### ***A member of what?***

So, what exactly are you a member of when you have joined “the church”? Well, if you have followed the pattern given in the pages of Scripture, you are actually a member of both the universal church and a local church. Let’s consider both of these briefly.

First, whenever you become a Christian, you are added by God to the one (universal) church that Jesus Christ established. Both Matthew 16:18 and Ephesians 4:4 clearly indicate that there is only one church in this sense. This is the collection of Christ’s saved people. Acts chapter 2 makes it perfectly clear that God adds each individual who obeys His plan of salvation to this church. For instance, verse 41 says that those who gladly responded to the preaching of the apostles were baptized – and about 3,000 people were added to the church (note that the church is implied, as they were counted among the followers of Jesus Christ). Verse 47 says, “the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.”

This universal church has no collective assemblies on earth. And, the universal church has no collective work to accomplish whereby all the members of the universal church must pool resources to accomplish. But, there are individual responsibilities to be faithful to Jesus Christ and accomplish the work He has given you as an



individual Christian to accomplish. Therefore, your membership in this universal church of Christ continues as long as you faithfully execute your responsibilities Jesus has given you as an individual Christian.

Second, the Bible pattern repeatedly indicates the value of joining yourself to a local church of Christ. Unlike the universal church, you are *not* automatically added to a local church whenever you become a Christian. Instead, local church membership begins with a choice and mutual agreement. Acts 9:26-28 is helpful in understanding this point. It demonstrates the example of Saul attempting to join himself to a local church. “And when Saul had come to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples; but they were afraid of him, and did not believe that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. And he declared to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, and that He had spoken to him, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus. So he was with them at Jerusalem, coming in and going out.”

From this example, we learn that the one who desires to join a local church must make an attempt to do so. He/she must let this desire be known. Saul “tried to join the disciples” in Jerusalem. Next, we learn that a local church has the right to refuse those who want to be members. The local church in Jerusalem did not believe Saul was actually a disciple. So, they did not permit him to join them. And, notice that the Scriptures do not negatively comment on that decision. Therefore, this is an approved example. Then, after a trusted disciple named Barnabas explained to the apostles that Saul had seen and heard Christ on the road to Damascus and preached boldly in His name, Saul was accepted into the congregation. So, recognize that there is a mutual agreement between each member of the local church and all the others. This is a mutual agreement to work with one another to accomplish the God-given mission of the local church.

This membership of one another in a local church continues until a time it is severed. And, according to the Scriptures, there would only be three implications about how an individual is no longer a member of a congregation. First, the Scriptures teach that the local church has a responsibility to disfellowship disorderly members who are unwilling

to repent of sin. Second, there is Scriptural implication to suggest that an individual could withdraw his/her membership or move it to another local church. And, third, death ends local church membership.

### ***Membership of a local church is...***

There are many ways local church membership can be described. But, I want to focus in two areas of local church membership (as it pertains to the purposes of this lesson). Local church membership is both a blessing and a mutual commitment.

First, local church membership is a blessing. Some might question why they should even join themselves to a local church in the first place. But, not only is local church membership consistently part of God’s pattern for His people in the New Testament, a local church is also a blessed fellowship. In the local church, there is a base of fellowship and strength that is greater than the individual Christian. It is certainly a difficult struggle for any Christian to remain faithful to Christ throughout his/her life. Therefore, God has designed the local church, in part, as a support group for recovering sinners! So, rather than each Christian trying to be strong and faithful in a world of wickedness by himself/herself, the local church is a like-minded community of people who are focused on doing the Lord’s will (both individually and collectively). And, as the Bible teaches in Ecclesiastes 4:9-12, there is strength in numbers!

The Scriptures present a number of blessings, then, being part of a local church brings. For instance, the Bible speaks of a number of “one another” responsibilities that Christians have toward each other. While these may not be limited to a local church, certainly they are applicable to the local church and most likely to be accomplished within a local church family. At this time, I want to consider the blessing of each one of these responsibilities. Romans 12:4-5 speaks of Christians being members of one another. Galatians 6:1 speaks of restoring Christians who are overtaken by sin. Galatians 6:2 speaks of Christians bearing one another’s burdens. Colossians 3:16 speaks of Christians teaching and admonishing one another through the singing of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Hebrews 3:12-13 speaks of Christians exhorting/encouraging one another every day to live faithful to Christ and

overcome sin. Hebrews 10:24-25 speaks of Christians considering one another to stimulate each other to love and accomplish good works (coupled with the responsibility of not forsaking the assembling of themselves together).

In all of these passages, you should be able to see the great blessing of being a member of a local church. There is spiritual strength and encouragement that you gain. There is an intimate fellowship you enjoy. You are stimulated to be better and do more in the Lord's service. You have brethren who care about the struggles you face. And, you have brethren who will help you understand when you sin. Therefore, a Christian who is not a member of a local church that follows God's pattern is missing out on a great blessing.

Second, local church membership is a mutual commitment. Local church membership is not and cannot be a "one way street." A local church cannot be very effective whenever just a few of the members are actively participating in the responsibilities God has given each one (i.e. when just a few are encouraging, when just a few are bearing the burdens of others, when just a few are correcting the erring, etc.). Instead, the entire concept of "one another" responsibilities is that they are *shared responsibilities* between every member of the local church! Whenever you join a local church, there is a mutual agreement made that every member will be actively working together to accomplish the things God has given the local church to accomplish. Unfortunately, many local churches could be divided into the "takers" and the "givers."

Once again, go through the list of verses we have just considered – and evaluate not only how you can be blessed by joining a local church, but also your responsibility in these areas. You must be a member of your brethren. You must restore Christians who are overtaken in sin. You must bear the burdens of your brethren. You must teach and admonish one another through the singing of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. You must encourage your Christian brethren every day to live faithful to Christ and overcome sin. You must consider your brethren and stimulate them to love and to accomplish good works (and not forsake the assembling together of your brethren).

Please recognize that when you choose to join yourself to a local church, you agree to do your part. There is a type of covenant relationship that you

have entered into. You agree to do everything that is within your ability to help the local church accomplish its God-given mission. In addition, you agree to pursue peace, to live in unity with your brethren, to submit to the church's leadership, to attend its assemblies, to strive to live a faithful life to Christ, to participate in its work, etc.

## What Every Joint Supplies

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There are two passages that especially address the responsibility that each member has to doing his/her part in the local church. These are Ephesians 4:11-16 and 1 Corinthians 12:12-27. Let's spend some time considering each one of these passages and drawing some necessary implications from them.

### ***Ephesians 4:11-16***

"And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head — Christ — from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love."

God has perfectly equipped His people to accomplish His mission. But, you should notice that accomplishing His mission requires the work of every member. Notice that there were to be apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers (note that apostles and prophets were limited to the early years of the church and are not part of God's plan for the church today). These help the church to be edified, to be equipped to stand against false doctrine, and to grow up into Jesus Christ.

But, I want you to notice carefully that it is not just these evangelists, pastors, and teachers who

are contributing to the growth and strength of the church. Instead, joined together by Jesus Christ, every “joint” and every “part” must do its own share. Like a body, a local church is composed of individual members who must work diligently supplying what they are capable of supplying and doing what they are capable of doing.

### **1 Corinthians 12:12-27**

Building on the principles in Ephesians 4, this passage continues to encourage us to think about the local church as a body – and to consider how each individual member of that body has an important part/role.

“For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body — whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free — and have all been made to drink into one Spirit. For in fact the body is not one member but many.

“If the foot should say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I am not of the body,’ is it therefore not of the body? And if the ear should say, ‘Because I am not an eye, I am not of the body,’ is it therefore not of the body? If the whole body were an eye, where would be the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where would be the smelling? But now God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased. And if they were all one member, where would the body be?

“But now indeed there are many members, yet one body. And the eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you’; nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’ No, much rather, those members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary. And those members of the body which we think to be less honorable, on these we bestow greater honor; and our unpresentable parts have greater modesty, but our presentable parts have no need. But God composed the body, having given greater honor to that part which lacks it, that there should be no schism in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another. And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually.”

First, observe how that each member of the body is different, and that these differences are

something to be cherished rather than despised. Just like our physical bodies would be ineffective if they were composed of only one body part, the local church would not be very effective if everybody was exactly the same! While every member should be striving to be like Christ and learn from Him, all have different circumstances, experiences, knowledge, personalities, relationships, abilities, strengths, etc. All of these are immensely profitable for a local church. Think about it. If every member was exactly the same, who would help in areas of weakness? How would the local church influence people outside of its “circle of contacts”? How would it accomplish something no one had the ability to accomplish? Yet, since every member is different, the strengths of some can make up for the weaknesses of others.

Second, no one can accomplish the work of the local church alone. There is much work to be done by local churches. But, since no one individual is the church, no one individual is capable of doing the entire work of the local church. It necessarily involves the active participation of every single member.

Third, you can contribute to the local church. Though it is certainly true that some members of the local church are capable of doing more than others, every member is capable of doing something (even the “shut-in,” the elderly, and the new convert). In fact, this passage even speaks of some who are weaker as being necessary to the body (just as we have weak members of our physical body that are important to the function of the physical body). So, it does not matter what age you are, what your physical limitations might be, how long you have been a Christian, etc., you can contribute something to the local church.

Fourth, you *must* contribute what you can to the local church. Each member must search carefully for a way that he/she can contribute to the local church. Recognize that God knows exactly what each person is capable of contributing – and expects only that much (see Jesus’ parable of the talents in Matthew 25:14-30)! But, recognize that God will not accept less than an individual is capable of giving. If every member of a local church would be diligent in doing this, congregations would be stronger and God’s work would get accomplished!

# Areas In Which Every Member Must Participate

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Each member of a local church has something to contribute. But, I want to specifically consider three areas in which every member must participate according to his/her ability. Each one must actively participate in these areas because God has instructed it.

## ***The assemblies of the church***

The most fundamental of responsibilities that a member of the local church has is pertaining to the assemblies of the church. Each member, therefore, must contribute how he/she is capable of contributing to these assemblies.

First, it is a fundamental responsibility of the local church to assemble together. For instance, 1 Corinthians 14:23 speaks of the “whole church” in Corinth coming together “in one place.” 1 Corinthians 14:26, similarly, speaks of *when* the church in Corinth comes together (not *if*). Acts 20:7 indicates that local churches were in the practice of coming together on the first day of the week to observe the Lord’s Supper. Similarly, 1 Corinthians 16:1-2 records Paul’s instructions to the Corinthian church to take up a monetary collection on the first day of the week – as he had also instructed the churches of Galatia. Furthermore, there is generic authority for the church to assemble together even more frequently than just upon the first day of the week.

Second, these assemblies accomplish some fundamentally important things. They are opportunities for the members to worship God collectively. They are opportunities for the church to fulfill its God-given responsibility of edification. And, they are opportunities for the church to fulfill its God-given responsibility of teaching the gospel.

Third, being actively involved in these assemblies are among the most fundamental responsibilities a Christian has as a member of a local church. The Christian, therefore, has the responsibility to attend all the assemblies he/she is capable of attending. God says that forsaking these assemblies is sin (Hebrews 10:24-25). The Christian has the responsibility to participate in these assemblies. Everyone must do what he/she is capable

of doing to actively worship God at these times in spirit and truth (John 4:23-24). Members should be singing the songs, focused on the prayers, correctly taking of the Lord’s Supper, contributing to the collection, and listening to and applying the gospel teaching – according to their abilities. Men of the congregation also should be taking leading roles in the worship according to their abilities. After all, the congregation will not be led in worship and accomplish what God wants from these assemblies if there is no one who will lead them. Then, each member should do what he/she can do to encourage his/her brethren at these assembly times.

## ***The work of the church***

God has given the local church a three-fold work to accomplish. It must teach the gospel, edify the saints, and provide benevolent help to needy Christians. But, none of this work will get done by itself. It requires the work of the members. And, in order for it to get done most effectively, it requires each member to do what he/she is capable of doing.

So, every member of the local church must appreciate the importance of the God-given work the local church has. Think about each one of these three areas. If the members of local churches are not actively involved in teaching others the message of the gospel, how will the lost hear the saving message? It is God’s plan for His saving message to be spread to others through teaching (see Romans 10:13-18; 1 Corinthians 1:18; 2 Timothy 2:2). Now, if it is good for one member of the local church to be teaching the message of the gospel to someone who needs to hear it, isn’t it better for every member of the local church to be teaching the message of the gospel to those who need to hear it? Second, if the members of the local church are not interested and engaged in edifying their brethren, how will Christians become stronger in the faith, more knowledgeable of the gospel’s message, and more equipped to overcome temptation in their lives? And, if it is good for one member of the local church to be helping his/her brethren in this way, isn’t it better for every member to be working to edify their brethren? Third, if the members of the local church are not engaged in helping their needy brothers and sisters, how will those brethren survive? And, if it is good for one member of the local church to be actively involved in helping his/her needy brethren, isn’t it better for all the members to be doing the same?

But, how can every member actively participate in the work of the local church? First, recognize that there are things that we can do working individually and collectively to help the mission of the church. For the purposes of this lesson, I will not divide these here. But, members can support the work prayerfully. They can support the work thoughtfully by considering the ways in which they might be able to help and contribute ideas about how to accomplish the work. They can support the work financially by contributing what they are capable of contributing to the collection on the first day of every week. And, they can contribute to the work physically by doing the “leg work” that needs to be done in order to carry out the work.

### ***The fellowship of the church***

The fellowship that every Christian shares in is depicted in 1 John 1. Verse 3 says that “our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ.” So, this fellowship is not one that is based on physical things. Instead, it is a fellowship that is based in a joint relationship with God and Jesus Christ. Verses 5-7 go on to explain: “This is the message which we have heard from Him and declare to you, that God is light and in Him is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and 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 Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.”

So, everyone who lives according to God’s ways has fellowship with the perfectly holy God through Jesus Christ. And, as long as they remain in fellowship God, that means they have fellowship with everyone else who has fellowship with God through Christ. But, this fellowship is severed whenever an individual refuses to live according to God’s ways and chooses to live for sin. While this fellowship is experienced with everyone who is a Christian, it is especially relevant to the local church.

Earlier in this study, I overviewed a few of the blessings and responsibilities involved in this fellowship – with a focus on the local church. Yes, there are “one another” responsibilities that we have. Now, I again want to focus on each member’s responsibility to be actively involved in this fellowship. Each member of the local church must do whatever he/she is capable of doing so as to fulfill

these responsibilities. Though some can do more than others, all can do something!

## **The Problem Of Lukewarm Members**

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This study of active participation is not complete without addressing the problem that exists in nearly every congregation of the Lord’s people (perhaps in every congregation): Lukewarm members. Not every member of every local church will choose to do his/her part. Some will be content to only do what he/she *wants* to do or deems to be absolutely necessary. So, let’s honestly consider the problem of lukewarm members in such a way that we can individually avoid being lukewarm and help those who are lukewarm. This is a problem that must be confronted, not just ignored!

### ***What are “lukewarm members”?***

Jesus confronted the problem of lukewarmness in the local church at Laodicea in Revelation 3:14-22 (as discussed in lesson 1). For now, let’s observe how Jesus identified the problem in verses 15-16: “I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth.” These were people who simply were not dedicated to following and serving Jesus as they should have been. They were neither all the way for Him nor all the way against Him. And, you can plainly see that Jesus despised the condition of His followers being “lukewarm” in His service. He said that He would vomit them out of His mouth and commanded them to repent (verse 19)!

The term “lukewarm members” does *not* refer to members who are capable of doing less than others. It does *not* (necessarily) refer to members who are sick or shut-in. It does *not* refer to members who are trying to grow and improve in God’s service, but just fall short from time-to-time. Instead, it refers to members who have willfully chosen not to give all that they are capable of giving in the service of Jesus Christ. They are willfully choosing to hold something back from Christ. And, by extension, they willfully choose to hold something back from the local church.

Perhaps they attend the assemblies of the local church irregularly (i.e. once per month) – when they are capable of more. Perhaps they attend the assemblies regularly irregular (i.e. Sunday mornings only) – when they are capable of more. Perhaps they miss the Bible classes offered by the church – when they are capable of attending. Perhaps they attend all of the assemblies but do little to serve God outside of the building – when they are capable of contributing in other ways. Perhaps they are not participating in the teaching work the church is trying to accomplish – when they are capable of contributing. Perhaps they are not committed to helping and encouraging their brethren – when they are capable of doing so. Lukewarm members come in many different packages, but they simply are not willing to contribute in the ways they are capable of contributing.

### ***Why are there lukewarm members?***

There were lukewarm members in the first century (i.e. in Laodicea) and there have been lukewarm members of local churches ever since! Though we all fall short of doing what we could and should do from time-to-time, I want to consider a few reasons why some are consistently lukewarm in their service to Christ.

(1) Some are lukewarm because they do not view the local church properly. Whenever an individual fails to recognize what the local church actually is, he/she will not function properly as a member of the church. (2) Some are lukewarm because they lack a personal commitment and love for God and Christ. They are not as grateful for the sacrifice of Jesus Christ as they ought to be. (3) Some are lukewarm because they lack a personal commitment to and love for their brethren. They just do not have the proper degree of care for the physical and spiritual well-being of their Christian brothers and sisters. (4) Some are lukewarm because they have misplaced priorities. They could do more in God's service, but other things and other people get put above God. (5) Some are lukewarm because they fail to see the seriousness of the work that is to be done. They fail to recognize the consequences of a church that does not accomplish its God-given work. (6) Some are lukewarm because they have developed the "Someone else will do it" mentality. They leave their work undone and expect others to pick up the slack. (7) Some are lukewarm because they fail to understand that they can make a contribution to

Christ through their lives. They just don't believe that they have anything to offer to Christ of any value. (8) Some are lukewarm because they are selfish. They only will give what they want to give and nothing more. (9) Some are lukewarm because they have been influenced by other lukewarm Christians. They have consistently seen the examples of lukewarm Christians and have accepted their examples as "normal" behavior for Christians. (10) I'm sure there are many other reasons we could add to this list. But, I would encourage you to honestly reflect on these and see if any of these are true about you.

### ***What saith the Scriptures?***

The Scriptures clearly condemn lukewarmness in those who attempt to follow Jesus Christ (see Revelation 3:14-22). Therefore, I want you to consider two reasons we must be concerned about lukewarm Christians as members of local churches.

First, lukewarm Christians are not pleasing to God. There is absolutely no approved example of a lukewarm Christian being acceptable to God. Therefore, the souls of those who are lukewarm are in danger of Hell! Jesus said, "He who is not with Me is against Me, and he who does not gather with Me scatters abroad" (Matthew 12:30). Certainly, if you are lukewarm, you should want to make your life right with God. And, if you know of someone who is lukewarm, you should want to help him/her make his/her life right with God.

Second, lukewarm Christians harm the body. Though it is commonly believed that those who are lukewarm should just be left alone (since they still identify with the church in some way), they are actually causing harm to the body. Since God does not approve of lukewarmness, it is sin. And, sin is compared to leaven. 1 Corinthians 5:6 says that "a little leaven leavens the whole lump" – and verses 7-13 warn that leaven must be eliminated from the body. It is like a cancer that continues to grow and harm the body. For one, lukewarm Christians harm the body because they influence others to be lukewarm. Remember, 1 Corinthians 15:33 says that "Evil company corrupts good habits." They also negatively influence the community by leaving a poor impression of what it means to be a Christian and what the local church stands for. And, they discourage and hinder the work of the local church.

## ***How to deal with lukewarm members***

The Bible identifies lukewarm Christianity as a problem. And, as we have seen, it is a very real problem many (if not all) local churches face. So, if local churches are going to become stronger, they need to develop a plan for addressing lukewarmness.

First, let's understand that there are some ways a local church must *not* deal with lukewarmness. (1) It must not jump to conclusions about others. (2) It must not hold others to man-made expectations. (3) It must not ignore the problem. (4) It must not deny the problem. (5) It must not make excuses for the problem. (6) It must not put the problem off endlessly. And, (7) it must not allow the thought of losing numbers or offending someone with the truth to hinder it from addressing the problem.

But, even though a local church must not react in these ways, there are still some things it can do to deal with lukewarmness. Let's consider a few essential points.

(1) Be careful and diligent in identifying the problem. Make sure that righteous judgment has been used to identify lukewarmness (John 7:24). Only hold people to God's standard of right and wrong and do not expect more of people than they are capable of giving. Yet, there are times individuals show themselves to be lukewarm by the things they do and say!

(2) Try to strengthen those who are lukewarm and bring them to repentance through teaching and encouragement. Every member of a local church should desire the best for their brethren. Therefore, they will want to spend time helping the lukewarm realize their condition by teaching them what Christ expects from them. And, there should be encouragement that is offered to overcome the temptations of lukewarmness and follow Jesus Christ (see Hebrews 3:12-13). Recognize that the only path out of lukewarmness is repentance (Revelation 3:19).

(3) Those who persist in lukewarmness need to be rebuked for their sin and withdrawn from if they fail to repent. If teaching and encouragement has not yielded positive results, those who are unwilling to repent of their lukewarmness must be privately rebuked for their sin (see Galatians 6:1). Remember

that Jesus rebuked and chastened those who were lukewarm (see Revelation 3:19). If they refuse to repent still, the church must take action against the sinner by withdrawing fellowship. 2 Thessalonians 3:6 instructs that Christians withdraw from "every brother who walks disorderly" and not according to the instructions given by God's apostles and prophets (see also 2 Thessalonians 3:14-15 and 1 Corinthians 5).

Whenever local churches take the proper steps in dealing with those who are content with lukewarmness, there are positive results. First, the sinner will be made aware of his/her sin and know that it is unacceptable to Christ. If he/she repents, this will result in saving a soul from death (see James 5:19-20). Second, the church will be strengthened. If the sinner repents, the church now has another active member who will contribute positively to the work. If he/she does not repent, the church has still eliminated leaven from the body. Even though there will be a numerical decrease, the result of this action will lead to the strengthening of those who remain! Third, others will know that the church is focused only on serving the Lord Jesus Christ faithfully and helping others come to do the same.

## **Conclusion**

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Are you actively participating as a member of a local church of Christ? Surely, God expects you to do everything you are capable of doing in His service. And, as a local church member, you have the responsibility to supply your part. It is only when every member of a local church contributes what he/she is capable of contributing that the local church will be as strong as it can be! If you are not doing your share, recognize that you are not living to please God, you are harming your brothers and sisters in Christ, and you are damaging the cause of Jesus Christ.

# Study Questions

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What level of active participation does a congregation need from its members for it to function at its maximum capacity?

## 1. What Is Church Membership?

What does it mean to be a member of the universal church and the local church?

How is local church membership both a blessing and a mutual commitment?

## 2. What Every Joint Supplies

How does Ephesians 4:11-16 demonstrate the importance of active participation from every member of a local church?

How does 1 Corinthians 12:12-27 demonstrate the importance of active participation from every member of a local church?

## 3. Areas In Which Every Member Must Participate

What is the responsibility for every local church member to participate in the assemblies of the church?

What is the responsibility for every local church member to participate in the work of the church?

What is the responsibility for every local church member to participate in the fellowship of the church?

## 4. The Problem Of Lukewarm Members

What are “lukewarm members”?

Why are there lukewarm members?

What does the Bible teach about lukewarm Christians/members of a local church?

How should a local church deal with lukewarm members?



# Step #4: Be United In Sound Doctrine

God wants every local church to be a strong church. But, in order for a church to be a strong church it must be entirely devoted to being united in sound doctrine (the pure and spiritually uncorrupt teaching of Jesus Christ).

Division happens within organizations for many different reasons. Sometimes, division is the result of a difference in belief, personality conflicts, differences of opinion that are not handled properly, power struggles, a lack of leadership, and many other reasons. But, unfortunately, division is not just something that occurs in businesses and earthly organizations. Instead, division has been a reality far too often among local churches professing to belong to Jesus Christ! But, please recognize that anytime God's people divide, there is sin somewhere. At least one of the parties involved (and perhaps both) have sinned against God – because God hates division!

God teaches us that unity is an essential quality in order for anything to be successful. In Luke 11:14-23, Jesus teaches a powerful lesson in unity. After Jesus had cast out a demon, some of the people accused Him of casting out demons by Beelzebub, “the ruler of the demons” (verse 15). Yet, Jesus responded, “Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation, and a house divided against a house falls. If Satan also is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand? Because you say I cast out demons by Beelzebub” (verses 17-18). So, their

objection that Jesus was working with Satan in casting out demons was inconceivable, in part, due to the fact that this would mean that Satan was divided against himself.

Now, let's think about this principle even further. It is a general principle that Jesus applied directly to Satan's kingdom. But, it has many applications. Nations that are divided against themselves will not stand. Businesses that are divided against themselves will not be successful. Families that are divided against themselves will not accomplish their God-given purposes. And, local churches that are divided against themselves will not be strong.

In this study, I want us to consider the importance of the local church being united in sound doctrine. And, as we study these things, please first make application of them to your own life – determining to do your part in helping the local church be united in sound doctrine. Our goals in this lesson are: (1) To learn about the importance of doctrine. (2) To learn about the responsibility God's people have in being united in sound doctrine. And, (3) to learn how the local church can be united in sound doctrine.

## Doctrine Matters!

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Does doctrine even matter? It is common for individuals and local churches to believe that doctrine actually does not matter a great deal. It is often claimed that only certain “core” doctrinal beliefs are essential. Therefore, we must carefully consider the role doctrine has in a local church being pleasing to God.

### ***Not all doctrines are right***

Some say that it does not matter what you believe – as long as you believe in Jesus. Yet, I want you to recognize that it is possible to leave the doctrine of Christ. 2 John 1:9-11 says, “Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him; for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds.”

We'll make some additional observations from this text momentarily. But, for now, please recognize that all doctrines *cannot* be right. There are those who are said not to abide in the doctrine of Christ. And, there are those who bring a different doctrine besides the doctrine of Christ.

Common sense also teaches us the same thing. For instance, the doctrine that Jesus is not God is not just as right as the doctrine that Jesus does possess the attributes/nature of being God. The doctrine that baptism is unnecessary for the forgiveness of sins is not just as right as the doctrine that baptism is necessary for the forgiveness of sins. The doctrine that babies are born in sin is not just as right as the doctrine that man is born sinless. The doctrine that we are once saved always saved is not just as right as the doctrine that we can sin so as to be eternally lost in Hell.

You see, two doctrines that teach the exact opposite things cannot both be true. Perhaps one is right and one is wrong. Perhaps both are wrong. But, both cannot be right. Now, according to 2 John 1:9-11, you must determine whether or not God accepts those doctrines which are not true. Clearly, He warns against adopting any false doctrines as being true or accepting into fellowship those who teach false doctrines.

### ***Christ's doctrine is right***

Notice 2 John 1:9-11 again and consider whose doctrine is the right one. It was not the individual who departed from the doctrine (teaching) of Christ. This one is said to "not have God." It is also not the one who comes to you bringing a doctrine other than Christ's doctrine. This one is not to be received and is involved in "evil deeds." Instead, only the one "who abides [stays, dwells] in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son."

Now, some will admit this to be true. But, they will claim that this only refers to the core doctrines about Jesus Christ. However, this is not all that God expects of people relative to doctrine. Instead, we will observe that all of the doctrines (teachings) that are taught in the Bible (God's revelation of His will to mankind) are essential parts of the "doctrine of Christ."

2 Timothy 3:16-17 even directly identifies that the words contained in the God-inspired Scriptures are useful for "doctrine." Therefore,

God's inspired revelation contains the doctrines/teachings that He wants people to believe and to apply to their lives. And, if these are the doctrines (teachings) God wants people to believe and practice, which doctrines that He reveals are insignificant to Him?

In reality, the Bible teaches us that "all Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17). This includes the teachings about Jesus, the teachings of Jesus while on this earth, and the teachings of the apostles and prophets.

In Acts 2:42, for instance, the early church "continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine." Why did they do this? 1 Corinthians 14:37 helps us to see that the things the apostle Paul wrote were considered to be "the commandments of the Lord." Therefore, the apostles and prophets who were inspired by the Holy Spirit wrote and taught things that pertained to the doctrine of Christ.

