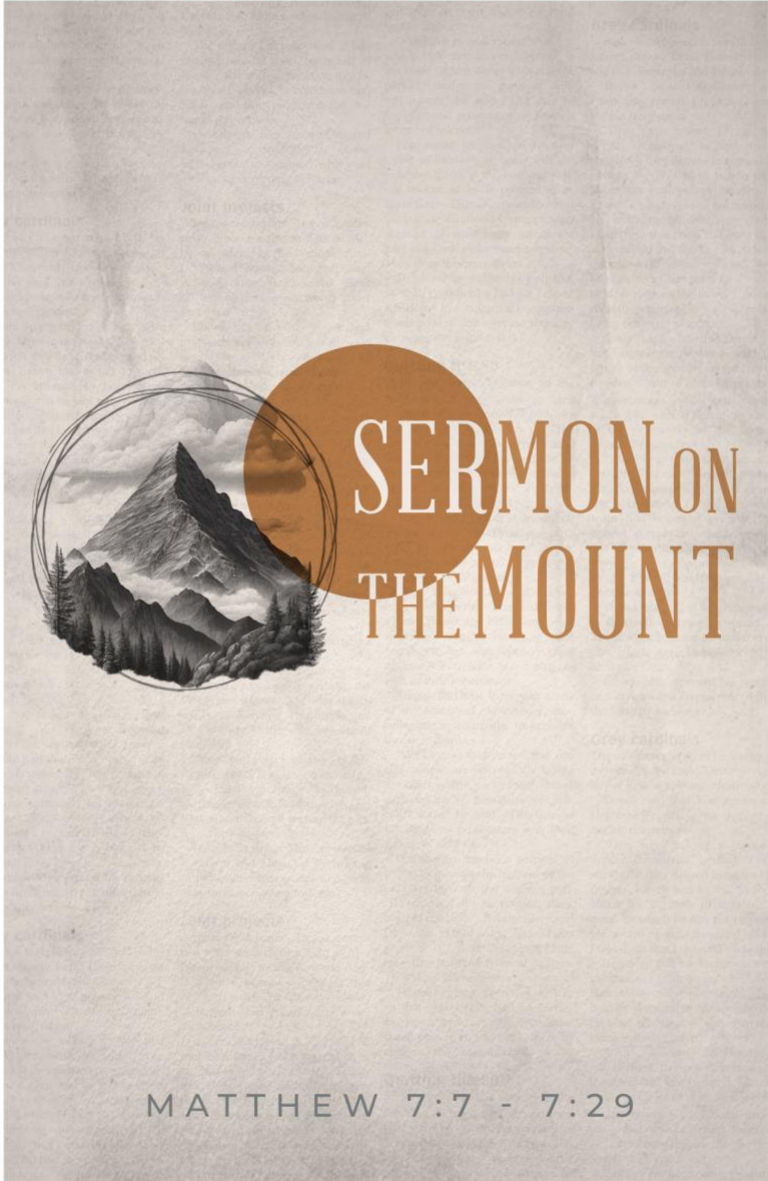
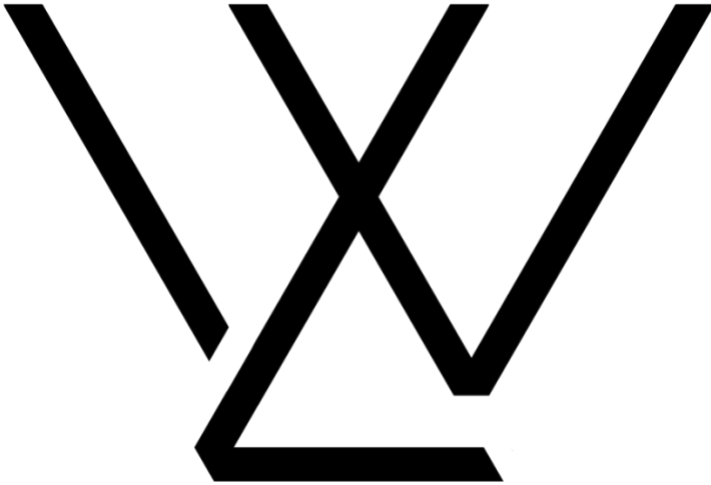




WORD TO LIFE

WEEKS 15-18





Word to Life studies are sermon-aligned study guides, created to help the church dive even deeper into the passages we study together on Sundays.

Each week there will be five studies to help you prepare for the upcoming weekend sermon. This will also be a great discussion tool at your next LifeGroup meeting.

We hope you enjoy and grow deeper in your faith!

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Week 15: Matthew 7:7-11

Day 1: A Day to Explore

READ: Matthew 7:7-11

EXPLORE:

Instructions: Spend time reading Matthew and complete the activities and questions below.

- **Activity:** As you read the passage, take notes in the space below about what you observe.

- **Questions:** Ask, seek, and knock are mentioned together in verses 7 and 8. What do you notice about those three terms? How are they similar? How are they different?

- **Question:** Have you ever asked for something from God and received it? If so, what are some examples that come to mind?

- **Question:** Have you ever asked for something from God and not received it? If so, what are some examples that come to mind?

- **Question:** How might Matthew 6:9-15 help guide you when you think through Matthew 7:7-11?

- **Question:** What did Jesus use as an example in verses 9-10 to make His point?

- **Question:** What are some things you have been praying about recently?

- **Question:** Have there been times in your life and in your prayers that you've found it hard to understand and maybe to believe verse 11?

Week 15: Matthew 7:7-11

Day 2: While We Wait

READ: Matthew 7:7-11, James 4:2-3, Jeremiah 6:16 and 29:12-14

EXPLORE:

In today's passage, Jesus once again teaches about the power of prayer. Throughout His ministry, Jesus often withdrew to pray, even pulling away from His disciples to be alone with the Father. While prayer is central to our walk with God, we (Brent and Sarah) find this passage challenging. What does it really mean to ask, seek, and knock? And more importantly, what does it *not* mean?

