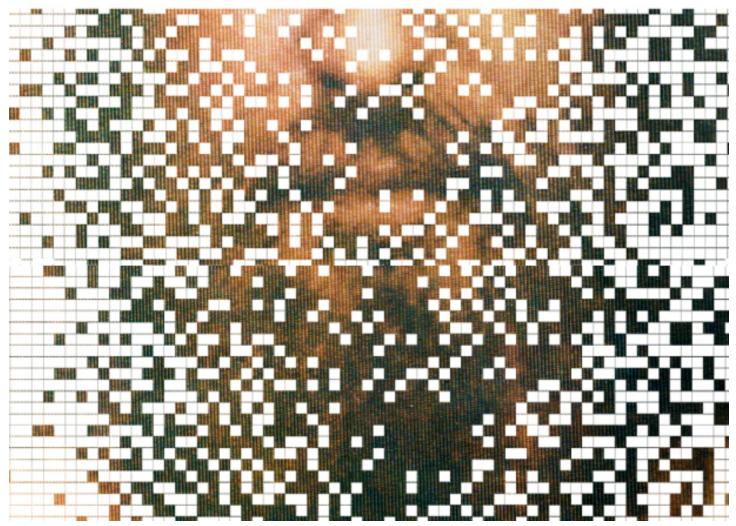


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Parable of the Sower

Bottom Line: If we do not take the responsibility of preparing our hearts to receive God's Word, then we shouldn't expect to receive anything at all.

Have you ever been accused of not listening to something someone was saying?

What is the difference between merely *hearing* something and actually *listening* to something? Why do you think listening well is such a difficult skill in today's culture?

Probably the biggest difference between *hearing* something compared to only *listening* to something has to do with comprehension and understanding. Listening is a lost art in our culture. We are constantly bombarded with noise from every direction—our spouses, our kids, our bosses, our televisions, our radios, our phones, etc. It is impossible for us to deeply process everything that is thrown at us each day, so in an attempt to quell all the noise we tend to only try and process what is quickly and easily digestable; our minds are too tired and overwhelmed to do much else. This results in a lack of understanding and we don't actually listen to what is really important. This affects every area of our lives, but especially our relationships, where listening well is crucial to demonstrating a heart that is open and receptive to the other person and what they have to say.

How important is listening well to our relationship with Jesus? How do we hear Jesus?

The biggest way we hear Jesus today is through the Bible, which (amazingly!) records some of the very words of Jesus Himself. Jesus frequently taught in parables. A parable is a story with a deeper spiritual meaning. In His parables, Jesus takes things that are commonly understood and uses them to point to and illustrate greater, deeper, more mysterious truths.

Read Matthew 13:10-17. Why do you think Jesus spoke in parables?

Jesus explains that the reason He speaks in parables is to weed out those whose hearts weren't truly receptive to the truth He was trying to convey to them (vv. 13-15). Jesus frequently drew large crowds and knew that a lot of people, although they may say the right things, wouldn't genuinely receive Him or His teachings in their hearts (**Read John 2:23-25**). So, to those who had been faithful to listen well, who proved in their hearts that they were actually receptive to Jesus and His message, they would be blessed with deeper insight and knowledge (v. 12; 16), while those whose hearts weren't truly open to Him would gain nothing.

In what ways do you see people hearing the words of Jesus but not listening to them?

Keeping in mind what we've learned so far, read Matthew 13:1-10 and discuss the following questions:

What do we learn about the sower? What do we learn about the seed? What do we learn about the soil? Is the focus in this parable on the sower, the seeds, or the soil?

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Out of the sower, the seed, and the soil, where does the problem lie? What does this tell us about Jesus, His word, and our hearts?

What is the problem with the first soil the seeds were thrown onto? How does this relate to our hearts? What about the second soil? The third?

What is the result of the fourth soil? What does this soil do differently than the others? (It produces fruit). How does this translate and relate to salvation?

Now read Matthew 13:18-23. How close were your interpretations to Jesus' explanation?

In Jesus' explanation here, which outcome shocks or surprises you the most? Why?

According to verse 15, what are the characteristics of a person who has been born again?

Jesus says that the disciples are blessed because their eyes truly see, their ears truly hear, and because of this the seed of the Gospel that the Sower planted landed on good soil—their hearts truly understand the message of the Gospel, and they will bear good fruit.

