Hey everyone, welcome back to another week of CONNECT – GROW – SHARE! Let’s start off with a prayer together. “Heavenly Father, open our lives to the truth of your Word and its place in our lives. Help us to realize how important it is for us to hear your words and study them together. IN Jesus, the word made flesh, amen!”

This session we continue to discover what it means to take the next step, to move as a disciple from CONNECT to GROW. Connect to God and His people in Worship… Grow together in God’s Word through Life Groups! Last session we talked about the importance and the essentials of Life Groups. 1. God’s Word 2. Growth 3. Acceptance 4.Confidentiality. We spent some time talking about Growth, Acceptance and Confidentiality. Let’s consider now the first essential and really the foundation to any life group experience, the Word of God. Without the Word of God a group that is committed to only Growth, Acceptance and Confidentiality… will actually stagnate. The Word of God is central.

When we let God speak into our lives through his Word, it changes us for the better. Deuteronomy 6:6 says “These words…shall be upon your hearts.” God’s words are so important that they need to be upon our hearts, within us, a part of who we are! Deuteronomy 6:6 also has the word hearts! It’s in the plural. That means more than one heart, more than one person is involved, it’s more than just me! Reading the bible on your own is very important, but the importance of studying the Bible with other people is also vital. God commands us to do it. Struggling and seeking to understand the Bible with other believers helps us to hear and see more clearly what God is saying to us!

Do you remember the phrase that we used to say as kids, “sticks and stones may break my bones… but words will never hurt me?” Well the research has demonstrated that this is completely untrue. In fact, words are more powerful than we ever thought before. I’m sure if you thought about it for a minute you would agree. Think of your childhood and your relationship with your parents. If your parents spoke strong powerful words of truth, grace, and love to you… those words brought safety, security, strength, confidence, freedom and empowerment to your life! Words are powerful. If your parents spoke words of destruction and abuse… well, those words damaged you… and on the negative side of things you too know how powerful words can be.

Think about the people who have spoken words of truth and grace into your life. Think about how they have helped you to become who you are today. Words of encouragement and empowerment change lives for the better. We all love to be around people who have that gift of encouragement. We feel so much better about who we are after talking with them and so often those words help us become so much better.

But what about all those other words that are floating out there in the world, in the media, even in our minds? Think about the words that circle us and influence us. Before the invention of the radio, television, and the internet, the words of family, friends, and God had the biggest voice. But now, words are everywhere bombarding us and invading our lives – magazines, newspapers, radios, television, internet, movies, advertisements, marketing… In some ways it seems like we can’t control the words and messages being hurled at us…

Though we often think we don’t have a choice over this, the reality is that we do! We can choose what place those words have in our lives. Will those words prevail over the words of our family, our friends, and even our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ?!

Think about how much time the Word of God influences your life. If you’re a Christian and believe that God speaks to you in His Word, the Bible, how often should that word be heard in your life? For some Christians the only time they interact with God’s Word is on Sunday Mornings. If they only go to worship 1x a month that means they are only spending 12 hours a year hearing God speak His words to them.

The bureau of Labor and statistics released its annual Time Use survey last year… they found that the average American watches 2 hours and 31 minutes of television every day! That’s 17.5 hours a week, 910 hours a year. Some Christians spend more time watching TV in a week than they do receiving God’s Word in a year!

I want you to know that I’m not trying to come down hard on you if you are one of those people, but I want you to think about the words of influence around you. Think about the words of encouragement and empowerment you have received from others and think about how spending time in God’s Word is like receiving that same kind of encouragement and empowerment… but 100 times better.

In John 6:63 – Jesus says “the words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life.” – and his disciples agreed… they said in 6:68 “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.” Jesus’ words aren’t surrounded by high definition special effects…they aren’t wrapped up in Hollywood packaging… but they are far more powerful than any word that any other media has spattered into your life… Jesus’ Words are life… they were spoken and written down for you!

 **[video testimony of how studying the word with other believers is important!]**

I hope those words about the power of studying God’s word, and studying it with other believers are an encouragement to you.

In 2nd timothy (3.14), the apostle Paul has some encouraging words for young Timothy. He tells him, “continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of.” As Christians what are we convinced of? We are convinced that the Word of God is the source of all truth and grace… the apostle Paul reminds us to continue in that truth, don’t let it be a 12 hours a year type of thing, let it be more than that. And he reminds us again why it is so important. In 2 Timothy 3:15 St. Paul says “the holy Scriptures…are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus!” It’s essential that we hear these strong words of encouragement. Words of salvation centered in the work of Jesus Christ on the Cross.

St. Paul also tells us that the Word of God brings us words of empowerment that Prepare us for the next step in our discipleship process. SHARE. Share Christ with our Words Service and Resources. He states this in 2 tim 3 16-17 when he says, “All Scripture is God-breathedand is useful for teaching,rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness,17 so that the man of Godmay be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” When we grow together in the Word we are equipped and prepared to take the next step in our discipleship process – Share Christ with our Lives.

2 Timothy talks about what the Word of God accomplishes in our lives. However, you might be wondering, how do we do it? What does it look like? How do we continue in God’s Word? Well, if you are watching this video you are at least 3 weeks into doing it. Growing together with other believers, in the Word of God, in a Life Group, is one of the most powerful ways to continue in God’s Word.

I mentioned Deuteronomy chapter 6 earlier. There we see Moses speaking words from God to the people of God. He tells them beginning in verse 6, “6 These commandments (the better translation would be “words”, These words) that I give you today are to be upon your hearts.7 Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. 8 Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. 9 Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.a (Deu 6:6-9 NIV).” Moses is telling the people that you’ve got to talk about these words with each other, in your families, at home, in the car, before bed, when you get up in the morning! All the time! Moses’s words remind us that we need to grow together in God’s Words, with other believers.

Personally speaking, as a pastor, I study the Word of God for a living, right? Still, every time I study the Word of God with other believers I almost always learn something new… and God’s word encourages and empowers me in a way that I couldn’t have experienced by myself. There is power in God’s Words to us and power in studying it together!

Almost 24 years ago, I went on a houseboat trip with the youth here at St. John’s. We grew together in God’s Word in a powerful way that week and after that trip I decided to read the Bible every day. Reading God’s Word like that changed my life, and I have to say that to this day I’ve found everything I need to know about myself, the world, and God in these pages. But it wasn’t just me and my Bible all those years. It was me, my Bible and… my Jr. high Wednesday afternoon life group, my high school wed. night life Group, my college buddies gathering weekly to pray and read the word, life groups in the Bay Area, Costa Mesa, St. Louis, LA County and now…. my Life Group at St. John’s. God has brought my Life Group and your Life Group together… Let his Words of encouragement and empowerment guide and transform your lives together and prepare you to take the next steps of discipleship. CONNECT – GROW –SHARE! Sticks and Stones may break your bones, but God’s Word will change your life forever!