

BIBLE STUDY | The Five Gs

We invite you to engage in this study to explore the scriptural principles behind the Five Gs.

A FARMER HAS NO POWER to make his crop grow. He can prepare the field, sow the seed, fertilize the soil, and protect the plants from parasites, but he cannot create the biological processes that bring a full yield.

Our journey with God is similar. We cannot save ourselves spiritually through our own efforts. Nor can we transform our character by simply trying harder. We can prepare the “soil” for a harvest in our souls, but God is the one who does the actual saving. He creates a clean heart within us. (When the Psalmist wrote, “Create in me a clean heart, O God,” he used the same Hebrew word for “create” that is used in Genesis 1:1 to describe God creating the heavens and earth.)

Once powerlessness is accepted, a Christ follower can—and must—engage in spiritual practices that will cultivate the harvest only God can produce. Writing to believers, the apostle Paul said, “You are God’s field” (1 Corinthians 3:9). God is the supreme overseer of the farm, and we are His tenant farmers, actively engaged in making His fields ready. The produce we desire to see grown is that of Christlike character.

A church is also God’s field. In order to contribute to its spiritual well-being, we must understand the characteristics of a healthy, thriving church. Likewise, we must be on guard against apathy and spiritual disease in order to fend it off.

The Five Gs help paint the picture of a healthy church. If each individual member grows, expressing those traits and values consistently, the church as a whole will grow healthily as well. The following Bible study is a tool for assessing and guiding our personal and churchwide health. Through this study, you will learn what Willow Creek aspires to be as a church—and what God aspires for each of us individually.

Grace

The foundation of our lives with God

“GRACE” MEANS “A FAVOR WE DIDN’T EARN.” It’s the bedrock of our Christian experience and saturates every aspect of who we are. It means every relationship we have and situation we encounter is an opportunity to experience grace—or share it.

Our Need for Grace

Some people think they are good enough for God to accept them just as they are. Use the space below to summarize what these verses say about this line of thinking:

Romans 3:10-18, 23
(See also Isaiah 59:2 and 64:6)

Once we understand and accept that we have fallen short of the standards set by our holy God, the next step is determining what to do about our shortcomings. Perhaps we react by becoming “religious.” We try to stop doing wrong things to earn God’s approval. That will settle things, right? Read Ephesians 2:8-9 and Titus 3:4-7, then write a letter to yourself explaining why you can’t and don’t have to earn God’s acceptance.

Dear _____,

Scripture often uses the concept of debt forgiveness to help us understand the concept of grace. When we forgive a monetary debt, the loss becomes ours, not the debtor’s. What do these verses say about how that concept applies to our relationships with God?

1 Peter 2:24

Hebrews 10:10-14

Our Response to God

Once we're in the place of being honest about our need for God's help and forgiveness, what's the next step according to these verses?

John 1:11-12

Acts 16:30-31

Romans 10:9

Galatians 2:16

Briefly describe the time when you finally gave up trying to obtain God's favor through your own accomplishments and instead rested in Christ's work on the cross for you. If you haven't done that yet—or are unsure whether or not you have—note this below.

The Inward Signs of Grace Received

According to these verses, who deserves our gratitude for the grace and forgiveness we've received?

Colossians 3:15-16

In light of these verses, take a moment to provide a reflective assessment of your own level of gratitude. What does your assessment reveal about your understanding of God's grace?

Read Luke 15:11-32. Do you see yourself as that lost son or daughter who is forgiven solely by the Father's grace? If not, why not?

The older son resented his brother and wanted credit for his good behavior—a sure sign he was living with a sense of entitlement rather than grace. As people of grace, how should we view those who have made mistakes, have not yet turned home to the Father, or who stand in judgment over others?

Reflect on your current level of concern for those far from God. What does your compassion-meter reveal about how close you are to reflecting your heavenly Father's heart for His lost children?

The Outward Signs of Grace Received

In the following verses, how did new believers demonstrate their responses to what God had done for them?

