

VOLUME 1

LEADER'S GUIDE

Grace, Kingdom, Mission:
Small Group Studies for
Missional Engagement

GOSPEL & GRACE

*Discovering the Heart
of Discipleship*

ALBERT SHIM

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Volume 1 of Grace, Kingdom, Mission:
Small Group Studies for Missional Engagement

Gospel and Grace - Leader's Guide

Grace, Kingdom, Mission - Vol. 1

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Introduction

Series Overview

It was perhaps predictable that Mission to the World should eventually come to publish *Grace, Kingdom, Mission: Small Group Studies for Missional Engagement*. After all, Mission to the World exists to see Christ-exalting churches planted among the least reached peoples of the world. Our passion is to plant churches that plant churches that plant churches that plant churches. We are convinced that the lifeblood of church-planting churches are disciple-making disciples, so it is toward this end that we have endeavored to create this curriculum. Discipleship is both our passion and our call.

Our sincere hope is that these lessons become much more than simply a *resource* for the teaching and equipping of the local church. Rather, we yearn to see these sometimes clumsy words on these pages become by God's grace and the Spirit's power, a *tool* for life-on-life discipleship, a *vehicle* for the creation of mission communities, and a *catalyst* for inspiring ever-deepening, sacrificially-intensifying missional engagement.

These admittedly ambitious goals have guided the creation of this series consisting of three volumes all intended to be used in small group settings but each with a distinct focus:

Volume 1 | Gospel and Grace. We begin with gospel and grace without which there is no mission, no good news. In this volume, we seek not only to nurture a deeper *understanding* of the gospel of grace but also to cultivate a *life* animated and sustained by its depth and richness.

Volume 2 | Kingdom and Mission. Upon this sure foundation, we next survey the biblical and theological foundations for mission and explore its nature, not primarily as a mandate or "to do," but as central to God's own nature and his Church's identity. We will further introduce significant issues in contemporary mission.

Volume 3 | Culture and Context. Finally, we close with those concepts and challenges that bear significantly on the practice of gospel witness to human contexts, namely, culture, worldview, and contextualization. While especially critical to cross-cultural ministry contexts, we believe they are no less relevant to effective witness in our native culture.

Volume	Objectives	Distinctives
Gospel & Grace	Present the gospel of grace as the operating principle for Christian life and mission	Discipleship focus "Heart"
Kingdom & Mission	Explore the biblical foundations for mission and introduce contemporary issues in mission	Teaching focus "Head"
Culture & Context	Explore concepts of culture, worldview and contextualization	Equipping focus "Hands"

A Vision for Discipleship

Why discipleship? Fundamentally, it is simply because Jesus commands us: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations. . .” (Matt. 28:19). We are called to be disciples and make disciples. And movements of church-planting churches in the least reached corners of God’s world will never be realized without the grounding, training, and equipping of disciple-making disciples.

What is a disciple? Somewhere along the way, we have come to associate the word “disciple” with those who are really serious about their faith; they are the more committed, more mature followers of Christ. Yet in Scripture, we find no evidence of this tiered spirituality. A disciple is simply someone who is learning how to follow Jesus. And it is not how far along we are, it is whom we are following. So as our working definition, *a disciple is an apprentice of Jesus who is actively engaged in learning how to live by the grace of God under His rule and authority.*

How are disciples made? We believe disciples are not mass-produced in a program or a classroom since brute information unpracticed and unapplied does not beget changed and changing lives. Rather, we believe disciples are made in community, through the disciplined application of the gospel both to our own hearts and also our relationships. As others have put it, discipleship is life-on-life and not curriculum-on-life. The vehicle is relationship with the gospel as its bond.

Then why a curriculum? Despite the relational context within which true discipleship occurs, there still remains a significant teaching-learning component to discipleship. We are called to “make disciples, *teaching* them to observe” all of Christ’s commands. So yes, curriculum—and doctrine—matter. But it is in the application of that teaching in the nurture of disciplines and the confession of sin, in peacemaking and reconciliation, and in mutual accountability and bold witness, that we grow as Christ’s disciples. We therefore view this curriculum simply as a *tool* with which the true work of life-on-life discipleship may occur.

How to Use This Study

Small Groups. We have designed these studies for use in small, intimate groups of three or four people who are dedicated to one another for a season of growth. Why such small groups? Because it is the safety of a small, mutually committed group that allows for greater degrees of honesty, accountability, and spiritual engagement.

Reading. Each lesson begins with a reading. Here, the main points of each lesson are variously defined, explored, or illustrated in a hopefully accessible manner. The reading for each lesson should be read *prior* to the group meeting.

Bible Study. Scripture is our ultimate authority and so we have designed each gathering to begin with a Bible study from which the key concepts are derived.

Discussion Questions. Following the Bible study, discussion questions are provided to help guide your sharing and reflection. Here, our aim is to invite honest self-examination and provide opportunities to speak grace and truth into each other’s lives.

Exercise. Each lesson concludes with an exercise that is intended to help apply the concepts covered in each lesson specifically to one relationship, one sin pattern, or one aspect of our lives in Christ.

Homework. Finally, a summary appears at the end of each lesson with the week's memory verse and to serve as a reminder to read in advance of the next meeting.

Discipleship Covenant

As a written expression of what I have committed to in my heart, both to God and to my discipleship group, I pledge to:

1. Be present and engaged for all group meetings.
2. Complete the assignments as faithfully as possible.
3. Contribute to an atmosphere of trust, honesty, love, vulnerability, and accountability.
4. Refrain from sharing with others that which is shared in confidence.
5. Pray for my group members.
6. Prayerfully consider reproducing this group with others upon completion.

Signed _____ Date _____

LESSON 1

Called to Discipleship

Overview

Key Concept: Discipleship | **Bible Study:** Luke 9:18–27 | **Memory Verse:** Matt. 28:18–20

Objectives:

- To learn what it means to be a disciple of Christ
- To see how the gospel leads us to joyful surrender to Christ and his lordship
- To confess those areas of our lives where we are not following Christ

Called to Discipleship

Christian philosopher and author Dallas Willard laments “it is almost universally conceded today that you can be a Christian without being a disciple.”¹ The word *disciple* has for many become associated with the spiritual elite, those who are “serious” about their faith, for whom following Jesus is a matter of wholesale devotion. Tragically, this move has created a space, and a wide one at that, for scores of others to profess to be Christians without actually following Christ.

Now this problem is not a new one. Even in Jesus’ day, many professed Jesus as Lord, identified themselves as his followers, and yet did not follow his commands. Jesus calls out, “Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I tell you?” (Luke 6:46). If you are a Christian, you are called to be a disciple. And what is a disciple? A disciple is simply *an apprentice of Jesus who is actively engaged in learning how to live by the grace of God and under His rule and authority, all toward ever-growing conformity to the Master.*

There is much more that can be said and needs to be said about the priority of discipleship, the mandate to make disciples, the troubling prevalence of “cheap grace,” and the general neglect of discipleship in the modern church. Here, we simply reflect on what it means to be apprenticed to Jesus by looking at Luke’s account of Jesus’ call to his first disciples in Luke 5:1–11:

5:1 On one occasion, while the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he was standing by the lake of Gennesaret, **2** and he saw two boats by the lake, but the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. **3** Getting into one of the boats, which was Simon’s, he asked him to put out a little from the land. And he sat down and taught the people from the boat. **4** And when he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into the deep

and let down your nets for a catch.” 5 And Simon answered, “Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets.” 6 And when they had done this, they enclosed a large number of fish, and their nets were breaking. 7 They signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both the boats, so that they began to sink. 8 But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.” 9 For he and all who were with him were astonished at the catch of fish that they had taken, 10 and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. And Jesus said to Simon, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men.” 11 And when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed him.

Disciples learn from Jesus. Luke points out that the whole “crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God” (5:1) and that Jesus “sat down and *taught* the people from the boat” (5:3). Luke thus unequivocally identifies the teachings of Jesus with the “word of God” (5:1). Here then is the context for the calling: they are gathered around the *teaching* of Jesus. There is a didactic component to discipleship. And like the typical master-disciple relationships of the day, the learning did not take place in a classroom or through a book, but in the context of a relationship, life on life, shoulder to shoulder, so that they might be apprenticed to him in every way. To be a disciple is to learn from Jesus and to submit to a teaching and an authority external to ourselves.

Disciples obey without condition. As Jesus concludes, he very matter-of-factly commands Simon in verse 4: “Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch.” This was not a question or a suggestion, and of course, Simon has just about every reason *not* to obey. He’s exhausted. He had “toiled” all night. He is cleaning his nets, nets which incidentally were only to be used at night because in the light of day they would be seen by the fish. But not only this, this lake was fished out! They hadn’t caught a thing. And in the Gospels, it’s interesting that the disciples are never able to catch any fish without Jesus’ help! Still, the card that Simon never plays is this: “I’m the fisherman, you’re the preacher. Aren’t you the son of a carpenter? You might have used this boat as a pulpit, but I actually use it to fish! This is my domain. Jesus, I think I know better.” It is in the area of his life that Simon is most inclined to believe he knows best that he is asked to relinquish control, trust, and obey.

So when Jesus asks Simon to let down the nets, he responds in obedience against his “better” judgment: “Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets” (5:5). At your word. There’s your word and there’s mine, and I choose to obey yours. Simon does not condition his obedience or argue with Jesus. Disciples are called to live under the authority of another and submit to the wisdom of another. They are quick to say “Master” despite their “better” judgment (*but I’m a fisherman!*), their own desires (*but I’m tired!*), and seemingly hopeless situations that Jesus couldn’t possibly understand (*but I worked all night and caught nothing!*).

To be a disciple is not to make Jesus your consultant. A consultant gives recommendations that you can choose to follow or not, since *you* retain authority over your life.² But disciples renounce their autonomy, yield final authority to Jesus, and obey. Disciples have masters. So the question that we who profess to follow, trust, and obey Christ must ask is this: Do we have a client-consultant relationship with the Creator of the Universe, the Author of Life, and the Savior of our Souls?

Disciples are called by grace. When the nets begin breaking from the catch and the boats start to sink, Simon immediately recognizes the miracle and falls at Jesus' feet. Simon might be a simple fisherman, but he's smart enough to know that he is now in the presence of one who is wholly *other* than him. And so in that moment, unable to bear the divine presence, gripped by holy fear, convicted of his sinfulness, it is now the disciple-apprentice that instinctively begs, rather *commands* his teacher-master, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord" (5:8).

What then is the master's response? Jesus doesn't do Simon harm or send him away. He doesn't acquiesce to Simon's demand. He doesn't leave the sinner alone in his sin. Instead it's, "Don't be afraid." Simon doesn't find condemnation, but rather acceptance, security, and assurance.

Discipleship exists by this encounter. It is not dutiful volunteerism (as if God *needed* our help). Jesus promises, "though because of your sinfulness you desire for me to depart, I will not; I will remain, and you with me." And what Simon doesn't quite yet know is what it would cost Jesus to say that. God's acceptance of sinners is not sloppy. He is not an incompetent judge or a weak-willed father. That acceptance would cost Jesus his life on the cross, crucified for their sins and ours. The call to discipleship is not just to intellectual enlightenment or moral transformation. It is not reserved for spiritual prodigies. It is a gracious call to be with Jesus, unworthy yet accepted, sinful yet beloved.

Disciples are sent on a mission. In the same breath that Jesus says to Simon, "Do not be afraid," he goes on to say: "from now on you will be catching men" (5:10). And here, in this enacted parable, the setting is apt. Jesus could have performed any miracle to get Simon on his knees, but for this moment, and for this call, it is a miraculous catch of fish. The call comes with a commission and the mission is guaranteed a success beyond all reasonable hope or expectation.

Discipleship is never an end unto itself. It is not to nurture a private life of obedience and faith. Simon and others after him would be the agents whereby multitudes would be drawn to their gracious Master. And how is this to be done? It would not be done by the ingenuity of the fishermen, but by the authority, power, and word of God: "Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch" (5:4). God will do it. It is his mission and by it unprecedented multitudes, enough to break nets and sink boats,³ even in the most desolate of lakes, will be brought into the boat that bears the divine presence so they too might hear the words: "Do not be afraid."

Perhaps like Simon, we too have a lot of reasons not to obey and to refuse our call. There aren't any fish here! Certainly not way over there! It's hopeless. I couldn't live there. I'm tired and I'm busy. I like it here in this boat and I don't much care for fishing. Can't I just have my personal Jesus and a nice Sunday service with my nice Christian friends? And to this Jesus says, "Let down your nets."

Disciples treasure Jesus above all else. The new disciples are said to have "left everything and followed him" (5:11). This is such an understated verse, so terse in its narration yet so immense in its implication. On this the most successful day of their career, upon reaching the shore, they leave everything to follow Jesus. They leave their nets, their boats, and two boatloads of fish (really, two boatloads of money, two boatloads of security, two boatloads of prestige, or whatever you'd like to call it) all to follow Jesus. From this we might correctly gather that the call to discipleship is not taken lightly, for it demands everything. They left everything! And while true, that might not even be the point.

The disciples do not leave everything because of their piety. They do not suddenly discover themselves to be ascetics. No, they leave everything because Jesus is better. Jesus is better, more valuable, and more precious than all they left behind. And even as they leave *everything* behind on that shore, they aren't getting the short end of the stick. No, they are the ones making out like bandits.

Jesus is more to be treasured than anything we could ever leave behind. We talk a lot about the cost of discipleship (and rightfully so!), but let us also talk about the delight of discipleship, because Jesus is better than anything we could ever leave behind. It is to this we are called, not simply to a path, but to a person; a gracious Master who loves us more than we will ever know.

Group Discussion

Bible Study

Read Luke 9:18–27

- 1. What is the relationship between verses 18–22 and 23–27? How do verses 18–22 set the context for Jesus’ discussion of discipleship?**

Luke 9:18–22 represents a significant moment in the disciples’ understanding of who Jesus was and what he came to do; it is the first instance of Jesus’ self-disclosure to the disciples of what he was to suffer as the Christ of God, or Messiah. They would still not completely grasp the implications of Jesus’ words and would have to be reminded over and over again of just what it meant to be the Messiah—namely, suffering, rejection, mockery, and death (9:44; 17:25; 18:32–33). Still, Peter answers Jesus correctly and Jesus seizes the opportunity to instruct his disciples about the nature of his “Messiah-ship.” He had not come to exert political authority or military power, or to establish the *geopolitical* kingdom of Israel. Instead, he would suffer, die, and be raised.

Jesus moves immediately from explaining the true nature of his “Messiah-ship” to explaining the true nature of discipleship. The two are inseparable. To follow Christ would mean to follow him to the cross in death. Disciples follow their masters and so to understand the nature of that “following,” the disciples had to understand the role of their master. If the essential nature of discipleship is radical association with Jesus Christ, then the life of faithful discipleship is the way of the cross.

“The surprise about Jesus the Messiah is that he came to live a life of sacrificial, dying service before he comes a second time to reign in glory. And the surprise about discipleship is that it demands a life of sacrificial, dying service before we can reign with Christ in glory . . . when Jesus set his face to walk the Calvary road, he was not merely taking our place; he was setting our pattern” (John Piper, “He Set His Face to Go to Jerusalem,” preached on April 4, 1982).

- 2. What does the metaphor of the cross convey? Why would Jesus utilize such a repugnant image in describing discipleship?**

Crosses were for dying but in the most horrific way imaginable: “Crucifixion seems to have been invented by ‘barbarians’ on the edge of the known world and taken over from them by both Greeks and Romans. It is probably the cruelest method of execution ever practiced, for it deliberately delayed death until maximum torture had been inflicted. The victim could suffer for days before dying. When the Romans adopted it, they reserved it for criminals convicted of murder, rebellion or armed robbery, provided that they were also slaves, foreigners or other nonpersons” (John Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, 29).

Jesus was calling the disciples to follow him in their dying to themselves. The “shock value” of using such a repugnant image suggests the radical nature of the call to follow him and the ruthlessness with which we are to put our old natures to death. Discipleship is not simply about learning propositional truths or mastering points of doctrine. It entails a complete surrender to Jesus—so complete that the surrender can only be described as a type of death.

3. In what sense is following Christ a kind of death? What does it mean to die daily?

Following Christ involves a death to my autonomy and self-rule. I no longer have final say over my life. My aspirations must be reconsidered, my values must be revised, and my priorities must be re-ordered until they all reflect my master’s. We are called to *daily* death because our capacity and impulse for self-enthronement lives on even after we follow Jesus.

4. How does the metaphor of the cross also evoke hope for would-be disciples? What happens when we follow Jesus into this “death”?

The metaphor also evokes hope because this death does not crush us into oblivion; it is the means by which new life is birthed. Jesus already hints at this in his self-disclosure: “The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, *and on the third day be raised*” (9:22). He is even more explicit in verse 24: “For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.” In death and in the losing of one’s life, there is salvation. The call *is* to death, but it is simultaneously a call to new life.

This is why Paul can say in Gal. 2:20, “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live,”—there’s death—“but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me”—there’s life. We have a new life and a new identity as followers of Christ. The hope we find in the metaphor of the cross is the glorious hope for resurrection unto new life.

Discussion Questions for This Week's Reading

Refer to "Called to Discipleship."

1. Was there anything from the reading that was particularly challenging or helpful for you?
2. In what area(s) of your life do you most resist surrendering to the authority of Christ? Where are you not following Him? Where in your life do you exhibit a client-consultant relationship with God?
3. In what area(s) of your life are you growing as a disciple of Christ? Where have you seen greater surrender, trust, and obedience?
4. The reading describes Peter's encounter with Jesus as a moment in which the presence of Christ brings him to his knees in conviction over his sin, but in which he still finds acceptance. Take a moment to briefly share your testimonies with one another. When and how did you first become aware of your sinfulness and Jesus' acceptance?

Exercise: Christ, Lord of All

Consider the following areas of your life:

- Career and/or academic achievement
- Money, wealth, and possessions
- Self-image and reputation management
- Sexual integrity
- Marriage or dating relationships
- Friendship, community, and forgiveness

Select one area from the list above and apply the following questions:

1. In what ways do you still live out a client-consultant relationship in this area of your life?

2. What would it look like to deny yourself and take up your cross in this area?

As God reveals the areas in your life in which you need to submit to the lordship of Christ, try for the moment to resist the temptation to make resolutions to try harder and spring into action. Instead, simply confess to one another and repent before God. Ask God to reveal to you why it has been so difficult for you to surrender in this area and finally, ask that God would free you to yield to the lordship of Christ.

At Home after the Lesson

Prayer Requests

Assignments

- **Memorize** Matt. 28:18–20.
- **Read** “Gospel and Grace” in preparation for next week’s meeting.
- **Pray** for your group members.

Memory Verse

Matt. 28:18–20

And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

LESSON 2

Gospel & Grace

Overview

Key Concept: Gospel and Grace | **Bible Study:** Luke 15:11–32 | **Memory Verse:** Eph. 2:8–9

Objectives:

- To see that the gospel is both cosmic in scope yet intensely personal
- To understand that the gospel is grace and not merit
- To see that the gospel is not just the entry point into the Christian life but also the truth that trains us in righteousness and governs our growth as disciples

Gospel and Grace

What is the gospel?

The Greek *evangelion*, which we translate *gospel*, typically applied to an announcement of a significant historical event intended to be received with great joy. It is good news. The ascension of a new emperor with its attendant celebratory procession would have been an event for which the term *gospel* might be invoked. When Paul writes of the *gospel of God*, he has in mind the good news of God that renders all rival gospels trivial and meaningless by comparison. It is the ultimate announcement of the most significant historical event, intended to be received by all peoples with the greatest of joy! The gospel of God is the good news that the risen Christ has come to inaugurate God's eternal kingdom on earth and that God the King has redeemed for himself a kingdom people to live under his gracious rule.

Now it is perhaps true that the personal dimension of the gospel has been so overemphasized that we have unwittingly diminished just how expansive the gospel really is. It is good news not just for me but for all of God's creation. The end for which the world was created will come to pass because of the work of Jesus Christ. Justice will reign, sufferings will cease, and all will be the way they are supposed to be. The gospel has implications that extend far beyond me and my personal faith. There is a cosmic dimension to the gospel; it is simply about everything.

But just as expansive as the gospel is in its breadth, so it is in its depth for you and me. The gospel is at once cosmic in scope and yet intensely personal. It reaches *me!* There is a greater story but I am lovingly and personally and irrevocably wrapped up in it. God, the Author of life and Creator of the universe, has set his affections on me! Christ, the Risen King and Great Redeemer of all broken things, was crucified and raised that I might have life and have it abundantly. Now how and why can this be?

These unfathomable truths are not true of us because we were deserving or lovable in any way. No, the gospel is grace because it was while we were enemies of God, aspiring to our own autonomy and self-rule, and dead in our sins as spiritual corpses that Christ came to die to give us life. Jesus lived the life we could not live and died the death we should have died. There on the cross the justice and grace of God met for our eternal joy. This is an unspeakable grace and it is good news for all who believe. And so Paul writes of the “*the gospel of the grace of God*” (Acts 20:24).

The Assault of Grace

Grace, like gospel, is a term that by its familiarity may have lost some of its earth-shattering impact. It has been defined simply as unmerited favor and yet that does not go far enough! It is not simply unmerited or undeserved in some neutral sense. It is *de*-merited favor. It is that we actually deserve the exact opposite of the love that we are shown. It is an extravagant love that has nothing to do with you. Yes, you are the object of that love but it originates in God himself. He has determined to set his affection on you and so it is; and thereby, it is the Giver alone that is glorified. There is simply nothing we can do to make God love us more and nothing we can do to make him love us less. And so his love for us is secure because it doesn't depend on us, but rather on God's faithfulness and unchangeable character. The source of your acceptance is outside of you. That's grace. It is as one writer has put it, one-way love that has “everything and only to do with the lover.”¹

This is what separates Christianity from every other religion. Religion says, “Obey and you will be accepted;” the gospel says, “You are accepted, so obey with joy!” And while this is unspeakably wonderful and undeniably attractive, the truth is that we run from grace with the earnestness of a fugitive. One writer put it this way: “Free grace, dying love, and unqualified acceptance might as well be a fifteen-foot crocodile, the way we respond to it: all our protestations to the contrary, we will sooner accept a God we will be fed to than one we will be fed by.”² But why is this so?