Together, all of these things compose "the faith of the gospel." The word "faith" is used in the Scriptures not only to indicate the trust that we must place in God, but also to reference the system of religious belief, teaching, and practice that is approved of God. Consider Acts 6:7. "Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith." Note that "the faith" is something that could be obeyed. Furthermore, observe that it is "the" faith. There is only one. In fact, the apostle Paul stated such in Ephesians 4:5, saying that there is "one faith." Therefore, there is only one system of religious belief, teaching, and practice that is approved by God.

Where can you locate information about this "one faith"? In the pages of the gospel of Jesus Christ (the New Testament). Philippians 1:27 instructs Christians to "stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel." And, Jude says that "the faith" was "once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 1:3). So, there are no new revelations of doctrine that must be accepted by the church today. The faith has been perfectly revealed by God in the pages of the New Testament.

## ***The importance of right doctrine***

Why does it matter whether a local church holds to this doctrine of Christ (the faith of the gospel) or not? Once again, 2 John 1:9-11 plainly revealed that the one who would not do so would also not be in fellowship with God and Christ. Furthermore, the one who would go along with false teaching (a different gospel) would share in the evil deeds of the false teacher.

Right doctrine is essential because it is the doctrine that we will be judged by. Jesus plainly said that we will be judged by the words He spoke (see John 12:48). Then, Revelation 20:11-15 also reveals that we will be judged by the words contained in the books (i.e. the books that contain the law of God, the books of the New Testament). On this Day of Judgment, all things that each person has done on earth will be perfectly judged by Jesus Christ according to the faith revealed in the pages of the New Testament (also see 2 Corinthians 5:10 and Galatians 6:7-8).

Therefore, we need to consider the dangers of false doctrine (teaching) that are identified in the pages of the New Testament. Galatians 1:6-9 contains Paul's warning to the Galatian Christians about turning away from the grace of Christ to "a different gospel" (besides the faith of the gospel that has been revealed). He said that there were people who were perverting (distorting) the gospel of Christ. But, these would be "accursed" (doomed to destruction) and must not be believed.

Revelation 22:18-19 contains a plain warning about changing God's teachings. "For I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life, from the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book." While this warning is specifically given concerning the things written in the book of Revelation, the same truth is also applicable to the entirety of God's revelation. Certainly, then, we are not permitted to refuse to believe or change any of the doctrines God's word reveals.

And, 2 Peter 2:1-3 helps us to see the danger of false teachers (who teach false doctrine). "But there were also false prophets among the people,

even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their destructive ways, because of whom the way of truth will be blasphemed. By covetousness they will exploit you with deceptive words; for a long time their judgment has not been idle, and their destruction does not slumber."

Observe, therefore, that those who believe and teach false doctrines (contrary to the doctrine of Christ) deceive others and bring destruction upon themselves and those who follow them. Therefore, false doctrines have serious consequences for those who teach and follow them. They lead both individuals and congregations away from "the faith of gospel" that result in salvation and to the doctrines and commandments of men that result in eternal condemnation.

## ***The church must hold to sound doctrine***

Given the significance of true Bible doctrine, each local church must be devoted to holding to God's words. In fact, listen to how God's church is identified in 1 Timothy 3:15: "but if I am delayed, I write so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground [or, support] of the truth." Therefore, God's church (His people/saints) are expected to hold up the truth that God has revealed for others to learn and obey. Jude 1:3 said that the saints should "contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered" to them.

Now, if God's church (His people) should diligently strive to follow and promote God's word of truth that has been revealed, how much false doctrine is God pleased with His people believing and promoting? In fact, Revelation 2:12-17 demonstrates an example of a congregation who failed to please Christ, in part because they held to "the doctrine of the Nicolaitans" which Christ hated (see verse 15). Although we do not know what this false doctrine taught, they were instructed plainly to repent (see verse 16).

So, God expects for local churches that claim to follow Him be holding to the faith He has revealed once for all in the pages of the New Testament (including all of its doctrines). Listen to the instruction given in 2 Timothy 1:13: "Hold fast the pattern of sound words which you have heard from

me, in faith and love which are in Christ Jesus.” Consider a couple observations.

First, there is a “pattern of sound words.” “Sound words” refer to words that are healthy and incorrupt. They are words that are entirely true and helpful and that do not contain any mixture of error. The Bible is clear that only God’s words are entirely true (see John 17:17). His words will set us free from sin (John 8:32) and will not lead us into any amount of error. Therefore, the New Testament (which reveals God’s perfect law for people today) is the “pattern” by which those who desire to please God must live their lives. It is also the pattern by which a church must conduct itself in order to please God.

Second, God’s people are expected to “hold fast” to this pattern. They are to cling tightly to this pattern, not letting it go. Everything the Bible teaches as doctrine must be accepted as truth and not one of God’s sound words must be rejected. Therefore, a local church that rejects God’s pattern (as demonstrated in Revelation 2:12-17) has sin it must repent of.

## The Church Must Be United In Sound Doctrine

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Up to this point in our study, we have been focused on establishing the importance of doctrine and the importance of God’s people holding to His doctrine (both individually and collectively). Now, we want to focus on the fact that God expects and commands that His people be united in the sound doctrine He has revealed in the pages of the New Testament. Consider the following passages.

### **John 17:20-23**

“I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me. And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one: I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me.”

This passage contains a prayer that Jesus prayed to His Father, not long before He died. Now, consider that if you were praying shortly before the time you knew that you would suffer and die, what would you be praying about? Certainly, you would pray about those things that were of the utmost importance to you. I contend that this is exactly what Jesus was doing here. And, notice that one of the things that was of great importance to Jesus was the unity of those who would follow after Him. Furthermore, notice carefully that Jesus was praying for every one of His people today. Certainly, those who believe on Jesus today have believed on Him through the word His apostles have taught!

Then, notice the degree to which Jesus desires for those who profess to follow Him to be united with one another. He did not want them to just get along with one another and be cordial with one another. Instead Jesus wants us to all “be one” just as the Father and He are one! He wants us to be “made perfect in one.”

That God’s people should be united in sound doctrine is not just a helpful suggestion to the God-given purpose for local churches. Instead, it is vitally important to their well-being and essential to fulfilling their God-given missions. For instance, notice the connection between unity and others believing in Christ. Jesus prayed for this unity so that the world would believe that the Father sent Him and has loved the world as much as He loved the Son! Therefore, whenever God’s people are not united, it makes it more difficult for the lost to believe in Jesus!

### **1 Corinthians 1:10**

“Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.”

Division was prevalent in the church at Corinth. Evidently, the Christians were dividing by following those who had a significant role in teaching them the gospel and/or baptizing them. This was even in addition to other problems of division. For instance, 1 Corinthians 6 deals with problems they were experiencing with brethren taking one another to court. 1 Corinthians 8-10 deals with problems they were having with the eating of meat that had been sacrificed to idols. 1 Corinthians 11 deals with problems they were having about the role

of women and the misuse of the Lord's Supper. 1 Corinthians 12-14 deals with division that they were experiencing over spiritual gifts. Evidently, some were elevating themselves as being more significant than others.

Before considering the statement made in 1:10, look at the statement made about division in 1 Corinthians 3:3. Paul said that "where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men?" Rather than acting like God's people, they were acting like the world – fighting and dividing among themselves. This did not please God. In fact, 1 Corinthians 12:25 makes it clear that the church (like a body) must have no division in it at all. Just like a physical body that divides among itself will fail to please its head, the church (Christ's spiritual body) that divides among itself will fail to please its Head (Jesus Christ, Colossians 1:18)!

Now, 1 Corinthians 1:10 makes it clear that local churches must be united in sound doctrine. Notice that Paul pleaded with the Corinthians by the authority of Jesus Christ (by His name). Jesus wanted this local church to all "speak the same thing," He wanted there to be "no divisions" among them, and He wanted them to "be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment."

Certainly, Jesus Christ was not permitting His people (His body) to be divided. He wanted and expected them to work together in perfect unison. He wanted them to be united in their thoughts, in their speech, and in their judgments. Now, the only way that this can be accomplished is for all the members of a local church to follow the same Head and submit to His teachings and judgments. Certainly, this passage plainly teaches us that this unity is within the realm of possibility for a local church – or God would not have commanded it of us. Yes, we can believe the same things, teach the same things, and have the same judgments when we all are dedicated to holding fast to the pattern of sound words revealed in the pages of the Bible!

### ***Ephesians 4:1-6***

"I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just

as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all."

In these first six verses of chapter 4, Paul transitions from the focus on the salvation God has made available in Christ Jesus to the responsibilities that those who are in Christ have. Therefore, Paul pleaded with these Christian brethren that they would conduct themselves in a manner that is worthy of the call of the gospel that results in the salvation of their souls. Certainly, they could not accomplish that by living in a divisive way toward their Christian brothers and sisters.

So, Paul instructed them to be lowly, gentle, patient, and bear with one another in love. All of these are absolutely essential to Christians living together in unity. Unity simply will not happen whenever Christians are thinking of themselves more highly than they ought, whenever they refuse to bear with the struggles of others, whenever they are not willing to patiently endure the wrongs that others commit against them, and whenever they refuse to act in a gentle manner.

All of these are essential to what Paul states next. He said that these who should be walking in a way that was worthy of God's calling should also be "endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." Notice first that there is unity in that which the Spirit of God has revealed. Verses 4-6 demonstrate this to be so. There is only one body (church) all of God's people are part of. There is only one Spirit who has revealed only one message from God. There is only one hope that belongs to the gospel's call (the hope of everlasting life in Heaven). There is only one Lord (Jesus Christ) who is Master of every Christian. There is only one faith that identifies what is and is not pleasing to God. There is only one baptism through which all Christians have been united with Jesus Christ. And, there is only one God who is Father of all who are Christians, through all, and in all.

So, God has done His part in making unity possible. For, if God had given no revelation or a divided revelation, He could not possibly expect for His people to be united. However, there is unity in the Spirit (as demonstrated in these seven areas). Now, the responsibility to be united falls to those who are Christians.

We are to do everything that is within our power to be united in the sound doctrine God has

revealed in the pages of the Bible. Notice again that part of living in a way that is worthy of the gospel's call of salvation is to eagerly maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Therefore, Christians must live in a way that will promote unity and peace among the brethren and be very careful not to divide.

### ***Philippians 1:27***

“Only let your conduct be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of your affairs, that you stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel.”

Once again, you should notice that the way Christians are expected to conduct themselves is in a way that is “worthy of the gospel of Christ.” Their conduct should be such that God approves in the message of the gospel. And, a significant part of this conduct that God approves is directly related to unity.

Similar to the language found in 1 Corinthians 1:10, Christians must “stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel.” They must be firmly convicted that they will work together in pursuit of their common objectives of pleasing God, spending eternity in Heaven with Him, and influencing others to do the same. Although there will be difficulties that are experienced, Christians are expected to always put “the faith of the gospel” first in their lives and be steadfast in standing only in it with their brothers and sisters in Christ!

## **We Can Be United In Sound Doctrine**

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We have been establishing the principles and commandments involved in Christians and local churches being united in the sound doctrine of Christ. Now, before closing this lesson, I want to examine some applications that need to be made.

### ***United upon God's word***

We have already identified the fact that God's word is the truth that sets mankind free from his sin (John 17:17; John 8:32). We have seen that doctrine truly does matter to God and that the

doctrine of Christ involves more than just the teachings about Jesus. Now, I want to briefly consider how it is that this unity in sound doctrine will happen.

Certainly, it will not happen accidentally. The devil is working feverishly to try and divide those who want to serve God. And, one of the primary ways he is attempting to do this is through false doctrine. 2 Corinthians 11:13-15 identifies that there have been those who were false apostles. And, this is not unreasonable since “Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works.” This implies that those who are Christians will have to be very cautious as to what they believe to be true.

The only way for Christians to be united in sound doctrine (to be of the same mind, the same judgments, and speak the same things) is for every Christian to be diligent in studying the Scriptures that reveal the doctrine of Christ! For instance, those who heard the word of God in Berea were commended as being noble in that they “received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so” (Acts 17:11). Since they only wanted to believe and follow the way of truth, they spent time every day carefully examining the teachings of God in the Scriptures! Similarly, 2 Timothy 2:15 instructs, “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.”

In order for a local church to be united in sound doctrine, therefore, every Christian has to be dedicated to learning more about God's word. And, every Christian must be faithful in demanding Bible authority for the things that are done and taught. Colossians 3:17, for instance, instructs, “And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.” Bible authority for a thing is only established whenever there is a direct command, an approved example, or a necessary inference. Without one of these, there is no Bible authority for a thing – and, therefore, cannot be part of the unity of sound doctrine.

## ***“Unity in diversity” is not true unity***

All throughout this lesson, I have been attempting to emphasize the kind of unity God expects of those who want to please Him. This is unity in sound doctrine. It is not just any kind of unity. For instance, there are many people and local churches that will claim to be united. But, their unity is based on agreeing to disagree. Instead of being united in sound doctrine (speaking the same things, being of the same mind, and being of the same judgments), many simply choose not to make differences in doctrine important. Therefore, they will never be able to speak the same things, be of the same mind, or be of the same judgment.

This is not true unity! Their “unity” is based in a lack of respect for the Scriptures and the doctrines that are taught therein. And, their “unity” is based upon “religious tolerance” that claims it does not matter what you believe and practice as long as you believe in Jesus. However, we have already seen throughout this study that this is a failed attempt at being united in a way that pleases God.

Instead, God does not want His people to be united with others who follow and teach false doctrine. Remember, 2 John 1:9-11 said that Christians must abide in the doctrine of Christ and not receive or greet (in an accepting kind of way) those who bring any other doctrine. To do so is to share in their evil deeds. Furthermore, Ephesians 5:11 instructs that Christians “have no fellowship [sharing, jointly participating] with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them.” God’s people must hold up the truth of the gospel and be united with those who also so choose. But, when others choose not to abide in the doctrine of Christ, God’s people must not share in their rejection of His word!

### ***Obstacles to unity in sound doctrine***

As the devil works to divide those who want to follow Jesus Christ, there are a number of obstacles that he commonly uses. Consider just a few of them here.

(1) The devil wants opinion to be held as law. Satan wants individuals to think that their opinions about things are always right. And, he wants them to bind their opinions on their brothers and sisters in Christ. However, while there are areas of liberty and opinions permissible by God, God says that these

must never be forced upon others so as to divide over them (see Romans 12:16 and Romans 14-15). Opinion must never be treated the same as God’s law.

(2) The devil wants man-made tradition to be viewed as authoritative. It is common for folks to confuse tradition with the authority that God has given. While there is room for some man-made traditions (i.e. the order of services for a local church), these traditions must never be viewed as anything more. And, there must never be division that occurs because of human tradition or tradition that is set on the same level as God’s word (see Matthew 15:1-14).

(3) The devil wants God’s people to lose respect for God’s word. He wants people to be more interested in justifying themselves, a loved one, or some action than they are interested in doing everything by Bible authority. He wants people to think that unauthorized things are “not that bad” and not something that would result in an individual being condemned to Hell. Still, we are warned not to add to or subtract from God’s revealed word (see Revelation 22:18-19).

(4) The devil wants the Scriptures to be misinterpreted and misapplied. The devil even has demonstrated his ability to misapply the Scriptures (see Matthew 4:5-7). Peter said that there were individuals who twisted the writings of the Scripture (see 2 Peter 3:15-16). But, whenever this happens, it becomes impossible to stand united in sound doctrine – because the unity is based on a perversion of what the Bible teaches. Instead, we must be diligent to accurately handle God’s word of truth (2 Timothy 2:15).

(5) The devil wants personality conflicts to divide. The devil has been successful in convincing God’s people to divide over many things completely unrelated to sound doctrine. Many of these divisions have occurred because of personality conflicts between those who are Christians. Therefore, the division is all about them! Yet, whenever Paul was apparently made aware of this kind of personality conflict between two women in Philippi (Euodia and Syntyche), he exhorted them “to be of the same mind in the Lord” and urged their brethren to help these two women who had, otherwise, been helpful to Paul in the gospel’s work (see Philippians 4:2-3). But, you should notice that division was not given as an option!

# Conclusion

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Are you doing your part in being united in sound doctrine with your brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ? Are you studying God's word daily and diligently making the right applications of it? Certainly, we will all be judged as to whether or not we have contributed to unity or division. And, the Bible clearly teaches that those who are divisive (i.e. those who choose not to be united with their brethren in sound doctrine) must be marked, avoided, and withdrawn from (see Romans 16:17-18; Titus 3:9-11; and 2 John 1:9-11). As we have seen, true unity in sound doctrine is a powerful thing and essential in helping the church be strong and accomplish its God-given responsibilities. There is much that you can and should do to contribute to this unity!

## Study Questions

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What principle about division and unity did Jesus establish in Luke 11:14-23?

### 1. Doctrine Matters!

Are all doctrines right?

Whose doctrine is right? What does this doctrine include?

What is the importance of right doctrine?

What is the importance of the church holding to right doctrine?

### 2. The Church Must Be United In Sound Doctrine

What can you learn about unity from John 17:20-23?

What can you learn about unity from 1 Corinthians 1:10?

What can you learn about unity from Ephesians 4:1-6?

What can you learn about unity from Philippians 1:27?

### 3. We Can Be United In Sound Doctrine

How can Christians be united upon the teachings of God's word?

What is "unity in diversity"? Is it true unity? Why or why not?



Identify five obstacles Satan uses to divide those who want to follow Jesus Christ.

(1)

(2)

(3)

(4)

(5)

## Steps To Building A Strong Church Series

# Step #5: Love One Another

God wants every local church to be a strong church. But, in order for a church to be a strong church it must be entirely devoted to loving one another (according to how the Scriptures define this love).

Loving one another is crucial to the well-being of any local church that desires to please God. In fact, many of the problems that exist in local churches today could be solved by a greater commitment to loving one another. Not only is this practical reasoning, but it is actually the direct remedy that the apostle Paul gave to the church in Corinth over problems that it was experiencing (as we'll discuss later in this lesson).

Without a proper degree of love for other members of the local church, churches will often be involved in constant conflict and strife – and this conflict will often result from otherwise insignificant matters. Without a proper degree of love for other members of the local church, Christians are more unlikely to be working together for the cause of Jesus Christ in the local community. In fact, without a proper degree of love for members of the local church, potential prospects and visitors will often be turned away from Jesus Christ and from joining the local church in its work to glorify God.

However, the reverse of these points are also true. Local churches that love one another fervently and according to the instructions given in the New Testament concerning love will be more dedicated to unity and resolving conflicts peacefully, will be focused on their work for the Lord in their communities (and beyond), and will work to attract others to Jesus Christ!

In this study, I want us to consider the importance for a local church to love one another. And, as we study these things, please first make application of them to your own life – determining that you will follow God's instructions and love your brothers and sisters in the local church. Our goals in this lesson are: (1) To understand the commands we have been given in the pages of Scripture concerning our love for one another. And, (2) to recognize what it really means to love one another.

## We Are Commanded To Love One Another

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To love is one of the Christian's primary responsibilities. For instance, Jesus said that the greatest commandments are to love God with everything that we are, and to love our neighbors as ourselves (Matthew 22:34-40). But, please recognize that when Jesus spoke of loving our neighbors as ourselves, He meant everyone we have the opportunity to demonstrate our love toward (see Luke 10:25-37). Therefore, Christians must love their family members, their physical neighbors, their friends, their co-workers, their enemies (see Matthew 5:43-44), and everyone who is a Christian. Particularly, we want to focus this lesson on the commands that we have been given to love others who are also children of God, recognizing from these passages that every Christian has been given this commandment to love his/her brothers and sisters in Christ.

### **John 13:34-35**

“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Jesus has been with His twelve apostles in John 13. Earlier in the chapter, Jesus rose from supper, girded Himself with a towel, and began to wash the feet of His apostles – instructing that they follow His example and serve one another. Now, not only does Jesus want His disciples to serve one another, but He also expects that they love one another.

Notice that Jesus identified this commandment to love one another as a “new commandment.” But, how is the commandment to love one another a “new commandment” (compare with 1 John 2:7-11)? Certainly it is not “new” because this was the first time it was ever instructed. For instance, the Israelites were instructed to love their neighbors as themselves (see Leviticus 19:18). However, Jesus’ commandment was “new” perhaps because it was fresh (not stale or expired) or perhaps because the commandment was given new and deeper meaning because of the love of Jesus Christ.

Regarding this second possibility, the love that Jesus’ apostles were to possess for one another was definitely qualified by the kind of love that Jesus had for them. So, as we consider the kind of love that is being commanded, we must consider the degree to which Jesus Christ loved His apostles. Jesus, as God manifested in the flesh, willingly left Heaven to come to earth, endure mistreatment, suffer, and die on the cross so that His apostles (and all mankind) could have the opportunity to be saved from their sins. Therefore, Jesus demonstrated a self-giving and sacrificial love toward His apostles – and expected them to have a self-giving and sacrificial love toward one another.

Then, observe that this instruction to love was not just given to one of the apostles or to a few of them. Instead, this instruction to love was given to all of the apostles. And, their responsibility to love was not just toward one or two of the apostles. For instance, Peter was not just under the obligation to love Andrew (his brother) and John. Rather, every one of the apostles was instructed to love every other apostle. This is the implication of the command to love “one another.” It is to be reciprocated by every one of them. And, in the same way, every Christian is given the instruction to love every other Christian!

Finally, notice that this passage indicates the importance of loving one another. Jesus said that it would be by this that “all will know” that they were His apostles. Think about it this way. People are often identified by certain characteristics or traits. For instance, some people are identified by a specific way he/she is dressed (i.e. a doctor, a soldier). But, for Jesus’ disciples, they cannot be identified by a certain type of clothing (except that it be modest clothing that professes godliness with good works). They cannot be identified by distinctions of wealth or fame. They cannot be identified by worldly

education/learning. Yet, Jesus said that others would be able to identify them as His disciples by the love that they had for one another.

Now, consider that a local church will certainly develop a reputation in its community. Therefore, every local church must consider Jesus’ words in this passage very carefully. They must not put their focus on being known by physical things of this world. Instead, the community will be able to know that they truly belong to Jesus Christ if the members of those local churches have true love for one another! Once again, this love is defined by the love that Christ has shown toward all mankind in giving Himself as the sacrifice for sins – and this love must be reciprocated between all of its members.

### ***Hebrews 13:1***

The first verse of Hebrews 13 contains the basic, yet powerful commandment, “Let brotherly love continue.” Each word in this simple verse is essential to the strength of every local church. Therefore, let’s spend a few moments investigating it carefully.

First, consider the phrase “brotherly love.” Whereas the love that was commanded in John 13:34-35 was from the Greek word “agapao” (which was the highest form of love in the Greek language – as depicted by the love that God demonstrated toward us through Jesus Christ), the love that is commanded in Hebrews 13:1 is from the Greek word “philadelphia.” This word depicts a love that exists between members of a family.

Therefore, whenever Christians are commanded to possess this kind of love toward one another, it brings to mind the family relationship that Christians have with one another. The Scriptures clearly present God’s people as all being members of God’s family. We are members of the household of God (see Ephesians 2:19). Thus, we ought to possess tender affection toward one another much in the same way that those who are members of physical families have for one another. There should be great care and concern that each member of God’s family possesses for every other member of that family.

Second, consider that this brotherly love must “continue.” This kind of love is not a one-time demonstration of love. It is not a command in which we “check the box” after fulfilling it at one point in our lives. Instead, it must be an ongoing characteristic that we have in our lives. For instance,

2 Peter 1:5-11 makes it clear that God expects us all to be growing. And, if we will keep increasing in all the characteristics He desires us to have in our lives, we will not falter in living for Him. Particularly, notice that one of these characteristics we are instructed to add to our faiths is the characteristic of “brotherly kindness” (the same Greek word translated “brotherly love” in Hebrews 13:1). Yes, this kind of love must be demonstrated throughout our lives in both easy and difficult times!

Third, consider that we must “let” brotherly love continue. There will be many obstacles to practicing brotherly love. There will be times of frustration, times of disagreement, times of confusion, etc. And, each of these difficult circumstances offers opportunities to sin rather than practice brotherly love. Sometimes we are given the opportunity to speak angry words, sometimes we are given the opportunity to gossip, sometimes we are given the opportunity to divide, sometimes we are given the opportunity to mistreat a Christian brother or sister, sometimes we are given the opportunity to sin against our Christian brothers and sisters, etc.

However, please consider that the Hebrew writer indicates that brotherly love is a choice. Each individual who is a member of God’s family can (even in the difficult times) choose to allow brotherly love to continue. In fact, the real tests for brotherly love are often at these difficult moments – when love is not the easy way to go. Still, in order to please God, we must choose to allow brotherly love to be practiced always in our lives!

### **1 Peter 4:8**

Peter states, “And above all things have fervent love for one another, for ‘love will cover a multitude of sins.’” One again, recognize that this instruction is to possess “love” (agape – self-giving, sacrificial love) for one another. Therefore, this kind of love is the responsibility of every Christian to show toward every other Christian. Now, consider a few additional points made by Peter that we have not considered previously.

Peter identifies the significance of loving one another whenever he says that this is “above all things.” This is a primary responsibility that those who are Christians have toward one another. Although all the commandments of God are equally important to obey, I believe that love can be placed above all the others in terms of its scope of impact.

For instance, this is similar to what Jesus said in Matthew 22:37-40. Jesus said that loving God with everything that we are was the most important commandment in the law (i.e. the Law of Moses). Then, Jesus said that the second most important commandment was to love our neighbors as ourselves. Now, why were these the two greatest commandments? Jesus said, “On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets” (verse 40). Without love for God and for others, all of the other commandments either would not be obeyed or they would be empty actions rather than heart-felt obedience. So, loving one another is “above all things” concerning our conduct toward other Christians because every other thing will stem from this love. All of the other responsibilities God has given Christians concerning our Christian brothers and sisters (including hospitality and serving, see 1 Peter 4:7-11) require a love for one another! For, if there is no love, these other actions are meaningless to God!

But, we must not *just* love one another. Peter says that we must have “fervent” love for one another. This is love that is intense, constant, and zealous. It is love that endures the difficult times and remains steadfast in the fulfillment of its duties. Therefore, God does not want His people to just be going through the motions of loving their Christian brothers and sisters or merely professing to love one another. Instead, He wants them to be practicing this love in an intense and sincere kind of way.

Then, consider that this kind of love will “cover a multitude of sins.” There are, perhaps, a number of ways that this can happen. For one, love for one’s Christian brothers and sisters will cover sins because he/she will be interested in helping those brethren overcome the sins they have committed. For instance, James uses some of the same language in James 5:19-20. “Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins.” So, in demonstrating love toward your Christian brothers and sisters in correcting sin in their lives, you cover the sin they have committed whenever they repent of them.

In addition, whenever Christians show love toward one another, they cover a multitude of sins they could otherwise commit (if they had not chosen

to love). For instance, the Old Testament passage that is referenced in 1 Peter 4:8 is Proverbs 10:12, which says, “Hatred stirs up strife, But love covers all sins.” Where there is no love toward one another, Christians will sin against each other – because there will be strife, envy, divisions, gossip, etc., etc., etc. However, practicing the kind of love that God wants His people to be practicing will keep all of those sins from occurring.

### **1 John 3:10-15**

“In this the children of God and the children of the devil are manifest: Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is he who does not love his brother. For this is the message that you heard from the beginning, that we should love one another, not as Cain who was of the wicked one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his works were evil and his brother's righteous. Do not marvel, my brethren, if the world hates you. We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love his brother abides in death. Whoever hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.”

There are two significant points to make about the importance of love from this passage. First, love for one's Christian brothers and sisters is one of the distinguishing marks between those who God's children and those who are children of the devil. Similar to love being a badge of discipleship (as discussed in the section on John 13:34-35), John now says that those who are really God's children will practice what is right in God's sight and love their Christian brethren, whereas those who are children of the devil will not practice righteousness or love their Christian brethren. So, whenever there is a difficulty between yourself and a Christian brother or sister, here is part of what is at stake: If you choose not to act in love, you are choosing to make yourself a child of the devil.