Acts 2:37-38, 41

Acts 8:36-38

Acts 16:14-15

Many of us were baptized as infants or small children, sometimes out of tradition, but often by parents who had a desire for us to embrace faith as we grew. The New Testament teaches we should believe first, then be baptized (see Acts 18:8). Why do you think Scripture teaches that Baptism follows belief?

Another outward sign of grace is sharing it with others. What does the Bible say about our role in telling others about what God has done in our lives (“sharing the gospel”)?

Matthew 16:15

Matthew 28:19–20

Romans 10:13–15

Matthew 9:37–38

1 Peter 3:15

Colossians 4:2–6

Since Scripture encourages us to share our faith with others, how might you do that with the people you know?

The Elders’ Statement on Grace

Christ followers understand and have individually received Christ’s saving grace. They have abandoned all attempts to earn God’s favor through accomplishments of their own and find security only through Christ’s sacrificial death on their behalf.

In obedience to Christ’s command, they have undergone water Baptism as believers, giving outward witness to the inner cleansing and renewal experienced in Him.

Growth Progressing as a Christian

GOD DESIGNED ALL LIVING THINGS to grow—and He wants us to partner with Him in the growing process. We plant, water, and fertilize, and God makes trees bud and crops flourish. We parent, and He guides our children into adulthood. We coach or teach, and He enables students and athletes to become more skillful.

That growth partnership is true in the spiritual world, too. God designed each of us to mature into fully devoted followers of Christ. When we trust Him to do His part, which He always does, and faithfully do our part, we can count on the spiritual growth He will bring.

But there’s a tension. Although God is faithful in His part to help us grow (the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit), we consistently fall short on our part. We resist things that would help us grow, fail to trust the Spirit’s help, and sometimes do things that actively keep us from growing. This tension will be with us all our lives. But when we commit to the growth process through our partnership with Him, we can deepen our lifelong response to His grace and earnestly express His grace to others. That’s what spiritual growth is all about.

The Inward Signs of Growth

If we are intimately connected to Christ, what “fruit” will our lives bear?

Galatians 5:22

Rate yourself in each of the nine fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control. Which one would you like to focus on developing as you take your next spiritual step?

According to this passage, how would you describe someone not intimately connected to Christ?

Galatians 5:19–21

Read the following passages and note the role of compassion in a transformed heart. Summarize what you discover.

Galatians 2:10

Luke 14:13–14

James 1:27

Describe how your heart is growing (or has become stagnant) in compassion for those who are poor, marginalized, or in need. What has helped you grow? What has hindered you? What help do you need moving forward?

We welcome people from all racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and sexual backgrounds. We strive to create a culture in which every person feels a sense of belonging. We accept each other's differences as we fully participate in building a unified church. Does anything prevent you from being fully engaged in that effort? If so, what can you do to move beyond it?

Tools for Growth

In John 15:4–5, Jesus talks about growing as one of His followers. Summarize what He says.

Growing as a Christ follower takes intentionality. The following tools can help you grow and remain intimately connected to Christ.

The Bible

Nothing catalyzes intimacy with Christ and growth in character quite like reading, reflecting, and responding to the Bible. What do the following verses teach about the importance of Scripture in the life of a growing Christian?

Psalms 1:2–3

Hebrews 4:12

Psalms 119:9–24

Read 2 Timothy 3:16–17. According to verse 16, who is the true author of the Bible? What are the different ways you can equip yourself with the Word of God (verse 17)?

How would you put in your own words the warning to Christ followers found in James 1:22–25?

What tempts you to be a hearer—but not a doer—of God's Word?

Prayer, Solitude, and Worship

What do Luke 5:16 and 6:12–13 tell us about Jesus' prayer life and solitude with God the Father? What can we learn from His example?

List the various types of prayer you see in these verses:

1 John 1:9

James 5:13

1 Timothy 2:1

Philippians 4:6

According to these passages, what are the benefits of Christians gathering together? How do weekend services and other church activities help you experience these benefits?

