

WEEK 1 What's This Week About?

RELYING ON THE VINE

Have you ever felt as though you should be further along in your spiritual growth? Maybe you look at your pastor, life group leader or favorite person from the Bible and ask yourself, “How do I go from where I am spiritually to where they are spiritually?” And perhaps when you think of actually being transformed to be like Jesus, it's easy to become discouraged, thinking, “That seems impossible! How can I ever grow that much?”

You are not alone. Many Christians of all ages and levels of maturity feel the same way. The good news is that we do not need to be discouraged. Growth is a process, and this process looks different for everyone. However, the question still remains: *How do I actually grow closer to Jesus and become more like Him?*

Spiritual growth can be defined as the process by which someone becomes closer in his or her relationship with God. Some of us have the perception that the best way to grow is simple: love more, sin less. But no matter how hard we work, those two seemingly simple tasks overcome us. Or maybe you think that growth is the result of some kind of equation: Reading your Bible + Praying Regularly + Going to Church + Making Good Choices = Spiritual Growth. The problem is, even the most disciplined of us are rarely able to keep that pace. And even if someone could, that equation doesn't necessarily lead to spiritual maturity.

Often, our primary focus is on what we must *do* and how we need to *act* in order to grow spiritually. As followers of Jesus, we sometimes have the outlook (often without even realizing it) that “Jesus was

responsible for my salvation. Now I am responsible for my growth.” But God does not ask us to grow ourselves. While talking to His disciples Jesus gave this illustration:

“Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.” (John 15:4-5)

Jesus’ illustration is simple: in the same way a branch needs to be connected to a vine or a tree to grow and bear fruit, we need to be connected to Jesus to grow spiritually and bear spiritual character similar to Him. A vine is the life source of a branch. It is responsible for collecting and providing all the nutrients and water that the branch needs in order to grow. The branch’s job is simply to receive. But Jesus is clear that the branch must be open to receiving from the vine. The vine will not force the branch; the branch must remain.

Jesus’ phrase, “Remain in me,” in simplest terms means, “Be open to what Jesus will do to transform you.” The first and absolute primary step in spiritual growth is openness to Jesus, remaining in Him as He remains in us. Over the coming weeks, we will explore what that means for our lives in depth. So your goal this week is to be open, to receive. Let us not rely on our own strength, but give control of our spiritual growth to the true vine, Jesus. Apart from Him we can do nothing.

WEEK 1 LEADER GUIDE

RELYING ON THE VINE

Primary Takeaway: Spiritual growth cannot come from our own effort. It can only come from Christ.

INTERACTIVE TEACHING

Fill a mug or small pot with dirt and plant a small branch broken from a tree in it (the goal is for it to look as much like a plant as possible). Ask your students, “What it would take to help this small plant grow?” (Light, water, etc.) Next, ask them to envision the small plant as their relationship with Jesus. What would it take to help that relationship grow? (Prayer, reading the Bible, serving, church community, etc.) Of those things, which is most important when it comes to growing closer to Jesus? (Maybe this stumps them. If it does, that’s OK.)

Let’s see what Jesus has to say ...

SCRIPTURE DISCUSSION

Read **John 15:4-5** together.

1) What illustration does Jesus use to describe the spiritual life? Who represents the vine? Who represents the branch?

Remove the “plant” from the soil, revealing it to actually be a branch. Point out to them that a branch is not responsible for collecting and providing all the nutrients and water that it needs in order to grow. That is the job of the vine (i.e. Jesus). The branch’s job is simply to receive.

2) How would you summarize this passage? What is Jesus' primary point?

In the same way a branch needs to be connected to a vine or a tree to grow and bear fruit, we need to be connected to Jesus to grow spiritually and bear a spiritual character similar to His.

3) What is Jesus' only command in this passage? (i.e., the most important part of spiritual growth)

To "remain": Jesus' phrase, "Remain in me," in simplest terms means, "Make your home with Jesus." That can only happen if our hearts are open to Him. The first and absolute primary step in spiritual growth is openness to Jesus, remaining in Him as He remains in us.

Though the things we *do* are important (prayer, reading the Bible, serving, church community, etc.), they are not what brings about spiritual growth. Only Jesus can grow us! We must remain in Him if we are to truly grow spiritually.

