



Join a Small Group for the Spring Spiritual Journey

Get the most out of the Spring Spiritual Journey by joining a Small Group at Second! It's part of the C in WCSI! C is for Connect. Connect with God in your daily quiet time with the devotionals provided in this study guide. Also, connect with others in a small group to use the discussion guide provided. Go to the Church Center App and click Groups or scan the QR Code!



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FROM THE PASTORS

We are excited you're joining us for this Spring Spiritual Journey, Unleash. We believe the Bible makes clear that every Christian is saved to serve and every member of our church is a minister. You have been uniquely shaped by God for His service. When you understand this, you're able to unlock your potential for God to work in you and see God do greater things through you in the life of a church where every member learns to operate in their spiritual gifts, abilities, personality, and experiences. God wants to unleash every one of us to ultimately unleash His church to do greater things for his glory!

So, if you're ready to see what God will unleash in us together for this 5-week journey, join us in these daily devotions, sermons, and small group discussions.

Your Pastoral Team

HELPS FOR HOSTS

Top Ten Ideas for New Hosts

CONGRATULATIONS! As the host of your small group, you have responded to the call to help shepherd Jesus' flock. Few other tasks in the family of God surpass the contribution you will be making. As you prepare to facilitate your group, whether it is one session or the entire series, here are a few thoughts to keep in mind.

Remember, you are not alone. God knows everything about you, and He knew you would be asked to facilitate your group. Even though you may not feel ready, this is common for all good hosts. God promises, "I will never leave you; I will never abandon you" (Hebrews 13:5). Whether you are facilitating for one evening, several weeks, or a lifetime, you will be blessed as you serve.

- 1.** Don't try to do it alone. Pray right now for God to help you build a healthy team. If you can enlist a co-host to help you shepherd the group, you will find your experience much richer. This is your chance to involve as many people as you can in building a healthy group. All you have to do is ask people to help. You'll be surprised at the response.
- 2.** Be friendly and be yourself. God wants to use your unique gifts and temperament. Be sure to greet people at the door with a big smile.... this can set the mood for the whole gathering. Remember, they are taking as big a step to show up at your house as you are taking to host a small group! Don't try to do things exactly like another host; do them in a way that fits you. Admit when you don't have an answer and apologize when you make a mistake. Your group will love you for it and you'll sleep better at night.
- 3.** Prepare for your meeting ahead of time. Preview the session and write down your responses to each question.
- 4.** Before your group arrives, take a few moments to pray for each member by name. Ask God to use your time together to touch the heart of each person in your group. Expect God to lead you to whomever he wants you to encourage or challenge in a special way. If you listen, God will surely lead.

5. When you ask a question, be patient; someone will eventually respond. Sometimes people need a moment or two of silence to think about the question. If silence doesn't bother you, it won't bother anyone else. After someone responds, affirm the response with a simple "thanks" or "great answer". Then ask, "How about somebody else?" or "Would someone who hasn't shared like to share anything?" Be sensitive to new people or reluctant members who aren't ready to say, pray, or do anything. If you give them a safe setting, they will blossom over time. If someone in your group is a wallflower who sits silently through every session, consider talking to them privately and encouraging them to participate. Let them know how important they are to you, that they are loved and appreciated, and that the group would value their input. Remember, still water often runs deep.

6. Provide transitions between questions. Ask if anyone would like to read the paragraph or Bible passage. Don't call on anyone, but ask a volunteer, and then be patient until someone begins. Be sure to thank the person who reads aloud.

7. Break into smaller groups occasionally. With a greater opportunity to talk in a small circle, people will connect more with the study, apply more quickly what they're learning, and ultimately get more out of their small group experience. A small circle also encourages a quiet person to participate and tends to minimize the effects of a more vocal or dominant member.

8. Small circles are also helpful during prayer time. People who are unaccustomed to praying aloud may feel more comfortable trying it with just two or three others. Also, prayer requests won't take as much time, so circles will have more time to actually pray. When you gather back with the whole group, you can have one person from each circle briefly update everyone on the prayer requests from their subgroups. The other great aspect of subgrouping is that it fosters leadership development. As you ask people in the group to facilitate discussion or to lead a prayer circle, it gives them a small leadership step that can build their confidence.