Why is it not enough to just hear the word of God? What does putting it into practice reveal about our trust in Him? (See James 1:22-25)

What ways can we till the soil of our hearts to make us ready to receive the word of God? How can we actively fight against each distraction that Jesus mentions—temptation by Satan (v. 19), overwhelming persecution (v. 20-21), the worries of life and deceitfulness of wealth (v. 22)?

Reflection

Which soil best describes the tendencies of your heart? Do you give in too easily to sin and temptation without putting up much of a fight or feeling any conviction? Is the strength of your faith dictated by how easy or hard your current circumstances are? Is your heart given to material possessions and worldly concerns more than Jesus and heavenly matters? How are these orientations and patterns preventing you from truly hearing God?

Are you listening well to the sermons on Sunday mornings? In group? In your personal time with the Lord? Do you go into each of these environments committed to put what you hear from God's word into practice? If not, what can you do to help you listen better? Do you need to take notes/journal? Do you need to discuss the sermon, the lesson, or your bible reading with others for accountability? What can you do next Sunday service, next group session, next Bible study, next quiet time, etc., to help you listen better?

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Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds

Bottom Line: We must patiently endure evil in this world, not taking matters of judgment into our own hands, but leaving it up to Christ when He returns.

Can you remember a time when you saw something being done wrongly and had to fight the urge to do it yourself? How did you handle the situation?

Maybe you've tried to teach somebody to do something, maybe you've seen something being done wrongly, or maybe you've just disagreed with the *way* something was being done—all of us have probably experienced frustration of seeing something being done wrongly and wanting to take matters into our own hands.

Is this kind of response a righteous response or not? Discuss.

Whether or not our desire to take over is a good response or not really depends on the situation: if we see somebody doing something dangerous, then for their safety and the safety of others, we should step in. But if we are honest, most of the time it is not concern for others that causes us to feel this way—it is pride. *We* know what is best. *We* know how to handle the situation. *We* can produce better results. This desire assumes that we are smarter or more wise than somebody else, which may very well be true, but there times when we are wrong. Similarly, Jesus warned His disciples to be wary of the temptation to try and take matters into their own hands when it came to judgment of sinners and the dispensing of justice. He taught them this lesson in the parable of the weeds and the wheat.

Read Matthew 13:24-30 and then the explanation in vv. 36-43.

According to this parable, what does Jesus tell us about our role in the Kingdom in regards to judgment? Rather than uprooting the weeds, what should we be doing instead?

In His explanation, Jesus explains that the weeds are "sons of the evil one" and the weeds are also referred to as "all causes of sin and all law-breakers." The presence of weeds in the world tells us that there will always be evil that we must contend with. But just as the slaves were instructed not to uproot the weeds, we must remember that it is not our job to bring final judgment on nonbelievers or evildoers. Rather we are to leave judgment in the hands of God.

Read Romans 12:17-21. Considering these verses along with Jesus' warning that uprooting the weeds may lead to accidentally uprooting some wheat, why is vengeance and judgment best left up to God?

(Note: The emphasis in this question is that God is a better judge than we are, but other questions from your group members about what it means to "accidentally uproot some wheat" may come up. Given what we **know** the Bible says about the eternal security of the believer, we know this doesn't mean that a truly saved person could lose their salvation by the way that we treat them. At the very least, we can confidently say that "uprooting wheat" entails some spiritual damage being done to somebody who is truly

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saved, therefore we should refrain from passing final judgment upon anybody. Unless you have come across a clearer explanation of what this means, it may be best to refrain from trying to provide definite answers and let the tension that it may cause rest where it is.)

Verse 17 leaves no doubt that getting even is evil, and verse 21 says that if we take matters into our own hands, we have been overcome by evil. Therefore, judgment is best left up to God because there is no way we can dispense it and be righteous at the same time. It is possible for our judgments to be wrong, misdirected, or misplaced, but that is not the case with God. His judgments are always right and true.

How can poorly wrought judgment affect our witness to unbelievers? Conversely, how does refraining from judgment help our witness?

Read 2 Timothy 2:24-25.

Here, Paul connects our "patiently enduring evil" with the hope that "God may grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth." God can save even the most wicked and evil person. He can turn weeds into wheat. By pronouncing judgment upon evildoers, we may be speaking against someone that God plans to save. We are called to patiently endure evil in this world, to be nestled in amongst the weeds, not tearing them out, but instead working to plant more wheat. We aim for the salvation of the lost, not their judgment. We leave that in the hands of God who alone "judges justly" (1 Peter 2:23).

