

This week for us at the Village has been a beautiful/difficult week. I became the pastor here five and a half years ago. I was 28 years old, I had no seminary degree and no pastoral experience, and a group of really crazy 50-60 year olds rolled the dice on me. And we talked at length about the fact that I didn't finish seminary. I tried, I was allergic and had to get out. And we talked at length about the fact that I had led college students for a long period of time but had nothing on my record that showed that I could lead adults. And I came in brash and confident/arrogant, depending on whether you liked me or not. And things began to happen pretty quickly in regards to numeric growth. It was never our goal. We never discussed numeric growth. We wanted to know Jesus deeply, but it started with the numbers. Ten years before I got here, there was a group of men lead by a man named Del Steele, who gathered up here several times a week and just asked God to do something powerful. They would just come up here and ask God to move and ask God to stir up hearts towards Him and ask God to do something special in Lewisville, Flower Mound, Highland Village and the D/FW area, for Christ to capture the hearts of men and women and create worshipers out of them, to create a place where the word would be taught and taught in such a way that it could be understood and grasped and applied. So when those things started happening, you and I actually started living off of the prayers of men who had been here for ten years through some very difficult situations. Del Steele became chairman of the elders and became a very close friend of mine, a very close confidant of mine, one of the few men in my life who loved me enough to rebuke me when needed. Because that's a rare kind of love honestly. Most of us don't have anybody in our lives who loves us enough to gently engage us in areas that we're weak. About six months ago, we found out that Del had cancer. They said that they could buy him time, but did not know that they could save his life. The next six months were very painful physically for him. He did not sleep well and had a lot of issues that came with the cancer. He suffered well. There are certain things older men can teach younger men. One of them is how to suffer well. Last week, he was released from the hospital after a lengthy stay in the hospital and began radiation treatments on Monday. He went in for a radiation treatment and went home. Tuesday morning, he fell and they rushed him to the emergency room. I got a call at noon, rushed up to the hospital, and at noon on Tuesday, they were deciding whether or not to put him in hospice or put him in I.C.U. The family and Del agreed that God could save him wherever he went, and he preferred hospice. And they moved him up to a room to get him ready to go to hospice. On Wednesday morning before they could get him to hospice at 12:03, Del went home to be with the King. I say these things to you for two reasons. One is, and I've wrestled with the Lord at length with this, for whatever reason Del Steele was an odd man. And what I mean by odd is he just dripped godliness. He was a 75 year old man who believed a suit and a tie is how you should walk in this room and that God loved worship music out of an organ and a piano more than He loved it out of any other means. But that's not what we do here, is it? For Del, the gospel was more important than the means by which it flowed. And he often said as long as men would be saved and the word of God would be preached, he didn't care what kind of pants I wore. As long as men were saved and the word of God was taught, he didn't care how loud the music was. At 75, I have never met another one like that, whose personal preference is secondary to the gospel. We will miss him even more than you know, even those who never saw him, never knew him, never met him. To have a man who fervently prays for you and for me constantly to be removed from us by our great King of Glory is a loss for us in more ways than one. I can only hope that God's plan in taking Del home was to raise up new ones. Good men are common, they're everywhere. Godly men? Now that's a rare breed.

Before we begin talking about community, I want us to pray for his family and then I want us to pray for this church. I want us to pray for Gerry his wife of 30-40 years, his two boys Doug and Stephen, their grandchildren. This happened a lot quicker than we thought it was going to happen. So they're mourning, but like 1 Thessalonians says, we do not grieve as those without hope. And then I want to pray for our church. If we really don't battle against flesh and blood but rather spirits and principalities

and dark powers, then I have to wonder how many wars and how many battles he won for us. Let's pray. "Father, I thank You for our time together this morning. This afternoon at 2:00, we will celebrate what You did in the life of Del Steele. We will not exalt him as a man, but rather exalt You in him. I thank You that right now he's joined the throne in Revelation 19 that sounds like a holy roar, like an explosion, of thunder, of roaring water. We love You. We pray for our time together, that You'd stir up our minds and hearts towards You. It's for Your beautiful name. Amen."

