

Growing Deeper

Standouts - Then you will shine like stars in the sky as you hold firmly to the word of life –Phil 2:15

Week One: *Unconditional Acceptance*

Matthew 9:9-13

Spend FIFTEEN – Day One

1. Before we dive into this week's reading, let's look at the events that took place just prior to God calling Matthew. Read Matthew 9:1-12. Where had Jesus just arrived? (vs.1)
2. What did Jesus say to the man? (vs. 2)
3. Why would the religious leaders of the day take offense at Jesus' words?
4. How would you answer Jesus' question in verse 5? Explain your answer.
5. What reason did Jesus give the people for healing the paralyzed man? (vs. 6)
6. What impact did the miracle have on the crowd? How might the setting have something to do with His need to take extra steps to demonstrate His authority?
7. God used this miracle to get at the heart of doubters and skeptics. How do you think you would have responded to seeing this miracle?
8. Seeing a formerly paralyzed man walk elicited praise and gratitude from the crowd. Can you say the same about the work you see God doing in your life? Finish your FIFTEEN in prayer by asking God to direct your focus to the work He is doing. Ask Him for a spirit of gratitude and trust.

Spend FIFTEEN – Day Two

9. Read Matthew 9:9. Whom did Jesus address and where did He find him?
10. If witnesses to this event tried to claim Jesus acted out of ignorance, there's no denying that Jesus knew what Matthew was, even if He didn't who he was. Looking at the account, does it seem that Jesus was worried about who may have seen Him with Matthew? Explain your answer.
11. Read Matthew 9:10. Where do we see Jesus next?

12. Have you ever been in a situation when you were with someone that you did not want others to know about, even for innocent reasons like planning a surprise party for someone else or going for a job interview while working for another employer? Describe how it felt, both emotionally and physically.

13. If Jesus was ashamed to be with Matthew, He sure didn't show it. After publically speaking to him, already a huge breach of protocol for Jews of that day, Jesus goes to Matthew's home. What does that say about Jesus' character?

14. You may have noticed that the author of this book is Matthew, the tax collector himself. Why do you suppose Matthew included these events? If you were in his place, would you have shared your own story? Why or why not?

15. Perhaps Matthew was just reporting the facts, or perhaps the fact that Jesus marched up to him in broad daylight and *invited* Matthew to follow Him profoundly impacted Matthew. Finish your FIFTEEN in prayer. Pray to be more conscious of those around you who may need the affirmation of your attention.

Spend FIFTEEN: Day Three

16. Describe a time when someone (maybe even you) did something unpopular or confusing to those around them.

17. In your case, did those upset address their concerns to the party causing offense, or did they talk to others about them instead of directly to them? For what reasons would people avoid addressing the offender directly?

18. Read Matthew 9:9-12. To whom did the religious leaders address their concerns?

19. The Pharisees went to the disciples instead of asking Jesus directly. What do you think this reveals about their intentions?

20. If the leaders did not truly want clarity, what reasons might they have had to talk to the disciples instead of directly to Jesus?

21. Crossing socio-economic, ethnic, religious and cultural boundaries (just to name a few) can still ruffle feathers today. How can we encourage those around us to have open and honest conversations instead of stirring up dissent or adding to the angst?

22. Finish your FIFTEEN in prayer by asking God to help you be gracious, especially with those that seek to undermine your efforts at crossing boundaries.

Spend FIFTEEN: Day Four

23. Can you remember some of your first boy-girl dances? Do you remember how much better it felt to stay on “your” side of the gym than to risk crossing the divide? What made it easier to stick with your own kind?
24. Read Matthew 9:9-13. How did Matthew describe the guests at his own party?
25. Many translations of the Bible have quotes around the word sinners. Why might Matthew have included that disclaimer?
26. Times now are not much different from Jesus’ day. There are still some sins that are frowned upon where others seem to get a free pass. Brainstorm a quick list of behaviors that used to be taboo five, ten, even twenty years ago that hardly raise an eyebrow today.
27. Many of us can recount tales of our parents, grandparents or family and friends that were ostracized because of a sin. What was often the result of those banishments?
28. Human nature does not change — people still have a need for relationships, and when ostracized, they will look for a new group with which to belong. How might it be unhealthy for a group of people like the tax collectors to cloister together? (Think of the results of long-term imprisonment, young institutionalized children, etc.)
29. If it is our desire as Christians to become more Christ-like, how can we display the same character as Christ when dealing with those with whom we may not typically agree? (See Colossians 3:1-17 for ideas.) Then brainstorm a list of actions you can take to be more welcoming to others.
30. Finish your FIFTEEN by asking God to help you to recognize opportunities to include those who need to feel accepted because of their lifestyle.