Second, those who refuse to love a brother or sister in Christ is a “murderer.” Think about Cain and Abel. Cain hated his brother Abel so much that he murdered him (see Genesis 4). Most people (especially those who are Christians) would recognize that this is something that God condemns and that will lead to the murderer's spiritual destruction in Hell fire (if it is not repented of). But, what many Christians fail to realize is that God views

the failure to properly love one's Christian brothers and sisters as equal to being a murderer (like Cain) – and the end result of being separated from eternal life is the same for both!

Certainly, every member of a local church must take notice of these verses. Many Christians act and talk with very little regard toward their brothers and sisters. Many have contributed to division in churches. Many have caused their Christian brethren to stumble or entirely fall away from serving Jesus Christ. These, according to this passage, must recognize that God calls them “murderers” – and must seek to be forgiven of their past lack of love if they desire to have everlasting life in Heaven!

### **1 John 4:20-21**

“If someone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also.”

We have already considered the fact that Jesus considered the command of loving God with all of our beings to be the greatest commandment (Matthew 22:37). Surely, then, everyone who desires to please God acknowledges this responsibility to love Him. And, it is certainly important to point out that loving God involves keeping His commandments (John 14:15) – and that His commandments are not burdensome (1 John 5:3).

But, this passage in 1 John 4:20-21 also indicates that loving our Christian brothers and sisters is essential in truly loving God. John says that it is impossible to love God and not love our Christian brothers and sisters. His reasoning is that if you do not love those you see (who are trying to imitate God in their earthly lives), how can you possibly love the God you cannot see? Therefore, as you do consider whether or not you will choose to love every one of your brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ, you must consider the fact that God equates failing to love any one of your Christian brothers and sisters to failing to love Him!

# What It Means To Love One Another

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Now that you should recognize how important God views loving your Christian brothers and sisters, we need to consider what this actually looks like in our lives. As we do this, please note the two different kinds of love that are commanded of us – as demonstrated through the two Greek words “agapao” and “phileo.” Particularly, I want us to consider the kind of self-giving and sacrificial kind of love that God commands in the Greek word “agapao.”

## **1 John 4:7-11**

“Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God, for God is love. In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.”

Those who are Christians must “love one another” because love is a main characteristic of God. Many passages of Scripture connect our responsibility to love with the fact that love is a main characteristic of God. For instance, Ephesians 5:1-2 says, “Therefore be imitators of God as dear children. And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma.” So, in order to truly be an imitator of God, you must imitate His love.

In fact, the only way that we really know what love even looks like is because of the love God has shown for us. Many people have many different ideas of what it means to love. But, it is the love that God has demonstrated for us in sacrificing His only begotten Son on the cross for our sins that we can really learn about love.

His love was completely sacrificial and self-giving. It was not motivated by selfish interests. Instead, God recognized that we were entirely hopeless, lost in our sins, and headed for an eternity in Hell’s punishment. He knew that there was

nothing that any one of us could do to possibly save ourselves from sin. He knew that the only way we could be saved is if He provided the perfect sacrifice that could take away sins – the blood of His Son, Jesus Christ. So, He sent His only Son to this earth, watched Him be mistreated throughout His life, watched Him be beaten and ridiculed, and watched Him die on the cross – all the while knowing that He could deliver His Son. Yet, He sacrificed in this way because it was in our best interest.

So, all of this teaches us that truly loving our brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ means that we must not be focused on only our own interests. Instead, we must put our focus on the needs of others. And, whenever we are aware of the needs others possess, we should have such great care for them that we are willing to sacrifice of ourselves in order to help them. Therefore, more significance is placed on the needs of others than is placed on the personal desires an individual has.

This kind of attitude is summarized in Philippians 2:3-4. “Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.” Unfortunately, many brethren in local churches are focused on themselves. They look down on their brethren. They put their own desires above the desires and needs of their brethren. However, God (as evidenced by the love He has shown for us in sacrificing His only begotten Son) expects that His children will love each other so much that they will put their brethren ahead of themselves and do whatever they possibly can do to help each other.

## **1 John 3:16-18**

“By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoever has this world’s goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him? My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth.”

As I have already mentioned and we have already discussed, we “know love” by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. We have already discussed the fact that this love was a sacrificial and self-giving love. Now, I want to consider how it is that we must *show*

this love toward our brothers and sisters – rather than just *say* that we love them.

Consider the illustration that is given in this text. One Christian has been blessed to have “this world’s goods.” Maybe he/she has plenty of food, has plenty to drink, has plenty of clothing, has a nice home, etc. And, suppose that there should be a brother or sister in Christ come along who is in need of these things. Now, the Christian who has these things has an opportunity to help the one who is in need. But, if the Christian who has refuses to help the one who has not (shutting up his heart from him), how can he possibly claim to love his/her brother or sister? The implication is that he/she does not really love his brother or sister – because he/she has not imitated the sacrificial love that God demonstrated in sending Jesus Christ to die on the cross for the sins of the world!

The application is given in verse 18. We cannot possibly think that it is enough to just love our brothers and sisters in word only. Instead, not only must we profess to love them, but we must also act like we love them – by acting in their own best interests. Consider, then, a few of the things that are involved in truly loving our brothers and sisters. Please note that this is just a small sample of things that are included in loving our brethren.

Galatians 6:10 says, “Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith.” As illustrated in 1 John 3:17, Christians have responsibility to help their Christian brothers and sisters who are in need of physical things – according to the ability of each one. For instance, 2 Corinthians 8:13-15 teaches the principle that Christians should be interested in an equality existing in the brotherhood. This involves those who are in need receiving assistance from their brethren, and those who have more than they need providing assistance to the needy. Therefore, you must sacrifice of yourself (even financially) in order to help your Christian brothers and sisters if you have the opportunity to do so.

1 Thessalonians 5:14 says, “Now we exhort you, brethren, warn those who are unruly, comfort the fainthearted, uphold the weak, be patient with all.” Here are four examples of loving your brethren on a spiritual level. Those who are involved in sin must be warned and corrected. Those who are discouraged and weary need comforted and encouraged. Those who are spiritually weak need to

be supported. And, every brother and sister in Christ will require some patience to be shown to them as they attempt to serve God and please Him with their lives. Every one of these actions (and all of the responsibilities we have toward our brethren on a spiritual level) will require sacrificial service. They will all require that we put the interests and needs of others ahead of our own!

In order to truly love one another, we must conduct our lives in a self-giving kind of way. Again, we simply do not truly love our brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus if we are unwilling to fulfill the responsibilities (both physical and spiritual) that God has given us to fulfill toward them. “My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth” (1 John 3:18).

### **1 Corinthians 13**

1 Corinthians 13 has often been designated as the “love chapter” of the Bible for all of its teaching on love. Certainly, then, this chapter is greatly beneficial to our study. But, we must first understand the context of the chapter. Throughout the book of 1 Corinthians, we read about a local church that was struggling with many different problems. There were problems related to division, to sin in the church, to Christians taking each other to court, to misusing the Lord’s Supper, etc.

But, in the specific context of 1 Corinthians 13, the apostle Paul was addressing a problem that had developed in this congregation concerning the use of miraculous spiritual gifts (see chapters 12-14). It appears as if there were some in this local church that desired to elevate those who possessed certain gifts (i.e. tongue speaking and prophesy) above the others. Then, in the second half of 1 Corinthians 12, Paul spoke to them about how every Christian was a member of the body of Christ – and each one played an important role in the local church.

Chapter 13 finds itself in this context. Why did Paul speak so much about love in this context? Because love was central to remedying the problem they were having. In fact, it would be a central part of the remedy to all of the church’s problems – and continues to be central to remedying all of the problems that are experienced by local churches even today! In fact, in order for any church to be strong, it must love!

The first three verses of 1 Corinthians 13 identifies the importance of love. “Though I speak

with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing.”

One of their big problems was in trying to elevate certain spiritual gifts above the others. Yet, Paul says that even if an individual would possess great spiritual gifts (i.e. the ability to speak in the tongues of men or of angels, to be able to prophesy, to understand all mysteries, to have all knowledge, or to have faith that could remove mountains), these gifts would not profit him/her at all if he/she did not love. Furthermore, even if an individual would give everything he/she had to feed the poor or surrender his/her own body to be burned for the cause of Jesus Christ, it would not profit him/her anything if that individual did not love! Therefore, the application is that we could do all manner of great things for the cause of Christ (i.e. teach everyone we come into contact with the gospel of Christ, help all of the world’s poor, attend all the assemblies of the local church, etc.), but those things would not profit us spiritually if we do not love! Remember (from 1 John 3:15) that those who do not love their Christian brothers and sisters are like murderers to God (just like Cain, who murdered his brother Abel).

The next four verses (4-7) of 1 Corinthians 13 records a God-inspired description of love. “Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”

In order for love to be pleasing to God, your love (specifically toward your brothers and sisters in Christ) must be according to this instruction. There must be willingness to bear with one another (even through mistreatment and difficulties). There must be a devotion to show kindness and respect toward one another. There must not be envy or jealousy toward one another (as there was between Cain and Abel). There must not be bragging and arrogance that one Christian demonstrates (in word or action) toward others. There must not be rude/unbecoming

behavior toward one another. There must be a commitment to seek the good of others more than self. There must be no willingness to provoke one another. There must be no evil thought or pleasure taken in unrighteousness/sin that others may engage in. Instead, love must rejoice only in truth, bear, believe, hope, and endure “all things.”

So, here is a love that truly puts others first. Here is a love that does not seek to get revenge or gets easily irritated. Here is a love that conducts itself properly (in kindness and humility). Here is a love that gives others the “benefit of the doubt” and is not automatically skeptical toward the actions or words of others. Here is a love that will make righteous judgments rather than rash ones. Here is a love that wants to think the best about others and desperately wants others to do what is right (rather than taking pleasure in the sin of others). Here is a love that treats others with honor and respect.

Then, the final verses (8-13) of 1 Corinthians 13 demonstrates the superiority of love. “Love never fails. But whether there are prophecies, they will fail; whether there are tongues, they will cease; whether there is knowledge, it will vanish away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away. When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known.

And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.”

Love does not end or fail. Therein lies its superiority! Other things will end. Miraculous spiritual gifts would end (and have ended). Faith will end whenever the faith becomes sight. And, hope will end in eternity because that which is seen is no longer hope. Yet, love will not end!

## Conclusion

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Are you doing your part in loving your brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus (especially those in the local church)? We must all determine to love our brethren in the way that has been described in the pages of God’s word. If we will not, we will not be



saved by God's love! And, not only will God be pleased with us (as individuals) if we love our Christian brothers and sisters in the way that He has instructed us to love them, but the local church will be made stronger and be better equipped to properly confront the difficulties that come along.

## Study Questions

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How is love crucial to the strength and well-being of any local church?

### 1. We Are Commanded to Love One Another

Explain God's command to love one another in John 13:34-35.

Explain God's command to love one another in Hebrews 13:1.

Explain God's command to love one another in 1 Peter 4:8.

Explain God's command to love one another in 1 John 3:10-15.

Explain God's command to love one another 1 John 4:20-21.

### 2. What It Means To Love One Another

Explain how 1 John 4:7-11 helps you understand what it means to love your brethren.

Explain how 1 John 3:16-18 helps you understand what it means to love your brethren.

Explain how 1 Corinthians 13 helps you understand what it means to love your brethren.

# Step #6: Engage In Bible Fellowship

God wants every local church to be a strong church. But, in order for a church to be a strong church it must be committed to engaging in Bible fellowship (according to how the Scriptures define this fellowship).

Unfortunately, over the years, the fellowship of the church (especially the local church) has not lived up to the fellowship that is described within the pages of God's word. Perhaps the problems regarding fellowship that are observed within local congregations today can be traced to a few common problems.

First, there is often a misunderstanding of what the local church is. Local churches often view themselves and function as if they are just an organization or institution. As such, they are often cold and lifeless. However, local churches are different than organizations and institutions. A local church is a family – a living organism. It is a community!

Second, there is often a misunderstanding of Bible fellowship. Local churches often engage in physical and social activities in the name of fellowship. However, they often do so in an unauthorized way (i.e. when local churches build and maintain “fellowship halls” that are used for sharing physical meals, gymnasiums, theaters, etc.). Or, they may focus on physical and social things in the name of “fellowship” and neglect true Bible fellowship!

Third, there is often a danger of individualism. This mindset is prevalent in our

culture and it can easily creep into local churches. This mindset seeks what is best for self (i.e. views situations from a perspective of “What can I get out of this?”). Furthermore, this mindset acts with little to no concern about others, often failing to see a need for meaningful relationships with others and accountability with others (often thinking, “I’m just fine on my own”).

Fourth, there is a great danger of isolationism. This is the tendency for some to remove themselves from the company of others. This is an increasing threat in 21<sup>st</sup> century American culture. For instance, fewer people know their neighbors well today compared to times past. This is also having a negative impact on local churches. It is not uncommon for members of local churches to be relative strangers to one another because they do not spend much time together and get to know one another. Perhaps they only see each other during the assemblies of the church.

In this study, I want to emphasize that a local church that engages in true Bible fellowship will take major strides toward building a strong church. This kind of church will be building a strong family unit that is able to withstand much adversity and will be a great blessing to each member (and to its community). Then, as we study this lesson, please make application of it first to your own life – determining that you will follow God's instructions and engage in Bible fellowship. Our goals in this lesson are: (1) To develop a proper understanding of Bible fellowship. (2) To learn what is involved in Bible fellowship. And, (3) to recognize some individual requirements of Bible fellowship.

## **What Is Bible Fellowship?**

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“Fellowship” has to do with a joint-participation in something with others. But, what is this joint-participation in, regarding those who are Christians? Let's carefully evaluate the Scriptures in order to understand the true nature of the fellowship that Christians share with one another.

### ***A picture of Bible fellowship***

In Acts 2, the gospel of Jesus Christ was first publicly preached after Jesus ascended into Heaven by the 12 apostles. Peter's sermon is particularly

recorded in Acts 2. In it, Peter outlined the fact that the one the Jews had put to death (Jesus Christ) has risen from the dead, ascended into Heaven, and now sits at the right hand of God. This Jesus, God has now made both Lord and Christ. Those who really heard this message were cut to the heart and wanted to know what they could do to be saved from the sins they had committed (verse 37). Then, Peter commanded them to repent and for every one of them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of their sins (verse 38).

About 3,000 people were obedient to that message of salvation on that day and were added to Jesus' church. Then, consider the fellowship that is pictured concerning them in verses 42-47. "And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need. So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved."

These new Christians shared a participation in Jesus Christ and all the blessings that God has made available through Him. They were, therefore, holding to the doctrine of God that was being taught by Jesus' apostles, remembering the sacrifice of Jesus Christ by taking the Lord's Supper (breaking bread, verse 42), and sharing in prayer. Then, this joint-participation in Jesus Christ led them to a couple other things. First, they were willing to help those Christians who were in need. Second, they were diligent to be with one another (on a daily basis), even sharing physical meals from house-to-house. Finally, we notice that God was adding those who were being saved to His church (thereby, adding them to this fellowship).

### ***The basis of our fellowship***

Why were these thousands of people suddenly in "fellowship" with one another? They were from different parts of the world, most of them would have been complete strangers, and they possessed varying degrees of earthly wealth (some

had less than they needed and others had more than they needed). Yet, they now shared in the fellowship with God and Jesus Christ! This was the basis of their fellowship – and is the basis for the fellowship that all Christians share today! This is how people with little to nothing in common physically can share in everything that is truly worthwhile.

1 John 1:3-7 explains further. Verse 3 explains how that Jesus Christ was declared so that those who became Christians could have fellowship with the apostles. And, John said that "truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ." So, the sharing that we have is in the Father and Jesus Christ – in having access to all of the spiritual blessings God has provided in Jesus Christ (see Ephesians 1:3). Verses 5-7 explain further: "This is the message which we have heard from Him and declare to you, that God is light and in Him is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and 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 Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin."

God is as separated from evil and sin as light is separated from darkness. Therefore, we cannot think we have any fellowship with God if we live for the ways of sin and darkness. Yet, if we live for the ways of righteousness, we have fellowship with one another. But, why is this so? Think about a triangle. Imagine God being at the top point of the triangle. Then, imagine that two Christians are the bottom points of the triangle. Those who are Christians have fellowship with God because they have been cleansed from their sins by the blood of Jesus Christ and are walking in the light as He is in the light. Then, if two Christians each have fellowship with God, these two are brought into fellowship with one another. Thus, every Christian has this same kind of fellowship with every other Christian – because they all share in having fellowship with God by being forgiven of their past sins and walking in the light of God's holiness! Then, please notice that this fellowship is severed whenever an individual chooses not to have fellowship with God. By walking in darkness (sin), an individual cuts himself/herself off from fellowship with God and from those who are in fellowship with God.

## ***A spiritual relationship with God and with one another***

So, the fellowship that Christians engage in is a spiritual fellowship – not one that is based on something physical. This fellowship centers around a spiritual relationship with God and others who have this spiritual relationship with God. Listen to what Paul wrote to Christians in Romans 8:16-17: “The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together.”

God is the Father of all those who are Christians and walking in righteousness (compare with 1 John 3:8-10). As such, He has given Christians the promise of an eternal inheritance that is beyond human comprehension (see 1 Peter 1:3-9). Then, not only are Christians children and heirs of God, but we are also joint-heirs with Jesus Christ if we are willing to suffer with Him. In Matthew 12:48-50, Jesus indicated that those who are His disciples and do the will of the Father are His “brother and sister and mother.”

This spiritual relationship with the Father and with Jesus Christ, then, forms the spiritual relationship that Christians have with one another. Consider a few ways this fellowship is depicted in the Scriptures. First, consider that we are part of the same spiritual family. Ephesians 2:19 indicates that the saints (Christians) are “members of the household of God.” We share in a relationship with the Father and with Jesus Christ since we all have God as our Father. Thus, the Scriptures repeatedly make reference to those who are Christians being brothers and sisters.

Second, those who are Christians are depicted as being members of the same body. 1 Corinthians 12:12-27 pictures every Christian as being individually members of the body of Christ. With Jesus Christ as the Head of the body (the church, Colossians 1:18), all Christians are joined together in this body to perform a special function. Each member contributes whatever he/she can in order that the entire body might increase (compare with Ephesians 4:11-16). Yet, although all of the members are individual and separate, they are all interconnected. In fact, Christians are identified as being “members of one another” in Romans 12:4-5 and Ephesians 4:25.

Third, those who are Christians are depicted as being part of the same spiritual house. In fact, the Scriptures even present this “house” as being the temple of God (see 1 Corinthians 3:16-17 and Ephesians 2:19-22). 1 Peter 2:4-5 says that those who are Christians are like “living stones” that are being built up as “a spiritual house.” And, the overall context connects this with the idea that we are being built upon Jesus Christ (who is the chief cornerstone). Again, you can see that there is an interconnectedness that exists between those who are Christians that is based upon a relationship with the Father and with Jesus Christ.

## ***Physical vs. spiritual fellowship***

Now that we have seen the spiritual nature of this fellowship, I want to contrast physical and spiritual fellowship. Remember that “fellowship” refers to a joint-participation in something. It is possible for people to have fellowship in just about anything. People can jointly participate in meals. They can jointly participate in athletic events. They can jointly participate in watching movies and playing games. They can jointly participate in reading books. They can jointly participate in political activism. Yet, we have seen that the fellowship that Christians have with one another (as depicted in the pages of Scripture) is a joint participation in a spiritual relationship with God and Jesus Christ, which brings them into a spiritual relationship with one another. This is true Bible fellowship.

Yet, whenever most people think about “fellowship,” they tend to think about physical things. Certainly, in today’s world, there are many churches that put their focus on engaging in physical activities – and call this “fellowship.” However, the reality is that these physical activities can be enjoyed with *anyone*. Only man-made physical barriers would restrict this kind of physical fellowship. For instance, any two people in this world (if they agreed to do so) could share a physical meal together, could play a game of basketball together, could watch a movie together, etc. Therefore, there is nothing all that special about physical fellowship. Certainly, this is not the kind of fellowship that the Scriptures speak so highly of!

In contrast, spiritual fellowship (as has been described) can *only* be enjoyed between those who are Christians. Only those who have been forgiven

by the blood of Jesus Christ and walk in the light of God's holiness share in this relationship with one another. This, as we have already seen, is a fellowship that is to be greatly preferred over physical fellowship!

That said, the spiritual bond that exists between those who are Christians ought to cause Christians to want to spend time with one another physically as well. This is exactly what we observed in Acts 2:42-47. Those Christians who shared in the fellowship with God and Jesus Christ were together every day and even shared physical meals with one another. Still, it is important to note that the church is not authorized to provide for physical fellowship (i.e. building and maintaining kitchens and gymnasiums, providing social meals, organizing social and recreational activities, etc.). Instead, these social and recreational types of activities are entirely the responsibility of individual Christians.

## Things Involved In Bible Fellowship

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Now that we have a better understanding of what true Bible fellowship is, we need to consider the fact that there are responsibilities that those who are Christians have toward one another. As we go through the elements involved in this fellowship, recognize how each one is a tremendous blessing to those who share in a relationship with the Father and with Jesus Christ. These are all designed so that those who are children of God will help one another get to Heaven and so that God will be glorified through His people. Then, please recognize that this spiritual fellowship that we have does have responsibilities – and you must do your part in fulfilling every one of these responsibilities in order to please God.

### ***“One another” responsibilities***

There are many responsibilities that the Bible gives to those who are part of this fellowship toward others who are part of this fellowship. These are “one another” responsibilities. And, please note that each one of these responsibilities belongs to every Christian toward every other Christian (as there is ability and opportunity). Consider just a few of these “one another” responsibilities.

First, we must love one another. 1 Peter 2:17 instructs that we love “the brotherhood.” Jesus instructed His disciples to “love one another” in John 13:34-35. As discussed in the previous lesson, this love for those who are Christians is essential to living in a way that is pleasing to God and it is essential in order to fulfill all of the other responsibilities God has given us toward one another. We must have a sacrificial love for every brother and sister in Jesus Christ to do whatever is in their best interests.

Second, we must receive one another. Romans 15:7 says, “Therefore receive one another, just as Christ also received us, to the glory of God.” Not all Christians are alike. Although we must all be living according to the doctrines and commandments of God, we have differences in personality, in opinions, in preferences, in background, etc. And, as long as these things do not conflict with God's teachings, these are all acceptable in the body of Christ. Yet, many people often do not like to receive those who are different from them. They want, instead, to cast them away. However, God wants His people to receive all others who are His people – because we are all one in Jesus Christ (Galatians 3:26-29)!

Third, we must encourage one another. Hebrews 3:12-13 says, “Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; but exhort one another daily, while it is called ‘Today,’ lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.” All Christians face temptations, trials, and persecutions. The devil is actively working to try to pull each one away from following Jesus Christ – every day. Fortunately, those who are Christians have brothers and sisters who care enough about them that they will work to encourage one another to follow the Lord – also on a daily basis. This encouragement can and should be accomplished both inside and outside of the assemblies of the local church.

Fourth, we must bear one another's burdens. Galatians 6:2 says, “Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.” While God promises that He will hear our prayers and that He does care for us, it is a tremendous blessing to be part of a spiritual family (especially a local spiritual family – a local church). Our brothers and sisters can also help us overcome the burdens that we all bear on a daily basis. As brothers and sisters, we ought to care for

one another and help each other overcome the obstacles that we face.

Fifth, we must teach and admonish one another. Colossians 3:16 says, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.” Christians have the responsibility to teach one another Bible truths and warn each other concerning the same, encouraging each other to follow the teachings of God’s word. One of the ways that we accomplish this task is by singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with one another.

Sixth, we must correct one another. James 5:19-20 says, “Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins.” Those who are Christians should care about whether a brother or sister in Christ remains faithful to the Lord or not. If he/she decides to sin, his/her brothers and sisters should care enough to go to him/her and try to turn him/her back to the Lord!

Seventh, we must forgive one another. Ephesians 4:32 says, “And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you.” If one who is in sin turns from that sin, others have the responsibility to forgive. And, the forgiveness that must be offered is the same kind of forgiveness God offers to those who are in Christ Jesus – a complete forgiveness. We must not continue to treat such a one as if he/she had committed that sin.

Eighth, we must care for one another. 1 Corinthians 12:25 says that the members of the body of Christ “should have the same care for one another.” As other points we have already considered demonstrate, Christians must care for one another in every way. Physically, Christians must care for one another – even to the point of helping those who are in need (see Acts 2:44-45; Acts 4:32-35; Romans 12:15). Spiritually, Christians are to care for the spiritual well-being of their brethren (demonstrated through encouraging one another, correcting the erring, teaching and admonishing one another, etc.).

Ninth, we must serve one another. Galatians 5:13 says, “For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.” As

many of these points have already demonstrated, Christians will be serving one another – just as Jesus was willing to serve (see John 13:1-17 and Matthew 20:27-28). This service, too, will be accomplished both physically and spiritually (according to the abilities and opportunities of each one).

Tenth, we must be hospitable to one another. 1 Peter 4:9 says, “Be hospitable to one another without grumbling.” God wants His people to be generous to one another and provide opportunities to be with one another. And, notice that this hospitality must be done “without grumbling.” So, it must be done joyfully rather than begrudgingly. This hospitality that is to be shown will provide opportunities to fulfill other “one another” responsibilities because (through hospitality) Christians will share deeper relationships with one another in Jesus Christ.

## **Worship**

Another responsibility involved in Bible fellowship is worship. Being in fellowship with God, Christians are expected to worship Him. In John 4:23-24, Jesus taught, “But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.” Yes, God wants His children to be devoted to worshipping Him according to His standard of truth and in a heartfelt/sincere way.

Then, those Christians who have joined themselves to a local church have the responsibility to worship God collectively. In fact, this is one of the great blessings of being part of a local church – the opportunity to worship God with others who are in fellowship with God. In the assemblies of the local church, churches are taught to worship God by singing, praying, taking of the Lord’s Supper, giving, and preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ.

As a Christian and part of a local church, listen to what the Hebrew writer said concerning your responsibility to attend these assemblies: “And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching” (Hebrews 10:24-25). Christians must consider how they can stir each other up to accomplish good works. One of the ways we

## Individual Requirements For Bible Fellowship

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do this is by faithfully attending the assemblies of the local church. In fact, this passage identifies that it is sinful for those who are members of local churches to willfully neglect (stay away from) the assemblies of the local church. Willfully neglecting these assemblies fails to show the proper devotion and consideration of God or other Christian brothers and sisters!

### **Work**

Everyone who is in fellowship with God is required to be actively involved in God's work. After telling the Ephesian Christians that they had been saved by grace through faith, Paul told them that they were God's "workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10). Similarly, Paul told Titus that Jesus Christ gave Himself to die for us so that "He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works" (Titus 2:14). The Corinthian Christians were told to "be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord" (1 Corinthians 15:58). And, the Philippian Christians were told to "work out" their salvations "with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12).

Certainly, then, individual Christians (who are in fellowship with God) have the responsibility of laboring for the Lord every day of their lives. This includes the works of teaching people the gospel of Jesus Christ, helping those who are in need, visiting, edifying the brethren, etc. The Bible speaks at great length about these individual works that we have the responsibility to perform as individual Christians.

Then, it is important to recognize that there is a specific work that God has given local churches to perform collectively. Therefore, those who have joined themselves together with other brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ in a local church have the responsibility to help the church fulfill these works. There are only three areas of work that God has authorized for local churches to fulfill collectively: Teaching the lost, edifying the saved, and showing benevolence to needy Christians. Every member of a local body (church) of Christ has the responsibility to help the church fulfill these works to the best of his/her ability.

If local churches want to be strong, the members of those churches will have to be committed to all the points of engaging in Bible fellowship. But, this does require a commitment from individual members. So, let's evaluate some individual requirements for Bible fellowship.

### ***Be actively engaged in this fellowship***

The spiritual fellowship that God has given people the opportunity to partake of with Him and with other Christians does require active involvement and participation. It is not something that happens by chance. It requires something of everyone who is involved. No Christian (who desires to be pleasing to God) has the option of sitting on the sidelines and refusing to share in the responsibilities we have toward one another. Instead, God has designed it so that we will interact with one another!

