

Making Life Work
Week 1
Day 1

Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves.
2 Corinthians 13:5

All a man's ways seem innocent to him, but motives are weighed by the LORD.
Proverbs 16:2

There are things I use every single day, such as my car, computer, and cell phone. Yet, I have no idea how any of them work. If my car were to break down, I would be completely clueless on how to make it work again. If I were asked to explain how my computer worked, I'd just shrug and walk away. All of these things I use everyday and yet, I have no idea how they work.

In the end, it probably doesn't matter if I know how my car runs (as long as I know a good mechanic), but it makes a whole lot of difference if I know how my life works. Or doesn't work. What do we do when our lives just aren't working the way we want them to?

We're beginning a new series called "Making Life Work" where we'll be looking at what God has to say about some practical areas of our lives.

So how's your life working right now? It's important we pull over onto the side of the road from time to time and check under the hood, kick the tires, and see how our lives are running.

The problem, of course, is unless we take time to intentionally examine ourselves, we have the tendency to assume everything is okay. The view from the inside can be deceiving and so it's important we allow God to measure and weigh our lives.

During the next four weeks we will be looking at different areas of our lives that might need a checkup. I challenge you to take this time seriously as a way of moving more and more into the direction God desires. Let's all use the next four weeks as a time to examine ourselves so we can learn more of how God wants us to make our lives work.

How often do you stop to assess how your life is 'working?' In what ways can you use the next four weeks to take a close look at your life?

Making Life Work

Day 2

Week 1

Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.

Colossians 3:23-24

So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.

1 Corinthians 10:31

The first area we'll be looking at with regard to making life work has to do with the amount of effort we put into our lives. It's a sad truth but life has a way of slipping away like water through our fingers. If we aren't paying attention we can turn around to find that years have passed.

So how much attention do you pay to your life? How much effort and work do you put into it?

I think sometimes we live with the assumption that the main purpose of life is to be happy. Don't get me wrong, its not that we aren't meant to have happiness in our lives. But the pursuit of happiness, no matter what our forefathers may have written, is not the central focus of our lives. We were made to honor, serve, and love God. When we do this we find fulfillment and happiness, but that is not the goal. Our goal should be to use our effort to serve and love God.

It sounds very churchy, I know. You might get the impression that everyone should quit their day job and work at the church. That's not what I mean at all. The Bible tells us that whatever we do, no matter where we work, we are called do it with all of our heart as if we were working for God.

This is a hard thing to do. Many people find themselves at jobs they don't like, working for

bosses they don't like, doing tasks that they don't like. We might have the temptation to slacken how hard we work, thinking our job is unimportant or insignificant. We might not put forward our best efforts or work as diligently because of this. Yet, we all have to remember who and what we are working for.

We are working for Jesus Christ himself. We are working for the glory of God. If we are lazy in our work, who are we really being lazy to? If we are lazy with our lives, we are not just wasting our time but also wasting an opportunity to glorify God.

In what ways does the work you do glorify God? How can you make this more of a reality in your life?

Making Life Work
Week 1
Day 3

Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise! It has no commander, no overseer or ruler, yet it stores its provisions in summer and gathers its food at harvest.

Proverbs 6:6-8

For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: "If a man will not work, he shall not eat."

2 Thessalonians 3:10

Each one should test his own actions. Then he can take pride in himself, without comparing himself to somebody else, for each one should carry his own load.

Galatians 6: 4-5

The Bible has a lot to say about laziness, or people that it terms sluggards. In every culture and during every generation there are people who want to avoid work or to find the easy way out of things. There are other people who do the work they are required, but only because they are forced to. There are others still that work hard but always with a begrudging spirit, grumbling under their breath.

The Bible talks about what it means to be lazy in our lives. The book of Proverbs in the Bible, which is a book full of statements of wisdom, addresses this at length. It contrasts someone who is lazy in his or her life to an ant. Ants work diligently. Yet, there is no one cracking a whip to keep them in line. They have no bosses looking over their shoulders. They have no spouse nagging them into submission.

And yet the ant gathers and stores food because it is the wise thing to do. The ant knows something some people do not: it is wise to save during the times of plenty so there will be something to fall back on during the lean times.

The early church was not immune to being lazy either. In a letter to the church of Thessalonica, Paul reminds this baby church of how important it is that people work. The church quickly gained a reputation of helping people and going out of its way to supply for everyone's needs. What this produced was a number of people who wanted to live off of the church and the kindness of others without working themselves.

Paul reminds them of one of the rules that the community created: "if someone is unwilling to work, than they shall not eat." It's not to say people who couldn't work weren't fed, but those who are unwilling to work out of plain and simple laziness are doing what is wrong in the eyes of God.

It sounds basic, but the bottom line is this: we must not live our lives as if we are privileged people. We are not entitled to take it easy. We do not have a license to lean on others when we are unwilling to work ourselves. Where we are able, we must carry our own load.

To what degree do you carry your own load?

Making Life Work
Week 1
Day 4

Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.

Galatians 6: 9-10

We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me.

Colossians 1: 28-29

The problem with doing what is right is it can get tiring. It's not the noblest truth, but it's a truth nonetheless. Those people who we admire deeply are often those who persevere in doing good even when the choice to quit is available. For most of us we do the best we can when we can. At least, as long as we feel like it.

And that's the real crux of the matter.

Most people don't set out to do evil to other people. Most people don't try to ignore others. Most people don't make plans to turn an indifferent eye toward the needs of others. Most of us just get tired of doing what is good. We get weary. And when that happens, most people give up.

The Bible warns us we need to persevere. We need to try and make the most of every opportunity, doing good to all people.

It sounds good on paper, but its hard to do in practice. When our calendars get full, its easy to let the will to serve others get pushed out of the equation. When we get tired and weary, we tend to look inward to satisfy our own desires. In the end, when we get weary of doing good, we get selfish.

So how do we live our lives without growing weary of doing what is right? Paul, who had as

many reasons to get weary of doing good as anyone, gives us an insight into how to live with perseverance. Paul writes, *“To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me.”* Notice what Paul says. Paul works hard. Paul spends a lot of energy on his work. But notice that the energy Paul uses is not his own, it is the energy of Jesus. Paul says we need to allow God to empower us with his energy. The energy of God is real and through this power we are able to continue doing what is right. Through the power of God we are able to make the most of every opportunity, never growing weary.

When have you grown weary of doing good? In what ways can you allow God to empower you to make the most of every opportunity?

**Making Life Work
Week 1
Day 5**

Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

1 Corinthians 15:58

No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him.

Revelation 22:3

Paul, one of the greatest followers of Jesus, lived a very difficult life. He was persecuted and mocked by his countrymen. He was stoned to the edge of death. He was shipwrecked. Twice. He was imprisoned, beaten, and finally killed. And you know the craziest part? It was all avoidable. Why suffer through all of this when you could avoid it?

