



TIME OF GRACE®

Gather, Seek, Serve

Study Notes

Summary

There are many temptations that keep us from church, and so many distractions that keep us from worshiping if we get there. This message reminds us why we gather every week in Jesus' name.

- **1 Thessalonians 4:1:** As for other matters, brothers and sisters, we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more.
- To “live” = To _____ = _____ and _____.
- Gather, Seek, Serve:
 1. Make church a _____.
 2. Seek _____.
 3. Serve _____.
- **1 Thessalonians 4:2:** For you know what instructions we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus.
- Why? Because of the _____.

Points to Ponder

1. How often do you “gather” for worship with other Christians? If church is a weekly habit, how did you get into that habit? If not, what is currently getting in the way? How might you improve it during this next season of life?
2. Do you tend to think of Jesus more as your “Lord” (authority) or more as your “Savior” (forgiveness)? If you balanced those ideas perfectly, what might change about your life?

3. Meditate on Hebrews 10:19-25. Find at least three wonderful encouragements to gather with other Christians around the good news of Jesus' love.

Homework for Next Week

Read John 20:1-18.

Time of Grace Ministry
Gather, Seek, Serve
1 Thessalonians 4:1-2
April 5, 2020

Pastor Mike Novotny

Do you know the statistics in America right now for churches? The many, many, many gatherings of Christians like this are shrinking and they're graying and they're aging and they're merging and they're dying.

About 10 years ago, there was a church on the north side of Appleton of about 900 total people and they decided to start this church. And now in the past decade that one campus has turned into two a few pastors have turned into five, a medium-sized staff has exploded and those 900 people now number 2,300.

So it almost seems wrong or greedy or ungrateful to stand up here and ask God to do greater. God's like, "Well, how many people do you want to hear the gospel? I gave you how many nations, I brought how many people, how many baptisms, how many are gathering into groups and growing in the word? What more do you want?" And we'd be tempted to think that until we took a long look at this. This in my hands is a printed version of our church's membership directory. It has all the names of the men and women and children who call The Core their church home. This doesn't have a list of all the guests who've ever visited us; the only people who show up on here are those who have taken a class to learn what we believe, who said they wanted to publicly and persistently be a part of our church family. Those who sat down with a pastor and learned about roots and the commitment that it takes; that two-way commitment to be part of a church. Those who have taken a vow before brothers and sisters, "I want to set down really good roots here."

And if you would page through this directory like I did this week, do you know what you would find out? That 50 percent of these names aren't here today. And so our Father is not offended by that prayer; that we would do more and more. That we would grow greater and greater because he loves everyone as much as we love that one person. So we pray for greater things until everyone has great roots in Jesus.

But that's not the only reason why we do this. The problem - and I don't know, maybe the worst problem - is that for those of us who are here today, just being here does not give you great faith. Have you heard that old jab, you know, showing up in a garage won't make you a good mechanic? And showing up in a church doesn't make you a great Christian. I'm not sure if your brain is anything like mine but I find it natural; like shockingly easy to sing songs and to confess the Apostles Creed and to get through an entire message, an entire service, without like engaging that much in my soul. If I don't intentionalize it, I can get through an entire song and not be able to repeat a single lyric or have applied it to my life or to my heart. And so, no, God is not offended. If we say, "God, we want more," we don't just want people to show up in the chairs

and to click on a podcast while they drive their car; we want them to think really deeply, to meditate profoundly on your love, your mercy, and the forgiveness you're offering in Jesus.

And the reason we're praying so passionately for greater today is because, as we like to say at church, if you don't have a strong root, you miss out on amazing fruit. Like for the people that could be sitting in these chairs here today but they're not, they're going to miss it. They're going to miss the love of Jesus that we proclaim in this service. They're going to miss the peace of conscience that comes from knowing that Jesus at the cross forgave every sin. There's going to be some wisdom, some guidance, some joy that they're just not going to get because they weren't here on this specific day. And so, no, I don't think it's greedy or ungrateful. I don't think God is angry. I think our Father actually wants us to pray greater. God, do greater things among us.

