

March 8/9, 2025

## **The Pillar and Support of the Truth**

*God's Design for the Church in 1 Timothy*

**1 Timothy 3:14-16**

Pastor Ryan Harmon

What if there were no church? It's hard to even imagine, isn't it? Now, we have some kids here in the audience today and they tend to have better imaginations than those of us who are adults. But it takes some creative thinking to imagine that in a world like ours, particularly in this city that we live in, that is so full of so many great churches. Each week we pray for them, praying that God would bless their work. But what if they ceased to exist? Or what if false teaching started to make its way through those congregations, and they no longer were fulfilling the purpose for which God called and planted them? What difference would it make? What would be different in our city? What would be different in our world? What if there were no church? How we answer that question reveals much about what we believe the purpose of the church is and what we're really doing here. That's what we consider together this morning.

So open your Bibles with me to 1 Timothy. It's going to be in Chapter 3, verses 14 to 16, just three short verses today. So, one would think I would speak for a briefer amount of time, but I make no promises...I make no promises. We come to verse 14. We come to what is really the climactic moment of this text where Paul states, in no uncertain terms and with great clarity, what his purpose in writing was, what his purpose in sending this letter to Timothy was. I believe there's some important things in these three short verses in Paul's description of the church that will really, profoundly affect the way we think about our very gathering. So, beginning in verse 14 of chapter 3. Paul says:

**I am writing these things to you, hoping to come to you before long; but in case I am delayed, (\*NASB, 1 Timothy 3:14a)**

Now we have talked a number of times about how the false teaching in Ephesus was starting to work its way through the church. The elders in that church were not doing their job. They weren't guiding and directing that church well. They were not upholding the truth of God, and so Paul was quite concerned about this. And so when he left, he asked Timothy to stay behind, so that Timothy might step in and bring this church back into alignment with God's purposes. Timothy was a fixer.

Now, we learn something new in verse 14. Paul's intent was to return to Ephesus, but with the 1st Century world being what it was, Paul knew that a delay was quite possible. And, of course, that's very true especially in Paul's life. He lived a very exciting life. Whether it be a shipwreck or bad weather that would prevent him from coming or maybe imprisonment, something could easily have held him up. But Paul determined that what he had to say was too important, too critical for it to wait for an in-person meeting, so he wrote this very letter.

So the question then is, “What was so important, what was so critical that Paul decided to expedite his communication to send this letter to Timothy?” Well, continuing in verse 15, Paul again says:

**...but in case I am delayed, I write so that... (So here’s the purpose .) ...I write so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself...(And we’re going to stop there.)**

He’s writing about **conduct**, about *behavior*, about the way this church organizes and gathers, about the characteristic markings or behavior that distinguishes and marks God’s very people.

Now, I have found in my 17 years of pastoral ministry that when we begin to talk about something like conduct or behavior, generally it provokes one of two responses. The first response is it makes people feel guilty. Perhaps even the last few weeks when we’ve been talking about qualifications for elders or qualifications for those serving as deacons, maybe that starts to stir up a little guilt for you. You think to yourself, “I just don’t measure up.” But, of course, that’s true because none of us are perfect. We’re never going to be perfect, and so there are ways that we fall short and that is one response that people have when we start to talk about qualifications or about the way we conduct ourselves. The second response that I found is quite common, is people begin to be anxious that, as we focus on conduct or behavior, we’re going to fall or slip into legalism. We’re going to start to veer into merely thinking about behavior management and we don’t need to be really taught about that, because we come by that inclination quite naturally. We naturally veer towards legalism, so it is a very justifiable concern.

So here’s what legalism is. Legalism is when we believe, and we act as if we can earn favor from God, that He owes us now because of our conduct. We’ve done so well that He needs to be impressed by our conduct and now His grace has to be given to us because, “Look how great we are!” But grace is in direct opposition to anything that resembles earning. Grace is a gift. Grace is given because God is gracious, not because we have done anything to deserve it. And so we can be quite confident that when Paul turns his attention to conduct, he is not talking in any way about earning something from God or about impressing God. We can’t impress God. We can’t do that. So, then what is he talking about?