9. Rotate facilitators occasionally. You may be perfectly capable of hosting each time, but you will help others grow in their faith and gifts if you give them opportunities to facilitate the group.

10. Go through the Small Group Guidelines. This is a very important part of starting a new group. This will help outline and clarify all expectations for your members.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

How Long Will This Group Meet?

This study is five sessions long. We encourage your group to add a sixth meeting for a serve project. In your fifth session, each group member may decide if he or she desires to continue on for another study. At that time, you may also want to do some informal evaluation, discuss your Small Group Guidelines, and decide which study you want to do next. We recommend you contact Rob Gaschler at rgaschler@secondbaytown.org for more information on future studies.

Where Do We Find New Group Members?

Recruiting new members can be a challenge for groups, especially new groups with just a few people, or existing groups that lose a few people along the way. We encourage you to use the Circles of Life diagram on page 8 in this study guide to brainstorm a list of people from your workplace, church, school, neighborhood, family, and so on. Then, pray for the people on each member's list. Allow each member to invite several people from their list. Some groups fear that newcomers will interrupt the intimacy that group members have built over time. However, groups that welcome newcomers generally gain strength with the infusion of new blood. Remember, the next person you add just might become a friend for eternity. Logistically, groups find different ways to add members. Some groups remain permanently open, while others choose to open periodically, such as the beginning or end of a study. If your group becomes too large for easy, face-to-face conversations, you can subgroup, forming a second discussion group in another room.

How Do We Handle the Child Care Needs in Our Group?

Second Baytown provides children's activities on Sunday night, Wednesday night and Thursday night. You can contact the church office to find out the specific times and arrange your meetings accordingly. One common solution is to have the adults meet in the living room and share the cost of a baby sitter (or two) who can be with the kids in another part of the house. Another popular option is to have one home for the kids and a second home (close by) for the adults. If desired, the adults could rotate the responsibility of providing a lesson for the kids. The last option is great with school-aged kids and can be a huge blessing to families.

SMALL GROUP GUIDELINES

It's a good idea for every group to put words to their shared values, expectations, and commitments. Such guidelines will help you avoid unspoken agendas and unmet expectations. We recommend you discuss your guidelines during the introduction meeting in order to lay the foundation for a healthy group experience.

WE AGREE TO THE FOLLOWING VALUES:

CLEAR PURPOSE: To grow healthy spiritual lives by building a healthy small group community

GROUP ATTENDANCE: To give priority to the group meeting (call if I am absent or late)

BE CONFIDENTIAL: To keep anything that is shared strictly confidential and within the group

CONFLICT RESOLUTION: To avoid gossip and to immediately resolve any concerns by following the principles of Matthew 18:15-17

SPIRITUAL HEALTH: To give group members permission to speak into my life and help me live a healthy, balanced spiritual life that is pleasing to God

LIMIT OUR FREEDOM: To limit our freedom by not serving or consuming alcohol during small group meetings or events so as to avoid causing a weaker brother or sister to stumble (1 Corinthians 8:1-13; Romans 14:19-21)

WELCOME NEWCOMERS: To invite friends who might benefit from this study and warmly welcome newcomers

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS: To get to know the other members of the group and pray for them regularly

OTHER: _____

We have also discussed and agree on the following items:

CHILD CARE: _____

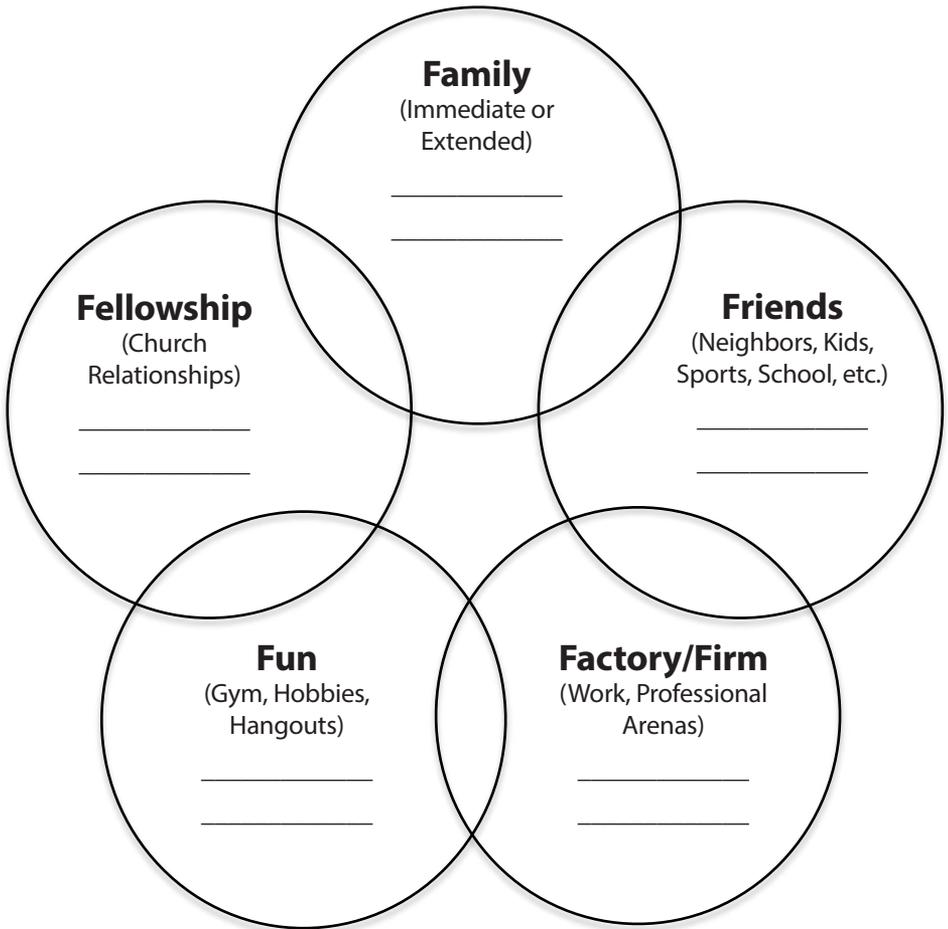
STARTING TIME: _____ **ENDING TIME:** _____

If you haven't already done so, take a few minutes to fill out the Small Group Calendar, which can be found on page 9.

CIRCLES OF LIFE

Small Group Connections. Discover Who Can Connect In Community.

Use this chart to help carry out one of the values in the Group Guidelines, to “Welcome Newcomers



Follow this Simple, Three-Step Process

1. List one to two people in each circle.
2. Prayerfully select one person or couple from your list and tell your group about them.
3. Give them a call and invite them to your next meeting. Over fifty percent of those invited to a small group say, “Yes!”

SMALL GROUP CALENDAR

Healthy groups share responsibilities and group ownership. It might take some time for this to develop. Shared ownership ensures that responsibility for the group doesn't fall to one person. Use the calendar to keep track of social events, mission projects, birthdays, or days off. Complete this calendar at your first or second meeting. Planning ahead will increase attendance and shared ownership.

DATE	LESSON	LOCATION	FACILITATOR	SNACK/MEAL
	SESSION 1			
	SESSION 2			
	SESSION 3			
	SESSION 4			
	SESSION 5			

	SERVE			
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HOW TO HAVE A QUIET TIME

Transformational Discipleship, a recently published book based on extensive spiritual growth research, found that the most significant catalyst for life transformation is daily time in God's Word. Having a daily quiet time or devotion will literally change your life. It is critical to living a Christ-centered life. So, for this study, we have provided daily devotionals for each week. Here are some tips to help you get started.

