

Growth Track | Grow

Aaron Brockett | 2 Corinthians 9:6-7

All right, good morning, everybody. How are you doing? Good. Good to see you.

Well, across all of our campuses right now, I just want to welcome anybody—maybe this is your first time to be with us; maybe you're a guest. We're so glad to have you.

I want to welcome our North campus, Downtown, our West campus, those of you tuning in online, and our Northwest campus here. So good to have all of you.

We are continuing on in this series called *Growth Track*, and so if you missed any of these weeks, you can go back and catch them online or on the church app.

I would encourage you to go back and just catch up with us, but you can jump in today and I think that you'll be tracking with us if this is your first time because really this whole series is about helping each one of us, regardless of where we may be in our spiritual journey, be able to determine what our next step is toward greater connection and growth.

That's really all we have control over in our lives anyway. We can't necessarily determine outcomes, but we can figure out, "Okay, what's the next step? What's the next step that I need to take in my own personal growth?"

So we've said throughout this series that the mission of every Bible-based, Jesus-following church is the same, or at least it should be the same. It's found in Matthew chapter 28. Jesus said I want you to go. I want you to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them.

That word disciple is just a fancy word for somebody who is following after Jesus. Jesus isn't just my Savior, but Jesus is my Lord. It's this like lordship issue, and so as a church we want to connect as many people to Jesus as we possibly can. We want to identify what the unnecessary barriers are that might be standing in the way of you coming to know Jesus and see him for who he really is. We want to remove them and then we want to help you to connect and help you to grow.

I know that this is a big place. We're spread out across multiple campuses, but the primary task that we have in front of us, and me as one of your pastors, comes right out of Ephesians 4. We looked at it last week. So I just want to help facilitate your growth, just help equip you to grow and to know what that next step is. This is what *Growth Track* is about.

These are the steps of *Growth Track* right here. Week number one is just: **Start**. We want to just help you to start following Jesus wherever you may happen to be in your life, explain who he is and who God is and why we need to be reconciled to him and what baptism is.

We had 140 people choose to be baptized two weeks ago, which we're still celebrating. We had another 150 people who marked the box saying I want to be baptized. That's a big deal. It takes a lot of courage to do that, but they just weren't quite ready yet. We've been following up with them. I was talking to one young lady in the lobby between services, and she said, "I'm doing it next week," and so we're really excited about that.

Last week, we talked about: **Connection**, the importance of connecting with others. You know why we gather on a weekly basis? It's largely to just stir one another up, to encourage each other toward love and good works because there are a lot of discouraging things that are in the world, and we need to come together on a regular basis to encourage each other.

And really I want you to join a group and get into a circle. I actually brought at least part of my circle up here on stage last week and would just encourage you to get in a circle, largely because of this. We believe that God wants the Church to grow larger because people matter, but we also believe that another thing needs to happen: The Church needs to grow smaller at the same time because you matter.

We see this example in the New Testament that the believers, they got together in large settings for the apostles' teaching, to encourage each other, but also in smaller settings in each other's homes. They would eat a meal together. They would do the Lord's Supper together, and they were in each other's lives.

We all learn in rows, but we grow in circles, and we all need a circle around us. So last week the call to action was to take out that card and fill it out and to say, "Man, if you're ready to get into a circle, if you want to be in a group, would you please let us know?"

Well, toward the end of this last week, our team told me that, get this, nearly 2,000 of you said you wanted to get into a group, which is unbelievable! And immediately presents us with a problem. I shouldn't have preached so good.

I'm totally joking.

So nearly 2,000 of you said you wanted to be in a group. I think that's amazing. In the 11 years that I've been here, I don't know that I've ever had that many people say they wanted to get into a group.

The team told me that they followed up with about 700 of you so far to get you placed, which means there are roughly about 1,300 of you still waiting, so I want to ask you to be patient with us as we try to get you placed into a group. That's a really tall order, and our team is working away at it.

But we don't have enough leaders. The math just doesn't work out. So what I want to ask of you at all of our campuses is, if God is calling you to step up and to lead a group—now you don't need to have a degree in theology to lead a group; you just need to love Jesus and love people. And if you're willing to do that, you can go on our website and sign up. Go to the groups link and say I'm willing to get trained as a group leader or stop by Connection Central at any one of our campuses and we'd love to help get you connected.