Let's go to Ephesians 4, we'll pick it up in verse 15. "*Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ,...*" We'll come back and finish up that text, but here's what I want to chat with you about. We've talked about truth here, we've talked about how truth penetrates the heart and creates a variety of gifts, a variety of services, a variety of activities, all for the building up of the body. And here's what I want to talk with you about now. The Scriptures are going to say throughout the New Testament that once a heart is awakened to the reality of Jesus Christ, you have what the theologians have historically called progressive sanctification. So let me explain that to you. From the moment Christ awakens our heart to Him, then we will from that moment on progress. Which means we will grow in our knowledge of Him, in our passion for Him, in our intellect for Him. We will progressively grow into the fullness of Christ. And that's what He just said here, "*speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him.*" So in every way imaginable, there should be spiritual growth. When it comes to our intellect, when it comes to our understanding of doctrine, there should be growth. When it comes to our emotions, there should be growth. When it comes to our zeal, there should be growth. When it comes to worship, there should be growth. In every area, the gospel penetrating our heart is not static, but individually we begin to grow into the fullness of Christ until we reach what the Scriptures would call a mature man, a Christ filled, God honoring, Holy Spirit power worshiping man or woman. And so we're all on that track. From the moment Christ saves us, we get on that track. Now, it can be confusing, because to use biblical imagery, almost all of us have what's called spiritually a desert or those really kind of dry times where God feels distant from us and we can't find Him anywhere and we feel like we're praying and nobody's listening, we feel like the weight of sin or whatever is crushing us and we can't get out of it or through it. We've all had those times. If we can be honest...and I never pretend that we can...almost all of us have had that month, that year, that series of months where God has just felt very far from us. If it happens to the men in the Bible, it's going to happen to you. David says, "How long, O Lord, will You forsake me." But nobody looks at David's life and goes, "God's just forsaken that guy." But here's what I know. Some of you know this because you've got enough life under your belt. Some of you will have to trust the Scriptures on this. For those of you who have lived through extremely dark periods of time and come out on the other side, looking back years later, you see the weight, mercy and presence of Christ even more profoundly than in common days. And sometimes God Himself is the author of the desert. He comes to Hosea and says, "I want you to marry a prostitute." Hosea's like, "I'm a prophet. Are You sure about that?" God goes, "Yeah, I want you to marry her. Gomer is her name. I want you to marry her. And here's what I'm going to do. I'm going to make your heart love her deeply. I'm going to make your affection and your mind and your heart be captivated by her and I'm not going to let you free. And she's not going to be faithful to you, but I'm not going to let you stop loving her." And He says this, which I think is one of the most profound texts in the Scriptures, He says, "I will lead you into the desert, and there in the desert you will quit calling Me master and you will start calling Me husband." So who is the author of the desert? Who's the author of some of his sorrow? Do I need to bring up Job? John the Baptist was beheaded, and the Bible says of him, "*among those born of women there has arisen no one greater.*" Yeah, sometimes God's the author of it. That actually should make us warm, not angry. It means that if He's the author of it, He's perfecting, growing, strengthening, deepening worship. Sometimes He loves us too much not to hurt us.

