

GROWING UP

Touching Lives with Dr. James Merritt

Where You Belong Is Here

Growing Up | Week 2 | Hebrews 10:19-25

Introduction

A pastor once called in sick on Sunday morning so he could play golf. Standing on a long par 4, he hit the ball like never before. It soared through the air and dropped right into the cup for a hole-in-one. Peter looked down from heaven and said, "Lord, are you going to let him get away with this?" The Lord smiled and said, "Who's he going to tell?" That's funny until you look at what's actually happening in our churches today. The reality is that if you were born after 1984, there's less than a 10% chance you're in church each week. Now think about this. If you have no desire to be with believers one day a week, why would you think you'd enjoy being with believers in eternity? The author of Hebrews writes to believers who had started "...giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing ..." (Hebrews 10:25, NIV). Part of growing up in the Lord is showing up for the Lord. Here are the three reasons why that matters more than you might think.

Key Points

1. Physically Attend the Fellowship of the Church

Throughout Hebrews 10:22-25, the author uses plural pronouns to emphasize that faith isn't an individual sport. Phrases like, "...let us draw near," "Let us hold unwaveringly," and "... let us consider," speak to the church body as a whole (NIV). Verses 24 and 25 explain, "And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching" (NIV). The phrase "give up" in this verse literally means "to abandon, to desert, to leave behind." Christianity is a team sport, and unchurched Christianity is not encouraged in the New Testament. When you come to Christ, He expects you to come to church, because, whether you were saved inside or outside the church, you were saved *for* the church. Once you decide to follow Jesus, you make three decisions: You follow

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Him; you lead others to follow Him; and you help other followers become better followers. Coming to church isn't just about you. It's about one another; it's about all of us.

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You can't encourage anyone in church if you're not there. You can't be part of the family if you're never with the family.

2. Personally Affirm the Faith of the Church

Your empty seat doesn't speak to a world that is desperate for hope. When you come to church, you're letting the world know you don't put your hope in plans, possessions, prosperity, or politicians, but you put your hope in a person named Jesus. Scripture reminds us to "...hold unwaveringly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful" (Hebrews 10:23, NIV). To a world full of guilt, you're saying there's hope for forgiveness. To a world full of death, there's hope for eternal life. To a world full of hurt, there's hope for healing. Even C.S. Lewis, who thought church music was "fifth-rate poems set to sixth-rate music" and didn't particularly love the sermons or people, attended faithfully because he believed if he didn't, he would fall into "solitary conceit." When pride tells you, "I've got this," that's when you start to believe you can manage your faith and maturity by yourself. If Jesus loved the church enough to give His life for it, we ought to love the church enough to give our lives to it.

When you come to church, you witness to those outside the church and encourage those inside the church. Your presence declares that your hope is in a faithful God.



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3. Positively Anticipate the Future of the Church

If Jesus returns on a Sunday morning, where would He find you? The author of Hebrews urges us to keep "...encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching" (Hebrews 10:25, NIV). Martin Luther said he only kept two days on his calendar: "today" and "that Day." There's a story of a 16th-century church in southern Europe called the House of Many Lamps, built with no artificial light except receptacles at every seat where members placed their lamps. If someone didn't show up, their place remained dark. It took every member's physical presence to totally light up the sanctuary. When you give up assembling together, when your light doesn't show up, you leave a spot of darkness. Pastor Kevin DeYoung observed, "In more than a decade of pastoral ministry, I've never met a Christian who was healthier, more mature, and more active in ministry by being apart from the church."

The fact that you know Jesus is coming again and you don't know when should tell you where you ought to be, especially on the Lord's Day.

Key Takeaway

The same Jesus who died for the church and shows up every Sunday expects you to show up too, not because you have to, but because part of growing up in the Lord is showing up for the Lord.

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Reflection Questions

1. C.S. Lewis attended church despite not loving the music or sermons because he wanted to avoid “solitary conceit.” In what ways might you be falling into spiritual pride by thinking you’re mature enough not to need the church community?

2. Imagine Jesus returns this Sunday morning. Where would He find you, and what would He say? How does the reality of His return “all the more as you see the Day approaching” change your perspective on church attendance?