As we write this WTL, we sit beside our precious baby girl, River, in the NICU. In moments like this, these words from Matthew 7 take on a deeper meaning for us. They echo back to earlier moments in our lives when this passage has been spoken to us during both joyful and difficult seasons—during Sarah's cancer diagnosis and now, as we navigate the uncertainty of our little girl's health. Well-meaning but painful words like, "You just need to pray *harder*," or "If you *truly* believe, healing will come," have been said to us more than once. These phrases, though spoken in kindness, can sting. They remind us of the importance of truly understanding what Jesus meant in this passage.

When we pray, it's important to check our hearts and intentions in what we are asking, seeking, and knocking for. Jesus invites us to bring our desires before God, but as He teaches in the Lord's Prayer, we must come with hearts surrendered to the will of the Father: "*Your will be done.*" Our prayers aren't about making long lists of demands—God already knows what we need before we even ask. While we are encouraged to ask boldly, we must remember that what we want may not always line-up with God's plan. But we can trust that in His goodness, our gracious and generous Father has already planned our steps and will always give us what is best.

Knocking on the door of the sovereign King requires great boldness. We're reminded of Esther, who bravely approached King Xerxes,

risking her life to make her request known. She trusted in God, and she knew her calling. Her boldness was not in demanding her own will, but in trusting God's.

If you feel like you don't measure up, like you can't even bring your requests to God, remember that Esther had to find her courage too. It took her two attempts—and likely a lot of prayer—to reach out and knock. But just as she had a calling, so do you. You were made for a time such as this, with the calling to know God and make Him known. Because of Christ, you get to approach the throne room of God. He eagerly waits for your knock.

Bold prayer does not mean confidently declaring something *will* be done. Bold prayer is declaring *His* will be done, trusting in His perfect wisdom and timing. Here in the NICU, we find ourselves knocking daily, making our requests known for our daughter. But as we do, we surrender our ways to His, waiting patiently for His power, His response, and the moment when the door will open to reveal His plan. Our prayer is that you too feel the freedom to knock, knowing the Father is waiting with open arms to receive you.

BIG IDEA: Bold prayer is not about demanding our will, but about surrendering to God's perfect plan, trusting that He knows and gives what is best.

APPLY:

- **Challenge:** Is it hard for you to pray for what you want, either because you are hurting in the silence, or feel like He has failed you in the past or present?
- Read Psalm 22, then spend some time in prayer, if you do not have the words, pray the Lord's Prayer and leave room for silence to seek God's comfort and presence.

Week 15: Matthew 7:7-11

Day 3: Ask, Seek, Knock

READ: Matthew 7:7-11

EXPLORE:

Today's passage is a beautiful discourse on God's benevolent nature. As with the rest of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches with authority and certainty, making bold claims on the surety of God's answer and His provision for us. "Ask, and it *will* be given to you; seek, and you *will* find; knock, and it *will* be opened to you." If there were any question in the minds of Jesus' listeners as to the active, personal, caring nature of God, this teaching must have erased all doubt, not only for the listeners of the day, but for us as well. Christians today who read Jesus' words and believe what they say walk away excited about prayer, thoroughly convinced of its importance and power. You pray in faith, your Father in Heaven hears you, and your needs are met. You can't help but praise God for His goodness.

But what about the situations where you ask, but you do not receive? You seek and knock and wait for a response, and you're met with silence? It can be so heartbreaking as a Christian to pray to the Father you rely on for provision, but seemingly receive a serpent, or silence, in response. We have the clear revelation of God's character in His Word and we also have our experience. How are we supposed to reconcile our disappointment with Jesus' teaching? There's so much that could be said, but I'll (Tim) speak to three points.

First, it's not always easy to tell if God *has* given an answer. Sometimes there's a long season of silence leading into a direct and undeniable response from the Lord. This was the case for Abraham and Sarah. People waiting on the Lord for a spouse or a child often have the experience of waiting to the point of

accepting His silence as “no.” After tiresome waiting, the Lord is reliable to bring clarity and peace. Wait and trust Him!

Second, maybe you’ve discerned from prayer, the Word, and the wise counselors around you that the Lord’s silence *is* the answer. It can be hard to accept because we want closure, but sometimes absence *is* the response. Paul received such an answer in response to what was known as the “*thorn in his side.*” Don’t be afraid to grieve in the face of heartbreaking silence. The Lord is near to the brokenhearted. He is still the Lord, and He is good.

The third is a hard truth. Sometimes the Lord gives us a direct answer and it’s painful. When David’s newborn son was stricken with a terminal illness, David spent all night outside on the ground weeping and fasting. When he learned that the child had died, Scripture says David rose, bathed, ate, and worshiped the Lord. Even Jesus, who gave the Sermon on the Mount, received a painful answer from the Lord as He wept tears of blood in the Garden of Gethsemane. He asked the Lord to spare Him from the events to come, but ultimately accepted the Lord’s will for Him.

The Lord is good. He meets our needs and answers our prayers. But He is still the Lord. It is for this reason that Jesus also taught us to pray: “*Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*”

BIG IDEA: The Lord listens to our prayers, but sometimes His answers are difficult for us to hear. We must continuously strive to find peace and to accept His will.

APPLY:

- **Question:** If you were trying to discern whether God has given you an answer to your prayer, how would you go about it?

Week 15: Matthew 7:7-11

Day 4: Pray, Rest, and Act

READ: Matthew 7:7-11

EXPLORE:

This passage speaks to how God will grant the requests of those who seek Him. We have explored what this means and if God will really grant us everything we ask for, but what do we do while we wait for His answer? How do we wait on the Lord well? Isaiah 64:4 says, *"No eye has seen a God besides you, who acts for those who wait for him."* This shows us that God will act on behalf of those who choose to wait on Him. Let's start with what not to do while we wait. Isaiah 31:1 says, *"Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help and rely on horses, who trust in chariots because they are many and in horsemen because they are very strong, but do not look to the Holy One of Israel or consult the Lord!"* God makes it clear that we must not take matters into our own hands. We must not put our trust in doctors, resources, finances, or relationships, but must put our trust in the Lord first to redeem and restore. Before we take one step of action to solve our own problems, we ought to pray. This does not mean that we stay stagnant and never do anything for ourselves, but it does mean that God should be the first place we turn to for everything.