The truth is that the gospel of grace is the most difficult thing in the world to accept. It says to those who would receive it, you cannot do a thing to make yourself acceptable. You cannot lift a finger to save yourself. It is an affront to our pride and self-sufficiency and it mocks our self-righteousness. It requires that our hearts be melted soft and that we relinquish our bitterness and our self-pity, which we secretly cherish more than we let on. It says receive and then receive some more. And this is why grace is so hard for us to accept and even harder to live by. We are programmed to resist it.³

In Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, the guilty Jean Valjean upon being shown a most extravagant grace describes the encounter this way: “In opposition to this celestial tenderness, he summoned up his pride, the fortress of evil in man. He dimly felt that this priest's pardon was *the hardest assault, the most formidable attack he had ever sustained*. . . .”⁴ To this assault and to this attack we likewise, again and again, summon our pride. We cringe at the thought of being needy and instinctively appeal to something we have done to feel acceptable. But the gospel of grace says that you were loved when you were a rotting corpse. This is why Jack Miller can say, “Cheer up! You are worse than you think! . . .” How is that good news? It is because with the very next breath, he can say with confidence, “Cheer up! . . . God's grace is much greater than you can imagine!”⁵

We Grow by Grace

One of the fundamental premises of this study is that the gospel of grace is not simply the entrance point into our new lives in Christ. We are not only saved by grace, we grow and we live by grace. We do not, having been initiated by grace, continue on by our own self-effort or by trying harder. We grow as we learn to apply the gospel of grace to our lives at every point. Consider Titus 2:11–12: “For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age.” What is it that *trains* us to renounce ungodliness? What disciplines us to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives? It is the *grace* of God. The grace not only brings salvation; it trains us to live godly lives.

The tragedy is that although we begin our new lives in light of this grace, we often deny that same grace as we continue on in the faith. We instinctively turn to our merits, operating with a success-fail orientation, trying hopelessly to attain to some standard of Christian living whereby we can win God’s favor or the admiration of others. Paul’s admonition to the Galatians is still apt: “Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?” (Gal. 3:3).

What does it look like to affirm grace in our creeds, but deny it in our lives? Grace first demands that we acknowledge the depths of our sinfulness. And as we grow as Christ’s disciples, we begin to see that our sin is even greater and more pervasive than we initially thought. We become aware of sin patterns that we didn’t realize were there before, we become more horrified that we should so continually offend so loving and holy a Father, and we grow in our hatred for the sin that remains. But grace meets us through this trauma of self-discovery to tell us we are still deeply loved and accepted. See, grace also demands that we acknowledge God’s complete, free, and full acceptance of us despite our sinfulness. There is nothing we can do to win God’s favor; it is already over us!

We practically nullify this grace however when we insist that we can commend ourselves to God or others through our good works. There must be something I can do! There must be something I can be! And to these “musts” we instinctively and stubbornly cling. So we struggle to repent and confess our sin because we can do better next time and we want to fix ourselves up a little bit before we go to God. So we boast in our success or in our perceived maturity or in our right understanding. We compare ourselves with others who don’t have it quite right. See, we’re not so bad! We pretend, keep secrets, and ruthlessly manage our reputations because we can’t allow ourselves or anyone else to know just how broken we really are. And since we have it all together, we are harsh and critical with others because they simply don’t measure up or just don’t understand. Our lives and our orientation toward ourselves and others ultimately betray us and expose our deep struggle to believe grace. We’d rather work for it. It’s not so humbling.

But grace is not a transaction or a lifelong negotiation to secure forgiveness or even to make that once-offered forgiveness stick. No, our acceptance is free and full in Jesus. And any and every effort to commend ourselves to God because of our good deeds or right thinking is an affront to grace. Grace, as Jean Valjean experienced, will feel like surrender. It is a surrender to the illusion that we can earn it, that we are right enough, or good enough. It is a surrender that demands of us nothing but to accept being accepted.

We said in Lesson One that discipleship exists by grace. It is only the grace of God that allows us to confront the depths of our sinfulness without being crushed, for we are completely loved *as we are*. And it is only the grace of God that trains us to become more and more like Jesus. Discipleship then is not a concerted, programmatic effort to make ourselves more acceptable. It is a lifelong journey to believe that grace is really true and to daily accept that we need it more desperately today than we ever did before.

Group Discussion

Bible Study

Read Luke 15:11–32.

1. Describe the offense of the younger son. What is so objectionable about his actions?

It is difficult to overstate the offense of the younger son. One writer has noted that the request for his inheritance was nothing less than a death wish upon his father, for an inheritance was only ever at one's disposal upon the father's death (see Kenneth Bailey, *The Cross and the Prodigal*). He is impatient for his father to die and wants to be free from his father's authority. It was the ultimate rejection of his father. This declaration of independence, this desire to be autonomous and self-legislating, is the very essence of sin as it's been ever since the garden. It *may* have been that he used this freedom for hedonistic living as his elder brother later assumes, but his sin is not lessened had he left his father to live a "virtuous" life. Furthermore, "not many days later" he liquidates one-third of his family's estate (the portion he was due). A significant portion of the wealth that his family had accumulated over lifetimes was thus gone in a matter of days.

2. Why do you think the younger son returns with the intention of being a hired servant (15:18–19)? Why does he abandon this plan?

This is admittedly a conjecture, but it may be that as he returns in shame, his unworthiness so dominates his thinking that he cannot imagine that his father would ever receive him again. His status as son certainly has been forfeited, hasn't it? The intention to return as a *hired servant* thus reveals his disbelief in the father's acceptance of him as his *son*. And so he pleads to negotiate. He wants to earn his keep and in so doing perhaps preserve a modicum of dignity. This is a perfect picture of us when we doubt God's love for us and his unconditional acceptance. So instead, we commit to working for him as a hired servant to earn our keep. Grace is an assault that is difficult to bear. We would rather work for it than receive it freely. But look what happens when the extravagance of the father's love is received. The plan is scrapped. Compare verses 18 and 21. In the embrace of the father, the plan is cast aside; it melts away because its folly is exposed. How can he possibly ask to be received as a hired servant in that embrace? There would be no earning because his acceptance was real and profoundly felt.

3. Describe the scene upon the son's return. List some adjectives to describe the father in this parable.

The father runs ("races") to him publicly while he is still a long way off, embraces him, and kisses him. The scene is celebratory. He is adorned with a robe, a ring, and shoes. The fattened calf is killed for a feast in his honor "and they began to celebrate" (15:24) with music and dancing (15:25).

He is *compassionate* and *forgiving*. He is *extravagant* in his love. He is *joyful*, *excited*, and *glad* for his son's return. He is *gracious* and *merciful*. In his embrace, he is *accepting*, *comforting*, and *reassuring*. In his kisses, he is *tender*, *loving*, and *affectionate*. In the public demonstration of all that was in his heart, he is *unashamed*. Do we believe our Father is all of those things toward us?

4. This parable could end at verse 24. Why must it include verses 25–32? What is the message of the conclusion to this parable?

The context and occasion for the telling of the parable is given in 15:1–2. Tax collectors and sinners were drawing near to Jesus and this upset the Pharisees and the scribes. They didn't approve of Jesus' table companions. And sharing a table in this context was not simply a gathering over food; it was an act of fellowship signifying a deep acceptance. This is the backdrop for Jesus telling these three parables (the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son) in succession and of which the Parable of the Prodigal Son is the culmination. Each parable has as dominant motifs "lostness," recovery, and joy. But in this final parable, it is not a lost sheep or a lost coin, but a lost son. And it is not one missing of one hundred or of ten, but of two.

It is through the elder son that the scribes and the Pharisees are invited into the story. And the picture is of the father entreating the elder son to rejoice with him. Jesus is asking that they stand in solidarity with God's redemptive purposes and share in the Father's joy. That sinners are gathering around Jesus is an occasion for rejoicing and not for anger. In the elder son, we see the hearts of those who begrudge others the extravagant grace of God. They are completely alienated from the heart of God. Jesus is simply asking them to have the Father's heart and to rejoice when lost things are found.

In the elder son, we not only see complete alienation from his father, we are confronted with his self-righteousness as his heart cries, "I am not like him" and "I am better than him." He has distanced himself from the company of sinners, and in so doing, grace has become a stumbling block. From his perch, he is harsh, demanding, critical, and judgmental. He exhibits a performance orientation. And here, the motif of son as hired servant arises again in sobering juxtaposition. The younger son, intending to return only as his Father's servant is received as a son in the most extravagant manner: "This son of mine . . ." The elder son however, though a son, stresses his servitude to his father: "Look, these many years I have served you" (15:29), and complains that his father's goodness has been withheld from him. To this insolence and this very public offense, the father leaves the party and entreats him to understand; he goes down another road, after another son. There are two sons, two broken relationships, and it is to both that the father extends grace.

Discussion Questions for This Week's Reading

Refer to "Gospel and Grace."

1. Was there anything from the reading that was particularly challenging or helpful for you?
2. In what areas of your life do you have the most difficulty believing that God is gracious?
How does this unbelief manifest itself in your life?
3. What keeps us from coming to God after we sin? Do you ever doubt the assurance of forgiveness?
4. Consider your life in Christ at the present moment. Are you growing in your awareness of your sinfulness or growing in your self-righteousness? Are you growing in your awareness of God's holiness and grace or are you actively trying to earn his favor through performance?
5. Look at the adjectives you used to describe the father in response to question 4 above. Are you actively conscious that God your Father is like that toward you? Put another way, as you imagine that God the Father is looking upon you, do you sense that he looks with pleasure or displeasure? Is he delighted or disappointed?

Exercise: Loving Others

One very clear and humbling way to assess how deeply the gospel has taken root in our lives is to honestly examine the manner in which we treat others. And by this, I do not mean how we treat those we have natural affinities toward, those who have much to offer us, those who are attractive, or those who are like us. In this exercise, think of someone in your life that you do not feel a natural inclination to love. Perhaps this is someone you tend to avoid or feel uncomfortable talking to, or someone you are harsh with and critical toward. Take five minutes to complete the following exercise and then share your answers with one another.

1. In what specific ways have you not been loving toward this person?
2. Why have you been harsh or critical toward this person, either openly or in your heart?
3. What does your treatment of this person reveal about your perception of yourself?
4. How does your treatment of this person reveal your heart-unbelief in the gospel of grace.
5. How can you love this person more fully as you are loved by God?

At Home after the Lesson

Prayer Requests

Assignments

- **Memorize** Eph. 2:8–9.
- **Read** “Righteous and Beloved” in preparation for next week’s meeting.
- **Pray** for your group members.

Memory Verse

Eph. 2:8–9

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

LESSON 3

Righteous & Beloved

Overview

Key Concept: Gospel Identity | **Bible Study:** Rom. 8:12–17 | **Memory Verse:** Rom. 8:33–34

Objectives:

- To know that we are justified freely by faith alone in Christ alone
- To understand the blessings of being an adopted, beloved child of our heavenly Father
- To see how believing our justification and adoption leads us to a life of freedom and joy

Righteous and Beloved

We have said that the call to discipleship is not a call to moral transformation but a call to die; it is not a call to be better, but to be new. The gospel, at once cosmic in scope yet intensely personal, declares that in Christ, through no achievement of our own and by no merit we can claim, we have this new life freely bestowed as gift and grace. It is a transformation so stunning and so radical that it must be said that we have an entirely new identity in Christ. And the disciple must come to daily embrace two truths, not always readily believed: you are righteous and you are beloved. Put another way, in Christ you are both justified and adopted.

Justification Defined

Justification as a theological concept derives its meaning from the courtroom, where it is defined as a one-time declarative act of one's innocence before the law. It is to be declared "not guilty." J. I. Packer summarizes, "Justification is a *forensic* idea, conceived in terms of *law*, viewing God as *judge*. In justification, God declares of penitent believers that they are not, and never will be, liable to the death that their sins deserve, because Jesus Christ, their substitute and sacrifice, tasted death in their place on the cross."¹ But how can this be? How can God declare as innocent those who are guilty? Or declare as righteous those who are unrighteous? Only a most wicked or incompetent judge would exonerate the guilty! Then is our justification before God some sort of twisted legal fiction?

Paul's answer to this dilemma is that it is by and through the work of Christ Jesus alone that sinners are justified: "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the *redemption* that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a *propitiation* by his blood, to be received by faith" (Rom. 3:23–25). Specifically, we are declared righteous because Jesus paid our ransom to free us (*redemption*) and bore our punishment as our substitute to appease God's

just wrath at sin (*propitiation*). It is not an empty declaration; the cross ensures that it is not so. We are completely forgiven and have absolutely no penalty to pay for sin, past, present, or future! “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1).

Now if the forgiveness of sins represents one aspect of our justification, there is still another. It is not simply that we are counted *not guilty* through the death of Jesus on our behalf; it is also that we are counted as *righteous* through the obedience of Jesus on our behalf: “For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous” (Rom. 5:19).

Passive Righteousness

By faith, our status before the law depends wholly on the righteousness and obedience of another, and so Martin Luther referred to it as an alien or a passive righteousness:

It is like this: the earth does not produce rain, nor is it able by its own power or work to get it. The earth simply receives it as a gift of God from above. It is the same with “passive” righteousness. It is given to us by God without our deserving it or working for it. So let’s look at what the earth is able to do to get the rain each season so that it can be fruitful, and we will see how much we are able in our own strength and works to do to get heavenly and eternal righteousness. We see we will never be able to attain it unless God Himself, by the great gift of His Son, gives us Jesus’ perfect record, and gives us Jesus’ perfect righteousness. So do we do nothing?

Don’t we do any work to obtain this righteousness? I answer, nothing at all, for this is perfect righteousness, “to do nothing,” but to know and believe only this; that Christ is gone to the Father and is not now seen. He sits at His Father’s right hand not as a judge but makes us before God wise, righteous, holy and redeemed . . . He is our high Priest pleading for us and reigning over us and in us by grace.²

We stand in the law court before God not on the basis of what we have done or by our own merit. The work of Christ alone, in his death *and* his life, is the ground for our justification, and it is ours by God’s grace through faith. It is a gift! Thus Paul writes of “not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith . . .” (Phil. 3:9). When we stand in the dock before God our Judge, we stand united by faith to the one who both paid our penalty and fulfilled all of God’s holy demands.

Believing Our Righteousness

So why is it critical to rehearse this somewhat “basic” truth of the gospel? We noted earlier that the gospel is not simply the entry point into the Christian life; rather, we never move on from the gospel of grace. Christian discipleship might well be conceived of as the hourly struggle to believe that the gospel is indeed true. So how in practice do we deny the gospel of our justification?

First, when we do not believe that we are completely forgiven and accepted because of the finished work of Christ, we are liable to be crushed under the weight of our sin. We doubt our place and position with God and so when confronted with our sin, we instinctively make resolutions to do better, fix ourselves, try harder, and make things right. We despair that we have sinned again and hesitate to go to God in repentance, not believing that we no longer stand condemned for our sin.

Second, when we forget the ground of our justification we have no recourse but to look to ourselves for our own justification. We become obsessed not with what Christ *has done*, but with what we must do to make ourselves acceptable to God and others. This is the path of self-righteous moralism. We perform for God and for others thinking that our worth or the basis of our acceptance is at stake. And so our response to our sin is to minimize it or to hide it so we can keep pretending that we have it all together (*I would not be acceptable otherwise!*). We are harsh with others (*they don't measure up*), judge others (*I would never do that*), protect our reputation (*they can't know the real me*), bristle at criticism (*don't attack my self-worth*), seek recognition (*see how competent I am*), and on and on toward a progressively joyless life, all because we don't believe that Christ is our righteousness.

In contrast, this is what a life of freedom looks like. I can accept criticism because God defines my acceptance, identity, and worth. I can boast in others' successes and accomplishments because I don't need the approval or recognition of others. I can forgive others because I have been forgiven much worse. I can welcome and love others indiscriminately because I don't need to measure my status by the company that I keep. I can confess my sins to others because Christ died for me while I was still a sinner. That is what it looks like to *believe* that we are justified by grace through faith.

Adopted by God

Now as glorious as our justification is, the gospel speaks to us still a better word. For it is not simply that we are pardoned by a judge while justly deserving his wrath. It is that the judge has now adopted us into his family as his own sons and daughters! Packer writes, "Our first point about adoption is that it is *the highest privilege that the gospel offers*: higher than even justification . . . to be right with God the Judge is a great thing, but to be loved and cared for by God the Father is a greater."³ You are not just righteous, you are beloved! This is the radical new identity the gospel confers upon you. You are a child of God! Now, do we believe *that*? What does it even mean?

It means we have unmediated access to and intimate communion with our Father. Paul writes, "For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, 'Abba! Father!'" (Rom. 8:15). "*Abba, Father,*" a phrase that occurs only three times in all known ancient literature, is unique in that it conjoins the Aramaic word *Abba* with the Greek *Father* in one exclamation. Now why would Paul employ this unheard-of phrase in a letter otherwise written in Greek? Why transliterate and not translate? We can't be certain, but perhaps it was because this was the manner in which Jesus himself addressed his Father: "Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will" (Mark 14:36). Now this form of address to God was absolutely unprecedented—to address the transcendent Creator of the universe and thrice holy God as *Abba!* But Jesus, as God's own Son, could not address his Father in any other way and stunningly, we are invited to do the same.

It means we are beloved. Packer notes, “the New Testament gives us two yardsticks for measuring God’s love. The first is the cross (see Rom. 5:8; 1 John 4:8–10); the second is the gift of sonship.”⁴ John writes, “Behold, what manner of love the Father has bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God!” (1 John 3:1 KJV). Behold, the love of God for us! We are loved as God’s own children!

God help us to believe that it is true! Because when we believe that God is for us, and that his affections are upon us, and that his love for us is real and not deduced, then what madness become self-pity, self-hatred, and self-condemnation. Insecurities and anxieties will exert less control over us as they give way to freedom and joy. And here also is the death of self-righteousness and the endless performance: there isn’t a thing you can do to earn God’s favor; it is already over you!

Not long ago, a family adopted a child raised in a violent home. Every time this child’s new father moved to embrace him, he drew back in fear that some harm might befall him. The child did not believe that his new parents loved him as they said they did. This hurt his father until he realized this is how he must appear to his heavenly Father each time he withdraws from Him, doubting God’s love and perfect care for him. It was many months after his adoption when one day the child looked up at his adoptive mother, patted her arm, and declared, “You’re my mommy!” He was finally beginning to believe his adoption. And so must we. In Jesus, you are justified and adopted, righteous and beloved.

Group Discussion

Bible Study

Read Rom. 8:12–17.

1. **Rom. 8:12 begins “So then . . .” implying that Paul has reached the culmination of an argument or line of thought that he is now bringing to its logical conclusion. Read Rom. 8:1–11 and briefly trace Paul’s thought flow.**

Paul begins by declaring that in Christ, we no longer stand condemned (*justification*) and are free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death (8:1–2). And how did that come to be? God accomplished it by sending his Son in the likeness of sinful flesh (*incarnation*) to condemn sin so that the righteous requirements of the law might be fulfilled in us (8:3–4).

Those who are justified, now live in an entirely different manner. Our justification is no mere propositional truth; it affects the manner in which we live. And Paul now outlines two contrasting paths. There is the life lived according to the flesh and the life lived according to the Spirit. Life in the flesh is characterized by hostility toward God and disregard for God’s law, and begets death and God’s displeasure. In contrast, life in the Spirit begets life and peace (8:5–8)

Paul then affirms what this life in the Spirit entails. It is not simply a path one chooses to follow or something that one qualifies for by right living. It is defined by relationship, specifically, that the Spirit of God dwells in us. Three times in three verses the Spirit of God is said to dwell in us and it is that dwelling that signals belonging (8:9–11).

“So then,” Paul continues (8:12), we are no longer debtors to the flesh. We have no obligation to live to the flesh, now that the Spirit of God lives within us. We have no business living according to the flesh, because we have the Spirit of God. Sin is no longer our debt-master. We owe it nothing. Rather, we live by the Spirit who confers and confirms our adoption as God’s children.

2. **Look at verse 15 and consider its parallel structure. With what is the Spirit of adoption contrasted? How do these contrasting “spirits” speak to the core of our being?**

The spirit of adoption as sons is contrasted with the spirit of slavery unto fear. Adoption then entails security, peace, and confidence. Fear is a powerful emotion. But more powerful is the emotion that is conveyed in the converse that is portrayed in this verse. The spirit of slavery leads to fear, but the Spirit of adoption leads us to “. . . cry, ‘Abba, Father!’” There is something almost primal or visceral about that, and indeed, the word that is here translated “cry” denotes a cry of crisis or desperation. And yet, it is not a cry marked by fear or uncertainty. It is a cry of security, peace, and confidence—even in crisis—that connotes feeling, relationship, and experience. This is not the cool rationalism of propositional truths, but the genuine experience of God as Father that has as its target our affections and not just our intellect.

3. Consider all of the affirmations about the Holy Spirit in these verses. What is the role of the Holy Spirit in our adoption?

The Spirit enables us to put to death the deeds of the body (8:13). The mortification of the flesh is not the squelching of our sinful impulses by sheer willpower. It is “by the Spirit.” The Spirit enables us to live out our new life of freedom in Christ. He indwells us so that might be so. The Spirit also gives us the assurance that we are his children (8:16). He makes us deeply aware that we now belong to God as his dearly loved children. The Holy Spirit thus both confers and confirms our adoption as children of God. He gives us the certainty and confidence to address God as Father.

4. How do you reconcile Paul’s assertion that we have “received the Spirit of adoption as sons” (8:15), implying a past and present reality, with the hope that “we wait eagerly for adoption as sons” in 8:23?

This seeming contradiction reflects a tension in which we live whereby the promises are real yet not fully consummated. This does not diminish the very real experience we have as adopted children of God today. But the full-orbed reality of adoption is only to be experienced when Jesus comes again to make us finally and fully his children. This is the tension that is commonly referred to as the “already, but not yet.” We are children of God. And yet we still dwell *bodily* in the realm of sin and death. As great as our adoption is, there is still much to be hoped for: “we wait *eagerly* . . .” For one day, the body of sin will be put to death once and for all. We will know our Father fully. We will no longer doubt our adoption. We will see our Savior face to face. But until then, we must learn to live out the reality of our adoption and continue in our struggle to believe that it is really true.

Discussion Questions for This Week's Reading

Refer to "Righteous and Beloved."

1. Was there anything from the reading that was particularly challenging or helpful for you?
2. Are you confident that God has declared you "not guilty" forever in his sight? If you lack this confidence, what do you think keeps you from believing it?
3. In what specific ways does your lack of belief in your full acceptance by God surface in your life?
In what specific ways does your lack of belief in your adoption surface in your life?
4. The reading notes that when we do not believe that our justification is grounded in the work of Christ alone, we will either be crushed by the weight of self-condemnation for our sin or by the burden of a self-righteous moralism. To which of these are you especially prone?
5. Are you actively growing in intimacy with your Father? If yes, how is it being expressed? If no, what is keeping you from it?

At Home after the Lesson

Prayer Requests

Assignments

- **Memorize** Rom. 8:33–34.
- **Read** “Union with Christ: The Foundation for Change” in preparation for next week’s meeting.
- **Pray** for your group members.

