

Rely on The Word

Ezra

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Turn with me in your Bibles to Ezra 7. Ezra 7. We're going to look at a few verses from Ezra 7 this morning, verse 10 in particular. We're going to start reading at verse 6.

Before we do, I do want to take a moment, though, to say another word about mothers. As Ted was saying, one of the amazing things that Scripture does teach very clearly is that God when he made man in his image, Genesis 1:26-27, he makes man to be a replica, a likeness, a reflection of his glory, and the Scripture is really clear and emphatic in saying this: so he made man in his image, in the image of God he made him male and female he created them. So the idea is that maleness and femaleness together images God. So as Ted was saying, there are parts of femininity that the Lord then brings as metaphors into his word. He mentioned, the hen, nursing mother looking after her chicks, Isaiah 57, the Lord says that he will never forget us in the same way a nursing mother doesn't forget her children. "Though she might forget, I will not forget you," he says. Another one of my favorite images is from Psalm 131 where the Lord through David says that, you know, "I'm not proud, nor my eyes haughty." It's really amazing that the king said this, "I'm not proud. My eyes are not haughty, nor do I concern myself, with matters too great for me, but like a weaned child against his mother, my soul is like weaned child within me." What a beautiful image. You think about a weaned child, a child that no longer nurses. You know, when a non-weaned baby is near mom, he's often thinking about eating, kind of rooting around trying to be fed, but a weaned child sitting against on his mother's lap against her, is not thinking about being hungry, he's not thinking about anything but the comfort of being with his mother. Marvelous picture. He says that's how we're supposed to be before the Lord, that we should sit before the Lord, in a sense, in the same way that a weaned child does.

Now think about that, a child that's a year and a half old or something, I mean, if you could get inside his mind, is that child thinking, "I wonder if we're going to be able to eat tonight? I wonder what's happening on the stock market? I wonder if dad's gonna keep his job? I wonder if I'm gonna be safe?" There's nothing like that on his mind; as he sits on the lap of his mother, there's nothing but comfort and the assurance that all is right with the world. It could be no better than this. And that's how, he says if we really understand what the Scriptures teach and we walk in obedience to the word and we see that our God reigns and rules over every molecule in the universe, that he's working all

things together for the good of those who love him, then we don't have to be sitting there fretting, worrying. If we really believed what the word says, we would be like that, going through life knowing that our Father is going to protect us and guide us, provide for us. He's got it all mapped out. No stress.

That's what the Lord wants for us and isn't it beautiful that's the image of a mother. That's where you get that from. It's not sitting on dad's lap that reminds us of God in that way, it's sitting on mom's lap and what a beautiful picture. How grateful we are for the gift of mothers, motherhood. How grateful I am for my mom and her love for me and my brother, and just the blessing of having a godly mother which is something that a number of you have had, some of you did not have that particular blessing. How grateful we are for our wives as Ted said, the mothers of our children. You know, what an amazing thing to watch the Lord work through our partner through life as men, to see the way that they love the children.

You know, I marvel at how Patti through the years, the kids are always on her mind, and that's something very different than me. You know, there's a lot on my mind a lot of times, I mean, I'm forgetting stuff or whatever and I love my children, but there's something different about a mother's love and it's the ability to be anticipating and thinking. That's one of the reasons that the child doesn't have to worry. Mom's taking care of all that, sometimes in not the best way. She's got to be like that weaned child before the Lord and she can really even more bless the child.

But how grateful we are for mothers and so we want to take a moment and recognize mothers here today. Many of you need to stand up now at this time, and if you're an expectant mother, you are a mother, so stand up right now and let's stand and we're gonna pray for you. Let's just express our appreciation to them and how much we love them. [applause]

Y'all can sit back down and we're gonna pray for our mothers and pray for the rest of the service.

Father, how grateful we are to You for Your incredible kindness in creating the family and we marvel that that's a picture in some ways of the marvelous relational Being that You are, Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, existing in a communion of love from all eternity past, delighting in relationship, and so You make man in Your image to be a relational being, to relate to You, to love You but also to relate to one another and to love one another and to serve one another, and in doing that to image You. We praise You, O Father, for the gift of the family and particularly today for the gift of motherhood and the gift of our mothers. We thank You, Lord, for this wonderful blessing. We pray for these ladies that have stood today that are still seeking to just honor You and glorify You in the way that they impact their children, some very small children, some grown children, but in every situation we pray for Your blessings, Your rich blessings upon them, Your grace to continue to empower them just to model out godly womanhood and godly motherhood. Lord, we know we need Your grace. We all are sinners as we just heard our little children sing, we all need the Gospel and we thank You that You are the