Why do you think Jesus wanted His disciples to be aware of the coming day of judgment that He speaks of in Matthew 13:41-43? How should this coming reality influence the way we live today?

What might it look like for you to stop trying to "pull weeds" and instead start trying to "plant wheat?" What does it look like for us as a group to do this?

Reflection:

Is it possible that in some way, you've embraced attitudes or behaviors that are the result of casting unjust judgment on others? Such as withholding forgiveness, physically avoiding someone, harboring bitterness towards someone, etc. Sometimes these attitudes are subtle and we can miss them.

Is there anybody in your life that you have sinfully pronounced judgment on? Meaning, is there anybody in your life that you have ceased to pray for? That you have given up on their salvation? That you have assumed is lost and there is no hope for them? Is it possible you have assumed this about entire groups of people (certain religions, political parties, ethnicities, etc.)? How does this reveal a lack of trust in God? In the work of Christ? In the power of the Gospel?

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Do you see yourself more as an instrument of God's justice? Or an instrument of His love, mercy, and forgiveness? How well do your actions line up with the answer to that question?

Do you have any anger that you try to justify by the wrongs that have been done to you? How does this reveal a lack of trust in the judgment of God?

Announcements

Constitution revisions are available for you to pick up at Connections. If you are a covenant member of FBCnl, please carefully read through the Constitution and if you should have any questions, you can submit them in one of the following ways:

- 1) Write your questions on the provided cards in the lobby and drop those cards off in the box.
- 2) Go to fbcnl.com/questions and submit your question

Be sure to include your name, as no question submitted without a name will be addressed.

On Sunday, February 11, following the evening Prayer Gathering, the Constitution team will be addressing questions that have been turned in. And on Sunday, March 4, at the quarterly Members' Meeting, members will vote to adopt the Constitution.

Curriculum is posted online at <u>www.fbcnl.com/resources/curriculum</u>. Here you can download the current study as well as any past studies that we have completed. Be sure to look around and find other resources on our website such as sermon recordings and Bible classes.

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Parable of the Mustard Seed and the Leaven

Bottom Line: No matter how things may appear, the Kingdom of God is advancing and will never be overcome.

Can you think of a person or a thing that at first glance seemed small, meek, or insignificant, but ended up having much greater potential or impact?

Read Matthew 13:31-32

Bahiagrass is a grass that is grown primarily in the southeastern United States. It has a lot of uses, but is not much to look at, so you don't typically want it in your lawn. The problem, though, is that bahiagrass is notoriously difficult to get rid of and it spreads like wildfire. Once you see even one stalk of it, you can be assured that before you know it, the rest of your yard will be covered in it. It has an outstanding heat and drought tolerance which allows it to persevere through extreme conditions where other grasses cannot. You can try your best to keep it out of your yard, but without extreme care and constant maintenance, it's a losing battle.

In these two parables, the way that Jesus describes the Kingdom is a lot like bahiagrass. The kingdom of God started out small, with just a band of rough, illiterate, uneducated men. But like the mustard seed, the leaven, and bahiagrass, Jesus taught that the Kingdom would eventually grow to become more than anybody ever expected.

Think over what you know about church history from the time of Jesus until now. What evidence do you see that this parable is true?

How does this truth relate to our mission/Kingdom building efforts today?

If there is one clear truth shown to us in these parables, it's that outward appearances count for very little. Doing the work of ministry is hard (and ministry is something that we are ALL engaged in, by the way). At times it can feel like we're not getting anywhere. We keep sharing, keep praying, keep serving, yet we're not seeing the results that we would like. Or if we do see results, they're about as spectacular as a mustard seed. However, even Jesus' ministry began with the most humble beginnings—His "kingdom" consisted of only twelve people who were hated by the world. But look at what has happened! You are doing this study today, in a room full of believers, in a church full of Christians, that is only one church of countless others all over the world who all bow the knee to King Jesus. And all of this 2000 years removed from the time of Jesus. What started out as small as a mustard seed has grown into a colossal, worldwide movement that has lasted thousands of years and shows no signs of slowing down. If things seem insignificant and slow, don't be discouraged by what *appears* to be happening. Keep sharing, keep praying, keep serving, and trust that God is working behind the scenes.