When we wait on the Lord there are often two ways to wait. Wait and rest or wait and act. First, wait and rest. Exodus 14:13-14 says, *"And Moses said to the people, 'Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the Lord, which he will work for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall never see again. The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to be silent.'"* Here is where we pray and seek the Lord to fight our battles. We rest and wait trusting that the Lord will make all things right for the good of those who love Him.¹ While we wait, we pray in expectation and cast our cares on the Lord. Second, wait and act. Sometimes God calls us to wait on Him while moving forward in

action. Proverbs 21:31 says, *“The horse is made ready for the day of battle, but the victory belongs to the Lord.”* So, even when going into battle, which takes planning, effort, and work, we still wait on the Lord to deliver the final victory. So, even when the Lord instructs us to act, we must act in reliance on Him knowing and trusting that God enables us to do the work we do and provides the final result. And just like when we rest, we also pray, when we act we pray, as well.

BIG IDEA: Sometimes God calls us to wait and rest, other times He calls us to wait and act, but through it all we pray.

APPLY:

- **Activity:** Take time to pray about the things in your life you are waiting on God for (financial security, a spouse, a family, reconciliation, healing, etc.) and ask Him if you are to wait and rest or wait and act.

- **Question:** Do you tend to jump into action while waiting without considering God first or do you tend to fall into apathy while waiting not believing God will come through for you? In either case, challenge yourself to pray intentionally about how the Lord desires you to wait in a way that glorifies Him.

Week 15: Matthew 7:7-11

Day 5: A Day to Share

READ TOGETHER: Matthew 7:7-11 and Luke 11:5-9

Instructions: We believe that biblical study and spiritual growth are meant to be shared. This Word to Life has that exact focus in mind. For some, Day 5 might be a good opportunity to lead your family in a devotional. For others, this study might serve as a simple reminder to tactfully communicate your faith with those around you. Regardless, this study is designed to help you grow in your faith by sharing it with others.

EXPLORE TOGETHER:

Make sure to take a quick moment and read through Luke's Gospel Account of this teaching from Jesus. If you already read through Luke 11:5-9, you will have noticed an interesting scene Jesus paints of a friendly, but simultaneously desperate request for bread in the middle of the night. In that scene, it is the persistence of the request that is honored by the one who gives.

Perhaps we can read a word like persistence and sigh to ourselves in dismay. We could say to ourselves, "Well, I've already asked, I've already sought, and it seems like I've already knocked. It seems that nothing has worked though!" This response can make sense in the moment, but it is not the ultimate response we should have to this teaching from Jesus. Allow me (Stephen) to briefly bring a few passages to mind!

In Psalm 88:1 we find words that ought to be our own, "*O Lord, God of my salvation, I cry out day and night before you.*"

In Deuteronomy 4:29 we read, "*But from there you will seek the Lord your God and you will find him, if you search after him with all your heart and with all your soul.*"

In Micah 7:7 we are reminded, *“But as for me, I will look to the Lord; I will wait for the God of my salvation; my God will hear me.”*

When we are praying with God’s will in mind and His kingdom purposes as our foremost aim, we should live and pray with an undying persistence that is reflective of the eternal hope which has been secured and extended because of the graciousness of Christ to those who believe.

We should remember that God delights to hear from us. We should remember that God desires to transform us as He works on us and through us for His purposes. God desires to grow persistence in us and He will often use prayer to do so. Of course, at the same time, we should remember that this invitation to ask, to seek, and to knock is not easy. In fact, I fear that words like tenacious, determined, and purposeful might better describe our selfishness than our prayer lives.

Think again about Jesus’ teaching. God desires us to diligently draw near to Him. He expects us to approach Him expectantly. He expects us to purposefully approach Him in willing submission to His purposes! Our invitation is to ask, to seek, and to knock.

BIG IDEA: Our prayers should be persistent, expectant, and submissive.

APPLY TOGETHER:

- **Question:** What topics or focuses tempt you to not be persistent in your prayer life?

Week 16: Matthew 7:12-14

Day 1: A Day to Explore

READ: Matthew 7:12-14

EXPLORE:

Instructions: Spend time reading Matthew and complete the activities and questions below.

- **Activity**: In the space below, write down some things you notice about Matthew 7:12-14. It's important to have your own observations alongside the insight of others.

- **Question**: What do you think it would look like for you to live out what Jesus taught in verse 12?
 - What changes would you have to make in order to *“do for others what you would wish they would do to you?”*

- **Activity**: On other occasions, Jesus summarizes the Law and the Prophets. Read the following and write what you notice.
 - Matthew 22:37-40

 - Mark 12:28-34

- **Question:** How are the two “*gates*” and the two “*ways*” described in Matthew 7:13-14?

- **Question:** What sort of thoughts go through your mind when you read and think through Jesus’ teaching on the narrow gate and the hard road?

- **Question:** In your opinion, what makes the wide way easy, but also worthy of our avoidance?

- **Question:** Why do you think few find the narrow gate and the hard way?

Week 16: Matthew 7:12-14

Day 2: The Law and Prophets

READ: Matthew 7:12-14

EXPLORE:

Today we will go over Mathew 7:12, *“So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.”* This is likely a familiar verse to many of you, it is commonly referred to as the Golden Rule. Have you ever reflected on what the verse means when it says, *“for this is the Law and the Prophets?”*

Jesus responded when asked which commandment was greatest in the Law, *“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”*¹ This ties the Golden Rule to Leviticus 19:18, *“You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD”*. At first glance Jesus may seem to say the same as another rabbinical teacher of the first century, Hillel the elder when he said *“That which is hateful unto you, do not do to your neighbor. This is the whole of the Torah; the rest is commentary.”* Jesus however takes this sentiment, which is largely passive and makes it active! One should not only seek to avoid doing ill to others but should seek to actively do what we wish others would do. Essentially challenging us all to live in accordance with Jesus’ ideal standard of behavior if we say that we follow him.

He addressed the issue of who we should define as our *“neighbor”* in the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37. In that story, Jesus illustrated a very countercultural understand of who ought to be helped and how they ought to be helped. Jesus always expanded the idea to include more people under the

definition of “*neighbor*,” and to call on the people around Him to do more that was the typical in the common practice of His time.

Remember what Jesus highlighted in Mathew 5:17, “*Do no think that I have come to abolish the Law and the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them.*” Throughout the sermon on the mount, Jesus challenged people to live up to the full spirit of the law, through the Golden Rule Jesus expounds on Leviticus 19:18 and challenges us again to do for others what we would want them to do for us. If we live this way the rest of the Law will be fulfilled, because it is the essence of the Law and the Prophets.