For instance, consider your fellowship with God. You do not enjoy all of the blessings of this fellowship unless you choose to do your part. God offers forgiveness, peace, hope, joy, and eternal life to all those who are in fellowship with Him. But, if you do not actively engage yourself to walk in the light of God's holiness, you will not receive the blessings of this fellowship.

In the same way, there are tremendous blessings involved in being in fellowship with your brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ. But, you cannot enjoy the blessings of this fellowship unless you are also committed to engaging in Bible fellowship. You do this by fulfilling the responsibilities that have just been outlined previously (along with other responsibilities we were unable to discuss).

So, you must be actively looking to do your part in this fellowship. Please recognize that in order for the body of Christ to function at its greatest capacity, He needs every member of His body to be contributing in whatever ways he/she is capable. For instance, Ephesians 4:16 speaks of the growth that happens in the body of Christ whenever every joint and part in the body does its share!

## ***An approachable personality***

If you are going to do your part in the fellowship of the body of Christ, your character and personality must be such that your brothers and sisters in Christ can feel comfortable approaching you. Think back to all of the responsibilities we have discussed as part of this fellowship (i.e. encouraging, correcting, serving, etc.). Many of these will require some sort of interaction between two Christians.

So, whenever we are approached by our brothers and sisters or whenever we approach them, we must not have the demeanor of being a grouch, arrogant, judgmental, uncaring, hypocritical, angry, etc. Certainly, these types of characteristics will hinder our fellowship. Our brethren would not want or feel comfortable to approach us – and would not feel comfortable being approached. Instead, our demeanor should be such that we are kind, compassionate, loving, caring, sincere, etc.

## ***A transparent lifestyle***

It is common for Christians not to want their brothers and sisters to know what is going on in their lives. They live in isolation by keeping to themselves. They don't want their brethren to know about their struggles, their failures, etc. They take offense to being asked questions and refuse to consider themselves accountable to others. Yet, as we have seen in the responsibilities God has given those who are Christians toward one another, this spiritual fellowship does involve transparency. While this does not mean that Christians should be busybodies or that brethren need to know everything that is going on in one another's lives, it does mean that we should be close enough that we want to have our brethren intimately involved in our lives.

So, we need to develop transparency in our lives. We need to recognize that our brothers and sisters in Christ want to help and encourage us to do what is right. But, they will have a difficult time doing this when they are blocked from our lives. We need to recognize that God wants us to be accountable to our brothers and sisters – because they will help us go to Heaven! Then, we must recognize that transparency works two ways – if we want others to trust us enough to be transparent, we will need to trust them enough to be transparent.

## ***A selfless attitude***

We have seen that there are many responsibilities in this fellowship toward one another. But, it will be impossible to properly fulfill any of these unless we are putting others ahead of ourselves. For, if we are focused only or primarily on ourselves, we will not be able to see what our brethren are in need of (physically or spiritually).

So, we need to count others as more significant than ourselves and choose to be servants of our brethren. Philippians 2:3-4 says, "Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others."

## ***A commitment to be together with brethren***

Think back over all of the responsibilities that are involved in true Bible fellowship. Which ones can be accomplished without spending any time together with our brothers and sisters in Christ? Which ones require time to be spent with our brethren? While some of these responsibilities of Bible fellowship can be fulfilled whenever Christians come together in the assemblies of the local church, not all of them can be – at least not to the greatest extent possible.

So, we need to commit ourselves to spending time with our brethren. Certainly, those who recognize the blessing of having brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ ought to want to be together. For instance, how can we possibly encourage one another on a daily basis to live for the Lord if we are not seeing or talking to one another every day? Or, how can we bear one another's burdens if we have not spent time with one another to know what those burdens are? As briefly mentioned previously, hospitality is a key to fulfilling many of the "one another" responsibilities that we have in Jesus Christ (see Romans 12:13 and 1 Peter 4:9).

## **Conclusion**

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Are you doing your part to engage in true Bible fellowship (especially with regard to your brothers and sisters in the local church)? Remember



that the local church is a community and a family of disciples who are all striving to follow the Lord and make it to Heaven – and each one has the responsibility to help one another accomplish this mission! Therefore, there is a great blessing and responsibility that each Christian has toward Bible fellowship. And, if every member will be fully engaged, the church will be built up stronger!

## Study Questions

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How is engaging in Bible fellowship crucial to the strength and well-being of any local church?

### 1. What Is Bible Fellowship?

Discuss the picture of Bible fellowship given in Acts 2:42-47.

What is the basis of our fellowship?

Describe the spiritual relationship Christians have with God and with one another?

Contrast physical and spiritual fellowship? Which is true Bible fellowship? Why is it preferable?

### 2. Things Involved In Bible Fellowship

List and briefly explain some “one another” responsibilities involved in this fellowship.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.
- 9.
- 10.

How is worship involved in Bible fellowship?

How is work involved in Bible fellowship?

### 3. Individual Requirements For Bible Fellowship

Why must you be actively engaged in this fellowship?

Why is an approachable personality important to this fellowship?

Why is a transparent lifestyle important to this fellowship?

Why is a selfless attitude important to this fellowship?

Why is a commitment to being together with brethren important to this fellowship?

## Steps To Building A Strong Church Series

# Step #7: Be Scripturally Organized

God wants every local church to be a strong church. But, in order for a church to be a strong church, it must be Scripturally organized (according to the Bible's blueprint for the local church).

God has provided a blueprint for the organizational structure of local congregations. This organizational structure is more than just a "good idea." This is crucial in order for a local church to be as strong as it can be. Certainly, how a local church is organized must have full Bible authority with it. That said, it should also be noted that it is not always possible for congregations to have the full organizational structure in place. For, God would rather a congregation be without elders and deacons if there is not a plurality of men who fulfill the qualifications He has given. And, congregations have Bible authority to exist and function without elders and deacons (as they did in the New Testament).

Philippians 1:1 provides an overview of the blueprint God has given for the organizational structure of the local church. "Paul and Timothy, bondservants of Jesus Christ, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons." Saints (Christians), bishops, and deacons. This is what God desires there to be present in every local congregation. For instance, Acts 14:23 says that elders (the same as bishops) were appointed "in every church."

Even though congregations are authorized to exist without elders and deacons, this is not what God desires. Titus 1:5 states, "For this reason I left you in

Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint elders in every city as I commanded you." If a congregation is not fully organized, this should only be a temporary condition – and it should be actively working to develop men to fulfill these important roles.

Unfortunately, many congregations go many years without being fully organized according to God's blueprint. Sometimes this is legitimately because there are not enough men who are qualified. Sometimes it is because there are not enough men who desire to fulfill these responsibilities (perhaps they want somebody else to do the work instead of doing it themselves). Sometimes it is because the qualifications are perverted in such a way that no one can be viewed as being qualified for the offices. Sometimes it is a combination of these reasons (and perhaps others) that prevents a local church from being fully organized. Regardless, such a congregation needs to be focused on overcoming the obstacles and be united in becoming fully organized according to God's blueprint.

Then, even when congregations are fully organized according to this blueprint, there are many times that the right work is not being done in each area. Sometimes there is a neglect of the God-given work. Sometimes there is a perversion of the work God has assigned. For instance, some congregations have men who are called "elders," but they do not truly do the work of shepherding. Some congregations have men who are called "deacons," but they do not truly do the work of serving. All congregations of God's people have saints, but many saints are not fulfilling their roles and doing their work. Then, many congregations work with evangelists who do very little to fulfill their work of preaching the gospel of Christ outside of the sermons that are given as part of the congregation's assemblies.

So, you can already begin to see that the issue of being Scripturally organized is one that affects a congregation's overall strength. How great it is whenever a congregation is devoted to fully implementing God's blueprint for the organizational structure of a local church. This congregation will have clearly defined roles for each member and be led in a way that is beneficial to every member and to God!

In this lesson, I want to consider the blueprint of what a local congregation will look like if it is

Scripturally organized (according to the full blueprint of the New Testament). Then, as we study this lesson, please first evaluate yourself to see if you are serving God by fulfilling your role in the local church properly. Or, is there something God desires for you to do that you are neglecting? Our goals in this lesson are: (1) To understand the qualifications and work of elders. (2) To understand the qualifications and work of deacons. (3) To understand the qualifications and work of the saints. And, (4) to understand the qualifications and work of evangelists.

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## Elders

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Those who are elders lead the local congregation. This group of men can be properly called “elders,” “presbyters,” “bishops,” “pastors,” “shepherds,” and “overseers.” All of these terms are used interchangeably in the Scriptures in reference to the same group of people. However, God is not just interested in a congregation having men with these titles. Instead, He wants every congregation to have men who meet the qualifications He has given to become elders and to do the work that He has assigned to elders. If a congregation will do this, it will be a stronger church!

### ***Qualifications of elders***

God has not left identifying the men who should be appointed to this very important work up to mankind’s own reasoning and judgment alone. Instead, God has been very specific in identifying the characteristics that a congregation must look for in order for someone to be appointed to the office of the eldership. And, it is important to note also that God has always identified that there should be multiple (more than one) elders in each local congregation.

These qualifications are identified in two passages. 1 Timothy 3:1-7 says, “ This is a faithful saying: If a man desires the position of a bishop, he desires a good work. A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober-minded, of good behavior, hospitable, able to teach; not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, but gentle, not quarrelsome, not covetous; one who rules his own house well, having his children in submission with all reverence (for if a

man does not know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God?); not a novice, lest being puffed up with pride he fall into the same condemnation as the devil. Moreover he must have a good testimony among those who are outside, lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil.”

Titus 1:5-9 says, “For this reason I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint elders in every city as I commanded you — if a man is blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children not accused of dissipation or insubordination. For a bishop must be blameless, as a steward of God, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, but hospitable, a lover of what is good, sober-minded, just, holy, self-controlled, holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict.”

There are two main areas of qualifications that must be considered for an individual to be appointed as an elder in a local church: Family qualifications and personal qualifications. In both of these areas, recognize that an elder (though not a sinless individual who always makes perfect decisions about everything – and not someone with a perfect family) does raise the bar for the rest of the congregation. He has demonstrated in his personal and family life the dedication and faithful service to Jesus Christ that the rest of the congregation ought to imitate.

So, in his family life, this individual has demonstrated that the Lord comes first. He has demonstrated what it is to be a good husband. He has demonstrated what it is to be a good father. And, notice that the reason it is so important to God for elders to be the husband of one wife and have faithful children is to demonstrate that he knows how to lead souls to serve the Lord. After all, that is the work he will be doing as an elder – leading souls in the service of the Lord Jesus Christ!

Then, in his personal life, this individual has demonstrated that the Lord comes first. He has demonstrated a commitment to live a life of holiness (according to God’s standard for holiness). He is someone with a good reputation. He is someone who has demonstrated his love for the good things the Lord also loves. He has demonstrated self-discipline (i.e. over his temper, with his habits, etc.). He has demonstrated a love for the brethren in showing

hospitality to them. He has shown knowledge and faithfulness regarding the word of God. In all of the personal qualifications that are identified by God as being necessary for such a one, realize that these are things God wants from every person who serves Him. So, those who are elders have proved that they are good models for the rest of the congregation to imitate – and the congregation knows that it can go to these individuals to find help in these same areas.

### **Work of elders**

Whenever you read through the New Testament (and depending on which translation of the Bible you are reading from), you will come across a few different English words. Initially, you may believe that each one of these words refers to a different “office” or special position in the local church. However, upon closer examination, you should conclude that the terms “elders,” “presbyters,” “overseers,” “bishops,” “shepherds,” and “pastors” all refer to this same office! While all of these names are Scriptural to use, I will use the term “elder” or “elders” through most of this lesson when referring to this office, for the sake of simplicity.

Why are all of these words used in our English Bibles in reference to the same office? There are two reasons. First, sometimes there are archaic (no longer commonly used) and modern (more commonly used) English words that mean the same thing. For instance, both “presbyter” and “elder” refer to someone who is older – “presbyter” is an archaic English word. “Bishop” is an archaic English word for the term “overseer.” “Pastor” is an archaic English word for “shepherd.” Second, there are actually three Greek words used in reference to this office. Why are three separate Greek words used for the same office? Each one provides useful information about the people who will fill this office and the work they will be doing. For instance, consider two passages that demonstrate these terms being used interchangeably.

First, consider Acts 20. In this passage, verse 17 identifies that Paul (when he was in Miletus) “sent to Ephesus and called for the elders of the church.” Verse 18 says that when they had come to him, Paul began to speak with them (a discourse that would continue through verse 35). Then, notice what Paul tells these “elders” in verse 28: “Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the

Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.” So, these “elders” were made “overseers” so that they would “shepherd the church of God.”

Next, consider 1 Peter 5:1-4: “The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock; and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away.” Again notice that when Peter wrote to exhort the “elders” that he instructs them to “Shepherd the flock of God...serving as overseers.”

Both of these passages demonstrate how these three words are all used interchangeably with reference to the men who fill this office in the local church. Each one of these words helps us to understand the nature of this office within a local congregation. What we can conclude is that the men who will fill this office must be older men who have gained life experience (and experience in Christian living), who are committed to watching over the souls of those within the local congregation. These individuals take the lead in a local congregation and serve as models for the rest of the congregation to imitate and follow. Briefly consider these three Greek words with me.

**(1) Presbuteros.** This is the Greek word that is commonly translated either “presbyter” (archaic English word) or “elder” (modern English word). The Greek word generally refers to someone who is older. In fact, context will determine whether this word is used in its general sense (simply referring to someone who is older) or whether it refers specifically to this office in a local church. Therefore, when this word is used specifically in reference to this office in the local church, it tells us that an older man (someone who has life experience) will fill this office. This is a man who has had experience dealing with the trials of life, experience in raising a godly family, experience in overcoming temptations, experience in the work of the Lord, and experience in leading/shepherding (i.e. within his own family). Now, this experience has worked to prepare him to lead the local congregation in ways that please God.

**(2) Episcopos.** This is the Greek word that is commonly translated either “bishop” (archaic English word) or “overseer” (modern English word). The Greek word refers to a man who is charged with the responsibility of seeing that the things done by others are done appropriately. Specifically, as this word is used in the New Testament with reference to this office in the local church, it emphasizes the work that will be done by these individuals. He oversees the congregation. He does so by teaching and admonishing the congregation, showing them the right ways of the Lord. He corrects those he sees to be living for sin. He shows Christians how they ought to be living by providing a right example of godliness. He makes sure that the congregation is accomplishing the right things (i.e. doing the right work and worshiping in a God-approved way).

**(3) Poimen.** This is the Greek word that is commonly translated either “pastor” (archaic English word) or “shepherd” (modern English word). This Greek word simply has reference to the one who does the work of shepherding. But, while it generally refers to a physical shepherd who leads physical sheep, this word is also used to identify the men who serve as elders and spiritually shepherd the flock (the local church). Like “episcopos,” this word emphasizes the work that these individuals have been given to do. This individual, therefore, smells like sheep. That is, he knows the members of the congregation (remember, the elder must be hospitable). He knows the challenges they face and he cares deeply for each one. So, he leads the flock of God (not allowing the flock to lead or do whatever it wishes). He tends to the needs of the flock (spiritually). He cares for the flock by doing whatever is in the best interest of each one of the sheep. And, he feeds the flock by providing it with the proper nourishment through instruction, admonition, and correction (remember that the elder must be able to teach).

These three words help us to understand the nature of the work that elders will be doing. Now, specifically consider some things the Scriptures identify as work that elders will be accomplishing.

**(1) They are to exercise oversight.** 1 Peter 5:2-3 says, “Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.” They are not to be lords over

the congregation; but, they must act as loving shepherds. Thus, they provide direction for the congregation and make sure that the things done by the congregation and individual members of the flock are according to God’s will.

**(2) They must be examples.** Hebrews 13:7 says, “Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of their conduct.” This commandment is applicable to elders in a local church. The members of the local church are expected to be paying attention to the ways in which the elders are living – and striving to imitate their godly examples. Certainly, the elders are expected to be godly men who are demonstrating a high standard of Christian living for the rest of the congregation to be able to follow! Just go back and consider the specific qualifications that we studied to see how God expects the elders to be living.

**(3) They lead and watch over the souls of the congregation.** Hebrews 13:17 says, “Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you.” Clearly, those who are elders have been given the oversight of the congregation (as demonstrated from 1 Peter 5:2-3). Not only does this involve the things which are done collectively by the congregation; but, this passage also demonstrates that the elders must be watching out for the souls of each member of the congregation. Again, they are to be shepherding each sheep in the flock (the congregation). The seriousness involved in this is seen in the fact that they will give an account for how they have carried out this work.

**(4) They will watch out for danger.** When Paul was meeting with the elders of the Ephesian church, consider what he told them in Acts 20:28-31: “Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears.” Part of exercising oversight in the local church will be watching for any danger to the flock.

There are certainly many “savage wolves” (spiritually speaking) that would love to come in and destroy a local church (i.e. through false teaching). In addition, Paul warns that they watch out for danger that could come from among themselves as well (either from within the congregation or the eldership itself).

**(5) They must stand boldly for the truth.**

Consider what is said about elders in Titus 1:9-11: “holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict. For there are many insubordinate, both idle talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision, whose mouths must be stopped, who subvert whole households, teaching things which they ought not, for the sake of dishonest gain.” The elders (who are not new converts to Christ, according to their God-given qualifications) must have a solid understanding of the truth – and be willing and able to stand against those who are speaking or acting contrary, for the good of the flock!

**(6) They must fulfill their responsibilities willingly and with joy.** Go back and review 1 Peter 5:2-3 and Hebrews 13:17. In fact, when we considered the qualifications in 1 Timothy 3:1-7, notice that the passage began by saying, “If a man desires the position of a bishop....” There must be a desire to serve God and the local church in this capacity. Certainly, this is not an easy work to do and one that will take a willingness and joy to accomplish – as well as to endure all of the cares and trials that will come when an individual serves in this capacity.

## Deacons

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Not only is the office of elders part of the organizational structure of the local church; but, the office of deacons is also part of the God-given organizational structure for the local church. While the Scriptures do not give us as much detail regarding the office of deacons as it does regarding the office of the eldership, we will spend some time discovering what we can know about the role of deacons in the local church.

### *Qualifications of deacons*

Just as we saw regarding the elders, God has given specific qualifications for the deacons of a

local congregation. These qualifications are given in 1 Timothy 3:8-13. Notice each one of these qualifications as you read this passage and understand that each one of these qualifications is absolutely essential for an individual to rightly be appointed as a deacon!

1 Timothy 3:8-13 says, “Likewise deacons must be reverent, not double-tongued, not given to much wine, not greedy for money, holding the mystery of the faith with a pure conscience. But let these also first be tested; then let them serve as deacons, being found blameless. Likewise, their wives must be reverent, not slanderers, temperate, faithful in all things. Let deacons be the husbands of one wife, ruling their children and their own houses well. For those who have served well as deacons obtain for themselves a good standing and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus.”

Like elders, the individuals who fulfill this role will be good examples to the congregation. They will be honorable men who have demonstrated their commitment to serve God and their trustworthiness. However, unlike elders, deacons can also be younger men with young families. Notice that God has not required their families to have grown and matured to the point of becoming faithful Christians themselves. They are required to be married and have children, but are only required that they rule their children and houses well.

### ***Work of deacons***

Since elders have the work of oversight and shepherding the congregation, what work do the deacons have? There is actually very little information given in the Scriptures concerning the specific work these men will accomplish. However, we are not without *any* information on the subject. In fact, God has given us enough information that we can make right conclusions about the nature of their work.

First, you must consider the Greek word for “deacon.” The Greek word refers to someone who is a servant. For instance, this word is used of a woman in Romans 16:1-2. Thus, it has a general use to refer to anyone who is a servant. Then, this same idea must also be applied to its specific use regarding deacons within the local church (in the sense Paul was addressing in 1 Timothy 3:8-13). Therefore, these **men** serve as special servants of the church.

Second, the passage in Acts 6:1-7 will prove to be helpful as you study the work of deacons: “Now in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplying, there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution. Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, ‘It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables. Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business; but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word.’ And the saying pleased the whole multitude. And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch, whom they set before the apostles; and when they had prayed, they laid hands on them. Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith.”

Though these seven men are not called “deacons” in the text, their work fits well with the service deacons should be performing as servants of the church. For instance, part of the work of the local church is to take care of needy Christians. Notice that these seven men were able to focus on this work and make sure it was accomplished – so that the apostles could focus on their God-given work and responsibilities. Thus, the work of these seven contributed to the word of God being spread and individuals being saved! In the same way, deacons will serve the church in ways that will help ensure that needs are met and that others (i.e. the elders) are able to focus on their God-given responsibilities, thereby contributing to the spiritual good that is accomplished!

## Saints

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Once again, Philippians 1:1 mentioned bishops (elders), deacons, and saints – as Paul addressed the local church in Philippi. Therefore, let’s give some consideration to the things God has said about “saints” in a local church – though we will not be discussing everything God teaches about the role of individual Christians or their role in local

churches. A brief overview should be sufficient for the purpose of this study.

### ***Qualifications of saints***

Every Christian is a “saint,” according to the teachings of Scripture. For instance, the apostle Paul said he was writing (in part) to the “saints” in the church at Philippi in Philippians 1:1. Was he writing to the living or to the dead? So, lest anyone should be confused by this point, please understand that a saint does *not* refer to any “office” within a local church. Instead, it simply refers to Christians.

Therefore, the “qualifications” to be a “saint” are the requirements God gives for an individual to become a Christian. Anyone, then, who has heard the word of God (Romans 10:17), believed in Jesus Christ as the Son of God (John 8:24), repented of sin (Acts 17:30), confessed Christ (Romans 10:9-10), and been immersed in water for the forgiveness of sin (Acts 2:38) has become a saint. Then, after taking those steps, God requires saints to live lives of faithful obedience to God – being faithful until death (Revelation 2:10). This includes living holy lives (1 Peter 1:15-16), zealously working for the Lord (Titus 2:14), devoting their lives entirely to Christ Jesus (Galatians 2:20), and keeping themselves in the love of God by being obedient to Him (Jude 1:21).

### ***The work of saints***

The Bible is full of instructions concerning the work of individual Christians. However, just consider a few basic points with me for the purpose of this lesson. All Christians must fulfill these responsibilities within the local church they have joined themselves to! This is just as important to building a strong church as the other things we have been considering in this lesson.

The work of saints includes: (1) Taking an active role in teaching the gospel (Acts 8:4), (2) doing good to everyone according to opportunity (Galatians 6:10), (3) serving others (John 13:14-15), (4) submitting to the elders of the congregation (Hebrews 13:17), (5) attending and participating in the assemblies of the local church (Hebrews 10:24-25), (6) fulfilling God-given responsibilities toward the brethren (Galatians 6:2; Hebrews 3:12-13), (7) helping to restore those who have fallen away from Christ (Galatians 6:1; James 5:19-20), (8) being zealous for every good work (Titus 2:14), (9) doing what each one is capable of contributing (Ephesians

4:16), (10) fulfilling all the God-given responsibilities relative to living a faithful Christian life (Revelation 2:10), etc.

You see, every individual Christian who is a member of a local church has something he/she can contribute to the local congregation! Each one has different abilities, opportunities, knowledge levels, interests, strengths, etc. that can benefit the group. If each Christian would simply do his/her part, the local congregation could be all that God desires for it to be! However, if even one member of the church decides not to do his/her part, the local congregation will not function at its maximum ability! Along with 1 Corinthians 12:12-27, Ephesians 4:16 describes the benefit of every member supplying his/her part: “from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love.”

## Evangelists

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Bishops, deacons, and saints represent the organizational structure of the local church (i.e. Philippians 1:1). However, I want to spend just a few minutes discussing the role of evangelists – as they often interact with local congregations. In this section, I want to create some basic awareness. But, we simply will not be able to study this in great detail at this time.

### ***Qualifications of evangelists***

Evangelists are often part of local churches. This is fully authorized by God. For instance, Philip (an evangelist) labored in the region of Samaria (Acts 8:5). Later, Philip went to Caesarea (Acts 8:40). Then, in Acts 21 (around 20 years after the events in Acts 8), Philip continued to work preaching God’s word in Caesarea (see verse 8). Perhaps this was with one local church, perhaps it was not. Definitively, the Scriptures say that Paul labored in Ephesus, working with the congregation there for three years (Acts 20:31). Other examples could also be provided; but, suffice these to help demonstrate the point that evangelists worked in a specific region for extended periods of time.

The term “evangelist” simply refers to a preacher of the gospel (someone who brings the good news of Christ to others). In this way, every Christian should be an evangelist – as all Christians have the responsibility to teach the gospel to the lost (see Acts 8:4 and 2 Timothy 2:24-26). However, the term is particularly applied to those who make their livelihoods through preaching the gospel. The Bible gives authority for individuals to be supported financially by their brethren and by local churches so that they can commit to a full-time work of proclaiming the gospel to others (see Philippians 4:15-16; 2 Corinthians 11:8) – and references them as having a role in the edification of the church (Ephesians 4:11-16).

However, although these individuals may be involved in working with a local church to preach the gospel “full-time” in a specific area, these individuals have no special authority over a local church in their roles as evangelists! Yet, because of their frequent involvement in the work of local churches, it is profitable to take a moment to consider their “qualifications” and their work, according to the Scriptures.

For those who wish to do the work of a full-time evangelist, the Scriptures do inform us of some basic “qualifications” for them. Although these are not listed in a single passage or two (like was true concerning elders and deacons), there are many things said of these individuals (especially in the apostle Paul’s letters to the young evangelist, Timothy).

Consider some things that could properly be considered to be qualifications for those who wish to do the work of an evangelist: (1) It must be a man (1 Corinthians 14:34-35; 1 Timothy 2:11-12), (2) he must keep himself pure (1 Timothy 5:22), (3) he must be diligent (2 Timothy 2:15-16), (4) he must be steadfast in faith, loyal in truth, refusing false speculative doctrines and uncompromising toward those who teach them (1 Timothy 1:3-11; 1 Timothy 4:1, 6; 2 Timothy 3:14-17; 2 Timothy 4:1-5), (5) he is to be an example to those who believe (1 Timothy 4:12), (6) he is to exercise care for both himself and for what he teaches (1 Timothy 4:16), (7) he is to fulfill the instructions in 2 Timothy 2:22-26, etc.

As you carefully consider these passages, you should consider that these qualifications are of both a personal nature and applicable to his treatment of God’s word. He must be faithful to the Lord both as



a Christian and as an evangelist. He must, therefore, faithfully and accurately teach God's word to others.

### ***The work of evangelists***

The work that God has given evangelists to accomplish can be seen through a study of the entire New Testament. Yet, again, Paul's letters to Timothy (and also to Titus) prove to be particularly beneficial in an attempt to summarize the work of an evangelist.

Consider the following points regarding the work of an evangelist: (1) He is to preach the word faithfully and without regard for how it is received (2 Timothy 4:1-4), (2) he is to help complete what is lacking within the organizational structures of local churches (Titus 1:5), (3) he is to give himself entirely to the work (1 Timothy 4:13-16), (4) he is to warn against apostasy (1 Timothy 4:1-6), (5) he is to guard the faith (1 Timothy 1:3; 1 Timothy 6:20-21), (6) he is to handle the word of truth correctly (2 Timothy 2:15), (7) he is to assist in the building up of local congregations (1 Timothy 1:3; Titus 1:5), etc.

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## **Conclusion**

Are you doing your part for the local church to be fully organized according to God's blueprint? Whenever this blueprint is followed and everyone fulfills their God-given roles, the church is made stronger (Ephesians 4:11-16). Therefore, every member must carefully evaluate himself/herself to see whether he/she is doing the best he/she can do to fulfill his/her role in the local church. If every member will be so dedicated, the local church will be built up and made stronger!

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## **Study Questions**

How is being Scripturally organized crucial to the strength and well-being of any local church?

### **1. Elders**

What are the qualifications for being an elder?

What is the work of elders?

### **2. Deacons**

What are the qualifications for being a deacon?

What is the work of deacons?

### **3. Saints**

What are the qualifications for being a saint?

What is the work of saints?