The simple answer is Jesus. But in the midst of Paul's life, it wasn't a simple answer. Paul had plenty of chances to give up on Jesus and his calling. Let's not pretend this wasn't a very real choice for Paul when the nights in prison dragged on and when the stones were poised over his head. When life was filled with pain and his friends seemed so far away, the choice to turn away must have been tempting.

So what does Paul have to tell us about giving all of ourselves to God, even when it costs us dearly? What advice does Paul give for people who would rather just relax and let someone else do the hard work of serving God? What does Paul tell us when we feel like the work we're doing isn't really significant?

Paul says to stand firm. That's all. Stand firm. No matter what comes, stand firm. When the storms of life rage, stand firm. When the night is the darkest, stand firm. When your body and mind are exhausted, stand firm. When it feels like life is crashing down around you, stand firm.

When you can't run toward God, stand firm. When you are too weary to even crawl, stand firm. When we stand firm in God, we find true purpose, comfort, and rest.

Stand firm.

In what areas of your life do you need to stand firm?

Making Life Work
Week 1
Small Group Guide

1. What do you think is the best invention that makes your life or work easier?
2. What are some common items that you don't know how they work?
3. In what ways do people evaluate their lives to determine if everything is working right?
4. In what ways do people get weary of doing what is good? How might this lead to laziness?
5. How often do you personally stop to assess how your life is working or not working?
6. When have you grown weary of doing what is good?
7. In what ways can you allow God to empower you to make the most of every opportunity?

Making Life Work
Week 2
Day 1

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" He called a little child and had him stand among them. And he said: "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. "And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me."

Matthew 18: 1-5

Things don't always work the way we hope. Sometimes, no matter how hard we try, we all can use a little help making our lives better. We are in a series called "Making Life Work," where we'll be looking at ways the Bible addresses very practical areas of our lives. We'll be using the wisdom of God to help us have lives that work better. This week we're going to discuss something no one can avoid: conflict.

One of the central causes of conflict in our lives is a want to be 'first.' We all have a desire to be perceived as the greatest. Jesus' followers were certainly not immune to this feeling. You can almost picture the situation.

A group of people gets in to an argument about who's the best. No one really talks about it directly, but we all know what's going on. It's very difficult to be a doctor. Oh yeah, well it's harder to be a stay-at-home mom. Did I mention that I have a degree from a prestigious university? It goes from 0-60 in the blink of an eye. Money, power, education, status: we can find plenty of things to argue over while attempting to look like the greatest.

After all, think about how many 'best and worst' lists there are in magazines at supermarket checkout counters. Best and worst dressed. The best and worst jobs in America. Who's the highest paid person in Hollywood?

Jesus has some very specific things to say on this topic of wanting to be first, this 'greatestness-syndrome.' Jesus' followers find themselves in this exact situation, arguing over who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. This isn't a theological debate, but an ego stroking moments of self-aggrandizing. I imagine each of them secretly hopes Jesus will point to them as the greatest in the kingdom of God.

Instead, Jesus flips the system upside down. If you want to be great, Jesus says, you need to be the least. If you want to be the highest, get really low. Do you want to be honored and exalted? Then you must humble yourself. They wanted to know who's the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus said they wouldn't even enter the kingdom unless they learned to be humble. Unless they learned to get over the greatness game and all of the conflict it causes, they wouldn't see the work God is doing in this world and what it means for their eternities.

Conflict often arises from our pride. We all need to learn to quiet the pride in our lives. There is so much at stake.

In what ways do you play the 'greatness game?' What is one thing you can do this week to become more humble?

Making Life Work
Week 2
Day 2

"If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.'
Matthew 18: 15-16

If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother.
1 John 4:20-21

If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.
Romans 12: 18-22

In life it's impossible to avoid conflict. No one lives a conflict-free existence. It doesn't matter to whom you're married. It doesn't matter who your parents are. Or where you work or live. If during your life you come into contact with another human being, you will have conflict. The real question is what do we do when conflict rears its head?

The Bible lays out what our response to conflict should look like. Jesus teaches if someone wrongs us, we should go to them personally and talk about it. This is done, not in the spirit of vindictiveness, but in the hopes of creating peace. The goal of this conversation is to restore the relationship. As far as it depends on us, the Bible tells us, we need to live at peace with others.

If the other person will not talk with you, Jesus says to bring one or two others along with you. Again, the point is not to gang up on someone, but to create an environment where peace is more readily possible. Sometimes it's helpful to have outside views to clarify the conflict.

The bottom line is that we must try to resolve the conflict. It might take some difficult conversations. It might take swallowing our pride. It might take allowing others to enter into the discussion, even when they might agree with the other person we're conflicting with.

Throughout it all, no matter what the conflict looks like, we are called to love one another. We are told that vengeance is for God alone. We are to repay wrongs done to us with good. We are to serve those who wrong us. In this way we will begin to be the peacemakers that God desires us to be.

How do you normally handle conflict? Is the view of conflict given by Jesus new or different than how you normally think about conflict in your life?

**Making Life Work
Week 2
Day 3**

"You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?

Matthew 5: 38-47

It's easy to feed conflict when it comes. When the insults start to fly, how do we react? When we've been hurt and your instinct tells us to strike back, what do we do?

I think for most people the natural reaction to being wronged is to fight back. We all want justice, retribution, and for things to be even and fair. If you hurt me, I want to hurt you back. If you take what is mine, I want to take what is yours.

Things look a little different now than it did two thousand years ago. We might be more likely to take someone to court than to challenge him or her to a fight, but the heart of the matter is the same. When we are wronged, we want payback.

Jesus flips the script. He says that when we are wronged, we should show love.

Jesus uses some very specific examples to express this point. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, give her your left cheek to strike as well. If someone wants your coat, give him your shirt too. If you are required to serve someone for an hour, serve her for two instead.

Jesus is making the point that it's easy to love people who love us. Yet, it's something else entirely to love people that have wronged us. People who have hurt us, whether physically or not, are people that are hard to love. People who have taken what is ours, who steal or embezzle our stuff, are hard to love. People who make difficult and unreasonable demands on us are hard to love. People who persecute us are hard to love.

But that's exactly what Jesus tells us to do. Why?

Because that's how God resolves conflict, through love. The shape of God's love is completely unconditional. God loves those who are difficult for us to love. God even loves us, when we are difficult to love. When people wrong you and all of your instincts are telling you to get them back, God calls us to show love instead. This is God's great plan for the world. God does not overcome evil and wrong by force or by sheer strength, but instead overwhelms evil with love.

The same should be true of our lives.

In what ways do you normally desire 'payback' when you are wronged? Why is it so difficult to show love to those that have wronged us? How might your life look different if you showed love in the midst of conflict in your life?

Making Life Work
Week 2
Day 4

Live in peace with each other. And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone. Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else.

1 Thessalonians 5: 13-15

"You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell.

"Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.

