

**Series: AS YOU PLAN YOUR YEAR - August 31, 2008**

**PLAN TO GROW!**

Matthew 7:24-29; 2 Timothy 3:16-17; Hebrews 4:12-13

**I. INTRO**

A. There are a lot of people in our world that would watch a video like that and think, “Yeah...so...?” From their perspective, not knowing the Bible would be the equivalent of not knowing the details of Shakespeare’s plays—or the writings of Plato.  
-And there are a lot of misconceptions about the Bible. Maybe you’ve heard some. That it’s full of mistakes and contradictions. That the Bible was created by the church hundreds of years after Jesus died. That it’s full of myths invented by Jesus’ followers to get people to follow Him. That as it got copied over and over and over again—it got further and further from the original.

1. I’ve done quite a bit of research on the Bible—and let me tell you what I’ve seen:

\*What we have in the Bible is **extremely** accurate. The manuscript evidence on this is huge. We have more ancient manuscripts—and older manuscripts than all the other ancient documents put together—including all the philosophers and historians of Greece and Rome.

\*Prophetic accuracy? The prophecies made about Jesus hundreds of years before he lived—about 100 of them--were fulfilled in minute detail.

\*We now know with very little doubt that most of the New Testament records of Jesus’ life were written within 40 years of his death. In fact, less than 30 years after Jesus’ death, Paul, early church leader, wrote that Jesus lived, was crucified, resurrected—and seen by more than 500 witnesses—and calls Jesus Lord and God and creator of all.

2. Now. I don’t expect you to believe this simply because I’ve said it. Around here, one of our sayings is, “Don’t check your brain at the door.” If you have doubts, do some investigation yourself—don’t just accept what skeptics say as being true.

-And don’t just read **about** the Bible—**read the Bible!**

B. Now. Why would I be talking about this stuff this morning? It’s because I want to talk about personal, spiritual growth. And personal spiritual growth is based on **truth**. What you choose as your source of truth about God, about what’s right and wrong, and about growth is a **huge** deal.

-I talk from the Bible every week because I believe that it is a flawless, uncontaminated source of truth about God, about what He’s like, what He expects, and what true spirituality really is. In fact, I believe that the Bible and the truth it reveals is the only foundation solid enough to build your one and only life on.

-It has been tested and investigated more thoroughly than any other source of information and truth—for almost 2000 years. It’s still around—and it still works. By the way, it’s not true **because** it works; it works **because** it’s true!

-My goal this morning is to somehow inspire you to take the effort and time necessary to build this truth into the fabric of your heart and life!

## II. ABSOLUTE TRUTH

- A. What I find so absolutely convincing about the Bible is that the truth is not just accurate, it's powerful. It transforms lives—and my life is one of them. I have had this unnerving experience with what the Bible says. When I do what it says, life works, and when I refuse, I mess up. It's insight into human nature is brilliant--and it's explanation for what is wrong at the heart of our world makes perfect sense.

-The most brilliant, exceptional person who ever lived, Jesus Christ, Son of God, said that the truth of this book would outlast the universe. What the Bible says is at the foundation of science, our judicial system, human rights and basic morality.

- B. Something you'll notice in even a casual reading of the Bible are the words, "God says..." And that's the *real* question, isn't it? Is God behind the writing of the Bible? Jesus claimed the Old Testament as His authority—and that's huge. What the Bible says is profound and changes lives. If God is, in fact, behind all that it says—well, that would make it the most important truth out there.

1. I'm fascinated by the fact that when Jesus, Son of God, came—he didn't come as a ruler or a political figure or economic figure to re-distribute the wealth—even though the world could've *really* used someone like that. He came as a *teacher*.

-His core task was to explain about God—and life in his Kingdom. See, people weren't flunking Bible class, as such; they were flunking life. They were filled with error when it came to truth about God and his will for the human race. And that error had a devastating effect on how they lived and how they treated others.

-After his first major message on life and spirituality, Jesus said that to hear his teaching and not actually *practice* it is like building a house on the beach--with no foundation. Ever seen film footage of what happens to beach homes in hurricanes? It's not a pretty sight.

-Jesus said that to hear and live out His teaching--is like *building your home on solid rock*. In fact, Jesus said, "Everything you see is one day going to be gone. And on that day, what I've said will still be standing.