- 1. Begin with the right attitude.** As you begin, take a minute to pray. Ask God to show you anything in your life that is preventing you from hearing from Him. Ask Him to open your eyes and ears to see and hear what He wants to show you (Psalm 119:18).
- 2. Be ready to obey.** Sometimes God will show you things that are difficult to deal with. Maybe it's a weakness in your life. Maybe it's something He's asking you to do. Whatever it is, listen and respond!
- 3. Select a special time.** If you don't set a special time to meet with God, someone or something else will undoubtedly take His place. Start by setting aside 15 minutes. As you get more comfortable, add more time. Remember, the important thing is quality, not quantity.
- 4. Set a special place.** Jesus had a special place He would go to spend time with the Father. Why? He wanted to get away from the noise and busyness of life to devote all of Himself to His relationship with the Father.
- 5. Gather your resources.** We recommend a journal and an *ESV Study Bible*. If you're ready for more, see other resources recommended throughout the study.
- 6. Don't make it legalistic.** The enemy hates the fact that you are making this a priority. He will try everything to get you off track. Don't let him. Be careful, however, to avoid having a quiet time "just to check it off the list."
- 7. Don't give up or feel guilty if you miss a day.** That's exactly what the enemy wants. Just pick back up where you can.

WEEK 1: UNITY IN HARDSHIP

Beginning the Journey: Today is your first meeting in our “Unleash” series, and we are excited that you have chosen to join us. Each week we will take a few minutes to “look back” and discuss what you learned last week through the daily devotionals. Then, we will “look up” at what God wants to teach us in our study today. Finally, we will “look forward” to how we will live out the principles God has taught us today.

Looking Back: Take a minute to introduce yourselves to one another, and go over the group guidelines on page 7 as you begin your journey together.

Looking Up: Play the video and consider the discussion questions together.

Think of a movie that ends with a “big win.” What did you like about the story?

Reaching a goal takes team effort. Why does pursuing unity in the Spirit require the effort of everyone?

Read Ephesians 4:1-6. According to these verses, how closely are we to walk in unity and how do we do it?

Have you heard Ruth’s story before? What stood out to you?

Read Ruth 1:14-18. Describe the commitment Ruth made to Naomi. What did Ruth sacrifice and what implications would this have?

Turn back to read Judges 21:25. How did Ruth act differently from the rest of Israel during this time?

Eventually God's story of redemption continues through the birth of Ruth's son whose descendants would include Jesus Christ. How does anticipating God's faithfulness help us endure when times are hard?

Why are we reluctant to commit to each other? How can we overcome that reluctance?

If we pursue unity in the Spirit by acting in humility, gentleness, patience, and love toward each other, what could we gain?

Looking Forward: How will you take what you learned today and apply it to your life this week? Take a few moments to pray together and ask God to help you do those things.

WEEK 1: UNITY IN HARDSHIP

DAY 1—READ PSALM 86:5

For you, O Lord, are good and forgiving, abounding in steadfast love to all who call upon you.

In the Disney movie, *The Lion King*,¹ Rafiki shows Simba his reflection in a pond. Instead of seeing his own image reflecting off the water, Simba sees his dad's face urging him to remember who he is. His dad's reminder gives him confidence to return to Pride Rock and reclaim his throne. We're not in a Disney movie and we don't have a herd of hyenas to face, but remembering who we are is needed to live out the unity God calls us to. When we look at our reflection, we should see an image of our Father.

As God's people, we reflect God's character to each other. He has revealed Himself to us as loyal and loving. He is good and forgiving. He abounds in faithful love. As those seeking unity in the Spirit, even in the face of hardship, we must remember how God has called us to himself. God has shown His steadfast love and as those who reflect Him, we are to be good and forgiving toward each other.

Often when we think about others in our community, we make ourselves the center of the story. We favor people who make us feel good about ourselves or those who are like us. We're quick to remember the wrongs of others, or we tend to isolate from the group and hide from others. But God's love looks different. He draws near to us. He does not hold our wrongs against us. He welcomes us into the family of faith though we have nothing to offer but our need for forgiveness. To find unity in the Spirit, we must reflect God's character, and the love God has shown to us.

1. Allers, Roger, and Rob Minkoff. *The Lion King*. United States: Buena Vista Pictures, 1994.

List three reasons why you know God is steadfast in His love toward you.