Matthew 5: 21-24

The strange thing about conflict is that it has the ability to either divide people or to draw them closer together. We normally don't think of conflict in these terms. Conflict, in and of itself, is not bad. It's how we deal with and our reaction to conflict that determines how conflict will affect us.

So what will it be for us? When conflict happens (and it will) will we use it to draw us closer together or to push us further apart?

Jesus thinks the resolution of conflict is so important that he tells a story to illustrate the point. During Jesus' day, the time of worship in the temple were a centerpiece of culture. The act of worship was of paramount importance. If asked, the teachers and leaders of the day would have placed worshipping God at the temple as the center of religious life.

Yet, Jesus says it is better to interrupt our worship of God in order to bring about a resolution to conflict. If someone has something against you, go to them and resolve the conflict before you worship God. Leave the gift you have brought to offer God right there on the altar, and go to your brother and make it right. As far as it depends on you, resolve the conflict. When we do, conflict leads to greater unity. When we don't, conflict leads to further disunity. Even the really important stuff can wait.

In what ways have you seen conflict causing division? In what ways have you seen conflict lead to greater unity?

Making Life Work
Week 2
Day 5

Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way. As one who is in the Lord Jesus, I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for him it is unclean. If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died. Do not allow what you consider good to be spoken of as evil. For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men.

Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a man to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall.

Romans 14: 13-21

It is to a man's honor to avoid strife, but every fool is quick to quarrel.

Proverbs 20: 3

Conflict has a way of happening in every setting, including inside the church. Sometimes the conflicts inside the church are fiercer than any others. Civil wars are always the bloodiest and conflicts centered on judgmental attitudes are particularly dangerous.

People can become judgmental in subtle ways. It begins casually enough. We decide on a course of action that seems right for us. It is something that might not be as important to others, but for us, it's something of a conviction. Then the decision we've made to help ourselves follow God more closely changes into something else. It changes into a requirement for others.

Maybe you've had this happen before in your life. I know it has for me. Any time I decide to start a diet (which is not frequently, but it's happened before) I tend to notice more closely what everyone else is eating. I'm eating healthier, so why isn't everyone else? How in the world can people eat that much pizza in one sitting? Yet, in reality, I was eating that much pizza myself just the day before.

As childish as it sounds, this very thing happens in our spiritual lives. Our own personal conviction becomes a requirement by which we judge others.

The same thing happened in the early church. People had convictions that were important to them, but not as important to others. This caused major conflict in the early church.

Paul writes a letter to this early church reminding them to let nothing come in the way of their unity. We are called to act out of love at all times, even when this means giving up something we are convinced we have the freedom to enjoy. Paul reminds this infant church to do nothing that will cause a fellow brother or sister to stumble, because these brothers and sisters were the very people that Jesus died for. Paul invites these followers of Jesus to let go of the things that are creating the conflict in their lives and church.

Do not destroy the work of God with our own personal freedoms. The kingdom of God is not concerned with things like food or drink, but with righteousness. When our focus changes so that our desire is to obtain righteousness, conflict becomes easier to resolve.

In what ways have your personal convictions becomes requirements for others? How have you seen conflict in the church before?

**Making Life Work
Week 2
Small Group Guide**

1. When you were growing up, with whom did you have the most conflict? A sibling? A parent? A friend? What did these conflicts often center on?

2. What is your most natural reaction to conflict? Do you avoid it? Do you retaliate? Do you try to resolve it?

3. In your life, how important is conflict management?

4. What are some of the root causes of conflict in your life?

Read: **Matthew 5: 38-47**

5. In what ways do you normally desire ‘payback’ when you are wronged?
6. Why is it so difficult to show love to those who have wronged us?
7. How might your life look different if you showed love in the midst of conflict in your life?
8. Is there a conflict in your life that needs resolution? What is one way you can show love in the midst of that conflict this week?



Making Life Work
Week 3
Day 1

May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.

Romans 15:5-7

We are in week three of the series “Making Life Work,” where we are looking at what the Bible tells us about some practical areas of our lives. If we are going to follow God, we must all

realize simply surviving is not enough. God calls us to have lives that are full to overflowing. It is because of this we are turning to God's wisdom to make our lives work the best they can.

All of our lives are filled with relationships. Some of these relationships are superficial while others are deep and meaningful. If we are going to learn how to make our lives work well, we need to learn how to handle our relationships well.

There are many different ways our relationships get messed up: pride, jealousy, and selfishness, just to name a few. These things have a way of dividing people and creating conflict in our relationships. These divisive attitudes sometimes work their way into the church as well. One thing we find over and over again in the Bible is that God desires for unity among the people following after Jesus.

A strange thing can happen when people try to follow Jesus. Sometimes we can begin to believe that the way we follow, honor, and connect with God is the only way it can (or should) be done. Or at least we have found the best way. When this happens, we can begin to focus more on what other people are doing around us than what we are doing. The result is division. Yet, over and over again we read in the Bible that God wants unity.

The Bible tells us that when there is unity among the followers of Jesus we become of one heart and mouth. It's interesting to note that these are the two things Paul, the writer of the book of Romans, points out. Being of one heart is something we might expect, but not being of one mouth. Paul knows that where there is disunity, there are often words of dissention. Yet, God calls us to something more.

When we are of one heart and one mouth, we bring glory to God. We are told to accept one another, just as Jesus accepted us. When we do this we will bring praise to God.

To what degree do you have “unity of heart and mouth” in your relationships? What can you do this week to create greater unity in your life? Do your words reveal unity or disunity?

Making Life Work
Week 3
Day 2

"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.
John 13: 34-35

Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.
Romans 12: 9-13

If you only had one day to live, what would you do? It's a classic hypothetical question that is supposed to get us thinking about what things are really important to us. The idea is those things we choose to do or to say with our final moments are the most important to us.

It's interesting to note what Jesus does with his final night on earth. Jesus knows that his time is running out. Jesus, with his closest friends and followers, has one more thing he wants to teach.

With his final hours, Jesus teaches his followers a new command: to love one another. Jesus wants to make sure his followers know what is really at the center of things. Jesus tells them to love each other. He doesn't tell them to pretend there are no differences among them, but to show love in spite of those differences. Jesus doesn't say there will never be disagreements, but that there should always be love even in the face of disagreements.

This is not the sort of lip-service love we sometimes come across in our lives. It is a love that is sincere, devoted, joyful, patient, faithful, and humble. This is the sort of love Jesus says will identify his followers. In our relationships we are called to show this sort of love. Who couldn't use more love like that in their lives?

Think about the difference it would make if people lived out this sort of love in their lives. What would it look like to live out love as Jesus describes it in your life?

Making Life Work
Week 3
Day 3

*The LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone.
Genesis 2:18*

Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Hebrews 10:25

Our culture is very individualized. People can spend weeks at a time indoors by themselves without any human interaction. We can isolate ourselves from everyone around us. Think of all the different ways society has made life so convenient that people become completely solitary. Yet, we were not created to live alone.