And that's why today I want to share a Scripture with you. It's a really unique Scripture; in my mind it's a powerful Scripture. It's a paradigm shifting Scripture. It's a Scripture that at the same time can encourage you, pat you on the back, and kick you in the pants as God inspires you to do great things. It's a little snippet in the New Testament from 1 Thessalonians 4. Before I dive into it, let me give you just a quick bit of context. About 2,000 years ago, the Apostle Paul was planting all these churches in the ancient world; basically around the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. And he got to this Greek city called Thessalonica and he started a church and for three straight weekends, he instructed them about Jesus. He told them that Jesus was God, that Jesus was Savior, that Jesus had done great things for them and they believed it and they embraced it but before Paul could show up to wrap up his four-week sermon series, the enemies of Jesus ran Paul out of town. Can you imagine that? He had three weeks to start a church and when he left, Paul was afraid. He was afraid that the suffering and the persecution and the pushback would rip up these tender roots from these brand new Christians. And so, Paul sent a messenger and finally that messenger came back as Paul was holding his breath and the messenger brought the news. I want to share the news with you here in 1 Thessalonians 4, where Paul writes these words: "As for other matters, brothers and sisters, we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living."

Did you all know that you have a way of making me mad on Monday mornings? My brain is one of those organized brains where when I go to a meeting, I like to have an agenda and I like to do the first thing and then the second thing and then the third thing. And when our staff gathers every Monday, what we love to do is talk about church. And one of the first things on our agenda is a section called "Headlines," where we get to gush and praise and glorify God for the great things we see among you. And our staff so often says, "Hey, did you see who showed up for church yesterday?" And we celebrate. "Did you see who brought a friend? Did you hear how many people checked that box to take the next step?" And headline after headline after headline, we celebrate what God is doing in you and through you. And so, we finished that part of the agenda and then we get to the last part of the agenda, which is basically how we can improve. And I say to our staff, you know, if Jesus gave us a time machine and we could go back to Sunday morning and we could redo church all over again, what would make it better? We try to be really critical and analyze the message and the music and the lights and the technology and the coffee and everything. What would have made it better? We don't want to get stuck or stagnant as a church. And do you know what happens almost every Monday that makes me so mad? Our staff keeps saying great things about you. Like a half hour later, all of

these stories - "Oh, did you know - Pastor, did you see who else came to church?" And I want to say, "We're past that part, alright? Now's the time when we're going to be critical." And, "Did you hear? Oh, did you see that family who came? Did you see - hey, did you see that guy singing?" And they gush and they gush and I kind of feel like our staff is a little bit like Paul. They say we gave this church instructions how to live, how to worship, how to gather and in fact, you're doing it.

About a year ago, I grabbed a cup of coffee with a couple who had been visiting our church. And they were honest enough to tell me that they still had questions and they still had doubts and they were interested but they weren't sure just yet and so I did something in that moment that I had never done before. I challenged them to come to church every single week for six months. And when I went home after that meeting, my wife asked how my day was and I said to her, "I think I messed up." And she said, "Why?" I said, "Well, I kind of like, I don't know, it just came out of me in the moment. Like you should come to church for 26 straight weeks." And I thought, "Did I set the bar like a bit too high? I was asking someone to really fail, especially when they're new; not part of our church family just yet." But do you know what happened? They did it! And every Sunday when I'd stand up here as I'm preaching and I make eye contact, I didn't do it but I always wanted to stop and like, "Yes!" "You're here! Oh my goodness, I can't believe this is happening." Because you can see people who aren't perfect but when you see God doing something great, when you see a step, progress, you have to just pause and say, "God, thank you; thanks for doing great things."