Memory Verse

Rom. 8:33–34

Who shall bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.

LESSON 4

The Foundation for Change

Overview

Key Concept: Union with Christ | **Bible Study:** Eph. 5:25–33 | **Memory Verse:** Gal. 2:20

Objectives:

- To learn what it means that we are united with Christ
- To see how our union with Christ is the foundation for spiritual transformation

Union with Christ: The Foundation for Change

We have maintained that grace is not the entry point into the Christian life, but that all of our lives are to be animated and sustained by the gospel of grace. Yet all too often, we so easily and instinctively resist grace and disbelieve the gospel, embracing performance and merit instead. When we don't believe Christ is our righteousness and we are completely justified by faith, we dive headlong into our self-justification projects. And when we don't believe we are fully embraced by our Father as his beloved children, we work to earn a favor that is already and irrevocably ours.

Over the course of the next three lessons, we seek to build upon that sure foundation of gospel and grace and to explore how it is that we as disciples of Jesus Christ are *formed* into an ever-increasing likeness of him. How do the truths of the gospel result in changed and changing lives? How does grace begin to bear the fruit of deep, inner heart change, such that our character conforms more and more to the character of Christ? How are patterns of sin undone and the flesh mortified? We begin by affirming that the foundation for Christian spiritual formation is the new, radical, and even mystical reality: *by faith we are united with our Lord Jesus Christ in a vital, organic, and irrevocable union.*

The Centrality of Our Union with Christ

It's been said, "The union of the Christian with the Lord Jesus Christ . . . is what makes us Christians."¹ As Christians, it is not just that we have a new judicial verdict proclaimed over us (justification), or a new filial relationship into which we are drawn (adoption). There is a deeper reality still. We must be led to ask, exactly how is it that *we* partake in the blessings of justification and adoption? By what right and through what means can we claim such radical and glorious promises?

Our answer of course is that they have been secured for us through the completed work of Christ Jesus alone. And *we* partake in the blessings won by Christ in that by faith we are actually made one with him: ". . . as long as Christ remains outside of us . . . all that he has suffered and done for the salvation

of the human race remains useless and of no value to us. Therefore, to share with us what he has received from the Father, he had to become ours and to dwell within us.”²

The gospel declares not just that Christ is *for* us, though that is wonderfully true! It declares that Christ is *in* us, and that we are in him: “Just as the air of life, which we breathe, is ‘in’ us and fills us, and yet we at the same time live in this air and breathe it, so it is also with the Christ-intimacy of the Apostle Paul: Christ in him, he in Christ.”³ That’s union. And it is by this union that all that Christ has secured by his death and resurrection are made ours by faith. It is what makes us Christian. Justification and adoption then are simply the *legal* and *filial* expressions of our union with Christ.

Listen to just a small sampling of how Paul describes wherein we have been united with Christ: we are united with Christ in his crucifixion (Gal. 2:20), in his death and burial (Rom. 6:3–4), in his resurrection (Rom. 6:5), in his heavenly enthronement (Eph. 2:6), and in his glorification that is for us, yet to come (Col. 3:4). Furthermore, we have been chosen “*in him* before the foundation of the world” (Eph. 1:4–5); have been made “alive together *with Christ*” (Eph. 2:4–5); and have died to the flesh so that our lives are “*hidden with Christ* in God” (Col. 3:3). That’s our predestination and election, regeneration, and sanctification, all by virtue of our union with Christ!

I say *small* sampling because by one count, over 160 times in the New Testament, Paul makes reference to our union with Christ! Over and over again, the refrain is “in Christ” or “with Christ.” And where *explicit* references are absent, we instead find metaphors. It is *organic* like a vine and its branches (John 15:1–5); it is *covenantal* like the one-flesh union between a husband and wife (2 Cor. 11:1–3; Eph. 5:25–32); it is *vital* like members of a body with Christ as its head (1 Cor. 12:12–13; Col. 1:18). One writer remarks, “Once you have your eyes opened to this concept of union with Christ, you will find it almost everywhere in the New Testament.”⁴

The Foundation for Change

Much more than an abstract point of doctrine, our union with Christ is a present reality that is the foundation for our growth in likeness to him. So how exactly is it that our union becomes as one writer put it, “the starting point and base camp for a quite differently motivated and directed life . . . an obedience enabled and enhanced by grace.”⁵

Well, let’s begin with the elephant in the room. On the one hand, we see what God says about us: we have been united with Christ so that we “might walk in newness of life” (Rom. 6:3–5); our old self was “crucified with him” so that we are no longer enslaved to sin (Rom. 6:6); we have been set free from sin (Rom. 6:7); we are “dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 6:11). But then we see our lives and the sin that remains. We experience hourly the power of temptation and the impulse to rebel; we see the depths of our idolatries; we begin to notice sin patterns that we didn’t even know were there before; we see our anger and our lust, our selfishness and our pride. “God, *really?* United with Christ? Dead to sin? Raised to new life?” And we start to wonder, perhaps it really was too good to be true.

As one preacher vividly illustrates, if we are honest we know that there is this gap that makes the Pacific Ocean look like a raindrop, between who we know we are and what God says is true about us. And God asks us to live in that gap.⁶ And because we are more acutely aware of our sin, we get

to a verse like Rom. 8:13 and we get crushed: “For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.” How do we put to death the deeds of the body? How do we live in that gap? Now the answer is, and has to be, “by faith.” Christian discipleship is not a *moment* of faith—it is a *walk* of faith. But faith in what?

United in Death. First, we must believe God at his word when he says something is true of us. So when Paul writes in Rom. 8:12 that “we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh,” we have to believe that sin is no longer our debt-master. We owe it nothing because our sinful flesh was crucified *with Christ*. We are dead to sin by virtue of our union with Christ in his death. Only *after* Paul establishes this does he say, “put to death the deeds of the body” (Rom. 8:13). We have to believe our union. It *starts* there. And the order matters.

See, killing sin is the *consequence* of our union with Christ, not the *condition* upon which it is attained. Our new identity, this new reality of Christ in us and of us in Christ, is what bears the fruit of inner, heart transformation. Time and time again, this is the biblical pattern. In Rom. 6:12, Paul exhorts us, “Let not sin reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions.” Here’s what comes first: “consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God *in Christ Jesus*” (Rom. 6:11). There’s union. In Col. 3:5 Paul pleads, “Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity . . . evil desire and covetousness. . . .” Here’s what comes first: “For you have died, and *your life is hidden with Christ in God*” (Col. 3:3). Everywhere the witness is, *first*, know who you are and believe it!

And here is who you are *in Christ*. Although we will never be free entirely from sin in this life, here is the new reality: you are no longer a slave to sin, struggling with all of your might, trying to be holy. No, you are holy, struggling with all of the help of the indwelling Holy Spirit, to rid yourself of the last vestiges of sin that remain. One writer put it this way: “Indwelling sin has been dethroned and dealt its death blow through the believer’s union with Christ in His death. Now, with the Spirit’s aid, the Christian must spend his lifetime *draining sin’s lifeblood*.”⁷

Now, the work of Christ on the cross is finished. We cannot improve upon the completed perfect work of Jesus. But that does not mean we *stop* fighting because the victory is won; no, it means we *can* fight. We stop fighting sin when there’s no hope—when we’re enslaved and defeated and alone. That’s when we stop fighting. But God says we are free and victorious and that he dwells within us. *Now* we can fight sin. *Now* we can pursue holiness. And by faith, we have to believe God at his word.

United in Resurrection. The second thing we must believe in this walk of faith, as we live in this gap, is God’s power. Paul is not mocking us. He is not commanding flightless birds to fly. He does not say “put to death the deeds of the body” without any provision for us to do it. He writes in Rom. 8:11, “If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.” This is the power of the resurrection and it is *ours*, “For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his” (Rom. 6:5).

Do you ever think, “No, but my sin is too strong, my addiction is too great, this sin pattern is too entrenched?” Please listen. Do you think that you and the sin that remains are any match for the living God, the resurrected Christ, the indwelling Spirit? The God who spoke the heavens into existence; who said, “let there be” and there was; who created you; who raised Jesus from the dead—is there a

sin that is too great for which he cannot bring deliverance? He, that God, *dwells* in you. There is *no* sin that is too great, not *any* measure of past mistakes that is too formidable for the one with whom you have been united by faith. We will not be made perfect in this life, but there *can* and there *will* be deliverance and victory over sin.

It will seem like baby steps. It might even seem more like a crawl of faith here in this gap, but we have to believe not only that God *can* do it, but that he *will* do it. Two verses to which I can add nothing: “And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Christ Jesus” (Phil. 1:6). “Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely . . . *He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it*” (1 Thess. 5:23–24). He will *surely* do it. And by grace, we can declare together with Paul, “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal. 2:20). That’s union. And it is what makes us Christian.

Group Discussion

Bible Study

Read Eph. 5:25–33.

- 1. What is the context and primary focus of Paul’s instruction in this passage? How and in what ways does Paul speak about union with Christ in this passage?**

In this part of his letter to the Ephesians, Paul is addressing the conduct he expects of Christians within the household. He appeals first to wives, then husbands, children, fathers, bondservants, and finally masters. To each he provides very practical instructions primarily with respect to their most fundamental relationships. In our passage, the most extended address in this section, he specifically speaks to husbands, exhorting them to love their wives. This explicit appeal occurs no less than three times in this passage. Although this is a relatively mundane, earthy appeal, Paul has recourse to the profoundest theology and uses this as an occasion to teach about the church’s union with their Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul describes the union between Christ and his church as like the unity of one’s physical body. Paul exhorts husbands to love their wives “as their own bodies” and to care for them even as they nourish and cherish their own bodies. Paul is saying much more here, however, than simply love them *to the same degree* as you love yourself; it is not simply the Golden Rule applied to marriage. No, Paul is saying, love them as your own body because that’s the new reality. Count yourselves as truly one. You are now “one flesh.”

But what is the basis for this union? Paul’s logic is based in a profound truth: the marriage covenant and union is a reflection of the union between Christ and his church. That is the understanding from which Paul argues; that is the source of the authority from which he can make his appeal. See, his exhortations are not just good advice. There is a higher and deeper reality at work. Paul exhorts husbands to love their wives as their own bodies as a reflection of how Christ has loved the church, who are “members of his body.” This is why Paul is able to write in Eph. 5:31–32: “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’ This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.” The one-flesh union of human marriage is but a reflection of the one-flesh union between Christ and his people. That’s union.

- 2. In the context of this marriage union, what is it that the bridegroom Christ does for his bride? How is the relationship between Christ and the church portrayed?**

The marriage union between Christ and the church is portrayed in beautiful and wonderfully tender terms:

- Christ loved the church (25)
- Christ gave himself for the church (25)
- Christ sanctifies the church (26)
- Christ presents the church in splendor (27)
- Christ makes the church holy and without blemish (27)
- Christ nourishes and cherishes the church (29)

Now, go back over your list and replace each instance of “the church” with “me.” That is what we have in our union to Christ.

3. Read 2 Cor. 11:1–3. Paul again describes our marriage relationship with Christ. What appeal does Paul make here on the basis of our marriage to Christ?

Paul speaks of our being betrothed to one husband, Jesus Christ, and his appeal is to be faithful, sincere, and purely devoted to him alone. It is a plea against adultery. Purity and faithfulness are important themes in these verses. We have been betrothed to *one* husband. We have been presented to him as a pure virgin. And Paul’s fear that they are being led astray is spoken of in terms of “jealousy.” If we are married to Christ, then he alone is to be the object of our highest and deepest affections. If we are married to Christ, the sanctity and exclusivity of the marriage bond screams out against our adulterous impulses to find fulfillment anywhere or in anyone else. If we are married to Christ, then our devotion, purity, and faithfulness to this marriage must trump everything else.

4. Read Hos. 2:19–20, Ezek. 16:15–17, Eph. 5:25–27, Rev. 19:6–8. Trace the theme of God’s marriage with his people through these passages. In particular, what does the Ephesians 5 passage contribute to the development of this theme?

This theme of marriage is one common and prominent way that God’s relationship to his people is portrayed throughout the Old and New Testaments. Hos. 2:19–20 is just one example where God’s loving care and covenant relationship is depicted as a marriage. There are numerous others, including Isa. 54:5 where it is perhaps most plainly stated: “For your Maker is your husband, the LORD of hosts is his name.” Time and time again however, God’s people commit adultery. Their disobedience, distrust, and devotion to idols is depicted in such terms, as is clear in the Ezekiel passage. They “play the whore” as Hosea also makes clear: “My people inquire of a piece of wood, and their walking staff gives them oracles. For a spirit of whoredom has led them astray, and they have left their God to play the whore” (Hos. 4:12). The Ephesians 5 passage picks up this theme, but now places the focus squarely on the person and completed work of Jesus Christ. By his sacrifice alone is the whoring bride presented as “without spot or wrinkle” and as “holy and without blemish.” The wedding is still on! Yet it is only because of the sacrifice of the bridegroom, the Lamb, Jesus Christ. In Revelation we get a glimpse of the final wedding celebration of the Lamb that is still to come. So then, “Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory” (Rev. 19:7).

Discussion Questions for This Week's Reading

Refer to “Union with Christ: The Foundation for Change.”

1. Was there anything from the reading that was particularly challenging or helpful for you?
2. How do you tend to define your identity or on what is your identity staked? What voices compete most loudly with the Bible's declaration of who you are? How does mistaken identity affect your growth as a disciple of Christ?
3. Have you ever felt the tension described in the reading as “living in the gap?” Have you ever felt so defeated by a particular sin that you stopped fighting it? What does that sense of defeat expose about what we believe about ourselves? What would be our response to sin if we truly believed our union with Christ?
4. How does the truth of our union with Christ give you hope in your struggle with sin?

At Home after the Lesson

Prayer Requests

Assignments

Memorize Gal. 2:20.

Read “The Holy Spirit: The Agent of Change” in preparation for next week’s meeting.

Pray for your group members.

Memory Verse

Gal. 2:20

I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

LESSON 5

The Agent of Change

Overview

Key Concept: The Holy Spirit | **Bible Study:** Rom. 8:1–13 | **Memory Verse:** Gal. 5:22–23

Objectives:

- To learn about the person and work of the Holy Spirit
- To see how the Holy Spirit works in the life of the Christian to develop Christ-like character

The Holy Spirit: The Agent of Change

We have established that the *foundation* for personal transformation is the new identity that the gospel declares over us: we now live in vital, intimate union with our Lord Jesus Christ. Christ is in us, and we are in him. Understanding the *concept* of our union to Christ, however, does not in and of itself bring about inner change; it is a new and glorious reality that we must learn to *live* out. So how is our union to Christ enacted? How is it made to bear the fruit of a changed and changing life? And relatedly, *who* is it that works it out? The answers to these questions lead us squarely to the person and work of the Holy Spirit.

“Another” Helper

On the night of his betrayal and with the cross ever looming, we find three of the most intimate chapters of the Bible in the so-called Upper Room Discourse (John 14:16). It is in this most poignant of settings that we find Jesus’ clearest and most extensive teachings on the Holy Spirit. Jesus’ bodily presence was about to be withdrawn from the disciples, and yet Jesus assures them that his presence, fellowship, and companionship would remain: “And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you” (John 14:16–18).

The word translated *helper* is “a rich word for which there is no adequate English translation, since it means by turns Comforter (in the sense of Strengtheners), Counselor, Helper, Supporter, Adviser, Advocate, Ally, Senior Friend . . .”¹ When Jesus says that he will ask the Father for *another* helper, the implication is that Jesus was to his disciples the *first* helper. But now, the Holy Spirit would assume Jesus’ role as helper-advocate-friend, and he would be with them *forever*. In some way, the presence of Jesus would remain with his disciples.

God's Indwelling Presence

Now if that weren't glorious enough, Jesus then says something that one writer suggests, "ought to make us shiver in our shoes."² The Spirit, he says "dwells with you *and will be in you*" (*John 14:17*). If you are a Christian, the real, personal presence of the living God dwells within you. Take a moment to digest that. If you are a Christian, the real, personal presence of the living God dwells within you. Now if that is too abstract to seem relevant or practical, let me share a quote and then tell you a story.

First, the quote:

Presence is a delicious word. Nothing can take the place of presence, not gifts, not telephone calls, not pictures, not mementos, nothing. Ask the person who has lost a lifelong mate what they miss the most; the answer is invariably "presence." When we are ill, we don't need soothing words nearly as much as we need loved ones to be present. What makes shared life—walks, concerts, outings—so pleasurable? Presence.³

This was illustrated to me in a powerful way many years ago. Five months after the birth of our first daughter, I was rendered temporarily paraplegic. In response to a viral infection, my body began to attack my spinal cord so that my nerves weren't working properly. It began with an intense tingling in my hands that I just dismissed, but then at around 2:30 a.m., I woke up with a searing, burning pain in my back. To this day, it remains the worst pain I've ever felt and it was a pain that would only later be relieved with a medication seven times stronger than morphine.

I remember vividly crawling out of bed to the top step of our staircase in our apartment, just praying, "God, please make this pain go away. God, please make this pain go away." And that prayer was more or less on repeat. Less than a minute into that prayer, God moved me in such a way as to re-direct my prayer. I can't explain it in any other way except to say that I knew instinctively that I was not to pray that anymore in that moment. And the prayer he gave me to pray instead was: "God, just let me know that you are with me. Just let me know that you are with me." And I prayed that over and over again. *That* was the prayer that God answered. In those two weeks of uncertainty and fear, in and out of the hospital on two separate occasions, God met me with a tenderness and a sweetness that I did not even have a mental category for to that point in my life as a Christian.

One very real way that he answered that prayer was by his love—his *presence*—that I perceived in the presence of my friends. I remember the presence of my community group that gathered to have a weeknight meeting around my hospital bed. I remember the presence of Peter and Lisa, who one night brought by a nectarine from the Farmer's Market, and in my mind I can still taste how sweet it was. I remember the look of concern on Walter and Terry's faces when they saw how I struggled to take a single step. I remember Arthur, who was always trying to get me to watch more movies, brought over a DVD and we watched it together in silence one afternoon. And of course, there was my wife Tina who was there to cry and to pray with me every limping step of the way.

That's presence. It is real, it cannot be faked, and it is deeply affecting. When was the last time you were deeply affected by God's *presence*? Do you know that God does not send you a text or a phone

call? He does not simply give you a list of rules to follow or a pamphlet of things about him that you're supposed to know. He does not FedEx a ticket to heaven in return for your faith—"I'll see you when you get here." No, God gives you himself. His *presence*. His very life with you and in you.

We have been united to Christ in his death and resurrection, and are even now united *in this present life*, by the indwelling Spirit of God. John writes, "By this we know that we abide in him and he in us"—there's union—"because he has given us of his Spirit" (1 John 4:13). The Holy Spirit, who dwells in us, is the bond of our union to Christ. And again, this union is not an abstract idea; it is not theoretical, it is *relational*. It is experienced, not deduced. If the Holy Spirit is in us, it will be deeply affecting and it will be as real to us as a Farmer's Market nectarine.

Presence, Temples, and Christian Character

Now if the Holy Spirit, who is God, *dwells in us*, then it is no surprise to hear Paul refer to Christians, both individually and collectively, as temples of God. A quick survey of the places where Paul most explicitly refers to Christians as temples (1 Cor. 3:16; 1 Cor. 6:19; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:19–22) is revealing in that we find Paul addressing in turn divisions in the community, sexual immorality, marriage ethics, and racial unity in the church. What is striking to me is the sheer ordinariness of that to which the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit is applied, not to mention the enduring challenges these issues continue to present today. But the point is that there are ethical implications to our union with Christ through the indwelling Spirit of God. If it is real, then it simply must affect the way that we live. The Holy Spirit does not come to dwell in us only so that our lives might bear no evidence of him. Neither does the Holy Spirit come to dwell in us to burden us with a new set of demands; he does not simply replace one law for another.

Rather, the Holy Spirit, promised to us by Christ himself (John 14:16); sent to us by Christ so that we might bear witness to Christ (John 15:26); whose ministry is to glorify Christ (John 16:14); and who in dwelling within us unites us to Christ (John 14:17; 1 John 4:13; Rom. 8:9–11); this Spirit is the one who works in the interior life of the Christian, to transform us more and more into the likeness of Christ. This is the inevitable consequence of one who bears in their being the Spirit of Christ. Paul writes, "Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit" (2 Cor. 3:17–18).

The Holy Spirit then is the *agent* of personal transformation, who alone is the source of inner heart change such that the character of Christ actually becomes a part of our character in increasing measure. We simply do not have the power to change ourselves through self-effort however well-intentioned, well-directed, or vigorously pursued. By sheer strength of resolve, we may be able to change our external actions for a season, but we cannot change our own hearts: ". . . inner righteousness is a gift from God to be graciously received. The needed change within us is God's work, not ours. *The demand is for an inside job*, and only God can work from the inside. We cannot attain or earn this righteousness of the kingdom of God; it is a grace that is given."⁴ Now the *means* of this change will involve the full and intense engagement of our will and our energies as we'll soon see, but the Holy Spirit alone can change our hearts.

Spiritual formation, Christian discipleship, is not a self-improvement project. It is the miracle that happens when the living God comes to dwell in us. And although it is “an inside job,” the work of the Holy Spirit will and must find *external* expression. The apostle Paul calls it fruit. The one who lives in organic, vital union with Christ will bear the fruit of the Spirit of Christ: a life increasingly characterized by “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Gal. 5:22–23). That is not a list of virtues for us to work on. That’s what the Spirit is like. And when he dwells in us, we’ll become more and more like that too. This heart change, toward conformity to Christ is the substance of Christian character. It is what it means to be *formed* by Christ, or to have Christ formed in us. It is what it means to be his disciple. And it is enacted by the Holy Spirit who dwells in us and will be with us forever.

Group Discussion

Bible Study

Read Rom. 8:1–13.

1. Read verses 1–4. What is meant by the phrase “no condemnation”? To whom does this verdict apply? How was this verdict secured on our behalf? What is the effect of the verdict on the present life of the believer?

The phrase “no condemnation” is the once for all, legal declaration that we are “not guilty” before God. It is the final and full declaration that there is no charge that can be brought against us. The verdict is for those who are “in Christ Jesus.” In other words, this legal verdict only applies to those who have been united to Christ by faith. This is necessarily the case because it is clear that God in Christ alone fulfilled the righteous requirement of the law; he has secured the verdict on our behalf. Yet, this is not simply a *past* declaration; it is a present reality. The effect of the verdict upon those who have been united with Christ is that we now walk, “. . . not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit” (8:4).

2. Read verses 5–8. What is being contrasted in these verses? What is the relationship between the “life” and the “mind”? What words or phrases does Paul use to describe the contrast?