I had several people already after the earlier service today come up and say, "Well I'm in a women's group," or "I'm in a men's group, but you know what? I'm willing to jump in and to be a group leader," and I really, really appreciate that.

Well, today this is where we're going. We want to talk about: **Grow**. How do we grow in our faith and in and through that group and in daily spiritual disciplines? How does that work? What's the goal of growth? How do we know if we're growing?

I was reading this past week about something called the Peter Pan syndrome, and it's this term that is used to describe anybody who is unable or unwilling to grow. The article goes on to describe how this delayed adolescence is affecting everything, as you might imagine that it would. So it affects relationships. It affects the work place, certainly affects marriage. It's even affecting the economy.

Now, the article was also quick to point out that the Peter Pan syndrome is not like officially recognized by the World Health Organization as a psychological disorder. What that means is that if you're going to go to the doctor the doctor is never going to say, "Well, looks like you got a bad case of the Peter Pan syndrome." The doctor's never going to say that to you because it's not an official psychological disorder.

And yet when I describe what the Peter Pan syndrome is, anybody come to mind? Is there anybody in your life like, "Oh, yeah. I know that person. I'm related to that person. I'm sitting next to that person."

They're unable or seem to be unwilling to grow. We could all probably think of somebody in our life who maybe would fit that description, but you can't do anything about their life. What about yours?

As I was thinking about this this last week, I thought, "You know what? I've definitely wrestled with the Peter Pan syndrome in certain areas of my life. When it comes to my spiritual life certainly there have been moments and times when I've felt like God was saying: Aaron, it's time to grow. You need to grow in your relationship with me.

Maybe when it comes to my marriage or my interpersonal skills or my parenting, it's this whole idea of like, "Do I need to grow or have I been plateaued for a while and what do I do about it?"

See, the author of Hebrews, in Hebrews chapter 5—if you have a Bible or maybe a Bible app go ahead and turn there with me. I want to look at two primary passages of Scripture today. Hebrews 5 is the first one. Luke chapter 8 is the second one.

In Hebrews 5, the author of Hebrews is explaining to us once again who Jesus is and how he reconciles us back to God, but then he seems to address the Peter Pan syndrome within the Church. He says there are actually a number of you who understand this, but there's a problem. You aren't growing.

So he addresses it in chapter 5 beginning in verse 11. He says, "There is much more that we would like to say about this," and *this* is that he's talking about who Jesus is and how he reconciles us to God. "...but it is difficult to explain, especially since you are spiritually dull and don't seem to listen." Tell us how you really feel.

"You have been believers so long now that you **ought to be teaching others.**" That's the place where you should be, but you're not. "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. For someone who lives on milk is still an infant and doesn't know how to do what is right. Solid food is for those who are mature, who through..." and this is a really key word that I want you to grab a hold of. Say it out loud with me at all of our campuses. "...**training**..." That's a really important word for us to understand when it comes to our spiritual growth. "...have the skill to recognize the difference between right and wrong.

I don't believe that the author of Hebrews was trying to be mean. I don't think that he was trying to insult them. I think what he was trying to do is what many of us need from time to time in our lives. We need somebody who is willing to sort of jolt us or awaken us to the reality that maybe we don't see in our lives.

And oftentimes, when it comes to an area of my life in which I need to grow, I'm usually the last one to see it. I need other people who would actually be willing to speak the truth in love into my life and say, "Hey, is there an area of your life in which you need to grow?"

The Peter Pan syndrome looks a lot like this, and this is a message largely for those of us who are already following Jesus. It doesn't mean that if you're not following Jesus you can't get something from this. But this is largely for those of us who have already accepted him. We've received him. Maybe we went into the baptism. It is to simply say, "Am I growing?"

I think it's really important to understand the differentiation between these two words. These two words are so important in the life of a Jesus follower. I don't have a slide for this. You can write it down or just kind of jot this note down, but these two words that are so important for us to get.

The first one is **justification.**

For many of you, this is just going to be timely review; others of you, maybe a brand-new concept. This is the day of your salvation, the day that you decided to place your trust in Jesus Christ. It's the day that you were justified in God's eyes. There isn't anything that you can do to earn God's love. There isn't anything you can do to lose God's love.