Adam, the very first man, knew what it was like to lack human companionship. After all, he was the only human around. Adam enjoyed a closeness with God that was unparalleled, but even this relationship was not enough to fill the void Adam felt in his life.

Before there was any sin in the world, before the darker side of humanity had reared its ugly head, God looks down on his creation and says something is not the way it should be. God looks down and says that it is not good for man to be alone.

I wonder how many lives God looks down at now and says the same thing. We have lost much of what it means to depend on each other. We rely solely on ourselves. Many of us have lost what it means to connect in meaningful and deep relationships that give us life. We have forgotten that humans were not made to be alone.

Relationships are hard work. They take effort and time that could just as easily be spent on our own interests or entertainment. Relationships can sometimes go wrong and cause us God knows how much pain. The fact is that God does know how much pain they can (and often will) cause us. Yet, He still calls us to live our lives in relationship with other people.

How about you? To what degree do you isolate yourself from relationships? To what degree have you given up meeting together with other people who are trying to live as you are?

Making Life Work
Week 3
Day 4

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

Colossians 3:12-14

Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil.

James 3:13-15

See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.

Hebrew 12:15

Relationships can be ruined by some of the smallest things. One thing that has a tendency to destroy relationships is bitterness. It often starts in small, subtle ways. It grows like a root, under the surface and hidden. Yet, over time even a small root has the ability to cause massive amounts of damage. When a root of bitterness is allowed to take hold, it can completely change the landscape of our relationships.

Bitterness has several side effects that damage relationships. When we harbor bitterness we are no longer able to fully grasp the grace of God. We are so concerned with keeping track of rights and wrongs that we forget God's grace keeps no score. Bitterness has a way of moving our eyes away from the things we have in common with each other (including our universal need for God's grace) to the things that set us apart.

Bitterness also pushes us to rely on our own wisdom. Bitterness often leads us to an inflated view of ourselves. This actually makes a lot of sense, since when we are filled with bitterness we are using our own judgments and perceptions to determine who is right or wrong in a conflict and whose resentment is justified. Taken to its extreme, bitterness can turn our perception of the world into the only perception that matters.

Finally, bitterness robs us of the ability to forgive. Instead of trying to make our relationships whole, bitterness focuses on the fractures of past conflicts. When this takes place, forgiveness is very rare indeed.

The Bible warns us against bitterness. Instead, we are to do everything in our power to bear with each other, forgiving all grievances among us. If there is bitterness living inside of us, no matter how small, we need to dig out that root. Nothing good comes from bitterness. If we want to take our relationships seriously, we need to identify and eliminate bitterness from our lives.

Do you have any 'roots of bitterness' in your life? What can you do this week to begin removing bitterness from your relationships?

Making Life Work
Week 3
Day 5

See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.

Hebrews 3:12-13

Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Ephesians 5:21

Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.

1 Thessalonians 5:11

One of the hardest aspects of our relationships is the level of mutual accountability God calls us to. It's easy to get wrapped up in ourselves to the point that we completely neglect this piece of what it means to have God-honoring relationships. All of us need people who care about us deeply enough to speak difficult truths into our lives.

The Bible speaks to this in several places, but maybe nowhere more clearly than in Hebrews. In this letter, the author wants to remind all of us that a life spent following Jesus is not complete

unless it is done with others. When we journey together with others we are able to avoid some of the pitfalls and deceptions that can easily befall us if we journey alone.

The author tells us to be sure no one turns away from the living God. How? By encouraging each other daily. This concept of ‘encourage’ is used here differently from what we normally think of in our lives. This isn’t the process of blowing sunshine at someone to make them feel better. To encourage each other, as God desires, we must also have difficult conversations to help keep each other from turning away from God.

This isn’t permission to begin railing on people who disagree with us, but is a chance to help others by saying what is truly needed. To hear and respond to this sort of encouragement takes a heart willing to submit to each other. Our pride battles against this sort of treatment, but if we want to follow Jesus, we need to cultivate a heart that submits.

Maybe the only conversation harder than speaking a difficult truth to someone is when we must hear a difficult truth ourselves. Yet, we all need people in our lives that have permission to speak this sort of hard truth to us. Without these deep relationships, we often convince ourselves we are doing ‘okay’ in areas of our lives where we really need some work.

Who in your life do you need to speak a difficult truth to? Who has permission in your life to speak such truths to you?

**Making Life Work
Week 3
Small Group Guide**

1. What are the different types of relationships you have in your life (i.e. parent, child, coworker, etc . . .)?
2. In general, how would you rate the health of relationships in our country? Why?

3. What are ways in which our culture has become individualized? How has this affected our relationships?

Read: **Hebrews 3:12-13, Colossians 3:12-14**

4. To what degree do you live an individualized life? How does this affect your relationships?
5. How readily do you ‘speak hard truths’ into the lives of others? Do you generally avoid or embrace this aspect of encouraging one another?
6. Who in your life do you need to speak a difficult truth to? Who has permission in your life to speak such truths to you?

Making Life Work
Week 4
Day 1

He who guards his lips guards his life, but he who speaks rashly will come to ruin.
Proverbs 13:3

Do you see a man who speaks in haste? There is more hope for a fool than for him.
Proverbs 29:20

When words are many, sin is not absent, but he who holds his tongue is wise.
Proverbs 10:19

The average American has 30 conversations a day. We will spend a fifth of our lives talking. The average man will speak around 20,000 words a day and the average woman will speak (I’m not making this up) around 30,000 words a day. Of course, most guys only catch about half of those words. There’s just no getting around the fact that talking is a part of our lives. If we are going to learn to live well, we need to learn what God has to say about what *we* have to say.

Think about this, in one year, if you typed out every word an average person says, it would fill up over 130 books at 400 pages per book. Every year we speak enough words to fill up a bookshelf. Let’s say you take down one of the books from that shelf, one of the books filled with the things we’ve said over the last year, and leafed through it. What would you find? What kind of conversations have you had? What sort of jokes have you told? Would you find things you’re proud of? Would there be gaps of silence where you didn’t speak at all?

If all someone had to go on were those books of the things I've said, what kind of person would they conclude I am?

Over and over again we read in the Bible that God takes what we say seriously. Let's take some time this week to learn how to use our words wisely.

How often do you carefully consider what you say?

**Making Life Work
Week 4
Day 2**

"Every word of God is flawless; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him. Do not add to his words, or he will rebuke you and prove you a liar. "Two things I ask of you, O LORD; do not refuse me before I die: Keep falsehood and lies far from me; give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread.

Proverbs 30:5-8

Listen to advice and accept instruction, and in the end you will be wise. Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the LORD's purpose that prevails. What a man desires is unfailing love; better to be poor than a liar.

Proverbs 19:20-22

There are several different ways we can use our words poorly. The Bible book of Proverbs, a book full of God's wisdom, spends a considerable amount of time addressing the issue of how we speak. One area that is mentioned over and over again is that of lying.