PRAYER EXPERIENCE

Have your students write to God about what they thought of spiritual growth before this lesson. Have them ask Jesus what He wants to teach them in the weeks to come. After taking a minute or so to listen to God, have them write what they think God might be saying (even if they have to guess what they think He might say). The hope is to help them to learn to both talk to God and receive from Him.

WEEK 1 DEVOTIONALS

RELYING ON THE VINE

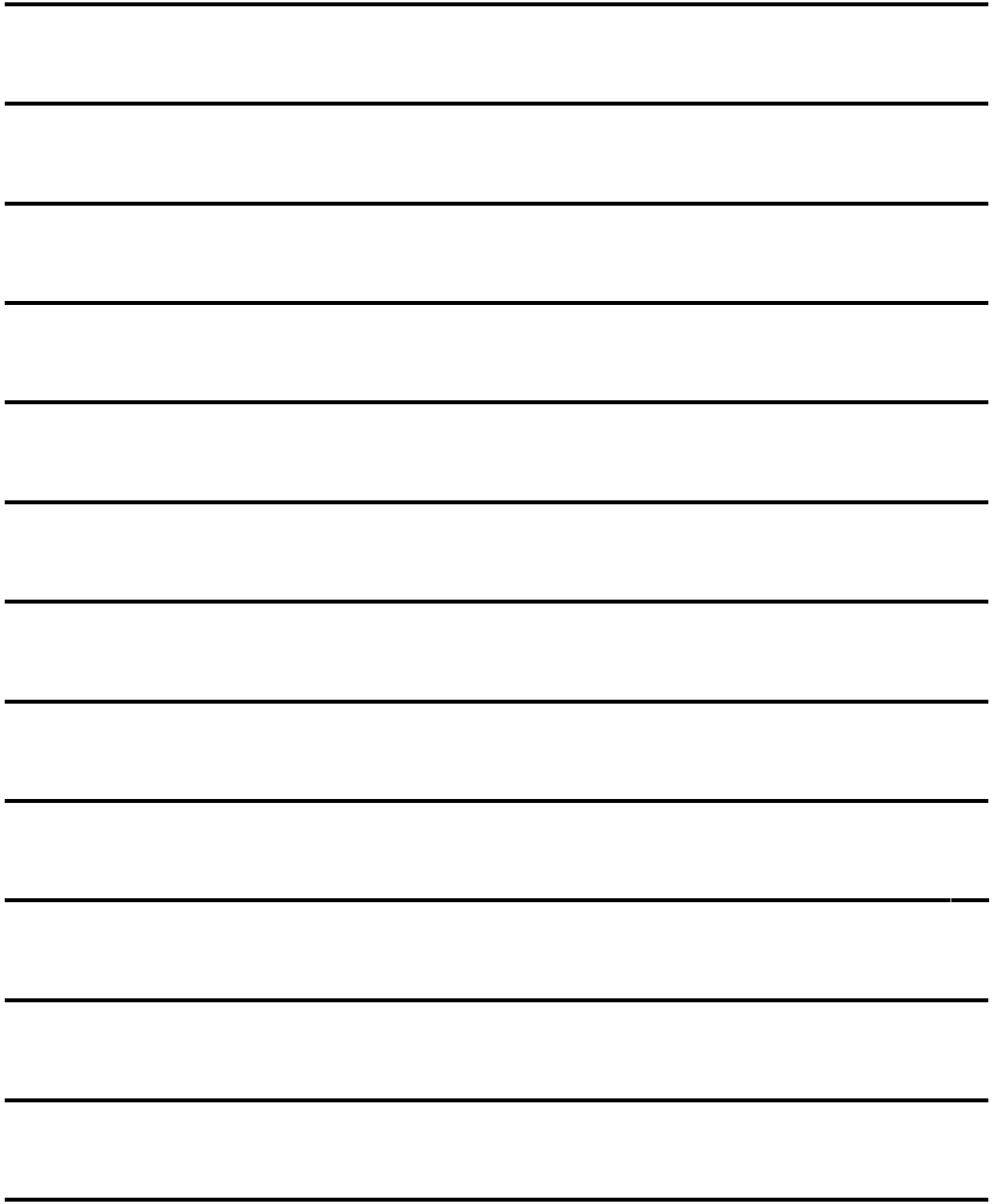
DAY 1

Read John 15:5-8.

