



LETTERS

TO MYSELF

LIFE GROUP LEADER MATERIALS

February 2020

ABOUT THIS SERIES

Most of us put some thought into things we'd like to do differently in our lives. We consider what we want to stop, start, or continue doing. Because something inside all of us looks at the future and sees potential for a fresh start. But most of us never end up seeing the change we want. We never do what we set out to do. Or we do them for a really short period before calling quits. Why is that? Why don't we change? That's the question we'll start answering in the next few weeks as we talk about how to make the kind of change that ultimately makes our life better. We're going to look at some notes we should write to ourselves. And we'll see it's not just about having a better year but living a better life story.

WEEK 1

**WHERE SIN ALWAYS
MATURES INTO MISERY,
TRUTH ALWAYS
MATURES INTO JOY.**

"For the wages of sin is death."

- Romans 6:23a

"When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death. Don't be deceived, my dear brothers and sisters. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. He chose to give us birth [or life] through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of first fruits of all he created."

- James 1:13-18

WEEK 1 SUMMARY

Everyone wants a better life. And when we get really honest, we admit we could be better people. We know we should try to act less selfish, be less angry, spend more time with our family, have fewer regrets, go to church more, pray more, read the Bible more, give more, and so on. No one is exempt from the feeling like there is something in our lives that could use some improvement. The problem is no matter how hard we might try, there are always some stubborn areas of our lives that refuse to change as easily as we would like them to, things that affect our ability to grow, love, and serve. Sin, something we all have that keeps us stuck, trapped and living in habitually unhealthy and hurtful ways, isn't something we are left alone to take care of on our own. There's a better solution. It's less about what we need to do, and more about what God has already done. This week, we're going to talk about the frustration sin brings and the joy we can find in God. And when we focus on the latter, we'll head into the new year with new hope and see how much better our life can be when we do.

LEADER NOTES

BIBLE READING PLAN

Day 1:

"Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights." - James 1:17

Have you ever found yourself saying, "If only..."? "If only I had this job". Or, "If only my kids would behave better." Or "If only this was different in my life." The list of "if only's" could go on forever. There's something in all of us that makes us think the life we want is just over the next rise, or just around the next bend, in the raise we want, the kids we want, the relationship we want. But we've all lived long enough to know it isn't true. You bought the car and it didn't change your life. You got the job, and things stayed the same. You had the kids, and you still feel a sort of emptiness. This continual cycle of dissatisfaction can only be broken when we find satisfaction in who God is. This verse in James tells us every good and perfect gift is from God, but what if there are "gifts" right now we are missing because we are anticipating a future gift from God? What if the good and perfect can be found in our present? How would the way you pray and the way you live change if you stopped looking ahead to what you want or what might be coming from God and instead started saying thank you for the gifts you already have right now? Pray and ask God to make you more aware of everything He has given you in your life.

Day 2:

"No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind."
- 1 Corinthians 10:13

Facing down temptation is never easy. Even if we know the right thing to do or say, doesn't mean we have the willpower or the courage to do or say it. And what makes it even worse is that oftentimes, dealing with temptation makes us feel alone and powerless, like no one else could possibly struggle like we do. But in his letter to the church in Corinth Paul gives us some of the best news we could ever hear. That every temptation we face is common. There is nothing unique about the desires we have or the impulses we are trying to control. We aren't alone in our struggles and failures. Knowing that levels the playing field. It should encourage us and offer a sense of relief. You aren't the first to feel this way and you won't be the last. Today, take comfort in the fact that you are not alone—that others share in your struggle. And consider talking to someone about whatever temptation is overtaking you and asking for help. Chances are you'll find someone who has experienced the exact same thing.