This is a central issue concerned with our speech and we'll address it first. When we are about to say something untrue, we would do everyone a favor by keeping silent. Yet, it's actually a little more complicated than it might first appear. Everyone knows it's wrong to lie. I mean, I don't think anyone thinks lying is a good long-term solution for a happy healthy life.

The Bible speaks clearly about lying. In Proverbs we read that it's "better to be poor than a liar" (Proverbs 19:22) as well as the authors deep desire to "keep falsehood and lies far from me." (Proverbs 30:8)

It is better to be poor, to have nothing in the way of possession but to have your integrity and the truth. It is worth investing time and energy to keep lies far from us. Yet, it's not always an easy thing. Little white lies seem to press in all around us, but it's so important we don't simply fold under the pressure of these lies. As far as out and out lying, we do okay. But what about the little lies in our lives?

What about exaggerating? Sometimes we are tempted to stretch the bounds of truth for the sake of managing our own images. Do you exaggerate to appease the almost constant temptation to make ourselves look better?

What about flattering other people? It might be nice to throw a little sunshine at someone, but if it's not true, it's just a polite lie. There are tons of really practical reasons why it makes sense to flatter someone, whether it's a boss or a first date, but your better off sticking to the truth.

You see, when we lie we are outside of what God wants for our lives. It seems like such a petty thing, little white lies, but what it really comes down to is the character of the person speaking. When we are willing to compromise the truth in little things we are much more likely to compromise it in other areas as well. What is being revealed about ourselves if we must always manipulate the truth in such ways?

When you evaluate your words, how often do you use 'little white lies' in your conversations?

Making Life Work
Week 4
Day 3

Without wood a fire goes out; without gossip a quarrel dies down. As charcoal to embers and as wood to fire, so is a quarrelsome man for kindling strife. The words of a gossip are like choice morsels; they go down to a man's inmost parts. Like a coating of glaze over earthenware are fervent lips with an evil heart.

Proverbs 26:20-23

A gossip separates close friends.
Proverbs 16:28

Another aspect of our speech the Bible addresses is gossiping. What gossiping really comes down to is the question: ‘Do I have permission to share what I’m about to say?’

Is what I’m about to say something I have a right to share or am I gossiping. That word gossip has some odd connotations in our culture, from the gossip magazines in the grocery store to gossip journalism on TV. But really, gossiping is just spreading information (true or otherwise) that is not our to spread for our own enjoyment or gain and at the detriment to someone else. For some people gossiping, sharing information that is not theirs to share, is a huge issue.

Some people feel the need to be on the cutting edge of information. They like to be up to date on the comings and goings of everyone. For them, it’s part of their identity to have a tasty little tidbit on everyone. Other people just like to be the carriers of information, especially information that gets people laughing, shaking their heads, or angry.

The Bible book of Proverbs has a lot to say about gossiping.

“Without wood a fire goes out; without gossip a quarrel dies down.” (Proverbs 26:20)

Have you ever noticed the truth of these words in your life? Gossip has a way of starting and maintaining fights. Gossip breeds misunderstanding and dissention. It’s divisive. Bottom line, gossiping is unhealthy for everyone involved. It’s no wonder why gossiping starts fights. Proverbs also says “A gossip separates close friends,” a truth that many people have known in their lives.

Maybe you've experienced the separation gossiping can cause in your life. Perhaps you've had a close relationship severed because one side had information that was 'just to good not to share.' Gossiping destroys relationships. The early churches were warned strongly to avoid it because gossiping is a community breaker, a divider of people.

Before we speak we need to determine if we have permission to share what we are about to say.

To what degree is gossiping an issue in your life? How has gossiping affected your life and relationships?

Making Life Work
Week 4
Day 4

*Therefore encourage one another and build each other up
1 Thessalonians 5:11*

*But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today
Hebrews 3:13*

There are so many different ways we can hurt people with our words. Many of us still bear scars from the wounds we've received from other people's words. It can be easy to unload on someone without ever considering if what we are saying is beneficial. As much as our words can injure others, they can also be used to benefit those around us.

There are things we all wish we had more of in our lives. I've never heard someone say they wish people would be a little less caring. I've never heard someone say they had a little too much support or a little too much love. I've never heard someone say they wished people wouldn't invest so much in their lives or wouldn't build them up so much. In fact, these are the areas where so many people feel a painful void in their lives. The Bible speaks to this in several places, giving us hints as to what our conversations and interactions should look like.

The New Testament portion of the Bible contains lots of letters written to young churches all trying to figure out how to follow Jesus and what that meant for their interaction with each other. Over and over again they are told to encourage each other.

Which one of us couldn't use more encouragement? Who couldn't use more building up? In this world there are so many things that break us down and discourage us. We are called to be something more. We are called to be people who speak words of life to each other, words of encouragement. So often we miss opportunities to say things that would be encouraging to others. We often miss chances to bolster flagging hearts.

Don't let that be our story. Let us be people who speak words of encouragement to each other whenever we can.

How often do you speak words of encouragement to people in your life? How often do you long to hear words of encouragement?

Making Life Work
Week 4
Day 5

"Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit. You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him.
Matthew 12: 33-35

A couple years ago I had a small problem with my car: it squeaked. My brilliant solution was to ignore it. At first it was a small squeak, barely noticeable, and so a simple turn of the radio dial and, boom, just like that, no squeak. At least, I couldn't hear it anymore.

Yet, as often happens when you ignore problems (especially car related ones) things got worse. Shortly after, the car was squeaking so loudly that my radio could no longer drown out the noise. I couldn't completely ignore it like before, but it's easy enough to just pretend nothing's wrong when you really want to. Then the noise turned into something else, something more sinister. My car began to pull to the right. Just a little tug at first, but before too long my car was trying to do donuts when I wanted to go straight. You'd think that an intelligent, responsible person would, at this point, get his car checked out. Being 19 and flat broke, I decided to just ride the

wave and see how it played itself out. Well, it did play out, culminating in my tire blowing out in spectacular fashion.

I wasn't paying much attention to it, but my tire was trying to tell me something. Jesus once said "out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks." My car was doing the same thing. I couldn't *see* anything was wrong with my car, not really. Maybe if I got down and slid under I might notice something was off, but maybe not. Yet, my car was making noise to let me know, without a shadow of a doubt, there was something that needed attention.

Our lives are the same way. It's not always immediately clear when there are areas of our lives that need attention. When we pay attention to the things we say, to the words that come out of our mouths, we get a clue as to the condition of our hearts. It's an easy diagnostic on what's going on inside of us.

Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks.

What sort of heart do your words reveal?

**Making Life Work
Week 4
Small Group Guide**

1. Are you more of a 'talker' or are you more of the quiet type? What are some of the pitfalls of each?
2. Have you ever put your foot in your mouth? What is the most embarrassing thing you remember saying?
3. Statistically, the average American has 30 conversations a day. Do you think you have more or less conversations than this? Who do you have the most conversations with in an average week?
4. How often do you think about the things that you say before you say them? Why is it so easy to neglect this area of our lives?