Paul draws the sharpest of contrasts here between life in the flesh and life in the Spirit. He is not here talking about the war *within* the Christian between the flesh and the Spirit; he is describing two paths that are utterly incompatible. For Paul, if they are not interchangeable, the “life” and the “mind” are intimately and inextricably related. To live according to the flesh is to set the mind on the things of the flesh; to live according to the Spirit is to set the mind on the things of the Spirit. In Rom. 12:2, Paul will go on to say, “Be transformed by the renewal of your *mind*.” It’s been said, “Sow a thought, reap an action; sow an action, reap a habit; sow a habit, reap a character.” The life is shaped by the mind. And those for whom there is now no condemnation, those who are “in Christ Jesus,” who are said to walk according to the Spirit, will find that their attention and imagination will be increasingly preoccupied with the things of the Spirit. Paul describes life in the flesh with words and phrases such as “death,” “hostile to God,” and “cannot please God.” Conversely, life in the Spirit is characterized by “life and peace.”

3. Read verses 9–13. What is the sure mark that we are “in the Spirit” and not “in the flesh”? How does Paul here define the very essence of what it means to be a Christian?

After describing the contrast between life in the Spirit and life in the flesh, Paul declares that we are “. . . not in the flesh but in the Spirit, *if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you*. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him” (8:9).

“That the Spirit is thus seen as the defining mark of the Christian is put in blunt terms in 8.9 . . . in fact, Paul provides the nearest thing to a definition of a Christian (someone who is ‘of Christ’). And the definition is in terms of the Spirit. It is ‘having the Spirit’ which defines and determines someone as being ‘of Christ.’ A Spiritless Christian would have been a contradiction in terms for Paul. The implication is also clear: in Paul’s understanding, it was by receiving the Spirit that one became a Christian . . . the presence of the Spirit in a life was the most distinctive and defining feature of a life thus reclaimed by God . . . Christian status was recognizable from the fact that Christ’s agent was in evident control of their lives” (James Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 423, 430).

4. Read verse 13. What is the basis of our putting “to death the deeds of the body”?

The exhortation to put to death the deeds of the body is grounded in our new identity as ones who live by the Spirit. To this point, Paul has labored to establish the contrast between the flesh and the Spirit. They are utterly incompatible. And Paul goes on to say that we are ones over whom the verdict “no condemnation” has been pronounced; ones who have been united to Christ Jesus; ones who walk and live according to the Spirit; ones in whom the Spirit dwells. In light of this new identity, we are no longer debtors to the flesh (8:12). We are no longer enslaved to the flesh; we owe it nothing. Our flesh is to be counted as dead, and we have new lives by virtue of the Spirit. So, “by the Spirit” we are enabled and empowered to put to death the deeds of the body that remain—the deeds which have already been disarmed and emptied of their power by the new life we have in the Spirit.

Discussion Questions for This Week's Reading

Refer to “The Holy Spirit: The Agent of Change.”

1. Was there anything from the reading that was particularly challenging or helpful for you?
2. How does it make you feel that the living God dwells within you? How regularly do you find yourself aware of this? What would your life look like if you were more consistently aware of his indwelling presence?
3. Think of a particularly persistent sin pattern in your life. At this present moment, do you feel defeated by its persistence or hopeful that it is itself being defeated? How does the presence and work of the indwelling Holy Spirit inform your attitude toward and your battle with this particular sin?
4. What do you think it means to “grieve the Spirit” (Eph. 4:30)? Identify an instance during the past week when you grieved the Spirit. How did you respond? Share about a time this past week when you knowingly surrendered to the Spirit. What happened as a result?

Exercise: Self-Examination and the Fruit of the Spirit

Writing more than a century ago, Octavius Winslow notes in the preface to his incisive work *Personal Declension and Revival of Religion in the Soul*: “It must be admitted, that the character and the tendencies of the age are not favourable to deep and mature reflection upon the hidden, spiritual life of the soul.”⁵ How much more fitting is that assessment now in our wired age. Winslow goes on to share the purpose of his book, which is a fitting introduction to this exercise:

It is, then, the humble design of the writer in the present work . . . to aid the believer in answering the solemn and searching inquiry, “What is the present spiritual state of my soul before God?” In the following pages he is exhorted to forget the Christian profession he sustains, the party badge he wears, and the distinctive name by which he is known among men,—to turn aside for a brief hour from all religious duties, engagements and excitement, and to look this question fully and fairly in the face.”⁶

The purpose of this exercise is to invite honest self-examination and to ask ourselves, Is there evidence in my life of the inner workings of the Holy Spirit? Does my life bear the fruit of the Spirit of Christ? Remember that although heart change is an “inside job,” the work of the Holy Spirit will find external expression. The ones who live in organic, vital union with Christ bear the fruit of the one who dwells within them: a life increasingly characterized by “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Gal. 5:22–23). Take this time now to honestly consider the following questions:

1. **Am I a more loving person today than I was two years ago? Am I growing in my concern for the well-being of others?**

2. **Am I a more joyful person today than I was two years ago? Is my joy more resilient in the face of disappointment? What steals my joy?**

3. **Am I more or less prone to anxiety and worry? Do I seek reconciliation or avoidance when there is conflict?**

4. Am I a more patient person? Am I able to deal kindly with those who are unkind to me or are otherwise difficult to love?

5. Am I a kinder person? Am I more sympathetic? Am I less discriminating with my kindness?

6. Am I growing in goodness? Am I growing in my hatred toward sin? Is there a growing correspondence between my words and my actions?

7. Am I growing in faithfulness to God and to others? Am I more devoted to God? Am I loyal and dependable?

8. Am I a gentler person? Am I more or less harsh with others? Am I more apt to listen?

9. Am I more self-controlled? Am I more or less controlled by my impulses?

At Home after the Lesson

Prayer Requests

Assignments

- **Memorize** Gal. 5:22–23.
- **Read** “Spiritual Disciplines: The Means of Change” in preparation for next week’s meeting.
- **Pray** for your group members.

Memory Verse

Gal. 5:22–23

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.

LESSON 6

The Means of Change

Overview

Key Concept: Spiritual Disciplines | **Bible Study:** Luke 10:38–42 | **Memory Verse:** Phil. 2:12–13

Objectives:

- To explore the tension between grace and discipline
- To see friendship with God as the foundation for the spiritual disciplines

Spiritual Disciplines: The Means of Change

We have proposed that our union to Christ is the *foundation* for change, and more specifically, change that is deep, abiding, and directed toward ever increasing conformity to the character of Christ. We have seen that the bond of that union is the indwelling Holy Spirit who is the *agent* of this change that we are otherwise powerless to enact by ourselves. We now turn to consider the primary *means* through which the Holy Spirit works to produce this change, namely the spiritual disciplines.¹

The Necessity of Disciplined Action

Why is it that knowledge alone does not produce changed lives? Why do we not study our way to holiness? It is a sobering thought, but the one who has mastered the doctrines of grace and even the dynamics of gospel transformation, may still be a stranger to the work of grace in the heart that produces Christ-like character. This is why disciples are not mass-produced in a classroom or on Sunday mornings, even when sitting under the most gifted of teachers. We need more, although never less, than cognitive change if our target is the heart.

So then, how do the truths of the gospel result in changed and changing lives? We know *who* is able to do it, but *how* does the gospel get in and get deep to produce real heart change? “How are the virtues formed so that they come to constitute one’s character? The answer in Christian tradition has been quite consistent: virtues are formed by acts . . . all actions are habit forming or habit reinforcing . . . it takes intentional, repeated actions of *growing* intensity for virtues to grow.”² In other words, the deep character change that we seek occurs when the gospel is regularly and habitually *applied* and lived-out in and through actions that become habits. It is as one teacher describes it, the practice of putting in the rivet between truth and life;³ to regularly fasten as it were the gospel of grace to real life decisions and actions.

The First Tension

If character is formed through intentional, repeated actions, then what of the Holy Spirit? It sure sounds like if we apply ourselves diligently enough and commit ourselves to a formula of prescribed actions, then we can by the sheer force of the will produce depth of character and inner heart change. Can we change ourselves simply by trying harder? Are the spiritual disciplines just a recipe for self-sanctification?

Our answer of course is emphatically no! And it is precisely because of this tension that we labored first to establish in the previous lesson that the indwelling Holy Spirit is indeed the *agent* of change. Only he can change hearts; it is still in every respect “an inside job.” But the deep, inner change that occurs as one is “. . . predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son” (Rom. 8:29), does not just *appear*. There is no fast track; there are no spiritual prodigies. Rather, the *lifelong process* of change that is initiated, superintended, and indeed enacted by the Holy Spirit, is one that “draws within its scope the conscious life of the believer” such that “our whole being is intensely active in that process which has as its goal . . . [conformity] to the image of his Son.”⁴

This is the God-ordained means of change. God, by his Spirit, does the work to change us, but the means by which that change occurs is through the work that we have been enabled and empowered to do by the same Spirit. This is most clearly and concisely summarized by the apostle Paul in Phil. 2:12–13: “. . . work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” Or as Luther comments, “It is true to say concerning ourselves that, inasmuch as God works in us, we work—though ‘work’ here means actually that the one doing the acting is himself acted upon, moved and led.”⁵ We are “acted upon, moved and led” to disciplined action through which the Spirit produces the inner heart change that we seek. The disciplines of prayer, Bible reading, service, and others, are some of the *actions*—the work—through which the Holy Spirit changes us. Richard Foster captures the dynamic this way:

A farmer is helpless to grow grain; all he can do is provide the right conditions for the growing of grain. He cultivates the ground, he plants the seed, he waters the plants, and then the natural forces of the earth take over and up comes the grain. This is the way it is with the Spiritual Disciplines—they are a way of sowing to the Spirit. The Disciplines are God’s way of getting us into the ground; they put us where he can work within us and transform us. By themselves the Spiritual Disciplines can do nothing; they can only get us to the place where something can be done. They are God’s means of grace. The inner righteousness we seek is not something that is poured on our heads. God has ordained the Disciplines of the spiritual life as the means by which we place ourselves where he can bless us.⁶

The Hard Road of the Disciplined Life

Consider the discipline applied by an elite athlete to her sport or a virtuoso to his instrument—the hours upon hours of practice in obscurity and the great measures of self-denial and focused intensity endured without immediate reward. Or perhaps we know by experience the degree of sustained,

vigorous effort required to pursue a career or even a healthy body. Likewise, and as the terminology suggests, our apprenticeship as Christ's disciples requires *discipline*. It must be said that the path to growth in Christ-like character—this path that *all* Christians are called to tread—is littered with thorns and thistles. It is a hard road and diversions abound. But, “holiness is not a condition into which we drift.”⁷ Paul's language in 1 Cor. 9:24–27 (NIV) is telling:

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air. No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.

Paul understands the gospel. He knows that victory has been secured in Christ; that he cannot earn God's favor; that grace is full and free; yet, he doesn't coast or relent. Rather, he engages with even greater intensity: “I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave.” The gospel of grace demands disciplined action. Absent discipline, our only recourse is to get by on our natural gifts. But assuredly we'll soon find that in small, almost imperceptible steps, our prayers get neglected, our attention to the Word gets broken, and our participation in corporate worship becomes less a celebration and more a critique. Such is the tendency toward secret departure from God.⁸

The Second Tension

Does this emphasis on disciplined action diminish or even nullify the priority of grace? Again, our answer is no. I wonder if we are so fearful of obscuring grace in our desire to be “gospel-centered,” that we simply do not speak enough about the hard road of the disciplined life. But, “grace is opposed to earning, not to effort.”⁹ We do not and cannot by our own effort, even effort described with such terms as “focused intensity,” “maximal engagement,” and “vigorous exertion,” thereby make ourselves more acceptable to God. We do not earn God's favor through the disciplines; God's favor is already over us! It is finished! By the work of another do we stand; to the work of another do we cling; because of the work of another do *we* work with everything we've got.

Grace precedes, motivates, enables, and empowers the effort. There is work to do, not to earn but because we have already received. And without this grace the spiritual disciplines are death. They become laws to abide, rules to follow, and burdens to bear, breeding externalism, formalism, legalism, Pharisaism, and every other death-nurturing “-ism” you might name. We will then exult in our willpower and condemn ourselves (*and others!*) when we fall short. That's without grace. But by grace we are led to work and by grace is the effort made to bear fruit.

The Spiritual Disciplines and Friendship with God

We come now to the heart of the spiritual disciplines. They are not simply the means through which the Holy Spirit changes us as if a better “us” was an independent object of our pursuit. The disciplines

are at the most fundamental level, the means by which we cultivate a friendship with God, our Creator, our Savior, and our Lord. We are on this hard road *with him*. And just as in any relationship, depth, intimacy, and trust in friendship are not enjoyed except by ever-increasing, intentional, active pursuit. Absent this, there is left only “a shallow association of civility.”¹⁰

Will we be satisfied with “a shallow association of civility” with the God who pursued us to death on a cross, to call us child and friend? It is not enough to affirm that the spiritual disciplines are the means to personal transformation; they are the means by which a deep, love relationship with our Savior is nurtured, honored, and protected. And with time, the initial hiddenness that might have characterized the relationship will give way, until it becomes more and more intolerable to *not* be in fellowship with him. This is why conceiving of the disciplines as laws or drudgery is so profane; they are not legalistic obligations or duties even as they are spoken of with the language of *must*. Rather, they are the means by which we find ourselves in conversation with God more habitually. They are the means by which we grow quicker to discern his voice; by which we develop a growing displeasure with the things that displease him; by which we begin to love the things that he loves; and they are the means by which the Holy Spirit changes us into the people God created us to be.

The spiritual disciplines then could well be conceived of as *the lived experience of friendship with God*. It is a wonder, but “the majestic Creator of the universe desires our friendship. In fact, he is more interested in this endeavor than we are; he has been contemplating it and planning it for a long time. God is personal and has created us to enjoy deep friendship with him.”¹¹ He has pursued us with a furious love, so let us now also seek him on the hard road of the disciplined life.

Group Discussion

Bible Study

Read Luke 10:38–42.

1. Describe the scene. Why is Martha so upset?

To understand Martha's displeasure, it's important to understand the context of the passage. Jesus and his disciples are on a journey and enter a certain town, where Martha “. . . welcomed him into her house” (Luke 10:38). One of the dominant motifs of these particular verses, and really the entire chapter (see particularly verses 1–12 on the theme of being welcomed on a journey), is that of hospitality. By welcoming Jesus into her home, Martha accepts all of the cultural expectations and obligations associated with being a host. She has work to do! And wanting to extend an appropriate welcome to an honored guest weighs heavily on Martha. In light of these obligations and duties, and in a culture where hospitality was so esteemed, she notices that her sister is not quite pulling her weight. While Martha is at work, Mary sits at Jesus' feet. Martha becomes so exasperated, she appeals to the guest of honor to help her cause.

2. What words are used to describe Martha? What words might you use to describe her and the manner in which she relates to Jesus?

Martha is described as “distracted,” “anxious,” and “troubled.” It's not difficult to imagine that she is a bit harried in her rush to fulfill her perceived obligations. She is certainly dutiful and hospitable even. It's just that perhaps Jesus is interested in a different *kind* of hospitality—a different sort of welcome.

I think it's also fair to say that Martha is *self*-regarding. Granted, all of her efforts are motivated by and directed toward her guest, yet within her service her thoughts are all self-directed. There is certainly a lot of “me-talk” in Martha's speech: “Lord, don't you care that my sister has left *me* to do the work *by myself*? Tell her to help *me*!” (Luke 10:40, NIV). One commentator notes, “Though she refers to Jesus as ‘Lord,’ she is concerned to engage his assistance in her plans, not to learn from his” (Joel Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 437). It may be appropriate to describe the manner in which she relates to Jesus, at least in this scene, as one of dutiful obligation. She is perhaps “distracted,” “anxious,” and “troubled” about her performance and her reputation as a hostess.

3. What is Jesus' response to Martha? Why does Jesus commend Mary and not Martha?

First, notice the tenderness with which Jesus addresses Martha. He does intend to offer a rebuke and a correction, but it is with gentleness that he addresses the one who is distracted and anxious: “Martha, Martha . . .” (10:41).

Jesus' rebuke cuts much deeper than Martha's act of service. Serving others is otherwise consistently commended in Luke's gospel. Nor is it simply the self-regarding, anxious *manner* in which she served, although this is a bit closer to the heart of the matter. Rather, she is rebuked for misguided priorities. Martha is presented with two choices: the dutiful obligation required by the cultural conventions of hospitality or the single-minded devotion to the Lord of Glory sitting in the living room, cultural conventions be darned. Martha chooses the "many things," when only "one thing is necessary" (Luke 10:40–41). The welcome—the hospitality—that Jesus desires is exemplified by Mary, who ". . . sat at the Lord's feet . . ." (Luke 10:39).

Mary is thus commended for her ability to discern the "one thing"—her ability to see that devotion precedes duty. And whereas Martha is self-regarding, Mary sees only Jesus.

4. What do we learn from this passage about how Jesus desires us to welcome and related to him? What implications might that have for our approach to the spiritual disciplines?

We said earlier that hospitality is a dominant theme in this passage. How do we welcome Jesus? What is the nature of hospitality he desires? I think it's fair to conclude that Jesus desires our presence, our fellowship, our attention, and our devotion. Dutiful obligation from a distance is not the "one thing."

The reading defines the spiritual disciplines as the lived experience of friendship with God. They are relational and intimate, not detached or impersonal. We don't seek mastery of abstract practices on a journey toward heightened spirituality, whatever that may mean. No doubt there will be seasons where the disciplines *feel* more dutiful than delightful. Yet when we continue to earnestly seek him, the momentary hiddenness shall pass and on the other side awaits sweet fellowship with the one who sought us first.

Discussion Questions for This Week's Reading

Refer to "Spiritual Disciplines: The Means of Change."

1. Was there anything from the reading that was particularly challenging or helpful for you?
2. Why is it so important to understand our growth as disciples and the spiritual disciplines in the context of a relationship with God? What are some of the dangers of pursuing spiritual formation apart from this relationship? Have you seen this happen in your own life?
3. Describe your friendship with Jesus. Are you growing or drifting in your intimacy with him?
4. Share about one way you are growing in your relationship with him. Share about a season in your life when you felt closest to him. What habits or disciplines characterized your life during that time?
5. What is your reaction to the use of the phrases "sustained, vigorous effort," "focused intensity," and "maximal engagement," to describe the path of discipleship? Are they appropriate? Put into your own words how this comports with the Holy Spirit as the agent of change and with the priority of grace.

Exercise: Practicing a Life of Discipline

Some of the more traditional or often cited spiritual disciplines include the following:

- Silence
- Prayer
- Meditation
- Bible Reading
- Scripture Memorization
- Fasting
- Service
- Worship
- Solitude

1. Which of the above spiritual disciplines do you consistently practice? In which are you experiencing the greatest growth?

2. What obstacles hinder you from more fully engaging in the spiritual disciplines of prayer and Bible reading, in particular?

3. In your answer to question 2 above, are those obstacles primarily circumstantial-external (i.e. busyness, lack of time, etc.)? If so, ask yourself if there are any underlying heart issues which may be keeping you from fellowship with your Father. How might your obstacles be rooted in a heart-unbelief in your identity as one who is righteous and beloved, as one who is united with Christ by the indwelling Spirit, and a friend of God?

At Home after the Lesson

Prayer Requests

Assignments

- **Memorize** Phil. 2:12–13.
- **Read** “Spiritual Friendship” in preparation for next week’s meeting.
- **Pray** for your group members.

Memory Verse

Phil. 2:12–13

Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

LESSON 7

Spiritual Friendship

Overview

Key Concept: Community | **Bible Study:** 1 Sam. 18:1–4; 19:1–2, 4; 20:41–42 | **Memory Verse:** Heb. 3:13

Objectives:

- To understand the concept of spiritual friendship¹ and to appreciate the urgent need for intentional community in the Christian life
- To see that Jesus is the friend you've always wanted so you'll have the power to be the friend you've always wanted to have

Spiritual Friendship

Pastor and writer Francis Chan shares this story: “A while back a former gang member came to our church. He was heavily tattooed and rough around the edges, but he was curious to see what church was like. He had a relationship with Jesus and seemed to get fairly involved with the church. After a few months, I found out the guy was no longer coming to the church. When asked why he didn't come anymore, he gave the following explanation: ‘I had the wrong idea of what church was going to be like. When I joined the church, I thought it was going to be like joining a gang. You see, in the gangs we weren't just nice to each other once a week—we were family.’ That killed me because I knew that what he expected is what the church is intended to be. It saddened me to think that a gang could paint a better picture of commitment, loyalty, and family than the local church body.”²

We have a crisis of community today and not just within the church. Social commentators from every sector have observed that a radical individualism typifies our cultural moment, breeding rampant isolationism and loneliness. We celebrate autonomy, independence, and *individualism*, a word which Alexis de Tocqueville, writing in the mid-nineteenth century, famously observed did not even exist in prior societies. We need look no further than our social media platforms which signal our inborn yearning for connection all while guaranteeing their superficiality, with friends and follows just a click away and with carefully curated posts and pictures screaming for affirming likes and loves. “We are all so much together, but we are all dying of loneliness.”³

Tragically, the life of the church and the disciple have not been spared. We instinctively privatize our faith, conceiving of the gospel on primarily personal terms. We're exhorted to preach the gospel to ourselves, which is exactly what we've done through the first six lessons: Remember that you are righteous and beloved! You are united with Christ! The Spirit dwells in you! And that is all gloriously true and undeniably central to our discipleship. Yet I suspect we are less often exhorted to preach the

gospel *to one another*. And so we get to a verse like James 5:16, “. . . confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed,” and don’t know quite what to do. Do we confess our sins to one another? Do we believe there is healing in corporate confession? Can it be that we have overemphasized the personal dimension of the gospel to the neglect of the corporate?

If we have, it is certainly not because the New Testament has suggested we do so. Take adoption, which we’ve said is the *highest privilege* the gospel offers. It is not simply that we have a new *Father*, but that we have a new *family*, brothers and sisters whom our God is also pleased to call his children. We have now an enduring family that can rejoice together, pray together, and weep together; a family we are called to love and serve, admonish and encourage. That’s adoption too.

Or take our union with Christ, which we’ve said is what actually makes us Christians. We are not only united to Christ by the indwelling Holy Spirit, we are united to one another! We are one body with Christ as its head (1 Cor. 12:12–27); we are branches with Christ as our vine (John 15); we are joined together as a temple with Christ as its cornerstone (Eph. 2:19–22). Paul writes more explicitly, we are “*members one of another*” (Rom. 12:5). We are radically interdependent; incomplete without one another. It’s not simply, “Be one,” functionally. It’s “You are one,” ontologically. So, live that out! There is simply no biblical conception of discipleship that is strictly private or personal. Discipleship occurs in community and gospel community begins with spiritual friendship.