Acts 2:42-47

Hebrews 10:24-25

Hebrews 12:28-29

1 Timothy 4:13-16

The Purpose of Spiritual Practices

The tools we use to grow spiritually (such as Bible reading, prayer, silence, solitude, enjoying the beauty of creation, and worship) are often referred to as “spiritual practices.” Religiously self-righteous leaders of Jesus’ day thought engaging in these practices would impress God—even if their hearts weren’t right (Mark 7:3-4). It didn’t (Matthew 23:13-36). The purpose of spiritual practices is to help us experience God’s grace—not earn His favor.

Ephesians 3:16-19 describes Paul’s vision for spiritual maturity. How would you put it in your own words?

When Sin Deadens Our Spiritual Growth

What do these verses teach us about our life and conduct?

1 John 2:4-6

1 Peter 1:14-16

If salvation means total forgiveness, why does it matter if we continue to sin once we have become Christians (Romans 6:1-4)?

According to Romans 1:21, what heart condition leads to a sinful lifestyle?

These passages tell us things fully devoted followers of Christ should avoid. Which do you struggle with?

1 Corinthians 6:18-20

Galatians 5:19-21

1 Timothy 1:9-11

2 Timothy 3:1-5

Titus 2:1-14

What do these verses teach us about growing in Christ and aligning our actions with God's plans?

Luke 11:28

John 14:23-24

Acts 7:39

Romans 6:16-17

1 John 2:4-6

The Elders' Statement on Growth

Christ followers know the grace of God that saved them is only the beginning of His work in them. They gratefully respond by actively pursuing a lifelong process of spiritual growth in Christ and seek to become conformed to His image. To this end, they consistently nurture their spiritual development through prayer, worship, and Bible study.

They regard the Bible as the final authority in all areas of their lives and desire to be wholly obedient to it. Christ followers honestly confront areas of personal sin and engage the Holy Spirit's power in seeking to turn from sin.

Christ followers also desire to extend the grace they've received to others through personal evangelism and participation in the collective ministry of the church in their community, their country, and around the world.

Group

Relationships that optimize life change

THOSE WHO ATTEND WILLOW gain the opportunity to get to know God at deeper levels and to see one another as we truly are: children of the Most High God who are loved completely and forgiven freely. Every event, experience, and relationship helps us understand those things more fully.

For example, when gifted teachers teach from God's Word, it changes how we think because we get a glimpse into the goodness and holiness of God. When we gather for corporate worship, we celebrate and enjoy a dimension of God's beauty that inspires us. When we meet in small groups, another group member can remind us of what we sometimes forget: God loves us beyond measure, is working in us, and will carry us to heaven one day to be with Him. These are moments that remind us we are breaking free from sin and becoming more like Him.

The Community of Christians

Early believers knew Christ never intended for them to live alone. What do the following verses teach us about their relationships with one another?

Acts 2:44-47

Acts 4:32-35

Read what the writer of Hebrews had to say about community life in Hebrews 10:24-25. Rephrase this passage in your own words.

The Few in the Midst of Many

According to 1 Corinthians 16:19, Christians met in large groups and in _____.

What are the advantages of each?

Examine the Scripture passages below. Why is it impossible to fulfill these teachings without having close relationships with other Christ followers?

Galatians 6:1-3

Proverbs 27:17

Colossians 3:16

Christlike Attitudes in Relationships

All believers are followers in one way or another. How does the Bible describe a good follower?

1 Corinthians 16:15-16

1 Thessalonians 5:12-13

Hebrews 13:17

Sometimes quarrels occur between individuals within the church. What does 2 Timothy 2:23-24 teach about this topic?

Describe the process for conflict resolution that Jesus talks about in Matthew 18:15-17.

What do the following verses have in common:
Romans 16:17; 1 Corinthians 1:12-13; Titus 3:10; James 4:1-3; and Jude 1:9?

Reflect on the passages below. Why do you think God is so passionate about division and factions not being part of our church?