APPLY:

- **Question:** Has our study of the Sermon on the Mount changed your view on the Golden Rule? If so how?

- **Question:** What are some behaviors that you wish others would do that you can work on showing the world in your everyday life?

Week 16: Matthew 7:12-14

Day 3: The Narrow Gate

READ: Matthew 7:12-14

EXPLORE:

Is all religion essentially the same? Do all roads lead to God? Is there more than one way to reach heaven? In our pluralistic and relativistic society, the answer we often hear is yes. But in Matthew 7:13-14, Jesus describes two, and only two, options — a narrow gate leading to life and a broad gate leading to destruction. These two ways are exclusive of one another, they lead in opposite directions, and which gate we enter, which road we're on, has eternal consequences. So, what does Jesus mean when he says to *"enter by the narrow gate?"*

Well, in a very real sense, Jesus Himself is the narrow gate. As he says in John 14:6, *"I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."* In Luke 13:24, Jesus parallels his teaching in Matthew 7 by instructing His followers to *"strive to enter through the narrow door."* We then see Him say in John 10:9, *"I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved."* It is only by the atoning sacrifice of Jesus' death on the cross that we can be reconciled with our Heavenly Father. Jesus bore the penalty for our sin, and it's only by placing our faith in Him and His gracious work on our behalf that we can rest in his certain promise of forgiveness and salvation. Jesus is the only way, a narrow gate among a breadth of worldly detours: false religions, misguided philosophies, an underappreciation of our own sinfulness, and an overconfidence in our self-imagined identity as "good enough" or "better" than others.

The Pharisees, of course, placed their faith in an outwardly focused works-based righteousness that Jesus spends most of the Sermon on the Mount critiquing and correcting. And as Jesus nears the end of His sermon, He is now asking his audience what

our response will be to his teachings. Will we recognize that our *“righteousness [must] exceed that of the scribes and the Pharisees”*² because they’re really not all that righteous to begin with if we peel back the outward façade? Will we embrace that we *“therefore must be perfect, as [our] heavenly Father is perfect,”*³ while at the same time acknowledging that we must look to Christ alone for this because we can never live up to such a holy standard on our own? Will we live by the golden rule of Matthew 7:12, or bear good fruit as Matthew 7:15-20 calls us to? These are markers of a life that has entered by the narrow gate.

And the narrow gate is described as *“hard”* in verse 14.⁴ This is not because we are called to earn our own salvation with constant striving, but because Jesus is warning against “easy believism” and falling prey to a false prosperity gospel. It is not enough to confess with our lips while continuing to lead lives devoid of real change. Faith in Jesus leads to a life transformed by Jesus, and the Christian life will be marked by trials, both internal battles against sin and persecution from the outside. We will be treated differently because we are called to walk differently, a walk Jesus teaches throughout the Sermon on the Mount. He encourages us to be ready and persevere. Our life on the narrow road is born out of saving faith, and the striving we’re called to doesn’t represent an outline of what we must do to be saved, but rather it describes what life on this road is like for citizens of God’s kingdom who are saved.

BIG IDEA: Jesus calls us to place our faith in him, and thus strengthened for the race, live lives that reflect our identity as citizens of God’s kingdom who enter by the narrow gate.

APPLY:

- **Question:** In what ways does your life reflect (or not reflect as it should) your walk through a different gate and along a different road than the world around you?

Week 16: Matthew 7:12-14

Day 4: Two Gates, Two Ways, and Two Endings

READ: Matthew 7:12-14

EXPLORE:

Have you ever been warned by someone to avoid something so that you could enjoy something far better? Maybe you have received a warning about avoiding a food that left a bad aftertaste. Maybe you've been warned to avoid a highway that was backed up. Maybe you've been warned to avoid making a certain decision. A helpful warning is given by someone who sees more than you can see and is intended for the good of the listener.

In this text, Jesus gives a warning. And it is a strong warning. "Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is *wide* and the way is *easy* that leads to *destruction*, and those who enter by it are *many*."⁵ Jesus, in His abundant kindness, gives a warning to the many who are walking on the easy path with the wide gate. The path they are on, Jesus says, leads to destruction. So, what does Jesus mean when He says "destruction?"

To gain a better understanding of the Bible's use of the word "*destruction*," let us consider what two references to the Bible's use of this Greek word. One reference would be in Paul's letter to the Philippians when he speaks of "*the enemies of the cross of Christ*."⁶ Paul writes that "*their end is destruction*."⁷ While this could refer to their present lives here on earth, it is more likely he is referring to the eternal damnation they will face after facing the judgement of God. Romans 9:22 also makes reference to the same Greek word for "destruction" used in Matthew 7:13 as it describes the summation of God's wrath against those who will not turn to Christ in faith. While "destruction" may include the process of something or someone being destroyed, Matthew

seems to use the word “destruction” to describe a state of eternal suffering, void of any grace from God, and governed by pure evil. So, hear the words of Christ. “*Enter by the narrow gate.*”⁸ Following Jesus is hard. It requires sacrifice. Our very lives are laid down at His feet, but great is the reward. Life is promised for the one who follows Him.⁹ Furthermore, the one who follows Christ will be on a road that, though it be narrow, will end in life. Eternal life with Christ! Jesus Himself has been “*crushed for our iniquities*” and “*pierced for our transgressions*” so that anyone who believes in Him will not face eternal suffering and destruction but rather life eternal with the One who died for his/her sake.¹⁰

BIG IDEA: Christ warns us to take the narrow gate that leads to life and avoid the wide gate that leads to destruction. Though the narrow gate leads to a way that is hard, Jesus promises to be with us on that road and reward us with life.

Apply:

- **Question:** Are you on the easy way that is marked by a wide gate or are you on the way that is hard that is marked by a narrow gate?
- **Question:** Who might you be able to encourage to take the narrow gate instead of the wide gate?
- **Pray:** Pray that God would give you strength to walk on the path marked by the narrow gate, and to see others join you.
- **Activity:** Meditate on the truth that in your weakness, then you are strong because God’s power is made perfect in weakness (2 Corinthians 12:10).