Read Psalm 25:6-7. How does remembering God's love help you relate to others?

Take a minute to think about others in your community. When you consider these people, are your thoughts self-focused or do your thoughts prioritize the good of others?

Thank God for His loyal love shown toward you. Ask the Spirit to help you forgive and seek the good of those in your community.

DAY 2—READ RUTH 1:16

But Ruth said, “Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God.”

Ruth lived with Naomi’s family for ten years before all the men in the family died. With no other sons for Ruth to marry, Naomi urged her daughter-in-law to return to her family so she could have a new start by marrying another Moabite. Ruth refused and committed herself to Naomi and the God of Israel. She didn’t know what would come next, but out of devotion and love for Naomi she left the home she’d always known.

Ruth’s story is in direct contrast to the book of Judges. The rest of Israel did whatever seemed right in their own eyes, but Ruth and Naomi showed what steadfast love looks like. While everyone else was focused on themselves, Ruth and Naomi sought the good of each other. Ruth loved sacrificially and not for selfish gain. Through the everyday acts of love of His people, God continued His redemption story.

We are not facing a national famine, but each of us is facing something difficult. There are circumstances we cannot control. To be faithful in our love toward each other may feel risky and uncomfortable. Our sacrificial love may not produce the relational outcomes we want. But God has never asked us to carry the weight of the world. He simply asks us to press on in our love and devotion to each other. Through everyday acts of loyal love, the Spirit will bring us into God’s story of redemption.

What makes sacrificial love toward the people of God difficult?

Read Matthew 1:5-6. Why is this an important connection to our passage today?

What might God be asking you to sacrifice in pursuit of unity in your community?

Pray God reorders the desires of your heart so that unity in the church becomes a priority in your life.

DAY 3—READ 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.

Being humbled isn't something we seek out. We often equate humility with being embarrassed or ashamed. The Bible defines humility differently. According to the Scriptures, humility isn't thinking of ourselves as insignificant or unimportant, it's simply prioritizing someone else's good above our own.

In Philippians 2, Paul said humility is for anyone who is comforted by Christ's love, for those who participate with the Spirit, and that to be humble is to have the same mind of Christ. As our humble Savior, Christ did not make much of Himself. He laid down His life and was obedient to caring for others even to the point of death. If God-in-the-flesh did not look to His own interests, but to the interests of others, then who are we to pursue selfish ambitions and vanity?

As God's people, who are comforted by Christ's love and share in His Spirit, we have the mind of Christ when we consider the interests of others. Most of our days revolve around us. My schedule is formed around my goals for my purposes in my way. Looking after these things is okay, but to share the mind of Christ we must also consider our neighbor's interests, our neighbor's needs, and our neighbor's good. Christ valued us to the point of dying for our salvation, and He extends the same offer to our neighbors. Humility is looking at others the way Christ sees them, as people worthy of sacrificial love.

How does the Bible's definition of humility differ from the world's?

Read John 13:34-35. What did Jesus say will be the result of loving one another as He calls us to do?

List two ways you will honor God's love for you today and two ways you will reflect Him by considering someone else's good.

Ask the Spirit to give you the mind of Christ and to help you join in the love of Christ toward those around you.

DAY 4—READ ROMANS 15:5-6

May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Each of us grew up with a story about what love looks like. We watch rom-coms or imagine how we want others to love us. Modern love stories suggest we can fall in and out of love, like a tide ebbing and flowing on the shore. Real love is deeper and more secure than a rom-com. It's not fleeting happiness but an anchored joy. Holy love grows in and multiplies through us.

God calls us to Himself by His holy love, and He remakes our love, so it reflects His. He doesn't woo us with guilt and shame, He invites us to pull up a chair to His table, and He offers us Himself. He lets us abide in His endurance and His encouragement so that we can know His love by living it as we go. When we inhabit the character of God together, we learn to live in harmony with one another to such an extent that we share the same voice. Together we glorify God because His love unites us to each other.