One who makes us able to be what You've called us to be, that in ourselves we have no good thing but in Christ we have everything that we need to be all that we should be. Thank You for giving us the glorious opportunity to see that lived out in godly femininity and we praise You for that. Now we pray that You would bless us as we study Your word. Help us, Lord, to hear Your message and to continue to reform our lives in obedience to You. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Well, we finished last week the last passage in the epistle of James which we spent a little over two years expositing. We had some breaks and some brief topical series, it wasn't two straight years, but a number of messages from James and so this week I wanted to do something, a topical message. The elders had, we felt a burden for some time to continue to clarify some things direction wise and I think it makes sense, especially in light of, you know, the driving emphasis of the book of James, you know, one of the things I found very helpful myself was the practical nature of that book. I mean, all of Scripture is practical but that there's on a continuum that book is more practical than most of the other books in the New Testament. James was concerned that we be doers of the word. He was concerned that we put the things we believe into practice; that it's not just faith but true faith works, works out. If you really believe, you will show it in the way that you live, your tongue, your attitudes, conflict, the way we plan, planning versus presumption, all of these different things he dealt with and at the end we saw the importance of praying for one another, confessing our sins, going after wayward believers. He's so intensely practical, all about putting faith into practice.

So today I want to share with you some regarding practical matters in the life of our church and so we're going to talk a little bit about some very practical things related to the building and the future, and as a way of introducing that, I want to share with you a metaphor. Some of you may have read the book, "The Trellis and the Vine," by Colin Marshall and Tony Payne? I started to get the last names mixed up. These two Australian brothers who have written this book, it's about maybe 8-10 years old. They've written a couple of other books since then but the metaphor they capture in that is really helpful and the point they're making in the book is that too often churches get focused on what really is the trellis and forget about the vine. What they're saying is that the body of Christ, that the spiritual body, the spiritual building, remember we did that series on the church, the glory of the church and the beauty of the church, that we're building the spiritual building here, not physical buildings is not the main focus, it's a spiritual building, a temple. The true temple is the people of God.

Well, in the book, "The Trellis and the Vine," the emphasis is to tell, to call the church back away from always doing trellis work. You think about a vine and how it grows. You know, grapevines or other vines have to be held up by some form of a trellis to be fruitful. If they just lay on the ground, they don't become fruitful. You know, they're trampled, they're eaten up by animals, they don't bear the fruit like they need to so they need to have a trellis under them sustaining the vine. But what happens in many churches is they get so focused on the trellis, they have the neatest looking trellis in the world, this is kind of the metaphor he works out, man, the trellis is painted, it looks great, everything's great about the trellis, but what's happening with the vine? Is anybody

tending the vine? And that's the emphasis of the book and that the Bible calls us to vine work primarily.

Well, what I think we need here at Providence, I think we've been emphasizing vine work really well. We've been focused on that and we talked about that, as I said, during the messages, we said as we move into this building opportunity that we're investigating, we can't forget that we're building a spiritual building and, that is, we're building or we're growing a vine, a living organic thing for the glory of God, the relationships. But I think we need, actually, to work a little more on our trellis and the trellis isn't just the buildings, it's also structure, and we've been doing some things like that as elders trying to be more organized and more intentional in the way we think about things and manage and lead, but in some sense you have to have a trellis for the vine to flourish. If you don't have a trellis, your vine's not going to be as healthy as it could be. You have to deal with practical things and God is a practical God and so he makes things like that and he has throughout the history of his dealing with the people. So we shared with you that we believe that, and so we'll consider basically, we'll talk about these things on three points: the problem, the proposal, and our purpose. The problem, the proposal and our purpose. We'll spend more time on our purpose.

The problem is that we've sensed for the last couple of years that we were having growth, growing pains. You know, obviously our parking is an issue. If you parked outside today, you appreciate dry weather for parking in the grass more than, you know, you did last week when it was dry because you're walking through puddles and stuff. We have issues with nursery being overcrowded, not where it needs to be. So we need some more space and we really believe that we're being hindered by our sanctuary size and classroom size now, and we also have a, our second building, the education building is wearing out. I mean, we're doing a good job of taking care of it but it's on a limited time. You know, maybe we get five more years out of it, if we can, maybe we get a little more, we don't know.

So we really feel like we need to be making a plan for the next step and so we have done research and we've come up with a plan to, well, we looked at very, very, host of options. Should we sell and relocate? Should we do nothing and just plant a church immediately? Or should we look at building? Well, we believe the best plan for us is to stay here. We like the location. We think it's a strategic location, actually. We couldn't be in a better location. You know, Sugarloaf Parkway, not far from 85. There aren't, we feel like this is a good place for a church like our church to be. It's the most financially feasible situation. It wasn't, it's not really feasible to sell the property and it's not as valuable as you might think because of easements on it and the typography. If you think about it, somebody's gonna have to spend a lot of money to flatten it out to make it into a Walmart.

[laughter] I didn't mean for that to be funny. I like when I tell a joke that's funny. I didn't even intend it. Surprised by that. Anyway.