So what now? Well, Paul can help answer that question at the end of verse one. Paul says, "Now we ask you and we urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more." So Coach Paul gets all the kids in at halftime. He says, "You guys did so great, okay, but now here's what we're going to do. We're going to run the play again and we're going to do it faster. And Johnny, you're going to hit that kid even harder and Billy, you're going to run that buttonhook even sharper. You did great; now let's do it better." And that's what God is saying to us today, too. You're here in church, praise God. Now this time, this season, this month, this year, let's do it even better. To grasp really what Paul is teaching though, you have to pick up on a word that's not exactly in our English translation. If you're taking notes in your program, grab your pen because when Paul says I want you to do this more and more, he is referring back to earlier in the verse where he talked about how a person should live in order to please God. But if you spoke Greek like Paul originally wrote in 2,000 years ago, you know that Paul didn't use the verb to live - here's our next fill in the blank - Paul actually used the verb to walk. A literal translation of this verse would be, "We instructed you how to walk in order to please God. And now we're asking and urging that you walk more and more."

Have you ever heard that phrase before; to walk with Jesus? It's kind of like Christian slang like, "How's your walk going?" It's really churchy, isn't it? Like, hey brother, how's your walk? We don't talk like that normally. Do you ever think if you've heard that before, like what's the connection? Why would Paul, if he wants to talk about the Christian life, why would he describe it as a walk? I was wrestling with that question and I came up with two answers; I'd like for you to write them down. One of the reasons that Paul's thinking about walking when it comes to our life is the idea of direction. So unless I'm like walking in place, which gets kind of weird after a while, alright? Every time I walk, I'm moving in a direction. I can walk towards you, I can walk

away from you, I can walk directly at you, I can kind of meander and wander and waver, which is a perfect description of how it is with faith in God, right? Every day with every choice, every season and every step, you can be moving towards a strong relationship with God or away from him. You can be super focused; like everything you do is going right at God. Or you can be kind of, sort of making choices, thinking about God, I'm kind of getting stronger in my faith and Paul says I want you to walk with a sharper, more focused, direction.

Number two, I think he picks up on that metaphor not just because of direction but because of pace. So you could be walking in the right direction right towards God but you could be taking these like millimeter kind of baby steps. Or you could be sprinting, you could be running the race, trying to win the prize like a distance runner who wants to get to the finish line first. So you could be moving towards God and say, "Hey, I only went to church on Christmas last year and now Christmas and Easter. Woohoo!" Well, you're going the right direction, I guess, but that's a really tiny baby step for a year and maybe God wants our walk to not be so much of a walk but running the race of faith. And you put those two things together and that's what Paul wants for us. As we think about church, as we think about what's going to happen for the rest of tonight and for the rest of this year, Paul says I want your walk, your behavior, to be in the right direction and I want it to be even faster than before.

Now what does that mean practically? Well, if you're still taking notes, I want to suggest three things. If you want a stronger gather route, if you want your walk to be better, straighter and faster, here's three things I think you should do. Number one: Make church a given. Make worship on Sunday an assumption. Don't wait to see how the weekend's going or if things are busy or if you still have company over. Let this be that thing in your calendar that gets prioritized over every other option. I know you can do this because you already do this. If I asked you to grab a cup of coffee on Tuesday morning at 10:00, some of you would automatically say, "I've got work." For some of you, if I would say, "Hey, let's grab lunch on Thursday," you'd say, "I have class." There are just some things in our mind that are in our schedule and they can't be moved so why couldn't we do that with church? If we wanted to seek God with all of our heart, why couldn't we just say, "Okay, everything else is going to work around this? I'm going to be here no matter what happens. I'm going to get out my phone, I'm going to put in the event, I'm going to repeat it, and have no ending to the repeat cycle." Why couldn't you? You could.

Do you know if that single step would make our church explode with growth like never before, we would need to cram in extra seats, add extra services; the simple fact if all of God's people would gather on all of the Sundays of the year, our church would blow up with both fruits and fruit. Now before I move on to number two, let me speak to those of you who aren't here live but are watching on TV. If you don't show up to a church but you connect through some media, I know there are so many reasons why you do that. For some of you, you're sick on a Sunday. Some of you really miss going to church but you've gotten older and you're stuck in a nursing home. Some of you have had really, really rough experiences with church and you're not sure if you're ready to reconnect. Some of you battle social anxiety and just showing up in crowds of people like this is super challenging. And for others of you, you just moved to a new city or you've gone off to college and you haven't found the right fit just yet. And if that's you, I want to say thank you. Like, thank you for still connecting and caring about Jesus. Thank you for

watching, thank you for listening, thank you that in the busyness and craziness of life, you're still holding on to the word of God and your connection to the word that creates and strengthens faith.

