



KINGDOM CULTURE



Second Baytown Small Groups

WEEK 3: INVITES DEEPER RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

Looking Back: What did God teach you this past week as you read the daily devotions? What opportunities did you have to apply what you learned?

Looking Up: Play the video and discuss the questions from the teaching.

1. What if you only had a set number of days to grow as close to God as possible? What would you do to help that process along? Are you doing those things now?
2. Read Ephesians 2:8-9. Since salvation is a free gift of grace that we don't have to work for, why did Jesus emphasize spiritual disciplines like prayer and fasting?
3. Read 2 Timothy 2:15. What does it mean to "do your best to present yourself to God as one approved"? Paul wrote those words to Timothy. Why are they important for every believer?

4. God's people in Exodus were not seeking Him in practices of spiritual discipline—they relied on Moses to do that. Do you typically view spiritual growth as your responsibility or someone else's? Explain.
5. How is the idea that we can get by on someone else's understanding of or relationship with God harmful?
6. Read Matthew 7:7. Name spiritual disciplines God's Word encourages you to practice. How do each of these disciplines develop hearts that ask, seek, and knock?
7. Which of these disciplines have helped you grow closer to God? Why? Which do you struggle with most? Why?
8. Read Philippians 1:6. How does this verse encourage us as we commit to practice spiritual disciplines like prayer and fasting?

Looking Forward: How will you apply what you learned today to your life this week? Take a few minutes to plan your next meeting and spend some time in prayer together.

WEEK 3: LET'S TALK ABOUT A GROWING RELATIONSHIP

DAY 1—READ PSALM 46:10

"Be still, and know that I am God.

I will be exalted among the nations,

I will be exalted in the earth!"

According to the New York Post, a 2017 study found that the average American checks his or her phone every twelve minutes, or eighty times per day. The article goes on to explain one cause of the frequent checking: "The survey found that separation anxiety is indeed real. As a matter of fact, 31 percent [of people] feel regular anxiety at any point when separated from their phone and 60 percent reported experiencing occasional stress when their phone is off or out of reach."¹

We certainly live in a busy time. We have become so accustomed to busyness of life and mind that we feel anxious when separated from the source of our busyness, like our phones. Many of us have become very uncomfortable with stillness on a day-to-day basis without even realizing it.

This is problematic for many reasons, but the most important is that busyness is often an obstacle to awareness of and thought toward God. In Psalm 46, God instructed His people to be still and know He is God. Some other translations use "stop fighting" or "cease striving" in place of "be still."

Our relationship with God will not grow when we fight to make a way, strive to do better in life, and remain in constant motion to keep up with the world. Fighting, striving, and moving cause us to stop praying and seeking God. We may be tempted to seek comfort in the distractions of busyness, but God is our only true refuge, strength, and security through all of the difficulties of life.

¹ SWNS, "Americans Check Their Phones 80 Times a Day: Study," New York Post, November 8, 2017, <https://nypost.com/2017/11/08/americans-check-their-phones-80-times-a-day-study/>.

How do the translations "stop fighting" (CSB) and "stop striving" (NASB) help you better understand the meaning of "be still" (ESV)?

Read Isaiah 40:31. What promise is there for those who do not rush ahead in busyness but wait for the Lord?

In what situation do you currently need to "be still" before God?

Be silent and still before God, and reflect on His goodness and His promises as your refuge, strength, and security.

DAY 2—READ PSALM 130:5-6

I wait for the Lord, my soul waits,

and in his word I hope;

6 my soul waits for the Lord

more than watchmen for the morning,

more than watchmen for the morning.

Can you relate to the psalmist here? Has there been a time in your life when you were determined to wait for God? If not, why not? If so, what were you waiting for?

All the psalmist could do was wait. In this particular situation, he was waiting for God Himself. He had sinned and desperately wanted his fellowship with God to be restored. But a word from the Lord had not yet come. Forgiveness was communicated as a word from the Lord in the Old Testament, often through a prophet or a priest (see 2 Samuel 12:12-15). Like a night watchman waiting for his shift to end, or a long flight where you're buckled in and all you can do is sit there until the pilot lands the plane, the psalmist was determined to wait.

In a growing relationship with God, we do more than wait physically, noted by the passage of time. The psalmist used the phrase, "My soul waits, and in his word I hope." This is still true for believers today even though we don't have to wait for a human prophet or priest. In Christ, our waiting is an attitude of the heart—a longing for God to reveal Himself to us more as we practice spiritual disciplines like prayer, fasting, and Bible study. Do you wait in the hope that He will reveal Himself to you? Will you persist in prayerful study until He does?

What is the connection between an attitude of waiting on God and the practice of spiritual disciplines?

Is it possible to practice spiritual disciplines like prayer, fasting, and Bible study without an attitude of waiting? What difference does an attitude of waiting make in those disciplines?

What is the relationship in your own life between the study of God's Word and prayer?

Commit to waiting on God while pursuing Him persistently. Ask Him to develop within you a soul that longs to hear from Him like that of the psalmist—content in His goodness and hopeful that He will entrust you with the privilege of knowing Him more.

DAY 3—READ JOHN 15:7

If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.