People are not always easy to love. We're difficult and awkward, fickle and insecure. God knows these things. God knew, if left to our own devices, our love would look like a rom-com, so He grants us an endurance and encouragement that is more certain than our own. He gifts us His love then He invites us to abide in it. When we refuse to love others, we isolate ourselves from His invitation. But when we are obedient in love, His love grows in and multiplies through us for His glory and our joy.

When you think of love, what images pop into your mind?

Read Romans 15:1-4. Christ's love serves others. Does your love more often serve yourself or seek another's good?

How can the church, acting in Christ's love, welcome the world into a better love story?

Thank God for His holy love that is certain and shared with us. Ask the Spirit to help you abide in God's love by living in harmony with others.

DAY 5—READ TITUS 3:5-6

...he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to His own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior.

White shirts are notoriously hard to keep clean. Sweat, tomato sauce, and coffee stains t hem. If you wear a white shirt, normal, everyday activities risk you soiling your appearance.

As we consider how the people of God reflect God's holy love, we often think about it like God gave us a white shirt that we want to make sure we don't mess up. We can mistake interactions with others as trying to balance coffee in one hand and pizza sauce in another—if we don't handle it properly then we'll ruin our appearance. But these verses in Titus say that living out God's holiness isn't something we muster within ourselves, we have a Helper who is continually making us clean again. Titus said our righteousness was never up to our work, we were saved by grace through Christ. Once He saved us, He didn't leave us on our own, He poured out His Spirit who continues to form us into His image.

Following Ruth's example of commitment to another is risky. Laying down yourself for another's good will feel like playing tug-of-war with selfish desires. And living in harmony with people who are difficult to love can seem more grueling than joyful. Each of these things is true if they depend on our own strength. But since Christ poured His Spirit on us, we have a holy Helper who can, and will, do for us what we cannot muster on our own. God in us will continue to wash and renew us, to form us into the image of His Son.

How does the Spirit help you pursue unity, even in hardship?

Read Hebrews 13:6. Why can we continue in faithfulness despite fear?

Which is stronger: your faith that God will make you into His image or your fear that commitment to others will cost too much? Why? How might you pursue greater faith in God?

Thank God for pouring out His Spirit on you. Ask the Spirit to help you live righteously.

WEEK 2: GOD CAN USE ANYONE

Looking Back: What did God teach you this past week as you read the daily devotions? What opportunities did you have to apply what you learned?

Looking Up: Play the video and consider the discussion questions together.

Have you ever been the last person chosen for a group or team? Have you felt like this was the case in work environments or friendships?

Why do we all want to feel included or chosen first at times?

What stood out to you about the story of David? David was sinful, yet God still called him a man after God's own heart. Why?

Read Psalm 32:1-5. According to David, what feels like death and what alleviates that feeling? Do you agree?

Nathan publicly exposed David's sin, and David publicly repented. What is surprising about David's response? What did this reveal about David's desires?

Read Psalm 32:8-11. Obedience follows true repentance. If it doesn't, what do the wicked receive? What do those who trust God receive?

What do you risk if you keep your sins and temptations hidden? What do you gain when your sin is brought into the light?

God can use anyone who comes to Him in repentance. Why then can you be confident that God will use you for His kingdom purposes? What is He calling you to do this week?

Looking Forward: How will you take what you learned today and apply it to your life this week? Take a few moments to pray together and ask God to help you do those things.

WEEK 2: GOD CAN USE ANYONE

DAY 1—READ MATTHEW 1:6B

And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah . . .

No one wants to be remembered by their worst decisions.

In the opening chapter of Matthew's Gospel, he reminds his readers of David's most famous sin. Matthew began by tracing the lineage of Jesus, and as he recounted Christ's ancestry, he was reminded of their stories. He didn't give Bathsheba's name, he referred to her as "the wife of Uriah". This reference was a reminder of the man David murdered and the man whose wife David took for himself. The path to the Messiah was always a story marked by sin and forgiveness.

When we look at our sin, we're often tempted to hide it away, excuse it, or beat ourselves up with the shame we feel. None of these temptations are righteous, because none of them lead us to Jesus. The path to Jesus is the one that acknowledges sin and points to the lovingkindness of God.