But the Bible views it as abnormal for our faith to grow stagnant and cold. Something's gone wrong if we're not progressively growing. If we grow stagnant, if we grow cold, if we're not progressing in worship, if we're not progressing in our heart, if we're not progressing in our minds toward the fullness of Christ, then something's gone wrong. Let me show you a place where this lines out real quick. Go to Hebrews 5, and I want you to see the weight of this and why we have to address it. Starting in verse 11, "*About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing.*" He says here, in regards to Jesus being the high priest, "There is more of Christ that I would love to talk with you about, there's more joy to be had, there's a deeper experience in Christ to be walked in, there's more power for you to experience, there's more love, more hope, more joy, more beauty, there's more of it to know, but I can't share it with you." Now look at why he can't share it with them. Verse 12, "*For though by this time you ought to be teachers,...*" That's not stand up on stage with a face mic; that's just being able to tell someone else about the gospel. "*For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled...*" For those of you who have raised children, nothing is more unskilled than a baby still on the bottle. If the only mode of nutrition going into a human is milk, then they are very, very young and very, very unskilled." A three month old? No skills...unless struggling to sleep and pooping your pants is a skill. No one has a four, five, six, seven year old whose primary means of nutrition is still milk. If that's true, you're going to the doctor a lot. And this is what he's saying here. He's going, "Spiritually, you're grown men still on milk. It doesn't make any sense. There's no way you can be what you were meant to be in regards to muscle, in regards to strength, in regards to mind, in regards to heart, in regards to emotion. You can't be where you're supposed to be, because your primary means of nutrients isn't what it's supposed to be. You should be on meat; you're on milk." So look at how they become unskilled because of this. "*...for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.*" Here's what I want to try to address. I know not all of you are pursuing the Lord, not all of you are chasing Jesus, not all of you are spiritual men and women. Some of you are here because the wife drug you, some of you are here because the husband drug you, some of you are here because a friend just absolutely deceived you, and now you're here. So I know there are all these different reasons why we're here, but here's the question I want to answer:

How can we be sure that we are growing up into the fullness of Him in every way? That's the question I want to try to answer. What are the pieces necessary for us to grow into this joy, grow into this depth of meaning, grow into this purpose and grow into this worship of Christ? What are the pieces necessary? Let's look at it. Hebrews 6:1, "*Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, and of instruction about washings, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment.*" He's going to say, "How do we grow up into the fullness of Christ?" Right before Hebrews 6:1, he talks about constant practice, and then in 6:1, he says, "Therefore since we're immature, on milk, weak, not strong in righteousness. Therefore let us leave the elementary and press on to maturity. Let's walk away from what's elementary and grow." I think the reference here is one of personal discipline. How do you get out of elementary school? You've got to know how to add, you've got to know how to subtract, you've got to know how to divide, you've got to know how to multiply and you've got to somewhat be able to spell. And until you get those things down...I mean, you're not going to middle school if you can't read. You're not going to middle school if you can't add. You've got to progress. And what he's saying here is that you and I, with personal discipline, need to make growing into Christ a priority. Romans 6 has one of my favorite ways to put it. It says, "In the same way you once chased what is sinful, now chase what is godly." So think back on when you were a scoundrel. For me, I would stay up late for my sin of choice, I would rearrange my

schedule for my sin of choice, I would forego sleep for my sin of choice. There were things where I enjoyed this or I wanted to do that or I wanted to go here, and I wired my life in such a way. And this is saying, "In the same way, you once chased sin, now with that same energy, with that same zeal, with those same sacrifices, chase what is righteous." That's profound if you let your mind think on it and chew on it and wrestle with it. It's talking about personal discipline. And this is not a strange idea in the Scriptures. Paul says, "I beat my body and make it my slave." Now that's discipline. He also says in 1 Timothy that physical training is of some value, but training for godliness has value for this life and for the next. Right before that he says, "Train yourself for godliness. The word "train" in the Greek is *gumnasia*. We get our word "gymnasium" from it. It literally means "to sweat," which means godliness isn't an accident. Train yourself for godliness, through constant practice. Now look at Titus 2:12. It says this, "...training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age," If you read it backwards, "In this present age that we find ourselves in, living upright, godly lives, knowing the difference between righteousness and unrighteousness, how do we do all that? Training." And unless you're super type-A, training is difficult for all of us. Even the idea of training...I don't know if you've ever trained for something. Earlier this year, we were training for a sprint triathlon. There's nothing more horrendous than finishing a spin class and then hopping on a treadmill to run two miles. There's no joy in that. Usually I'm on the treadmill going, "Why? What am I doing? I'm gangly. I don't need to do this." I mean, you have to push it, you have to move. It's part of training. It's funny to me how many of us spend so much time on our bodies, looking at what we eat, so much money on the gym, so much time on those things, and he's going here, "Okay, physical training is of some value. But training in godliness, it has value in both this life and the one to come." Training in godliness will never betray you. Physical will eventually betray you. What I mean by that is you'll eventually grow too old to be able to do it. So you've got personal discipline. And those are the historic disciplines of the faith: reading the word, praying, clinging to righteousness, shunning unrighteousness and those kinds of things.

