

Introduction

- A. Back in August we took some time on a Sunday night to break up into several small groups. Then, we spent some time talking over where things are in the spiritual lives of each member and what we might do to help all of us raise the bar in our service to God. It's something we've tried to do about once each year over the last couple of years. The information collected in these sessions is valuable to us in two ways.
 - 1. First, it helps gauge the spiritual pulse of the congregation – to know where people are in their walk with Jesus.
 - 2. Second, it helps us set the agenda for the future – to know what kinds of things we need to be doing to best serve the needs of the disciples who make up this group.
- B. Over the last several months we've been compiling and discussing all of the information collected in these breakout sessions.
 - 1. A few things we were able to respond to immediately. Others have taken more time and planning.
 - 2. This morning I want to bring you up-to-date and where we are with all the feedback you shared. We want to talk about some of the things we heard in our breakout sessions and some of the things we can do together in the coming year as we strive to grow in our faith and our kingdom service. We want to address some family business this morning to help each other become the people God wants us to be and stay on that path that leads to heaven. There are three things I want to highlight from the feedback we received from all of you.

Item One: *Help me raise my personal level of commitment to the Lord.*

- A. This need was expressed in many different ways. I need to study my Bible more. I need to be encouraged to do this. I need to pray more than I do. I need to be studying with my family and talking about spiritual things around my house.
- B. It's good that we are concerned about such things because they certainly matter to God.
 - 1. He gave us His word so we can know His will for us (II Timothy 3:16-17). He wants us to pray to Him (Philippians 4:6, Colossians 4:2). He wants us to teach our families (Ephesians 6:4, Deuteronomy 6:6-7).
 - 2. And yet, as we strive to do these things, we face so many distractions. It's easy to let the busyness of life – jobs, school, bills, TV – get in the way of the important things we need to be doing. These struggles were evident in the feedback you shared with us.
 - 3. It is good that so many of us acknowledge the need and the problem. But it is a problem we need to solve. There are many things we try to do to encourage these vital spiritual disciplines (Bible classes, reminders in sermons). In fact, the recent sermon series on being devoted to Jesus was in part a response to the feedback we received from these sessions. Taking part in classes and worship services all of the time will help each of us raise our personal commitment to Jesus.
- C. But in 2010 we want to add something new that we hope will contribute to this effort. Beginning the first Monday in January (4), we are going to launch a Bible reading challenge to the Dowlen Road family.
 - 1. We have a reading schedule that will take us through the entire New Testament over the course of the next year. The schedule involves reading one chapter every day for five days each week. It is a very doable program. One chapter each day involves at most a 10-15 minute time commitment. Reading Monday-Friday leaves the weekend open to catch up on any readings missed during the week. We've printed up the schedule for the entire year on a small flyer that can be tucked in the front of your Bible. It is also posted on the front page of our website. You can actually pull up the reading for that day and read it on your monitor, or listen to it read if you choose. This is a very doable plan.
 - 2. It's a plan that will offer help along the way. One of the reasons people get discouraged with Bible reading is because they don't understand what they are reading. To address this need, you can pick up a copy of the daily Bible reading companion. It's a resource that Mark Roberts has put together to explain each week's reading. With just a few extra minutes at the beginning of the week, you can get a quick commentary that will help explain what you will be reading that week. In addition to this, all of the Wednesday night invitations for the rest of this year will be drawn from the reading. At least one of the sermons each month will be drawn from the reading.
 - 3. Keep in mind that the goal is not simply to read. If all we do over the next year is read the New Testament we haven't done much! We want to understand the message and to see its application in our lives. We hope the reader's companion, the Wednesday invitations and the sermons will help. Also, keep in mind that all nine of the elders have committed themselves to doing this reading as well. So, if you encounter something you don't understand, just ask.
 - 4. We want this to be something we do together as a family, something in which everyone participates. It's a great opportunity for parents and children to do this together, to begin reading the Bible as a family. Bible class teachers can talk about it before Bible class starts and encourage their students to do it. It would be great for grandparents to read along and ask their grandkids if they are keeping up.
 - 5. But having said all of that, let me be clear about the goal. It would be great if we could all say by the end of the year that we have read the entire New Testament. But what is even more important is that we be able to say, "I read my Bible a lot more in 2010." If you fall behind, don't sweat it. Just pick up where we are and move on.
- D. It's a family challenge that we've committed to and that we will stick with until the end of the year. Will you accept the challenge?
 - 1. A while back the college class was given a challenge – for 80% to come to class with their lessons prepared to study. They accepted the challenge and they've been doing it this fall... and it has made a difference in their class.
 - 2. How many of you have felt guilty for a long time because you just don't study the Bible like you should? Aren't you tired of that?
 - 3. This Bible reading program is not a single fix for every spiritual problem we have. But it will help us do what we know we're supposed to do. It will help us know God's word and draw closer to Him.