So, but it's not financially feasible unless something extraordinary happens and the market changes dramatically for us to move, and we really like the location. We think,

you know, the area is changing but what a great opportunity. The body of Christ ought to look like heaven and so we're excited how the Lord's been working in our body over the last 8 or 10 years to make us more diverse and we'd like to see that more and more, and we would like to plant churches but we just don't think we're quite ready to do that. Our goal originally had been to get to, if the Lord grew the church to 400-500 people, that we would plant churches by sending out a number of people like a minimum of 50, 50-100 people. That's a real plant. A lot of times guys plant churches and it's a pastor and his wife and his kids. That's really daunting but if you send out, and we have such quality leaders and men in the church, I could see us being able to send out a couple of elders, three deacons with associate pastor and plant a church that would be really viable, and send another 8-10 families along too. We think it would be ideal if you got to where if you're sending out 100 people, you don't want to just have 250 or 200 and so that half the church goes. It just kind of, you know, it's not wise or prudent. But if you have 400 people or 450, it's more doable.

That's kind of where we've been thinking through the past and we feel like that's still a good plan. Well, we have the problem, we need space, so that's a problem. The trellis needs to be addressed in some way. The proposal, second point, was to start a building fund to raise money for a new building, to ask the Lord to give us funds to pray, seek his direction, and so as we looked at the, you know, just possibility, trying to be frugal and wise and yet enable ministry to happen, which is the goal of having a building. You know, a building isn't anything but a place where people can glorify God and meet, have Bible studies, have classrooms, have counseling meetings, have one-anothering opportunities, so we've looked at putting a 7,500 square foot building out here between our building now and Sugarloaf Parkway, that this building that we had initially done some research on, we thought it would be wise if we could make it basically a versatile flexible building that would start out as education space, but it would be built to be the long-term sanctuary. You just put a roof, you know, a ceiling in it and make it all fellowship hall, classrooms, counseling rooms, offices, and what we would do immediately is then get rid of the modular building and that would then take that money we're spending on it over here and that kind of thing.

So that was the plan but you need about 1.2-1.4 million dollars just to do that and to add the parking that's necessary. So the plan was, well, if the Lord gives us half of that over three years, then we could perhaps start and not borrow more than half. It would be a wise and prudent kind of approach. We don't want to get in trouble where the church would be, you know, in a place where we might be tempted to compromise because of our financial situation. It's always best to be debt free but you need to be wise about what debt you would take on that would be really manageable and prudent.

So we've been thoughtful about that and that's kind of the idea we were thinking about, so we asked you a while back, those of you who have been with us since January, to pray about planned giving and we came up with the idea of actually, I think we sort of coined that, I don't know, we didn't get it from anybody else, planned giving forms, and the rationale behind that was we think that was a biblical approach. Interestingly enough, in expositing James which is, you know, as you work through the word and you're trying to

put things into practice, like James says, "I want you to live this out," one of the things that we were confronted with was James 4:13-16 where James makes the statement in James 4:13, "Come now," now think about this, we're talking about planning, planning versus presumption, he says, "Come now you who say today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit." You know, that seems like a fairly reasonable, "Hey, my plan is I'm going to this city and I'm gonna spend a year there and I'm gonna make a profit." If I ask you what your plans are, for vacation, or my plans are for vacation, we're gonna go here, we're gonna do that. Okay, James says what we really ought to do is always add, "Lord willing," to it, and he says that in verse 14, "Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow." You really don't know what you're gonna do. He said, "You're just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away. Instead you ought to say if the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that, but as it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil." I don't mean that we need to be legalistic and saying, "Lord willing," all the time. I think it's not a bad habit to cultivate. I try to do that myself. "I'm gonna preach on something, Lord willing, next Sunday. This is what I'm gonna do." I don't always say it and you don't have to throw a penalty flag when you hear me not say it, and I won't do it to you either, but what we want to do is cultivate a mindset that says, "Look, I really understand that God is the only One who says something and it always comes to pass." Man proposes, that's all we can do is propose, God disposes, and James is saying that he was recognizing in the lives of the believers that he was seeing and he's writing to, there was this presumption that was sinful and really ungodly because we really don't know what we're gonna do. We don't know, we don't know what's gonna happen one second from now. It's like a veil over the future.

Well now, okay, so if you're always, one of the phrases that has been an important part of my own philosophy of ministry since I learned about it, somebody asked me or I asked somebody, actually, "What's Reformed theology mean?" when I was just getting introduced to it. Our church is a Reformed Baptist Church, "What's Reformed theology?" Normally you associate Reformed theology with the doctrines of grace, the sovereignty of God. Well, when I asked Dr. Luder Whitlock this, the President of Reformed Theological Seminary, I said, "Dr. Whitlock, what, help me understand what Reformed theology really is. Or when I have to answer somebody else, what should I say?" because I was getting questions from people that didn't know about it and they were kind of skeptical. I was telling them I was going to Reformed seminary and it sounded like I had committed some crime. Remember reform school? Remember that? "Oh, he's in reform school." He was going into the ministry but now he's in Reformed school."