It is important to understand what is unconditional and what is conditional in relationship to God. For example, God's love is unconditional (see Romans 5:8). Personal experience of the fellowship of God's love is conditional (see John 3:16; 14:23). The privilege of prayer is also unconditional. Because Jesus broke down the barrier of sin and understands and sympathizes with us, we can approach God in prayer continuously and confidently (see Hebrews 4:15-16; 10:19-20). Effective prayer is conditional, though. Jesus said that if we abide in Him and His words abide in us, then our prayers will have a powerful effect.

So what does it mean to abide in Jesus? What does it mean for God's words to abide in you? It's different than showing up to church every week or memorizing theorems or lines for a play. Jesus is alive and active (see Philippians 3:21). His words are alive and active (see Hebrews 4:12). His words are not meant to give you intellectual knowledge about Him only but also to give you fellowship with Him. You abide in Jesus when you wait for Him in an attitude of trust instead of forging ahead on your own. You abide in Him when you invite Him to speak to you now through the words He has already spoken in Scripture. And His words abide in you when you respond to them in faith and obedience.

What this means is that your prayer life can be either ineffective or effective, depending on your relationship to Jesus and His living Word. Do you ever feel like your prayers or other practices of spiritual discipline are empty and without direction? Invite Jesus to speak to you and draw you into prayerful fellowship as you meditate on His Word and seek to walk in its truths.

What is the promise Jesus gives in this verse? Why is the fulfillment of that promise conditional?

Read John 14:13. From Jesus's words in John 15:7, what does it mean to ask "in [His] name"?

Do you approach the study of God's Word more as intellectual pursuit or life-giving fellowship with the Lord of the universe? How can you tell the difference?

Ask the Lord to help you abide in Him. Pray that His words would abide in you, not for you to know more facts but so you know more of Him and hear more of His voice.

DAY 4—READ 1 THESSALONIANS 5:16-18

Rejoice always, 17 pray without ceasing, 18 give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

Always is a big word, isn't it? Words and phrases like "always," "without ceasing," and "in all circumstances" encompass literally every moment of every day. Think about it. Is there anything you continually do without ceasing and in all circumstances? Outside of breathing, you're likely hard-pressed to come up with an answer.

But Paul's instruction in 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 was literal, and it affects our understanding of spiritual growth and the practice of spiritual disciplines. In case we might see these words as an exaggeration, Paul restated his point three times. It is God's will for us to rejoice in everything, to never stop praying, and to continuously give thanks.

This isn't a call to pretend we have no troubles in the world or to walk around speaking aloud non-stop prayers and words of thanks. But it does mean disciplines like prayer involve far more than a few minutes before dinner and bedtime. We are called to remain in a prayerful attitude of full dependence on God, finding joy and thanks in His continual presence. We are to depend on God in every type of situation and circumstance.

You need God always, without ceasing, and in all circumstances. And He wants to draw you into that type of relationship with Him. What would it look like practically for you to depend on God every single moment today?

How do these three short verses impact your understanding of spiritual disciplines?

Read **Philippians 4:6**. How does continual prayer change your focus in the day-to-day?

What is one step you can take toward praying without ceasing this week?

Express your need for God in this moment and every moment. Pursue prayer without ceasing in an attitude of dependence by trying the following:

- Do not close your prayers, but leave them open-ended, continuing to turn your thoughts to God.
- When you're outside, look up, down, and around to notice God's creation.
- When you encounter people, think about how God loves them and has purpose for them.
- Pray as you walk from your car to class, work, or into your house.
- Listen to worship songs that turn your thoughts to Him.

DAY 5—READ EZRA 8:23

So we fasted and implored our God for this, and he listened to our entreaty.

The purpose of spiritual disciplines, like fasting, is to seek God so that we might grow closer to Him. It makes sense that Scripture connects fasting to prayer and reflects a sense of desperation for God. Prayer doesn't always involve fasting, but true fasting will always involve prayer.

Fasting is often demonstrated in Scripture as the spiritual practice of a whole group. Ezra 8:23 is one such example. The prophet Ezra led a group of Jews in their return from Babylonian captivity back to Jerusalem. It wasn't an easy journey. All their children and possessions traveled with them, and they would be vulnerable to attacks by their enemies along the way. Ezra led the group to fast so they would humble themselves before God and seek Him for safety. Ezra didn't want the king of Babylon's help; he wanted God to get the glory. So they fasted and prayed to God, and God answered.

We desperately need God as individuals and as a community of believers. Life is hard, and we are vulnerable to spiritual attacks—just like the people of Israel. Fasting is one way we can humble ourselves before God and ask Him for protection. There is no other help we want or need here at Second Baytown but to seek God and invite Him to receive the glory of which He alone is worthy.

If God answers the prayers of those who wait for Him and abide in Him, then why does fasting matter? Why do you think the people didn't just pray?

Fasting means we abstain from all or some type of food or drink. As we learned in this week's devotional readings, the spirit of fasting is of greater importance than any method of fasting. So what are some other ways you can fast to pursue closer relationship with the Lord (set aside your phone for a period of time, give up watching college football for an entire Saturday, not eat out for a week, etc.)?

What are some ways Second Baytown might be vulnerable to spiritual attack?

As you fast this week, implore God for protection for our church where we might otherwise be vulnerable to spiritual attack. Invite God to do a work that only He can do so that He might get the glory.



KINGDOM CULTURE



SecondBaytown.org