Whenever the New Testament talks positively about conduct, about our behavior, we need to keep in mind this idea of impressing God, of earning His favor, that is never on the radar. That is never what the New Testament is talking about. What the New Testament is talking about when it talks about conduct, is *Gospel Change* that is brought about by Jesus Christ and faith in Him that results in different outward actions. We’re talking about a very change of the heart, something we cannot do on our own. God brings a change about, and what is in us now is different. We are different people and, as different people, brought about by the very grace and empowerment of God, we then act differently in the world because of an internal change. It’s *Gospel Change*.

When Paul is talking about conduct, that’s what he has in mind. There is a gospel change that has been brought about or that is supposed to be brought about in the lives of these people. Jesus said this in Luke 6. He said: *There is no good tree which produces bad fruit, nor, on the other hand, a bad tree which produces good fruit.* Gospel change works like this. Jesus comes in, and by His very grace through our faith in Him, He makes us into different kinds of trees. We become good trees capable of producing good fruit, not by our earning, not by our strength, not by our focus or

clenching our teeth and doing it, but because He's made us into different people. That's *Gospel Change*.

So Paul has in mind, when he's writing to Timothy about how one ought to conduct himself, he's speaking about the good fruit, the proper conduct that will naturally flow from hearts that are increasingly surrendered to Jesus and submitted to God and His ways. So as God's people, we affirm behavior matters, but we affirm it matters because we believe the gospel changes people, that we are different people; we are new creations. And as new creations, we get to live a totally different kind of life, no longer enslaved to the old ways of living. The fruit and the fruit that is produced matter, but fruit cannot be forced. Fruit is the product, the result of faith.

So when Paul turns his attention to conduct, he's thinking about this gospel change and the question arises, "Why was he so concerned about this?" Of all the things he could write, why was he so concerned about the way this church and its people conducted themselves? The answer, briefly is, "There is simply nothing like the church." The church is incredibly important. In fact, I would say there is no organization, no organism—this living, breathing group of people—in the world like the church...nothing more profound, nothing more mysterious, nothing more critically important than the church. Let's not think too little about what we are doing here when we gather.

Now, I understand that is a big statement to make, so let's see if the rest of verse 15 will kind of flesh this out for us. So he says:

***...I write so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth.***

Those are descriptions of the church, of this gathering of God's people that are filled with meaning, layers of meaning. So, we need to talk about each one of those descriptors, but before we get to those descriptors, let's just remember together what the church is.

The church is not a building, not primarily. The church is a people. We, you and I, are the church. We are God's people and the reason we call this building a church is because this is the place that we gather. That makes it a church, and it's very significant to us. I'm thankful for this building. I'm thankful for the memories that God has given me in this building. I'm thankful for the way He meets me here when we gather, but this building, if we would sell it to a different organization, would no longer be called a church. If it were bought by Lowe's and sold hammers, it wouldn't be a church. It's a church because this is where we gather, and "we" are the church.

Throughout this town, there are faithful churches that meet in buildings that were formerly different things: office spaces and grocery stores and restaurants. It was a Pizza Hut; now it's a church. What made it a church? It's where God's people gather. So Paul is emphasizing that this church is critically important, but we're not talking about a building. We're talking about us. We are the church, and he says, "We, the church, are **the household of God...the household of God!** We could translate that phrase, quite literally, to *the house of God*. The church...God's people...or God's house.

Now, we know that God is everywhere. He can't be contained by a building. We say He is omnipresent. He is all places, but we also know that God chooses, by His own sovereign choice, to sometimes come and inhabit things in certain particular ways. He chooses to do that. It's not that He's contained. It's not that He's not other places, but there's something special about places He chooses to dwell. Immediately your mind might go back to the temple in the Old Testament and that certainly was the case where God in the temple or in the tabernacle chose to dwell in that place, particularly in the temple in the Holy of Holies, this room where God's potent, powerful, manifest presence was contained.