The Need for Friendship

Ralph Waldo Emerson observed, “Every man passes his life in search after friendship.”⁴ This universal longing finds its origin in the Garden where everything was good, save one thing: “It is *not good* that the man should be alone” (Gen. 2:18). God created us to need relationships, for we are created in the image of the one who said, “Let *us* make man in our image” (Gen. 1:27). In the very being of God—between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—there is community: an eternal friendship of divine persons who perfectly delight in one another. We desire intimate friendships because God made us like himself. We have an urgent, inborn need for friendships.

The irony is that while friendship is *desired* by all, it is *valued* by few. In *The Four Loves*, C.S. Lewis observes that while the ancient world prized friendship above all else, the modern world virtually ignores it. Why? Friendship, Lewis notes, is the least natural of the loves: “The least instinctive, biological and necessary; there is nothing throaty about it, nothing that quickens the pulse or turns you red and pale. Without sexual love, none of us would be here; but we can live and breed without friendship.”⁵ Strictly speaking, friendship isn’t *necessary*, or at least doesn’t strike us as being necessary. But above all, Lewis argues that the primary reason we diminish its importance is this: “Few value it because few experience it.”⁶

Before you object, “I have a lot of friends,” let me explain: what most of us have are companions, and there is an important difference. Companions are those with whom we share life circumstances: work, hobbies, life stage, or geography. Companionship is the matrix of friendship. It’s where friendships are discovered, but it’s not friendship. That’s not to disparage companionship. We don’t disparage silver by distinguishing it from gold. It’s just to say that shared circumstances may promote very friendly and mutually beneficial exchanges, but that is still not friendship. So what then is spiritual friendship that creates gospel community?

The Heart of Friendship

Passion. In *The Four Loves*, C.S. Lewis writes:

Friendship arises when companions discover that they have in common some insight or even taste which others do not share, and which, till that moment, each believed to be his own unique treasure or burden. The typical expression of opening friendship would be something like, “What? You too? I thought I was the only one.” . . . We picture lovers face to face, absorbed in each other, but Friends side by side, absorbed in some common interest. Their eyes look ahead. That is why those pathetic people who simply “want friends” can never make any. The very condition of having friends is that we should want something else besides Friends. There would be nothing for the friendship to be about; and Friendship must be about something . . . those who are going nowhere can have no fellow travelers.⁷

The passion, the “You too!” of spiritual friendship is the discovery of a shared and ultimate passion to be like Jesus. It is what we want above all else for ourselves and for the other: I want to see Christ formed in you! With how many of our companions can this be said to be true?

Loyalty. Aelred of Rievaulx writes, “Nothing is more praiseworthy in friendship than loyalty. Loyalty is hidden in prosperity but conspicuous in adversity. A friend is tested in necessity. A rich man’s friends abound, but whether they are true friends adversity proves.”⁸ 1 Sam. 18:3 records, “Then Jonathan made a covenant with David, because he loved him as his own soul.” A covenant means I am committed to you. I am bound to you. It is a solemn commitment and is one reason you can’t have many friends: you can’t tell ten people, “I’ll be there no matter what.”

Honesty. A friend is honest *with* you. We all have blind spots for which we need to deputize a few friends to reflect back what we cannot see for ourselves, a “hunting license” so to speak: “Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses” (Prov. 27:6, NIV). A friend is also honest *before* you. Friends let you into their confidence, their fears, and their feelings: “David rose . . . and fell on his face to the ground . . . and they kissed one another and wept with one another” (1 Sam. 20:41). A friend lets you in, knocks on the closed doors of your life, and demands “Let me in!”

Sacrifice. Consider what his friendship with David cost Jonathan: not only his status, not only his standing with his father, but it cost him the kingdom: “And Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that was on him and gave it to David” (1 Sam. 18:4). When Jonathan took off his princely robe, he was abdicating his claim to the throne. It’s not, “Your friendship is more to me than my success;” it was, “Your friendship is more to me than my kingdom!” “You shall be King over Israel, and I will be next to you” (1 Sam. 23:17). Friendship for Jonathan was costly.

The Power for Friendship

So how many friends do we actually have? I suspect few of us believe we have, much less *are*, a friend like Jonathan. But in the gospel, we have a friend far greater than Jonathan. Jesus says to his disciples, “No longer do I call you servants . . . but I have called you friends” (John 15:15). If you are a

Christian, you are a *friend* of Jesus. Jesus is your friend, passionate and loyal, honest to you and before you. And if the wounds of a friend are faithful, how much more faithful are the wounds *taken* by a friend. In the Upper Room, Jesus makes a covenant with *us*: “This cup is the new covenant sealed by my blood . . .” (Luke 22:20, NIV). And like Jonathan, Jesus took off his robe. Jesus gave up his crown rights to give us the kingdom.

When you understand that Jesus is the friend you’ve always wanted, then Jesus’ friendship frees you to *become* the friend you’ve always wanted. You can be transparent. You can be loyal. And you can love as you have been loved. As disciples, we follow Christ on a journey of personal transformation, but it is a journey that none can make alone. Spiritual friends accompany each other on this sacred journey as two together with Christ as their bond.⁹

Group Discussion

Bible Study

Read 1 Sam. 18:1–4; 19:1–2, 4; 20:41–42.

1. Read Heb. 10:25. The New Testament is full of commands that end “one another.” The Bible is addressed to people in community. In our text, Jonathan makes a “covenant with David” (1 Sam. 18:3). What is the significance of making a covenant?

When you make a covenant with someone, you commit yourself. You promise. This is not just forming community—which has become a threadbare concept—it is *intentional* community with one another for the sake of one another. When you make a covenant, you bind yourself formally. In most cases it takes time to get to the point where you are ready to make a binding commitment like that (as in marriage). But you bind yourself because you love the other person, for their sake. That is, because you care for them, you want them to have security and confidence in you for the sake of their own security and peace. You want them to have a haven, so they can rest in your promise, which is why the text says that Jonathan made a covenant with David “. . . because he loved [David] as his own soul” (1 Sam. 18:3). In a similar manner, the LORD has made a covenant with us (Heb. 8:8–12).

2. Read James 5:16. When David and Jonathan part for the last time, the Bible says that, “David rose . . . and fell on his face to the ground . . . and they kissed one another and wept with another” (1 Sam. 20:41). What can you tell about their friendship from this exchange and what does it have to do with the verse from James 5?

Just a few chapters earlier, David had told Goliath that he was going to feed his flesh to the birds of the air. David is a warrior! Here though, he weeps and embraces Jonathan. This is what friends do. They open up to let you see in. They are vulnerable and transparent. Friends let you in, and they also knock on the closed doors of your life and demand to be let in. This theme of transparency is strung throughout the Bible: “Confess your sins to one another.”

3. Read John 17:21–23. Then compare it to 1 Sam. 18:1 and 1 Sam. 20:42. Why does Jesus say community is so important to him? What is to be the defining mark of the community of Jesus’ followers? Where do you see this in Jonathan’s friendship with David?

Three times in three verses, on his last night, Jesus prays for his disciples—that they all be one, perfectly one, “. . . so that the world may know that You sent me” (John 17:23). Jesus is implying that people in this world are alienated from each other, isolated. So Jesus prays for the Father to let the Church be such a community that people will be able to look at that community and see such a startling difference in their relationships that they are compelled to wonder where that community

comes from. That community is held together by nothing less than the presence of Christ: “I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one” (John 17:23). Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ—two together as one, with the Lord as their bond (See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Witness to Jesus Christ*, 178). This is the friendship that David and Jonathan had: “. . . the soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul” (1 Sam. 18:1). Just as Jesus prayed centuries later, the LORD was the link between David and Jonathan, “The LORD shall be between me and you . . . forever” (1 Sam. 20:42).

4. In 1 Sam. 18:4, what is the significance of Jonathan stripping himself of his robe and giving it to David, along with his armor and his sword? Why is this the epitome of spiritual friendship?

When Jonathan took off his princely robe, he was functionally abdicating his throne, giving up his crown rights. When Jonathan took off his sword, he was making himself radically vulnerable to David. But Jonathan wasn't only saying, “Your friendship means more to me than my success.” He was saying, “Your friendship means more to me than my kingdom!” “You shall be King . . . and I shall be next to you!” (1 Sam. 23:17). What sacrificial love! Jonathan preferred his friendship to his kingdom (see Aelred of Rievaulx, *Spiritual Friendship*, 111). Jesus Christ himself set this as the definite goal of a friendship when he said, “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13, KJV).

Discussion Questions for This Week's Reading

Refer to "Spiritual Friendship."

1. Was there anything from the reading that was particularly challenging or helpful for you?
2. Do you agree with C.S. Lewis' conclusion that "few value friendship because few experience it"? What is the difference between a companion and a friend? What makes the quality of friendship discussed in the reading so difficult to find?
3. What makes a friendship a distinctively "Christian friendship"? By the standards presented in the reading, would you say that you have or strive to have any true spiritual friendships? How will you pursue the type of friends and community the reading presents as necessary for growth as a disciple?
4. The reading asserts that the context for discipleship is community. How have you seen this in your own life? Do you agree that there is generally an overemphasis on the personal dimension of the gospel in discipleship? Why or why not?

Exercise: Evaluating and Building Friendship

The book of Proverbs is filled with admonitions about friendship. Take a few minutes to read through these verses and use them to evaluate the quality of your current friendships. Share your reflections with your group.

Prov. 17:17 A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity.

1. **Would your friends describe you as someone who is loyal, accessible at all times, and particularly present in adversity?**

Prov. 18:24 A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.

1. **Do you have a friend who may be closer to you than even your biological family?**

2. **Do you make yourself vulnerable and transparent to someone outside your family?**

Prov. 27:6 (NIV) Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses.

1. **Is there anyone to whom you have given a “hunting license” to wound you?**

2. **When was the last time you “wounded” a friend out of a sincere desire to see them healed?**

3. **When was the last time you were wounded by a wound of love?**

At Home after the Lesson

Prayer Requests

Assignments

- **Memorize** Heb. 3:13.
- **Read** “Free to Forgive” in preparation for next week’s meeting.
- **Pray** for your group members.

Memory Verse

Heb. 3:13

But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

LESSON 8

Free to Forgive

Overview

Key Concept: Forgiveness | **Bible Study:** Matt. 18:21–35 | **Memory Verse:** Eph. 4:32

Objectives

- To confront our instinctive resistance to extend forgiveness
- To see how the gospel gives us the freedom and power to forgive others

Free to Forgive

One fundamental premise of *Gospel and Grace* is that although we are familiar with the gospel, we continue to live in a manner that practically speaking, denies the gospel as we relate to God and to others. We know it, but we do not *know* it. We know we are justified by faith, yet insist on our self-justification projects to give us our sense of worth. We know we are beloved children of God, yet succumb to anxiety and worry, self-pity and self-hatred.

One area that rather ruthlessly exposes the often shallow depths to which the professions we hold in our head have penetrated our hearts is our resistance to forgive others who have genuinely hurt us. This is the point where it gets real, and for many there is perhaps no other area that is as challenging as this one when it comes to living out what we say we believe. One teacher has remarked, “There is nothing else in my life that has shown me how impotent I am like trying to forgive.”¹ Why is it so difficult for us to forgive?

Jesus and Paul speak repeatedly about forgiveness and the commands to forgive are consistently set in the context of the forgiveness that we’ve received from God (Matt. 6:12, 14–15; Eph. 4:32; Col. 3:13). In Matthew 6, you’ll recall that Jesus is teaching his disciples how to pray. Of all the petitions contained in the Lord’s prayer, Jesus only bothers to explicate one of them: “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Matt. 6:14–15). That is a difficult teaching. Can it really be? Can we, in some way, be disqualified from the forgiveness of sins by our refusal to forgive others?

Jesus is not teaching that as I struggle today to forgive my spouse or my roommate that my salvation is somehow teetering on the brink. That militates against everything we have been talking about to this point in this study. But I do think that it is fair to say that in a very real way, if we don’t “get” forgiveness, we don’t “get” the gospel. Or put another way, if you want to know if the gospel is taking

deep root in your life, then you can look right here for the answer: are you able to forgive those who have hurt you?

We'll spend the rest of our time reflecting on the radical nature of biblical forgiveness contained in Matt. 18:21–35, the Parable of the Forgiving King.

Matthew 18:21 Then Peter came up and said to him, “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” **22** Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven. **23** “Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. **24** When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. **25** And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. **26** So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ **27** And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. **28** But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay what you owe.’ **29** So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ **30** He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. **31** When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. **32** Then his master summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. **33** And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’ **34** And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. **35** So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”

True forgiveness is costly. Forgiveness involves a real debt and a real offense. And forgiving that debt will come at great cost to us. Minimizing the offense for the sake of a superficial, expedient peace is not true forgiveness. The payment is not forgiven, it is simply deferred (and also likely to be demanded at a later, more convenient time!). That’s bookkeeping. The king surrendered an immeasurable sum in forgiving the servant’s debt. Someone always has to incur the cost. Everything within us wants the perpetrator to incur it, but true forgiveness requires we assume it. And how do we incur the cost? Practically what does this look like? Don Hamilton writes:

Once upon a time, I was engaged to a young woman who changed her mind. I forgave her . . . but in small sums over a year . . . done when I spoke to her and refrained from rehashing the past, done whenever I renounced jealousy and self-pity when seeing her with another man, done when I praised her to others when I wanted to slice away at her reputation. Those were the payments—but she never saw them.²

This is a great picture of what it means to incur the debt in extending forgiveness. The author incurred the debt each time he refused to gossip about her. He made a payment each time he willingly engaged

her in conversation refusing to avoid her through the silent treatment. Forgiveness is costly and *feels* unjust. And it doesn't end at the moment forgiveness is granted; the payments are usually made incrementally over time because again, the hurt is real and forgiveness is costly.

True forgiveness doesn't demand repayment. There is a perfect word-picture for an unforgiving heart in verse 28: “. . . and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay what you owe.’” Now we may not recognize ourselves in this scene until we realize that “seizing” and “choking” do not necessarily entail physical violence. We can “choke” someone in refusing to extend forgiveness through much subtler, “refined” means: gossip, avoidance, coldness, angry thoughts, biting remarks, bitterness, and others. In one form or another, we will demand that the offender incur a cost if we are not willing to incur it ourselves. And for any action over which we can honestly say, “Because you have done *that*, I will now do *this*,” we are “choking” and “seizing” our debtor.

True forgiveness makes us free. One reason that we may bristle against forgiveness is that we appeal to our sense of justice—and isn't justice a good thing? “But, they deserve it!” We fear that in extending forgiveness, we will be taken advantage of, abused, or controlled in some way. We certainly don't want to be a doormat, and so we assert our rights by demanding that they pay. But when we refuse to forgive, and we harbor bitterness, plot our revenge, or work to avoid this person, then ironically, we have allowed the offender to exert control over us—the very thing we feared would happen if we had forgiven them their debt! We actually place ourselves in bondage to our debtor when we refuse to extend forgiveness. We find ourselves in a figurative prison, held hostage by destructive thoughts and emotions. Forgiveness is what brings us our true freedom and joy. But how do we grow to be able to forgive like that?

Our debt is far greater than any debt that is owed us. Whatever offense we have suffered and whatever debt we feel is owed to us as a result, it is paltry in comparison to the debt that we have been forgiven by God. The parable is intended to be laughable. It is caricature. One denarius was roughly equal to one day's wages. One talent was roughly equal to 6,000 denarii. Ten thousand talents would then equal roughly 164,000 years of wages. It is a ridiculous sum, impossible to ever repay. That one person could owe ten thousand talents is simply inconceivable. Yet that is what we are told. This is a picture of our indebtedness to God for our sinfulness and for the offenses we have committed against our Creator and Lord. It is a debt that is impossible to repay and trying to repay it is simply absurd. Can you imagine just how ridiculous it is for this servant to ever think that he could work to repay his debt? “Ten-thousand talents? OK, the check is in the mail!” But that's a perfect picture of us when we think that we could ever repay our debt through any measure of self-imposed laws or standards we have set for ourselves. The good news of the gospel is that we have been forgiven a debt even greater than that of this pitiable servant by a merciful and gracious King. And we have nothing now to pay. But it was costly for our King as well. It cost him the life of his son. Our debt is paid in full and that truth needs to be worked out in our relationships with others, even those who have hurt us.

The gospel frees us and empowers us to forgive. Having received this great mercy, the foolish servant turns immediately to a fellow servant, seizes him, chokes him, and demands payment from him. *What has happened?* He has utterly forgotten the mercy of the Great King. Or, that mercy has not done a thing to change him. Quite possibly, he still feels as if he can repay his great debt (for such a degree of mercy is humiliating, isn't it?), and so he practically lives as if all of the resources available

to him in forgiveness aren't really there. We rightly see this servant as foolish, insolent, and impossibly dense. But if we are honest, that is us in living color when we refuse to forgive. The good news of our forgiveness has not penetrated our hearts. We know it, but we don't *know* it. When we withhold forgiveness, we remove ourselves from the company of the indebted and from the community of sinners saved wholly by grace. We count others the greater sinners, their debts greater than our own. "But I would never do that!" But the gospel tells us that we've done far worse and still find mercy. *We* are the bigger debtor. Only our awareness of the debt that we have been forgiven frees us to release others from their indebtedness to us, costly though it may be.

The foolish servant is not imprisoned for his debt, but for the hardness of his heart. It is because he could not forgive, though forgiven. It is because he could not show compassion, though pitied. The gospel *frees* us to forgive because our debt has been cancelled. Now we can release others from their paltry debts. But the gospel also *empowers* us to forgive because in it we find the resources to deal honestly with the hurt in our lives. Has someone maliciously tarnished your reputation? Your reputation and identity are secure as a child of God! Has someone stolen something of value to you, be it peace of mind, a relationship, or an opportunity? Your wealth is found in Christ! The gospel both frees us and empowers us to forgive others. To persist in withholding forgiveness then is to disparage both the great mercies we have been shown and the wealth of resources that we have freely in Christ. And that is why forgiveness gets to the very heart of the gospel.

Group Discussion

Bible Study

Read Matt. 18:21–35.

1. Consider the verses immediately preceding this parable (Matt. 18:15–20). How do these passages relate?

It is significant that the key teaching on forgiveness occurs immediately following the key teaching on church discipline for the unrepentant sinner. To forgive is not to enable. By incurring the cost associated with forgiveness, it is not that we allow someone to persist in harmful behavior or serious wrongdoing. We simply surrender the “right” to pay them back. We don’t overlook injustice or serious wrongdoing that is an affront to the righteousness of God. There is a time to confront in love and to seek peace. Yet, it must be done in the context and with the posture of forgiveness. Jesus instructs his church to administer discipline to the one who “sins against you” and remains unrepentant, but it is significant that he follows with this teaching on forgiveness.

2. How does Peter’s question in verse 21 reveal a misunderstanding of biblical forgiveness?

There is a question that is implicit in Peter’s question: when is enough, enough? When may *I* assert my rights? When may *I* stop suffering this injustice? Judaism stressed the importance of forgiveness although some rabbis saw the need to limit forgiveness to three instances of premeditated sin. Now Peter is being remarkably merciful here. Seven times are a lot of times to forgive the same person (*do we do that?*). So, Peter is possibly looking for some affirmation: “I’ll double that and then some!” But what is he doing? On the one hand, he is insisting that there ought to be an end to forgiveness. And on the other, he is imposing for himself a law. Anyone can jury-rig his or her heart to achieve some self-imposed requirement—and self-righteousness is close behind. Jesus’ response to what seems on the surface to be a virtuous gesture exposes Peter’s misunderstanding of biblical forgiveness, to which there is no limit, and speaks to the radical nature of true forgiveness.

3. Why does Jesus introduce his parable with, “Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king . . .” (Matt. 18:23)? What is the relationship between “kingdom” and the kind of forgiveness that Jesus portrays?

The kingdom of God, inaugurated by the incarnation and ministry of Jesus Christ, though not yet consummated, is present in this world through the life of his Church, albeit in mustard-seed form. The community of God bears the presence of the kingdom of God in its life and witnesses to the reality of the kingdom through changed lives and cultural renewal. The economy of this kingdom is such that the King has forgiven his subjects an incalculable debt. And life in the kingdom entails new values, of which forgiveness is central. To forgive like this in our world is revolutionary and

even subversive in that it turns the world's prevailing values and sensibilities on their collective heads. And that is a picture of the kingdom in the world. Forgiveness should characterize the community of Christians as a community whose priorities and values have been radically reoriented and indeed, turned upside-down.

4. In addition to those noted in the reading, what other principles of biblical forgiveness are apparent in the text?

Allow your group members a few moments to share any other principles of forgiveness that appear in the text.

Discussion Questions for This Week's Reading

Refer to "Free to Forgive."

1. Was there anything from the reading that was particularly challenging or helpful for you?
2. Why is it so difficult for us to forgive someone who has wronged us? What gospel promises do we need to believe? How is withholding forgiveness a manifestation of self-righteousness?
3. Share about an instance when you simply "deferred" repayment of a debt instead of forgiving the debt for the sake of an expedient, artificial peace, while still keeping an account of wrongs. How did you require payment from this person at a later time?
4. What are some ways that you demand repayment from someone who has harmed you? How do you tend to "choke" and "seize" others?
5. In what ways do you find yourself trying to repay an un-repayable debt like the foolish servant in the parable?
6. Share about an instance where refusing to extend forgiveness to someone figuratively imprisoned you—OR—share about a redemptive experience you have had in forgiving someone who has harmed you or in being forgiven by someone you wronged. How was the gospel operating in that situation?

Exercise: Forgiving from the Heart

1. Note a relationship where you have withheld forgiveness. How have they wronged you? In what ways have you demanded repayment from him or her? How have you figuratively choked them?
2. What conditions do you want to place on him or her before you truly forgive? What would it look like to incur the cost yourself?
3. Have you sought to minimize, deny, or avoid the hurt so as to avoid true forgiveness? How does this short-circuit your need for the gospel?
4. How has this reflected a deficiency in understanding the gospel? Do you single this person out as an exceptional sinner who is entirely unlike you? Pray for this person. Pray for yourself and that God would help you begin to forgive this person in your heart.

At Home after the Lesson

Prayer Requests

Assignments

- **Memorize** Ephesians 4:32.
- **Read** “Gospel Witness” in preparation for next week’s meeting.
- **Pray** for your group members.

Memory Verse

Ephesians 4:32

Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

LESSON 9

Gospel Witness

Overview

Key Concept: Evangelism | **Bible Study:** 2 Cor. 5:14–21 | **Memory Verse:** Acts 1:8

Objectives

- To see how the gospel moves us outward to share it with others
- To examine the heart attitudes that keep us from more actively sharing our faith

Gospel Witness

You may recall from our first lesson that Simon's call to follow Jesus included a commission: “. . . from now on you will be catching men” (Luke 5:10). Here, we look at how having the gospel firmly rooted in our hearts actually propels us outward toward others in faithfulness to this commission.