Item Two: *We continue to hear a lot about drawing closer as a family.*

- A. Again, this was expressed in many different ways. Some spoke of the need to spend more time together away from the assembly. Others emphasized the importance of being there for each other in times of need – illness, passing of loved ones, spiritual struggles. A few even alluded to the fact that we need to hold each other accountable to be faithful to the Lord in every aspect of our lives.
- B. These are all things God wants for us.
1. We are a great spiritual family; Paul described us as the household of God (1 Timothy 3:15). He wants us to spend time together. This was characteristic of the early disciples (**Acts 2:46-47**), and needs to be characteristic of us. As we continue to grow in number, it is vital that we strive to maintain that family spirit.
 2. There are some specific things we want to do in the coming year to address this need.
 - a. The elders would like to stay connected with each of you. We will continue to make visits in homes. If you have a special need, please let us know and we will put you at the top of our list.
 - b. We also plan to start meeting with members for prayer on the second Sunday of every month (January 10) as we have done in the past. We are planning to do this for the first three months of the year, but we can go longer if this time is needed.
 - c. We are also working with the deacons to come up with a plan to post work that needs to be done in the member's section of the website – sort of spiritual job board. This will help each member be aware of different ways they can be involved in the work.
 - d. Of course, organizing social activities is not the work of the church. However, it is good for disciples to spend time together away from the assembly, just as the early Christians did. Some of our families are working on a plan to get us all together for a meal every fifth Sunday of every month that has five Sundays. It will be a great opportunity to spend time together. Let me commend to you the example of these individuals. Rather than sitting back and waiting for others to do for them, they got busy doing for others.
 3. As we strive to draw closer as spiritual family, we need to imitate this example – a spirit we see first in Jesus (**Philippians 2:1-8**). Do you feel that longing to get closer to other disciples? Do you feel disconnected from the family? Then take the initiative. Invite someone out to dinner or over to your place. Host the college students or the teens for a devotion at your house. Go to these fifth Sunday gatherings. Don't miss one! Do these kinds of things and by the end of 2010, you will feel differently. You will feel closer to your spiritual family.

Item Three: *We always hear concern about evangelism.*

- A. As with the previous, this was expressed in several different ways. Let's have some classes on how to teach the lost. We've had more classes on that subject than any congregation I've ever been part of. And yet, you guys want more! Teach me how to study with people. Get me some materials that will help me answer questions and religious errors.
- B. I love that about you guys. There is a passion among us to reach the lost.
1. We need to be passionate about our mission (**Matthew 28:18-20**).
 2. As much work as has been done, we can do a lot more. Just our little invitation push a few weeks back brought several visitors, a couple of Bible studies and even a couple of baptisms.
 3. Can you imagine what we will accomplish for the kingdom when every one of us is activated in this work the way we should be?
- C. You can expect to hear about this in the coming year.
1. Right now Curtis is working with Max and David to post material on the website which will serve to answer some of the questions that arise in Bible studies and some of the false doctrines that must be addressed as we talk with others. These will be available online so you can download them any time you need them. We will continue to work with our website to make it a powerful evangelistic presence in our community. Already we are getting responses and questions through this tool.
 2. In addition to these things, we continue to think about things we can do to light the evangelistic fires of our group. We hope to have more to say about that in coming weeks.
 3. But again, the key to all of this is a personal sense of responsibility. I need to get out and do my thing – reaching out to my friends and neighbors with the gospel.
 4. We will keep pressing that point, so that the Lord can give us an abundant harvest of souls in 2010.

Conclusion:

To be part of this great effort, you must be on God's team. Where do you stand with the Lord today? Are you a dedicated soldier of the cross, ready for action in the coming year? Are you a disciple who has wandered away and lost your passion? Are you lost in sin, having never really made a decision to serve Jesus? If things are not right with you and the Lord, you need to get on track as we enter this New Year.

- David A. Banning