Read: Proverbs 26:20-23, Proverbs 29:20, Matthew 12: 33-35

5. When was an instance that you experienced the power of words in your life (either positive or negative)?
6. Jesus said that our words reveal our heart. What sort of heart do your words reveal?
7. With regard to your words, do you have more issues with lying, gossiping, or not being encouraging? What is one thing you can do this week to improve in this area?

Making Life Work
Week 5
Day 1

"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?"

"And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

Matthew 6:25-34

Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth.

Proverbs 27:1

All of us at some point have read through an instruction manual. Whether it's a new electronic or a toy that is not-so-easy-to-assemble, sometimes it helps to have a reference that will just make it work. We are in a series called "Making Life Work," where we've been looking at ways the Bible speaks to some very practical areas of our lives.

The tendency we often have when reading the Bible is to think it concerns itself solely with 'spiritual things.' The Bible, we sometimes presume, is useful for learning how to pray or become more pious, but it really doesn't have much to say about everyday life. Nothing could be further from the truth. The Bible is filled with plain old good ideas.

We aren't able to cover every area of life during Sunday morning, so we'll be using these study guides to address different practical topics. In this week's reading guide we'll be looking at an area of life that affects us all: how we use our time. You might be tempted to think there's nothing about time management in the Bible, but you'd be wrong.

Jesus addresses the idea of how we use our time when he talks to his followers about what they pursue in their lives. So much of our time is spent looking after some of the basic needs of our lives. We worry and stress about what we'll wear and what we'll eat, burning away our hours. Yet, most of us don't walk around naked. And most of us have food to eat. Jesus tells us these things are important, but they are not worth spending our lives chasing. Jesus tells us we should use our lives to seek God. We should use our one and only, nonrefundable, irreplaceable life to seek God and what he wants for us. God promises to take care of the rest.

As we move forward to evaluate how we use our time, always use this as the guiding principal. It can really make all the difference.

How much thought do you put into your schedule and time management? How much of your time is spent seeking God?

Making Life Work
Week 5
Day 2

"Show me, O LORD, my life's end and the number of my days; let me know how fleeting is my life.

You have made my days a mere handbreadth; the span of my years is as nothing before you.

□ *Each man's life is but a breath."*

Psalms 39:4-5

Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.

1 Corinthians 9:26-26

Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil.

Ephesians 5:15-16

When we look at the Bible to learn how to manage our time, one of the things we find over and over again is the idea that our time on earth is limited and therefore we need to use it well. I think we all know intellectually that our days are numbered and we'll die someday. But we live with an emphasis on the word *someday*. While we may know it with our heads, we very rarely live it out with our lives.

Yet, the truth is, we are all going to die. The statistics on that one are still 100%. As the Bible puts it, our days are nothing more than a breath. This being the case, we must learn to be wise with how we live and use our time. Maybe managing our time seems like a fairly minor issue in the long run. Perhaps there are other things that feel more pressing than what your day planner looks like.

Yet, the Bible tells us we need to be careful how we use our time. God wants us to make the most of our days, to make the most of every opportunity in our lives. Unfortunately, it's so easy to *not* make the most of our days.

Paul, the writer of much of the New Testament portion of the Bible, understands this as well. He writes about how he doesn't want to run aimlessly or fight like a man shadowboxing the air. He doesn't want to burn the hours of his life on things that don't matter and that don't make any real difference in the world.

Think about our world and our lives. There are so many things that would fall under this category. How much time do we waste on things that don't matter? How many hours in front of

the TV, or computer, or any number of things that don't last. Be wise to make the most of the hours you're given. As we run the race of life, let us not use our time and energy running in circles. Instead, let's spend our lives on things that matter.

Take some time today to look at how you use your hours. What things do you spend your time on that will last or that have significance? What things in your life are like 'running in a circle' or 'shadowboxing the air?'

Making Life Work
Week 5
Day 3

Moses' father-in-law replied, "What you are doing is not good. You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out. The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone. Listen now to me and I will give you some advice, and may God be with you. You must be the people's representative before God and bring their disputes to him. Teach them the decrees and laws, and show them the way to live and the duties they are to perform. But select capable men from all the people—men who fear God, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain—and appoint them as officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens. Have them serve as judges for the people at all times, but have them bring every difficult case to you; the simple cases they can decide themselves. That will make your load lighter, because they will share it with you. If you do this and God so commands, you will be able to stand the strain, and all these people will go home satisfied."
Exodus 18:17-21

One of the things that haunt many people is the idea that they have to do everything themselves. Somewhere along the line we stopped asking for help. Instead we just lace up our boots a little tighter and charge through.

The same thing happened to Moses, one of the most well known figures of the Old Testament portion of the Bible. Moses was the person God chose to lead the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt by way of some amazing miracles. During their long journey to the land promised to them by God, Moses sat as judge and advisor over the people he helped free. All day long Moses would sit and listen to the cases of the people, while many more waited and were not heard.

Moses' father-in-law saw what was happening and spoke up. Moses was doing some good, for sure, but he was not meeting everyone's needs and he was also stretching himself painfully thin.

Instead, he should let trustworthy people help him so Moses could “stand the strain,” and also so “all these people will go home happy.”

Moses had taken on a workload he couldn't maintain. If he continued at such a pace he would burnout, which would be harmful to both Moses (duh) and the people he was trying to help. Many of us find ourselves in similar situations. We bite off more than we can chew and before we have time to catch our breath it's become a way of life. Some people are juggling so many balls at the same time they feel like even taking a vacation would cause the earth to stop spinning on its axis.

It's hard to say why Moses took on such a large workload, but it's an easier task to figure out why we do. Sometimes we have no other options and so we just make do. The hard part, though, is to ask for (and accept) help once it does become available.

Sometimes we have an inflated view of ourselves. We can become convinced no one would be able to do our work, and so there is no way to slow down or delegate responsibility. Or maybe we think it's tantamount to admitting failure to ask for help when responsibilities begin to overwhelm us.

Whatever the reason, it's important we don't overstretch ourselves. If you're having trouble with time management, take a look at what your time is going to. Is it possible that you're working harder than you need to because you refuse to ask for help? Is it possible you need to delegate tasks to other people? Maybe we could all learn a lesson from Moses.

Are there areas of your life where you're overwhelmed? What can you learn from this passage about this situation in your life?

Making Life Work
Week 5
Day 4

So when they met together, they asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"

He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own

authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Acts 1:6-8

Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.

Galatians 6:9

Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.

Colossians 4:5-6

If you're anything like me, traveling becomes a sort of personal competition. I obsess over how fast I'm getting from one place to another, always with the goal of 'making good time.' I keep a mental record of how long trips have taken in the past in order to compare the current trip to those standards. For me, it's pretty easy to become concerned with when things are happening or the time frame of events.