Read Matthew 13:33. What significance does this parable have for us? In what way does the kingdom spread like leaven? How does the leaven change the flour and what parallels does this draw to the Kingdom?

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In the parable of the mustard seed, we are surprised by the contrast between the beginning and end product: the tiny mustard seed blooms into the largest of garden plants. In the parable of the leaven, what is surprising is not the end result, but the *method* through which the result is brought about. The leaven spreads through the flour silently, internally, and unseen. This was not the way that the Jews expected the Kingdom of Heaven to be inaugurated on the Earth. The Jews were expecting a King to come and initiate a powerful military and political takeover. They anticipated that the Kingdom would come visibly, quickly, and powerfully. But instead, the change the King caused was one that happened within the inner, unseen person. Just like the leaven within the flour, Jesus said "the Kingdom is within you" (Luke 17:21). We don't physically see the Kingdom itself, we only see its effects in the lives of those who are its inhabitants. Jesus rescued souls, He did not capture land or overthrow rulers. But nevertheless, just like the leaven, His Kingdom would spread and pervade the entire world.

In what ways do we sometimes make the same mistake as the Jews? What are some incorrect expectations that we may have about the Kingdom of God? Does your life look like the life of someone who belongs to the unseen Kingdom of God?

What do these parables teach us about how to respond when it seems like our witness is ineffective?

What does the parable of the mustard seed teach us about what we are capable of as **believers?** (Even the smallest, weakest, and least of us have incredible potential to create an impact in the Kingdom).

With both the parable of the mustard seed and the parable of the leaven, Jesus defied the conventional understanding of the Kingdom that was prevalent at the time. There are some ways that these parables defy our own expectations about the Kingdom as well. God will bring about the Kingdom through humble means, and often in ways that are not obvious. We must rely on His timing, His process, and His power in this work, trusting that even though our efforts may be small and seemingly inefficient, God can cause their effects to be far-reaching and powerful.

Reflection

Do you doubt that you are sufficient enough to do anything for God's Kingdom? Why do you feel that you are inadequate? How can you increase your level of trust in God's ability to take what you have and magnify it into an incredible impact?

Are you pessimistic about the advance of the Kingdom here on earth? Is your pessimism due to the fact that you are expecting more physical indications of God's activity in the world rather than spiritual? Do you falsely equate the success of the Gospel in the world with how politically stable the world is? Do you falsely equate the influence of the Kingdom in the world with how politically influential Christianity is? How can you take your focus off of the physical, which is deceiving, and place it on the spiritual?

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The Parables of the Treasure and the Pearl

Bottom Line: The Kingdom of Heaven is more valuable and precious than anything we have to give up to obtain it.

What is something that you saved up a long time to purchase? What all did you do to try and earn the money for it? How did the process of saving up for it affect your appreciation for it?

When you work hard for something, you appreciate it more. This applies to anything that requires an effort to attain: paying off debt, getting in shape, becoming proficient at a craft or instrument, etc. For all of these things, the value of them is inherent in themselves, you don't have to try hard to convince people of the value of financial security, health, or artistic expertise. But when you sacrifice time, energy, and resources to attain them, you better understand their value and you realize that the sacrifice you made was completely worth it. The same idea is true when applied to the Kingdom of Heaven. This is what Jesus emphasizes in the parables of the treasure and the pearl. These parables are meant to convey the immense worth of the Kingdom of Heaven is simply God's reign and influence on the Earth through His people. In essence, when you "find" or "enter into" the Kingdom of Heaven, you find or enter into salvation.

Read Matthew 13:44-46.

In the parable of the treasure, Jesus implies that it's possible for the Kingdom to be found by those who are not overtly looking for it. This is something that God explicitly predicted would happen in Isaiah 65:1, saying "I revealed Myself to those who did not ask for Me; I was found by those who did not seek Me." This is probably the experience of most of us as very few people actually go "looking" for God (Romans 3:11). Hardly any of us arrive at a saving knowledge of Jesus after first comparing all other religious options, weighing the evidence, and finding the claims of Christianity to be most compelling or rational. Most of the time we are caught off-guard by the grace of God. Maybe it's a song we hear on the radio or an unexpected conversation with a friend that leads us to experience, understand, and accept Christ. Many people's testimonies are much like the man who stumbled across a treasure lying in the place he least expected it to be.