Spend FIFTEEN: Day Five

31. Look again at Matthew 9:9-13. What assumption about Jesus does the Pharisees’ question in verse 11 suggest?
32. How did Jesus respond to their question?
33. Many people make a similar assumption about the church, that it is for perfect people. If Jesus says that He came for the sick and not the healthy, whom might His church be intended to reach? Explain your answer.
34. If you had to estimate, how many perfect people attend your church? (Just kidding.) Seriously though, how effective is your church at conveying the idea that the church is not intended for perfect people? Would you say they are doing

pretty good or do they need a little work in that area?

35. If showing unconditional acceptance is a good thing for individuals to do, how can an institution like a church do the same thing? What steps can a group of people take to let others know they are welcome? Take a few moments and brainstorm a list of actions or attitudes a church can adopt to be more accepting.

36. As you finish your final FIFTEEN this week, look over the list you have just brainstormed about the church, and the list you made on Day 4, question 29. Ask God to give you the courage to be a part of making them happen, both personally and as a part of your church.

Week Two: *True-to-Life Approach*
Matthew 12:1-14

Spend FIFTEEN - Day One

1. If you wanted to serve God the best you could—right now—what would be the most God-honoring, holy thing you could do?
2. Now think about your answer: did it involve withdrawing from the world around you (such as studying the Bible or praying), or was it more about engaging with the world around you (such as volunteering to care for needy people, doing an act of kindness)?
3. How might a Buddhist or Catholic monk have answered this question? Would they think it's holier to focus on God or to focus on the world?
4. Read Philippians 2:1-8. What act of Jesus Christ is Paul describing?
5. How did Jesus answer the question of what's most pleasing to God? Was it holiest for Him to stay in heaven with God the Father, or to come to earth to help us? How should we understand God's choice?
6. God prioritizes the needs of people over staying separate and unsullied. How does God's choice impact our own understanding of the best ways we have to please Him? What are the holiest kinds of things we can do?
7. Close your FIFTEEN in prayer. Ask God to help you see the holiest ways you can serve the needs of those around you.

Spend FIFTEEN - Day Two

8. Here's a classic ethics question: what if you had to break the law to do something good for someone else? For example, would you steal a loaf of bread if you had no other way to feed your family?
9. A Lutheran pastor in World War II, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, was faced with an ethical dilemma:
“During this time, Bonhoeffer was teaching pastors in an underground seminary, Finkenwalde (the government had banned him from teaching openly). But after the seminary was discovered and closed, the Confessing Church became increasingly reluctant to speak out against Hitler, and moral opposition proved increasingly ineffective, so Bonhoeffer began to change his strategy. To this point he had been a pacifist, and he had tried to oppose the Nazis through religious action and moral persuasion. Now he signed up with the German secret service (to serve as a double agent—while traveling to church conferences over Europe, he was supposed to be collecting information about the places he visited, but he was, instead, trying to help Jews escape Nazi oppression). Bonhoeffer also became a part of a plot to overthrow, and later to assassinate, Hitler.”
Do you think Bonhoeffer, a pastor and Christian leader, violated God's law (that we should not murder)? Why or why not?

10. Read Matthew 12:1-2. What act of Jesus' disciples offended the Pharisees? Why?

11. At this time, people simply thought of Jesus as a holy man. What conundrum did holy people—who respected the Sabbath—now have to wrestle with?

12. “Resting on the Sabbath” had been a moral law for thousands of years, but now Jesus' people seemed to be disregarding it! What is an example of a moral issue in our culture today that some believers no longer seem to respect or defend? (If you struggle to think of something, check your Facebook page!)

13. We haven't gotten to the end of the story, but you can guess that Jesus will probably explain some nuance to the law that changes how a faithful person interprets it. Think of the issue you identified above: what are some nuances that could explain how a faithful believer might change how they interpret it? If you struggle with this question, why don't you find someone you know who holds an opposite position from yours and ask them to share, while you simply—and only—listen.