Day 3: Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. James 1:2-3

When you first read this verse it sounds like James misspoke. We're supposed to be happy when we face hard things? That's the exact opposite of how we tend to react to difficult circumstances. So what could he possibly mean by saying this? James is speaking as brother of Jesus, as one of the apostles whose life was constantly being threatened for sharing the Good News about Jesus, and he suggests we can be joyful because he knows something. He knows that his brother, who he saw killed, came back to life. And that taught him something about God we would be wise to remember when we face our own difficulties. That trials don't get the last word. Because when it came to Jesus, death didn't get the last word. We can persevere through challenging times because our faith tells us they aren't the end. We can develop patience and endurance because we know there's always more happening with God than we may ever know. That may not make the current difficulties we face any easier. But it can give us an anchor to hold on to when in the middle of them. We can know the story hasn't ended, the journey isn't over, because things took a turn we didn't expect. We can persevere because we serve a God who specializes in the long game and seeing us through to the other side.

BIBLE READING PLAN CONTINUED

Day 3:

"Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance." - James 1:2-3

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Day 4:

"And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one." - Matthew 6:13

If there were an easy fix for dealing with temptation, all of us would want to know what it was. Everyone wants a quick tip that will help them overcome whatever it is they're struggling with. Unfortunately, there's no such thing. But Jesus did give His disciples advice on how to pray about temptation. We don't have to pretend to have it all together, or act like we are beyond temptation. Jesus, when telling his disciples how to pray, specifically included temptation in the prayer. He knew we can often feel powerless when it comes to dealing with temptation, so in telling us to pray about it, to ask for help when dealing with it, he acknowledges that this isn't something we'll ever get a complete handle on. And not only that, but God is accessible, able to help us handle the temptation we face. We get to pray to God, knowing He will hear, and knowing He is looking out for our best interests, eager to help us find a way out of whatever temptation we are dealing with. Turning to God when faced with temptation begins to instill the practice of including God in your struggle. Chances are you've tried to "get better" on your own and realize that doesn't do a whole lot of good. But when you have God on your side, and when you work side by side with Him, you'll see your heart and mind changed in accordance with God's will. Start today by praying the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6.

WEEK 1 LEADERS GUIDE

BIBLE READING PLAN CONTINUED

Day 5:

"God is faithful; He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear." - 1 Corinthians 10:13

Have you ever experienced temptation that felt like it was simply too much? A moment when there didn't seem to be a way out or a way forward? We've all had those times where it seemed like the temptation was impossible to fight against. It's a powerless feeling. But what if it wasn't completely true? What if the reason temptation feels too big or too much is because we are fighting it on our own? In his letter to the Corinthians Paul tells them that God will never let us be tempted beyond what we can bear. Meaning, even when it doesn't feel like it, there's a way out. There's a way to combat what feels impossible to tackle. And even if it doesn't feel like this is true, we know it's true because of what God has promised us: that we are never alone. That he is always with us. That what feels like a losing battle doesn't have to get the best of us, because he is fighting alongside us. When it comes to sin and struggles and trying to change, you are not alone. There are other people who are struggling in the exact same way, and there is a God that promises to be with all of us through anything and everything that comes our way. How does knowing that God is on your side change your attitude toward temptation? Pray and ask God to empower you with His Spirit and that He would fight temptation alongside you.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Are you the type of person who makes New Year's resolutions? What have some of your resolutions been in the past? Do you typically follow through on them?

What are some of your goals for this year? Do you ever feel like the standard God calls us to live is like an impossible New Year's resolution? Why or why not?

When you face temptation of any kind, what is your typical response?

How have you seen sin lead to a "death" of sorts in your life or the lives of others? How might keeping in mind the maturation process of sin change the way you handle temptations when faced with it?

How have you seen truth mature into joy? How does knowing this is the life cycle of choosing what is right change how might handle temptation?

Think of some of the "destinations" where you want to arrive in your life. How can you begin to make decisions this week to fight temptation and take steps to go where you want to go in your future?

WEEK 1 LEADERS GUIDE

LEADER NOTES

WEEK 2

SACRIFICE ALWAYS BRINGS LIFE.

"Whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it."

- Matthew 16:25

"From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!"

Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns. Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it."