But maybe today, maybe this message, is God's nudge. Maybe God knows that as great as podcasts and TV shows and YouTube videos are, there are some things, some blessings that you can only get with people. Now I love podcasts, I binge them on double speed on every single day of the week but I can tell you there are some blessings that happen in my life, not just when I'm listening here, but when I'm gathered here. When face-to-face, flesh and blood, brothers and sisters refine me and I get to refine them. So I want to encourage you respectfully, if at all possible, this is God's nudge for you to reconnect and experience the true blessings of gathering in Jesus' name. Number one, make church a given.

How else can we strengthen our gather roots? Here's number two: Seek God. Your brain loves to conserve brain power. God made your brain in such a shockingly beautiful way that it's like a muscle and if you use it, it gets tired and worn out. So if there's any way that it can go into like autopilot mode to save energy, it will. Which is really dangerous in church because if I say something like, "Jesus died on the cross for your sins," do you know what your brain thinks? "I know this one. Yep, grace, forgiveness, yeah, free gift of heaven, yep, yep, yep." If we break out into a confession like the Apostles Creed, do you know what many of your brains will do? "Oh yeah, I know all these words. Take a break, take a siesta there, Mr. Brain. The mouth can speak the words even if the heart is far from God." And you can say that the Son of God, Jesus himself, was conceived and born. He suffered, he died, he was raised from the dead. He ascended into heaven. You can say all of that without experiencing any of that. You can bust out in the Lord's Prayer, perhaps the greatest prayer that has ever been prayed, and you can ask God to protect you from temptation and deliver you from evil and make sure you don't starve and forgive all of your sins and you know what your brain will almost automatically do? "Oh yeah, I've been saying this since I was two." And you can totally check out. So if we're going to walk more and more with God, something we have to do when we're sitting in these seats is to seek him. Is to engage and exhaust our brains with the treasure that we hear in this book. So I want to encourage you to take this time we have together with eternal seriousness. Mechanics don't get better by showing up in garages; Christians don't get stronger by showing up in churches. But people who ponder, think and meditate do.

Finally, number three. When you're here, I'm asking you to serve people. I'm about to call a bunch of you out right now so this is going to hurt about one-tenth of you. Can I still say it? One of the best ways that you can serve people is by not sitting in the last seat in a row. Now if you're sitting in the last seat in the row right now, I forgive you, you didn't know until today, but next Sunday, daggers of judgment whoever's sitting on that end seat. Do you know why though? It's so natural to want to sit on the end, you know, if I'm boring you can leave quickly, you can go to the bathroom, especially if you have a little kid or you have to serve with our church, I get that. But when you sit on the end row and people walk in, do you know what they normally won't do? Crawl over you. They'll find somewhere else to sit. But if you sit in the middle of the row, do you know what you subconsciously do? You invite. And especially if we have a guest who shows up and church is a little bit full like it is today, when someone can walk in and sit down right next to you because you have subconsciously like spatially invited them to sit next to

you, you can give them a great first impression instead of feeling embarrassed that they have to crawl over you while you're meditating or praying. One of the best ways that you can put people first is by sitting in and inviting them. And then when they do, remember that they exist. We sometimes call it tic-tac-toe hello. Picture yourself in the middle of a tic-tac-toe board; if anyone gets anywhere near you, they will be greeted, they will be loved, and they will be welcomed. I can tell you when you do that - as a guy who gets to talk to a lot of new people to our church - it means the world. And I know for some of you that's a struggle. You're introverted, you're not good at small talk; that's okay. Do it for Jesus, do it for them. Because if those people come back and have a strong gather root, it produces such incredible and great fruit.