Now Paul is saying in some significant and mysterious way that we, the church, we, the people of God, we are God's house. He chooses to dwell in and among us. The New Testament makes it quite clear that there are two ways that is the case. The first is that each one of us as individuals, when we place our faith in Jesus Christ, we are given the very Spirit of God. The Spirit enters us and dwells in us and that leads Paul to say in 1 Corinthians 3 that our bodies are *temples of the Holy Spirit*, God dwelling among us. Later in Ephesians, Paul then is talking about the church and in Ephesians 2 he says that the church is *growing into a holy temple in the Lord*. So somehow, just as God once chose to have his potent presence dwell in that temple in the Holy of Holies, just like that, God now dwells among His people, His church. He dwells in us through His Holy Spirit as individuals, and then when we gather together, we are His household, His house...God dwelling among us. It's an amazing, mind-blowing reality that it's so easy to take for granted.

A few years ago I was able to go to Israel. And of course, when you go to Israel, you always go to the Temple Mount, and you go to the Western Wall. It's an incredibly moving thing and that wall is the foundation of the temple, where the temple once stood. So it's a significant place in the Jewish faith and, of course, it's very moving to go there. As we were there, we found that there was a tunnel that was kind of burrowed along the edge of the wall, kind of going north along the Temple Mount, and so we were able to walk through there. And as we were walking through, we came upon one particular place where there were people, men and women, gathered and sitting in chairs and praying towards a particular spot on that wall. I asked our guide, "What's going on there?" He told me that that is as close as they can get to the physical location where the Holy of Holies once stood. They're trying to get as close as they possibly can to the historic location where God's presence dwelled when the temple stood on that Temple Mount. It's incredibly moving, drawing near to God's presence, even the historic artifact of His presence.

Now, what I'm about to say, I don't mean in any kind of arrogant way. It is true of every single one of us who is a believer in this room. But as I reflected on that moment, it occurred to me that it's actually quite accurate biblically, theologically to say that if they really wanted to draw near to God's presence, they needed to turn around. My friend and I are followers of Jesus, given the Holy Spirit of God, so our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit. God's Spirit no longer dwells in a building made by hands. In fact, if they wanted to really experience God's presence, they needed to surrender their life to Jesus. He would grant them His Spirit. They needed to gather with other believers, come together to worship Jesus and be the household of God. This new covenant temple reality mysteriously is the place where God has chosen to dwell in this New Covenant moment.

In the Old Testament, we read in the Psalms of the people of God, the Jewish people, while working their way up to the Temple Mount sang songs written, songs of joy as they anticipated gathering

near the temple, gathering with God's people, singing praises to His Name. Well, in just the same way, how do we come to church? We are the household of God. As we gather, we should do so with awe, with anticipation of how God might meet us. What a privilege it is to be able to gather. There's so much more happening in our gathering than meets the eye. Scripture points to it. We access it and we understand it by faith. Let's not miss it. Let's not think too little about our gatherings.

There's another sense in which this phrase **household of God** or *house of God* has significant meaning and that's as the household of God, we are adopted members of God's very family. That means it's very real that when we call each other "brothers and sisters," we are saying we are a part of the same family, and God is the head of the household. And our job as members of that household, is to gather around Him and learn the house rules essentially, and start to resemble the Father more and more, the head of the house, take on the family resemblance.

Then as we go out in the world, we go out with the mission that we are to represent that household, represent what the head of the household is like to a world that is caught up in chaos and disarray, to let them know there is a household they can be a part of and the head of that household is good. To be a member of the household of God fills us with mission. We have an incredible mission in the world. As Paul continued in that sentence we just read a moment ago, there's another aspect of that mission. He said that we are **the household of God which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth.**

That sounds pretty important, doesn't it? **The pillar and support of the truth.** Paul turns to architectural imagery: a pillar, a support, a foundation. This would have been very familiar imagery to the Ephesians because in Ephesus, at this time, there was the Temple of Artimus. It was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, a massive structure. Now, today it is gone. There is one pillar that remains, but someone who knows how to do these things recreated it on their computer. And I wanted to show you that, just so we could get a little picture of what this temple would have been like. *(Photo shown on screen.)*

So those are the front steps, and you can see these massive pillars upholding this magnificent massive roof. This building was massive, larger than the size of a football field. There were 127 pillars that made up this temple and these pillars were enormous, 18 meters tall. Now I had them measure a number of times in this room because I don't quite believe it, but this roof is like 17 meters tall. These 127 pillars, taller than this building, upholding this massive marble roof, all of it laid on an incredibly secure foundation so that this roof could be upheld. Everyone from great distances would see it, but also the magnificence of this roof would be upheld and supported. So Paul uses that imagery and he says, "Now here's what the church is. **The church is the pillar and support of the truth.**" That is, we have an incredibly important role to play in the world. We are to be upholders of the truth. We're to stand on the foundation that supports the truth. We're to proclaim that truth. We're to let the world know about the truth...an incredibly important role to play.