There isn't anything that you can do to justify yourself in the eyes of God. Jesus does it for you. He lived the life that you and I could never live, he died the death that I deserve to die, and he walked out of a grave so that one day I could have hope beyond my grave. I am justified in God's eyes. It's really, really freeing. It's really good news. You are justified,

This second word, I think many times we forget as Christ followers and it's just the word: **sanctification**, which sounds really complicated or maybe really churchy. It's really not. It's just this whole idea of growth.

Don't confuse this for trying to earn God's love or stay in his good graces. That's not what it is. It's exactly what the author of Hebrews was talking about. He said now that you have received what Jesus freely gives you; you've got an opportunity to grow. Now you've got an opportunity to begin to put one foot in front of the other and begin to see what it is that God might do in and through your life.

This is the whole idea that many of us love the whole concept of Jesus as Savior, like I want him to save me from whatever difficult situations in my life; I want him to save me from an eternity without God, but it's an entirely different perspective to say, "I also want Jesus as Lord." It's this lordship issue.

So I don't have one with me, I wish I did, but just imagine that I have a dresser up here on stage with me, a dresser like you would put your socks and your underwear and your shorts and your T-shirts in, all right? You've got maybe just a six-drawer dresser. Maybe some of you have this at home.

And just imagine that the dresser represents your life. I think that what many of us have done—I know that I was guilty of this early on in my life as a Jesus follower—is that the day that I gave my life to Jesus, basically what I did was I just opened up one of the dresser drawers and I just kind of scooted some stuff to the side and said, "Hey, Jesus, you can have that one. You can have that area of my life, Jesus. Like this is the spiritual side of my life. I'll open you up on Sundays, but when the service is over, we're going to shut that drawer. Could you just kind of stay in there until next Sunday?"

It's this idea that I don't want Jesus to touch any area of my life, and so this is my spiritual life and then this is my career. This is my spiritual life and this is my sexuality. This is my spiritual life; these are my finances.

Lordship says that Jesus isn't just a drawer in the dresser; he's the dresser that all the drawers fit into. Does that make sense to anybody? Listen, it's not because he's trying to cramp your

style. It's not because he's trying to ruin your life. It's actually because his wisdom actually will make your life better. Following after Jesus will actually improve your marriage. Following after Jesus will help you with your perspective toward your finances. Following after Jesus will produce more fruit in your life than just kind of doing things your own way.

Jesus says: Listen, are you stuck? And I think periodically at times we just need to look at our lives and do an honest reflection and say, "Is there any area of my life where I should be growing, but I haven't yet grown?"

I want to look at another passage of Scripture. This is Luke 8. This is how Jesus actually describes growth and how at times maybe we don't appear to be growing anymore. Jesus tells a parable, a story, and he basically just equates this to seed on the ground. He says a farmer cast some seed, and he said some of the seed got snatched up by the birds of the air, some of the seed fell on rocky soil, some of the seed got choked out by the thorns.

Then he explains the parable this way. He says, "This is the meaning of the parable: The seed is God's word. The seeds that fell on the footpath represent those who hear the message, only to have the devil come and take it away from their hearts and prevent them from believing and being saved." So maybe for a number of us, you grew up in church. You've heard the message before. It just didn't go anywhere. It just didn't take root in your heart.

Then he said, "The seeds on the rocky soil represent those who hear the message and receive it..." Like you've opened yourself up to it "...with joy. But since they don't have deep roots, they believe for a while, then they fall away when they face temptation."

Then he said, "The seeds that fell among the thorns represent those who hear the message, but all too quickly the message is crowded out by the cares and riches and pleasures of this life." And the result of this is "**...they never grow into maturity.**"

But then he says, "And the seeds that fell on the good soil represent honest, good-hearted people who hear God's word," and they "**cling** to it..." You cling to it. You've got to hold onto it, "and **patiently**..." It's not going to happen overnight. It's a process. "...produce a **huge** harvest," in their lives.