For those of you who weren't looking for Jesus, how did you come to "find" the Kingdom? Was it where you expected it to be? What hope does this give us in regards to our lost friends, family members, and loved ones?

If the Kingdom of Heaven truly is "hidden" like the treasure in the field (see 1 Corinthians 1:18; 2 Corinthians 4:3) what is the appropriate way to react to our knowledge of the Kingdom? What is an inappropriate way to react?

In the parable of the pearl, the merchant is well-versed in his industry. He knows what makes a good pearl and has probably dealt with many fine pearls in his life. But although he is an expert in pearls, this single find so far surpasses any other pearl that he has ever seen that he

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considers it a *bargain* to sell off all of his posessions to acquire it. In other words, after years of searching for the Kingdom, the man has finally found it. This situation most closely resembles somebody who has spent most of their life in church, performing religious duties, and being a good person. They relied on their knowledge of the Bible and doctrine (the "Christian industry") to justify themselves as an expert Christian. But when they truly encounter Jesus, they see that everything they had considered valuable before is actually worthless and they freely give it up for the sake of genuinely knowing Christ (see Philippians 3:3-11).

Did any of you find Jesus in this way? Is it possible that this could be you right now? What does the Kingdom of Heaven provide for us that is so much more valuable than anything that can be offered by the world?

The characters in the two parables both found the kingdom in different ways, but both experiences shared something in common: they *joyfully* and *willingly* gave up everything they had in order to obtain the treasure. They didn't count what they gave up as a *loss* but a *bargain*. They enthusiastically gave up everything they had to receive their treasure.

Think back to when you were saved. What was it about Jesus that convinced you to give your life to Him? We live in a time when our perspective is easily dulled by the things around us. What kinds of things stand in the way of our ability to see the true value of the Kingdom of Heaven?

According to Jesus, the Kingdom of Heaven has all-surpassing value, but that value doesn't come without cost. There is no way that we can come to Jesus without making a sacrifice. We must lay down our lives if we want to truly follow Him. But the good news about losing your life for the sake of Jesus and His kingdom is that your experience doesn't stop there. When we lose our lives, we truly find them (Matthew 16:25). Whatever we might sacrifice for the sake of the kingdom we will find, in the end, is nothing in comparison to what we gain.

Why does finding and embracing the Kingdom of Heaven always involve a measure of sacrifice? What kinds of things do we have to sacrifice, or give up, if we are to gain the Kingdom? What sacrifices have you made for the sake of gaining Christ?

Reflection

Jesus said to seek first His kingdom (Matthew 6:33). Is this true of you right now? What are some of the things, that might not necessarily be bad things, which you might be seeking instead of His kingdom?

Is there any practice you can introduce or eliminate from your life this week that would help you see the true value of the Kingdom of Heaven? How can you hold the kingdom in its rightful place of value in your family? In your social circle?

Have you grown dull in your affections for Christ and the Kingdom of Heaven? What can you do to "return to the love you had at first?" (Revelation 2:4).

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Parable of the Net

Bottom Line: The mark of a true believer is that they are growing in their faith as they grow in their love for Christ.

Can you describe a time when something wasn't quite what you thought it was? How did it effect you?

Read Matthew 13:47-50.

The point of this parable is similar to the point made in the parable of the wheat and the weeds. (If you need to, go read the parable of the wheat and the weeds in Matthew 13:24-30; 36-43). Jesus is describing the Kingdom of Heaven like a net that is dragged through the sea collecting any and all fish that are in its path. When it is full and hauled back to shore, the fish that are good are kept, but the bad fish are thrown away. In the same way, at the end of the age, the angels will identify who the evil are from among the righteous and will cast them into hell. Right off the top, we know the main point of this parable is that the Kingdom of Heaven and its citizens will not have to endure evil and evildoers forever. God will purge His Kingdom of all sin and wickedness, removing those who reject and defy Him from His presence and casting them into the lake of fire.

Something interesting to note is that some bad fish ended up getting swept up in the net, just like the weeds growing alongside the wheat, or the wolves hiding amongst the sheep (Matthew 7:15). So the question is...

How do you know that you're not a bad fish that has just been "swept up" in the net of the Kingdom? In other words, how do you know that you haven't fooled yourself? How do you know that you truly belong?