There is an inherent and inevitable centrifugal movement to the gospel. Roland Allen, a twentieth century missionary to China, refers to this quality as a “certain natural instinct:”

This instinct is admirably expressed in a saying of Archytas of Tarentum quoted by Cicero: If a man ascended to Heaven and saw the beautiful nature of the world and of the stars, his feeling of wonder, in itself most delightful, would lose its sweetness if he had not someone to whom he could tell it. This is the instinctive force which drives men even at the risk of life itself to impart to others a new-found joy.¹

The “sweetness” and “wonder” of the gospel make it eminently shareable; its very nature demands that it be shared. It is not dutiful obligation. Rather, what will get us to actively and boldly share our faith with others is to more deeply comprehend the depths of the riches we have through the gospel in Christ: the gracious call to discipleship, the wonder of our adoption, our precious union with Christ. And so what we need first, before evangelism training (*which we also desperately need!*) is to treasure our God and the gospel of Christ more and more. John Piper writes, “Passion for God in worship precedes the offer of God in preaching. You can't commend what you don't cherish.”² Do we *cherish* the gospel of grace? Is it sweet enough to us to share?

For many of us, evangelism conjures up images of soapboxes and street corners. The context for evangelism, however, is actually much more pedestrian: “The network of relationships within which

we live is the primary place where evangelism is to take place. This is where every Christian is a witness.”³ These pre-existing “networks of relationships” include our families, relatives, neighbors, co-workers, and friends. Understanding evangelism as taking place primarily within these networks ensures that our witness is relational, not programmatic; authentic, and not manipulative.

This pattern of evangelism has been referred to as *oikos* evangelism. *Oikos*, the Greek term for “household,” encompassed much more than one’s nuclear family. An *oikos* represented the fundamental units of society that consisted of all those within one’s sphere of influence: friends, neighbors, associates, and relatives. Thomas Wolf points out that “the early church spread through *oikos* evangelism—evangelizing family members who saw the old sinner become the new saint; sharing with the neighbor who questioned how such a difference had come over his old friend, and reaching the guys in the local trade union or the *oikos* that played tennis together.”⁴

Now with just a moment of reflection we can see the attractiveness of *oikos* evangelism. It is not manipulative or dehumanizing because we don’t see people as simply targets for evangelism. Rather, it honors the person and the relationship. It listens, loves, and empathizes through their struggle, and even resistance, to believe. It has been said that conversion is not reducible to a single decision but is rather a culmination of a thousand smaller decisions. When we evangelize within the context of our networks of relationships, we don’t demand that a decision be made on the spot; we simply walk side-by-side our *oikos* through each of those smaller decisions.

Although there is something organic, attractive, and certainly less anxiety provoking about *oikos* evangelism when compared with other modes, it is actually much more personally demanding:

. . . it is easier to approach a total stranger, develop a conversation in which a “testimony” is given, and then present the gospel. It is far more difficult to live with one’s “neighbors” daily and to put words on one’s convictions, explaining who one is and why one lives a certain way, called Christian. It is, of course, more “natural” to say the witness in such a way that the gospel surfaces out of the interactions of daily life. Through his relationships, the Christian explains and shares himself.⁵

Darrell Guder explains rightly that *oikos* evangelism is *more* challenging, not less, because it demands congruence between your life and your message. You don’t pass along a tract; you *are* the tract. In a very real way, your life is under the microscope. Your decisions, your priorities, your words, and your actions explain to those around you what it means to follow Christ. And therein lies, for them, evidence for the faith. You are to them the apologetic, as a changed and changing life.

To go about our lives, in our network of relationships, does not however absolve us of the responsibility to verbally articulate “the reason for the hope” that is in us (1 Pet. 3:15, NIV). Our manner of life still needs to be explained. Guder continues: “This observable difference in the very nature of Christians’ lives and behavior calls for an explanation. To live without fear in a fearful world is not ‘normal’ and demands a reason. To be able to forgive and really have it make a difference in one’s relationships is revolutionary behavior. To make one’s decisions and judgments on the basis of criteria other than self-interest is so threatening a difference that the world must know how this can be.”⁶

Our daily interactions with others then does not equal evangelism; these interactions simply provide the context and make the sharing credible, because as we have implied, we don't simply educate someone into following Christ. The gospel however does consist of historical events and propositional truths. And while those truths are enfolded and made tangible to them through relationships, the truths must still be shared: that we are created by God to worship Him (creation); that instead we consistently desire to live apart from God, being the final authority for our lives (sin); that we thus stand under God's just punishment (judgment); that God in his love and mercy did not leave us to remain under His judgment (grace) but instead became man through the person of Jesus Christ (incarnation), to live the life that we are incapable of living and to bear the judgment on our behalf through his death on a cross (atonement); that Jesus rose from the grave (resurrection) to give sinners new life, so we can begin to live by his Spirit as God had purposed from the beginning (sanctification), as beloved children (adoption), under the loving authority of Christ (discipleship), if only we would believe that that is true (repentance and faith).

Penn Jillette, an avowed atheist and half of the famous comic-illusionist act Penn and Teller, had this to say upon reflecting on an encounter he had with a polite man who shared his faith with him:

I've always said that I don't respect people who don't proselytize. I don't respect that at all. If you believe that there's a heaven and hell, and people could be going to hell, or not getting eternal life or whatever, and you think that, well, it's not really worth telling them this because it would make it socially awkward . . . How much do you have to hate somebody to not proselytize? How much do you have to hate somebody to believe that everlasting life is possible and not tell them that? I mean, if I believed beyond a shadow of a doubt that a truck was coming at you, and you didn't believe it, and that truck was bearing down on you, there is a certain point where I tackle you. And this is more important than that.⁷

Penn Jillette gets it. Ultimately, evangelism is an act of love. It is an expression of love and gratitude to our Savior that flows naturally from the gospel being rooted in our hearts, and it is also an act of love to those within our networks of relationships. J. I. Packer writes: "If we ourselves have known anything of the love of Christ for us, and if our hearts have felt any measure of gratitude for the grace that has saved us from death and hell, then this attitude of compassion and care for our spiritually needy fellow-men ought to come naturally and spontaneously to us. It was in connection with aggressive evangelism that Paul declared that 'the love of Christ constraineth us.'"⁸ That's Paul's way of saying that the love of Christ in us compels us to go and share. It is not the guilt-inducing "should" or "have to," but the inevitable outworking of the work of grace in us.

Group Discussion

Bible Study

Read 2 Cor. 5:14–21.

- 1. Make a list of the attributes and actions attributed to Christ and God. Then make a list of the affirmations made of Paul and other believers.**

Christ loves us (14)

Christ died and was raised (14–15)

God gives new life (17–18)

God in Christ reconciled the world to himself (18–19)

God gave us the ministry of reconciliation (18)

God entrusts to us the message of reconciliation (19)

God makes his appeal to others through us (20)

Christ is made “to be sin” (21)

We are controlled by Christ’s love into action (14)

We no longer live our ourselves but for Jesus (15)

We are a new creation (17)

We are reconciled to God (18)

We are ministers of reconciliation (18)

We are guardians of the trust and God’s message (19)

We are ambassadors for Christ (20)

We are made the “righteousness of God” (21)

- 2. What do your lists reveal about the nature of evangelism in general, and Paul’s ministry in particular? What drives Paul to give his life to the “ministry of reconciliation?”**

We are the “acted upon.” God goes first. Everything that is true of us, from our identity as a new creation to our call to be ministers of reconciliation, begins with what God has done for us. Evangelism then also originates in what God has done first.

Paul is clear that it is the “love of Christ” that “controls” him (5:14). Other translations read “compels” or “constrains.” So there is both a sense that Christ’s love “impels him to action” (David Garland, *2 Corinthians*) and a sense in which he is constrained to action. He can’t help but do otherwise; he has no choice. His ministry is the natural outflow of having known the love of Christ. The gospel propels him outward to plead with others to be reconciled to God. There is an inevitable outward movement to the gospel having been rooted in our lives. And the source of that movement is the “love of Christ.” Evangelism is thus a response more than a duty or an obligation.

3. How does Paul make it clear that the work of evangelism is primarily the work of God? Does this absolve us of our responsibility in evangelism?

Paul makes it clear that the ministry of reconciliation is of God in the following ways:

God’s work. The primary content of the message involves the finished work of God in Christ. It is Christ who “died and was raised” (5:15). And it is the movement of God toward the world that is the impetus for the ministry of reconciliation: “. . . in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them . . .” (5:19). If God does not act and reconcile first, then there simply is no such thing as evangelism. It is because he has done the work, that we have a message to share.

God’s message. Paul is clear that their message is from God. With God having done the work of reconciliation (5:18–19), Paul can only echo the message “be reconciled to God.” He is even more explicit when he writes that God is “. . . entrusting to us the message of reconciliation” (5:19). The message is given to them by God as a precious trust.

God’s messengers. God “commissions” his ministers by literally creating them anew. Paul refers to himself as an ambassador for Christ (5:20). As an ambassador, he is merely the mouthpiece for the One who bears the real authority. An ambassador is not free to deliver any message other than that which has been authorized by his sender. This is why Paul writes, “We implore you *on behalf of Christ . . .*” (5:20).

God’s appeal. This is remarkable. When we share the gospel with someone, it is God himself who is actually “. . . making his appeal through us” (5:20). The manner in which we live and speak, if we bear the name of Christ, is the manner in which God’s appeal is heard by those around us.

Because Paul is swept up into God’s own ministry and mission, it does not absolve him of his responsibility to actively participate in what God has called him to do. Although it is primarily the work of God, He has chosen to entrust that message to us. He has chosen to make his appeal through us. God’s appeal is heard by the world through the faithful witness and words of his people. We bear more responsibility, not less!

4. What is the relationship between new life in Christ and the ministry of reconciliation?

It appears that for Paul the two are inseparable. New life means that we are God's ambassadors. In verses 14 and 15, Paul writes of having died, and that new life entails not living unto ourselves, but unto Christ. New life is living for Christ. We are his. We are at his disposal. But at his disposal to do what? This is what he expounds in the following verses. We are at his disposal to bear the message of reconciliation (19), to be his ambassadors (20), to be the conduit through which God himself makes His appeal to others (20), and to implore others to be reconciled to God. To be a new creation is to share with our lives and words the gospel of Christ to those who are perishing.

Discussion Questions for This Week's Reading

Refer to "Gospel Witness."

1. Was there anything from the reading that was particularly challenging or helpful for you?
2. How do you feel when you think about sharing your faith with others? Anxious? Apathetic? Defeated? Excited? Did anything from the reading or the Bible study speak to this?
3. Is sharing your faith burdensome for you? Does it take on the nature of a duty or an obligation? If so, why do you think that is the case?
4. What heart attitudes hinder you from sharing your faith with others? What attitudes do you need to repent of?
5. What specific gospel promises do you need to believe with respect to evangelism?

Exercise One: Diagnosing Your Evangelistic Condition

The following chart, adapted from Mack Stiles' *Speaking of Jesus*,⁹ can help us understand where we stand when it comes to evangelism. Consider the following statements:

- (1) I have a heartfelt desire to share the good news of Jesus Christ (Motivated).
- (2) I have natural social relationships with non-Christians that I am attentive to (Available).
- (3) I am comfortable sharing the basic content of the gospel (Equipped).

Motivated	Available	Equipped	Diagnosis
NO	NO	NO	<i>Sequestered</i>
NO	NO	YES	<i>Academic</i>
NO	YES	NO or YES	<i>Apathetic</i>
YES	NO	NO or YES	<i>Isolated</i>
YES	YES	NO	<i>Frustrated</i>
YES	YES	YES	<i>Engaged</i>

Understanding that a simple chart cannot adequately express what is in our hearts, what is your diagnosis? What area do you feel is *most* lacking and how might you begin to address it?

Exercise Two: Next Steps

1. Think of one or two pre-existing relationships you have with non-Christians. What steps can you take to deepen that relationship? What can you do to love and serve them?

2. Commit to praying for those relationships. Pray for their welfare (this requires knowing what life issues they are dealing with!) and pray for opportunities to share the gospel with them.

At Home after the Lesson

Prayer Requests

Assignments

- **Memorize** Acts 1:8.
- **Read** “Confronting Mammon” in preparation for next week’s meeting.
- **Pray** for your group members.

Memory Verse

Acts 1:8

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.

LESSON 10

Money, Sex, and Power, Part 1

Overview

Key Concept: Stewardship | **Bible Study:** Matt. 6:25–34 | **Memory Verse:** Matt. 6:19–21

Objectives:

- To honestly examine what Jesus teaches us about money and possessions
- To grow as faithful stewards of God's gifts and to confront our material idolatries
- To develop the practice of sacrificial giving and simple living

Confronting Mammon

For our final three lessons, we want to look at the specific ways the gospel works itself out in the life of the disciple, namely, with respect to three of our culture's dominant pursuits: money, sex, and power.

The typical posture of the Western church to the issue of money and possessions is one of determined silence or awkward defensiveness. It is either summarily ignored (“*we don't go there, it's personal*”) or so thoroughly nuanced and domesticated (“*we don't go there, we don't want to provoke guilt*”) that it might be rightly said: “We have managed to do something that the early Christians would not have thought possible. We have made Christianity safe, middle-class, comfortable.”¹ In a culture dominated by affluence and consumption, this has become the path of least resistance and so we fail to confront our most cherished idol. So why disrupt the *status quo*? Why threaten this uneasy peace and risk offence?

First, we affirm that in discipleship there is no area of our lives that is not subject to God's authority. There are no boundaries, no limits to the extent of Jesus' lordship over our lives. Second, despite our own reluctance to talk about money, Jesus spoke more about money and possessions than any other single topic: more than faith or repentance, heaven or hell, prayer or fasting. Now why would the Savior of the world say more about how we are to view and handle money than any other single topic? Perhaps Jesus means to teach us that “there is a powerful relationship between our true spiritual condition and our attitude and actions concerning money and possessions.”² Or more pointedly, “If Christ is not Lord over our money and possessions, then he is not our Lord.”³

Two Pitfalls

Two opposing but equally erroneous approaches to money are asceticism and greed. Asceticism is the rejection of material possessions as inherently evil. Ascetics thus renounce possessions, consistently

pit the spiritual *over against* the material, and fail to see the goodness of God's material gifts because they recognize only the dangers they pose. With greed, it's the opposite. Greed enthusiastically affirms the goodness of material gifts without acknowledging the very real threat they pose to our souls. Possessions are thus pursued, coveted, acquired, and protected, all to inordinate degrees that safely exceed our need and mock any notion of justice. We pursue the status-conferring car, the identity-reinforcing fashion, and the "didn't-know-I-even-needed-that" gadget all without ever appealing to the One we profess to follow as disciples.

In our instinctive reaction against either of these extremes, the error of the other looms ever near. So in our reaction against greed, let us not despise God's good gifts and succumb to the vilest forms of self-righteousness and judgment toward those we perceive to be less spiritual. That's asceticism. Conversely, in our rejection of asceticism let us not seek sham consolation for our greed and so justify our idolatrous worship. How might this look? Bring up egregious economic inequities on a global scale and you may be met with the always passionate charge of being a "guilt manipulator," heaping false and unnecessary guilt on the church.

Two Treasures

To navigate the extremes, let's look at Jesus' teaching from Matthew 6, beginning with verses 19–21:

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Jesus begins by inviting us to correctly appraise the value of these competing treasures. The fundamental property of earthly possessions and treasures is their impermanent and fleeting nature. In this first century context, wealth often consisted of precious metals and cloth, and monetary savings were simply kept in their homes. The threat of moths, rust, and thieves was thus very real. For Jesus, the three together "represent the insecurity of life lived for accumulation,"⁴ despite the illusion of security that accumulation masterfully creates. Jesus is simply teaching his disciples to see the illusion for what it is.

By contrast, Jesus exhorts his disciples to ". . . lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven" (6:20). There is a lasting treasure immune from decay and loss. We simply need to embrace a value system that recognizes that which is of eternal significance and so worthy of our most earnest pursuit. But how do we store up treasures in heaven while still here on earth? Here's one way. In a parallel passage in Matt. 19:21, Jesus says to a rich, young man, ". . . go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven." At least in this instance, it appears that one "concrete practical way to have treasure in heaven is to make the life move of economic *divestment* for the sake of *investment* in the poor."⁵

This matter of which treasure we pursue is not simply a matter of applied wisdom, although it certainly is that: to spend our lives in endless pursuit of material possessions is as foolish as the

vacationer who spends his life and fortune outfitting his hotel room when he is checking out at noon the next day. But it is more. It is a matter of our devotion: “. . . where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (6:21). Jesus affirms as axiomatic that what we treasure exposes what has our hearts, and it is to this that he now turns.

Two Eyes

Jesus proceeds to emphasize the critical importance of rightly valuating these competing treasures. Although there is no explicit mention of money or possessions, the context demands that our view of money is the issue at hand when Jesus says: “The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light, but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!” (Matt. 6:22–23).

This is a radical claim seldom considered in our context. Jesus teaches us that a distorted view, a misguided eye toward money and possessions, has immense and far-reaching effects, so much so that it can be said to fill our “whole body” with darkness. One commentator explains, “if the eye is not clear on this matter [of money and property], the whole of one’s life is perverted.”⁶ The way we handle our finances and possessions simply affects *everything*, whether we recognize it or not.

Two Masters

Have you ever wondered why so much of Jesus’ teaching on money is *evangelistic* in character? So far Jesus has said that what we treasure is linked inextricably to our hearts and that our attitude toward money and possessions affects every part of who we are. It follows then that he affirms that the manner in which we handle our possessions is ultimately a matter of lordship:

No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money (Matt. 6:24).

The word appropriately translated “money” is the common Aramaic word, *mammon*, which is left untranslated in the Greek text. The effect of retaining *Mammon* (not done here by the ESV) is that *Mammon* is personified, deified even, to remind us that “Mammon is a spiritual force who works with tremendous attracting power to draw us into its orbit and out from under the service of Christ.”⁷ There is something about the explosive mix of the human heart and money and possessions, such that money and possessions take on a god-like quality to inspire devotion and idolatrous worship, often and most insidiously, unbeknownst even to the worshipper. There is a deeply spiritual character to money that goes far beyond its use as a medium for exchange. And so Jesus teaches his disciples not that it is *unwise* to serve God and money. It’s not that it’s *unspiritual* or *ill-advised*. No, he says it’s *impossible*: “You cannot serve God and money.” It is whole-hearted, sold-out, life-altering devotion to one or the other. So which will it be?

The Treasure That Frees Us from the Treasures That Enslave

Where do we get the strength and the wherewithal to resist the allure of money and possessions? What can free us from the pursuit of more and “better” things? Where is real and lasting security? There is an answer to these questions on *this* side of eternity. The writer of Hebrews tells us to keep our lives “. . . free from the love of money, being content with what you have . . .” and how and why we are to obey: “. . . for he has said, ‘I will never leave you nor forsake you’” (Heb. 13:5). God’s promise of his very real presence with us is given as the reason to be free from greed. God himself is our treasure. He alone is the treasure that frees us from the counterfeit treasures that enslave. We find freedom from the love of money, as we grow in our perception of God’s nearness, his goodness, and in our confidence in his loving and tender care.

This too is Jesus’ logic. He follows his teaching on money with a beautiful passage on God’s loving care for his children (Matt. 6:25–34). Over and over again, the refrain is, “Why are you anxious?” or “Do not be anxious.” And why? Because God is our Father. He knows our needs. And he will never leave or forsake us.

Getting Practical

In this extended reading, we conclude with three more practical questions:

1. Is it “wrong” to drive a luxury car? Or wear designer clothes? Or consume expensive meals?

Thankfully, I cannot answer these questions for anyone but myself. They can only be answered in the heart of the prospective owner-consumer when they have been asked sincerely and humbly to the One who has provided everything we have on loan. But the questions must be asked of our Lord. He must have a say and the answer must not be presumed in either direction.

2. Can a Christian be “rich” in a world of grievous economic inequities?

As a teacher, it is with great trepidation and strict qualification that I say “yes.”

Why the trepidation? Because the combination of the human heart and material possessions is explosive and one that naturally tends toward god-like worship; because the human heart so easily and so blindly turns this “yes” into a license for greed; because we have a penchant to trust material wealth more than God’s loving care; because the sage prays “Don’t make me rich!” even as he prays against poverty: “. . . give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that is needful for me, lest I be full and deny you and say, ‘Who is the LORD?’” (Prov. 30:8–9).

Why the qualification? Because Paul himself, while recognizing that there are wealthy Christians, has a special word for them in 1 Tim. 6:17–19:

As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, thus storing up treasure for themselves as a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is truly life.

Thus, if we answer “yes,” then it is with at least these qualifications:

- Our possessions must not lead to haughtiness.
 - *Do you derive an inner satisfaction, a sense of status, or sense of superiority from your home, your clothes, your car or any other material possession?*
 - *Are there brands that you feel are beneath you?*
 - *Do you show partiality or treat more favorably those who are rich?*
- Our hope must not be set on the “uncertainty of riches, but on God.”
 - *Do you derive a sense of security from your material possessions that would be threatened were they to be taken away?*
 - *Do you anxiously pursue the acquisition of wealth as a means of obtaining security?*
- We must recognize that all that we have is given to us by God who “richly provides.”
 - *Do you regularly thank God for his good gift and thereby honor the Giver?*
 - *Do you continue to ask for daily provision as an expression of your dependence?*
- We must be “rich in good works,” “generous,” and “ready to share.”
 - *Do you give freely, spontaneously, joyfully, and sacrificially?*

It appears that it is not impossible, by the mercies of God, to master money without being mastered by it, though it would seem to require great wisdom, relentless and honest self-examination, and loving and intrusive accountability. Material wealth is both a blessing and a test. And if we fail on these points, for the sake of our souls, let us give more of our possessions away.

3. Must I tithe?

Before we directly address the question, first a little background. The Old Testament *tithe*, which literally means “a tenth part,” was God’s required return for his gracious provision: “Every tithe of the land, whether of the seed of the land or of the fruit of the trees, is the LORD’s; it is holy to the LORD” (Lev. 27:30). The tithe was used to support Israel’s religious order, the Levite priests, and to provide for widows, orphans, and the poor in their midst. Tithing was a solemn matter, and it should come as no surprise that it was intimately linked to their worship; one stated purpose for its observation was that Israel might “. . . learn to revere the Lord your God always” (Deut. 14:23). Indeed, to fail to observe the tithe amounted to robbery: “Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you say, ‘How have we robbed you?’ In your tithes and contributions” (Mal. 3:8).