This parable packs so much truth and understanding for the way that our spiritual growth works. It's a lot like seed and it's got to take root in your life, and it's not going to happen overnight. You've got to cling to it. But if you do, the cumulative effect of this will be that there will be a huge harvest if you don't give up.

See, I think that there are two terms here—the first one we find in Hebrews 5; the second term we find in Luke 8—to help us understand how we grow spiritually. The first one, Hebrews 5 says is growing spiritually is like training.

It's just like working out. It's like you're not going to get in shape by doing one workout. You've got to be consistent with it over time. Don't get frustrated, go in and just say, "This is just going to become a part of my lifestyle where I'm just training my body physically."

And Hebrews 5 says your spiritual growth works the same way. Think training versus trying. You're not trying to be more of a godly person, you're training to be a godly person. Does that make sense? Just shake your heads like this even if it doesn't and I'll be good.

The second analogy that Jesus gives is—if you're not a gym rat, if training's not your thing, give me a doughnut, not a barbell—Jesus says well also think about the analogy of gardening. Maybe gardening is your thing. The same principle is there. You're not going to grow a crop overnight. You're going to plant a seed. You're going to water it and then, over time, you begin to yield a harvest.

So how do we train and how do we garden? I just want to get like super, super practical here and I just want to give you a list of the ways in which you and I can train, you and I can garden. Once again, this may be review for many of us, but this might be helpful for many of you.

You can pull out your phone, take a picture of the screen to kind of keep these, or you can go on our church app and go under the live notes and everything that's on this screen can be on your phone on the live notes, so that way you can take it with you.

The first one I would just say is just daily Bible reading. This is why we just keep hitting this over and over again with all of you. You can sign up here at our church and we will send you every morning in your inbox just a daily Bible reading plan—it will take you all of three to five minutes—just to start off your day, read a passage, a little devotional thought.

That's a good place to start. I wouldn't say that it's like all sufficient; I would say you need to move on from that. I would say you need to maybe get a good Bible reading plan, and we can certainly give that to you, but I want you to think about daily Bible reading not as just trying to get through the content of the Bible, but I want you to think about reading God's Word a lot like you would eating a meal.

You and I eat three meals every single day just to stay nourished. We don't just eat one meal and say we're good; we get on a diet and we make sure that we're eating and making sure that the nutrients are spread out, and so we want to read God's Word in a very similar way.

Another way in which we train is just through consistent prayer, and I would say this word is really important. I'll speak from firsthand experience here. My prayer life at times looks like a bunch of stops and starts. Anybody with me? Are you going to leave me alone in that?

It's like at times my prayer life—I feel really good about it, and then other times I go, "Man, I don't know when the last time I talked to God was." Or it looks like this: I either turn God into a vending machine—like, "Hey, God, here are a few prayers. Give me back what I've asked"—or I

only go to God when I'm in trouble. I only go to God when life gets turned upside down, I'm stressed, there's a problem. Listen, don't misunderstand me. It's not that God doesn't want you to come to him when you have a problem; he does. Just don't let that be the only time.

It's kind of like this. How many of you have a person in your life who every time you get a text message from them or a phone call you know that it's just because they want something. Even though maybe you love them and you want to be there for them, that relationship's probably not going to thrive very much if that's the only time they're reaching out to you.

Think about prayer more like a conversation. Maybe some of you are prayer-closet people. Maybe you get up early in the morning. You're on your knees. Maybe for you that intimidates you and you're like, "I don't exactly know what to say."

God just wants you to be yourself. Just be yourself, and prayer is inviting him into your day and taking the thoughts that you're already thinking and just directing them up toward him and saying, "God, I want you to be part of my day." That's all consistent prayer is.

Another way in which we can train and grow is just through weekend services. I won't talk a bunch about this. We talked a lot about it last week, that the reason we gather together is to stir each other up, to encourage each other, to listen and to learn from God's Word. This is to be a celebration. I want you to be inspired, but it shouldn't stop there.

I also want you to be in a group. We talked about that last week as well, to have a circle of people in your life who are speaking into your life and encouraging you in your own growth.

Another way that we grow is just through serving. This is just getting to this place in all of our lives where we say, "I just want to live an externally focused life. I don't just want to be focused on me and my needs and my issues and my problems, but I want to pull my head up and I want to look out and I want to see how God wants to use me to serve other people."