Week 16: Matthew 7:12-14

Day 5: Straight to the Point

READ TOGETHER: Matthew 7:12-14

EXPLORE TOGETHER:

Instructions: *We believe that biblical study and spiritual growth are meant to be shared. This Word to Life has that exact focus in mind. For some, Day 5 might be a good opportunity to lead your family in a devotional. For others, this study might serve as a simple reminder to tactfully communicate your faith with those around you. Regardless, this study is designed to help you grow in your faith by sharing it with others.*

I (Lucas) enjoy all aspects of communication, perhaps to a fault. I have to remind myself (often with the help of my wife) that not everything needs to be talked about exhaustively. When our first son learned to talk, I was excited to be able to have conversations with him. At one point, when I was disciplining him, I wanted to make sure he understood why he was in trouble. I spoke to him for several minutes explaining why what he did was wrong. He listened as patiently as a four year old could. When I finally finished speaking, I asked him, “Does that make sense, buddy?” In the best way that his limited vocabulary could offer, he responded, “No, Dada, it’s too many words.”

His simple response helped me realize that sometimes you just need to get to the point. This week’s passage gets straight to the point. Nearing the end of His sermon, Jesus takes a moment to recap so much of what has been said by using a few simple statements. Let’s briefly look at the two main points being made.

In verse 12, Jesus points our focus to a universally favored topic; ourselves. Who taught you how to be self-focused? The answer—no one. It comes naturally. Jesus tells us to use the instinctual self-focus of how we want others to treat us as the standard by which

we are to treat others. In doing so, He helps us transform what is so often a selfish focus into a selfless focus.

Does that feel difficult to do? Of course! I believe that is why the next verses follow. Verses 13 and 14 help us see that living the way God calls us to live is not easy. In fact, as paths go, it's narrow, difficult, and few people take it. What you will find is that most people choose the easy path. It's straightforward and has plenty of room. The problem is that it is a selfish existence, always seeking satisfaction but never finding it. And for all its comfort, its ultimate end is death. In contrast, the narrow and difficult path leads to life! A life filled with purpose, joy, and fulfillment. Which path will you take?

BIG IDEA: The heart of God's law is to think of others before we think of ourselves. It's not easy, but the results are amazing.

APPLY TOGETHER:

- **Activity:** Give an example of a way that you put yourself before someone else this week. How can you respond differently the next time you are in that situation?

- **Activity:** Read Luke 9:23. How does this verse help you keep the truths of this week's passage in mind? See how fast you can commit this verse to memory.

Week 17: Matthew 7:15-20

Day 1: A Day to Explore

READ: Matthew 7:15-20

EXPLORE:

Instructions: Spend time reading Matthew and complete the activities and questions below.

- **Activity:** Read the biblical passage and write some observations in the space below.

- **Activity:** The Bible has consistent warnings about false prophecy and false teaching. Take a moment to read the following and write down what you notice.
 - Deuteronomy 13:1-18

 - Jeremiah 6:13-15

 - Galatians 1:6-10

- **Question:** Is everyone who teaches something wrong about God a wolf in sheep's clothing? Why or why not?

- **Question:** Why do you think Jesus so often uses fruit as a metaphor in His teaching?

- **Question:** Jesus said that a wolf in sheep's clothing can be recognized by their fruit. Do you think that means (1) by their words (2) by their deeds, or (3) it must be their teachings and their actions?

- **Question:** If someone were to notice the fruit in your own life, what would they see? Is what others would see accurate to what is actually being grown in you or is it a façade?

- **Question:** Do you think it is possible for a wolf in sheep's clothing to be called out and change?

Week 17: Matthew 7:15-20

Day 2: Declaring the Danger

READ: Matthew 7:15-20

EXPLORE:

A day or two before writing this Word to Life, I (Stephen) had the bank we use as a family send an email warning its customers about the most recent tactics of scammers. Defrauders send emails that look real, they make requests that seem legitimate, and they format wording to closely emulate that which is authentic.

A lot of thoughts went through my mind as I read the email warning. I was sad about the people who are tricked. I was angered by those who don't find a better use of their time and talents than to trick others. And, as you might assume, I was grateful for the warning which would help my family stay protected.

Not once did I think to myself, "Wow, my bank is really being harsh to those hackers." Not once did I think, "Well, maybe let's give the swindlers a chance to give their side of the story." It was quite the opposite. I was thankful for the warning. I was really grateful the danger had been declared.

When I read passages like the one we are working through this week, I am reminded of how often we overlook the value and blessing of a good warning. It is, in fact, necessary that the flock of Christ is warned about the reality of masquerading wolves. We don't outgrow our need for solid warnings. We consistently need to hear them, and we consistently need to heed them.

First, Jesus was not hesitant to call out false teaching. Second, the Apostle Paul called out false teaching on no less than six occasions. Third, there are repeated warnings issued not only for

false teaching, but also for true teaching accompanied by sinful behavior. When we consider the model for counteracting false teaching that we encounter in Scripture, we certainly see examples of personal correcting, conversational accountability, and sometimes publicly identifying error.¹

Not all correction results in disqualification. For example, we see a moment of private correction benefitting the life and ministry of Apollos.² We see that Paul purposefully warned the church about wolves who come in to contradict the Gospel.³ Certainly, we will see Jesus calling out false teaching in the coming sections of Matthew's Gospel Account. In any of these cases, there was an uncomfortable, but necessary warning and confrontation.

Following not only these examples in the early church, but also the clear teaching of Jesus, we should pray constantly, observe discerningly, warn wisely, and avoid prudently.

BIG IDEA: It is fundamentally a good thing for unbiblical and ungodly teaching to be identified and avoided.

APPLY:

- **Question:** How would you explain the relationship between (1) being aware that wolves exist and (2) calling them out specifically?
- **Question:** Do you think we often recognize the value of warning? Why or why not?

Week 17: Matthew 7:15-20

Day 3: Recognize Wolves by Their Fruit

READ: Matthew 7:15-20, 2 Peter 2:1-3

EXPLORE:

I (Tim Brown) met my oldest brother's close-knit group of Christian friends once when I was about ten or eleven years old. I don't know where they usually hung out to study the Bible, but on this occasion it was our parents' living room. Being at all times the thoughtful and socially sensitive younger brother I was, I decided to hang around while they did their thing. I remember being struck by the passion and fire one of the young men had for the Lord. I knew the group would regularly street preach and evangelize in rough areas. I had absolutely no trouble imagining this guy doing it. There was another member of the group who stood out to me for a much simpler reason: she was very pretty.