2. Let me read what Paul, an early church writer says to his understudy, Timothy. **All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right. God uses it to prepare and equip his people to do every good work. (2 Timothy 3:16-17 NLT)**  
-What do you think it means when it says that all Scripture is **inspired by God**? Well, it's basically saying is that **God has spoken!** Peter, leader of the early church, confirms this as well:

**Above all, you must realize that no prophecy in Scripture ever came from the prophet's own understanding, or from human initiative. No, those prophets were moved by the Holy Spirit, and they spoke from God. (2 Peter 1:20-21 NLT)**

-Every person has to decide, "Is this from God Himself—or not?" If it is—then it has huge implication for our lives, right? This passage says it's useful for teaching. Think about that for a minute. How does it teach us to live?

- a. The Bible teaches us who **God** is. There are all sorts of weird ideas floating around out there about who God is and what He is like. Rather than us just trying to **guess** what He's like--God wanted us to know Him as He really is. He wanted us to know that He is just and fair--that He is the author of everything good and beautiful--every amazing experience we can have. Because we often get intimidated by life, He wants us to know that he is bigger and more powerful than any problem or issue we'll ever face. Most of all, He wants us to know that He can be **trusted**.

-The Bible doesn't just list the characteristics of God. It tells stories. It features Him in poetry and songs. It tells us how He's been involved in the hearts and lives of **real** people since the beginning of time. It tells us what we can expect--and what we should **not** expect from Him. Here's the deal: Becoming like Jesus is at the heart of personal and spiritual growth. How many of you think really knowing what He's like **might** be helpful?

- b. The Bible teaches something else. It teaches us what life on this planet is really all about—and what God expects. John's biography of Jesus calls Him the **Word**. Among other things, Jesus was the personification of what God wanted to say to us; about what He's up to; about how reality is put together.

-We get lots of conflicting messages on that—from every direction, really--messages from a world system insisting, "This is the way things **really** are!" TV, the marketing industry, government, science—and all their prophets present life and reality as a world view they insist is right and unbiased.

-What need is a higher perspective—not a message from someone who wants our money, our cooperation or our vote. We need to know that truth--that life is **not** about how nice our yard looks, or about what our friends think of us—or even about our needs—or our egos. Life without **truth** gets weird and destructive!

- c. The Bible makes another claim—to be the source of truth on the **world we don't see**. Friends there is a whole unseen realm that we need to know about. Nancy gave a great message on this last week—and I would encourage you to get the CD or listen on line. God is here right now--but you can't see him. The Bible tells us that there are angels--powerful, pure servants of God who do exactly what He says. But there

is also a realm of evil spirits--or fallen angels. Intuition and speculation is not enough in dealing with this reality!

- d. The Bible also teaches us who **we** are. That we were not an accident, but that we were lovingly created in the image of God. We need help from the One who made us to know what's healthy—and what's **not**.
  - e. Now, I could go on and on—but think about it like this: Imagine Someone who loves you, who knows you, who knows what the future holds—being willing help you make really, **really** wise decisions—and avoid the pain and regret of dumb decisions. I'll bet you'd do it. What the Bible says is the wisdom of God on life. You and I can save ourselves **transcendent** amounts of pain and money and time! But—we have to read, listen and learn.
3. What Paul says to Timothy in the passage I read has a part most of us don't get **real** excited about, though. It says that Scripture "**make[s] us realize what is wrong in our lives.**" Anyone here like to be affirmed? Man, I do! Bring it on! Tell me I'm wonderful—and how lucky the world is to have a person like me in it!

-But **sometimes** we need corrected. We get off-track. We go down detours we have no business being on. And God cares enough about us to tell us the truth before we slam **into** it.

- a. Several years ago, I took Brian on an overnight camping trip to a lake near North Bay. The car was spraying a mist of transmission fluid out the back—but a backyard mechanic told me we'd be okay. We made to North Bay—we just didn't make it back!

-As inconvenient and expensive as it would've been to get the transmission rebuilt here—it would've saved us from a 3 day stay in wonderful, scenic North Bay! No one wants to be told they have a major problem with their car or their body. But there's one thing worse. Having a problem and **not** being told—**not** having it corrected!