And look at this piece, because this isn't the only piece. Growing in godliness is not just about personal discipline. In fact, this is one of the most difficult texts in the Bible. It's a small little verse that has so much in it. Hebrews 6:1, "*Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity,...*" Now skip down to verse 3, "*And this we will do if God permits.*" As in, maybe He won't. Now that's a mildly horrifying text. Personal discipline in and of itself will not be enough. Anyone who has any history in church, any lengthy period of time involved in this thing, if they were honest, will tell you that they've had seasons of their life where they were doing everything that they were supposed to be doing and the time was dry and difficult. You can check everything off the list you can, you can read your Bible every morning, you can pray every morning, you can pray before meals, you can not watch rated-R movies (unless they're about Jesus), you can not drink devil juice, you can not listen to secular music, you can do all of those things right, but that does not necessarily mean you have a deep, vital relationship with Jesus Christ. In fact, some of the most cold, hollow, angry people I've ever met are people who have mastered the list but have no relationship with Jesus Christ. You need the power of God in those things. And that's what he's saying. "If God permits, we will do so." You are in no position to barter with God on high. I know that's not very popular. I know there are a lot of preachers you can go sit under who will tell you that you can barter with God. "If you'll do this, God will do that." Now there's two problems with that. One is that the Bible doesn't teach that. The second is that that has been no one's experience who has actually tried to follow Him. You don't get to barter with God. Realizing that puts you in a desperate, desperate, desperate place, and it's in that place that worship and transformation happen. Now there seems to be, in my mind's eye as I've walked with people for the last 13 years, that people want to pick one of these. They want to do the personal discipline thing and they've got the personal discipline thing down, they've got the list and they're working it and doing it. And we had better be doing their list too, because that list is in

the Bible. So they've wired their whole life that way. Their alarm is set so they can get up early and spend a certain time with the Lord. I mean, they've got the list down. And then you've got the pendulum all the way over here with guys going, "I'm just waiting for God to do something. I've got sin in my life, I struggle, I've got issues...I'm just waiting for Him to show up." And they're just kind of waiting on Him. "When ever You want to do it..." They've gone to church sometimes on the weekends, and they're just like, "Yeah, he's right. It's horrible. Well, I need Him to do something here, to work in me." And so, maybe you'll come and the Lord will stir up, "Hey this is an issue that we need to deal with." Maybe the Lord will stir up, "Hey this is dark here," and you'll agree. And some of you who have some church background are like, "Well you know, I would pray, but the Bible says that He knows what we're going to pray before we pray it. So it just seems repetitious and I don't really know. If I said that, He already knows. I mean, He's God. It just seems like it would be wasting His time and mine. He knows what I need." Or it may be something like, "I read the Bible, pastor. But you told me you can't just read the Bible like it's the paper. So I don't want to..." Let me just clarify something here. Because if you try to pick either one of these, you're just kind of picking the way you'll sin. That's all you're really doing. Because these two camps, they even make different churches. The linear, mathematical, doctrinal types kind of form over here in certain churches, and then the more organic types kind of form a different church. The problem is, when you pick either one of those in isolation of the other, you're just picking the way you're going to sin. Over here, it will be that kind of Pharisaic, arrogant, boastful, proud. And then over here it will be hollow and unsustainable. You've got to have both pieces, you really do. And so we need the power of God. We're desperate for it. And we need personal discipline. We need to move towards it, we need to ask God. There is a huge, huge, huge difference in being obedient to the commands of Christ in order to appease Him so He won't harm you. That's one way to look at it. It's the wrong way to look at it. There's a difference between that and being obedient to Christ because it gets you more of Christ who is better than life. Those are two very different things.