- Matthew 16:21-25

WEEK 2 SUMMARY

In this series, we're talking about the idea of change as it relates to making our lives better. We are also talking about notes that we should write to ourselves to help making that change possible. All of us can agree: change can be really hard. Even though most of us already know the things we need to change, we don't always have the will power to follow through and actually do them. This week, we're talking about something we know will help lead to the change we need, but it's something none of us want to actually do. So what is it? Sacrifice—the idea of giving up something we value in order to get something better. Sounds great, but the “better” isn't always about us, or something we can see, or immediate. So it is hard to follow through. But as we'll see this week, even though sacrifice is the opposite of instant gratification, it is the key to a better long-term future. As Jesus says, it's how we can “find life.” And for those of us looking to find a better year—and a better life—sacrifice may be the first step in the right direction.

LEADER NOTES

BIBLE READING PLAN

Day 1:

“Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”
-John 15:13

Sacrifice is the ultimate act of love. This happens every day in our relationships. For example, spouses have to constantly let one another decide things like where to eat and what movie to watch. And while those two examples may sound trivial, think about how difficult their lives would be if neither one of them was willing to sacrifice. What if two people wanted to eat at different places, but neither was willing to budge? That’s the opposite of love. Love, as Jesus clearly explains here, is laying down our life for our friends. That doesn’t mean we have to die for everyone we know—although Jesus did!—but it does mean we’re called to choose others as our first priority. This type of life is both radical and challenging, but imagine what the church would look like if it was full of people who were constantly trying to serve one another! That’s what we’re looking for with this verse. Who is someone in your life you can make a loving sacrifice for today? How would your life look differently if you lived with this verse in mind this week?

Day 2:

“Whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it.”
-Luke 9:24

This verse seems completely backwards. What does it mean to lose our lives in order to save them? How is that even possible? For an answer, we need to look no further than Jesus. See, even though Jesus is the Son of God, He surrendered His life for God’s purpose. He was willing to do whatever the Father had for Him to do—even when that meant death. And when Jesus gave up His life, He saved the entire world. While we won’t save the entire world, (it has already been saved!), this verse promises that our lives will be saved when we lose our lives for God. What does that look like? It looks like surrendering our will to God’s will, choosing to give our lives up and over to Him. God promises that when we hold our lives with an open hand, we’ll find that He has such a fuller, richer life in store for us than we could have ever experienced if we held our lives with tight reins. God calls us to let go of our tight grip and hold His hand for the ride.

Day 3:

“For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” -Mark 10:45

This verse never gets less shocking. How could this be true? If you want to put yourself in Jesus’ shoes, imagine an anthill. You’ve seen them, maybe in your yard or in a park. Picture you’re looking down at an anthill one day, and suddenly you become an ant. Imagine your mind in an ant’s body. What would you do? How would you go about life as an ant? Think about how much more you’d know than the other ants! They’d be so busy trying to build their little dirt pile while you on the other hand know that things like oceans and continents exist. They’d seem so small to you. That’s an attempt at explaining how Jesus might’ve felt. Yet, what did He do with this power? He gave it up. He served people. In fact, He died for us. What would it take for you to let ants kill you as a sacrifice for their greater good? The comparison isn’t perfect, but it does bring into light just how shocking Jesus’ life was. And if He chose to serve, who are we to do otherwise?

WEEK 2 LEADERS GUIDE

BIBLE READING PLAN CONTINUED

Day 4:

"He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" - Romans 8:32

When was the last time you really wanted something from God? Like really really wanted something? Maybe it was trivial—like a certain Christmas present as a child. Or maybe it was something serious, like the healthy recovery of someone you love. When you were praying and asking God for these things, did you ever wonder if He'd come through for you? Isn't it frustrating to know that God is all-powerful and all-knowing, yet we still have to wonder if He's going to give us what we want? Here's the good news: He already gave us everything we could ever want. Maybe you got that Christmas present as a child or maybe you didn't. Maybe the someone you loved got better or maybe they didn't. But what we did get is the opportunity to have a relationship with God that will last forever and on into Heaven. And there, sickness doesn't exist. It's not just that everyone "gets better"—it's that they're already perfectly healthy. What Paul is saying in this verse is that we don't have to wonder about what God will give us. Yes, there is no guarantee of what we'll get in life on this side of Heaven. Some people's lives will be better than others. But when we die and go to Heaven, when we see God in all His glory, we'll have no doubt about who He is and about how much He has given us.