We find joy in forgiveness by exposing our sin. When sin remains in the dark, it festers and grows. In the light of Christ, our sin is forgiven, and we gain a righteousness that we don't deserve. To refuse to confess our sin is foolishness. No part of us is hidden from the loving gaze of Christ. When we confess our sins to God, we aren't telling Him something He doesn't already know. Instead, we're showing Him we trust Him with every part of our being—even the most unbecoming parts. We bring our sins to Christ in faith that each time we turn away from sin and seek His righteousness, the Father welcomes us. God delights in our repentance because He is known through it.

When you see your sin, are you tempted to hide it away or to expose it to the faithful mercy of Christ?

Read James 1:14-15. List the steps these verses give from sin to death.

Confessing our sin is the first step in returning to God in repentance. How does knowing God delights in your repentance help you imagine God's nearness as a place of refuge?

Thank God for His abundant mercy and forgiveness. Ask the Spirit to remind you that God delights in your repentance.

DAY 2—READ 1 JOHN 1:9-10

If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us.

Toddlers like to play hide and seek by covering their eyes with their hands. They think if they can't see you, they're somehow hidden from your sight. They cover their eyes, and hear, "Oh no, where did you go?" As soon as they move their hands away, it's like they've suddenly reappeared.

To say we have no sin to confess makes us look like toddlers standing in front of the God of the universe with our palms over our eyes, as if we can stay hidden away from His sight. John is more direct. He said believing we have no sin is to frame God as a liar and reveal that His Word is not in us. If we have no need for forgiveness, then we mock the cross of Christ because we would have no need for His sacrifice. We are sinners, and Christ came to save us anyway. When we confess our sin, Christ is faithful and just to forgive us and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

When we acknowledge our sin, we tend to ignore it or heap guilt on ourselves. Both responses are a form of self-righteousness. Jesus didn't welcome us with disappointment and guilt; He welcomed us with His grace and mercy. Why, then, do we return to guilt when Christ accepted us at our worst? Self-righteous efforts make us more dependent on ourselves. But, by confessing our need for Christ and trusting in His forgiveness, we enjoy fellowship with Him.

Do you have sin that you have not yet confessed to another person? What is stopping you?

Read Proverbs 28:13-14. What do we trade for hiding our sins away? What does hiding sin reveal about our hearts?

How can confessing our sins to one another help us enjoy fellowship with Christ and one another?

Thank God for the faithful mercy shown in Christ. Ask the Spirit to remind you of God's Word in you.

DAY 3—READ 2 SAMUEL 12:13

David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the Lord." And Nathan said to David, "The Lord also has put away your sin; you shall not die."

In the movie, *Mean Girls*, a high-school counselor tries to mend broken relationships by having the girls publicly apologize to each other. But, the experiment doesn't go as planned. Instead of apologizing, each girl explains away her behavior and ends her confession with a cheap, "I'm sorry." No relationships are mended because no one is truly regretful.

David's confession wasn't cheap. He recognized his sin against Uriah, Bathsheba, and the people who expected Him to act like God's chosen king. Even more, his sin was against God Himself. David was convicted and regretted his sin. According to Nathan, David's confession was immediately followed by God's forgiveness. David's relationship to God was restored, but his relationships with those he sinned against would take more time and effort. David's reign was never the same as it was before his transgressions, but—unlike the other kings—David continued to cling to the Lord through obedience.

Conviction of our sin takes contrition, a feeling of remorse for the way our sin hurts others and offends God. Repentance without conviction is like a cheap "I'm sorry" without any intention to respond differently next time. True repentance is a recognition that we have wronged others and rebelled against God. The moment we confess to God, our relationship with Him is restored, but restored relationships with others require patient endurance. Once we find relief in the forgiveness of God, we continue to abide in God by pressing on in obedience. We continue in the mercy of God by seeking to restore the relationships our sin broke. Sin convicts us, we turn to God in repentance, then He forms us into people who reconcile with others.

When you think of your sin, do you consider it a personal problem or a relational one? How is it both?

Read 2 Corinthians 7:10-11. Describe how godly grief over sin looks different than a shallow “I’m sorry.”