John 13:34-35

1 Corinthians 12:12-27

Philippians 2:3-8

The Elders' Statement on Group

A Christ follower honors God's call to participate in community in order to grow in Christlikeness, to express and receive love, and to carry out the ministry of the church.

For this reason, Christ followers give priority to attending the corporate gatherings of the church for the purpose of worship, teaching, and participation in the sacrament of Communion, and are connected relationally to a small group of believers for the purpose of mutual encouragement, support, and accountability.

Christ followers also:

- Pursue Christ-honoring relationships at home, within the church, and in the marketplace, and are committed to pursuing the biblical pattern of reconciliation when conflict arises.
- Support the leadership of the church and are biblically submissive to it.
- Affirm and uphold the fundamental truths of Scripture (as summarized in our Statement of Faith), and refrain from promoting other doctrines in ways that cause dissension.

Gifts

God-Given Abilities Used for the Common Good

IF GOD GAVE EVERYONE IN A CHURCH every spiritual gift, what would that look like?

“What a tremendous ministry!” you may think. “No shortage of volunteers. If the pastor is sick one week, no problem! Everyone has the gift of teaching, so anyone can fill in. Every small group has a leader; every ministry vacancy has a number of potential directors to choose from. In addition, there are no financial problems because everyone has the gift of giving and gives way beyond the tithe!”

Maybe. But think a little harder. There would be constant frustration because no one could fully use their gifts—and developing them through practice would be almost nonexistent. More importantly, we wouldn’t need or appreciate each other.

God’s plan for the church looks better than this. He gave everyone different gifts and abilities so we’d excel at different things and therefore need each other.

The Privilege of Serving

Read Matthew 9:36–38. Imagine Jesus visiting one of Willow Creek’s weekend services, and afterward, you sit together in the lobby and watch the thousands of people head directly for the doors. He sighs, then repeats what you just read. How do you think He’d feel?

In 1 Timothy 1:12, the apostle Paul tells us his attitude toward working in God’s service. How would you explain what he says?

Different Parts, One Body

In 1 Corinthians 12:14–26, the apostle Paul compares the church to a human body: Christ is the head, and all of us are different members. In three or four sentences, summarize the key ideas he brings out.

According to 1 Corinthians 12:4–7, what is the reason God gave everyone different skills and abilities?

Every Person is a Difference Maker

What did Jesus mean by “bearing fruit” in John 15:8, 16–17?

What’s the connection between bearing fruit and evidence we are His disciples?

What does the need to bear fruit say about being involved at Willow?

The following isn’t a biblical story, but it’s worth some thought:

A group of 15 people were carrying a log on their shoulders. One man tripped and fell, but the others kept going. As the man sat on the ground and watched them, he thought, “No need for me to help. They’re doing fine without me.”

Now for a twist: You’re leading the team carrying the log. How would you convince the man who quit that he’s wrong?

What encouragement does 1 Corinthians 15:58 give to those willing to “keep carrying the log?” How might this motivate you when you want to “sit this one out” and watch others serve?

Discovering Our Gifts

If you aren't clear on what spiritual gifts you have, we want to help you discover them. Go to willowcreek.org/workshops and find the next "Discover Your Spiritual Gifts" class to learn more.

If you know your gifts, what's keeping you from employing them at Willow?

Our Attitude as We Use Our Gifts

In the following passage, Jesus does something for the disciples that illustrates the attitude we should have when we serve. What is it?

John 13:3-17

Would others describe you as a towel-over-your-arm kind of Christ follower? Why or why not?

The Elders' Statement on Gifts

Christ followers recognize the church is composed of interdependent individuals, each uniquely gifted by the Holy Spirit for the purpose of building up the body and furthering the ministry of the church.

They therefore seek to discover, develop, and deploy those God-given gifts—and to find a place of service within the church with the support and affirmation of the body.

Good Stewardship

The Reasonable Response to Our Gracious God

"Mine."

IT'S ONE OF THE FIRST WORDS we learn as children. In one sense, knowing the difference between "mine" and "yours" is a natural and necessary phase of childhood development. It helps us become self-aware and establish appropriate boundaries.