Now there's a third piece, and it's the one I want to to you about. When the Bible speaks of progressive sanctification or growth into Him, it never speaks of sanctification as an individual process, but rather a process that that takes place within the confines of deep relationship. There is nowhere in Scripture where, when it comes to sanctification and growth into the fullness of Christ, we're spoken to as individuals removed from the communal aspect of our faith. It's just not in there. At the beginning of almost every book in the New Testament is to the saints in (name of city here). He's talking to the body. So all the admonitions of, "Let's go...let's grow...let's not do this...let's cling to this...let's walk in this..." is not given to individuals as much as it's given to a group, a body that's striving after it together. And even in those books where he's addressing a single individual, he's addressing that individual in order to teach the body at large. This is inescapably communal. In fact, everything God even does in the life of an individual is meant to pour back out into the group. I'll show you some examples of what I mean here. 2 Corinthians 1:3-4, "*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction,...*" So that's a popular idea, right? We're troubled, we're overwhelmed, we're grieved and God comforts us. Now listen to why God comforts us. "...so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God." God comforts us in our time of trouble so that we might comfort others in their time of trouble with the comfort we received. Let's keep going. I love 1 Thessalonians 4:18. It says, "*Therefore encourage one another with these words.*" In the book of Thessalonians, he's talking about the dead in Christ shall rise first. It says they were grieving the loss of loved ones, but he said we don't grieve as those without hope. And he says, "Share these words with one another. I'm not just giving you these words so you guys in Thessalonica can huddle up and go, 'Oh, this is our word. It's not everybody else's. It's our thing.' No, you spread that. That was given to you for the body." And then there's my preaching verse, 1 Thessalonians 5:14.

It's what I try to do week in and week out. It says, "*And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all.*" Do you hear how communal this is? If you're warning someone who is idle, someone whose faith is just, "Yeah, whatever," and you try to engage them, how well does that work if you don't really know them? Like if the guy next to you just opened up his Bible and it kind of creaked and you looked over and went, "Hey, what's your name? Bob? Alright Bob, is that a new Bible? I know it's not because the edges are curling up and it looks like maybe you leave it in your car. Do you not think you need the word?" Is it going to go well for you? If Bob is like most of us, you might just get punched in the throat. So how well does it work? It doesn't work well at all. But it's a tremendous asset to have people who know you well enough to engage you at that level. But it isn't going to happen unless we're a part, unless we're connected, unless we're doing life together. Somewhere along the way, we've really messed up what church is. Like this thing that we're doing in here, this isn't church. Now this is a part of it, but it's not all of it. It's not all of it at all. Let's do this as a litmus test. I know I'm a little unorthodox when it comes to presentation. And so people come to just kind of see that. It's like some kind of show or something. And I think that I'm a motivator. And what I mean by that is when I speak, for whatever reason, God does something and people go, "Yeah, I need that...I want to get that...I need to do that...I want that..." And so let's say on my best weekend, let's say I'm just thundering away and glowing, and Jesus manifested Himself right behind me and went, "Mmm Hmm," and tongues of fire are falling down, the whole thing just went huge and everything in you went, "Okay, I'm in. I'm not going to do that and I am going to do this. And I'm going to take this seriously and I'm going to get plugged in and I'm going to walk deeply. I'm not going to be a part of shallow, trite, fleeting pleasures anymore. I'm going to chase real, deep, sustaining, gospel-centered pleasures. I'm after it." How long does that last? Do you make it home? I know I'm not wasting my time. The Scriptures have declared that the elect will hear. That's the confidence I stand in. If not, I don't know how you do this job. How long does it last? Does it make it to Wednesday? Because I test some of you. Some of you are like, "Great word last weekend," and I'll be like, "What was your favorite part?" "Um, that thing about Jesus." "Ah, that thing about Jesus. Well, I guess you're safe there." So I know. I'm not a fool. Without the power of God flowing in this, without people in your life that can hold you accountable to transformation, it's just not going to happen. You can't muster it. You can't motivate into it. So you're going to have to be serious about your own spiritual walk, about your own self-discipline and where you're weak. You've got to put people in your life who encourage you in those areas. Otherwise it grows stale, it grows stagnant, it grows cold, it becomes mechanical, it becomes empty. The most common illustration given to what we're in is a body. If you cut off a finger and throw it aside, it doesn't keep growing or moving or playing its part; it shrivels up and dies. You cannot remove yourself. The more you isolate yourself from deep, authentic, real Christian community, the damage you do to your own joy.