These two eventually got married and had a child. I don't know much about the years that followed, but one day I heard from my brother that the young woman had been abandoned by her husband. He left their family to live in a desert commune with a group of Christians who'd chosen to live apart from the world. She refused to go with him, believing he had joined a cult. Their family was split.

There was a wolf in sheep's clothing here, but it seemed as though it was more than the young man. It was whoever had been influencing the young man, for however long it took. Someone had been pouring bad teaching into him, leading him ultimately to uproot his family and move to a desert commune—and failing that, to leave them behind. We know he was a false prophet by his fruit. It destroyed a family.

These aren't questions of secondary and tertiary theology, or of slight misinterpretations. A wolf doesn't want to convince you of

his Biblical interpretations. He wants to destroy you. It is of course possible for the systematic inception of unbiblical, unsound doctrine to slowly erode the foundation of a Christian body. That's the very reason God has placed shepherds over the church to safeguard His flock. Just as diseased trees bear bad fruit, healthy trees bear good fruit.

When you're discerning which prophets and teachers to listen to, here are a couple of questions worth asking:

- Does the teacher draw your focus toward the Gospel of Jesus Christ, godliness, the Bible, and a right fear of God?
- Are the students of this teacher growing into spiritually mature, biblically literate Christ-followers or are they stagnating or diverging from the faith?

Godly teachers should seek to simply and faithfully communicate the Scriptures to others so that Christ is magnified and God is glorified. Wolves in sheep's clothing can look convincing, but we should not be deceived by their false teaching.

BIG IDEA: Not every teacher or prophet is what he seems. Jesus warns us to choose our teachers with discernment.

APPLY:

- **Question:** Consider the teachers you listen to. How would you describe their fruit?

Week 17: Matthew 7:15-20

Day 4: You Reap what You Sow

READ: Matthew 7:16-20; Galatians 6:7-8; John 13:35

EXPLORE:

As a married woman and mother of six children, I (Cean) can say with complete certainty that it is extremely easy to point out someone else's mistakes and failures. I have had no shortage of material to gripe about over the years; however, the truth be told, while I was busy "playing Holy Spirit" to my family, the fruit I was bearing was just as rotten. I guess that is why Jesus tells us to take the plank out of our eye before pointing out the speck in another's.⁴

This week's section of Scripture teaches us that we can tell a lot about a person by the fruit they produce. Bearing fruit is a theme found throughout the teachings in the Scriptures. To a city girl that didn't grow up in church, this idea was foreign to me. However, the audience in the Scriptures were familiar with agriculture; therefore, analogies, stories, and metaphors were often designed around this common experience.

Over the years, I have endeavored to have a garden in my yard and successfully grew various vegetables, herb plants, and a few fruit trees. The plants that didn't fall victim to the sun, bore fruit for my eating pleasure. This brought me great joy. The funny thing about fruits and vegetables is they don't become fruitful because of their exertion. They are designed to be fruitful. The same is true for anyone who puts their faith in Jesus Christ.

Bearing fruit is not an effort to be made, but a natural byproduct of abiding in the Lord. These words may be confusing to some, but basically means that if you are saturating your mind in the Word of God, He cleans your heart, He cleans your mouth, and He

cleans your desires. It is not behavior modification or self-determination, but the working of the Holy Spirit in you.

The fruit or behaviors of walking/abiding in the Spirit is listed in Galatians chapter 5: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. These are preceded by fruits or behaviors that result from walking/abiding in the flesh: sexual immorality, impurity, idolatry, envy, jealousy, anger, etc.⁵ So, dear brother and sister, which list most accurately reflects your inward and outward disposition?

BIG IDEA: People will know us by our fruit.

APPLY:

- **Question:** Examine the last few days of your life. What fruit have you been bearing? (Refer to Gal 5:16-23)
- **Question:** How do you abide in Jesus?
- **Question:** How does today's discussion of fruit bearing help you understand Jesus' teaching about wolves in sheep's clothing?
- **Activity:** Pray and ask Jesus for the strength to surrender to the Holy Spirit and that the results would strengthen the relationships around you.

Week 17: Matthew 7:15-20

Day 5: A Day to Share

READ TOGETHER: Matthew 7:15-20

***Instructions:** We believe that biblical study and spiritual growth are meant to be shared. This Word to Life has that exact focus in mind. For some, Day 5 might be a good opportunity to lead your family in a devotional. For others, this study might serve as a simple reminder to tactfully communicate your faith with those around you. Regardless, this study is designed to help you grow in your faith by sharing it with others.*

EXPLORE TOGETHER:

There is no doubt that you have experienced good confrontation and bad confrontation. To be clear, this doesn't mean that either felt good. It means, moreover, that the cutting conviction of a godly person is a good thing. Correction is a means of God's grace toward us. Simultaneously, not everything that is called correction is helpful.

Have you ever thought about the difference? Have you ever wondered what makes some correction tough, but helpful while others remain ineffective?

Let's talk about how to call someone out well. Maybe it would be better to ask it like this, "When and how should we call someone out in a godly way?"

As you already know, this week we have been talking about recognizing wolves in sheep's clothing. If someone studied Jesus' teaching this week and had a sinful heart posture, these words could easily lead to unwise action. On the contrary, if someone studied Jesus' teaching this week and had a godly heart posture, these words would be incredibly valuable for the health not only of the individual believer but the whole church.

As a reminder, Jesus had in focus the false teaching and sinful action of a leader, but some basic concepts about handling confrontation are warranted and applicable in various contexts. Here are a few helpful questions that might serve as beneficial guardrails when you think about biblical correction.

1. Have you prayed and considered having a personal conversation?
2. Are you seeking to support your thoughts and submit your life to God in accordance with the Scriptures?
3. Have you asked for clarity about the error?
4. Is the error repeated?
5. Have you considered the severity of the error?
6. Have you considered what role and relationship you have to encourage, influence, and correct?
7. Have you followed underlying steps for reconciliation and clarity laid out in God's Word?⁶

With these questions and more in mind, you are ready to see a few critical tensions clearer. By God's grace, you ought to discern the difference between a misunderstanding, an error, or an unrepentant persistence in sin. May God help us to abide in Christ, to hold fast to the Scriptures, and to stay vigilant as His church.