I want you to think about it this way: Every follower of Jesus needs a bib and an apron—a bib because I want you to feed, I want you to grow; an apron because I want you to serve. When you are eating right and when you are exercising, it kick starts your physical metabolism. When you are feeding on God's Word and you begin to serve through that mindset, then it kick starts your spiritual metabolism.

One of the things I always ask people—I ask it of myself—is whenever I'm feeling plateaued in my growth, I say, "Am I growing in my understanding of God's Word and am I doing something with it? Am I serving?" And if I'm not, then maybe that's a reason why I've plateaued.

Don't just focus on your problems. I'm not trying to minimize your problems, but problems are like weeds, aren't they? You get rid of one, one pops right up to take its place. It's kind of like putting my kids to bed at night. I put them to bed, they pop right back up.

Problems are kind of like that. Problems are like you focus all of your energy and you're trying to get rid of your problems, but another one's just always going to be there. Instead of focusing on your problems, focus on your purpose. When you focus on your purpose, like why God put you here, what will end up happening is your problems have a tendency to get smaller. We'll talk more about that next week.

Here's another way that we can train. It's just personal study and application. I just want to ask you how do you grow? For the longest time I would try to fit myself into the mold of how somebody else grew, but what is the primary way that you grow? Some of you are readers. Some of you are not. Some of you really love the arts. Maybe some of you don't. What are the spiritual pathways in your own soul?

Some of you like to get out into nature. Some of you don't. Maybe you like to go to the beach. Maybe you like to go to the mountains. Whatever it is, how do you grow? And are you spending enough time in personal devotion and reflection?

Here's another one. It's just fasting. This is withholding—it could be food, it could be something else—but it's withholding something to take that time that you would spend toward that and refocusing those energies.

And here's what fasting will do for you. Fasting will clarify your thinking faster than anything else. Fasting also reminds me that my body is a spoiled brat, and every time it screams, I feel like I've got to feed it, or I feel like I've got to appease it. And actually, what fasting does is saying no to the flesh so that way it attunes you more spiritually to what it is that God wants to do in your life.

Now fasting is never commanded in the Scriptures because God doesn't want to be legalistic about this, but he does say this would be an expectation. He says *when* you fast, *when* you do it. So I would encourage you just to try this at some time.

Some of you are like, "Well, I've got like a health condition; I can't fast from food." Well, you can fast from Netflix. Now you're like, "Okay, well I'll fast from food." It can be anything in your life that maybe you enjoy, a pleasure where you just say, "You know what? For a certain period of time...", and then a fast was meant to be broken. But during that time period, you're focused.

Did you know that every time God was about to do something big and significant in the life of his people they fasted and prayed? So this is something that we do to invite God into our lives.

Here's another one. It's just through generosity. This is really the idea that growing people are generous people, that this is part of the fruit that God is doing in and through your life. It's part of being externally focused.

Here's another one: Just faith-stretching experiences. It's this idea of, "Maybe I've been playing it a little bit too safe and so God, would you send me outside of my comfort zone?" I know that's a really scary prayer for us to pray because God will likely answer it. And it's just this idea of like what is it that you're afraid of doing? What are you fearful of? What can you not do in your own strength and just ask God to send you there.

The reason why that's so important is because it causes you to be fully dependent upon him. Many of us never put ourselves in a situation where we're fully dependent upon his Spirit because we play it too safe. We insulate ourselves. I'm not saying live a reckless life; I'm saying, "God, take me to this place where I can only be dependent upon you."

Here's the last one that I'll give—this is not an exhaustive list by any means, but—difficult seasons. I would just say that whenever I am in a valley in my life, the prayer that I can commonly go to is, "God, get me out." It's like that Star Trek prayer; you know, beam me up, Scotty. "God, get me out of here, like I don't want to be in this situation anymore." I'm not saying you shouldn't pray that. I'm just saying in addition to praying that say, "God, while I'm here, what do you want to teach me?"

I've learned more in the valleys of my life than the mountaintops. The mountaintops are great. I love the mountaintops. I can't live there. God will sometimes lead you into a valley and he'll sometimes keep you there for a while, not to crush you, but to grow you. And there is a real difference.