So I asked him about Reformed theology and he said it means this, the essence of the Reformation, and I think he nailed it, is in the phrase and he used the Latin phrase "semper reformanda." Semper reformanda. Now you may be familiar with semper fi, the Marine motto, always faithful. Semper reformanda, always reforming. Always reforming. That is the essence of Reformed theology. It is always submitting yourself to the word of God. Always changing my beliefs, changing my values, changing my behavior, to match up and line up with Scripture. That's the essence of Reformed theology. That's the essence of what Luther basically called the church to. He said, "Look," to the Catholic

Church, "you guys have departed from the Bible," and the Reformation was simply a call to those who had departed to come back. It was really what James 5:19-20 is talking about, they have wandered away and Luther's calling them back and they act like Luther is the heretic that left the fold. No, you all left the fold and the Reformation was the recovery of the biblical Gospel and what the Bible had always said, what our little children sang about, sinners that can only be made right with God because of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, Christ alone. Where do you get that? Reading the Bible carefully. Really looking what the Bible says about how someone is saved and reforming your life, your belief in light of it. That's what Luther did and that's what the Reformers did.

So the Christian life is always reforming, so then when we came to how do you do a building fund, we tried to practice that, always reforming. Okay, we need to do it with a little less, helping our people not be presumptuous, and so we're not gonna say sign a pledge or a commitment card because you don't know what tomorrow holds, but we're asking you, we ask you and are asking you, to prayerfully consider what the Lord might lead you to give over and beyond your regular giving because you can't neglect your regular giving, otherwise we might have a building but we won't have a church. We can have a nice trellis but there'll be no vine. We won't be able to continue doing what we're doing along the way, right?

So this has to be over and above and we're asking you to prayerfully consider, each of us to prayerfully consider what can we do over and beyond our regular giving for three years, and we're asking to make a plan because we think it's biblical to plan as long as you realize that, you know, a man plans his way, the Lord directs his steps, Proverbs 16:1, or actually Proverbs 16:9. Proverbs 16:1 says, I can't remember, basically the answer is from the Lord, the question is from man. Something like that, 16:1. Three times in Proverbs 16 it talks about planning, so planning's not evil, it's just that you realize your plans are tentative.

Luke 14:28-30 says that Jesus said in explaining the Gospel, he used an image, he said, "What man among you," he's basically saying, "If you want to become My follower, You're gonna have to lose everything. Deny yourself, take up your cross and follow Me," and he says, "Listen, before you do, count the cost," and he says, "What man among you would set out to build a tower without first calculating if he had enough money to finish the tower? It would be foolish to start the tower and not be able to finish it," he says, "people would then mock you." So he's using a very practical analogy to say obviously planning is appropriate.

So that's what we were trying to do is strike the biblical balance and so we asked you to consider taking, giving planned giving forms. So we had put these in the bulletin today, this little form which has, you can calculate giving weekly, monthly, or yearly, and our goal was, it's anonymous, not to hold people to, like, sending you reminders, "Hey, you committed to something. Have you sent in your giving?" No, we don't want to do that. We think it's between you and the Lord. We think the Lord will do a much better job of reminding you. We may keep you up-to-date with how we're doing, have we met our

goal. That's appropriate. But we're not saying to you, "Hey, where's your check?" What we are all saying, though, is every one of us needs to be continually humbling ourselves before God and doing what he wants to do. He owns everything. He owns us and so he owns our money, so we need to be willing to lay it down however he wants us to use it, and so we're asking you to do that.

And there's other ways you can do this, you can do it online. We sent you email links and now just effective in the last 12 hours, if you go on the Providence Church app, how many of you did not know we had a Providence Church app? You may be willing to raise your hand, it's not that big a deal. I mean, I would be the last to know, honestly, myself. Okay, we have a Providence Church app so interestingly, almost 99% of the people knew that. I don't think they did, but anyway they're probably like me, a little sheepish about saying, "What are you talking about, a Providence Church app? What is an app?" Some of you may be thinking that. I need an app this afternoon. I hope I get one, you know.

We actually have an app on the phone that you can download from the, you know, Apple Store, iTunes, whatever the deal, and the Google Play. If you go on and you put Providence Church, Duluth in, you'll find our app, and it is really pretty impressive. Jess and Bethany and our computer guy have done a great job putting that together and it's really, it's excellent. In fact, it's the best way to look at last week's message if you were out. You can find it on the app and watch it on video easier than anyplace else, easier than the website by far, or Sermonaudio. Just go on the app. Well, the app has a giving thing where you can, you know, you can give your offering or you can pay for Wednesday night suppers, or you can now make a planned giving commitment and it's anonymous on the app as well.