- b. See, we would **like** to grow into heroes at work, in the home—for God—and get a heroes welcome when we cross into eternity some day. All without ever having to face ourselves—and the selfishness and the unloving behavior and pride that seems to come so naturally. But God is merciful enough to say, "Life can be **better** than this! Let me help!"

4. And that's where the second part of this verse comes in. God doesn't just help us see what's wrong—He helps us correct it. The word literally means, "The restoration of something to its original condition." My wife does that to old stuff. That's why she married me.
- What happens is that God speaks through His Word, we listen—and own what's wrong—and then the Spirit gives us power to change.

5. The final thing the Word of God does for you, because it is inspired of God, is that it

...**teaches us to do what is right. God uses it to prepare and equip his people to do every good work. (2 Timothy 3:16-17 NLT)**

-This is **so** important to understand. God's Word is not about us getting information so we can pass the entrance exam into Heaven. The Bible was **never** intended as 1150 pages of laws to keep.

-The Bible is foundational truth for life. It's truth about how to live under God's leadership; how to live the life He's already blessed. It's about how to be people who make it clear in a broken world that God is good. It's truth about the power and character of God. Truth about how to genuinely love God and love others in this world—and become all we were created to be. And when we engage, the Holy Spirit becomes our **personal trainer** and coach!

### III. **HOW TRUTH BRINGS GROWTH**

- A. Here's the question I want to pose: Why would God, when He shows up here, choose above **all** things to be a teacher? Let me read something from the Bible that I think explains that.

**Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is true worship. Do not conform 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 12:1-2 TNIV)**

This passage talks more clearly about the process of life transformation than any others I know of. The first step is that we offer ourselves completely to God—as an act of true worship.

Now. Does it stop there? Do we just go limp? No! Second, we **stop** conforming to the patterns of this world. The patterns of this world are **just the way most people think**.

-And **then** we are told to **be transformed**. How? By the **renewing of our minds**. Know how the Bible talks about our need to repent? The word means, quite literally, **re-think everything**. Over time, God's Word washes our minds of untruth—and renews the way we think about everything. Then can understand what God's will is—and see it as good, pleasing and perfect.

-See, every day we get a different kind of advice; it could be called, **just the way most people think**. We hear it in the hallways of our university, around the water cooler at work—on TV, on CNN--our Ipods. Everywhere. This is the question. How do you decide if the life you're building is going in the right direction? Do you just **guess**? Do what you **feels** right in the moment?

-**Truth** is the corrective. Let me talk about how truth helps us think differently.

1. I've already briefly mentioned one role. This cement block represents what Jesus said about his teachings. Let me read what He said:  
**"These words I speak to you are not incidental additions to your life, homeowner improvements to your standard of living. They are foundational words, words to build a life on. If you work these words into**

**your life, you are like a smart carpenter who built his house on solid rock. Rain poured down, the river flooded, a tornado hit—but nothing moved that house. It was fixed to the rock. But if you just use my words in Bible studies and don't work them into your life, you are like a stupid carpenter who built his house on the sandy beach. When a storm rolled in and the waves came up, it collapsed like a house of cards."**  
**(Matthew 7:24-27 MSG)**

-Jesus said, "you need a **foundation.**" Something beyond fads and conventional wisdom. So. What are you building your life on?

The quick spiritual answer on this is, "I'm building on what **Jesus** said—Silly!" No. What guides the decisions you make. What truth to you trust when it comes to how you spend your money and use your time--what **drives** your life?

What's the foundation for how you raise your kids, treat your spouse, handle people who wrong you?

2. That brings up something else. God's Word is a mirror. Jesus half-brother James, an early church leader says:  
**But don't just listen to God's word. You must do what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves. For if you listen to the word and don't obey, it is like glancing at your face in a mirror. You see yourself, walk away, and forget what you look like. (James 1:22-24 NLT)**

Mirrors are very important. They tell you whether or not you've combed your hair, how old you're getting, whether or not you need to shave or color your hair, or whether you have spaghetti sauce dribbling from your chin, and whether or not you've spackled all the cracks.

***Mirrors tell us something about ourselves.***

-It's pretty important to understand that the Bible is not just a means for us accumulating information and winning debates. It was given to help us see ourselves **as we really are**—and change the way we think. Remember—we are transformed when our **minds** are renewed. And our minds are renewed when we begin to see this world the way Jesus does.