If the tithe specified the *amount* the Israelites were to repay, firstfruits signified the *nature* of the offering that was to be brought. The Israelites were to bring the best and the first of all of their goods and produce as soon as it was harvested or received.⁸ And yet to be precise, the tithing of firstfruits was not considered giving, so much as it was repayment. There is thus provision in Israel’s law and numerous examples in the Old Testament of voluntary freewill offerings that went above and beyond the tithe. This is where their giving began: “Voluntary giving started after the firstfruits. The tithe was never a ceiling for giving, only a floor. It was a beginning point. Beyond it, God’s children gave more, sometimes much more, as needs and opportunities arose. The tithe was a demonstration of obedience. Voluntary offerings were a demonstration of love, joy, and worship.”⁹

So back to our original question: *Must I tithe?* Strictly speaking, if by tithing we mean a legislated, law-binding, explicitly required level of giving, the answer is no. Yet the principles of giving are clear. Let us add to the principle of the tithe, the following consideration: should we who have experienced the fullness of God's grace in Christ, be more or less generous than Old Testament Israel who perceived but the shadow of the glory that was to come? So while there is no pre-determined level of giving specified in the New Testament, there are plenty of examples of radical generosity. Be it the early church of Acts 2:44–45 (“. . . all who believed were together and had all things in common . . . and were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need”) or the Macedonian church of 2 Cor. 8:3–4 (“. . . they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and *beyond their means*, of their own accord, begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints”), we are faced with the call to radical, sacrificial, community-honoring giving, that in my view, ought to *far exceed* the tithe.

We recognize that for some, giving “a tenth part” is truly sacrificial and that for others, it may be a convenient figure to nurture greed whilst still fulfilling some perceived, guilt-mitigating duty. And so we affirm that the principle of the tithe remains operative not as law, but as a starting point for growth in sacrificial giving; as a means of mortifying our appetite for the impermanent riches of this world; as a discipline to cultivate a greater hunger and longing for home; as a practice whereby the Spirit actually makes us more generous people; and as a weapon against the Mammon-worship to which we are so prone. As one writer put it, tithing is the “training wheels” of true giving.¹⁰

Group Discussion

Bible Study

Read Matt. 6:25–34

1. **This passage begins “Therefore I tell you . . .” suggesting that what is to follow is the logical conclusion of the verses immediately preceding it. How is this passage related to verses 19–24?**

Jesus culminates his teaching on money and possessions here with an extended discourse on God’s loving care for us that is peppered with the repeated exhortation, “Do not be anxious.” It is a fitting conclusion, “for at the root of the money question is the anxiety question” (Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary* Vol. 1, 328). The race to acquire more possessions and more shares of false security is itself an anxious pursuit aimed at relieving a sense of anxiety. Yet precisely because it is a false security, with greater accumulation of *things* comes the anxiety associated with their potential loss. Jesus here provides us with the antidote to Mammon-worship and to anxiety. You can be free from the relentless pursuit of things because you are under God’s loving care. He is your Father and you are his child. God knows and sees your need. He will take care of our necessities, so we have no need to be anxious over our superfluities.

2. **On what is Jesus’ teaching to be free from anxiety and the enslaving power of earthly possessions based? To what does Jesus appeal in his exhortation to be free from anxiety?**

Jesus’ logic here is based entirely on the character of God. Previously he argued, “earthly wealth is temporary and impermanent”; “the pursuit of earthly treasures poisons the whole person”; “the pursuit of money and possessions is nothing less than idolatrous worship.” Now, however, he appeals to God’s loving character as “Father.” Are you anxious? Know God. Are you tempted by the allure of Mammon-worship? Know God. Know him as your Father who cares for birds, lilies, and grass. Now, how much more must he care for his children?

3. **What does this passage teach us about God? His concerns? How is God portrayed?**

God is Father. Twice in the passage God is referred to explicitly as “your heavenly Father” (6:26, 32).

God sustains his creation. His concern extends to birds and lilies. He is said to feed them and to clothe them with their natural beauty. No creature is too small; nothing in creation too inconsequential. God sustains what he has made.

God is concerned with physical needs. “The Father is not to be left out of a single concern—least of all from physical concerns. He is not too busy to be bothered or too spiritual to be debased . . . no one may push God into a spiritual corner” (Bruner, 331-332). Thus, God’s concern and care extends to all creation as well as to the most basic of needs.

God values his children above other creatures. Jesus argues from the lesser to the greater: God cares for birds and lilies, but, “Are you not of more value than they?” (6:26).

God is the Creator of beautiful things. Let us not overlook the fact that God is said to clothe the lilies in beauty: “. . . yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these” (6:29).

God knows our needs. This is explicit from 6:29. This comforting truth was also given earlier as encouragement to pray without “empty phrases” or “many words” (6:7–8). It is important for Jesus that we know that God knows our needs.

God provides for the necessities of children. This of course is the main thrust of the passage, but we mustn't sidestep the seeming contradiction and scandal this teaching presents. Because of course, at least peripherally or theoretically, we are acquainted with famine and hunger. There is an inescapable tension that ought to weigh heavily upon us who do not suffer such lack. What are we to do with this? One writer has framed it this way: “. . . every starving sparrow and, even more, every famine, plague, or war flies in the face of Jesus' teaching. Believers suffer deprivation, too. God's poor do everywhere, hauntingly. I do not know what to do about this contradiction except to attempt to be a deeper, more economically-concerned-for-others disciple, and to teach Jesus' radically countercultural economic ethic more faithfully” (Bruner, 330).

4. See verse 33. If not material possessions, then to what should our energies and affections be directed? What is the disciple's subversive counter-pursuit?

Jesus does not instruct us to stop seeking or to stop pursuing. He commands that we seek something far greater. A new master, a new allegiance to Christ, demands as much: “In the midst of a consumerist society, disciples are to be distinguished by a countercultural stubbornness: their ‘first priority’ in life is the quiet, steady seeking of God's ‘kingdom and righteousness.’ Disciples, too, are acquisitive, ‘seekers,’ on the hunt. But their quest is for realities more consequential than consumer goods” (Bruner, 333). We are to seek after that for which he commands us to pray, “Thy kingdom come.” May there *be* in this world, a fuller expression of God's rule over all that he has made. May there be in *me*, a fuller expression of Christ's righteousness. And may my life be spent and poured out to those ends.

Discussion Questions for This Week's Reading

Refer to "Confronting Mammon."

1. Was there anything from the reading that was particularly challenging or helpful for you?
2. Do you lean toward asceticism or greed?
3. Why do you think money and possessions have such attracting power? Why is it such a potential danger? How have you seen this in your own life?
4. In what specific way is God challenging you to more fully yield to his lordship in the area of money and possessions?
5. Share about your giving habits. Do you tithe? Think of ways you can encourage one another to become more generous givers.
6. Describe the difference between ownership and stewardship. How ought this impact our use of money?

Exercise: A Plan for Personal Giving

Much of the time giving is not done because there was no plan to give. Set aside time this week to develop a plan for giving. Be intentional and allow the plan to have the teeth to stretch you to greater degrees of sacrifice. Remember the principles of the tithe as you prayerfully consider how to give.

1. Estimate the amount of money you gave last year in tithes, offerings, charitable donations, and personal giving to those in need. Calculate what percentage of your income this represents.
2. Decide what percentage of your income you will give this year in tithes, offerings, and charitable donations.
3. Is this a responsible figure given your current financial situation?
4. Is this a sacrificial figure given your current financial situation?
5. What sacrifices will you make to be able to give at this figure?
6. How will this be distributed among persons, causes, missions, and the local church?
7. To meet your goal, at what intervals will you give and how much will you give at each interval?
8. Who will keep you accountable to this plan (even as you make provisions for secret giving)?

At Home after the Lesson

Prayer Requests

Assignments

- **Memorize** Matt. 6:19–21.
- **Read** “Eros Redeemed” in preparation for next week’s meeting.
- **Pray** for your group members.

Memory Verse

Matt. 6:19–21

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

LESSON 11

Money, Sex and Power, Part 2

Overview

Key Concept: Sexual Integrity | **Bible Study:** 1 Cor. 6:9–20 | **Memory Verse:** 1 Cor. 6:19–20

Objectives:

- To understand God's good design and intention for sex
- To grow in holiness and sexual purity

Eros Redeemed

This is the second in our three-part look at the dominant cultural pursuits of money, sex, and power. Our sexuality is a topic that is so personal, so powerful, and so profoundly knit to our core being that there may be some unease as we come to this subject. And yet, as disciples of Christ we are called to surrender every aspect of our lives to him, including this, our sexuality.

Where We Must Begin

Before another word is written, let me first address those of you who bear the weighty burden of past mistakes or present addictions, and those as well, who as victims of abuse and through no fault of your own, struggle to believe God's *good* intentions for you with respect to your sexuality. We will speak of God's glorious purpose for sex, of his gracious provision, of its deep spiritual significance, and of its design for our joy and our pleasure, for peace and for intimacy. And my word to those of you who acutely feel your sexual brokenness is that the beauty and the glory of God's good intentions for sex remain for you and are in no way forfeited by your past. I know that for many of you this is nearly impossible to believe. But as child of the living God, your life is now hidden in Christ. Remember, that you are married—*married*—to Christ Jesus himself, and you are chaste and pure in him, so deep and profound and complete is your union with Christ.

There is no brokenness that is beyond repair, no wound that cuts too deep, no shame that is too unspeakable, no measure of past mistakes that he cannot redeem. The healing may be slow when it involves something so intrinsically powerful; but even if it is aching slow, it is still healing. And the healer and mender of our souls is good and faithful to complete in you what he has begun.

Sex According to God

It is trite but true to say that we live in a sex-obsessed culture. And yet despite this obsession, it is clear that we don't quite know what to do with sex. On the one hand, sex is *glorified*. It is flaunted and celebrated as the ultimate desire to be earnestly pursued, thus the relentless appeals in any and every form of media. On the other hand, sex is *debased*. It is simply a primitive animal instinct, signifying little more than an appetite to be satisfied, an itch to be scratched. Are you hungry? Eat. Do you have sexual desire? Have sex. Either way, glorified or debased, the bottom line remains the same: you are free to use sex as you please.

Amid this confusion, the church has historically failed to provide an answer that adequately honors both the goodness of sex and the intensity of our desires. Augustine referred to “the shame which attends all sexual intercourse”¹ and Yves of Chartres “counseled the devout to abstain from sexual intercourse on Thursdays in remembrance of Christ’s rapture, on Fridays in remembrance of Christ’s crucifixion, on Saturdays in honor of the Virgin Mary, on Sundays in commemoration of Christ’s resurrection, and on Mondays out of respect for departed souls.”² But neither of these extremes—“sex is shameful” nor “sex is less than spiritual”—honors God’s good and glorious design for sex.

God is unequivocally and unabashedly *for* sex. Indeed, God created it with all of its attendant pleasure as part of his “very good” creation. Our sexuality is a part of our image-bearing status as male and female (Gen. 1:27) and there in the garden, *before the fall*, male and female are drawn to one another, naked and unashamed in one-flesh union (Gen. 2:24). This intimacy and physical pleasure is celebrated again without shame in the entirety of Song of Songs, and later the Apostle Paul articulates the deep significance of this union (Eph. 5:31–32). There is a deep, positive, unflinchingly affirming attitude in Scripture to sexuality and erotic love, for they were conceived and designed by God himself. Our very strong sexual desire then is also from God and when properly channeled, is a witness to his good and perfect design.

Central to God’s design is that the wonder and beauty of sex is to be celebrated exclusively within the covenant of marriage. This was the case even in the garden: “Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast *to his wife*, and they shall become one flesh. And the man *and his wife* were both naked and were not ashamed” (Gen. 2:24–25; cf. Matt. 19:6). Sexual union is intended to be enjoyed by a husband and wife bound together in ways more than physical, both as an expression of their oneness and as the means of their becoming more deeply one. But of course, this is where the eyes roll at the perceived prohibition and the restriction. Why is sex reserved for marriage? If sex is such a wonderful and good thing, why put *any* restrictions on it at all?

Precious and Powerful

You put a fence around something that is incomparably precious (to protect *it*) or intensely powerful (to protect *you*). With respect to sex, both apply. Sex is precious. It is for a man and woman who have given their lives and all of their very selves to one another in a whole-person, soul-uniting, life-long covenant. Sex engenders greater peace and trust within the safety of that covenant and is for their mutual and exclusive pleasure such that no one else *knows* them in that way. But sex is also powerful. It was designed to be. Even those who misuse sex without insight into its God-ordained purpose can

attest to its power. When used properly, it has the power to affirm and to heal, to deepen trust and intimacy. But when used improperly, it has the power to inflict pain and to wound, to destroy trust, and ultimately erode our capacity for intimacy. Sex is much more than physical.

In 1 Corinthians, Paul writes to Christians struggling to navigate their way through a sexually-charged culture. Gentile converts to Christianity in Corinth would have been leaving a life in which the normal and expected practice would be to have sex with temple prostitutes. To them, Paul writes “Don’t you know that he who is *joined* to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For, as it is written, “The two will become one flesh.” Now Paul is not simply referring to the *physical* union of the act of intercourse. Otherwise, he would in effect be saying, “Don’t you know that if you have physical union with a prostitute, you have physical union with her?” That’s tautology. No, there is something much more profound that happens when a man and a woman have sex. Paul is saying that the act of physical union is always and never less than to engage in whole-person, one-flesh, soul-uniting union. So to paraphrase, he says, “Don’t you know that if you have sex with a prostitute, you are really becoming one with her in the deepest possible way, in ways *much more* than physical?”

Sex is designed to be a bonding mechanism, and so the Greek word translated above as “joined” means to bind or to cement together. Sex is “a sealing act, a bonding apparatus, a unity forming event,” akin to soul-to-soul super glue: “And like super glue it bonds with extraordinary rapidity. Like super glue you have to be very careful where you stick it because if torn apart, it takes a piece of both with it.”³

This is why the misuse of sex is so destructive. Sexual union outside of marriage is to engage in a soul-uniting event apart from a soul-uniting covenant. It is the giving of the body without the giving of the soul, leading literally to self-dissociation. And over time, with greater promiscuity, the capacity for whole-souled interpersonal intimacy diminishes. Outside of a covenant relationship, the safety and peace sex is meant to promote is replaced instead by anxiety and fear: *Will my partner break up with me if we don’t have sex? Will my partner break up with me as soon as we have sex? Is my partner having sex with anyone else?* And when the non-covenantal relationship is broken (or the covenantal relationship in the case of adultery), the trauma is immeasurably heightened because they have physically enacted the sealing event of a deeply spiritual union. In other words, the glue worked.

But what now if there is no other partner? There is no whole-person, soul-uniting union with pornography, is there? But therein lies the problem. Even without a partner, pornography robs us of our capacity for one-flesh intimacy through mutual dehumanization, for the actors *and* the consumers, and again soul-body dissociation: there is the pleasure, the visual stimuli, and the physiologic effects intended for whole-person union, and there isn’t even another “person” there.

Sex as Signpost

At some point, we must be led to ask, why the obsession? Why will people go to such great lengths, even down paths of self-destruction, to find “sexual fulfillment?” Is it really just another basic human appetite? Then why is no other basic human appetite pursued with such frenzied lust? Ultimately, I believe the answer to those questions can only in the final and fullest sense be explained outside of the finite bounds in which we live. We were created with a profound longing and deep desire for intimate

connection not only with one another, but also and ultimately with our Creator. It is an inborn impulse to be fully known yet deeply accepted. We were also created for glory and with a capacity for the eternal, image-bearers that we are, and we remember that our image-bearing encompasses our sexuality. Sex is thus but an echo of the reason for which we were created: to know an ecstatic, soul-bonding, intimate union with our Creator. One writer puts it this way: “The fact is that sex is the closest that many people will ever come to a spiritual experience. Indeed, it is because it is a spiritual experience of sorts that so many chase after it with a repetitive, desperate kind of abandon . . . whether they realize it or not, they are searching for God.”⁴

Sexual union is God’s gift to humanity then, whereby we creatures are given a fleeting glimpse, the faintest echo, of the ultimate union and the deepest intimacy for which we were made, to be naked and unashamed, *in our core*, before God as we behold him as he is. It is no accident or coincidence that God’s relationship with his people is everywhere described in terms of marriage, covenant, and union; nor that unfaithfulness to God is described in terms of adultery, shameful nakedness, and divorce. And so, when things shall finally be as they ought, we find ourselves at a wedding: “Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready” (Rev. 19:7). This is the real union for which sex is but a signpost.

Sexual Integrity Hid in Christ

In this extended reading, we close with what we hope will prove to be practical wisdom as we seek to live holy lives of sexual integrity as Christ’s disciples. Richard Foster provides a helpful image:

Sex is like a great river that is rich and deep and good as long as it stays within its proper channel. The moment a river overflows its banks, it becomes destructive, and the moment sex overflows its God-given banks, it too becomes destructive. Our task is to define as clearly as possible the boundaries placed upon sexuality and to do all within our power to direct our sexual responses into that deep, rich current.⁵

The call to sexual integrity is a call to channel our God-given desires and sexuality in a manner that acknowledges God’s good and gracious design. It is no use ignoring the intense desires that we feel for we were created sexual beings. But as Christ’s disciples, our sexuality must also be brought under his lordship. So how is it to be done? Where do we begin? This is just a start:

Community. Although we have never met, I can say with the utmost confidence that you do not have the strength to do it alone. It takes a community. Confess together, pray together, rejoice together, and encourage each other. There must be someone in your life who bears the burden of *your* sexual purity. Who is it for you?

Flee! Paul exhorts us to *flee* sexual immorality (1 Cor. 6:18; 2 Tim 2:22). Why flee? You flee from something that is so strong that it can devour you. You don’t fight a bear. You don’t see how close you can get to the bear without being devoured. You flee, because it can destroy you. And when you flee, flee headlong to Jesus, your Savior and Friend. Go deep into his Word which can transform your mind. Meditate upon it and memorize it, until your hunger for God grows more and more intense.

Safeguards. The problem of lust and sexual immorality is *inside* of us. Sexual desire is itself good, but we are wired to misuse and misdirect that desire because of our sin. Because this is true, no amount of external laws can change our hearts or produce inner heart change. Yet, it is the height of arrogance and foolishness *not* to erect safeguards for fear that they are legalistic. It is not legalistic to erect a glass wall at the zoo to keep us from playing patty-cake with a hungry lion. It's wisdom. It is not legalism to be discerning with our entertainment choices. It's wisdom. If your purity is at stake, it is not legalism to disconnect the Internet at home, unsubscribe from Netflix, ditch your smart phone, or move the computer from out of your bedroom. It's wisdom.

Confess. Regularly confess your weakness and acknowledge the power of sexual lust. If you think you are incapable of committing adultery (pre-marital or extra-marital), you are one step further down the road to committing adultery: “. . . the consummation of infidelity usually comes as the last in a series of mild compromises and unobtrusive self-deceptions. More [Christians] have drifted into adultery than lurched into it.”⁶

Receive. Learn to receive God's forgiveness and healing by faith. Precisely because it is so powerful and so profoundly personal, the scars of past mistakes or trauma, and even present addictions, run deep and healing can be slow. Habits that have been engrained *over time* are undone *over time*. But they can be undone. Remember Jesus is drawn to the sexually broken who know they are broken. It's the glory of the gospel of grace that welcomes the broken. Remember you are righteous and beloved.

Group Discussion

Bible Study

Read 1 Cor. 6:9–20.

1. See 6:9–11. Who is Paul addressing? Who *were* they? Who are they now?

These verses describe both the life from which some of the Corinthian believers were delivered and their new status in Christ Jesus. Their old life is schematically described thus:

9a Or do you not know that *the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God?*

9b–10a Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers

10b *will inherit the kingdom of God.*

11a And *such were some of you.*

Prior to their conversion, they could well be described as “unrighteous,” as prohibited and excluded from the kingdom of God, and with any number of the descriptors used by Paul. Paul reminds them that this is their past: “such *were* some of you.”

Now however, Paul emphatically affirms that they have a new identity in Christ and recalls for them what has happened. Literally, and strikingly, he says, “. . . *but* you were washed, *but* you were sanctified, *but* you were justified . . .” and all of that “. . . in the name of the Lord *Jesus Christ* and by the *Spirit* of our *God*” (6:11). They are clean, they are righteous, and they now belong to the kingdom of God.

It’s important to remember that even though they have a new identity and now belong to a new kingdom, they are not as yet made perfect or entirely free from sin. Paul, in teaching about sex, is addressing sexual misconduct *in the church* (see 1 Cor. 5). He is writing to Christians! Their transfer into a new kingdom did not, in a moment, free them from their struggle with sexual (or even non-sexual) sin. They are now entirely free from the guilt of their sin and declared righteous before God, but the battle with sin continues.

2. See verse 13. Why in a passage about sexual ethics does Paul include this verse about food?

Paul here appears to quote a popular slogan as a means of contrast to the deep significance of sex. Apparently many in Corinth viewed food and the physical appetite as belonging to the same category as sex and sexual desires; both as no more than basic, instinctive urges. Remember, in

Corinth, prostitution was a widely accepted social convention, and participation in idolatrous worship involved “sacred” prostitution with the priestesses of Aphrodite. And so the “Corinthians themselves must have been using this argument about food analogically to justify their sexual freedom” (Richard Hays, *First Corinthians*, 104). This view, of sex as simple biology, is also the most prevalent of our day.

The Corinthians, “seeing the body as transient and trivial, have concluded that it makes no difference what we do with our bodies. If we are hungry, we should eat; if we are desirous of sexual gratification, we should seek it. None of this makes any difference, they say, because it concerns only external physical matters, which are of no lasting significance” (Hays, 103). But Paul presents the two as antithetically parallel and emphasizes the contrast by offering a counter-slogan:

Food is meant for the stomach, the stomach is for food—God will destroy food and the stomach.

The body is meant for the Lord, the Lord for the body—God raised the Lord and will raise us.

Paul roots his sexual ethic in the bodily resurrection of Christ. The body and the physical realm *do* matter, and so sex is not a trivial matter. It cannot be treated as a basic appetite; there is something that is deeply significant about sex and our physical bodies.

3. Summarize the statements that Paul makes about “the body” in verses 15–20, noting in particular the implications these statements have on our understanding of sex.