### **4. Evangelists**

What are the qualifications for being an evangelist?

What is the work of evangelists?

Steps To Building A Strong Church  
Series

# Step #8: Keep The Church Pure

God wants every church to be a strong church. But, in order for a church to be a strong church it must also be a pure church (with every member of the church dedicated to purity).

God desires and expects His people to be pure. At Mount Sinai, God called the nation of Israel a “holy nation” (Exodus 19:6). Later, God commanded them, “For I am the Lord who brings you up out of the land of Egypt, to be your God. You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy” (Leviticus 11:45). As God’s holy nation, the Israelites were to be able to make a distinction between what was clean and what was unclean (Leviticus 10:10; Numbers 19:20). In the same way, God expects His people today (those who are Christians) to be pure. He, likewise, expects that Christians be holy as He is holy (1 Peter 1:15-16; Ephesians 1:3-6). For, it was Jesus’ mission to present the church “to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish” (Ephesians 5:27).

In fact, keeping the church pure is such an important task, this is a main responsibility of the elders (shepherds) of the local church. These have been given the work of overseeing the local church. In doing so, they must make sure that none come into the church so as to lead the members of the congregation into sin – and they must make sure that no one within the congregation leads the congregation into sin (see Acts 20:28-31). Those who are elders of a local church must be willing and

able to silence those who lead members of the church into sin and false doctrine (Titus 1:10-16).

But, purity in the local church is not *just* the concern of the elders. Instead, it is the work of every single member of the church. All the members of a local church have a personal responsibility to keeping themselves pure. And, there are other areas we will discuss in this lesson that can be positively impacted by the commitment every Christian must make to purity.

In order to build a strong congregation, there must be an absolute commitment made to purity. Remember (from lesson 1 of this series) that God does not accept every congregation that claims to belong to Him. Revelation chapters 2 and 3 demonstrate that various situations resulted in congregations failing to please God. Particularly, Revelation 2:18-29 shows a church in Thyatira that had allowed a woman within that congregation to seduce others into committing sin. Repentance was the only appropriate action for such a congregation. Yes, there are times that strength will even come from a congregation purging out members who have no desire to commit to purity and change their sinful ways. Such a commitment to purity by the congregation will eliminate evil influences that work to turn hearts away from God and will help bring in those who are committed to purity.

In this lesson, I want to consider how it is that a local church can keep itself pure. Or, if a local church is not pure to begin with, it should also consider these same basic steps – along with repentance. Our goals in this lesson are: (1) To recognize the responsibility that each member has to be pure. (2) To understand that pure churches insist that only the pure word of God is taught. (3) To consider the responsibility that a congregation has in watching who is accepted in as members of the congregation. And, (4) to discuss the responsibility every local church has to put away impurity from among itself.

## Keep Yourself Pure

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First, if a local church wants to be pure, every member of that church must make a personal commitment to being pure. Remember (as we have established in previous lessons), a local church is

composed of individual Christians. Therefore, if the whole is to be pure, each part must also be pure.

### ***Purity is a personal responsibility of every member***

There is not one member of a local church who is exempt from the responsibility to be pure. Let's consider the instructions given in 1 Peter 1:13-16: "Therefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and rest your hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ; as obedient children, not conforming yourselves to the former lusts, as in your ignorance; but as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, 'Be holy, for I am holy.'"

First, recognize that this responsibility is given to every Christian. Every child of God has the responsibility to live in such a self-controlled kind of way that he/she is not living for the same sinful things he/she lived for prior to becoming a Christian. Instead, each one must possess a commitment to holiness.

To be "holy" is to be separated from everything that is evil, unclean, profane, etc. – and be entirely dedicated to serving the Lord. Then, notice what the standard for holiness is: The holiness of God! Each Christian must be holy as God is holy. God's holiness is one that is perfect. He is entirely separated from everything that is evil and impure. So, the Christian must also be separated from what is evil and impure in "all" of his/her conduct!

Timothy (a Christian and an evangelist) was instructed to "keep yourself pure" (in 1 Timothy 5:22). So, not only do those who are Christians have to become holy at some point in their lives, but this holiness and purity must be maintained. There is a responsibility to remain pure.

In fact, this is not just applicable to whether a church is a strong church or not. Instead, this is a matter that is pertinent to where you will spend eternity – either in Heaven or in Hell. The apostle Paul told the church in Corinth that the "unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God." He then specified that "Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Corinthians 6:9-10).

Then, your purity or impurity will have an impact on the local church. As we will discuss in greater detail later in this lesson, there was a situation in the church at Corinth in which one of the members was living in adultery. This sin was known to the congregation and they did nothing about it. However, they were warned, "Your glorying is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?" (1 Corinthians 5:6).

So, one man's unwillingness to commit himself to purity endangered the entire congregation. The Lord recognized that sin easily spreads within a congregation. If this sin was not corrected, it would have a negative influence on other members of the congregation. Perhaps it would pull others into this same sinful activity. Or, perhaps it would pull others into a different sin. Either way, whenever a member of the congregation openly lives in sin (and the sin is not properly handled by the congregation), other members of the church can easily become desensitized to sin and fall away from the grace of God!

### ***How you can keep yourself pure***

Keeping yourself pure is your responsibility. And, we have seen that it has an impact on both your own eternity and others. But, how can you keep yourself pure? Consider three things.

First, you must obey the truth of God's word. It is only when you obey the word of truth that you will be made pure. 1 Peter 1:22-23 says, "Since you have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit in sincere love of the brethren, love one another fervently with a pure heart, having been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever."

You are made pure whenever you hear and obey what the pure word of God requires you to do in order to be saved and forgiven of your sins. Namely, God's word required that you hear the word of God (Romans 10:17), believe (John 8:24), repent of your sins (Acts 17:30), confess Jesus Christ (Romans 10:9-10), and be baptized for the forgiveness of your sins (Acts 2:38). When you obey these commandments God has required of you, the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses you from your past sins. Then, the word of God requires that you continue to be faithful to the Lord throughout your lifetime (Revelation 2:10).

## Insist That The Pure Word Of God Is Taught

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Second, you must think on things that are pure. Philippians 4:8 teaches us precisely what our minds should be thinking about. “Finally, brethren whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy – meditate on these things.”

Why does it matter that you only think about pure things? Proverbs 23:7 states, “For as he thinks in his heart, so is he.” God says that what you think about is connected with who you are. So, if you are thinking on impure things, you will find that impurity is produced in your life! Therefore, we should be very careful about what we take into our minds (i.e. what we see, what we hear, etc.). Every member of the church should be careful to only watch pure television programs and movies, visit pure internet sites, read pure magazines and books, keep close company with other pure people, etc.

Third, you should flee and follow. 2 Timothy 2:21-22 says, “Therefore if anyone cleanses himself from the latter, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified and useful for the Master, prepared for every good work. Flee also youthful lusts; but pursue righteousness, faith, love, peace with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart.”

We need to flee things that are contrary to the righteousness of God. Specifically mentioned in this passage are youthful lusts. We should not play around with such things. Instead, we should get away from them. And, we should follow (pursue) that which is approved by God (righteousness, faith, love, and peace with other Christians).

So, you must evaluate your own commitment to purity. Are you keeping yourself pure? Or, are you allowing yourself to be defiled with sin (even if it is only a “little” bit of sin)? James wrote, “Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world” (James 1:27). Notice that God wants you to be spot-free! This is your responsibility!

Second, if a local church wants to be pure, it must insist that the pure word of God is taught. After all, we have already seen that it is obedience to the word of God that will make people pure from their sins. So, if the pure word of God is not taught, then people cannot be made pure!

### ***God’s word is pure***

We like things that are pure. Think about the things that are necessary to physical life. Consider water and air. Do you want either of these to contain anything that is toxic to you? Or, would you prefer that they be entirely pure? In fact, there are many people who will go to great lengths to make sure that they are breathing pure air and drinking pure water – even purchasing water and air purifiers.

Certainly, if we recognize that it is important for the things that are necessary to our physical lives to be pure, we should consider the need for the word of God (which purifies the soul and gives us spiritual life) to be pure! In fact, the word and law of God has always been perfect and pure. Psalm 19:7 says, “The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul; The testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple.” James 1:25 references it as “the perfect law of liberty.”

So, since God’s word (as He has revealed it to us) is completely pure, how much can we alter it before it is no longer pure? Consider the same question regarding air and water. How many toxins can we add to air or water before it is no longer pure? After just the first one! The same thing is true regarding the pure word of God. God’s word is no longer perfectly pure whenever one thing has been changed!

### ***Things necessary for the pure word of God to be taught***

Since God’s word is no longer perfectly pure after one thing has been changed, let’s consider some things that are necessary for the pure word of God to be taught. First, God’s word must be taught without addition. Proverbs 30:5-6 says, “Every word of God is pure; He is a shield to those who put their trust in

Him. Do not add to His words, Lest He rebuke you, and you be found a liar.” Yet, there are many people who are adding to the teachings of the word of God. Some are adding sprinkling and pouring as acceptable modes of baptism. Some are adding the mechanical instrument of music in worship to God. Some are adding church-supported institutions to the work of the church. However, when anything is added to God’s word, it is no longer pure!

Second, God’s word must be taught without subtraction. Revelation 22:18-19 says, “For I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life, from the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book.” Yet, there are many people who are subtracting from the teachings of the word of God. Some are subtracting baptism from the plan of salvation. Some are subtracting sins that God has condemned. Some are subtracting the truth that there is only one true church. However, when anything is subtracted from God’s word, it is no longer pure!

Third, nothing that God has said must be kept back. You see, all Scripture is inspired by God and works to make us approved of God (2 Timothy 3:16-17). For a preacher to fail to preach any part of God’s word is unacceptable and will not help the church be pure. Instead, preachers are only innocent whenever they have declared the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:26-27)!

Fourth, whenever a preacher declares the whole counsel of God, this will include both the “positive” and the “negative.” Both must be taught. All of God’s word edifies (builds up in the faith, Acts 20:32). “Positive” lessons that emphasize subjects such as the grace, mercy, and love of God must be taught. But, so must “negative” lessons that identify and rebuke sin. In fact, many times a “positive” or “negative” sermon is in the eye of the beholder. 2 Timothy 4:2 instructs the preacher, “Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching.” Yet, some people will hear a sermon and be encouraged by it (because they are living according to the truth they have just heard), while others will hear the same sermon and be rebuked by it (because they are not living according to the truth

they have just heard). Just consider the fact that the people in Peter’s audience (in Acts 2) and the people in Stephen’s audience (in Acts 7) heard the same basic sermon. Yet, many in Peter’s audience obeyed, while Stephen’s audience put him to death. The fact is that both “positive” and “negative” preaching is needed in order for the pure word of God to be taught.

Fifth, local churches must demand the kind of preaching be done today as it was done in New Testament times. While many examples could be provided, consider just a few quick points. In Matthew 15, Jesus called out the hypocrisy of the Pharisees. He told them that they were worshiping God in vain by teaching man’s doctrines. And, He would not apologize for telling them the truth – even though they were offended by what He said. In Acts 20:31, the apostle Paul said that he “did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears” while he preached in Ephesus. In 2 Timothy 2:14-18, Timothy was told to remind and charge the people about some things, to shun some things that are contrary to God, and identified two false teachers by name. Then, in Acts 11:23, Barnabas encouraged people to continue with the Lord with purpose of heart!

The local church must insist on the pure word of God being taught if it truly desires to be pure! It must not just *tolerate* the pure word of God. Instead, it must hunger and thirst for it – and accept nothing else. Therefore, the elders of a local church and every member of a local church must make sure that nothing is being taught from the pulpits, in the Bible classes, or privately that is not fitting with the pure word of God!

## Watch Who Is Accepted In

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Third, if a local church wants to be pure, it must carefully watch who gets accepted in as members of the church. For, if a local church is careless in receiving new members into the local church who are not pure, then these members will work contrary to the mission of purity.

***A church has the right to decide who is received into the church***

All too often, local churches accept individuals as members of the local church without

exercising the proper care. Many times, local churches are just excited about the prospect of someone wanting to join the church that they do not exercise care in who they are receiving as members. They may not get to know those who want to join the church before allowing them to be members. However, growing numerically must not be the only goal of a local church. Instead, local churches must be committed to true growth that God approves. But, this kind of growth is not accomplished by allowing just anyone to join the local church.

The Bible gives local churches the right to reject prospective members. Consider a Biblical example of one local church refusing to allow someone to join them. Listen to Acts 9:26-28: “And when Saul had come to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, and did not believe that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. And he declared to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, and that He had spoken to him, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus. So he was with them at Jerusalem, coming in and going out.”

Saul had persecuted Christians. So, whenever he claimed to be a disciple and wanted to join the church in Jerusalem, they did not believe him. It was not until Barnabas testified on Saul’s behalf – about how he had seen Jesus and was now boldly preaching the gospel of Christ. At that point, they accepted him (i.e. as a member of the local church).

But, please recognize that this is an approved example of conduct for a local church. This local church was not rebuked for refusing Saul. Notice that their interest was not in keeping out someone who was living a faithful Christian life. Instead, they were keeping out someone they believed was not truly a disciple of Christ. Certainly, local churches ought to refuse to allow anyone to be a member of the congregation they do not believe is a faithful child of God!

That, in fact, should be the criteria for a local church allowing *anyone* to be a member of the congregation. 1 John 1:5-7 teaches that if two people are each in fellowship with God, then they are in fellowship with one another. Therefore, whenever someone desires to be a member of a local church, the local church *should* be diligent to learn whether that individual is in fellowship with God (i.e. whether he/she is truly a disciple of Jesus Christ)!

Consider another example that demonstrates the fact that congregations have responsibility to exercise care concerning those who are accepted as members. Acts 20:28-31 says, “Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears.”

Not only should a congregation generally be devoted to carefulness regarding those who are accepted in as members, but this is especially the work of those who are elders. Paul warned the elders from Ephesus that “savage wolves” would come in among them and not spare the flock. They needed to watch for this. Now, what were they to do if they spotted a savage wolf who wanted to come among the flock? Were they to sit by and allow such a one to be part of the congregation? Or, do you suppose they were to reject such a one?

One of the ways a congregation in New Testament times would know whether someone was truly a disciple of Christ or not was through the recommendations of other known faithful brethren. Although such recommendations are not always perfect (since they come from man), they do help those who are not acquainted with an individual have some degree of confidence in the prospective member.

This was seen in the example of Saul. Although it was not in the form of a letter, Barnabas (someone who was respected by the elders in Jerusalem) took Saul to them and personally testified of Saul’s conversion. Another example can be seen in Acts 18:27-28 regarding Apollos. “And when he desired to cross to Achaia, the brethren wrote, exhorting the disciples to receive him; and when he arrived, he greatly helped those who had believed through grace; for he vigorously refuted the Jews publicly, showing from the Scriptures that Jesus is the Christ.” Other examples still can be seen in 2 Corinthians 3:1, 1 Corinthians 16:3, and Romans 16:1-2.

Just consider that if you were a member of a local church in New Testament times and the church

was not careful as to who joined the church, who would you possibly have received? You might have received a fornicator from Corinth (1 Corinthians 5). You might have received someone who wore the names of men rather than Christ (1 Corinthians 1). You might have received someone who taught falsely concerning the resurrection (1 Corinthians 15). You might have received someone who followed a different gospel and believed in binding fleshly circumcision (Galatians). You might have received someone who had shipwrecked the faith (1 Timothy 1:18-20). You might have received someone who loved the preeminence (3 John 1:9-11). You might have received someone who held to or tolerated false teaching (Revelation 2:12-17).

As we have seen, letters of commendation were used in New Testament times – and should continue to be used today (or some other means of commendation, i.e. the telephone, in person, etc.). I understand that an individual could get a friend to write a glowing letter of recommendation. I also understand that an individual could have made such enemies in taking stands for the gospel that he/she may not be able to get such a letter. So, we must also consider the source of the letter. Then, other steps could also be taken to watch those who are being brought into the local church. This could include spending time studying with the prospective members, spending some time getting to know the prospective members, etc.

### ***Unity demands that carefulness be exercised in this area***

Local congregations (as we have studied in a previous lesson) should be united in the gospel of Jesus Christ (see Psalm 133; 1 Corinthians 1:10; Ephesians 4:3). This is the only way for a local church to be the most effective it can be in its community. And, for a local church to be united in sound doctrine, every member of the local church must be committed to that unity in sound doctrine – including any new members who are accepted into the congregation!

There are many forces at work to divide congregations today. Therefore, a congregation should exercise diligence in knowing the individual who desires to be a member of the local church and the things he/she stands for. Although each individual will be handled differently (depending on his/her own circumstances), here is a list of subjects

that *may* need to be addressed with a prospective member: The expectations and responsibilities of being a member of the local church, baptism as necessary for salvation, the differences between institutional and non-institutional churches of Christ, the need for faithful attendance to the assemblies of the congregation, God's teachings about marriage, divorce, and remarriage, etc.

The point is simply this: If a local church is not being careful to know a person who is attempting to join the local church, the church may be welcoming someone who will disrupt the unity of the church and even lead others into sin! Although there is no set procedure for accepting new members into the church, every church should keep these principles in mind and fulfill its responsibility to be watchful as to who is accepted as a member of the church.

## **Put Away Impurity**

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Fourth, if a local church wants to be pure, it must put away impurity. A local church has the responsibility to carry out God-authorized discipline on any of the members of the church who are not living to please God. Consider two specific passages that address this discipline in detail.

### **1 Corinthians 5:1-13**

The church at Corinth had a member of the congregation who was knowingly living in adultery. 1 Corinthians 5:1-2 clearly indicate that this man was living in adultery with his father's wife. But, rather than being ashamed of the sin that was among them, the church was puffed up about it.

In 1 Corinthians 5:3-5, Paul plainly commanded that action must be taken by the congregation against such a one – and why it was to be done. He said that the congregation (by the authority of Jesus Christ) must “deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.” That is, this individual was to be given over to Satan. This was for his own good – so that he could realize his situation and turn from it (so that his soul would be saved). To deliver him over to Satan is to mark him as a servant of Satan (rather than a servant of God) and no longer count him as a faithful member of the congregation. Ultimately, this action was for the

good of this man – so that he would return to Jesus Christ before it was too late for his soul to be saved!

In 1 Corinthians 5:6-8, Paul warned the church about the danger such a member posed to the church. He was a leavening influence on the congregation that could result in great harm. Like a little leaven that leavens the whole lump of dough, a little sin that is permitted to remain in the congregation can easily drag others into sin and make the entire church unfaithful for willingly remaining in fellowship with sin. Instead, they were instructed to “purge out the old leaven.”

Then, listen to the instructions given to the church in 1 Corinthians 5:9-13: “I wrote to you in my epistle not to keep company with sexually immoral people. Yet I certainly did not mean with the sexually immoral people of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner—not even to eat with such a person. For what have I to do with judging those also who are outside? Do you not judge those who are inside? But those who are outside God judges. Therefore ‘put away from yourselves the evil person.’”

The apostle Paul said that the church in Corinth was not even to keep company with such a person who was unwilling to repent of the sin he had committed. This was not just that he would no longer be considered a member of the local church in Corinth. But, the members of that church were not even to share a physical meal with him anymore! That person was to be put away from among them!

Certainly, this passage applies to how congregations are to handle impurity in the church today. A member of the church who is known to be living in sin and is unwilling to repent of it must be marked by the church as being unfaithful to Jesus Christ and put away from them – not even eating or keeping company with such a one!

## **2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14-15**

Here is a second passage that must be observed regarding the subject of putting away impurity from among a congregation. 2 Thessalonians 3:6 states: “But we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you withdraw from every brother who walks

disorderly and not according to the tradition which he received from us.” Verses 14 and 15 say: “And if anyone does not obey our word in this epistle, note that person and do not keep company with him, that he may be ashamed. Yet do not count him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.”

Notice that this is a commandment. It is not just a suggestion or a good idea. Instead, those who are God’s people have the responsibility to obey what these three verses command. Specifically, the command is pertaining to those who had become Christians, but are no longer living according to the instructions of the Lord. They are now walking disorderly and not according to the ways of God. This would certainly include many things – not just sins that are considered by the church to be “really bad.”

What was the church to do about such impurity? They were to withdraw themselves from such a one and were not even to keep company with him/her. This pertains to “every brother who walks disorderly and not according to the tradition” laid out in the word of God. These are rebelling against God and must not be treated as if they are living in God’s favor!

What is the purpose of such action? Certainly, this action seems extreme and harsh, but it is all done from love. This individual must be warned as a brother/sister in Christ Jesus. But, if he/she is being treated as if nothing is wrong, why should he/she change the sinful behavior? In fact, this discipline is to be carried out so that the sinner will be ashamed and return to the Lord!

Every local church that wants to be a strong and pure church must carefully watch out for impurity among its members. Whenever there is sin in the congregation that is known, it should be dealt with properly! It must never be brushed aside or considered to be insignificant. And, even though discipline is painful, it must be carried out promptly. For instance, consider the fact that the man in 1 Corinthians 5 appears to have been still attending the assemblies of the church. Local churches should not wait so long to take disciplinary actions that they will not be effective in dealing with the sin!



# Conclusion

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Are you doing your part so that the church can be pure and strong? Are you keeping yourself pure? Are you insisting that only the pure word of God is taught? Are you helping to watch who is accepted in? And, are you doing your part to withdraw from the impure? If every member of the local church will be committed to purity, the local church will be made stronger!

## Study Questions

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How is purity crucial to the strength and well-being of any local church?

### 1. Keep Yourself Pure

What is your responsibility to personal purity?

How can you keep yourself pure?

### 2. Insist That The Pure Word Of God Is Taught

How pure is God's word?

What is necessary for the pure word of God to be taught?

### 3. Watch Who Is Accepted In

Does a church have the right to decide who is received into the church?

How is carefulness in this area connected to unity?

### 4. Put Away Impurity

What does 1 Corinthians 5:1-13 teach about putting away impurity from among a local church?

What does 2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14-15 teach about putting away impurity from among a local church?

# Step #9: Be Dedicated To Worshipping God

God wants every church to be a strong church. But, in order for a church to be a strong church it must be dedicated to worshipping God (according to how God desires to be worshiped).

“Worship” is a term that is somewhat difficult to define. You see, English Bibles commonly translate many different Hebrew and Greek words as “worship.” And, the Bible does not say “*this* equals worship.” Instead, the subject of worship is presented in the pages of Scripture as something that God’s people have done in the past and should do in the present and future. Still, we can gain some understanding of worship by considering specific teachings the Bible gives on the subject.

When our English Bibles use the word “worship,” the consistent ideas of the Hebrew and Greek words they are translating are the ideas of bowing before and kissing toward. Worship is always pictured as an intentional act that is done to express praise and reverence toward something/someone. It is a bowing of the heart before the object of worship. If God was on earth, this could be accomplished by physically bowing before and kissing toward Him (like was done to Jesus, see Matthew 28:9). However, since God is not living on this earth, there is more for us to consider.

Worship, then, is something that is intentional (not accidental or continuous) and it is directed toward a specific object. And, the Bible

records a number of activities that have accompanied this worship. For instance, Old Testament worship frequently was accompanied by the activity of offering sacrifices to God. And, the worship local churches of Christ engaged in during their assemblies were the five activities of singing, praying, gospel teaching, the Lord’s Supper, and the collection. As we will discuss later in this study, true worship is bound by the criteria of being done in spirit and in truth (John 4:23-24).

In this lesson, I want to consider how it is that a local church can be dedicated to worshipping God. Our goals in this lesson are: (1) To learn the need to be dedicated to true worship. (2) To recognize how local churches are to worship God in their assemblies. And, (3) to discuss how a local church can improve and become more dedicated to worshipping God.

## Be Dedicated To True Worship

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As we begin to think about the subject of worship, we should recognize that we must offer God the kind of worship He desires from us. For, our worship to God is not about *us*. Rather, worship to God is about the one who is being worshiped! Therefore, a local church that desires to be a strong church must be committed to offering Him true worship.

### ***True worship is about the Object of worship***

Worship is all about the one being worshiped. Worship, as we have already seen, is an expression of reverence, devotion, praise, etc. for the one being worshiped. In fact, to worship someone/something implies that there is worth in that person or thing. So, the most basic of all questions regarding our worship is: Who or what is most worthy of worship?

The answer is that God is the only one who is worthy of all our worship. He should be held in high esteem and shown the proper degree of reverence. After all, God is the one who created all things. There is none higher than He is.

For instance, we are likely familiar with the part of the Ten Commandments in which God

commanded the Israelites: “You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image – any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them...” (Exodus 20:3-5). Thus, God demanded their allegiance, their service, and their worship. No other gods were permitted to receive such. But, why?

In Exodus 20:2 (before giving the Ten Commandments), God said, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.” No one else had been responsible for delivering the Israelites out of Egyptian slavery. Only God had shown His power by bringing the ten plagues upon the land of Egypt and parting the Red Sea so that the Israelites could cross over and be delivered. None other was so powerful as to accomplish this feat. Therefore, the Israelites were expected to remember what God had done and only worship Him – because He is the only one who was worthy of their worship.

In the same way, God is the only one who is worthy of our worship today. He displays His great power throughout this universe in the things that He has created (see Psalm 19:1 and Romans 1:19-25). Furthermore, it is only God who has loved this world so much that He gave His only begotten Son to die on the cross so that we can be forgiven of our sins (John 3:16). And, it is God who has provided His saving message of the gospel so that people throughout the world of all time can learn about Him, about the way of salvation, and about what God desires from our lives (2 Timothy 3:16-17). Therefore, it is entirely inappropriate to deem anyone or anything else worthy of our worship! There is none other who is so great or who has done so much for us!

As the one who is worthy of worship, He has the authority to tell us *how* He desires to be worshiped. Think about it this way. Suppose you are an avid sports fan. Except, you are not just a fan. Instead, you believe so much in a particular athlete that you allow yourself to think that he is worthy of worship. Now, suppose that you wanted to try and express your reverence toward that athlete through your worship. Suppose that this athlete told you that he wanted you to bring him an offering of M&M candy. But, suppose that you thought it would be better to give him a bag of Skittles candy (because

that was *your* preference and you thought he would like it as well). Would this be acceptable? Would this offering be what the one you were trying to worship wanted from your worship? No, it would not!

In the same way, God has told us what He desires from our worship today. Since He is the one who is worthy of our worship and has authority to tell us how He desires to be worshiped, our worship must meet His standard! Even if I feel right in offering Him some other kind of worship, I must recognize that my worship is *not* about myself. Instead, my worship must be about God! And, the only way that my worship can fully be about God is if I worship Him in the way that He desires to be worshiped! Once again, worship is about the Object of the worship – not about our own desires in worship!

### ***God is seeking true worshipers***

God is not just seeking any kind of worship. Instead, God is seeking true worshipers. Listen to the following exchange between a Samaritan woman and Jesus in John 4:19-24: “The woman said to Him, ‘Sir, I perceive that You are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, and you Jews say that in Jerusalem is the place where one ought to worship.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews. But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.’”

This Samaritan woman brought up a key problem about the way many people have tried to worship during their lives. Most notably, people often put the emphasis in worship in the wrong area. Both the Jews and the Samaritans put the emphasis on the place of worship – and they disagreed about where the worship should take place. The Samaritans emphasized worship on Mount Gerizim and the Jews in Jerusalem.

But, Jesus helps us to think about true worship. True worship is *not* about the place of worship. Instead, it is all about offering God the kind of worship that pleases Him. So, our worship is not about a certain place or even confined to a particular

place. Those who are God's people should worship Him whenever and wherever there is opportunity. But, Jesus gives us two characteristics of true worship that must both be involved whenever we worship God. We must worship Him in spirit and in truth.

Recognize that God is said to be seeking true worshippers. Certainly, if God is said to be "seeking" true worshippers, shouldn't we desire to be true worshippers? After all, He is the one who is worthy of worship! And, if God is seeking "true" worship, we should also recognize that it is possible to worship Him in a way that is not according to the true worship He is seeking from us. Consider a few examples of people who failed in their attempts to worship God.