14. Finish your FIFTEEN in prayer. Pray and ask God to show you His heart behind the moral laws He gave us. Ask Him for humility and an openness to learn more about His laws, unlike the Pharisees of Jesus' day.

Spend FIFTEEN - Day Three

15. Let's speculate about intent for a moment. Why do you think God might have made a law that says, “You shall not steal” (Exodus 20:15)? What's the point of such a law? How does it benefit humanity?

16. Let's try another one. Why might God command, “Do not wear clothing woven of two kinds of material” (Leviticus 19:19)? What is the benefit of such a law?

17. The first question was probably easier to answer than the second, wasn't it? Now read Matthew 12:1-4. After you've read it, ask yourself: “What is the point of God's law to ‘remember the Sabbath’ (Exodus 20:8-11)?”

18. The Pharisees only ever paid attention to the “what” of God's law. They never bothered to ask about the “why”. But Jesus gives them a hint through His example of David and the sacred bread. Read 1 Samuel 21:1-6. What choice did Ahimelech the priest face?

19. What is the “what” of the law of sacred bread? (See Leviticus 24:5-9.) Why did Ahimelech choose to honor?

20. As Christians who stand for God's moral law, how important is it that we understand the “why” behind the law before we enforce the “what”? Think of some of the moral controversies facing us today (immigration, sexual morality, freedom, poverty, sanctity of life): what “whys” might be getting lost in the discussion?

21. Close your FIFTEEN by asking God to reveal to you His why's. Ask Him to help you have discernment as you sift through the best way to honor the intent of God's laws, and not merely the letter.

Spend FIFTEEN - Day Four

22. How to honor the Sabbath has been a controversial subject for thousands of years. Do you think it breaks God's law to work on the Sabbath? Why or why not?

23. Read Numbers 15:30-36. How fair do you think this story is?

24. Now read Matthew 12:1-8. Keeping in mind Numbers 15, how justified do you think the Pharisees feel in their reaction to the disciples' actions? Weren't they right in their traditional understanding of the law?

25. A Lutheran pastor cautioned that sometimes Christians "can be right wrongly," but we need to figure out how to be "right rightly." In your own words, what do you think this means?

26. On what contentious issues of today would you say that Christians are "right wrongly"?

27. Now take a moment to get personal. Are there any interactions or positions where you think you were right, but maybe you still didn't handle it the way you should've? What are those? How can you change your actions, even when you know you're "right"?

28. Close your FIFTEEN in prayer. Pray that God will show you the difference between winning the argument (being right) and winning the person (being righteous).

Spend FIFTEEN - Day Five

29. When you make a rule in your household, why do you think your children should obey it?

30. Your answer likely fell into one of two camps: "Because I said so," or "Because it's good for them." Which camp do you think God's moral laws fall in?

31. As a refresher, skim Matthew 12:1-8. What is Jesus' final point and conclusion (vs. 8)? Is this a "because I said so" camp, or a "because it's good for you" camp?

32. Now read a different account of the same story in Mark 2:23-28. It's a very similar summary, but with one extra line. What is it? (Hint: see verse 27). How does this line change the motivations behind Jesus' interpretation of Sabbath law?

33. How does this truth change how you see God's heart for you? Why does God make rules that you should follow?

34. How does this truth change the way we should talk about God's moral law with other people?

35. Close your FIFTEEN by asking God to help you radically reorient around His heart for you (and others) and not simply His rules for you (and others).

Week Three: *Inspiring Connections*

John 15:1-8

Spend FIFTEEN – Day One

1. Are you the kind of person who prefers to work alone or do you like to collaborate? Explain your answer.
2. Read Genesis 1:26-27. How did God refer to Himself when He made man? How did He describe the way He made humans?
3. One of the hardest things to grasp about God is that He is One. Yet, He is also three distinct persons: Father, Son & Spirit, all in relationship within Himself – complete and full. Since man is created in His image, with the same inherent need for relationships, what is the benefit of being created male and female?
4. Read John 15:1-2. How does Jesus describe His own and His Father's role in this analogy?
5. What do these roles say about their relationship?
6. Before we even know where Jesus is heading with this analogy, we see a beautiful picture of the Father and the Son working together. The Son bringing life and the Father guiding its growth and productivity. Read Romans 8:28-29. What does it mean to you to know that this relationship is hard at work for your benefit?
7. Finish your FIFTEEN in prayer. Pray for a humble, open spirit that is willing to look at relationships in a way that you may not ordinarily be comfortable.