- Our bodies are “members of Christ” (15). We are united to him and belong to him. The physical act of illicit sexual union then is to join together the body belonging to Christ with a prostitute.
- The *sexual* union of two physical bodies results in deep, profound, one-flesh union, so much so that the act can be likened to becoming “one body” and “one flesh” (16). It is neither trivial nor transient. Paul cannot be saying that the transient physical act of sexual union results in a transient physical union—that would be a tautology. Rather, “For Paul, in sexual intercourse the *whole body*, that is the *whole person* becomes one flesh with the sexual partner” (Kenneth E. Bailey. *Paul Through Mediterranean Eyes: Cultural Studies in 1 Corinthians*, 191).
- Sexual sin is a sin against one’s own body in a way that is distinct from every other sin (18). There are other sins that we might place in the category of a “sin against my own body” (think gluttony or suicide), but only sexual sin binds us to a new body. No other sin brings together members of the body of Christ with the body of a prostitute. As such, it is particularly powerful and destructive.
- Our physical body is a temple of the Holy Spirit (19) in whom God dwells. We belong to him and are to glorify God with and in our physical bodies.

Discussion Questions for This Week's Reading

Refer to "Eros Redeemed."

1. Was there anything from the reading that was particularly challenging or helpful for you?
2. Do you have trouble believing that God forgives you when it comes to sexual sins, either past or present?
3. What strategies have worked for you in your personal battle against lust and sexual immorality? What strategies do you currently employ? Share an instance where you experienced victory over a particular temptation.
4. Review the list in the conclusion to this week's reading, "Sexual Integrity Hid in Christ." What would you add to this list? How else would you counsel yourself and others in seeking sexual purity? Of this list, which particular counsel do you most need to heed? How specifically will you begin to do it? How does the gospel speak to your battle for sexual purity?
5. If you are married, are you able to talk freely about your sex life (i.e. hopes, expectations, etc.)? If not, what do you think gets in the way? Also, have each married individual answer the following question: is there anyone of the opposite gender with whom you are sowing the seeds of emotional intimacy?

Exercise: A Plan for Personal Accountability

Sexual integrity takes community. We are neither strong enough nor honest enough with ourselves to provide the accountability that we need. Answer the following questions and ask others to walk with you in your struggle for purity:

1. **Who will keep you accountable in the area of sexual integrity? When and how will you ask this person to walk alongside you in this way?**

2. **In what specific areas will you ask this person to keep you accountable? What questions will you invite them to ask you every time you speak or meet?**

3. **One friend disconnected the Internet from his home. Another gave up his smart phone. What safeguards can you employ in your struggle for sexual purity (acknowledging that they are powerless to effect heart change)? How does the gospel prevent these safeguards from becoming laws?**

At Home after the Lesson

Prayer Requests

Assignments

- **Memorize** 1 Cor. 6:19–20.
- **Read** “Upside-Down Power” in preparation for next week’s meeting.
- **Pray** for your group members.

Memory Verse

1 Cor. 6:19–20

Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.

LESSON 12

Money, Sex and Power, Part 3

Overview

Key Concept: Service | **Bible Study:** Phil. 2:1–11 | **Memory Verse:** Phil. 2:3–4

Objectives:

- To recognize and confront our impulse for power
- To develop practices that will lead to humble service and humble hearts

Upside-Down Power

The final chapter in our study and in this three-part miniseries on Money, Sex, and Power is a look at our inborn impulse for status, greatness, and power. Now while the word power may conjure up images of politicians and CEOs, the problem of power is much more pedestrian and thereby insidious, for at its heart are the more basic questions: Do you feel superior to others? Do you compare yourself with others and seek a privileged status over them in your mind? Is there ever a task that you feel is beneath you? The regularity and humility with which we serve others will reveal our answers to those questions. It is the disciplined cultivation of a life of service that is our surest weapon against the pride that relentlessly seeks to define ourselves over-against and above others.

Greatness Redefined

God surely knows how deeply ingrained this impulse for greatness is because it seems to surface over and over again in the life of Jesus with his disciples. Luke 9:46 records, “An argument arose among them as to which of them was the greatest.” Time passes. Then again we read, “A dispute also arose among them, as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest” (Luke 22:24). It would be comical just how dense the disciples are, were it not equally true of us. Interestingly, Jesus’ answer to his disciples’ pursuit is not to dissuade them from seeking greatness. Rather, he sets about to *redefine* greatness. It’s not, “Squelch your ambition;” it’s “Change what you are ambitious for! Seek greatness! And seek it with all of your heart! Just seek it on my terms.” What then are his terms?

It was on the road to Jerusalem and in the shadow of the impending cross that we find the disciples again bickering about greatness. In fact, in Mark’s record Jesus has *just finished* saying that he will be mocked, spit upon, flogged, and killed (Mark 10:33–34) when James and John infamously request: “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory” (10:37). Upon hearing about their request, the other disciples become “indignant.” Perhaps they were upset because they were beaten to the punch! I believe we are meant to feel and hear the dissonance of this clamor for greatness as the cross looms. But it is in the midst of this fray that Jesus declares, “But whoever would be great

among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (10:43–45). Greatness is redefined as service and our model is the Lord Jesus himself.

The Radical Nature of Service

In reflecting on Jesus’ call to greatness, we must be careful not to de-radicalize the nature of service. To *become* a servant, although never less, is not equivalent to occasional acts of service. Ours is not a call to the momentary mortification of our pride or to the measured sacrifices of our time and energies. Such a truncated understanding of service may well lead to what Richard Foster refers to as self-righteous service that: “enjoys serving, especially when the service is titanic,” “to make impressive gains on ecclesiastical scoreboards,” that “needs to know that people see and appreciate the effort,” that discriminately “picks and chooses whom to serve” to gain an advantage, and that “puts others into its debt,” becoming “one of the most subtle and destructive forms of manipulation known.”¹ Self-righteous service is performed on *our* terms, for the benefit of *our* reputation, and with more regard for *ourselves* than the dignity and humanity of those we serve.

In contrast, the true and radical nature of service is a call not to simple, occasional acts, but to an entirely new and counter-cultural pattern of seeing and living. It is to indiscriminately count others more significant than ourselves and to habitually look to the interest of others until it becomes instinct (Phil. 2:3–4). It is to learn to count greatness not by how many people we exercise authority over or how many people know our names, but rather by our ability to see and respond to the dignity and humanity of all persons. It is to less and less define ourselves as over-against or superior to, or more important than others, and to more and more define ourselves as adopted children of God, for whom the highest worldly distinction or status is no prize by comparison. It is relentlessly *other*-regarding, because our regard for ourselves is secure and complete in our identity in Christ. Thus for our purposes, let us define service as the *joyful and sacrificial giving of the fullness of ourselves, in being and in deed, to affirm the worth, priority, and dignity of another.*

The Relational Nature of Service

Because the nature of service involves such a radical re-orienting of our perspective, we must see service as a call not primarily to *do*; it is a call to *be* that necessarily involves doing. Put another way, service belongs first to the category of relationships and not tasks, with the relationships having both vertical and horizontal dimensions.

The vertical dimension is best summarized by the apostle Paul: “Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ” (Col. 3:23–24). In every sense that matters, our service is a reflection of *this* relationship. It is unto God, with God as our only audience and with our status secure in Him. If this is true, then it’s easy to see why true service has difficulty distinguishing between small and large tasks. It explains why no task is beneath us. And it explains why true service thrives in hiddenness. God sees.

The horizontal dimension involves getting lower than the ones we serve. This is not just self-effacement for its own sake; it is the affirmation of the worth, priority, and dignity of the ones you serve. This is more difficult than it sounds. The trouble is never the performance of the task (i.e. washing the dishes for your

roommate—*again!*); we may well be able to muster the sufficient goodwill to do it again. The trouble comes when there is no acknowledgement of our service and we are treated not like a thoughtful roommate, but—*gasp!*—as a servant, as one who was supposed to have done it anyway and as one who will be expected to do it again. This is the feel of *being* a servant. At the end of the day, you've only done your job.

The Discipline of Service

So how do we get there? By faith, we must believe that we have indeed been united with Christ; there is then no greater honor or distinction to obtain and so we are free to *be* servants. The Holy Spirit who dwells within us is the only one who can effect this inner change to actually transform us into servants. And led by the Spirit, we must set about to intentionally cultivate a pattern of disciplined acts of service, remembering again that our efforts are not meritorious—there is nothing left for us to earn!

Thus, although the radical nature of service is never equivalent to acts of service, it is never less. Disciplined acts of service are the Holy Spirit enabled and empowered *means* by which he makes us servants; the acts themselves are not the end; Christ-like character is. The Spirit forms it within us through the steady, habitual re-directing of our energies, resources, and priorities away from ourselves and toward others in need. You may call these simple acts of service the training wheels whereby we learn to see others as better than ourselves, or perhaps the laboratory where we work out what we truly believe about greatness. However you conceive of them, remember that they are the place where the Holy Spirit makes us the servants we were created to be.

Service Hid in Christ

When Jesus confronts the pride of his disciples and their desperate concern for status, he consistently draws their attention to *himself*. He isn't so much concerned about transforming our view of ourselves and of others because it is right and virtuous and good. Neither does he establish a rule or law. The call and invitation is simply "follow me." Be like me. Follow my example. Serve because I have served. And so, in the Upper Room, when Jesus laid aside his outer garment, took a towel, and tied it around his waist so he could perform the task reserved for the *lowliest* servant, it was to be etched into their memory as an example of the radical call to serve one another: "If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you" (John 13:14–15).

Our Lord was born in a manger, rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, washed dirt-caked feet, and hung on a Roman cross. Our call is to identify with *that*, and not with the prevailing attitudes of our day toward status and greatness. God wants us to have positions of honor and greatness, but on his terms, namely foot-washing and cross-bearing. Now these terms are not meant to be oppressive. To the contrary, they are the truest expressions of the deepest freedom that the gospel provides. It is simply madness to continue to heed the relentless call to *be* somebody—we are treasured children of the King! The constant demands of self-promotion and upward mobility? Where is *up* when we are seated "with him in the heavenly places *in Christ Jesus*" (Eph. 2:6)? Incidentally, there's union again, *in Christ Jesus*. The Spirit of the servant Christ dwells in us and we are in him. And in self-sacrificing, other-affirming service, we actualize and live out the reality of this union. The heart of service is thus deep identification with him: "We are never more like Jesus than when we serve others."² This is what power and greatness looks like.

Group Discussion

Bible Study

Read Phil. 2:1–11.

1. See verses 1–4. As best as you can determine from within the passage, what problems in the Philippian church is Paul addressing? What is the primary content of Paul's exhortations?

As far as we can tell, the Philippian church seems to have been facing at least some measure of internal strife and disunity borne out of selfish ambition and vain conceit. Paul is more explicit in 4:2 (“I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord”), although surely these attitudes were more widespread in the community. Paul exhorts them to be “of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind” (2:2). This is a plea for unity. He exhorts them to do nothing out of “selfish ambition or conceit” but instead to count others better than themselves and to look to the interest of others.

2. See verses 1–2. On what basis does Paul make his appeal?

The basis of Paul's appeal is the Philippians' experience of the gospel; he anchors the appeal in the riches of the gospel. The four-fold “if” clauses speak to this: “if there is any encouragement in Christ,” “any comfort from love,” “any participation in the Spirit,” “any affection and sympathy.” Despite the “if-then” construction, Paul's appeal is not *conditional* in the strictest sense. He is not saying, “if you happen to be near the store, then pick up some milk.” He is saying, “since.” *Since* you have experienced encouragement and strength in Christ; since you have experienced deep consolation from love; since you are all participants in the fellowship of the same Holy Spirit; since you have received the tenderness, compassion and mercy; because in the gospel all of those things are true, then you must treat one another accordingly. Selfish ambition has no place in light of our Christian experience of gospel riches. Since you have received encouragement, consolation and tenderness from God in Christ, there is no longer any need to clamor for recognition or status. If you have fellowship in the Spirit, then unity must prevail.

3. See verses 5–11. On what basis does Paul continue his appeal?

Paul continues his appeal by drawing their attention to the glory of the person and work of their Lord Jesus Christ. He begins by stressing again their union to Christ: “Have this mind among yourselves, *which is yours in Christ Jesus . . .*” (Phil. 2:5). They are to be of a certain mind that they already have in Christ Jesus! Paul then provides a beautifully concise summary of the life of Christ that is to serve as an example for the Philippians and for us. We find in these verses Christ's deity (2:6), his incarnation (2:7–8), his crucifixion (2:8), and his exaltation (2:9–11). Christ, as God, humbled himself in his incarnation and his crucifixion, taking the form of a servant. As a result, he was exalted not by himself, but by God.

As a bit of an aside, consider how Paul utilizes and applies the most glorious doctrine (of the person and work of Christ) to address such a commonplace problem:

Theology exists in order to be applied to the day-to-day problems of the Christian church. Every doctrine has its application . . . [in] the Philippians example-passage . . . Paul is dealing with what are surely comparative trivia, the problem of vain glory in a Christian congregation . . . Paul, as he wrestles with both of them, has recourse to the most massive theology. It's not only that you have the emphasis on the unity between theology and practice but you have the emphasis on the applicability of the profoundest theology to the most mundane and most common-place problems . . . Who might imagine that the application of the glories of New Testament Christology might be to stop our quarreling and our divisiveness in the Christian *ekklesia*? That is what Paul is doing here. He is telling them: You have these practical problems; the answer is theological; remember your theology and place your behavior in the light of that theology. Place your little problems in the light of the most massive theology. We ourselves in our Christian callings are to be conscious of this. We must never leave our doctrine hanging in the air, nor hesitate to enforce the most elementary Christian obligations with the most sublime doctrines (Donald MacLeod, *Philippians 2 and Christology*).

4. Express Paul's logic in your own words. How do Paul's radical exhortations in verses 3–4 make perfect sense in light of the riches of the gospel and the work of Christ?

At face value, the exhortations in verses 3–4 are incredibly radical. They are the sorts of verses whose message we tend to soften—"well, it doesn't really mean *that!*" Are we really supposed to count others better than ourselves? Yet, in light of the riches of the gospel and the work of Christ, it makes perfect sense. The gospel *ought* to humble us to this degree.

Here is one attempt to personalize Paul's logic. Because of the riches of the gospel that are mine; because I have the strength and consolations that come from Christ; because I have experienced the mercies and tenderness of God, I am free to die to my selfish ambition. I do not need acclaim from others, because I am treasured and valued by the only one that matters. I have more now, than I could ever attain by myself. Furthermore, I have a new identity in Christ Jesus to whom I am united in a vital relationship. I follow the example he has set for me and do not seek glory apart from him. I must learn to take up my figurative cross (cf. Luke 9:23) and die to self-exaltation and self-promotion. Because of the gospel and because of Christ, I can look more and more to the interest of others and count them better than myself.

Discussion Questions for This Week's Reading

Refer to "Upside-Down Power."

1. Was there anything from the reading that was particularly challenging or helpful for you?
2. Is your life characterized by service? Are you growing in your desire and your willingness to serve?
3. In what specific and practical ways do you feel God may be calling you to serve?
4. The reading referred briefly to "self-righteous" service. Can you think of a time when you have served in this manner? Share about a time where you either served for the acknowledgement of others or where you felt bitterness for service that was not acknowledged in the manner you had hoped.
5. The reading suggests that service belongs primarily to the category of relationships and not tasks. How is your life of service a reflection of your relationship with God and with others?

Exercise: Practicing a Life of Service

It is through the practice and the discipline of service that we grow into the servants we are called to be and so mortify our pride. In considering how you can practice a life of service, answer the following questions:

1. Identify one person in your life whom you think God may be calling you to serve.
2. In what specific ways can you sacrificially serve this person?
3. What heart attitudes would be indicators to you that this might be a form of “self-righteous” service?
4. In what specific ways does the gospel free you to serve in the manner in which you’ve committed.

At Home after the Lesson

Prayer Requests

Assignments

- **Memorize** Phil. 2:3–4.
- **Pray** for your group members.

Memory Verse

Philippians 2:3–4

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.

The Final Meeting

Congratulations on completing *Gospel and Grace!* We encourage all groups to gather informally over a meal for a final meeting, to reflect back on your time together, and to give thanks for the ways in which God is at work in each of your lives. The following is provided simply as a tool that may be helpful for guiding that time.

Looking Back

In what area of your life has this study had the greatest impact?

In what ways have you noticed growth in one another's lives?

Is there a lesson that you have found yourself returning to?

What practices have "stuck," if any?

Looking Ahead

Are there people whom you would like to lead through Gospel and Grace?

Will you consider meeting over *Grace, Kingdom, Mission – Vol. 2: Kingdom and Mission*?

Prayer

Close the time with a moment of prayer, giving thanks to God for the ways in which he is working in each of your lives.

Memory Verses

- Week 1** **Matt. 28:18–20** | And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”
- Week 2** **Eph. 2:8–9** | For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.
- Week 3** **Rom. 8:33–34** | Who shall bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.
- Week 4** **Gal. 2:20** | I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.
- Week 5** **Gal. 5:22–23** | But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.
- Week 6** **Phil. 2:12–13** | Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.
- Week 7** **Heb. 3:13** | But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.
- Week 8** **Eph. 4:32** | Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.
- Week 9** **Acts 1:8** | But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.
- Week 10** **Matt. 6:19–21** | Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.
- Week 11** **1 Cor. 6:19–20** | Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.
- Week 12** **Phil. 2:3–4** | Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.

Notes

Lesson One. Called to Discipleship

1. Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, 282.
2. See also, “How Do I Follow Jesus?” in Gospel Christianity Course 2, Redeemer Presbyterian Church.
3. See “Breaking Nets, Sinking Boats and Saving Men,” John Piper, preached September 29, 2002.

Lesson Two. Gospel and Grace

1. Paul Zahl, *Grace in Practice*, 36.
2. Robert Farrar Capon, *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment*, 457–8.
3. See also, “The Trauma of Grace,” Rankin Wilbourne, preached October 12, 2008, pacificcrossroads.com/sermons.
4. Victor Hugo, *Les Miserables*, 110.
5. *Sonship* (1997), World Harvest Mission, iii.

Lesson Three. Righteous and Beloved

1. J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, 207.
2. Quoted from *Sonship* (2002), World Harvest Mission, 37–8.
3. J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, 206–7.
4. *Ibid*, 214.

Lesson Four. Union with Christ: The Foundation for Change

1. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *God’s Way of Reconciliation*, 70.
2. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, III.1.1.
3. Adolf Deissmann, *St. Paul: A Study in Social and Religious History*, 140.
4. A. A. Hoekema, *Saved by Grace*, 64.
5. James Dunn, *The Theology of the Apostle Paul*, 411.
6. See also, Joe Novenson, “Living with a Gap.”
7. J. I. Packer, “Introduction” to John Owen, *Sin and Temptation*.

Lesson Five. The Holy Spirit: The Agent of Change

1. J. I. Packer, *Keep in Step with the Spirit*, 54.
2. N. T. Wright, *Simply Christian*, 131.
3. Gordon Fee, *Paul, the Spirit and the People of God*, 9.
4. Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 6.
5. Octavius Winslow, *Personal Declension and Revival of Religion in the Soul*, 5.
6. *Ibid*, 6.

Lesson Six. Spiritual Disciplines: The Means of Change

1. By “spiritual disciplines” we refer to those practices given to Christians in all ages for the purpose of growth in Christ-likeness. Traditionally, these have included prayer, Bible reading, fasting, solitude, and others. There is understandably some variation in what is considered a spiritual discipline. We say that the disciplines are the primary means because they are not the exclusive means. For instance, suffering is often considered another means the Spirit uses to produce inner heart change.
2. Simon Chan, *Spiritual Theology*, 96–7.

3. See David Powlison in his course “Dynamics of Biblical Change.”
4. John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 148–9.
5. Quoted from Helmut Thielicke, *Theological Ethics*, 65–66 in Simon Chan, *Spiritual Theology*, 81.
6. Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 7.
7. John Stott, *God’s New Society: The Message of Ephesians*, 193.
8. See Octavius Winslow, *Personal Declension and Revival of Religion in the Soul*.
9. Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission*, 34
10. Klaus Issler, *Wasting Time with God: A Christian Spirituality of Friendship with God*, 16.
11. *Ibid*, 28.

Lesson Seven. Spiritual Friendship

1. Portions of this lesson, including the Reading, the Bible Study, and the Exercise are adapted from the lesson “Spiritual Friendship,” *Gospel Foundations*, 69–77, co-written by the author and Rankin Wilbourne.
2. Francis Chan, *Forgotten God*, 152.
3. Attributed to Albert Schweitzer.
4. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays*, 371.
5. C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, 58.
6. *Ibid*.
7. *Ibid*, 65.
8. Aelred of Rievaulx, *Spiritual Friendship*, 74.
9. See also, Timothy Keller, “The Friends,” preached on February 8, 2004.

Lesson Eight. Free to Forgive

1. Dave Desforge, “Forgiveness,” *Sonship* (1997), 14–8.
2. Don Hamilton, *Forgiveness*, 10.

Lesson Nine. Gospel Witness

1. Roland Allen, *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church*, 12.
2. John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad*, 11.
3. Darrell Guder, *Be My Witnesses*, 147.
4. Thomas A. Wolf, “Oikos Evangelism: The Biblical Pattern.”
5. Darrell Guder, *Be My Witnesses*, 147.
6. *Ibid*, 160.
7. Quoted from Colin Marshall and Tony Payne, *The Trellis and the Vine*, 53.
8. J. I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, 76–77.
9. J. Mack Stiles, *Speaking of Jesus*, 40.

Lesson Ten. Money, Sex, and Power, Part 1

1. Vaughan Roberts, *Turning Points*, 190.
2. Randy Alcorn, *Money, Possessions and Eternity*, 5.
3. *Ibid*.
4. Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary Vol. 1*, 321.
5. *Ibid*, 322.
6. Eugene Boring, “Matthew” in *New Interpreter’s Bible*, 210.
7. Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary Vol. 1*, 325.
8. See also, Randy Alcorn, *Money, Possessions and Eternity*, 176.
9. *Ibid*, 178.
10. Randy Alcorn, *Money, Possessions and Eternity*, 173.

Lesson Eleven. Money, Sex, and Power, Part 2

1. Richard Foster, *The Challenge of the Disciplined Life*, 100.
2. Ibid, 101.
3. Rankin Wilbourne, “Sex? Dating? Mind Your Own Business,” preached October 9, 2011.
4. M. Scott Peck, *Further Along the Road Less Traveled*, 220.
5. Richard Foster, *The Challenge of the Disciplined Life*, 109.
6. Douglas Wilson, *Fidelity*, 59.

Lesson Twelve. Money, Sex, and Power, Part 3

1. Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 128–129.
2. Duane Elmer, *Cross-Cultural Servanthood*, 21.

About the Author

Albert Shim and his wife Tina served with Mission to the World from 2012–2016 in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, together with their three daughters. There, he served as co-team leader and co-regional director for Southeast Asia. Albert is a physician, board certified in internal medicine and pediatrics, having received his M.D. from the University of Southern California and his B.A. in English literature from the University of California, Berkeley. He is ordained as a ruling elder in the Presbyterian Church in America and served on the pastoral staff of his church in Los Angeles, where he had the opportunity to exercise his passion for teaching and writing.

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