3. How might making church attendance a non-negotiable transform your spiritual life this year?

Building Blocks

Growing Up | Week 3 | Acts 2:42-47

Introduction

In 2009, British TV host James May built a full-sized, livable house with LEGO® bricks. The house was complete with a toilet, a shower, and a LEGO® cat. May didn't use wood, concrete, or steel. He used millions of small plastic bricks that most people consider children's toys. As a follower of Jesus, you're just like that LEGO® brick. One LEGO® brick is worthless, but when you put them together, you can build something people actually live in. Every LEGO® brick is designed to connect with other bricks. Without connection, the brick will never be what it could be. If you're a follower of Jesus, you're a building block. Think about the early church. It survived without any political power, military might, or buildings because God used the building block of small groups. When you connect with other believers in a small group, three essential things are built for you, by you, and with you. And what gets built is the difference between surviving and thriving in your faith.

Key Points

1. Small Groups Build Faith

The early church “...devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (Acts 2:42, NIV). They didn’t just live together; they were learning together. While you can grow spiritually on your own, it’s impossible to know how much, how fast, or how well you’re growing without a small group. Iron sharpens iron, and you will never grow as strong, wide, and deep in worship services alone as you will in a small group. Why would you limit your spiritual growth to only what you can do alone? Think of Sunday worship as a banquet, big and celebratory, but a small group is like the family dinner table. It’s intimate, interactive, and relational. Individual Bible study will never give you the mutual encouragement, teaching, discussion, and influence you experience in a small group.

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Small groups don't replace personal Bible study; they multiply its impact through mutual encouragement and accountability that accelerate your spiritual growth.

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3. Small Groups Build Friendship

Research says it takes 200 hours to build a close friendship. Scripture repeatedly emphasizes that believers were “together”: “All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together ...” (Acts 2:44-46, NIV). In America, 45% of adults find



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it difficult to make new friends, and the average American hasn't made a new friend in five years. The closest relationships come from investing time in private, relaxed, intimate settings. Like Sequoia trees whose shallow roots intertwine with neighboring trees for support, believers need each other. Jesus modeled this, forming a small group of 12 and spending the majority of His time with them.

Invest consistent time in a small group where shared life naturally cultivates the deep, lasting friendships your heart craves and your spiritual growth requires.

Key Takeaway

No organization is stronger than its foundation, and the primary building block of discipleship is small groups. When you connect with others in a small group, you'll build faith that grows deeper, fellowship that holds you accountable, and friendships that last.

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Reflection Questions

1. If you're honest, how much of your spiritual growth has been limited by trying to do it alone?

2. The early church made small groups a priority, not a preference. What would need to change in your schedule or mindset to make consistent small group involvement a non-negotiable priority in your life?

3. Research shows it takes 200 hours to build a close friendship. Where in your life are you investing that kind of time with other believers, and what would it look like to begin building those lasting friendships in a small group setting?

Seed Sowing

Growing Up | Week 4 | Psalm 126:5-6

Introduction

One of the most amazing sights in America is the giant Sequoia tree. It towers up to 325 feet tall, weighs over 6,000 tons, and can live more than 3,000 years. The famous General Sherman tree is 275 feet tall and 100 feet wide at its trunk, with roots stretching 80 feet in diameter. But that massive, nearly indestructible tree started from a seed no bigger than a tomato seed. That's the power of a single seed. And when that tree matures, it produces 400,000 seeds every year, capable of creating entire forests. Jesus understood this power, which is why He told a parable about the most powerful seed of all, God's Word. Every believer is called to be a seed sower, and Psalm 126 gives us both the promise and the pattern of what that looks like. "Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy. Those who go out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with them" (Psalm 126:5-6, NIV). Once you understand what it means to "sow with tears," you'll learn why some seeds produce forests while others never break ground.

Key Points

1. We Must Be Committed to Sowing Seed

The psalmist uses this seed metaphor because sowing seed is hard work, but it's not difficult work. Breaking ground, fertilizing, and cultivating require effort, but the actual sowing is simple. Notice the psalmist says, "Those who go out weeping, carrying seed to sow..." (Psalm 126:6, NIV). That little word "go" is two-thirds of "God," one-third of "Gospel," and half of "good." Your first priority isn't to come to church; it's to go from the church and sow seed. Every day when you walk out your door, you're carrying seed. Everywhere you get the opportunity, sow it. A Christian who won't go is like a ship that won't sail, a plane that won't fly, or a car that won't drive. There's not one verse commanding unbelievers to come to church, but verse after verse commands believers to go and sow.