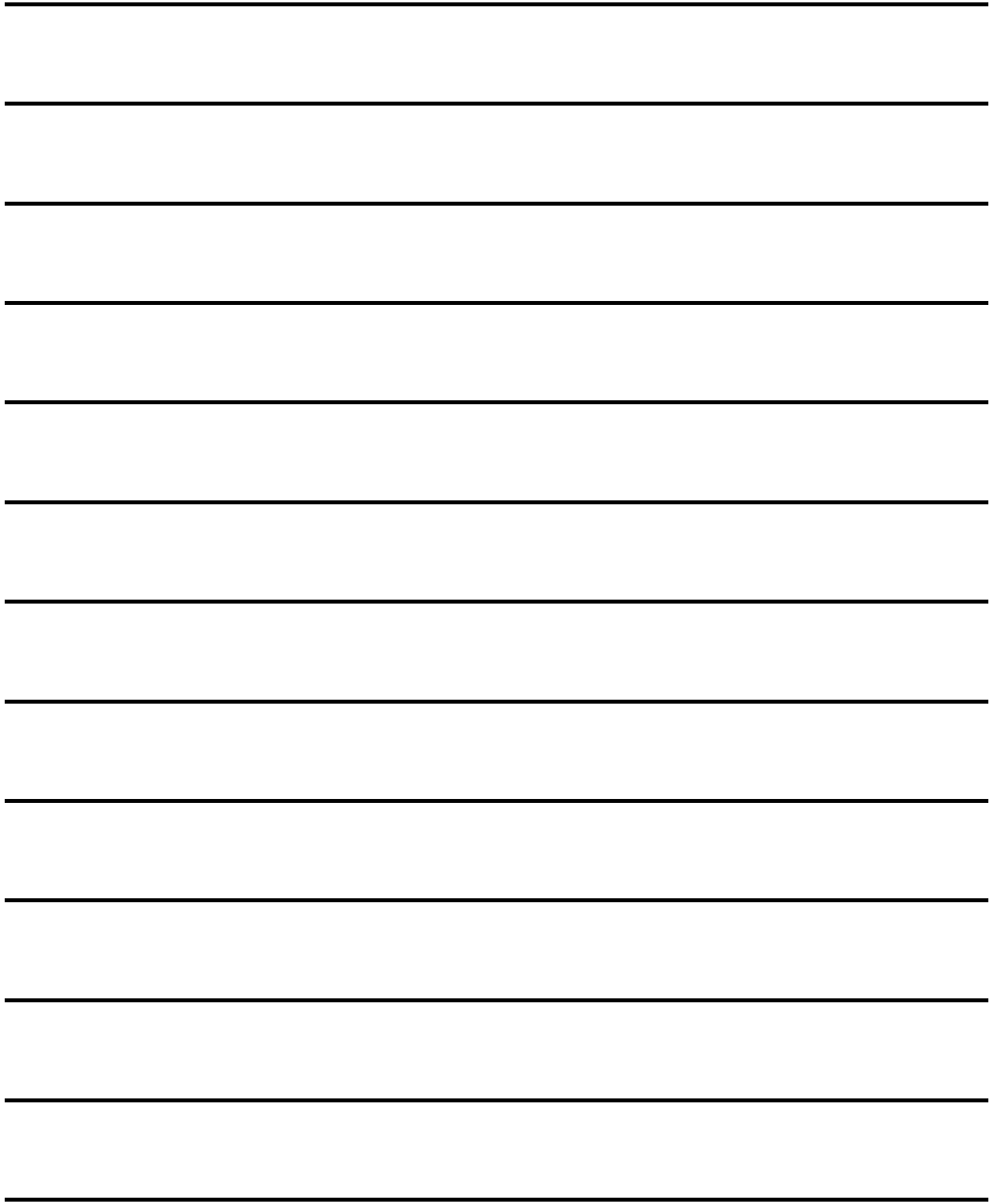
Remember from this week's lesson: Jesus is the vine. We are the branches. The vine provides all the nutrients and water necessary for the branch to grow and produce fruit. Our primary role in spiritual growth is to receive from Jesus, to be open to what He will do.

Practice Prayer

- If you had to guess, what do you think God wants you to receive from Him today? Spend a few minutes talking to God about that guess.
- Talk to God a bit about what you would like to receive from Him. If you want, write out your prayer below.







DAY 3

Read John 15:9-15.

Practice Prayer

Take a walk with Jesus. Spend some time talking to Him about whatever is on your mind and heart right now. Speak to Him like you would speak to a close friend.

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