First, consider Cain. Both Cain and his brother, Abel, brought an offering to God (see Genesis 4:1-5). Abel, who was a shepherd, brought an offering of the firstborn of his flock. His sacrifice is described in the Scriptures as being by faith (see Hebrews 11:4). Genesis 4:4 says that the Lord respected Abel and his offering. However, Cain, who was a tiller of the ground, brought an offering of the first of the fruit of the ground to the Lord. But, Genesis 4:5 says that God did not respect Cain and his offering. So, both individuals attempted to worship God by sacrificing to Him. While the Scriptures do not reveal what was wrong with Cain's offering, they are clear in stating that God did not respect it. Only one of these two attempts at worshipping God was pleasing to God.

Second, consider Nadab and Abihu. These two brothers were both priests and sons of Aaron. As such, they should have known the law of God concerning the sacrifices God desired. Yet, Leviticus 10:1-2 records that these two individuals "each took his censer and put fire in it, put incense on it, and offered profane fire before the Lord, which He had not commanded them. So fire went out from the Lord and devoured them, and they died before the Lord." There was something about this offering that was unauthorized by God. They did something that the Lord "had not commanded them." Therefore, their attempt to worship God actually provoked the Lord to anger so that He killed them.

Third, consider Judaizing "Christians." There were "Christians" among the early church who desired to bind Jewish laws and traditions on those who desired to follow Jesus. As Paul dealt with this problem in Colossians 2, he said that "These things

indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh" (verse 23). So, by following man-made traditions and commandments, they were imposing their own religion (and worship) on God. Rather than focusing on what God wanted, they were focused on what they wanted to do or thought was appropriate.

### ***Worshipping God in spirit***

The expression of your worship to God requires that you recognize God is Spirit. Jesus plainly stated that "God is Spirit" in John 4:24. The conclusion is that you must worship Him in spirit. Though individuals could physically bow before and express their worship to Jesus while He lived on this earth (Matthew 28:9 says that two women held Jesus by His feet and worshiped Him), God does not exist in human form to worship Him in that way now.

Now, it requires the spiritual element of man to be fully engaged in worship. You see, God created mankind in His own image (see Genesis 1:26-27). Numerous Bible passages help us to understand that this means mankind has been created with a spiritual existence (a soul). Therefore, of all God's earthly creation, it is only mankind who is able to express worship to God. In fact, man (as a spiritual being) longs to worship. Unfortunately, mankind has often worshiped the wrong object or has failed to worship God acceptably.

The necessary element of worshipping God in spirit, then, requires you to be fully engaged in your expression of worship. Since God does not exist in the flesh, you must bow your heart before the awesome God. You must not just be going through the motions of an external act of worship – while allowing your heart to be far away from God. Such vain worship is condemned in Matthew 15:8-9, whenever some were said to have drawn near to God with their mouths and honored Him with their lips, while their hearts were far from Him. Instead, whenever you worship God, you must be focused on what you are doing. For instance, when you sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs in worship to God, you must be focused on the words and meanings of those songs and not focused on the melody or some other thing!

## ***Worshipping God in truth***

The expression of your worship to God also requires you to recognize that God has revealed an objective standard of truth. You cannot express your worship to God in just any way or corrupt the true nature of God. Instead, John 17:17 says that God's word is truth. And, John 8:32 says that it is God's truth that will set you free from sin. Yes, God has revealed His word of truth in the pages of the Bible.

Then, consider what Paul stated in Colossians 3:17. "And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him." God's word reveals the standard for all things in our lives. 2 Timothy 3:16-17 says that the Scriptures (which have been given by inspiration of God) are profitable "for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work." Everything God wants you to be doing that pleases Him can be found within the pages of the Bible (His word of truth). Therefore, in everything that you do, you must have Bible authority! This is the only way to know that what you are doing pleases God.

Furthermore, this general truth must be applied specifically to your worship. You can only please God in your worship if what you are doing has Bible authority behind it! Otherwise, it is self-imposed worship (worship you are trying to force God to accept). Again, recognize that God has told us (in His word of truth) exactly what pleases Him in worship. If you decide to offer Him something He does not want, how can you please Him through your worship? You simply cannot. As an example of this principle, God has authorized singing as an expression of worship to Him. Colossians 3:16 says, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord." However, in addition to the authorized action of singing, many people have attempted to worship God by using a mechanical instrument of music. Yet, God has not authorized the use of mechanical instruments of music in worship anywhere in the pages of the New Testament (which governs God's people today). Simply put: Anything that is according to God's standard of truth for worship is acceptable to Him. But, anything that He has not authorized is not acceptable to Him for worship!

## **Worshipping God In The Assemblies Of The Local Church**

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True worship can happen any place and any time someone is committed to offering it to God. However, we must recognize that being dedicated to the true worship of God is vitally important to the strength of a local church. Specifically, God has authorized the local church to assemble together and engage in some specific activities of worship. Each one of these activities, therefore, is crucial to the strength of a local church.

### ***God wants local churches to assemble for worship***

God has authorized the existence of local churches throughout the pages of the New Testament. These are locally organized groups of Christians who have joined themselves together to form a base of fellowship and strength that is greater than the individual Christian. Part of the God-given function of these local churches is to engage in worship.

For instance, God has authorized these local churches to assemble together. 1 Corinthians 14 shows an example of this. Verse 23 references a time when "the whole church comes together in one place." Verse 26 also speaks of the church coming together. Acts 20:7 shows another example of this. On this occasion, the disciples in Troas "came together" on the first day of the week to partake of the Lord's Supper.

The assemblies of the local church in the New Testament had a two-fold purpose that is in harmony with God's design for the local church. Today, the assemblies of the local church must continue to fulfill these two purposes.

**(1) Worship.** First, these assemblies were for the purpose of worshipping God. As we will see, God has prescribed five acts of worship that are to be accomplished in the setting of local church assemblies. Each one of the specific acts of worship engaged in by the local church served the purpose of worshipping God. For instance, Ephesians 5:19 says that when we sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs we make melody in our hearts "to the Lord." So, the

primary focus of the assemblies of the local church is to praise and glorify God!

**(2) Edification.** Another purpose for the assemblies of the local church is concerning the edification of the church. Edification is one of the God-given works for a local church to accomplish. The assemblies of the church is one of the main ways a local church can accomplish the work of edification. It should be a great encouragement for anyone who takes part in these worship services to know that they are not alone in their desire and attempt to worship God! Consider 1 Corinthians 14:26 again: “How is it then, brethren? Whenever you come together, each of you has a psalm, has a teaching, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification.” All things relative to the assemblies of the local church should be focused on spiritually building up others. That is Paul’s point in this passage. While this specifically addresses assemblies dealing with miraculous spiritual gifts being used, the general principle is applicable to every assembly of the local church!

The five activities of worship God has authorized a local church to engage in are: Praying, singing, gospel teaching, the collection, and the Lord’s Supper. Outside of these, there are no activities that are authorized as worship during the assemblies of the local church today. For the purposes of this study, we want to overview each one of these and consider how we can utilize each act of worship to offer God true worship that is in spirit and truth.

### ***Praying***

God wants His people to worship Him through prayer whenever they assemble together. For instance, 1 Corinthians 14:15 says, “What is the conclusion then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will also pray with the understanding. I will sing with the spirit, and I will also sing with the understanding.” In order to worship God through prayer according to the way of truth, all of the Scriptural guidelines concerning prayer must be observed. For instance, the Scriptures teach that we must pray in the name of Jesus (1 Timothy 2:5; John 14:13-14), pray according to the will of God (Matthew 6:10), not be involved in vain repetitions or to be seen of men (Matthew 6:5-7), etc.

Then, not only must you pray according to the truth that God has revealed in the Scriptures, but you must pray in spirit. That is, you must be fully engaged in the prayers. For instance, when Jesus condemned “vain repetitions” in prayer (Matthew 6:7), He was condemning the practice of just repeating words in prayer without really meaning what you say. So, whenever a local church is praying during its assembly, you must be focused on the words of the prayer and offering it to God as your own. If you are focused on other things, you are not offering God true worship – even if you have the appearance that you are praying to God with the rest of the congregation!

### ***Singing***

God wants His people to worship Him through singing whenever they assemble together. Once again, 1 Corinthians 14:15 not only mentions praying in the context of the assemblies of the local church, but also singing. Also, Ephesians 5:19 says, “speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord.” Notice that there are two things involved in this verse with regard to singing. First, this is being done to “one another.” So, each member of the church is expected to be involved by participating in the singing. Second, this singing and making melody in our hearts is “to the Lord.” Ultimately, it is offered up in worship to God. Then, as I have already mentioned, please recognize that in order to worship God in truth with our music means that we can only worship Him in song (psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs). There is simply no New Testament authority to worship God with a mechanical instrument.

Then, not only must you sing according to the truth that God has revealed in the Scriptures, but you must sing in spirit. That is, you must be fully engaged in the singing. You must not become focused on the melody of the song (i.e. whether your singing or the congregation’s singing is good or bad, whether the song is a “fun” song to sing, etc.). Instead, your focus must be on the words and meaning of the song. Every word that you sing should be heartfelt and sincerely offered to God as a sacrifice of your lips (Hebrews 13:15).

## ***Gospel teaching***

God wants His people to worship Him through gospel teaching whenever they assemble together. For instance, Acts 20:7 says, “Now on the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul, ready to depart the next day, spoke to them and continued his message until midnight.” Paul’s speech on this occasion was of a more formal nature than just an ordinary conversation (as indicated by the Greek language). So, without a doubt, Paul preached a gospel sermon before this assembly of the local church in Troas. In order for these gospel sermons to be offered as true worship, they require a couple of things. First, they require that the message that is preached be according to God’s truth – with no mixture of error in them at all (Galatians 1:6-9; 2 John 1:9-11). Second, they require that a man be preaching before the assembly (1 Corinthians 14:34-35; 1 Timothy 2:9-10).

Then, not only must the gospel of Jesus Christ be preached according to the truth that God has revealed in the Scriptures, but you must be fully engaged in the preaching. It is simply not enough to just sit still while the preacher is preaching. You must be focusing on the words that are being taught and making the appropriate applications of them to your life.

## ***The collection***

God wants His people to worship Him through contributing to a collection whenever they assemble together on the first day of the week. For instance, 1 Corinthians 16:1-2 says, “Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given orders to the churches of Galatia, so you must do also: On the first day of the week let each one of you lay something aside, storing up as he may prosper, that there be no collections when I come.” This is the only passage in the New Testament that tells how the local church is authorized to raise money. It is a free-will offering taken up from among its members on the first day of the week (Sunday). Consider that there is no specified amount that God requires of each member to be contributed (i.e. a tithe). Instead, each member is expected to give in accordance to his/her prosperity.

Then, not only must you participate in the collection on the first day of the week according to

the truth that God has revealed in the Scriptures, but you must give in spirit. That is, you must be fully engaged in your giving. Therefore, you must not have a spirit that gives just because you are commanded to give. Instead, you are expected to find joy in giving – recognizing all that God has given to you (see 2 Corinthians 8-9)! For instance, 2 Corinthians 9:7 says, “So let each one give as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver.”

## ***The Lord’s Supper***

God wants His people to worship Him through partaking of the Lord’s Supper whenever they assemble together on the first day of the week. For instance, this is what we have observed the church in Troas doing in Acts 20:7. Once again, the passage teaches that it was “on the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread.” This breaking of bread has direct reference to the Lord’s Supper. In order to partake of this according to God’s standard of truth, therefore, it must be observed at the time God commands. This is the first day of the week. And, the necessary implication is that it must be observed by local churches upon each and every first day of the week. Then, it must involve the right elements that God has specified. These are the elements of the unleavened bread and the fruit of the vine. These are the only two elements Jesus used whenever He instituted the Lord’s Supper in Matthew 26:26-29.

Then, not only must you partake of the Lord’s Supper on the first day of the week according to the truth that God has revealed in the Scriptures, but you must also partake in spirit. That is, you must be fully engaged in this memorial supper. For, God did not command His people to partake of this for the sake of eating a physical meal. Instead, it is designed to be a spiritual feast that reminds us of the Lord Jesus Christ and His death! So, whenever you partake of the Lord’s Supper, your focus must not be on the taste of the unleavened bread or the fruit of the vine, what you are going to be doing later in the day, or what you are going to eat for dinner. Instead, your focus must be on the sacrifice that Jesus Christ has offered so that you can be saved from your sins!

# How To Improve Your Worship

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Now that we have considered true worship and what God desires for our worship whenever we assemble together as local churches, we should consider how we can improve our worship. We should desire to be constantly evaluating our worship so that we can offer God the most true worship we can possibly give Him.

## **Things that do not improve your worship**

As you consider things that might improve your worship to God (i.e. both your own individual worship and the worship offered by the local church), you should avoid treating the wrong problems. For, there are many times that people try to improve their worship by changing things that have no real impact on their worship. Consider just a few.

**(1) Adding unscriptural elements to the worship.** In an effort to “improve” worship, there are many people and congregations who go beyond what God has authorized in worship. For instance, many have added the mechanical instrument to their worship, believing that it will improve their worship to God. However, it is impossible for an unauthorized thing to improve your worship to God!

**(2) Changing external things.** While all things must be done decently and orderly in our worship (see 1 Corinthians 14:40), many people will put the focus on changing external things as a means to improve worship (i.e. the order of worship, the location of worship, etc.). And, while there may be nothing wrong with making these changes or using some things to aid our worship (i.e. overhead projector), we should not believe that these things (of themselves) will improve our worship.

**(3) Treating the worship as a spectator event or means of entertainment.** There are many people who assemble for worship with a local church in the same way that they would go to the movies. They show up to be entertained and to be a spectator. So, they demand that the singing sound great and that the preacher be a highly skilled public speaker (and often that he be more of a motivational speaker than a preacher of the gospel). Then, if they do not feel “fulfilled” by the service, they blame someone/something else.

**(4) Focus on getting more from worship.** One of the most sure-fire ways to *not* improve your worship is to put your focus on *getting* more from your worship. Yet, there are many people who attend the worship assemblies of the local church with a focus on what they want to *get* out of them. However, as we have already seen, worship is about the Object of the worship (God) – and not about the one who is worshipping!

## **Things that do improve your worship**

As you consider things that might improve your worship to God (i.e. both your own individual worship and the worship offered by the local church), you should focus on things that will have a real impact on your worship. For, there are some things that each person can do to improve the worship he/she offers to God. Consider just a few.

**(1) Assemble for worship.** You cannot improve your worship without actually worshipping God. So, whenever the local church assembles together for worship, you must (according to your ability and opportunity) be present at the assemblies. For, Hebrews 10:25 directly instructs, “not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.” Then, you must not just determine to assemble for worship. Instead, you should be excited and eager to have the opportunity to worship God with your brethren (see Psalm 122:1)!

**(2) Focus on God.** We have already established the fact that true worship is about the Object of the worship rather than the one who is giving the worship. As you worship God, then, your focus should be on God and offering Him the kind of worship He desires. Then, only when you attempt to give as much as you can give Him in your worship will you actually benefit the most from worship!

**(3) Consider your brethren.** Whenever you assemble for worship with your brethren, you must consider them in order to stir them up to love and good works (Hebrews 10:24). So, as you worship God, you should not try to do anything that hinders your brethren who are also trying to worship God (i.e. by needlessly getting up and down from your seat, whispering, passing notes, arriving late, etc.).

**(4) Prepare yourself.** Properly preparing yourself for worship will only help you to improve it. For instance, you can prepare your mind for what



you are about to do. You can prepare to arrive early enough that your mind is not rushed and stressed as you prepare to worship. You can prepare your clothing to fit the seriousness of the occasion. There are many things that can help you better prepare for worship if you will just think about what you are doing!

**(5) Worship more frequently.** The more that you do something, the better you tend to become at the thing. The same is true with worship. The more that you dedicate yourself to worshipping God, the better you will become at worshipping Him in truth and keeping your mind focused on the activities of worship. So, not only should you attend as many assemblies of the local church as possible, but you should also worship God privately and can take opportunities to worship Him with brethren outside of the assemblies of the entire church.

**(6) Give God your best.** God has always demanded and deserved the best that His people have to offer Him. So, it is today with regard to your worship. You should evaluate every area of your worship and determine to offer Him the best that you have. Therefore, you should do your best to worship Him in truth by giving Him exactly the kind of worship He wants you to give. And, you should do your best to worship Him in spirit by fully engaging yourself in the activities being done!

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## Conclusion

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Are you doing your part in helping the local church be strong by being dedicated to worshipping God? Have you determined to be a true worshiper of the true God by worshipping Him in spirit and truth? Are you faithful in attending the assemblies of the local church and worshipping God with your brethren? And, are you doing what you are capable of doing to improve the worship that you offer to God? If every member of the local church will increase his/her commitment to worshipping God, the local church will be made stronger!

## Study Questions

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How is a dedication to worship God crucial to the strength and well-being of any local church?

### 1. Be Dedicated To True Worship

How is worship about the Object of worship?

What kind of worshiper is God seeking? Is every attempt to worship pleasing to God?

What does it mean to worship God in spirit?

What does it mean to worship God in truth?

### 2. Worshipping God In The Assemblies Of The Local Church

Are local churches authorized to assemble together?  
What is the purpose of these assemblies?

Explain how local churches can worship God in spirit and truth through praying.

Explain how local churches can worship God in spirit and truth through singing.

Explain how local churches can worship God in spirit and truth through gospel teaching.

Explain how local churches can worship God in spirit and truth through the collection.

Explain how local churches can worship God in spirit and truth through the Lord's Supper.

### **3. How To Improve Your Worship**

Identify some things that do not improve your worship.

Identify some things that do improve your worship.

Steps To Building A Strong Church  
Series

# Step #10: Be Zealous For Good Works

God wants every church to be a strong church. But, in order for a church to be a strong church it must be zealous to accomplish the good works God has commanded.

Yet, it is not uncommon for local churches to be composed of spiritually lukewarm and dead “Christians.” Whenever you spend time around some “sound” churches, you get the sense that very few people actually want to be present when the church assembles together, you get the sense that whenever there is work to be done that it is like “pulling teeth” to get anyone to do even the smallest task, and you get the sense that very few people really care about the spiritual wellbeing of others enough to sacrifice to teach and encourage them. Whenever some of these churches do assemble together, it is common for the songs to be sung with little enthusiasm, the prayers are more routine than heartfelt, the observance of the Lord’s Supper seems to have little impact, the giving is a chore, and the preaching is a bore. Outside of the assemblies, there is little-to-no interest or desire to act like Christians should act by showing hospitality to others, doing good to others whenever there is opportunity, encouraging brothers and sisters on a daily basis, or teaching the gospel of Jesus Christ to anyone.

Although this has become acceptable to some who profess to be “Christians,” this kind of religion has never been acceptable to God. Recall (from the first lesson in this study), that two of the seven churches in Asia Minor were rebuked because of their lack of zeal. For instance, the church in Sardis

was rebuked for having a name that it was alive, while it was spiritually dead and was commanded to repent (Revelation 3:1-6). The church in Laodicea was rebuked for being lukewarm (neither hot nor cold) and was commanded to repent (Revelation 3:14-22). Similarly, those who were “Christians,” but were hearers only were said to deceive themselves (James 1:22-27). Then, those who were “Christians,” but did not have works of obedience to accompany their faith were said to have a “dead” faith (James 2:14-26).

Now, the effects of a church composed of spiritually lukewarm and dead “Christians” are devastating. First, it is devastating to their own souls. One Day, they will be held accountable for their lack of zeal for God and be punished. Second, it is devastating to their brethren who are trying to be zealous. This lack of zeal can work as a constant discouragement to those who are zealous for the Lord and result in the zealous ones becoming lukewarm or dying. For, a “little leaven leavens the whole lump” (1 Corinthians 5:6). Third, it is devastating to the souls in the community. For one, a church that is composed of lukewarm or spiritually dead “Christians” will not be helping their community learn and obey the saving message of the gospel. And, most people in the community will have no desire to want to worship with a church that is lukewarm or dead!

In this lesson, I want to consider how a church must be zealous for good works. Our goals in this lesson are: (1) To understand what it means to be zealous. (2) To learn why every church and every Christian should be zealous. (3) To consider what zeal in the local church should look like. (4) To consider what zeal in the lives of individual Christians should look like. And, (5) to learn how we can create and maintain zeal.

## What It Means To Be Zealous

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Zeal is like a burning fire or heat that is at work in the life of a Christian. Think of a boiling pot of water and how active the water is when the heat is applied. The kind of zeal that is acceptable to God is a fire that burns and leads you to accomplish the things that are pleasing to God. For, it is actually

possible to have a burning desire that leads you to accomplish things that are not pleasing to God.

### ***Zeal illustrated***

Consider three Biblical examples of zeal. First, consider Jesus in John 2:13-17. Whenever it was almost time for Passover, Jesus went to Jerusalem. When He came to the temple, He found it being used as a place to sell merchandise (like cattle, sheep, and doves). So, Jesus made a whip out of cords and drove all the people and animals out of the temple and overturned the tables of the people who were exchanging money. To the people who sold doves, He said, "Take these things away! Do not make My Father's house a house of merchandise!" (verse 16). And, His disciples remembered the Old Testament prophecy that said, "Zeal for Your house has eaten Me up" (verse 17). Jesus recognized the way that people were misusing the place that had been built to honor and worship His Father. Now, these people were using it for their own benefit. And, notice that Jesus had a burning desire (zeal) to correct the situation that resulted in driving out all the people and animals, and overturning the tables.

Second, consider the Corinthians in 2 Corinthians 9:1-5. There was a need in the church at this time for financial assistance to be given to the needy Christians in Jerusalem. In writing about the matter, Paul said that there was not a need for him to write to the Corinthians because he knew (and would even boast) that they were ready to give. In fact, he said that they had been ready since last year because of their "zeal" (verse 2). But, so that Paul would not be ashamed, he was writing to the Corinthians and sending some brethren to them to make sure that they prepared their gift beforehand, that way it could be offered as a "matter of generosity and not as a grudging obligation" (verse 5).

Third, consider Paul in Acts 17:16-17. Paul was alone and waiting for his travel companions in the city of Athens. While he was waiting, he toured some of the city and noticed that it was "given over to idols." The passage says that Paul's "spirit was provoked within him" whenever he saw this (verse 16). Then, he "reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and with the Gentile worshipers, and in the marketplace daily with those who happened to be there" (verse 17). Although the word "zeal" is not used in this passage, it is still an excellent example of it. Paul had such a burning desire to fulfill his God-

given responsibility to teach the gospel that he could not contain himself whenever he saw this city that was given to idolatry. He had to preach the gospel to them!

### ***Zeal must be properly channeled***

As I have mentioned, zeal is a burning desire. But, such a passionate desire alone does not always produce something that pleases God. So, we must learn how to develop the right kinds of desires and properly channel and control those desires.

You see, zeal becomes dangerous whenever it is not properly channeled. For instance, the same Greek word that is translated "zeal" is also translated "envy" or "jealousy." Envy and jealousy also result from a burning desire, but it is a desire that is not pleasing to God and results in sin (see Galatians 5:19-21).

There are still other examples of individuals who have a desire for religious matters, but have not channeled their passion properly. For instance, the Ephesians appear to have been zealous for the goddess Diana that they worshiped (see Acts 19:21-41). Whenever Paul was accused of turning people away from this false God and destroying her magnificence, the people in Ephesus began chanting, "Great is Diana of the Ephesians!" (verse 28) and began a riot in the city. Yet, their zeal was misplaced because it was directed toward the defense of a false god rather than the true God.

Then, some have even had misplaced zeal toward the true God. For instance, the apostle Paul wrote the following concerning the Jews. "For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God" (Romans 10:2-3). These Jews were interested in serving God. They just wanted to serve Him their way rather than His!

A similar point can be made about Paul prior to the time he became a Christian. In describing this time, Paul said, "concerning zeal, persecuting the church..." (Philippians 3:6). Yes, Paul was so zealous for God as a Jew that he even persecuted and was responsible for the deaths of Christians. He was convinced that this is what God wanted him to do.

All of these examples describe misplaced or misdirected passion. It is not enough to just be passionate for God. Instead, it must be brought under

God's full control. We can do great damage if we do not bring our passion under God's control. For, we might (with good intentions and zeal for God) speak words that discourage and tear down. We might act in ways that lead people away from Christ. We might even overthrow the faith of some people.

Yet, if our zeal is brought under the control of God by following what He instructs in the pages of the New Testament, our zeal can turn ordinary people into world-turners for Jesus Christ! For instance, in Thessalonica, Christians had developed the reputation that is described in Acts 17:6. "These who have turned the world upside down have come here too." They were known as being people who were passionate for what they believed in and wanting to spread that message to others. This kind of properly directed passion for Jesus Christ will help lead people to Christ, will help encourage others to remain faithful, will help those who are in need, etc. Rather than keeping our beliefs about God and Jesus Christ to ourselves, we must be so passionate for God and Jesus that others will see and hear about it. And, even those who do not approve of what we believe in or stand for will be able to know our passion!

## **Why We Should Be Zealous**

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Now having a better understanding of what it means to be zealous, we should consider some reasons *why* we should be so passionate for God and to do the things God wants us to do. For now, I want you to consider two very basic reasons.

### ***Because Christ died for us***

Titus 2:11-14 says, "For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works."

First, I want you to recognize that Jesus Christ purchased us. The passage says that He "gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed." Focus on the sacrifice Jesus Christ

made in order to "redeem" us from sin (buy us back from sin). We all deserved to spend eternity in Hell fire because of the sins we had committed. But, because Jesus Christ redeemed us by purchasing us with His own blood (1 Peter 1:18-19), we can be saved from those consequences of sin and have everlasting life in Heaven. Now, just take a moment to consider what Jesus endured to purchase each and every one of us. He left Heaven to come to earth and suffer. He endured mistreatment throughout His life. He was blasphemed and ridiculed. He was spat on and beaten. And, He was nailed to the cross and died.

Second, Jesus Christ purified us. His blood is what cleanses us from every stain that resulted from our sin. Therefore, He gives us the opportunity to be free from the bondage of sin and the opportunity to be a new creation (see 2 Corinthians 5:17). And, now that He has died for us to cleanse us from our past sins, He does not want us to continue living for sin any longer. Instead, the Scriptures demand that we put our ways of sin to death (Romans 6:1-4; Colossians 3:1-17)!

Third, Jesus Christ took possession of us. Recognize that we were all living as slaves to sin that would result in death. But, because Jesus bought us with His precious blood, we are slaves to God that will result in righteousness and eternal life in Heaven (see Romans 6:15-23). So, we are not free in Christ to live in just any way that we desire to live (whether it pleases God or not). Instead, we must recognize that He died in order to "purify for Himself His own special people." We are now His possession rather than Satan's. Listen to 1 Corinthians 6:19-20. "Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's." Thus, we must consider ourselves to be "crucified with Christ," no longer living for ourselves; but for Christ, who loved us enough to die for us (Galatians 2:20)! We are now the "people of God" (1 Peter 2:9-10).

Fourth, Jesus Christ purchased us, purified us, and took possession of us to produce zeal in us! As the people of God, we cannot live in just any way that pleases us (as we have done in the past). Now, we must recognize that Jesus "gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works" (Titus 2:14). Jesus Christ expects

the people who have found salvation through Him to be on fire to accomplish the good works that are outlined throughout the pages of the New Testament! He simply did not suffer and die so that people could half-heartedly serve Him whenever it was convenient for them!

### ***In order to please God***

As you consider the first reason why we should be zealous for God, you should be led to consider this second reason. Ask yourself: “Can a Christian be pleasing to God without being zealous for good works?”

If the answer to this question is “Yes,” consider what that does to Titus 2:14. First, would we be okay if Jesus Christ only went halfway to redeeming us from our sins – even though we don’t deserve that much? Yet, those who are only partially committed to serving God recognize that Jesus Christ gave His entire life to die for them and redeem them from their sin, but insist that God only gets some of their lives in His service!

Yet, Jesus both expects and deserves whole-hearted devotion to Him! In Matthew 6:24, He said, “No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.” In Matthew 12:30, He said, “He who is not with Me is against Me, and he who does not gather with Me scatters abroad.” In Luke 14:26, He said, “If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple.” Verse 27 says, “And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple.” Verse 33 says, “So likewise, whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple.”