Day 5:

"My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise." -Psalm 51:17

Do you ever get tired of hearing about sacrifice and service in church? Does it ever feel like they're asking too much from you? Sometimes, living life as a Christian can be exhausting. It can be completely overwhelming to do all the "good things" we can do while trying to avoid all the "bad things" too. But what if God was less focused on our actions and more concerned with our hearts? What if instead of trying to put on a fake smile at church this week, you prayed what was actually on your heart? What if instead of singing worship songs that you don't resonate with, you talked to God about what was actually going on? The truth is, the best thing we can give to God is our true selves. That's all He wants. This week, keep this verse in the back of your mind. Ask God to open up your eyes to see what it means for you, and what it might look like for you to offer Him your true self just as you are.

WEEK 2 LEADERS GUIDE

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

When you hear the word sacrifice, what are some things that come to mind? Do you hear it as a positive thing or a negative one?

When was the last time you sacrificed something for someone else? What was that experience like?

Why do you think sacrifice is such a difficult virtue to practice? Why are we hesitant to do it?

What are some of the things in your life you're hesitant to sacrifice or give up? What would it take for you to be more willing to sacrifice those things?

How have you seen a sacrifice improve yours or someone else's life?

What is it you want to change in your life? What might you need to sacrifice in order to make that happen?

How can our group help you/encourage you in this journey of sacrifice and growth?

WEEK 3

RIGHT THINKING EQUALS A CHANGED LIFE.

"Repent . . ."

- Matt 4:17b

"Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect."

- Romans 12:2 NLT

WEEK 3 SUMMARY

All of us know the frustration of realizing there are behaviors in our life we want to change, but feeling like we just can't do what's necessary to make lasting change possible. Even more, we know real, lasting change is difficult—mostly from personal experience, failing more often than we succeed. And this can be frustrating. But also discouraging. Because as Christians, being able to change our behavior seems like it should be just part of the job. And yet, we consistently let ourselves down. But what if there was a piece of the puzzle, when it comes to growing more and more like Jesus, that we are missing? A piece that isn't just about lasting change in our actions, but in how we think? What if changing the way we use our minds has more of an impact on how we behave than we ever thought possible? If that's true, then we need to make a note to self and learn how to think in a way that will equip us for creating the kind of change that lasts.

LEADER NOTES

BIBLE READING PLAN

Day 1:

"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." - Matthew 4:17

Repent literally means to change the way we think. When Jesus said this, He was instructing those around Him to change the way they were thinking—about God, about others, about sin, about themselves. For most of us, we could stand to change the way we think too. We think about ourselves too much and others too little. We judge others and judge ourselves. We think God is out to get us and is angry, or can be won over by our good behavior. We need to change what we've always thought was true. We need to see the best in others. We need to extend grace to them and to ourselves. We need to see God for the loving Father He is, whose love for us doesn't depend on what we get wrong or what we get right. We need to change the way we think about these really big ideas because that's how we'll begin to take the steps to change our individual lives. This was why Jesus came. To reframe for us the way we were used to seeing the world, God, and everything in between. Think of an area in your life where you could repent. What's a habit of thinking you've gotten used to, but may not be right? Jesus came near to show us a better way to live and a better way to think. Pray about an area where you might need to repent and take steps today to start the process.