BIG IDEA: Wolves should be corrected and called out. We should not just consider *when* this ought to occur, but *how* it ought to occur.

APPLY TOGETHER:

- **Question:** How would the questions above help you think through whether or not you should confront someone?

Week 18: Matthew 7:21-29

Day 1: A Day to Explore

READ: Matthew 7:21-29

EXPLORE:

Instructions: Spend time reading Matthew and complete the activities and questions below.

- **Activity**: In the space below, write down notes about what you observe in your reading.
 - Verses 21-23

 - Verses 24-27

 - Verses 28-29

- **Question**: What do you think Jesus meant when He said, “*I never knew you?*” Do you think He meant He didn’t know who they were or something else?

- **Questions**: Prophecy, wonder working, and demonic exorcisms are listed by Jesus as things which people will point to as spiritual evidence. What should we understand about how Jesus thinks concerning these things?

- **Question:** In verses 24-27, Jesus talked about how obedience establishes us like a home that is built on rock. How often do you think about obedience in this way?

- **Questions:** When have you experienced the metaphorical “*wind and rain*” in your life? When you experienced the storm did it feel like your foundation was rock or sand?

- **Questions:** Did you notice that both houses experience similar storms? What do you think that teaches us about godliness and adversity?

- **Question:** What was the response to Jesus after His teaching concluded?

- **Question:** This week we are wrapping up the Sermon on the Mount. If you had to isolate one section in Matthew 5-7 that has been most impactful/challenging, what would it be and why?

Week 18: Matthew 7:21-29

Day 2: I Never Knew You

READ: Matthew 7:21-29

EXPLORE:

Both platonic and romantic relationships can be tricky. Sometimes a person changes to the point that you don't really want to be friends anymore. Maybe this person was never really authentic around you such that you were in a relationship with a fake version of that person.

If you don't want to relive your own worst breakup for an example of this then recall a scene from one of the inferior Star Wars prequels, when Padme looks at her husband Anakin after realizing her sweet little jedi has become a murderous megalomaniac and proclaims, "I don't know you anymore." Does she mean that she doesn't **know** who Anakin is or what he has become? Of course not. She **knows** exactly what he has become. What she really means is that Anakin is no longer the kind of person she can be in a relationship with. He is not the person on the inside that she thought she knew.

In Matthew 7, Jesus describes a situation where there will be people that think or pretend like they know Him and He will "*declare to them, 'I never **knew** you.'*" But Jesus **knows** everybody, right? His knowledge is supreme. He walked up to the woman at the well¹ and described aspects of her life like they were lifelong acquaintances. Jesus has knowledge of everything about everybody, so in this instance, we need to clarify His statement using our common vernacular and say that Jesus is saying I never **truly knew** you or better yet we never had a genuine relationship.

The Greek words *oida* and *ginōskō* both translate to the English word 'know'. *Oida* means to "have knowledge of", but the Greek

word used here in Matthew 7:23 is *ginōskō*, which refers to that deeper intimate relationship sort of knowing.

Those who don't really have a relationship with Jesus and yet teach in His name inaccurately or for their own gain will not enter the kingdom of heaven. These aren't Pharisees Jesus is talking about here. These are people calling him Lord. These are false Jesus followers, teachers, and prophets He seems to be clearly warning about. He is talking about those that will come after Him and pretend to have an intimate knowledge or relationship with Him to gain followers for their own selfish gains.

What does that mean for us?

1. We need to be wary of false teachers and prophets that would seek to prevent us from having that true intimate relationship with Jesus. How do we discern? We study scripture diligently so that we can know Jesus on an intimate level.
2. We need to strive to have an ongoing and developing relationship with Jesus. That means not just saying and doing all the right things to earn favor with others.

BIG IDEA: Strive to know Jesus on an intimate level through scripture and prayer and not just have knowledge about him.

APPLY:

- **Activity:** During your next prayer time, spend less time asking for God to do this or that and more time deepening your intimate relationship with God. During your next Bible reading, focus less on gaining knowledge and more time getting to know God better.

Week 18: Matthew 7:21-29

Day 3: The Words of God: A sustaining and Reviving Foundation

READ: Matthew 7:24-27, Psalm 1, Psalm 19:7-8

EXPLORE:

Jesus finishes His sermon with one final metaphor. He likens following His teaching to building upon a firm rock. To build a home on an easily changeable and unstable foundation is folly and will result in the collapse of your building. Yet, how often do we find ourselves hearing Christ's words and walking away unaffected? We unconsciously build our houses on the sand and let the wisdom of God merely pass us by in a Sunday sermon or Bible study.

It is one thing to hear what God says but it's another to observe them in our everyday life. This application is what separates the wise from the foolish. The first Psalm further contrasts how God's people build their life, and the longevity that results from it. Those who delight in the Lord have not only a firm foundation to rest upon, but they prosper in the service to God. As we hold firm to God's words and His wisdom, we glorify Him!

When storms and winds come against us, we must be rooted in sound doctrine and have people around us that share our same conviction in the Word. Jesus always pointed to His father, and it is this example we should follow. We must hear the word and then live it out for God's glory. God is our rock. When the winds of life come to knock us over, if we are rooted in serving ourselves and our glory, we will easily fall.

However, God's glory and His statutes are perfect as it says in Psalm 19. David says, *"The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul."* How our lives would change if we realized that the Word of God revives our souls! The Lord is our anchor in the trials, and a proper delight in His law sustains us! When the rains come and

wind blows upon us, let us point, like Jesus did, to God and His perfect Law.

BIG IDEA: Hearing the wisdom of God and doing nothing is foolish. We need to not only hear it but apply it. God's statutes sustain and revive us in the trials.

APPLY:

- **Question:** When has God's law and wisdom anchored you in a storm? Pray to God thanking Him for His statutes and ask for Him to help you delight in His law!

- **Question:** What would it look like to have God's law "*revive your soul?*" How would it impact the people around you?