Throughout this series we've talked about how upsetting it was to Paul, what a significant and serious thing it was that false teaching had made its way into this church. The elders weren't doing their job, and this rot of false teaching was compromising the church, and it becomes quite clear why this is so upsetting. The core of the church's purpose is to uphold the truth, and so then if they embraced false teaching, they had abandoned the very purpose for which they existed. False teaching is serious business because the truth is serious business.

If we go back to our initial question, "What if there were no church?" what would it look like if there were no church in Lincoln? What if there were no church in Nebraska, or society at large? What would happen? Well, what would happen is that would mean that there would be no pillar and support of the truth in that place. The truth would still exist. The truth doesn't change because we believe it or because we affirm it. The truth is what it is, but if there is no church to be a pillar and support of the truth as a society, then the people walk in darkness. They can't align their life to the truth. They can't submit to the truth because no one is there to proclaim it; no one is there to uphold it.

This is why the church has always had a missionary heart to it. This is why people have dropped their careers, and they've stepped on planes or on boats and they've gone to a place where there is no church, because they can't handle the idea that there are places in the world where there is no church, there is no pillar and support of the truth upholding Jesus Christ. So, they give up everything to go to plant a church so that place might be changed. It's hard to imagine it, but that is the reality on the ground in so many places throughout the world. It's what motivates our very activity for decades now in South Asia that these places—these villages, these towns—are places where there's not a single believer. Some of them don't even know the name of Jesus, have never heard it. And we as believers say, "That is not okay," because there has to be a church to uphold the truth.

But we need to keep in mind that so many of us—the majority of us—are not going to be missionaries. We pray that the Lord would raise up missionaries here in our midst, but so many of us are going to be right here in Lincoln, and we need to keep in mind that although this city is so full of faithful churches, this city is far from reached. Each one of us in the places we inhabit: in our neighborhoods, in our workplaces, in the classroom and the university campus, there are people walking in darkness. They do not know the truth and we, as the church, have been given a mission to represent the household of God, uphold the truth wherever we go, so that many might know, that they might come to know the lifesaving truth of the gospel. Let's not think too little about what we're doing when we gather. God is doing something profound in our midst and He intends to use us as His people to make the truth known in the world. The church matters because the truth matters.

Now, as Paul continues and we get to verse 16, he's going to bring this truth focus that we have as a church. It's going to singularly focus on one person as we continue. In verse 16, he says:

**By common confession,** (That is to say that this is what all churches confess; this is what our faithful churches uphold.) **great is the mystery of godliness:**

That word **mystery** in the New Testament always refers to something that was once hidden, once was unknown, but now God has made known His plans, His purposes in the world. They were once a hidden secret but now that secret has been revealed but there are still people in the world who do not know the open secret. But God, through His revelation, has made it known to His people in the church. So, what is the secret, the mystery that has been made known, that all focus on one person, on the truth of Jesus Christ?

I believe this was an early Christian hymn or creed. We don't know precisely how it was used, but every phrase that I'm about to walk through refers to the truth of who Jesus was and is. So Paul says by common confession:

**.... great is the mystery of godliness:**

**He who was revealed in the flesh,  
Was vindicated in the Spirit,  
Seen by angels,  
Proclaimed among the nations,  
Believed on in the world,  
Taken up in glory. (Vs. 16)**

As a church, we are called to be pillars in support of the truth, but to uphold the truth is not to uphold some vague notion. Truth has a name. Truth is a person. Jesus Christ is the truth. When we as the church, as the people of God, uphold the truth, we uphold Jesus. We point others to Him. He is the One that human history was waiting for, and in the right time, God revealed Him. God sent Him into the world that He might serve as a mediator, Paul said in Chapter 2, between God and men. The man, Jesus Christ, the One who the world longs to know, even if they don't know it. The One who is the fulfillment of their deepest heart's desires is Jesus Christ. He is the One we uphold. He is the truth. He gives six phrases, that all refer to who He was and who He is. So he begins by saying:

**He who was revealed in the flesh ...**

That's just to say that Jesus took on flesh. He was God in the flesh. He was a human being. He was fully human. He lived and walked among us. He breathed the same air that we now breathe. In the early church, there was a problem. In time people started to think bodies were bad and physical stuff was bad and so they started to believe that Jesus just appeared to be human. He couldn't have really been human because stuff, material matter is bad. But the church rejected that because it is essential that we uphold Jesus was fully man.

So Paul says, *one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus*. Jesus was fully human, but He wasn't only human. Paul continues:

**(He) Was vindicated in the Spirit,**

Jesus was fully human, but He also was fully God. He walked in perfect union with the Father throughout His days in the flesh, upheld by the Spirit of God, empowered by the Spirit of God, manifesting what God is like to the world because he was God Himself. In time He was put to death, but death was not an end for Him. It was the beginning of a new and glorious life, a new-creation life. Death couldn't hold Him because death cannot hold God. Rather, He was **vindicated in the Spirit**. He arose victorious and He lives and reigns forever. The God man, Jesus Christ, King of kings, Lord of lords; He's the One that we proclaim. He's the truth upon which we stand. Paul continues with a phrase that is a little confusing and hard to understand, but he says:

**Seen by angels,**

Now, commentators disagree exactly as to what this means. The way I understand this phrase is that Jesus was the focal point, the only attention-getter of the entire cosmos. The heavens looked upon him in wonder. The angels looked upon Him in wonder at what God had done. The long-hidden plan had been revealed and now Jesus, God in the flesh, the Word made flesh, dwelled among men. And the angels looked upon it and were astounded, captivated. But not only them. He continues:

**Proclaimed among the nations,**

**Proclaimed, preached among the nations.** The church has always been about missionary activity, going to the ends of the earth in order that His name might be proclaimed. Because if Jesus is who He says He is, then He is the hope of the nations and He has to be proclaimed; He has to be preached. The truth has to be upheld so that many may know, for there's always been a missionary heart to the Christian message, a heart that says everyone must know this eternal one, this glorious Savior that is the hope of human hearts...every human heart...**proclaimed among the nations** and to great effect. Through that proclamation, God has done something incredible, and so Paul says:

**Believed on in the world,**

That proclamation did not return void but **believed on in the world**. If you just look at the astounding growth of Christianity, you can almost say that the growth can't be explained in human terms—it's so unexplainable. When Jesus arose, there was a small gathering that gathered around Him and in time—thousands in the book of Acts—came to believe, and then Paul went throughout the world and proclaimed His name. But now, in due time, billions of people have proclaimed His Name and called Him Lord. Billions! There's no way to have a precise number, but estimates are that since the time of the New Testament, eight to nine billion people have called Jesus, Lord, have



said they are Christians. We don't know the hearts of people, but God does. But rest assured, heaven is going to be very full. The proclamation of the gospel has not returned void. Through it, God has brought many sons and daughters to glory. That's precisely where Paul turns on this last stanza:

### **Taken up in glory.**

When Jesus ascended, He was glorified and sits now at the right hand of the Father. But that glorification in so many ways continues. It continues this morning as we come together. We lift His name up. We affirm what we believe about Him. When we uphold the truth, He is glorified. When we grow up in Him, He is glorified. When we let the nations know, He is glorified and we tell all the people we encounter through our actions, through our words, that there is one Savior. It's Jesus Christ! He's the truth we uphold. When we do that, we are glorifying Him, letting the world that so longs to know, letting them know that ***He is the way, He is the truth and He is the life.***

God has granted His church; He's designed His church, that we would be a people that upholds the truth, that resembles the household of God, that resembles the head of the household. We're given a mission. We're given a purpose in the world to uphold the truth, and the truth has a name. It is Jesus Christ. He is the One we uphold. He is the One we pursue in our own lives. He is the One we uphold in the world as we go and live on mission.