Day 2:

"I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." - Luke 5:32

It can be really easy it is to forget that the people Jesus hung out with the most were the ones you wouldn't necessarily find in our churches these days. He didn't come to hang out with well-behaved people. Jesus spent most of His time with "the worse of the worst"—the sinners and tax collectors, the ones who had spent their whole lives certain that because they behaved so badly, God would want nothing to do with them. But Jesus came to help them repent. Not just repent from lifestyles that were hurting themselves and hurting others, but to repent of the way that had come to see God, and the way they thought He saw them! These people thought they would be kept out of religion because of their choices, But Jesus showed up with them to help them change the way they saw God and what they thought He was like. It can be easy for us to slip back into this same way of thinking. When we have pasts we would rather forget, or habits we can't seem to break, or decisions we can't get right, we can think God isn't for us, but for those who more like Him. According to Luke, that's not true. Jesus came for people like us. The down and out. The can't get it right. The sooner we realize Jesus came to change how we see Him and how we think He sees us, the sooner we can begin making lasting changes in the way we live.

BIBLE READING PLAN CONTINUED

Day 3:

"Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord." - Acts 3:19

Repentance leads to refreshment. Chances are if you're walking around and living life stuck in old ways of thinking, in believing something to be true of God that isn't, or something to be true of you that isn't, you need a way out. This verse from the book of Acts talks about that very idea. Of turning towards God, away from the old patterns of living and thinking we may have gotten used to. And when we do that? We are refreshed. Like drinking a cold glass of water on a hot day. Like reaching the end of a long hike. Like arriving at a destination you've been travelling towards all day. It's exhausting trying to keep up with ways of thinking and ways of living don't reflect what God is like or what He cares about. We need to be refreshed. Living out of a place of refreshment accomplishes way more good than living out of place of exhaustion and wrong thinking. Taking the time to right our thinking patterns may feel overwhelming, but ultimately, it leads to a better place to live from and a healthier understanding of God.

Day 4:

"Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death." - 2 Corinthians 7:10

Have you ever done something bad, realized it was wrong, only to keep beating yourself up for it day after day? No matter what you do, no matter how big or small it was, you can't get passed it. We all know that feeling of self-induced guilt and shame. It's the worst. Not only because it feels bad, but because it isn't helpful. It consumes us, but doesn't take any action to right the wrong. This is the worldly sorrow this verse mentions. Worldly sorrow is self-focused. Godly sorrow, on the other hand, recognizes a mistake or sin and immediately turns to God, and then begins taking steps to right the wrong that was done. Godly sorry doesn't wallow in feeling bad, it goes about the work of making things right again. This is the difference between guilt and shame. Shame says, "it's all your fault and you should be embarrassed for what you've done." Guilt says, "you made a mistake, but God has forgiven you and isn't holding it against you. Now do what you can do fix it." See how much more freeing that is? Part of repentance is seeing ourselves in a true light, but then being humble enough to take responsibility for the sorrow our mistake made. Pray that God would give you a heart that turns to Godly sorrow. Ask Him to show you how to turn your attention away from yourself and toward Him.

BIBLE READING PLAN CONTINUED

Day 5:

"The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance." -2 Peter 3:9

Do you ever feel like God is out to "get" you? Or "catch" you being bad? That He is waiting around every corner to trap you? This idea of God isn't unusual. But it couldn't be further from the truth. In this letter, Peter is saying God is patient with us. He gives us time and care and space to come to understand repentance—areas where we have messed up and misunderstood, where we have gotten it wrong and missed the mark. God isn't out to get us because He loves a good trick. He's waiting for us to draw our own conclusions. To see where we've messed up our own lives and take responsibility for righting what we've wronged. He's patient with us. What a better way to see and understand and know God. How does seeing God as patient change the way you understand His character and change the way you see repentance?

LEADER NOTES

WEEK 3 LEADERS GUIDE

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

What is the most difficult or challenging thing about creating lasting change?

Why do you think Christians feel even more pressure to bring about lasting change?

How have you heard the word "repent" being talked about in church before?

How did Jesus talk about repentance? How is this different from what you have heard before?

How does a different understanding of the word "repentance" affect the way you view change?

Why do you think Jesus focused on repentance starting with our thinking before our behavior?

What are some areas where you need to change the way you think? And what are some ways you can begin to change the way you think?