So we were asking you, all of you, especially our member families, we have at this point we have 65 families that are members of the church, and another 28 that are regular attendees and it's mothers that are just visiting. We will see about that, but basically we have 65 member families and right now only 27 forms have been turned in of those 65 families. So we feel like probably some people have forgotten, needed to be reminded maybe that it's not clear how to do it, so we wanted to talk about it again. We've added a slip on there, though, or a slot that if you don't think you can give anything at this point, you can't plan to give anything, you can still fill out the form and say zero and it helps us to know that we've heard from more of our people because it's anonymous. As I said, we don't have a way of knowing. That's between you and the Lord. We don't care. We want you to do what God wants you to do. So but we would like to call all of our member families to please fill out a form. As elders, we think that's appropriate to ask you to do that.

So now, and what does the Lord, you know, what does he want you to do? That's the question: what does he want me to do? What does he want us to do as a family? Make it a matter of prayer and I do think it's something that we need in times like this to think about and allow the Lord to really search our hearts because a friend was sharing with me this week, a statement by a pastor who was saying that imagine getting to heaven and the Lord asks you a question, you know, you're talking about how you did with what he gave

you and he says, "Did you think I made you an American," think about this, you're standing before Jesus, I'm standing before Jesus and he says, "Do you think I made you an American, a part of the wealthiest society to ever live on the earth, just so you could enjoy creature comforts and enjoy yourself? Don't you realize I made you a part of the wealthiest country in the world to give to my kingdom work?" So we all need to allow the Lord to search us and see where we are and so we're calling you just to do that and do as the Lord leads you.

That's the problem, the proposed, the proposal, and then third point this morning is the purpose and this really gets back to why we do what we do anyway. Our passage, Ezra 7:6-10, I'll read it now. Ezra 7:6.

6 This Ezra went up from Babylon, and he was a scribe skilled in the law of Moses, which the LORD God of Israel had given; and the king granted him all he requested because the hand of the LORD his God was upon him.

Now Ezra is a, he's one of the captives from Jerusalem that is now in the land of Babylon, the land of Persia. This takes place in 458 B.C. The Lord has stirred up the heart of Ezra, a scribe who knows the law of God, to lead a return of the people back to Israel and he's going to give us the account of this in chapter 7 and following, the amazing work that God did through Ezra and the people, and so he's gone to the king, the Persian King Artaxerxes, and he's asked him for permission to take some of the people back and the text is saying that the Lord, that he was able to be granted his request because the hand of God was upon him. The Lord moved the king's heart. That's a key phrase in the books of Ezra/Nehemiah. Ezra/Nehemiah, though they're two different books in our English Bibles, most scholars believe they were one work originally, and so in Ezra/Nehemiah, this is a key phrase, "the hand of the LORD his God was upon him." You're gonna see it even in these next few verses. So verse 7,

7 Some of the sons of Israel and some of the priests, the Levites, the singers, the gatekeepers and the temple servants went up to Jerusalem in the seventh year of King Artaxerxes. 8 He [that is, Ezra] came to Jerusalem in the fifth month, which was in the seventh year of the king. 9 For on the first of the first month he began to go up from Babylon; and on the first of the fifth month he came to Jerusalem, because the good hand of his God was upon him.

He basically makes this journey with these thousands of Jews in dangerous territory in four months, kind of record time, because the good hand of his God was upon him. And what's really neat, what he's about to tell us is why is the good hand of God upon him. How do you get God's hand upon you as an individual? How do you get God's hand upon you as a church? Look what he says in verse 10, after he says in verse 9 because the good hand of his God was upon him, verse 10,

10 For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the LORD and to practice it, and to teach His statutes and ordinances in Israel.

So there's three points. Ezra had set his heart to do three things. He had set his heart to do three things: to study, to practice, and to teach the word of God. This is, in a sense, it resonates with James. He didn't just set his heart to study the law of the Lord, to hear it, to practice it. Ezra was a doer of the word. In fact, the word "practice" could be translated and several of the translations translate it this way, "to study the law of the LORD and to do it." It's not just theoretical knowledge, God intends his word to be lived out. Always reforming doesn't just mean reforming our thoughts, our beliefs, it means reforming our values and reforming our actions, and Ezra models this for us and this really is a summary really of what we're all called to do. This is disciple-making. This is another way of saying what Jesus says when he says, "Make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you." Teaching them to observe, you don't just teach, you teach them to observe, and so this is what we're called to do as a church and this is what our purpose is. This is divine work that we need to trellis to accomplish but we can't forget how urgent this work is. This is what God has put us here to do.

So let's think about these three subpoints here under this. Let's talk about setting our hearts to do these three things: to study, to practice, to teach. Interesting, the word "set his heart" is interesting in itself. It means "to prepare; to establish; to make ready; to fix." It can mean "to stand something up; to put it in place." It implies effort and focus and intentionality. Ezra had set his heart. The Christian life doesn't just happen, you have to discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness. You have to set your heart to seek the Lord and so Ezra set his heart and we are called to do that.