The truth is, we sit here today because we are beneficiaries of faithful generations before us. Every generation of the church prior to ours has faithfully said, "We will take up the mission. We will be a people who uphold the truth, who stand as pillars in support of the truth." And because of their faithfulness to that call, their faithfulness to that mission, we gather together today as believers. The question for us in this moment, here in Lincoln, Nebraska, in 2025, the question for this generation is, "Will we take up the call as well? Will we be a people who are committed not just to go to church, but to be the church, to uphold the truth, the truth of Jesus Christ, the Name above every name, and the only Name by which people are saved. Oh, let it be true of us! Join me as we pray these things together.

*Our Father, we do stand astounded at the mystery revealed, that you sent Your Son to die that we might live, and we ask that You will empower us to be a people who uphold that truth. Lord, when we gather, would we be grateful, would we be astounded, would we be compelled by Your very presence among us, and then would we be people on mission to make the truth known in a world that so longs to know it? Lord, we ask these things in the Name of Jesus and for His glory, Amen.*

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## WINTER 2025 // WEEK 9

### Life Group Questions

1 Timothy – What Are We Doing Here? // March 8/9, 2025

The Pillar and Support of the Truth // 1 Timothy 3:14-16

### Introduction

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In this week's passage Paul gives us the main reason for writing his letter to Timothy as well as a "Christological hymn" describing the mystery of godliness. It is short but has a lot for us to unpack!

**We invite you to look over all the questions on the following pages and write your thoughts down before you meet with your group. Some people even use these questions to take notes during the sermon. The questions are meant to stir your thinking and prompt open discussion, and we do not expect you to cover every question each week.**

### Warm Up *(Suggested time: 30 min)*

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- 1) Did you grow up attending church or not? What was that like?
  
- 2) What is one of the things you enjoy most about spring?

### Getting Started

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Transition into group discussion.

- 1) Open group discussion with prayer. Here are a few potential prayer items:
  - a. For the Spirit of God to lead you in truth
  - b. For the fruit of the Spirit to be cultivated in your lives
  - c. For grace to hear and apply what the Spirit says to you
- 2) Choose someone to read the passage aloud for the group.

## **Study Questions** *(Suggested time: 40 min)*

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1. What was encouraging or challenging from the weekend worship gathering?
2. In 1 Timothy 3:15, what does it mean that the church of the living God is the pillar and support of the truth?

If the church disappeared, how would the following be affected?

Your Life

The Community of Lincoln

Our nation

The world

3. What does Paul mean in verse 16 when he says, “great is the mystery of Godliness?”

How is this mystery revealed to us?

4. Explain in your own words each of the phrases Paul uses in verse 16 to describe Christ.

Revealed in the flesh

Vindicated in the Spirit

**Seen by angels**

**Proclaimed among the nations**

**Believed on in the world**

**Taken up in glory**

**Do Christians have a tendency to overemphasize one or several of these phrases over others? Why is it important that we consider all of these phrases when thinking about Jesus?**

5. **How do the ideas in this passage come together to help us understand what it looks like to be the church in our world today?**

## **Personal Spiritual Exercises**

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Just like physical exercises help strengthen and stretch our bodies for healthy living, these spiritual exercises are meant to move us spiritually in ways that may be new so we might experience inner growth. Since God longs for us to experience Him with our whole selves—mind, body, spirit—we invite you along each week to strengthen your souls with suggestions and prompts.

**Scripture Focus:** Take time to immerse yourself in the life of Jesus. Find time to read the entire gospel of Mark in one sitting this week.

**Prayer Focus:** There are several other “Christological hymns” found in the scriptures. One is *Philippians 2:5-11* and another is *Colossians 1:15-20*. Prayerfully read and meditate on these passages several times this week.

## **Prayer** *(Suggested time: 20 min)*

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A significant part of “coming together” is being open and honest with our lives. Sitting in a group of people for prayer may be new or it may be familiar to you. If you would rather not pray aloud when it is your turn, feel free to pray silently and then say “Amen” aloud signaling the next person in the group to pray. Whether or not you choose to verbalize your prayer, everyone is a participant in sharing this time before God together.

Take a few moments to prepare a prayer request. What did the message, working through the above questions or the discussion cause you to notice about your own relationship with Jesus? Would you be willing to share your prayer request with the group?