Now there are a whole bunch of other things that we can maybe add to this, but here's the warning that I want to give to those of you who maybe wrote these down or took these pictures, and I was even really wrestling with this this last week as to whether or not I should even guide you through this because I don't want this list to turn into a to-do list.

If it turns into a to-do list, "Oh, these are all the things I need to do for God to love me and for God to grow me," then you're reading it wrong. I don't want this to turn into like a legalistic kind of a thing, "Well, this is what good Christians do." No, this is training. This is gardening.

If you think about it that way, then what you'll end up doing is you'll actually take on the work of producing growth in your life, and that's not your role and that's not mine. You and I can't produce anything in our lives. The goal of each one of these things is to say, "How can I, through this spiritual discipline, connect to Jesus?" And Jesus is the one who produces the fruit in my life. I don't produce it.

That takes a ton of pressure off of all of us. In fact, Jesus would say it this way in John chapter 15:4-5. He would say, "Remain in me, and I will remain in you. For a branch cannot produce fruit if it is severed from the vine, and you cannot be fruitful **unless you remain in me.**" And then he explains it. He says, "Yes, I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing."

Jesus gives us this really clarifying visual. Much of the time, when it comes to spiritual growth, we think, "Okay, what I need to do is I need to produce for God and then I'll feel connected to him." And Jesus says no, you just need to connect to God, and then he'll produce the fruit in you. Does that make sense? I hope that that's clarifying for a number of us. Jesus says: Listen, I'm the vine and you're a branch.

These spiritual disciplines, in no way do they make you more loved by God or make you a better Christian. These are just practical ways to get connected to the vine so that Jesus can produce the kind of fruit in our lives that only he can.

You and I say, "Well, what is the fruit?" Well, Galatians 5 actually gives us a whole list of them. It says, "But the..." What is it? "...the **Holy Spirit** produces," you don't produce this; the Holy Spirit produces "this kind of fruit in our lives..." And then he says here they are. Here are the fruits of the Spirit. Are you growing in love, in joy, in peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control?

Once again, not a to-do list. It's a fruit list. He says: These are all the fruits that will naturally begin to emerge in your life as you stay connected to the vine. And I want you to think progress, not perfection.

When I was in the tank a couple weeks ago and as people were coming down into the tank—I love those conversations because people are so vulnerable. They're a little bit fearful. It takes a lot of courage to get down into that tank in front of y'all.

I would sit and I would just look people in the eye and I would just have this same conversation with all these people as they came down in the tank. I would just say, "First of all, thank you for coming down here. Thank you for taking your conviction and turning it into courage, because that's exactly what you did." And then I would just say this. "I just want to ask you do you believe that Jesus is God's Son, and do you believe that he reconciles you back to God as Savior of your life?"

Every single person, through tears in their eyes, were like, "Yeah, absolutely." And I would say, "That's great. Now I want to ask you another question. Are you willing to make Jesus Lord of your life?" That means that he's not just a drawer in the dresser, he's the whole dresser that all the drawers fit into. They would be a little more tentative on that one. They'd be like, "Yeah, yeah I do," and I'd say, "Great. Now lean into his grace every single day because you're going to need it because I do too."

See, this lordship issue is basically us saying, "I'm going to put one foot in front of the other and every single day I'm going to begin to chase after Jesus to allow him to do what only he can do in my life."

Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist, got this right in John chapter 3. John the Baptist was like this wild-haired, crazy guy who didn't have very good personal hygiene habits and had locusts in his teeth and ate wild honey, just a crazy guy. I love him. I love him.

And John the Baptist, people were coming to him saying, "Are you the one that we've been expecting?" In other words, are you the Messiah? And I love John's response. He was like: Oh no, no, no. I'm just the messenger. And he goes, "He must become greater; I must become less."

Can I just say that that's lordship in a nutshell? I've been chasing after Jesus in my life now for about 25 years, and I still have a long way to go, not to make God love me more, but to get more of Jesus into my character and less of me, and it just takes training versus trying.

Is there any area of your life where you would say, "I think the Peter Pan syndrome has sort of visited me in this area,"? And only you can assess that. I can't call that out in you. This is an issue that I primarily want you to take ownership of and to say, "Is there any area of my life in which I need to grow?"