Luckily for us, we just have to look back at the previous parables that Jesus taught to understand what the character of a true Kingdom citizen looks like.

Read Matthew 13:1-9; 18-23. According to verse 23, what is the main difference between the good soil and the bad soils?

Jesus says that the true Kingdom citizen is someone who not only *receives* the word of God, but also *understands* it, and because he understands the word of God, he will bear fruit. The way James put it was that we wouldn't only be hearers of the word, but *doers* of the word as well (James 1:22). "Bearing fruit" is the most commonly used term in the New Testament to describe what a true believer does (John 15:16; John 15:8; Colossians 1:10; Matthew 3:8; Matthew 7:17-20; Ephesians 5:9; Philippians 1:11; Galatians 5:22-23; etc.). It is important to understand that if we are bearing fruit, then we are *producing* something. It is easy to convince ourselves that simply refraining from participating in immoral activities is equal to bearing fruit, but that's not the case, all you've done is not produce *bad* fruit.

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How would you describe someone who is a hearer of the word only and not a doer? How is it possible that someone could be convinced they are a Christian even though they do not bear any fruit? What role does motivation play in determining whether the fruit we bear is good or bad? (Think about how believers and unbelievers alike can produce the same kind of "good" fruit).

Read 2 Peter 1:5-8. What is the key point in verse 8 that is pertinent to this discussion? What does it mean if someone is not increasing in the virtues that Peter lists?

From the overwhelming evidence provided in the New Testament, it is clear that the trajectory of a believers life is one of growth and progress. If you are bearing fruit and are growing in righteousness, no matter how small the growth or how seemingly insignificant the fruit may be, this is evidence that you belong in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Read Matthew 13:44-46. What characteristic of a Kingdom citizen is shared by both characters in these parables?

Here, Jesus makes clear through two parables that the Kingdom of Heaven is worth giving up everything for. In neither parable does the character give up their possessions reluctantly or under compulsion. They both enthusiastically and joyfully trade their worldly possessions in order to gain the Kingdom. Although Jesus does call some people to literally sell all they have to follow him (Matthew 19:21), the main thrust of these parables is that the Kingdom is the believer's first and utmost priority in life (Matthew 6:33). The mark of a true believer is that they treasure and esteem Christ supremely, far above any other, and are willing to count all things as loss compared to knowing Him (Philippians 3:8).

If treasuring Christ is a distinctive mark of a Christian, how should that inform the activities we engage in as believers? How does loving Christ affect the fruit we bear and the growth we experience?

Think through and discuss your thoughts on the following: "The more you know Him, the more you love Him. The more you love Him, the more you obey Him. The more you obey Him, the more you know Him."

So, according to Jesus, the marks of a true believer are that they love Christ supremely and are on a positive trajectory of growth throughout their lives. There will be times when a believer stumbles and falls into sin, but the overall *trend* should not be a negative one, it should be positive. If we set our hearts upon Christ and pursue Him above everything else, He will lead us into righteousness and we will be assured of our place in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Reflection:

Think back on your time as a Christian. From the beginning until now, is your Christian life marked by growth, stagnation, or even decline? Have you grown in your love for Christ? Do you have an increased desire to learn more about him? Do you want more

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and more to be obedient to Him? Are you growing in the fruit of the spirit? If these things are evidence of salvation, how assured are you that you are truly saved?

What in your life is competing for your affections? What is robbing you of joy in Christ? What is keeping you from growing in obedience? What is preventing you from bearing fruit? What steps can you take to remove these distractions from your life?

Read 2 Peter 1:5-8 again. Which of these qualities do you need to grow most in? How will you go about doing this?

Announcements:

Service Opportunity: The deacons of FBCnl are tasked with serving and facilitating the needs of the body, the church. To help with this, they are asking that if anybody has any specific skills that they would like to volunteer (plumbing, painting, etc.) to please sign up at Connections and let them know how you would possibly be able to help if any needs arose. For more information, visit Connections or talk to Dean Wright.

Prayer Gathering and Business Meeting: Next Sunday, March 4, we will have our Sunday night Prayer Gathering starting at 5:30. Immediatley following the Prayer Gathering will be a business meeting where we will vote on the revised Constitution and Bylaws. There will be a carry-in meal in the gym immediately following the service.