And what did he set his heart to do? Three things, to study the law of the Lord. To study the law of the Lord. He had set his heart to understand it. In fact, the word here means "to seek with care; to inquire about; to investigate." He set his heart not just to kind of mill around in the law of the Lord but to really search it out, to be intent upon something, and to go there repeatedly with that intentionality. In fact, it's interesting the word, the Hebrew word that this is translated "study" here, it comes from a word which in its literal meaning, you know, literal, figurative meaning, study, search out, investigate, the original literal meaning was "to frequent a place; to rub; to beat; to tread; to trample; to tread a path." It's like you walk over a certain area. You know, do you have dog paths? Do you have dogs? Isn't it neat how they mess up your grass in little paths? Do you know what I'm talking about? If you have a dog, you know what I'm talking about. You can't have a perfect yard. Well, nobody can have a perfect yard anyway, but you can a much, you can't have as perfect a yard as you could have if you have dogs. They don't respect what you're trying to do. "Don't you understand I put these things here? You know, this mulch is here for decoration, not for you to dig out." And the little dog paths through the yard, you just can't do anything about that. I was talking to my uncle who's a landscaper, "What do you do about that?" He says, "There's nothing you can do. You get rid of your dog, that's what you do."

Well, he's saying Ezra, he had set his heart to be in the word so much that he was treading a path in the Scriptures. In fact, this is what led him to be what he said in verse 6. Way back in verse 6 he said Ezra was a scribe skilled in the law of Moses. Skilled in the law of Moses, literally that word "skilled" means "to move with haste." It could be translated "rapid." He was rapid in the law of Moses. Well, how did that happen? It means a man who was skilled in understanding because he had studied so much.

Derek Kidner writes this in his commentary, "This word 'skilled; rapid,' suggests a quickness of grasp, an ease of movement amid this complex material which was the fruit of devoted study." So there's an ease of movement, a quickness of grasp because he's been in the law of the Lord so much. He sees how it fits together. This is the call to every Christian. Every one of us are called to be learners, disciples. If you're truly a follower of Jesus, you truly have repented and placed your faith in him, you are called to follow him, to continue in his word, "Truly are you My disciples," John 8:31. To follow him means to pursue actively him; to study him; to study his word; to abide in his word; and to obey his commandments. So as Christians, we're to be lifelong learners, that is, lifelong students. Jesus is our Master. He's our Rabbi and we are to be following him.

So that's the call to be a student of the word. This means that for our church to fulfill this, this shows the importance of, this is why we have preaching and teaching, this is why we get together and we almost always break the word together when we get together, we make that the primary focus of what we do. Music is important and it's wonderful and it's necessary and it's beautiful and God has given it as a tremendous gift to us, but the word is primary. Why is the word primary? Because when Scripture speaks, God speaks. We hear the Lord and what we need more than anything else at every moment is to hear from the Lord. This is why Jesus said, "Man shall not live by bread alone." Think about this and really hear this. "Man shall not live by bread alone but by every word which proceeds from the mouth of God." He says it's more important than eating to take in the word of God. It's more urgent for you and me to hear from God on a daily basis, I mean, think about that, how often do you eat? Isn't it amazing how we eat a meal and you automatically think about the next meal? Sometimes have you had that problem, like you eat and maybe it was a great meal, maybe it wasn't so great and you're thinking, "Well, maybe dinner will be better." I don't know why it is but I find myself sometimes thinking about supper when I just finished eating lunch. Yeah.

So food is on our minds because we need food. Jesus says you need the word way more than you need food. I need the word way more than I need food. These things, the word of God, this is your life, so we need to set our hearts to study. This is why we need to get together around the word of God continually. We're to let the word of Christ dwell in you richly continually. All the time the word needs to be dwelling among us. How? By speaking and admonishing and teaching one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. So music gets involved but it's the word of God driving the process.

So the church is to be a place where the word of God is broken and where people can come and receive the word of God as food for their souls. In every Bible study in every age group that we have, that's the calling. Jesus says, "If you love Me, Peter, do you love

Me?" Yes, Lord, you know I love You. "Feed My sheep. This is how you love Me, feed the people." And that's what we're called to do but it's not just to study the law of the Lord, Ezra didn't just study it, he also, it set his heart not just to study, it set his heart to practice it, that is, to do it. It's not theoretical knowledge. God never just informs for the sake of knowledge. Knowledge puffeth up. Wisdom is knowledge applied to life and God wants our hearts to be inclined to wisdom. He wants us to walk out what we believe. As James said in James 1:22, "Do not be merely hearers of the word but doers." This is the purpose of Scripture. It's not given to inform us, it's given to, it's not given to inform, it's given to transform us. "Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your minds," Romans 12:2.