So how do you know you're growing? And I would just say maybe the most tangible, practical way that we can know if we're growing is what Jesus says to us in Matthew 6:21. He would say, "Wherever your treasure is," and this could include money, but this is way beyond it. It's just whatever you treasure in this life. That's where "...the **desires of your heart** will also be." So he basically says where do you want your heart? Where do you want this to go? Then send your treasure there, and your heart will follow it.

I would just simply say this. One of the most tangible evidences of spiritual growth in my life is just this one right here: A **growing** person is a **generous** person.

If I were just to open up my own life to you, I would say that this was the last area of my life in which I wanted Jesus to be Lord, and I still wrestle with it and I still struggle with it and I still have to continue to give it to him.

Did you know that Jesus spoke about money and material possessions more than any other subject in the Bible including love and forgiveness? Every time I say that, some people kind of are shocked by it. I didn't say giving. I said money. There's a difference. I think the reason why Jesus talked about it so much is because money and treasure and physical possessions, they serve as God's chief competition for the throne of our hearts.

Let me just get real practical. Do any of you have a certain level in your bank account that when you do your online banking and the balance is over that level you relax, but if the amount drops below that level you panic a little bit? Anybody with me in that? Those of you who do the finances?

I can tell which ones of you run the finances in your home because some of you are going, "Yeah," and others of you are like, "I'm clueless. I don't know. I have no idea. She just tells me how much money I can spend this month."

What that feeling is when you look at your bank account and whether you feel at peace or at worry is worship. That's what that is. And that's why Jesus would talk about that so often, not because he wants your money but because he wants your heart. Our hearts will often follow our money and material possessions.

You know what can break that in your life and mine is this spiritual discipline of just saying, "God, I'm just going to be generous with what you've entrusted to me." The Bible teaches for followers of Jesus that it's something called a tithe, and all a tithe is, the Bible kind of gives us this benchmark of just 10 percent of our incomes just going to back to God, not only as a spiritual discipline, but to expand the mission and the vision of what God wants to do around the world.

I would say it this way. A tithe is where you should start. It's the starting line, not the finish line. It's where you should say, "God, I'm going to trust you in this area." It's the training wheels of generosity.

I love how God describes this in 2 Corinthians chapter 9. He says don't get hung up so much on percentages. This is what your disposition should be. "Remember this—a farmer who plants only a few seeds will get a small crop. But the one who plants **generously** will get a generous crop."

Now here it is. "You must each decide in your heart how much to give. And don't give **reluctantly**," like don't feel strong-armed into it, "or in response to **pressure**. For God loves a person who gives **cheerfully**." This passage right here I think is the determining passage for the way in which God wants us to view generosity.

I love that word cheerfully. Did you know in the original Greek it's literally translated hilarious? God loves a hilarious giver. This is the kind of belly laugh, make your sides hurt, snot come out of your nose kind of laughter.

He's like when you give you're that cheerful because you understand what it's doing in your own spiritual life. That's where I want to guide you to. I don't want you to get hung up on percentages. I don't want you to get legalistic about this. I don't want you to get defensive. I want you to get to this place where you say, "You know what, God? I want to give this area of my life to you as an act of obedience and then come to see that if my spiritual growth is plateaued that God might actually use this as a catalyst for my growth."

I appreciate my good friend, Chris, who was willing to kind of open up and share his story with us, and so take a look at his story on the screens.

Chris:

I've had the experience of not having money when I was a kid growing up. We really didn't understand and know what poor was until we met other people that were better off than us financially.

Cut a lot of deals with God when I was younger and asked him for a lot of things, and then, as he started delivering, sometimes I just wasn't that excited about returning the favor.

My parents had talked about tithe when we were coming up, but I don't think I was a very good steward of that earlier on, you know, because I was selfish and I wanted what I wanted.

Being a businessman, you know, I'm always looking at the numbers. What I was able to do is make enough money to look at my own personal finances and just say, "Hey, look, God expects us to give 10 percent," so I just budgeted for 10 percent. I would tithe and I'd look forward to collecting that 10 percent back on my taxes. I began to look at giving as a reason for me to personally gain something, so truthfully, I really wasn't giving with the right heart.