The downside is that "mine" can quickly morph into an attitude of selfishness. There's no area where that shows up faster than in our attitudes about money. So it shouldn't surprise us that Jesus and New Testament writers talk a lot about the concept of money and possessions. They know our tendency is to forget that "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it" (Psalm 24:1).

Despite our tendencies, God is still incredibly gracious. Even though He knows we will mismanage what He has given us—and it's all His—He still shares it with us. All He asks is that we be gracious and sacrificial with it.

That's what Jesus did. He gave up everything in heaven to graciously and sacrificially accomplish our redemption. When we follow His lead, He promises we will store up for ourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy and where thieves do not break in or steal (Matthew 6:20). When we get there, no one will grasp for more or try to selfishly clutch their "toys." No one will ever say "mine" again. We'll freely enjoy what our good stewardship here has imitated—it's all His, and He freely gives it to us (Romans 8:32).

A Biblical Basis for Giving

What percentage of our income is the biblical model for giving?

Genesis 14:18-20

Leviticus 27:30-32

Proverbs 3:9-10

Malachi 3:8-10

Stewardship of Our Resources

What's the moral of the story Jesus shares in Luke 16:10-13?

What does this passage teach about how we should view our possessions?

Savings and Debt

According to Proverbs 6:6-11, why is the ant a good model of money management?

In the same passage, what do we avoid when we work hard and save?

What does Proverbs 28:20 teach us about get-rich-quick schemes?

We live in an age of credit and consumer debt. What does God's timeless wisdom say about that?

Proverbs 21:25-26

Proverbs 22:26-27

Proverbs 22:7

Attitudes about Money and Giving

According to these passages, how should we think about money and giving?

1 Timothy 6:8-10, 17-19

1 Corinthians 16:1-2

2 Corinthians 8:9,12

Luke 6:38

Matthew 6:3-4

2 Corinthians 9:6-9. What challenge is presented in this passage? What promise?

How We Should Give

GENEROUSLY: We know Christ has given us everything and owns all we have.

PROPORTIONALLY: We give the highest percentage of our income possible, recognizing the tithe (10 percent) as the long-established benchmark in Scripture. We look forward to giving more as we prosper.

REGULARLY: As resources flow in, we offer our "firstfruits" back to God, honoring Him first—before fulfilling our other financial obligations.

LOCALLY: Willow is our spiritual home, and we support it with our tithes and offerings because God uses the church to bless us, those in our community, and our brothers and sisters around the world.

COMPASSIONATELY: As we're able, we give beyond our normal levels of giving to support special initiatives for those in need.

CHEERFULLY: Knowing God sees our heart, we don't give begrudgingly. We give as a willful, joyful act of worship to honor God and serve others.

HUMBLY: We don't call attention to ourselves when we give—and we don't give to gain favor or influence over others.

EXPECTANTLY: We're confident in God's provision and look forward to how He will use our gifts. We know He is pleased when we give generously and sacrificially. We look forward to seeing how He will faithfully provide for our physical needs when we have been faithful in honoring Him with the firstfruits of our income.

Good Stewardship Commitments

1. I believe all I have has come my way through the loving hand of God.
2. I will live joyfully within God's current provision for my life (Philippians 4:12-13).
3. I will honor God by giving the first tenth of my earnings to him (Proverbs 3:9-10).
4. I will save a portion of my earnings for emergencies, above-and-beyond giving, and my retirement (Proverbs 6:6-8).
5. I will live each day with an open ear toward God and respond eagerly to any direction He gives me regarding my resources.

The Elders' Statement on Good Stewardship

Christ followers realize they were bought with the price of Christ's blood, and everything they are and have belongs to Him. In light of this, they desire to be responsible caretakers of the material resources God has entrusted to them. They recognize the tithe (10 percent of one's earnings) as the historic standard of giving in the Bible. Moreover, in response to Christ's abundant giving, they increasingly submit their resources to His lordship and display a spirit of generosity and cheerfulness in supporting the work of the church.