So practicing it, doing it, it means we're to help each other apply it. This is why we have some of the things that we have in place. Again, these are trellis things. Why do we have home groups? Home groups are to help us connect and help one another apply what we're hearing and learning to our lives to do it. We know that we need one-anothering relationships. We've been talking about that a lot this year, including last Sunday. We need to be one-anothering. We were told in James 5:16, "Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another that you may be healed." Over 50 times, imperatives in the New Testament have the direct object "one another." Love one another. Serve one another. Build up one another. Teach one another. Admonish one another. Over and over again. To be a Christian, there are no Lone Ranger Christians in the New Testament. Christians are people in relationship and so how do you practice it, you need to have the help of one another. That's the picture the New Testament gives. We're sheep and we're trying to help each other follow the Shepherd. This is why we need rooms to meet in and places to have meals over and things like that, it's not just for our ease and convenience, it's for the work of the Gospel to go forward.

In fact, this is one of the things that has been most encouraging to me about our emphasis on biblical counseling since 2006 when the Lord really turned our church with bringing folks with a passion for that, Jack and Barbara Enter, and then helping us get a vision for that and then the Lord has continued to bring people that have a passion for that. Well, listen, we're not trying to become just a biblical counseling church, that's not our primary objective. Our primary objective is to do the word, to know it and to do it, and the beauty of what's happening, let me just explain, biblical counseling can be a little bit confusing and if you don't know much about it, it can be kind of a mysterious thing. Essentially the biblical counseling movement was the response to what happened in the evangelical church about 100 years ago or certainly the last 80 years, with the rise of modern psychology, increasingly the church referred people out to psychologists and psychiatrists when they had "psychological problems." The biblical counseling movement was kind of rebirthed. It wasn't just born, this used to be the way people did church in the old days, the Puritans, the Reformers, they knew that God had given us this book to care for the soul. I mean, psychology, logos, psuche, psychology, the study of the soul. That's what the word means. Where do you study the soul? Right here. This is the book given to show you how the soul works. This is God revealing to the people he made in his image to reflect him and to glorify him. "This is what I made you to be and to do."

So with Jay Adams and Wayne Mack, organizations like NANC, today ACBC, Association of Certified Biblical Counselors, what's basically happening is the church realizing, "Hey, we have everything we need for life and godliness in the Scriptures." Yeah, there are medical issues that you need a doctor for, we're not saying that they're aren't those. Of course there are, but the real issues of the heart are not to be solved by man-centered, you know, humanistic ideas about the psyche of man. No, God has spoken. We find it in the word.

So that's essentially the biblical counseling movement was recovery of that but one of the things that happened along the way was that when you really look at it, the reason people have severe problems, and Christians struggle with debilitating anxiety or fear or lust or anger, is because they have a soul problem and they need to be transformed by the power of the word. They need to, in other words, be sanctified. They need, in other words, to become a doer of the word, not a hearer. They need to be shown how to do that so that biblical counseling is really just kind of intense discipleship. There's an intense need because the situation's gotten aggravated and so counseling is just doing that, and we use the term counseling just because the world does. The biblical picture really is just teaching and admonishing. It's discipling, making disciples.

Well, one of the beauties of it is in by learning about that, the whole church has been blessed by having a better sounder theology of sanctification and this is what I love about it more than anything, is that we're all learning what it means to follow Jesus and how we help each other follow Jesus and how people change, how do Christians really change. What does it mean to transform your mind? How do you put off, you know, anxiety and put on trusting the Lord? And how do you put off lust and put on gratitude? How do you put off anger and put on meekness? Well, it's biblical, it's applying the Scriptures and these folks have just been plowing the word. They've been becoming skilled like Ezra, rapid in the way they understand the word because they started believing that the answers were here and they started digging in like Ezra did, and so now we're just receiving the fruit of that.

So it's really trying to become as a church where people help one another. We just help one another follow Jesus and it's supposed to be one-anothering, and most of the time we're not gonna need counseling, we just need one-anothering, and you can call it counseling if you want to. It doesn't really matter, but a better word is just speak the truth in love. I just need you to tell me what I need to know because I'm a dumb sheep and God has made it so that I sometimes, I need you to tell me what I already know or I won't do it. But when you come and you tell me, haven't you had that experience, somebody tells you something and you're like, "Of course, I knew that but I sort of needed to hear that. I know this. How did I forget?" Well, you are a sheep and remember God didn't give us that term, that metaphor, to be a flattery for us. Sheep be stupid.

So we're to do it. We want to have a culture of one-anothering so we can meet together, we have places to spend time together, have conversations, develop relationships so that we, then, are able over time to have deeper conversations, Gospel conversations. We can

confess our sins to people that love us and we can pray for one another. That's practicing it. And in teaching it.

So we're learning to study. We want to be like Ezra, set his heart to study and to practice it, and the third subpoint, to teach it. We're all called to be people who make disciples. Not all of us have the same gifting, only a relatively small percentage are really skilled at teaching but all are called to teach. Only a relatively small percentage are skilled at evangelism but all are called to evangelize. Only a really small percentage of people are really skilled at mercy and showing mercy, but all are called to show mercy. Take the gift and just put that statement with it. Some of you are really skilled in certain areas because God has gifted you that way, but everybody else is called to that and when it comes to teaching, we are called to tell people about Jesus, to help them know. This means relational evangelism. This means ministry together in helping reach people, Belmont, Good News Club, Prison Ministry, things that are going on now, and I really believe God wants our church to become a training center to help other churches, even, because he's coalesced a lot of people here with a passion for the truth and gifting, and he's given us relationships and Atlanta is such a strategic place. I think he wants us to be able to use our facilities more to train people, encourage other believers. Have them in for conferences with us. Maybe have a school of some kind.