I went through a few other different things in my life. God was like: Look, dude. This is not the way you give, and if you're going to continue to do that, stop. And at that particular time, the light bulb went off and I really understood what tithing and giving to the church was about, and it wasn't about me writing it off on my taxes; it was about me giving with a good heart.

I think we often block our own blessings by not giving. God encouraged us to have a great life. He wants us to be joyful. He wants us to live a good, fruitful life, you know. As our father, he wants us to have the best possible life we can, but so often, we just won't be obedient and we'll get something and we'll hold onto it so tight or we won't share, we won't give, and oftentimes we create those dynamics for ourselves.

It's not about just what you give; it's more about how you give it, you know. For me personally, it just took some maturing and then me building my own personal relationship with Christ, understanding what he really wanted from me, and that was a personal relationship. It wasn't the money.

Aaron:

Hey, can we give it up for Chris? His willingness to be that vulnerable? When I watched that video for the first time and I heard him say, "Hey, I was just looking for a tax break," I was like "Whoa! Thank you for being that vulnerable with us," but if you caught what he said right after, he's like, "You know what? My heart was in the wrong place."

One of the things I love about our church, one of the many things that I love, is that this is the most generous church I've ever heard of. Because of that, I don't have to talk about this subject very often. We don't pass offering bags or plates. You guys are generous.

The downside of that is that it's easy for all of us to kind of go, "Well, it looks like everything's covered. Looks like things are great," and I just want you to know that it's your generosity, your premeditated generosity that enables us to do what we're doing in and around the world. And we have way more vision and opportunity than we have resources.

I want you to know we take this super seriously, the stewardship of the dollars that are given. So right now, as a church, we want to be as externally focused as we possibly can be.

Many of you may know this, many of you may not, but right now we are partnering with organizations like the International Justice Mission that frees people from sex trafficking around the world. We're partnering with this organization called Missions of Hope in Kenya, trying to come alongside of children who are living in poverty to meet their physical needs as well as to give them an education.

We partner with this organization called TCM International, which is a seminary of sorts that trains pastors and leaders in ministry in very difficult places around the world. We partner to start brand-new churches around our country all the way from Santa Barbara to Chicago to Harlem and even internationally. We're part of a church plant in Paris right now.

We're partnering with organizations right here in our city like Wheeler Mission and Ascent 1:21. And right now, one of the things that we understand is happening right underneath our noses in our city is that there are so many children who are in need, so the foster care system is just overloaded, and through our Live 1:17 ministry, we want to come alongside families who want to be safe families and want to foster kids and resource them through adoption.

We want to continue to start campuses and start churches so that more and more people can be reached. And I want to thank you for your generosity because your generosity enables us to continue to chase after what it is that God has called us to do in and through this world.

But here's a very personal application that I just want to leave with you. Do with this what you will. If you are in a place right now where you're just not trusting God with a tithe, would you be willing to try it?

Did you know that this area is the only area in the Scriptures that God actually trash-talks us? He does it in Malachi. He says: Hey, just test me in this. Just bring the whole tithe to the storehouse and see just see what'll happen.

And can I just say to you if you're not tithing, if you've never tried it, if you've gotten away from it, would you try it, just try the tithe between now and the end of the year? If you don't trust me, if you think I'm trying to get something from you, don't tithe it here, tithe it somewhere else, but chances are what'll happen is what Jesus said in Matthew 6. Your heart will follow your treasure, wherever that may go.

Just try it and see what God might do in your own personal and spiritual growth between now and then because this is usually the last area of lordship that I'm willing to give up and invite God into my life.

I just want to pray for us right now at all of our campuses, pray that as we respond back to what God has already spoken to us today that we would just invite him into this place.

God, we come to you right now. I just pray that you would help each and every one of us right now, regardless of where we are in our spiritual journey, to determine what our next step is toward spiritual growth.

Father, may we just get really, really honest; really, really vulnerable with you and invite you in. Is there any area of our life that we've put up that kind of yellow tape and said, "God, you can have every area but this one," and maybe we'd be willing to take that down and invite you in, not just as Savior, but as Lord.

We invite you into this place right now. We thank you for your grace. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.