Jesus' followers show some of the same tendencies. Right before Jesus goes back up to heaven after his resurrection, his followers ask him if it's time. "Is it time for you to make Israel a great nation like it was generations ago? Is it time for you to throw off the oppressor's chains that hold Israel in thrall? Is it time for the brokenness of our nation to be repaired?"

These are the questions that underlie what they ask. Yet, Jesus wants them to focus on something different. Don't worry about the time, Jesus says. Don't worry about when things are going to happen or when they aren't. In the meantime, I have some work for you to do. You are going to be my witnesses, Jesus says, while you wait.

Jesus tells us not to worry about the days and times of when God will return but instead to get to work reaching the world for him now. Jesus tells us that the details about the times God chooses to act is none of our business, but that we need, instead, to get about the work of being his hands and feet on earth now.

We are told to make the most of our time in how we act around people who are far from God. We are to make the most of our conversations, our friendships, and our lives. Don't worry or fret about things that are out of your control. Instead, use your time to reach others for God.

How much of your time do you use "being a witness" for Jesus? How careful are you in how you use your time with others?

Making Life Work
Week 5
Day 5

The elders of Gilead said to him, "Nevertheless, we are turning to you now; come with us to fight the Ammonites, and you will be our head over all who live in Gilead."

And Jephthah made a vow to the LORD : "If you give the Ammonites into my hands, whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites will be the LORD's, and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering."

When Jephthah returned to his home in Mizpah, who should come out to meet him but his daughter, dancing to the sound of tambourines! She was an only child. Except for her he had neither son nor daughter. When he saw her, he tore his clothes and cried, "Oh! My daughter! You have made me miserable and wretched, because I have made a vow to the LORD that I cannot break."

Judges 11: 8, 30-31, 34-35

"Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it?"
Luke 14:28

The story of Jephthah from the Bible is one you may have never heard before. It centers around a man named Jephthah who is a mighty warrior. The people of Gilead were in trouble with the Ammonites and so they asked Jephthah for help. They promise that if Jephthah wins they will make him ruler of all of Gilead. He agrees.

Jephthah then makes a vow to God that if he is given the power to have victory he will sacrifice the first thing that leaves his house when he returns. Jephthah wins the battle and when he returns home his daughter runs out of the house to greet him. Jephthah follows through with his vow and his daughter is killed. Jephthah's daughter takes the full brunt of the consequences while Jephthah gains power and prestige. Not a very uplifting story, is it? Yet, we see some very basic truths at work in the Bible.

This obscure story about Jephthah out of the Old Testament book of Judges might appear, at first glance, to have nothing to do with time management. After all, what does a man making a vow that eventually leads to the death of his daughter have to do with us? Well, more than you might think.

First of all, what is the real reason Jephthah takes on the mission of helping the elders of Gilead? It's because if he wins he is promised to be made the head of them all. It's really all about Jephthah. It's pure selfishness and pride. As is so often the case, this selfishness and pride lead Jephthah into making a very foolish vow. Any thinking person would know it's just plain stupid to make a solemn vow that could so easily bite you in the butt. After all, who did he expect to run from the house to greet him, his mother-in-law? Of course it would be his child who would be excited to see him. Jephthah only has thoughts for himself.

As we look at our own lives we see how often our commitments hurt those around us. While looking out for our own good, how many times have we made promises or 'vows' that are just plain foolish? And who often bears the brunt of the consequence? It's normally the families and loved ones *near* the person making the promise, not the person themselves who feel the mistake most acutely.

In our lives, how often do we slow down enough to determine if our promises, commitments, and vows are worth making? Do we think about how our promises will affect others? Do we commit to too many things because of our own pride or selfishness, only to hurt those nearest to us?

Jesus once warned his followers to count the cost of an act before we commit to it. We should all make a practice of counting the cost before filling our schedules. Let us not foolishly or blindly make commitments that will hurt those we love.

In what areas of your life do you make commitments or promises too easily? How have these affected your family or those near to you?

**Making Life Work
Week 5
Small Group Guide**

1. What are some common, everyday items that you have no idea how they work?
2. If you had an entire day to just waste, what would you do with that time?
3. When it comes to your schedule, are you more rigid or do you 'go with the flow?'

4. If you were to break down an average day of 24 hours, how would you say you spend your time?

Read : Psalm 39:4-5, 1 Corinthians 9:26-26, Ephesians 5:15-16

5. To what degree do you live with the present knowledge that your days are numbered?

6. Of the things that you spend time doing, what things have lasting significance? What things have no lasting significance?

7. Knowing that your days are numbered, what is one thing you can do this week to schedule things of lasting significance into your life?

Making Life Work
Week 6
Day 1

Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life.
Proverb 4:23

We've been looking at what the Bible has to say about some of the practical areas of our lives. We've been using the Bible book of Proverbs, a collection of God's wisdom, to learn ways to make our lives work better.

This week we'll be looking at an area of our lives we often ignore, the health of our hearts.

The word heart, as seen here in Proverbs, means something a little different than the way we normally think about it. Heart here doesn't mean the biological heart beating away in our chests. It also doesn't primarily mean our emotions either.

When the author of Proverbs writes heart, he means the inner core of who we are. It means the innermost part of a person, which encompasses the mind, the will, the soul, and the deepest place of our understanding. Proverbs is telling us we must guard the inmost part of ourselves.

It's ironic that in our culture of overprotection, we put forth so little effort in guarding our hearts. We have medicine to deal with almost any problem. We have more safety features in our cars than ever. We pay close attention to the health of our financial portfolios. Television shows now have ratings so we are more able to protect our children from seeing things we don't want them to see. Yet, how often do we think about the health and protection of our hearts?

If we are going to have lives that honor God we need to learn to guard our hearts. After all, we are not just physical creatures. We often live like we are purely physical, but we are not. We are something more. One thing the Bible makes clear is there's a soul in each of us.

Sometimes I hear people say something like, "I'm not a very spiritual person." The truth is we are all spiritual and physical people. We are physical – made up of different chemicals and a whole lot of water. But we are also spiritual. We are amphibious creatures. Just like frog or newts, we are amphibians. The thing that makes amphibians distinct from other types of animals is they spend a portion of their life in water and a portion on land. You can't classify them a purely water animals or purely lands animals, they're both. They are creatures of two places.

Humans are the same way. We are physical and spiritual. This is why it's so important to guard our hearts. We must guard the part of us that isn't tangible and the part that isn't physical. We must learn to guard our hearts.

To what degree do you normally think of yourself as spiritual as well as physical? Have you ever thought about the health of your heart?

Making Life Work
Week 6
Day 2

Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, "Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. Nothing outside a man can make him 'unclean' by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him 'unclean.'"