I keep, I'm praying that the Lord will lead John Street to come retire with his grandkids and we're gonna put him on faculty here. Y'all start praying with me about that. You have not because you ask not. Let's ask. Now, I'm not gonna ask John yet. Don't tell him yet. Just ask the Lord.

No, but you know, we've been so blessed. Dr. Mack, all these different relationships. So the Lord is investing in us, well, what can we do to take that investment and multiply it? Not just hold it and bury it and give him back what he gave us. No, but turn it into more for the kingdom. This is what God has put on our hearts and we really believe that for us to do what we need to do, it's gonna mean we need some kind of strategy for building. If the Lord doesn't give it, then, you know, we will make do.

I mean, right now I said that, what 65 families, 27, right now we have pledged \$130,000 roughly. We've received \$116,000. That would mean in three years we have \$246,000. That's not gonna build a building so that would mean the Lord is telling us we're not gonna build a building, we're apparently supposed to really fix up our modular building. I call it modular, some people call it trailer. Please don't call it a trailer. Modular building. It is a series of trailers put together but they're really modules put together and I'm so grateful for that building, but if you really look around, it's beginning to wear and so the Lord has to help us. Our hope is that part of the reason we have the low number right now is that less than half of our people have filled out the form and that the Lord is going to show us his faithfulness in ways that'll just make us give him glory and praise.

We're sharing with you where things are. We're just asking you to pray with what the Lord wants you to do and put it in light of what really is our vision overall is to help people know the glory of a God who left the glory of heaven to become a man, and Jesus

lived a perfect life fulfilling every demand of the law, positive, negative, he never did anything he wasn't supposed to do and he always did everything he ought to have done every moment of every day for 30 years. What a perfect record of righteousness. That is the glorious man Christ Jesus. This is the good news and not only that, but this glorious man who deserved praise and deserved, could have been received into heaven without dying, he could have, he had not sinned, he could have gone right into heaven without dying but he died. Why? So that he could bear our sins and on the cross he bore the sins of everyone who would ever believe. He bore the wrath of God for every single sin of thought, word or deed committed by everyone who would ever believe. All of those piled upon Jesus, he bore the wrath of God and experienced hell itself on the cross. This is why he so dreaded the cross. This is why in Gethsemane he pleaded with the Father three times, "If there be any other way, Father, let this cup pass from Me." Yet this glorious person submitted and he always said, "Yet not My will but Thy will be done." And then he died that atoning death in obedience to his Father so that he might take our sins out of the way, and having taken our sins out of the way, he gives us his perfect record of righteousness. That's the glorious exchange. He who knew no sin became sin for you and me, that we might become not just not guilty, we might become the righteousness of God in him. So by faith he takes your sins, removes them forever, never to be remembered, never to be accounted for, for you to have to pay any, there's nothing left to pay, and he gives you his righteousness. This is why we can boldly go to the throne of grace, because we go wrapped in the robe of perfect righteousness.

That's the message that we have. That's the message that everyone needs. That's the message that people all around us need, neighbors and friends, coworkers, family, they need that message. The people around the community that could learn about Providence Church and our counseling center because that's what we'd like to have, is a place where people from outside can come who are struggling with all kinds of issues in this sin-sick world. So much deception. We want to be a place of compassion that says there is a Savior. He can wash you clean and he can make you his own. Not only that, he will walk with you and teach you how to be obedient to him and he will make you more and more like himself and you will have the joy of being what you were created to be. That's the message of the Gospel and that is a message worth giving ourselves to and that is a message worth giving our resources to.

Let's go to the Lord in prayer.

Our Father, we praise and honor You. We marvel at Your incredible kindness to us and though we confess our own need of how much we need Your grace, look how easy it is to be distracted by the things of this world, the cares of this life, and to forget the urgency of the moment, that every day people are dying and going into eternity without Christ, that every day we have an opportunity either to walk in the Spirit and walk in holiness and give glory to our Savior and shine the light of Christ, or we can walk according to the flesh and dishonor the One who loved us. Father, we ask You for wisdom and grace each individually that we might become all that You want us to be. We pray for those here that You're working on that need to truly repent and place their faith in Jesus, to count the cost and just render everything to follow Him. Help them, Lord, even now to do just that.

And we pray for those that belong to You but need to allow You to search our hearts. We want You to have Your way in us, Lord. Remove everything that is a hindrance to Your work and Your glory and, Father, make us like Jesus. Make our church what You want it to be and make us what You want us to be, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.