Week 18: Matthew 7:21-29

Day 4: Astonishment and Authority

READ: Matthew 7:28-29

EXPLORE:

Matthew 5:17 reads: *Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.* Jesus came to earth, fully man and fully God, to dwell amongst His people and ultimately suffer and die for their pardon. Throughout the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus spoke with authority, exposed the limitations of the law, and revealed how deep sin lies in the heart. When he finished speaking, the Word says that the crowds were astonished because He spoke with authority, contrasting how their scribes spoke about the Word. Even Moses, one of the greatest leaders in Jewish history, who led his people out of Egypt and towards the promised land, did not handle the law as one with authority to wield it. When Moses addressed his people to give them the Ten Commandments, he began like this: *And God spoke all these words saying, I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.* (Exodus 20:1-2). God spoke to His people through Moses, and Moses interceded on their behalf. God gave the law to his people through Moses and taught them to make atoning sacrifices. Even so, His people remained apart from Him, and no one except the high priest on Yom Kippur could pass the veil to enter the Holy of Holies lest they die. The law could never save them, but one would come who would be the final atoning sacrifice.

The Scribes and Pharisees knew the law and all of its established standards, but they were missing the heart of it. What Jesus preached astonished the people, who legalistic religious leaders had taught. The religious leaders were not concerned for the people's spiritual well-being or dedicated to exhorting them in truth, to follow the law out of love and reverence for the one who

gave it to them. Jesus called the meek, poor in spirit, and persecuted blessed and sharply warned against being like those whose extravagant yet empty actions made them hypocrites. To love God is to follow His commands and delight in them. He wants our whole hearts and desires to commune with us. Our God is jealous and we should have no idols above Him. The idolatry of self and others' estimations was glaringly evident through the grandiose acts of the hypocrites Jesus talked about. The Lord said to His people in the wilderness in Exodus 34:14 (*for you shall worship no other god, for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God*).

The walk of a Christian is difficult and the path is narrow. The Sermon on the Mount makes it clear that it is not just about checking boxes. If we read the text with a hunger and thirst for righteousness and purity of heart, we should be left in awe and acknowledgment of our Savior who we so badly need. Jesus acknowledged Himself as Lord and delivered this oft-quoted verse that sparks fear into the hearts of believers seeking to do the will of God. Matthew 7:21-23 reads: *"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord,' did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name? And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'"*

The will of God is that His name be glorified and that His followers make disciples of all nations so that His kingdom is exalted. If we do good deeds, even in the name of the Lord, but we do them so that we are elevated and our own names gain prominence, they become acts of lawlessness. The Sermon on the Mount is a beautiful yet solemn reminder that we are deeply sinful and in need of redemption. Jesus is the Messiah about whom the prophets prophesied. He was given authority by the Father to bring forth justice to the nations, and the Spirit of the Lord rested

upon him. He came as a light to the world, but many would prefer to live in darkness. The prophet Isaiah foretold this. Isaiah 53:3 reads: *He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.* Jesus's teaching, exposing the lawlessness of the proud, and giving an inheritance to the meek and poor and Spirit, sets the tone for us as we continue to walk through Matthew as a church. As His power is made evident and His authority established, we will see how there are only a few who follow Him until the end. Teaching like His that uncomfortably convicts and daringly challenges who society deems as worthy, is what causes the church to be so persecuted. Take heart, for we know that just as we are persecuted today, Jesus bore these same burdens in His time on earth. Let us prayerfully and humbly continue our study of Matthew, and marvel at the life of Jesus, whose example we follow.

BIG IDEA: Jesus's teaching at the Sermon on the Mount was distinct and authoritative, astonishing the crowds gathered around Him.

APPLY:

- **Reflection:** Reflect upon our time studying the Sermon on the Mount, and think about how it has convicted, shaped, and emboldened you in your faith.

Week 18: Matthew 7:21-29

Day 5: Renovation vs. Relocation

READ TOGETHER: Matthew 7:21-29; James 1:21-25; Ephesians 2:8-10

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EXPLORE TOGETHER:

George found out that he was living in a flood zone, so he decided he had better renovate his house. He redid his kitchen, installed another bathroom on the second floor and repainted his house inside and out. The only problem was his house was built on the sand! He didn't need renovation, he needed relocation.

Many people think they have an arrangement with God. They've been baptized, they've "prayed the prayer," they call him "Lord," but their life decisions are not based on Jesus' teachings. Instead, their life decisions are based on selfish desire and conformity to the world. The way they conduct themselves morally is similar to everyone else. Is this you? Will Jesus declare to you, "*I never knew you; depart from me, you worker of lawlessness?*" Or has your life been transformed by Jesus' words?

Maybe you've already built your "house" and are living in it, but now you realize its foundation will not withstand the flood of God's judgment. Your life is built on sand. You've been building in the wrong place. You're going to have to move! You're going to have to make a lot of changes. You have to abandon your old way of living.

Your so-called “arrangement” with God is not really an arrangement at all - God never agreed to it. There has to be a change. Jesus’ words do not allow you to “get saved” and then keep living the same old way. Radical transformation is required.

Admit that you’ve been living wrong. Receive forgiveness, based on Jesus’ death and resurrection. Move to the rock and start afresh. Build a new life on Jesus’ teachings. Own him as your Lord, own his teachings as authoritative, and start building. You can’t do it on your own! The Holy Spirit will give you strength.

Maybe you are trying; you really want to follow Jesus’ teachings, but it’s so hard. It seems impossible. You just keep messing up. Welcome to the club! Don’t give up. God isn’t finished with you yet. You have already moved from the sand to the rock, but your new house is still under construction. Saturate yourself in God’s word. Return daily to God in confession and repentance. Ask God to search your heart and demolish strongholds of selfishness, worldliness, and idolatry. Confess your inability to live out Jesus’ teachings on your own, and ask the Holy Spirit for the power you need to obey. Link arms with your church family as we strive together to build our house on the foundation that will never fail.

BIG IDEA: If you call Jesus “Lord” but don’t build your life on His teachings, are you really a Christian?

APPLY TOGETHER:

- **Question:** What saves our souls according to James 1:21?
- **Question:** What does it mean to “*put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness*” in James 1:21?
- **Question:** In addition to saving our souls, how else does the implanted word change us in James 1:22-25?



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