- a. Let me tell you something really cool about how the Bible works. The Spirit of God, the One who lives in us when we choose to follow Jesus—is the very One who inspired and directed those who wrote the words. When we take the time to read and reflect on what the Bible says—the Spirit holds up the mirror and speaks; "See, you've got **egg** on your chin and chili on your shirt!"
- b. Sometimes the Holy Spirit uses good friends to hold the mirror. Good friends sometimes whisper, "Your fly is down; you've got spinach stuck in your teeth!" We **need** friends who love us enough to hold the mirror--keep you from unnecessarily embarrassing yourself.

3. There's another role truth plays in our lives. I brought this bayonet to illustrate it--mostly because it's big enough to see. Let me read the passage that describes that role.

**For the word of God is alive and powerful. It is sharper than the sharpest two-edged sword, cutting between soul and spirit, between joint and marrow. It exposes our innermost thoughts and desires. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God. Everything is naked and exposed before his eyes, and he is the one to whom we are accountable.**

**(Hebrews 4:12-13 NLT)**

That is a *powerful* statement. Contrary to what some people say about the Bible—that it's a dead book written in dead languages by long-dead people, it's not.

It's *alive*. It is more current than YouTube! It's razor sharp—sharp enough to cut through all the excuses, all the fog, all the whining, all the cover-ups—and expose both us and our motives and attitudes! It gets *way* beyond the things we do--and it deals with the motives! Attitudes! Stuff we'd prefer to hide!

-Now, the immediate image with a sword is a bloody, destructive one—like a Samurai warrior coming at you ready to take off your head. Some people *use* the Bible like that, unfortunately. But God's word is about corrective surgery. Like cancer surgery that successfully, skillfully removes a tumor. Like cosmetic surgery that straightens your nose. Like cataract surgery that helps people see again. The surgeon isn't some hack with a rusty knife; it's God Himself!

-Know why the Bible always insists on truth? Because **we can't grow if we won't hear the truth and tell the truth**. This passage says, **NOTHING in all creation is hidden from God's sight**. Tell me, what does that word, "nothing" leave out? Not a thing. **Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give an account**.

-Truth is our one chance in life to own the truth, make things right, repair the damage we've done. That's what *I* want!

- B. Now, can I tell you what I see as I watch followers of Jesus—and have watched them through the years? I see a *lot* of people who *believe* the right things about the Bible. That it's powerful, true, from God—and has a *profound* effect on our growth. But, for the most part, it pretty much lies untouched week after week after week—except, of course, for the occasional flop and stop. You know, where it gets used as a kind of crystal ball. "I've tried everything else—maybe **God** has something to say about this!" I'm not trying to create guilt—I just think that's the reality of the busy, visually oriented, information overload, attention span deficit world we live in on Aug. 31, 2008.
1. Let me tell you what I know. I know...**I know** that one weekend feeding a week will *not* ultimately turn you in the person you want to be—and the Follower of Jesus you *need* to be. **I know** that. Let me tell you why. The Bible compares the church to a family. We come into families as babies. At first we are incredibly self-centered, need carried, fed, dressed. But over time—families look for certain growth markers. We feed ourselves, wash ourselves, clean up after ourselves.

-Ultimately the goal is self-sufficiency—in the positive sense. It's not that we don't need others; we always will. We just are not dependent on them to feed us, dress us, care for us. We **expect** that! It's normal. It's called—**growing up!**

2. Do you see what I'm saying? A church is, by definition, a gathering of people—not an institution. A recent study in which many of you participated, called REVEAL showed that daily reading and reflecting on God's Word is absolutely critical in life if that's going to happen—if we're going to grow up spiritually—and keep growing.

-The gathering of people here at The Olive Branch is very broad. It includes an incredible range in ages and cultures. We have people who are at the front end of seeking truth—and seminary professors. There is no way that everyone's need for spiritual truth can be met in a once a week gathering. Not even a twice a week—or three times a week gathering. No way. Not even close!

-Just like growing up in a family, growing in your relationship with Jesus means that you and I take more and more responsibility for our own spiritual growth. We can help provide opportunities, but ultimately who's responsible for you developing spiritual friendships? Whose responsibility is it for you building a truth-grid in your life to filter out the junk and help you re-think **everything?** Whose responsibility is it for you to find and manage the gifts and resources God has given you—so that you give back generously?