The thing that will be hard to replace from Del going on home will be that for five and a half years, he's been the consistent one to sit me down and with a lot of gentleness and a lot of grace say, "Hmm, you do that and you distract us from Jesus. Don't do that." Think about it this way, and I don't want to depress you. You want to see how unloved you are? When's the last time another man in your life took you for a cup of coffee (or another beverage) and sat you down and said, "Hey man, thanks for coming in. I'm worried about you. Can I point something out to you?" Like I've been there. I've been in a home group where a guy's just constantly jabbing his wife. "Oh, the old ball and chain...Oh, she could burn water...Oh, she's allergic to work..." Enough of those and something's wrong, isn't it? Somebody's got to love him enough to pull him aside and go, "You know the Scriptures say he who finds a wife finds what is good. Are you alright? You're disrespecting the bride given to you. God says not all men get to find one." Or the guy who blew up at his three year old kid for spilling his glass at dinner? Something's gone wrong in there. You don't blow up for spilled milk. It's not like your

three year old is like, "Forget you, father. I'm going to spill my glass." If your three year old did do that, then...I want to meet him. Listen, they get food on the floor and they spill their drink. It's what they do. If you explode over that, something's off, something's wrong, something's derailed. Somebody's got to love him enough to take him aside and talk to him about it. And listen, I'm trying to entreat you here, see how unloved you are. See how shallow our relationships are. See how hollow they are that no one's willing to engage us at that level when everyone in this room knows that we've got areas that we're blind in, that we've got issues in, that we've got trouble in. No one loves enough to go, "How are you really doing with your relationship with Christ?" I mean, this isn't some game. Hey, you're going to die. Are you tracking with that? Del's time was Wednesday. We're all an hour closer. This isn't a game. Eternity hangs in the balance, joy hangs in the balance, and it seems like we talk about the same lame junk as everyone else. "Hurray, the Cowboys got what they needed in the 1st round!" That's not a bad point of conversation, but it's got to go farther than that for us. It's got to go farther than that. And it's not easy. It's not easy because most people don't want to get there. They want to hide, they want to protect themselves. I call it "fine-itis." "How are you doing?" "Fine." We all want to look a certain part, despite the fact that that we're not.

So what's my hope here? Just a step. Here's what I mean by that. Some of you have been coming for a while. You've sat out there, you like the preaching, you like the music. You don't really belong. Like you haven't really connected. Well, maybe your step is to finally get connected. I know they've set up a table out in the foyer with just every way you could possibly connect here at the Village. They have everything from home groups to Village Mommies, a group for women with small children, stay at home moms who get together. Anyway you could connect, it's out there. So maybe for you, you just finally take the step. Maybe today you go, "Okay, I'm in," and you stop by the table and go, "How do I connect?" But then here's the other thing I know. Just because you go to a home group or just because you are connected doesn't mean that you have any real, deep, Christian community. Going to home group is the easy part. It really is. So some of you who have been connected, you need to take another step. Maybe now that you're connected, maybe you open up a little bit more and be a little bit more honest. Maybe that guy or woman in the group that you see and admire their faith from afar, maybe you invite them out for a cup of coffee (or another beverage) this week and sit down and go, "Hey, can you help me? Because something's not lining up for me here." Just another step, not a marathon. I plan on being here 40 more years if the Lord's gracious. We don't have to do the marathon today, we don't have to do it this week. Just a step. If depth, joy, beauty, fullness, healing, knowledge of Christ are all at stake, then the power of God, personal holiness and deep community are the three pieces necessary to grow into the fullness of that. Why would we not chase that with every bit of discipline, vitality and energy that we have? I don't know the answer to that one.

Let's pray, "Father, I thank You for our time together. I pray that You would stir up our hearts towards You. And I want to pray for movement for those who are just loosely connected. God, I just pray that they would take a step. For those who really are connected but really haven't pushed, I pray that they would push a little bit more. Holy Spirit, help us on this one. I now most of us are afraid, most of us are conditioned that our faith is ours and we don't need anybody else and we can do it and we can handle it, but that hasn't been true. So help us, Father. It's for Your beautiful name I pray these things. Amen."