Then, not only does Jesus Christ demand our complete allegiance in these verses, but we need to consider the situation in the church at Laodicea a little more closely. To this church, Jesus said, “I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth” (Revelation 3:15-16). Perhaps we could describe them as just kind of “going through the motions.” They were not all the way against God in their words or actions, but they certainly were not all the way with Him either. They

were lost somewhere in the middle. But, this “middle” area was not pleasing to God in any way. Notice that He says He would rather them to even be “cold” than in this lukewarm state. Then, in verse 19, Jesus said, “As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent.” They had sin in their lives they needed to repent of because of their lukewarm condition. And, notice that Jesus said they needed to “be zealous and repent.” No more just going through the motions. That is not enough to please God. He expects and demands a passionate service from those who desire salvation through Jesus Christ!

## **Zeal In The Local Church**

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As we think about building a strong church, in part, through being zealous for good works, we need to think about two areas. First, we will think about the *collective* zeal as a local church. There are two areas I want us to consider in this regard.

### ***Zealous in accomplishing the work of the local church***

God has given every local church a purpose. This purpose can be understood primarily through the work that God has given it to accomplish. Then, as we begin to consider these truths, we should recognize that not just anything we do with passion for Jesus Christ collectively is pleasing to God. For, there are many things that churches are engaged in that simply are not according to God’s truth.

There are three areas of work that are assigned to every local church by God. First, the local church is responsible for teaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. The congregation in Thessalonica provides an excellent example. Concerning them, Paul said, “For from you the word of the Lord has sounded forth, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place. Your faith toward God has gone out, so that we do not need to say anything” (1 Thessalonians 1:8). Local churches should be so zealous for spreading the word of God that they use every available and Scriptural option for preaching the gospel. This should certainly focus on the local community the church is in, and then try to spread the gospel as far as it possibly can (i.e. through

sending out preachers into other areas and communities).

Second, the local church is responsible for the work of edifying those who are Christians (particularly the members of that local church, see Ephesians 4:11-16). A local church's organizational structure plays a part in accomplishing this (i.e. having elders who lead the church in ways that please God). Another part of this is the assemblies of the local church that provide opportunities to worship God and be encouraged with our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Third, the local church is responsible for the work of showing benevolence toward needy Christians (see 1 Corinthians 16:1-4). Recall that the Corinthians were said to be zealous with regard to this work (in 2 Corinthians 9). Today, the local church has the responsibility to provide financial assistance to needy brothers and sisters whenever there is opportunity to do so. And, the church is not to do this grudgingly, but with generosity, cheerfulness, and zeal!

Now, all of this work does not just happen by chance. It does not get done just because God has said it should be done. Instead, people actually have to do the work! This is where zeal comes in. All too often, members of a local church attend some/all of the assemblies and feel as if they have fulfilled their obligation, without really taking an active role in the work of the church. In fact, in many (and perhaps most) congregations, most of the work is done by a very few of the members. This is not because there are few who are capable of doing the work, but because there are few who are willing to be actively engaged in the work. Yet, to be the most effective we can be in the work God has assigned to the local church, it will require all of the members being zealous for these good works.

You see, a strong church will have members who ask how they can accomplish *more* in the Lord's work, not members who try to get by with doing as *little* as they can. Some churches are perfectly content to have regular assemblies on Sundays and Wednesdays, a couple of gospel meetings every year, and pay a preacher as their work. But, they never consider doing anything more than this to accomplish God's work. They never seem to consider what else they could do to teach more people the gospel, to strengthen the members of the

congregation, or assist more Christians who are in need.

And, many members of local churches are entirely disengaged from the work of the church outside of the assemblies of the church. Anything beyond the assemblies is considered to be "what we pay the preacher for" or "why we have elders and deacons." Yet, after considering our responsibility to be zealous for Jesus Christ, it is my sincere hope that you recognize that you do have the responsibility to be fully involved in the work of the church to the best of your ability! There is work that you can do!

### ***Zealous in the assemblies of the local church***

Another area regarding zeal in the local church pertains to the assemblies of the local church. As we discussed in the previous lesson, the local church must assemble together. Whenever it does, it does so to instruct/teach people the word of God, spiritually build up those who are in attendance through focusing on spiritual truths revealed by God's word, and worship God in spirit and in truth.

Now, I want you to consider that a strong church will be zealous concerning these assemblies. First, we must be zealous to attend these assemblies. Hebrews 10:24-25 says, "And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching." So, the members are not to view these assemblies as being burdensome or interfering in their schedules. Instead, the members of the church should have a burning desire to attend these assemblies every opportunity they have. And, whenever they are unable to attend, it should feel like they are missing out on something they really wanted to be part of.

Then, whenever the members of the church are assembled together, this zeal should continue to be present. There should be a zeal for everything that we do when we come together. There should be zeal for studying the Bible (whether in the Bible classes or during the preaching). It should not be a burden to sit and learn about God's word. Instead, there should be a hunger and thirst for righteousness that is demonstrated through the desire to learn more about God's word (Matthew 5:6; Acts 17:11). There should be a zeal for the singing that manifests itself in doing your best to contribute to the singing and being

passionately focused on the words (regardless of how you sound). There should be a zeal for the prayers that manifests itself in being focused on the words that are being prayed and offering them as your own prayer to God. There should be a zeal for the Lord's Supper that is used as a memorial for the Lord's sacrifice and a point of reflection on our own lives. And, there should be a zeal for the collection that manifests itself in giving cheerfully and according to our prosperity so that the church can accomplish its God-given work to its full potential.

Then, the male members of the congregation should also be zealous to take a leading role whenever possible. Leading the public worship assemblies of the local church is one of the responsibilities God has given to men (see 1 Corinthians 14:34-35). Therefore, the men should be zealously working to develop their abilities to do more and to more effectively lead the worship – not doing less or taking the responsibility lightly (or neglecting your responsibility entirely).

## Zeal In The Lives Of Christians

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Here is a second point we need to consider regarding zeal in the local church. Yes, some of what we can accomplish for the Lord is accomplished *collectively*. However, a great deal of what is accomplished will be done *individually*. Therefore, as members of the local church, each one should consider how he/she can be zealous for good works on this individual level. Consider four specific areas in which zeal is needed in the lives of those who are Christians.

### ***Zealous for every good work***

Just like there are works that God expects local churches to be involved in collectively, there are works that He expects His people to be involved in individually. Remember, Jesus Christ gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed and “purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works” (Titus 2:14). These works include such things as teaching the gospel to those who are lost, helping the needy, visiting the sick, widows, and orphans, encouraging the fainthearted,

strengthening the weak, warning the unruly and erring, studying the Scriptures every day, etc.

Doing these good works should not be done grudgingly. Instead, you should have a burning passion to do as much as you can to accomplish the good works God wants from you during your life on this earth! 1 John 5:3 says, “For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome.” You simply do not truly love God if His commandments are burdensome to you! Instead, like Jacob's seven years of service for Rachel only seemed like a few days because of his love for her (Genesis 29:20), your service to God should be done with great eagerness because of your love for Him! Rather than trying to do as little as you can to serve God, you should want to do as much as you can do in His service.

### ***Zealous to be pure***

God wants all His people to be holy, as He is holy (1 Peter 1:13-16). This means that just as God is separated from everything that is evil, God expects His people to be separated from everything that is evil. Thus, God's people must individually work to put to death all of their sinful ways and put on new characteristics that are pleasing to God. Galatians 5:19-26 shows that this includes putting off such things as “adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like.” And, they must put on “love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.”

Doing these things must also not be done grudgingly. Whenever we recognize that there is some change that needs to be made to our lives (i.e. in the way we think, talk, act, etc.), we must have a burning desire to do/change it so that we can be right with God. 2 Peter 3:14 speaks of looking forward to the Day when Jesus Christ returns and being diligent “to be found by Him in peace, without spot and blameless.”

### ***Zealous to worship God***

God is seeking true worshipers who will worship Him in spirit and in truth (John 4:23-24). This is applicable to both our worship individually and collectively. So, the God who is all-powerful and has created this entire world *wants you* to worship



## How To Create And Maintain Zeal

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Him in the way that He has prescribed. He does not just want you to worship Him in any way. He wants you to worship Him according to the way of truth and in a heartfelt and sincere way.

Now, if God is seeking for you to worship Him in this way, shouldn't you have the burning desire to worship Him accordingly? Shouldn't you want to take advantage of as many opportunities you can to worship Him? Certainly, worshipping Him privately or with your brethren should never be a burden. You should never feel burdened to "have" to attend church services. You should have a burning passion for God that compels you to attend all of the assemblies of the local church and worship God as often as you can outside the assemblies!

### ***Zealous to fulfill our roles***

God has given every one of His people a role(s) in serving Him. Like a body has many members that carry out different functions, God's people each have a unique way that they can serve God. Ephesians 4:16 says, "from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love." Specifically, the Bible outlines the fact that there are specific roles God has assigned for His people in the home and the church.

Fulfilling these roles must never become burdensome. Instead, you should have a burning passion to do as much as you can do in God's service and want to serve God to the best of your ability. This means that husbands and wives should do their very best to fulfill their roles toward one another. Mothers and fathers should fulfill their roles toward their children. Men of the congregation should be working toward leading the congregation in worship and to be elders and deacons (whenever possible). All Christians should be working to do the very best they can to do their part in Christ's service – rather than leaving their role(s) unfulfilled and making others pick up the slack they have left!

Maybe you are not living a zealous life for Jesus Christ. Maybe you are, but you struggle to maintain that zeal. Let's consider a few very brief points that will help you create and/or maintain zeal if you will recognize and make the appropriate applications of them.

### ***Recognize who God is***

You should recognize that the God you need to serve is the all-mighty, all-knowing, eternal God who created this world from nothing! He is truly magnificent and worthy of all our adoration, praise, service, and devotion. Whenever you consider this great and awesome God, it should inspire awe within your heart and lead you to be devoted to Him.

### ***Recognize what Christ has done***

As we have already considered, Jesus Christ died so that you could be saved. He gave everything by suffering in horrible ways so that you do not have to spend eternity in Hell – and so that you might spend eternity in Heaven. Whenever you consider this great love and sacrifice, you ought to give your life entirely to Him.

### ***Recognize that you were bought at a price***

Jesus purchased you with His own blood. Your life is not your own any more if you have come to Him for salvation. Instead, your life belongs to Him. Whenever you consider the price that was paid for your salvation, you should devote your life to being used in God's service to glorify and honor Him at all times.

### ***Recognize that you will be judged***

There is a Day coming when Jesus Christ will return and judge all people who have lived on this earth. You will stand before the one who died to save you and give an account of how you have lived while you were on this earth (whether you were obedient to Him or not). If you were not, you will spend eternity in Hell. If you were, you will spend eternity in Heaven. Whenever you consider this Judgment, you should devote your life to pleasing God.

## ***Recognize that others will be judged***

All of these truths are not just applicable to you. Instead, they are also just as relevant to everyone who is living around you. Therefore, you should recognize that the people around you need to learn about the God who created the world, sacrificed His Son to save mankind from sin, and will judge the world one Day. Whenever you consider this, you should devote yourself to having such compassion on others that you will help them live so as to be saved eternally.

## **Conclusion**

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Are you zealous for the good works God wants you to be doing? Are you passionately following the Lord in every area of your life? Are you burning to do everything that you can do in God's service? If every member of the local church will be zealous for good works, the local church will be made stronger!

## **Study Questions**

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How is a zeal for good works crucial to the strength and well-being of any local church?

### **1. What It Means To Be Zealous**

List some example of zeal.

Why is it important to properly channel zeal?

### **2. Why We Should Be Zealous**

How is should your zeal be connected with the sacrifice of Christ?

How should your zeal be connected with pleasing God?

### **3. Zeal In The Local Church**

How should zeal be present in the local church regarding the work of the local church?

How should zeal be present in the local church regarding the assemblies of the local church?

### **4. Zeal In The Lives Of Christians**

How should zeal be present in the lives of Christians for every good work?

How should zeal be present in the lives of Christians for purity?

How should zeal be present in the lives of Christians for worshipping God?

How should zeal be present in the lives of Christians for fulfilling our roles?

## **5. How To Create And Maintain Zeal**

List some things that you should recognize that will impact your zeal for God.

Steps To Building A Strong Church  
Series

# Step #11: Be Faithful Stewards

God wants every church to be a strong church. But, in order for a church to be a strong church it must be composed of individual members who are committed to using all of their blessings in God's service to the best of their abilities.

Suppose you were going on a trip for a period of one year. During this time, you would not be around to see to it that all of your possessions were taken care of properly. So, you would need to hire someone to make sure that the bills were paid, the checks were collected and deposited properly, the grass was cut, the house was in order and secure, etc.

Now, whenever you got back from your trip, what would you hope to see? Surely, you would hope that the individual you had paid to manage your possessions had done a good job and everything would be in proper order. However, suppose that when you returned, you found that the electricity and gas was shut off because the bills had not been paid the entire time you were gone. Because of this, some of your pipes had frozen and were about ready to burst. The mail had not been collected and the checks you were supposed to have received had never been deposited. The grass around your house was like a hayfield. And, you notice that the ceiling in one of the bedrooms has been leaking for months and has never been taken care of.

Would you be very pleased with the individual you had put in charge of your possessions? If not, why not? After all, there is no evidence that he/she did anything that was directly against you. For instance, there is no sign that he/she stole anything

while you were gone. Yet, by not working actively *for* you, this individual was working *against* you.

The same thing is true concerning those who desire to follow Jesus Christ. Jesus said, "He who is not with Me is against Me, and he who does not gather with Me scatters abroad" (Matthew 12:30). Those who agree to serve Jesus Christ cannot just try to not work contrary to the cause of Jesus Christ. Instead, those who are Christians must also work to accomplish the very things Jesus wants us to accomplish. If we do not, we are (in reality) working against Him. Everyone who is a Christian has been enlisted in the service of Jesus Christ as a steward and has the responsibility to devote their lives entirely to serving Him, according to how He desires to be served.

In this lesson, I want to consider how a church should be dedicated to being good stewards for Jesus Christ. Our goals in this lesson are: (1) To learn from Jesus' parable of the talents. (2) To understand that we are all stewards of Jesus Christ. And, (3) to evaluate what kind of stewards we are.

## Jesus' Parable Of The Talents

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During Jesus' earthly ministry, He would frequently teach in parables. Parables were earthly stories that were used to convey spiritual truths. Among the many different subjects Jesus addressed through His parables is the subject of stewardship. For instance, Jesus teaches parables about stewardship in Matthew 24:45-51, Matthew 25:14-30, Luke 12:42-48, and Luke 16:1-13. You would be profited by a study of each one of these parables. However, for the purposes of this study, we will only focus on Jesus' parable in Matthew 25:14-30. This is, perhaps, His most well-known parable dealing with the subject of stewardship.

### ***The parable***

"For the kingdom of heaven is like a man traveling to a far country, who called his own servants and delivered his goods to them. And to one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one, to each according to his own ability; and immediately he went on a journey. Then he who had

received the five talents went and traded with them, and made another five talents. And likewise he who had received two gained two more also. But he who had received one went and dug in the ground, and hid his lord's money. After a long time the lord of those servants came and settled accounts with them.

“So he who had received five talents came and brought five other talents, saying, ‘Lord, you delivered to me five talents; look, I have gained five more talents besides them.’ His lord said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.’ He also who had received two talents came and said, ‘Lord, you delivered to me two talents; look, I have gained two more talents besides them.’ His lord said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.’

“Then he who had received the one talent came and said, ‘Lord, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you have not sown, and gathering where you have not scattered seed. And I was afraid, and went and hid your talent in the ground. Look, there you have what is yours.’

“But his lord answered and said to him, ‘You wicked and lazy servant, you knew that I reap where I have not sown, and gather where I have not scattered seed. So you ought to have deposited my money with the bankers, and at my coming I would have received back my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to him who has ten talents.

‘For to everyone who has, more will be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who does not have, even what he has will be taken away. And cast the unprofitable servant into the outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’”

### ***Explanation of the parable***

From a physical perspective, this is a story similar to the situation I posed at the beginning of the lesson. There was a man who took a trip and entrusted what he had to the care of some other people. Particularly, there were three men who were enlisted in this man's service. One man was given five talents (note that a “talent” was a particular weight of gold or silver), another was given two, and another was given one. Each one was given this

particular amount because the master knew they could handle that much.

While the master was gone, two of these servants put the master's talents to good use. The “five talent man” went out and gained five more. The “two talent man” went out and gained two more. However, the “one talent man” hid the master's talent in the ground.

Whenever the master returned, he was very pleased with the “five talent man” and the “two talent man.” He rewarded them for their diligent and faithful service. Yet, he was angry with the “one talent man” because of his wickedness and laziness. Therefore, he sent him into punishment.

This is quite an interesting story. But, it is not *just* a story. It has a very real application for each and every one of us if we are interested in pleasing Jesus Christ with our service. For, He is the one who is like the master in this parable. Jesus has left this world and ascended into Heaven. During this time, He has entrusted His followers with the responsibility of carrying on the work that He began (compare with the “Great Commission” in Matthew 28:18-20). And, just like the master in the story returned, Jesus has promised to return. Actually, the entire chapter of Matthew 25 helps us to learn a great deal about Jesus' return.

For instance, we do not know when Jesus will return (Matthew 25:13). Whenever Jesus returns, it will be too late to make any changes to our lives (Matthew 25:11-12). Whenever He returns, every person will stand before Him and be judged according to how we have lived our earthly lives (Matthew 25:31-32). Some will be rewarded for their faithful service (Matthew 25:33-40). Some will be punished for their failure to serve Him faithfully during their earthly lives (Matthew 25:41-45). So, some will go into “everlasting punishment” and some will go into “eternal life” (Matthew 25:46).

This parable of the talents should be a serious warning that your stewardship will be a key part of your final judgment. If you have been a wicked, lazy, and unfaithful steward, Jesus Christ will punish you on the Day of Judgment. However, if you have been a faithful steward, Jesus Christ will reward you on this Day.

## ***Lessons from the parable***

This parable teaches you some vitally important lessons to help you understand what kind of steward you are. Consider five basic lessons from this parable.

First, notice that in Jesus' parable of the talents, each of the three men were entrusted with an amount the master knew they could manage and were judged accordingly. For instance, the master did not give every man five talents. Instead, one man was given five talents, one man was given two talents, and another man was only given one talent. These talents were given, according to Matthew 25:15, "to each according to his own ability." Similarly, God only entrusts to your care what you are capable of handling. He does not give you more than you can bear – and then punish you for failing to bear it! Consider 1 Corinthians 10:13 as proof. The passage should help you see that God knows what you are capable of bearing and will not allow you to be tempted beyond your ability. "No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it."

Second, also notice (from Jesus' parable of the talents) that the master judged each of his three stewards on the basis of what each one had done. They were *not* judged on the basis of what the others had done. For instance, the one talent man was not condemned for his actions because he did not gain five talents or two talents (as the others had done). Instead, he was condemned because he did not properly manage the one talent he was entrusted with. Similarly, God will judge you based on what you do with what you are entrusted with. God is a righteous and fair Judge who will not hold you to a standard which you are incapable of living by. Instead, the God who knows your abilities will judge you according to what you do (see Romans 2:5-11).

Third, observe that there were only two categories of stewards in Jesus' parable (in Matthew 25:14-30). Both the five and two talent men were declared to be "good and faithful" servants, as they were faithful over what had been entrusted to their care (Matthew 25:21, 23). Both of these were rewarded as a result. However, the one talent man was declared to be a "wicked and lazy servant," as he

was unfaithful as a manager over what had been entrusted to his care. This man was punished as a result of his unfaithfulness. Therefore, as this parable depicts the Judgment that you will be subject to one Day, you must observe the fact that you will either be found to have been a faithful or an unfaithful steward of what God had entrusted to your care.

Fourth, you learn from this parable what it means to be a faithful steward. Both the five and two talent men used their abilities and opportunities to accomplish the master's purposes with what had been entrusted to their care. Similarly, if you want to be found to have been a faithful steward, you must use your abilities and opportunities to accomplish God's purposes with what is entrusted to your care.

Fifth, you learn from this parable what it means to be an unfaithful steward. Notice carefully that the one talent man did not lose what was entrusted to his care. Instead, the man simply hid the talent in the ground and returned that single talent to the master when he returned. The man who was given a single talent did not use his abilities and opportunities to accomplish the master's purposes for that single talent. This was enough for him to be considered a "wicked and lazy servant." Similarly, God will find you to be a wicked and lazy (unfaithful) servant/steward if you do not accomplish His purposes with what He has entrusted to your care.

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## **We Are Stewards!**

Perhaps we struggle viewing ourselves as stewards. But, if we will learn to view ourselves as stewards, we will be much more successful in serving the Lord. For, if we view ourselves as stewards, we will look at all of the things that we have in a very different kind of way. So, let's work on learning to view ourselves in this way and understanding what we are stewards of.

### ***We have been created for a purpose***

We have been created to accomplish a very specific purpose. Therefore, as you consider your own life, you must evaluate whether you are using it according to this purpose or whether you are living to accomplish some misguided purpose. This single purpose that God expects those who have found

salvation through Jesus Christ to accomplish is to glorify God in all things.

Isaiah 43:7 indicates that this is the very purpose for which God has created us. “Everyone who is called by My name, Whom I have created for My glory; I have formed him, yes, I have made him.” This is also the reason that God, through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, has shown us His grace and mercy so that we might be saved. Ephesians 1:6 says that it was “to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He made us accepted in the Beloved.” Ephesians 1:11-12 says, “In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will, that we who first trusted in Christ should be to the praise of His glory.”

Then, consider Ecclesiastes 12:13-14. “Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, For this is man's all. For God will bring every work into judgment, Including every secret thing, Whether good or evil.” Your entire duty on this earth is to fear God (which involves both a reverential respect for God and a terror of rebelling against Him) and to keep His commandments. This is the only way that you will glorify God in all things. So, if you live your life for any other purpose (i.e. earthly pleasures, earthly wealth, earthly desires), you fail to be successful during your earthly life!

### ***We belong to Jesus Christ***

Listen to what Paul said about himself in Galatians 2:20. “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.” Paul recognized that, as a Christian, his life was not about living to please himself. This means that all of the things that made up Paul's life (i.e. his money, his possessions, his abilities, his time, etc.) were also not his to use in just any way he wanted to use them. Instead, he considered that everything about his life belonged to God to be used in His service, to His honor and glory.

But, this is not just true about Paul's life. This is also true about everyone who is a Christian. Every Christian (including yourself) has been bought with the precious blood of Jesus Christ. Therefore, listen to the language of 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 and consider how Paul's statement in Galatians 2:20

ought to be the same kind of statement you will make about your own life. “Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's.”

In addition, Jesus pictures it this way. In Matthew 13:44-46, Jesus teaches two parables with the same meaning. “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and hid; and for joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking beautiful pearls, who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had and bought it.”

These individuals realized that their opportunity to have the hidden treasure or the pearl of great value was so wonderful that they gladly gave up everything in order to possess it. In the same way, Jesus says that your opportunity to take part in the joys of the kingdom of Heaven (an opportunity that has been made available through the blood of Jesus Christ) is so great that you should gladly give up anything and everything that is necessary to obtain it. And, as we learn from both Galatians 2:20 and 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 (along with other passages), God requires that you give Him complete control over your life.

### ***We have a work to accomplish***

Think about the work Jesus Christ was dedicated to accomplishing during His earthly life. In everything that He did, He focused entirely on fulfilling the mission His Heavenly Father sent Him to accomplish. This included accomplishing a purpose that only He could accomplish (offering His life as the sacrifice for the sins of the world). Then, this work also included teaching His new law and seeking those who were lost (Luke 19:10). Jesus had compassion on the lost so much that He wanted to help them come to an understanding of the salvation that He was offering. Generally speaking, then, Jesus' work was one of care and service to help people be saved from their sins.

Now, Jesus has ascended into Heaven (see Acts 1:9-11), after accomplishing the mission He had been sent to do. But, this does not mean that God's work is done. Jesus has simply done His part by supplying the sacrifice that no one else could have

provided. And, whenever Jesus was about to leave this earth, He indicated that there was more work to be done whenever He gave the “Great Commission” to His followers.

Matthew 28:18-20 says, “And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, ‘All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.’ Amen.”

They were to be “witnesses” to Jesus “in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8). And, this is the work that the apostles went about accomplishing. They were joined in the early church by many other disciples of Jesus Christ who also focused their attention on accomplishing the work that Jesus Christ had left them to do. For instance, whenever there was persecution caused by Saul, “those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word” (Acts 8:4). There are also examples of Christians who were involved in helping other Christians who were in need and trying to encourage their Christian brothers and sisters. All these Christians had the responsibility of letting their lights shine brightly for Jesus Christ so that others would see their good works and come to glorify God (Matthew 5:13-16).

Today, there is an entirely new generation of people who are in need of being saved by the gospel of Jesus Christ. Those who are Christians have this work extended to them. Christ is not in the flesh to accomplish this work today. He has no hands, except our hands. He has no feet, except our feet. He has no tongue, except our tongues.

So, if we want to fulfill the purpose for which God has created us and sacrificed His only begotten Son on the cross, we must be fully dedicated to accomplishing His work. And, if we have truly devoted our lives to the service of Jesus Christ and value the opportunity to have eternal life in Heaven, we will be fully committed to this work. We will only use our hands in the ways He would use His hands. We will only use our feet in the ways He would use His feet. We will only use our tongues in the ways He would use His tongue. And, we will only use everything that composes our earthly lives in ways that will glorify God and accomplish the work He has given us to accomplish. For, He continues to desire

that we live our lives in a way that will glorify Him and help others come to glorify Him!

### ***Stewards of what?***

Each and every one of us is a steward. So, we must carefully consider what this means. What exactly are we stewards of? And, as we evaluate some of the things that are involved in our stewardship, we should recognize that some points are only applicable to us individually, while others are applicable to the collective efforts of a local church.

First, we are stewards of our time. Time is probably the most valuable resource that has been given to any of us. For, it is such a limited resource! Ephesians 5:15-16 commands those who are Christians, “See then that you walk circumspectly [carefully], not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil.” We must buy up and make the best use of the time that God has given to us, using it the best that we can to accomplish our God-given purpose. Certainly, this is applicable to each individual Christian. But, it is also applicable to a local church, collectively. Local churches must use their time doing the things that would best please God.

Second, we are stewards of our money and possessions. Since all good things have been given to us by God (James 1:17), He is the one who has blessed us with all of the wealth that we have. And, it has great potential to do good for the cause of Jesus Christ – if we will put it to work in that way. For instance, Acts 4:32-37 records an excellent example of Christians in the New Testament using what they had been blessed with to help their needy brothers and sisters. Specifically, verse 32 says that they did this because no one said that the things they possessed was their own! They recognized that their possessions belonged to God and should be used to accomplish His purpose. Now, this is also applicable to the collective treasury and possessions a local church has. These must be used in the best way possible to accomplish the work of the Lord.

Third, we are stewards of our relationships. God has blessed us with many earthly relationships. Some of these are family relationships between husbands and wives, parents and children, brothers and sisters, cousins, etc. Some of these are relationships with friends. Some of these are relationships with co-workers or classmates. Some of



## Evaluating Ourselves

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these are neighbors. Some of these are acquaintances. Some of these are brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ. Regardless, Jesus teaches, in Luke 10:25-37, that we all have responsibilities toward the people we are around (our neighbors), to love them as we love ourselves. Certainly, this involves fulfilling our roles, doing good to them as we have opportunity, and loving them enough to help them be saved. And, as a local church, there is responsibility toward each and every member of the church – as well as the responsibility to teach those who are outside of Jesus Christ.

Fourth, we are stewards of our physical bodies. Again, 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 teaches that our bodies are not our own. Instead, we have been purchased with the precious blood of Jesus Christ. Therefore, we must use our bodies to glorify God in all things. So, we must consider how we can use each member of our bodies to accomplish God’s purposes. And, we must make sure that we do not abuse our physical bodies so as to rob God of what is His. Whatever degree of health we have, we must dedicate exactly that much to doing the best that we can do in God’s service.