-If you've been on Jesus' way any length of time, it is **your** responsibility. Know how kids sometimes grow up and blame all their problems on their parents? When I stand before God, I will not be able to stand there and whine about how I got hurt, and I had boo-boos, and my parents were defective, and my church didn't feed me. Uh-uh! I will have to take responsibility for my own life and my own growth. And so will you!

3. I've heard people who've been in the church 15, 20, 25, 30 years say, "I'm not being **fed!**" The author of Hebrews says this:

**You have been believers so long now that you ought to be teaching others. Instead, you need someone to teach you again the basic things about God's word. You are like babies who need milk and cannot eat solid food. (Hebrews 5:12 NLT)**

-Spiritual growth is not about consuming and consuming and consuming more and more sophisticated truth—any more than personal maturity is about eating more and more and more food—or even taking university classes for the rest of your life.

Growth is about **learning to think about someone besides yourself!** Growth is about initiating. Growth is about choosing Jesus' radical world-changing movement—and figuring out how you can engage in the scary, messy, time-consuming task of loving, serving and helping others—and showing the goodness of God to **your** world.

4. Here's the deal. If you've been following Jesus for some time—and you came here expecting that church services alone are going to take you where you need to be—you will get extremely disillusioned with church—and you'll stall out in your growth.

-My final prop. A **spade**. If you want to grow in your walk with God and reach your potential as a follower of Jesus—**you** have to take the initiative and do the spade work. We will help as much as we can—but you have to do it. You will have to take the time—no, **make** the time to learn to read God's Word consistently, reflect on the truth it communicates—and open your heart to God.

-There are no custom-made serving opportunities with your name on them—where all you have to do is show up and it **fits perfectly!** You may have to start something new!

-There are no wonderful small groups, filled with mature, relationally intelligent believers—like you-- just waiting for you to show up so they can be your life-long friends. In all growth—no matter **where** it is—there's some three-steps-forward, two-steps-back stuff. There's frustration. Anyone here who, when you got into university, took a class that had you baffled until your final exam? Truth can be like that.

-But when you dig deep, press through, stay with it—truth gets built into the fiber of your life and your soul—and it sticks!

5. You've probably heard the line, "It was the best of times...and it was the worst of times..." That would be what it's like in our world—especially when it comes to learning and understanding God's Word. Imagine living back in New Testament days. There was no such thing as a personal Bible. You came to a gathering like this—and it was read. And **you** had to do the hard work of memorizing it. Tough stuff!

-Today—you can have the Bible just about any way you want. There are some amazing, very easy-to-read versions translated into clear, unmistakable language. There are boat-loads of books, on-line courses—the Bible on CD, DVD, AOL, MP3 and CNN. Actually, not on CNN—but it sounded good.

-But...along with God's Word—there are a bazillion **other** books. We're on information, noise, and time overload. We struggle with a diminished attention span that can have a crippling effect on our souls. And we're **busy—MAN** are we busy! So. That means we will have to make really hard choices. We will have to learn to feed ourselves daily. **Plan** to grow. **Plan** to give, serve and belong. **Plan** to take time to hear God in a very noisy world. Will you?

#### IV. CLOSING

- A. Right this very minute, there is a law at work—quietly, yet powerfully under the surface of my life—and yours. It's called the **law of exposure** and it's just as real as the law of gravity. It goes like this; what you are exposed to, you think about. The more you exposure you have, the more you think about it.

-And what you **think** about is ultimately what you become. If you feed angry, resentful, self-pitying thoughts—you will become an angry person—and treat others—in angry, resentful, self-pitying ways. It's inevitable. What you are exposed to—you think about. And what you think about—you become. This law of exposure is just as real as the law of gravity.

- B. There's one way to turn this law into something that works for you. And that's to expose yourself—regularly, continually--to powerful, life-changing truth. Truth that forces you to re-think **everything**. Truth that renews your mind—and then transforms your life. But if it's going to do that—you can't play games with it; it will have to be...

...**your FOUNDATION**

...**your MIRROR**

...**a SCALPEL that does corrective surgery**

And now, it's your choice! No one else can choose for you!