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Make a daily commitment to carry and sow the seed of the Gospel at work, at school, and in your neighborhood, because no farmer ever got a harvest by sitting in his barn.

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2. We Must Be Concerned About Sowing Seed

Why does the psalmist twice mention weeping—“Those who sow with tears ...” and “Those who go out weeping ...” (Psalm 126:5-6, NIV)? Because evangelism is not just about your hands; it’s about your heart. Ask yourself: *Do the things that broke Jesus’ heart break mine?* Nothing broke Jesus’ heart like people being far from God. When He looked at Jerusalem, He was moved with compassion. In fact, the shortest verse in the Bible is simply, “Jesus wept” (John 11:35, NIV). And what was He weeping about? People’s unbelief.

The reason we don’t share the Gospel more is because we don’t care more. We shed more tears over lost football games in one day than churches shed for lost souls in a month. God wants you to see people the way He sees them, not as interruptions but as eternal souls who desperately need the Savior. Does it move you to tears to think of anyone going into eternity without Jesus?

Pray daily for God to give you a broken heart and genuine compassion for people who don’t have Jesus, because passion with compassion produces persistence.

3. We Must Be Consistent in Sowing Seed

Notice the psalmist says, “Those who go out weeping, carrying seed to sow ...” (Psalm 126:6, NIV)—literally “leaving a trail of seed.” Picture a farmer walking up and down furrows, continuously dropping seed. You cannot go out once or twice and expect a real harvest; you must look for every opportunity, make opportunities, and take opportunities to sow. Your only job is to sow the seed. It’s not your job to force the harvest.



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That's why we're called "witnesses," not lawyers. Lawyers argue cases; witnesses just tell what they've seen, heard, and experienced. That removes the pressure of having to say the "right" thing, or the consideration of whether to sow at all, because not every seed you plant will bear fruit. Most people you share with won't respond immediately. But the ones who say "yes" are worth a thousand who say "no." Jesus sowed everywhere He went. To the woman at the well, He offered Living Water. To a butcher, He'd speak of the Lamb; to a baker, the Bread of Life; to a candlestick maker, the Light of the World.

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Consistently look for natural ways to weave the Gospel into everyday conversations, remembering that seed not sown is absolutely useless, but seed sown is never wasted.

4. We Must Be Confident in Sowing Seed

The promise that will fire you up is that "Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy" and "... will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with them" (Psalm 126:5-6, NIV). In Bible times, sheaves were bundles of grain laid in paths to be carried to the threshing floor, visible proof that what was sown had come to harvest. Sometimes the most unlikely people come to faith. When one of our faithful members, Deena, took an Uber to the airport, she started sowing seed with her Muslim driver, Servan, from Istanbul. She got his contact information and connected him with me. I sent him a Bible and set up a lunch meeting. A month later, after hearing the Gospel clearly explained, that 28-year-old man gave his life to Jesus Christ right there in the restaurant. Deena sowed, I reaped, but God gave the harvest. You never know what seed will bear fruit or where God will bring the harvest, but you can be certain a harvest will come.

Share the Gospel with confidence, knowing that God promises a harvest when you faithfully sow, even when you can't see immediate results.



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Key Takeaway

When Jesus is precious to you, sharing Him becomes natural. Every Christian is either a missionary or an impostor. And becoming God's missionary starts with sowing small, loving words as often as you can.

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Reflection Questions

1. When you walk out your door each day, do you see yourself as “carrying seed” with opportunities to sow the Gospel? What specific commitment could you make to be more intentional about going and sowing?

2. Does thinking about people going into eternity without Jesus move you to tears, or have you become comfortable with their lostness? How can you cultivate greater compassion for those far from God?

3. Think about the people in your everyday life. Who has God placed in your path that needs to hear about Jesus? What’s one natural opportunity this week when you could sow a seed?