So those three things - take the great things happening here in church and make them even greater. Make Sunday a given, seek God during the service, serve others before and after.

Now before I say amen, let me answer one final question and the question is: Why? Why would you do all those things? I mean, for some of you, that's going to mean coming to church every week instead of once or twice a month. That's a lot of time. Why would you do that? And man, your brain could just relax after a long weekend. Why would you engage and exhaust it during this hour of worship? And getting out of your comfort zone to welcome strangers and sit in a place that you really don't prefer, why would you do that?

Here's our last words for the day; verse two. Paul explains, "For you know what instructions we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus." If you're taking notes, that's our final fill in the blank. Why would you do this? Because of the Lord Jesus.

And before your brain is tempted to zone out because the Lord Jesus, we know all about that. Have you ever thought about the Lord Jesus? What does the word "lord" mean? It means master. It means the authority. Why would you come to church? Paul says because Jesus is Lord and your Lord said so. He's the coach; you're the player. He's the king; you're the citizen. He's the general; you're the soldier. He's the Lord; you're the servant so do it. He wasn't suggesting; he was saying, "Hey, if you think you can make it." He laid out 10 commandments and one of them said remember, set a day apart, keep it holy, protect it. I don't think it would be good for you; I'm demanding and commanding that you do it. So there you go. You either show up or you're rebellious. The Lord.

But the Lord Jesus. Do you know what the word "Jesus" means? He saves. Jesus comes from the Hebrew "Yeshua," where we get Joshua, which literally means "the Lord saves." Which is shockingly cool. Paul's rationale for why people should grow in faith, why you should gather more frequently, more passionately, and with more focus is because your Lord is named Jesus. He saves. See, when Jesus wants you to come to church, he's not just trying to boss you around and tell you what to do. He wants to bless you. He's not just trying to exert his authority over you; he really wants you to grow in faith. He wants you to show up here Sunday after Sunday and think so passionately because he wants you to know the great thing he did out of his greater passion for your eternity. In fact, we might say it is the greatest thing of all - his walk. Jesus Christ walked with God. Every step was straight towards the Father's heart. Everything he did was according to the Father's command. And by the time that Jesus died, he was as close to God as a person could get. Do you know why? To save. Because when Jesus got into the perfect

happy presence of God, he didn't turn around to people like us and say, "Come on!" No, do you know what he did? He set us down as he singlehandedly carried us into God's presence. So that even as we're fighting to make progress, even as we're trying song after song and Sunday after Sunday to do the right thing, we would never have to wonder where we stand with God. We are right in his presence. His very breath is in his lungs. He is with us always. We see him face-to-face and that face is shining upon us because our Lord isn't just named anything; he's named the Lord Jesus.

And when you believe that, it will spark the greatest passion in your soul. When you know that Jesus isn't just here to tell you what to do but he did everything for you, there is incredible fruit, love from God, peace in his presence and joy that lasts forever. So brothers, sisters, I'll see you next Sunday. I'll look for you all crowding to get the middle seats in church. And I'm going to watch the expression on your faces as you meditate, maybe for the first time, on every line and every lyric from every song. I believe that you're going to gather greater and here's why: Because Jesus is not just your Lord; he's also your Savior.

Let's pray.

Jesus, you are so good to us. When I think that right now we are forgiven of every sin, that's such a great thing. All the things that we wish we could rewind and do over again, you've already wiped them out of the Father's thoughts and memory and that is such a great thing. No matter how much we struggle, no matter how much we wish we were further into our recovery, right now we are forgiven and loved and liked by our great Father in heaven and that is such a great thing.

Jesus, we trust you today. We are willing to rearrange our schedules and our thoughts and everything about our lives because you are worthy because you did the greatest thing. So I pray boldly today, Father, that you would send the Holy Spirit. Not just to open our eyes to the clarity of your commands but to open our eyes to the beauty of the cross of Jesus. Let the thought of hearing his word, gathering with his people, and singing his praises be enough to compel and change our hearts to gather even greater. We pray it all passionately in his beautiful name, Amen.