Fifth, we are stewards of God’s grace. 1 Peter 4:10 says, “As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.” God has given each one of us the opportunity to be saved through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Now, we must evaluate how we are using that opportunity. We would do well to learn from the apostle Paul, who was committed to serving Jesus Christ faithfully throughout his life so that the grace of God would not have been shown to him in vain (for nothing). However, the Hebrew writer speaks of some who had become Christians, but by being unfaithful to the Lord, they would trample the Son of God underfoot, count the blood of the covenant by which they were sanctified as a common thing, and insult the Spirit of grace (Hebrews 10:29).

Sixth, we are stewards of all things that pertain to our earthly lives. Continue thinking about everything that makes up your life on this earth. Consider your job. Consider your abilities. Consider your opportunities. Consider your knowledge/wisdom. Consider your experiences. Consider everything. Then, evaluate whether or not you are using these things to accomplish God’s purposes. God has given you all of these things to use them to His honor and glory.

The subject of stewardship is a serious one. We have already seen that it will be a key part of how Jesus Christ will judge us on the Last Day (Matthew 25:14-30). So, we had better carefully evaluate ourselves in order to know whether we are living to please God in this respect or not. 2 Corinthians 13:5 says, “Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not know yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you are disqualified.” Each person and each congregation must honestly evaluate themselves in order to know whether Jesus Christ will be pleased with how they have managed what He has given them during their earthly lives. We must evaluate ourselves, then, to see whether we have used the things He has given us in the same way that He would use them – and whether we have devoted them to God in the same way that He would have devoted them to God.

### **Only two kinds of stewards**

Think back to the beginning of the lesson. We understand that we would not be okay with someone entrusted with managing our possessions *not* giving everything he/she had to do the best job possible. And, neither will Jesus be pleased with those He has entrusted with so much only devoting *some* of what they have been given to His service (go back and consider Matthew 12:30).

Remember, there are only two kinds of stewards: The faithful and the unfaithful. There is no middle ground. Recall that the “one talent man” who failed to gain anything for the master, also did not lose anything. Yet, he was called “wicked and lazy” (Matthew 25:26). Only those two who were actively working to accomplish the master’s purposes were called “good and faithful” servants and were rewarded.

Listen to Paul in 1 Corinthians 4:1-2. “Let a man so consider us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover it is required in stewards that one be found faithful.” Notice that it is not a mere suggestion that servants of Christ and stewards be faithful. Instead, Paul said that it is “required in stewards that one be found faithful.” So, God has set the bar at this level in everything that we do. And, recognize that being

faithful involves making the choices and taking the actions that please God rather than yourself.

Therefore, let's spend a few moments in honest evaluation of ourselves as stewards. Given all that we have studied, we should consider everything that makes up our individual lives in order to see whether we are being faithful or unfaithful stewards of those things. Then, we should consider everything that pertains to the local church we are members of in order to see whether the church is being faithful or unfaithful as steward of those things.

### **Faithful**

Individually, are you being a faithful steward of your time by using your time wisely to study the Scriptures, visit those in need, serve others as you have opportunity, teach the gospel to the lost, encourage your brethren, pray, etc.? Are you being a faithful steward of your money and possessions by making sure that your family has all that it needs, using them to help those who are in need, giving to support the work of the local church, helping to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ, etc.? Are you being a faithful steward of your relationships by fulfilling your roles toward each one, by teaching them the gospel, by serving the needs you know they have, etc.? Are you being a faithful steward of your physical body by taking care of your body to the best of your ability, by keeping yourself free from sin, by using the members of your body to accomplish the works God wants you to be involved in, etc.? Are you being a faithful steward of the grace of God by completely committing yourself in His service, by helping others experience the grace of God, by keeping yourself holy, etc.? Are you being a faithful steward of everything that God has blessed you with?

Collectively, are the decisions that are made and the actions that are taken by the members of the local church fitting with good stewardship? Are the members being faithful stewards of their time by only engaging in Scriptural worship when they assemble together, by doing all that they can do to teach the gospel to the lost, by doing the best they can to build up those who are Christians, and by doing the best they can to relieve needy saints? Are the members of the local church being faithful stewards of the money and possessions they have (i.e. the meeting place) to only be involved in the works God has authorized them to be involved in and to use these resources wisely so as to accomplish the

best possible results? Are the members of the local church being faithful stewards of the relationships they have with the members of the congregation, the visitors, and the community so as to help lead people to Jesus Christ and build them up in the faith? Are the members of the local church being faithful in their stewardship of all their collective assets?

### **Unfaithful**

Individually, are you being an unfaithful steward of your time by using it to accomplish selfish purposes, by using the majority of your "free time" to fulfill earthly desires and purposes, or by just failing to do the best that you can do for the Lord with your time, etc.? Are you being an unfaithful steward of your money and possessions by using them to accomplish your selfish purposes, pursue luxuries and entertainment at the expense of serving God, or by just failing to do the best that you can do for the Lord with your money and possessions, etc.? Are you being an unfaithful steward of your relationships by failing to fulfill your responsibilities toward them, by failing to serve their needs that you are aware of, by failing to use your relationships and contact with them to help them spiritually by teaching them the gospel or encouraging them to be faithful to the Lord, etc.? Are you being an unfaithful steward of your physical body by using it to accomplish the works of the flesh rather than the purposes of God, by using it for selfish purposes some of the time, by abusing it through doing things that are known to harm the body, etc.? Are you being an unfaithful steward of the grace of God by not doing everything you can possibly do to serve and glorify Him, by becoming involved in sinful things, by failing to help others experience the grace of God, etc.? Are you being an unfaithful steward of anything that God has blessed you with?

Collectively, are the decisions that are made and actions that are taken by the members of the local church demonstrating unfaithfulness as stewards of the things God has given to them? Are the members of the local church being unfaithful with their time by making the assemblies less about God and more about them, by letting opportunities to teach the gospel pass by, by failing to edify the saints in the needful way, etc.? Are the members of the local church being unfaithful with the money and possessions of the church by putting the focus on physical things rather than spiritual things, by wasting money that ought to be accomplishing the

work of the Lord, by being involved in things that are unauthorized, etc.? Are the members of the local church being unfaithful with the relationships they have in the church by failing to fulfill responsibilities to the members of the church, by failing to teach the gospel to the lost in the community, etc.? Are the members of the local church being unfaithful with anything that the Lord has entrusted to them?

## Conclusion

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Are you being a faithful steward over everything that God has entrusted to your care? Are you doing your very best to use each of these things to accomplish your God-given purpose of glorifying Him? Are you helping the local church exercise faithful stewardship as a member of that local church? If every member of the local church will be a faithful steward, the local church will be made stronger!

## Study Questions

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How is faithful stewardship crucial to the strength and well-being of any local church?

### 1. Jesus' Parable Of The Talents

Where is this parable found?

What does this parable discuss and what does it mean?

What are some lessons you learn from this parable?

### 2. We Are Stewards!

What purpose have you been created to fulfill?

Why do you belong to Jesus Christ?

What work have you been given to accomplish? Why should you accomplish this work?

List some things you are a steward of:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.

### 3. Evaluating Ourselves

How many kinds of stewards are there? What are they?

Are you a faithful steward? Are you helping the local church practice faithful stewardship?

Are you an unfaithful stewardship? Are you helping the local church practice unfaithful stewardship?

## Steps To Building A Strong Church Series

# Step #12: Be Steadfast

God wants every church to be a strong church. Throughout this series of lessons, we have now discussed eleven steps that will help accomplish this goal. But, in order for a church to be a strong church, it must also be steadfastly committed to serving the Lord throughout all of the difficulties that are experienced.

It is inevitable that difficulties will arise from time-to-time within and surrounding a local church. These things will put the congregation to the test to see whether it will remain faithful or not. You see, Satan does not want any church to be a strong church. Instead, he wants churches to go through the motions of serving God, but not to be steadfast in their commitment to serving God in all things.

So, Satan puts pressure on local churches whenever and however he can. He tries to pressure congregations through outside forces, like persecution. But, he also tries to infiltrate local churches (even elderships) by getting them to accept false doctrine, by getting them to tolerate sin in the congregation, by causing division, etc. And, not only is he trying to infiltrate and attack the local church (collectively), but he is trying to attack each and every member of the church. He is willing to tear down the local church one member at a time!

Therefore, our steadfastness will impact the strength of the local church (both collectively and individually). If we are not steadfast, we will cave to the pressure to conform to the world. If we are not steadfast, we will become discouraged from doing good. If we are not steadfast, we will not be able to overcome the “bumps” and “potholes” that are on the road to much better things in Heaven!

Consider 1 Corinthians 15:58. “Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.” Because there is victory in Jesus Christ (verse 57), we must be steadfast. This is further explained by the other two terms used in the verse: Immovable and always abounding. We must not let go of the hope that we have for eternal life in Heaven and we must always strive to accomplish the work of the Lord, no matter what difficulties we confront during our earthly lives.

In this lesson, I want us to consider the subject of steadfastness so that we will overcome the attacks of the devil, both individually and collectively. Our goals in this lesson are: (1) To recognize some areas in which we must be steadfast. And, (2) to understand some keys to remaining steadfast.

## Areas In Which We Must Be Steadfast

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The devil is at work in this world. 1 Peter 5:8-9 instructs Christians, “Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. Resist him, steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world.” Yet, the Bible also tells us that “we are not ignorant of his devices” (2 Corinthians 2:11). Therefore, let’s consider some areas in which Satan wants to attack us and get us *not* to serve God faithfully. These areas will require steadfastness in serving God.

### ***Trials***

There are many things that put our faith and commitment to serving God to the test – both individually and collectively. Whether individually or collectively, we experience difficult and trying times whenever we face the constant pressure of dealing with health issues or the deaths of those we love. Whether individually or collectively, we experience difficult and trying times whenever our finances are not what we desire them to be. Whether individually or collectively, we face difficult and

trying times whenever we deal with various burdens of life.

The apostle Paul experienced trials in his own life. Although he experienced trials of many sorts, just consider the “thorn in the flesh” that tried to hinder him from serving God. 2 Corinthians 12:7-10 says, “And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

### ***Temptations***

Not only are there many obstacles that we face in trying to serve God faithfully, but there are also many opportunities Satan gives us to sin against God. In fact, in all of these trials that we face, there is an opportunity provided by Satan for us to stop serving God according to God's instructions. However, there are also ways Satan tries to appeal to us directly through our own earthly desires. These temptations work on us both individually and collectively. He tempts us to be conformed to the ways of the world. He tempts us to follow the lusts of our eyes. He tempts us to follow the lusts of our flesh. And, He tempts us to follow the pride of life.

James 1:14-15 teaches us how Satan works to tempt us. “But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death.” Although Satan may appeal to a different fleshly desire in each one of us, he knows the areas he can be most successful in. And, he will attack us as often as he can to try and lure us away from God through these physical desires. For, such physical desires are of this world rather than of God (see 1 John 2:15-17).

### ***Persecutions***

There can be no doubt that Satan attacks men and women of faith. He wants to use every tool at his disposal to get us to forsake the Lord. So, there are

times that he uses pressure that is directly connected with serving God. Sometimes he causes Christians to be alienated from their family members or friends because they are Christians. Sometimes he causes Christians to be mistreated in the workplace because they are Christians. Sometimes he causes churches to be slandered in the community or threatened because they are Christians. Sometimes he even causes people to be physically violent toward and kill those who are Christians.

Yet, Jesus taught His followers that this would happen. John 15:18-19 records Jesus as saying, “If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.” Satan wants to foster a hatred of those who are Christians in the hearts of those who are not. He wants to punish Christians for believing God and for doing what God says. And, he accomplishes this in many ways.

### ***The doctrine of Christ***

Doctrine is an essential part of the Christian's faith. For, if we do not believe the right doctrines we will not be able to practice the things that are pleasing to God. Therefore, the devil would like to convince those who are Christians to believe in doctrines that are foreign to the teachings of the New Testament. This is true with regard to individual Christians and entire congregations. The false doctrines that are in this world are far too numerous to list here. But, they include false doctrines about God, about Jesus, about the Bible, about sin, about salvation, about the church, about living as a Christian, etc.

The devil knows how dangerous false doctrines are to every soul. Not only do the doctrines destroy those who believe and follow them, but they are also very deceptive. Through false doctrines, Satan convinces many people to follow him while they believe they are following Christ. 2 Peter 2:1-3 explains. “But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their destructive ways, because of whom the way of truth will be blasphemed. By covetousness they will exploit you with deceptive words; for a long

time their judgment has not been idle, and their destruction does not slumber.”

### **Good works**

Satan wants individual Christians and entire congregations to become discouraged in doing good works. He wants Christians to misplace priorities so that other things will be accomplished rather than the works that will be most pleasing to God. He wants us to feel as if nothing good is being accomplished by the things that we are doing so that we will give up. He does not want people to be involved in teaching the gospel to those who are lost, serving others, studying the Bible, worshiping God, helping those who are in need, showing hospitality, visiting the sick, the widows, the orphans, those in prison, etc.

Galatians 6:9 says, “And let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart.” The implication of this verse is that it is possible to grow weary in doing good. The devil is working hard to discourage and distract us from doing the good things God desires us to do every opportunity he gets. He does not want us to keep our focus on the eternal reward of Heaven and to have an easy path or sense of accomplishment in serving the Lord.

### **Prayer**

Prayer is a powerful tool for Christians and local churches to use in combating the work of the devil – and the devil knows it! So, he is working to discourage us from praying. He wants us to think that God does not hear our prayers whenever He does not answer our prayers according to what we ask. He wants us to believe that there is no point in praying fervently and frequently. In fact, He even wants us to begin to doubt in God and in His power.

Romans 12:12 instructs those who are Christians to be “rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation, continuing steadfastly in prayer.” Again, the fact that we must continue steadfastly in prayer implies that there are things threatening our commitment to prayer. For instance, I think about the apostle Paul and his thorn in the flesh on this point (2 Corinthians 12:7-10). Although we do not know what his thorn in the flesh was, we do know that he pleaded with the Lord three times that it would be removed. However, the Lord did not remove it. Instead, it was the will of God to make Paul rely on the strength that comes from God in order to

overcome. And, there is no indication that this one situation ever shook Paul’s faith in God or in the power of prayer!

### **Love**

God is a God of love who wants His people to love. But, Satan is described as “a murderer from the beginning” (John 8:44). Satan recognizes that if people choose always to love, they will follow God. So, if he can convince people *not* to be steadfastly devoted to showing love, he can win people over to his side. Therefore, he works tirelessly to get people to choose not to love God, not to love their spouses and children, not to love those who are lost and headed for certain destruction in Hellfire, not to love their brothers and sisters in Christ, not to love their neighbors, and not to love their enemies. Certainly, this is true on both an individual and collective level.

For instance, one of the most sure-fire ways Satan can disrupt the steadfast devotion to serving the Lord within a local church is to cause strife, contention, and division. When these are present within a local church, it hinders people not only from fulfilling their responsibilities toward one another but also from loving the Lord, accomplishing the work the church should be doing (like teaching the gospel to the lost), etc. So, Ephesians 4:1-3 says, “I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” Once more, the instruction to endeavor to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace implies that the devil is trying to destroy the peace and unity that should exist in Christ. So, Christians must work at loving one another in order to maintain peace and unity!

## **Keys To Remaining Steadfast**

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I’m sure there are other areas in which we need to remain steadfast. Regardless of the threats that we face, we must remain steadfast, be immovable, and always abound in the work of the Lord – individually and collectively. But, the question is *how* do we accomplish this? Fortunately,

the Bible gives us some keys that will help us be steadfast in serving the Lord, both individually and collectively.

### ***Remember that God is greater than Satan***

Whenever we experience the difficult circumstances in life that try to pull us away from serving God, we can feel as if there is no hope. Yet, we must always remember that God is greater than Satan. Consider three passages that will help us remember this key lesson.

First, remember Job. Whenever Satan wanted to test Job, he had to get permission from God (see Job chapters 1 and 2). He could not just choose to do anything that he desired. And, whenever God told Satan not to injure or kill Job, Satan could not go against God's limits. So, even though Satan put Job through some extremely difficult and trying times, God was still in control and had more power than Satan!

Second, consider 1 Corinthians 10:13. "No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it." Even though the temptations we face often seem like they are stronger than we can endure, God assures us that they are not! There is *always* a way of escape from any temptation we face – because God is greater than Satan.

Third, consider James 4:7. "Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you." Satan cannot tempt you endlessly. Although he will tempt you often, God does not allow him to keep such pressure on you that you cannot endure it. Instead, God promises that when you choose to obey God and resist the temptations of the devil, the devil will flee from you. This, again, is because God is greater than Satan! Therefore, nothing that you face in life is so difficult that it puts you in a lose-lose situation. There is always an opportunity for you to win and be steadfastly committed to the Lord! You simply must find and take that path that God has provided you with.

### ***Remember that trials can make us stronger***

The trials that we face are not *just* tests of our faith. They are also opportunities to become stronger. Although they are not pleasant to go through, God

promises that they can result in good if we are faithful through them.

James 1:2-4 says, "My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing."

Similarly, Romans 5:3-5 says, "And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope. Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us."

The testing of our faith is a tremendous opportunity to show how much we trust in God. And, these tests can produce great benefits in our spiritual lives that will help us to endure future tests. Notice that the testing of our faith can produce a greater ability to persevere through future tests. That is, we will become stronger in our faith and commitment to serving the Lord. Then, we will develop greater Christian character that has God's approval. And, our hope will become more intense and we will be rejoicing in our hope with greater frequency. Overall, we will be able to find joy in these trying times because we know that they will help us to serve God more effectively in the future.

### ***Remember that others have endured hardship***

Whenever we are going through any kind of difficulty in living for the Lord, it is helpful and encouraging to know that there have been others who have remained steadfastly committed to serving the Lord through these difficult times. In fact, even in 1 Peter 5:8-9 (as quoted earlier in this lesson), we saw that Peter encouraged Christians to resist the devil, remaining steadfast in the faith, "knowing that the same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world." It is strengthening to know that others are enduring or have endured the same kinds of difficulties that we face (and, some, even more difficult trials).

Consider how we can gain encouragement from the examples of faithful men and women in the Scriptures. Romans 15:4 says, "For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the

Scriptures might have hope.” And, couple this with what we can read in Hebrews 12:1-2 says, “Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”

Think about the many examples of those who have faithfully endured their trials, temptations, and persecutions faithfully. Think about Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, Gideon, Samuel, David, Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, Abed-Nego, Paul, Peter, John, etc., etc., etc. Surely, these all faced plenty of difficulty throughout life on this earth. But, they were committed to serving the Lord. Therefore, we can learn from these individuals who demonstrated what faith through difficult circumstances looks like. And, we can be encouraged that if they could remain faithful to the Lord, we can as well!

Then, we must always look to Jesus. Although these individuals were faithful to the Lord most of the time, they were not perfect individuals. The perfect one is Jesus Christ. He lived on earth and faced all of the difficulties life could throw at Him. In fact, the world hated Him (John 15:18-19). So, the world put Him to death, even though He had committed no sin. Therefore, no matter what kind of hardship we face in life, we can always look boldly to Jesus Christ to see the perfect example of how to navigate through difficulties with a steadfast commitment to the Lord.

### ***Remember that there is victory in Jesus***

One of the reasons that we often become anxious and fearful whenever we go through difficult circumstances is that we do not know how things will turn out. But, those who are Christians should never have this fear. You see, the Christian should have complete assurance that God wins and that those who choose to follow the Lord will also be overwhelming victors.

1 Corinthians 15:57 says, “But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” Then, because of this victory, those who are Christians are encouraged to be steadfast, immovable, and always abound in the work of the

Lord. This is because their labor for the Lord is not in vain (verse 58).

Therefore, we should always be assured that no matter how difficult the tests of life are to endure, God will always win. In fact, the *only* victory that God has promised is through Jesus Christ. He is the only one who has provided victory over the great enemy of death. It is through His resurrection from the dead that those who have experienced physical death will raise from the dead – either to a resurrection of life or a resurrection of condemnation (John 5:28-29).

For those who stay committed to serving the Lord, they will experience the resurrection of life. They are the ones who will be “more than conquerors through Him who loved us” (Romans 8:37). So, this ought to provide the needed encouragement as we go through the difficult times in life, to recognize that we are on the winning side as long as we stay steadfastly committed to serving the Lord. All other responses to the difficulties of life will lead to defeat.

### ***Remember to put on the whole armor of God***

God has not left His people to fend for themselves in their spiritual war against Satan and his allies. Instead, God has given His people all of the armor they need to be successful in fighting off all the attacks Satan hurls at them and remaining faithful to the Lord. This armor is identified in Ephesians 6:10-18.

“Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.

“Stand therefore, having girded your waist with truth, having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace; above all, taking the shield of faith with which you will be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God; praying always with all



prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints.”

Notice the frequency with which this passage assures that we will be able to “stand” against the attacks and schemes of the devil. This armor is simple and effective. Truth, righteousness, the preparation of the gospel of peace, faith, salvation, and the word of God. If we will put *all* of this armor on, Satan will not be able to defeat us. We will stand strong in the Lord and accomplish all of the works God wants us to accomplish for Him.

### **Remember that we are not alone**

Loneliness is one of the greatest tools the devil can use to defeat someone. Although the great lion may charge into a whole flock of Christians (i.e. a local church), he can try to isolate just one of Christ’s sheep. He wants us to feel hopeless. He wants us to feel as if no one cares. He wants us to feel like our faithful service to God does not matter. And, if we accept Satan’s lie that tells us we are all alone, we may neglect to faithfully serve God.

However, the Bible teaches us that we are never alone in serving God! First and foremost, we must recognize that God is with us as we serve Him. Whenever Jesus issued the “Great Commission” to His followers, He said, “and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20). Then, the Hebrew writer said, “Let your conduct be without covetousness; be content with such things as you have. For He Himself has said, ‘I will never leave you nor forsake you.’ So we may boldly say: ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me?’” (Hebrews 13:5-6). We are never truly alone! We always can approach the throne of God through prayer. And, God promises to hear us and says that our prayers are powerful whenever they are according to His will!

Then, we are never alone because we have brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus who are going through the same kinds of things we are enduring. Again, 1 Peter 5:9 encouraged those Christians who were enduring the attacks of Satan to recognize that brethren throughout the world were enduring the same struggles.

But, it is not just encouraging to know that there are others who are striving to live faithfully to the Lord. Instead, God expects those who are Christians to help each other through their times of

struggles. For instance, Hebrews 3:12-13 says, “Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; but exhort one another daily, while it is called ‘Today,’ lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.” Brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ are expected to be working every single day to help each other overcome the attacks they face from the devil! We should care about one another so much that we are willing to make sacrifices for the good of each other.

### **Remember that all things work together for good**

As Christians, we can be steadfast in doing all the good things God wants us to do because there is a solid hope that we can cling to. “This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast” (Hebrews 6:19). We never have to worry about how things will end, even though we may face very difficult circumstances during our earthly lives.

God promises us, “And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose” (Romans 8:28). But, this is *not* assurance that our physical situations will improve. Actually, God does not promise us that we will have all the things that we want or desire while we live on this earth. Instead, this is a spiritual promise with two applications.

First, those who love God can know that all things will work out for their spiritual benefit in the sense that they will become stronger whenever they endure the difficulties of life. This is just as we saw in Romans 5:3-5 and James 1:2-4. We know that everything we go through in life will help us to become more of who we should be whenever we are faithful to the Lord. And, we will be stronger to endure the next trial of life.

Second, those who love God can know that all things will work out for their benefit in the sense that they will go to Heaven. Even if the trials of this life result in physical death, the Christian can know that everything will be wonderful because he/she is assured of the fact that Heaven is waiting and is promised to those who are faithful to God. Again, the Christian knows that all of his/her steadfast labor for the Lord is *not* in vain (1 Corinthians 15:58). There will be a great reward!

## ***Remember that we will reap what we sow***

Those who just live in the moments of life will often choose not to remain faithful to God. This is because the moments of life often offer us more pleasure to rebel against God than to remain steadfastly committed to serving Him. However, this short-sighted approach to life will not be rewarded eternally. Instead, it is only those who live their lives with the recognition that God will reward those who are faithful in serving Him and punish those who live to please themselves who will stay focused on serving God.

Galatians 6:7-10 says, “Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life. And let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith.”

If we live to please our own fleshly desires, we will reap eternal punishment in Hellfire. However, if we live our lives to please God, we will reap eternal life in Heaven. So, rather than getting caught up in the moments of life, we must keep this perspective. And, we must remember that God sees everything about our earthly lives. Proverbs 15:3 says, “The eyes of the Lord are in every place, Keeping watch on the evil and the good.”

Therefore, as we recognize that we will reap according to what we sow, we must be steadfastly committed to doing good works. We should never take our eyes off the prize of eternal life in Heaven so as to become weary and give up on doing the good God wants us to be doing – for any reason! Instead, we should keep focusing on our opportunities to do good and determine to make the best use of those opportunities in the Lord’s service, knowing that God sees and He will reward us some day!

## ***Remember the cost of falling***

Those who are Christians must determine to remain steadfast because of what it means if they do not. For, even though we have become Christians in the past, it is possible to fall from God’s grace and be eternally lost in Hell. For instance, the apostle Paul told the Christians in Galatia, “You have become

estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace” (Galatians 5:4).

The Hebrew writer also warned Christians about falling away from the Lord whenever he said that vengeance belongs to the Lord and that it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God (see Hebrews 10:26-39). So, just as Paul promised in Galatians 6:8, we will reap corruption if we sow to the flesh – even if the sowing is after we have become Christians.

Think about the church in Sardis. Although they had become Christians and had a name that claimed them to be servants of God, they were not actually serving Him faithfully. Instead, God saw their works and knew that they were spiritually dead (see Revelation 3:1-6). Then, Jesus told them, “He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels” (verse 5). Therefore, it is entirely possible to have our names written in the Book of Life – and then be removed from it if we are not steadfastly committed to serving Him!

2 Peter 2:20-22 comments on this kind of unfaithfulness in the following way, demonstrating how God views this lack of steadfastness. “For if, after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the latter end is worse for them than the beginning. For it would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered to them. But it has happened to them according to the true proverb: ‘A dog returns to his own vomit,’ and, ‘a sow, having washed, to her wallowing in the mire.’”

## **Conclusion**

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Are you being steadfast in the work of the Lord? Are you steadfast in your faith? Are you steadfast in doing good works? Are you steadfast in doing your part as a member of the local church? If every member of the local church will be steadfastly committed to serving the Lord and doing good, the local church will be made stronger!

As we close this series of lessons, we must evaluate ourselves both individually and collectively. Collectively, each local church should evaluate itself to see how strong it is and where it needs to improve. Then, individually, each Christian must also be evaluating himself/herself to see the areas he/she needs to improve in serving the Lord and as a member of the local church. If a local church wants to be as strong as it can possibly be in serving the Lord, it must take these steps. Although there may be others steps that could be discussed, I hope that these have helped you to grow in Jesus Christ and be stronger in your labor as a local church! Remember, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13)!

How does Satan try to hinder us from holding to the doctrine of Christ?

How does Satan try to hinder us from doing good works?

How does Satan try to hinder us from praying to God?

## Study Questions

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How is being steadfast crucial to the strength and well-being of any local church?

How does Satan try to hinder us from showing love?

### 1) Areas In Which We Must Be Steadfast

How does Satan try to hinder us from serving God through trials?

### 2. Keys To Remaining Steadfast

How will remembering that God is greater than Satan help us remain steadfast?

How does Satan try to hinder us from serving God through temptations?

How will remembering that trial can make us stronger help us remain steadfast?

How does Satan try to hinder us from serving God through persecution?

How will remembering that others have endured hardship help us remain steadfast?

How will remembering that there is victory in Jesus help us remain steadfast?

How will remembering to put on the whole armor of God help us remain steadfast?

How will remembering that we are not alone help us remain steadfast?

How will remembering that all things work together for good help us remain steadfast?

How will remembering that we will reap what we sow help us remain steadfast?

How will remembering the cost of falling help us remain steadfast?