Spend FIFTEEN – Day Two

8. How do you deal with overwhelming responsibility: plow through, seek help, shut down? How would you describe your typical method of operation?
9. Read John 15:1-4. To whom does Jesus say we are to be rooted?
10. On Day One, we saw that Jesus began His analogy by defining His relationship with God. Now He has moved on to His relationship with us; He doesn't just ask us to do all the work. What are some of the things He promises us in verses 3 & 4?
11. What do these promises mean to you? Do they give you confidence, or solace? What else?

12. Read the following verses and summarize the promise or counsel that each one gives you:
- a. Deuteronomy 31:6
 - b. Joshua 1:5
 - c. Psalm 73:23
 - d. Matthew 18:20
13. Whatever God calls us to do in life, He gives us a very strong promise, that we won't have to do anything without Him. Finish your FIFTEEN in prayer. Ask Him to help you learn to rely on His promise to be with you, no matter what your circumstances may be.

Spend FIFTEEN – DAY Three

14. Look again at John 15:1-4. Traditionally, the vine and branches have been depicted with a grapevine, a plant indigenous to the region and very common to the people of Jesus' day. Have you ever looked at a grapevine or even purchased grapes? How do grapes grow differently than other fruit?
15. Grapes aren't the only fruit that grow in bunches—many fruit, veggies, nuts and seeds grow in bunches. Just for fun, how many can you name? What do you suppose is the benefit of fruit and other foods growing in bunches?
16. It's not surprising that God also places people in "bunches." One example is families. Read 1 Timothy 5:4. How does Paul, the author of Timothy, describe how God feels about the value of family?
17. God clearly does not end our responsibility toward others with our own families. Read Galatians 6:10. Different versions use slight variations in translating word. How is the church described in the Bible you are using?
18. No matter how you say it, being a part of a family comes with responsibilities. What does this say about our responsibility toward others in the church?
19. Finish your FIFTEEN in prayer. Ask God to give you a heart for the fellow family of believers in your church.

Spend FIFTEEN – Day Four

20. There's no doubt we live in an achievement-driven society; success is revered and kindness can be greatly undervalued. Stop and think about people in your life that have had the greatest impact. Was it their success that affected you, or something else?
21. As you think about your relationship with the person in question 20, what kinds of practical things did they do? Did they help you during a difficult time? Were they a friend to you when you were lonely? Why do those types of influences have such long-lasting effects on us?

22. Read John 15:1-8. In this section of scripture, we repeatedly see the term *fruit* used to describe the results of being connected to the true vine, Jesus. What fruit have you experienced because of that connection?

23. On Day One, we looked at our inherent need for relationship as image bearers of God, on Day Two, we looked at the need to be connected to Jesus, the True Vine, and on Day Three, we looked at our need to be connected to each other. If these are some of the greatest needs humans have, what would it look like to intentionally help make connections with other people? Brainstorm ways to increase connections among the people in your sphere of influence.

24. Finish your FIFTEEN in prayer. Pray to have eyes to see ways you can help others make these connections and the courage to act when the opportunity arises.

Spend FIFTEEN – Day Five

25. If helping people connect to Jesus and others is a personal responsibility of Christians, it makes sense that the church is called to do the same. Read Matthew 28:18-20 and summarize Jesus' final command to His people before He ascended to the Father.

26. Read Hebrews 10:23-25. How does this scripture say we can live this command out together?

27. What are some practical ways churches can help connect people to Jesus and each other? Brainstorm a list of ways. Do you participate in any of these things?

28. Look again at John 15:2. What happens when a branch does not fulfill this purpose? Does it seem too harsh to you? Why or why not?

29. If God takes away people because they are not fulfilling their purpose, and even prunes ones that are in order to make them more productive, do you think it's likely that God does the same to churches? If so, what might that look like?

30. As you finish your final FIFTEEN this week, pray for your church, that it would be strong in its resolve to reach people for Jesus and to help connect people to each other. Then ask God to show you how you can join Him in your church's work.