For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man 'unclean.' "

Mark 7:14-15, 20-23

Sin doesn't just happen. Distance from God doesn't just happen. The Bible says our hearts are the "wellspring of life." The things in our hearts will eventually express themselves in our lives. We are used to having fresh water available at our fingertips, but in ancient times they would have to draw water up from wells. Cities and towns were often built around a well because it was vital to protect it. It was vital to protect the supply of water because it was the lifeblood of

the people. If something was wrong with the water in the well, if the well became poisoned somehow, it would destroy the community. Our hearts are the wells of our lives. Our thoughts, our wills, our deepest parts effect how we act, what we believe, and ultimately how we live.

Jesus taught about this very thing. One time Jesus was being quizzed by the religious leaders of the day about what it meant to be pure. Purity, as understood by these religious leaders, pertained mainly to restrictions and rules, such as what you could eat and when you could eat it. Jesus wasn't overly concerned with such things. Jesus was much more concerned with what was going on inside of people.

Jesus taught about the things on the inside. He knew the things which make people unclean, things like immorality, theft, greed, envy, arrogance; all of these come from inside our hearts.

It's easy to see murder is wrong. It's easy to pinpoint why it's wrong to steal. But where do these things come from? They come from inside our hearts. The things that live in our hearts will be expressed in our lives. Someone who murders or steals has murder and envy living in their heart before they ever commit a single act. Few of us live in these extremes, but what about jealousy or pride? Do these live in your heart? They will, at some point, express themselves in your life. We need to assess the health of our hearts.

What is the condition of your heart?

Making Life Work
Week 6
Day 3

*We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God,
and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.*
2 Corinthians 10:5

The thoughts in our head and the secret sins of our lives will be brought to light. Our thoughts are not hidden from God. We might savor a particular fantasy believing no one knows or cares, but the truth is God knows. All things hidden in darkness will be revealed. This is a hard truth, but it's something the Bible teaches clearly. God knows our thoughts. Nothing is hidden from

God. Our thoughts are a part of who we are and God cares deeply about every part of us, including what we're thinking.

We believe our thoughts and emotions are uncontrollable, but the Bible says differently.

We must learn to get to the point where we are instinctively and instantly capturing our thoughts. We must learn to capture the things that enter our minds. If we seriously want to guard our hearts, we must learn this skill. Notice, the Bible doesn't say never think, but to actively capture every thought.

It's not enough just to identify the thoughts that aren't pleasing to God; we must make efforts to capture these thoughts. This isn't going to be easy, but there's just too much at stake to ignore this teaching.

I know it sounds sort of weird to talk about capturing something as ethereal as thoughts, but what this really comes down to is which thoughts are we entertaining and which are we ignoring.

Of course we can't control what thoughts come into our minds, but we can control what we do with those thoughts. We can control which thoughts we entertain. We can't control the birds flying overhead, but we can keep them from building nest in our hair. We can decide what thoughts to focus on and which to capture.

What thoughts in your life are you entertaining? Are there any thoughts you need to capture in order to please God?

Making Life Work
Week 6
Day 4

He was going down the street near her corner, walking along in the direction of her house at twilight, as the day was fading, as the dark of night set in.

Proverbs 7:8-9

We all need to understand, with regard to the realm of our thoughts, there will be times of weakness for everyone. We must identify our weaknesses so we can be prepared for them. There are times and situations which will make capturing our thoughts more difficult for us. The things that challenge you will be different than the things that challenge me, but all of us have times when our guard will be lowered. We need to identify these times so we can be extra alert during our times of weakness.

Maybe your weakness has to do with a certain situation. Maybe it's when you're on the computer, or in a conversation with a specific person, or flipping through the channels. Maybe it's after a long day of work when you're a little extra tired. Maybe it's when you're lonely. Maybe it's when you don't feel respected or loved.

During week five of this series we talked about what Proverbs (and God) have to say about sex, describing a young man who was seduced and lead astray by a married woman. What's interesting to note is just how this young man found himself in such a situation.

How did this young man get himself near the adulterous woman? He walked there. This young man should know better than to wander by her house, but here he is, walking in the direction of her house. What time of day is it? Twilight. If this was a horror movie the creepy music would be kicking in and everyone in the audience would be yelling at the screen, because it's obvious what this is leading up to.

This young man is putting himself in a position where doing the right thing is becoming more and more difficult. He should know this is a time of weakness for him, but he doesn't. What this leads to is a drastic mistake, a mistake the Bible describes in terms of life and death. This doesn't have anything to do with it being twilight or about walking down the road. This is about the weaknesses of this particular young man. Yet, he seems almost oblivious to his own weaknesses and the danger he's walking into.

We all have times of weakness and it's vital that we identify them. We all need to know when we are at our weakest so that we can be prepared. Once we've identified the times we are at our weakest, we need to begin putting ourselves in a position to honor God.

When are times of weakness in your life?

Making Life Work
Week 6
Day 5

Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.
Romans 12:2

. . . whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.
Philippians 4:8

I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.
Psalms 119:11

When it comes to our minds, it's not a matter of thinking less. We can't just tell ourselves to think the right things. That's about as effective as telling yourself not to be hungry. What it's really about is changing what we are focusing our thoughts on. As I heard said once, we need to repaint the walls of our minds.

This is something that goes directly against our culture, but it's something the Bible speaks about directly.

God knows there is something essential about our minds and if we want to be transformed into something new, something that glorifies and honors God, we need to renew our minds. We need to tear down the old posters and wallpaper that cover our minds. We need to have renewed minds, minds that no longer obsess, fixate, and fantasize the way they used to. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, the pattern that says it's perfectly normal and acceptable to think about and imagine anything you like.

The Bible tells us to fix our thoughts on Jesus and on the things of God. Over and over again the Bible makes it clear we have control over our thoughts. The thoughts we feed and embrace will grow.

Are you reading things worth fixing your thoughts on? Are you having conversations that help you capture your thoughts? What are you focusing your thoughts on and where can you begin to replace unhealthy thoughts with thoughts that are true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, and praiseworthy.

For generations people have used the Bible as a way of focusing their thoughts on God.

The word of God, the things written in the Bible, should be hidden in our hearts. Why? Because when it is, the words of God help us avoid sin. The word of God can help us stay near to God. This is especially the case with our thought life.

Maybe you need to begin reading the Bible on a regular basis so the word of God can be something real in your mind. Perhaps part of this for you is the practice of memorizing parts of the Bible to arm yourself during these times of weakness. Maybe you can start with the Bible verses for today's reading. Try to 'hide' this in your heart and you'll be better equipped to honor God with your thoughts.

To what degree do you have God's word 'hidden' in your heart? How might memorizing the Bible better prepare you to face your times of weakness?

**Making Life Work
Week 6
Small Group Guide**

1. What are some ways that we focus on protecting or guarding our safety?
2. Are you a cautious person or a risk-taker?

Read - Proverb 4:23, Romans 12:2, 2 Corinthians 10:5

3. The Bible talks about guarding your heart. What do you think 'heart' means in this context?
4. Have you ever thought about the health of your heart?
5. What thoughts in your life are you entertaining? Are there any thoughts you need to capture in order to please God?
6. What is the condition of your heart?