Conviction leads us to repentance and reconciliation. Is there someone you have sinned against? How will you seek to reconcile with him or her?

Ask the Spirit to convict you of your sin and give you wisdom in how to reconcile with others.

DAY 4—READ EPHESIANS 4:31-32

Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

According to Gallup polls, 22 percent of the world have a daily experience of anger. Though slightly lower than during the pandemic, anger among adults has increased over the last decade. Anger isn't the only negative emotion to increase, so has sadness, stress, and worry.¹ As the study states, the world is on an emotional edge.

The people of God have the antidote—we have Christ. As those who know Christ, we are uniquely equipped to show Christ's grace and mercy toward others. We know our sin hurts others and offends God. We see the cross of Christ and recognize the immense cost of our rebellion. And, we have turned away from our sin and returned to God in repentance. We know God's lovingkindness. God has humbled us with His grace by giving us a righteousness we could never earn on our own. As those who are united to Christ and empowered by His Spirit, we display Christ in the kindness we show to one another.

We are a community of sinners marked by forgiveness. Our belonging to God and each other is our identity. When we continue in bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, slander, or malice instead, we refuse to walk in that identity. When we continue in these sins we look like the rest of the world, and we no longer display the unique calling we've been given—to reflect Christ. Anger and malice is unloving to others and belittles the cross of Christ. So, throw off all bitterness and clamor. Be kind to others just as God in Christ was kind toward you.

1. <https://tinyurl.com/2jr5msd6>

**What makes you bitter or quickly stirs you to anger?
How does the cross of Christ cover these things?**

**Read 1 Peter 3:8-12. According to these verses, how
do we further God's blessing and thwart sin's curse?**

**Why are tenderness of heart, love, and humility the
path to abundant life in God?**

**Pray the Spirit would put away all bitterness, anger,
slander and malice in you.**

DAY 5—READ PSALM 32:10-11

Many are the sorrows of the wicked, but steadfast love surrounds the one who trusts in the Lord. Be glad in the Lord, and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart!

Would you rather take a free, all-inclusive cruise to your favorite destination or play tic-tac-toe for an hour? Or, how about this one: Would you rather go to a giant feast with your favorite people or eat the same microwave dinner alone for the rest of your life? These choices are easy. The better option is clear.

When we continue in sin, it's like choosing a bad trade-off. God has shown us the way to Himself, to enjoy His character and multiply His lovingkindness in the world. God's Word tells us how to be obedient and follow the path toward God's goodness. To choose our own way instead is like being satisfied with microwave dinners alone. We can continue in sin and multiply our sorrows, or we can return to God in repentance and multiply our joy. We can belittle and hide away our sin, or we can live as those surrounded by the steadfast love of God.

God wants you to see yourself as He does: forgiven and redeemed in Christ. You are righteous and upright because by faith you have believed in the Son and by faith you live in step with the Spirit who is in you. We feel within ourselves this battle of sinful desires against our desires to be made more like Christ, but God has already proclaimed that we are His children, His possession, and His redeemed. So, rejoice, be glad, shout for joy. The God of all creation calls and equips you to embody His love and He frees you from the sorrows of the wicked.

As you look at and consider your sin, why is it difficult to accept the abundant love God has for you?

Read Philippians 4:8-9. How does where you put your mind affect your practices and lead you to God?

Why do you have reason to be glad in the Lord? Even if you don't shout, when was the last time you spoke your joy to others?

Pray to God, listing the reasons you can rejoice in Him. Ask the Spirit to make you abound in gladness.

WEEK 3: NOT LIKE US

Looking Back: What did God teach you this past week as you read the daily devotions? What opportunities did you have to apply what you learned?

Looking Up: Play the video and consider the discussion questions together.

The video quoted a study that said many adults identify with Christianity and believe they follow it somewhat closely, but only 34 percent say they put their faith in God. What do you think 66 percent of people put their faith in instead?

How does placing your faith in Christ give your life purpose and direction?

Read Isaiah 55:1-5. Who does God invite and what do they get without cost to them? What does this reveal about God's character?

Why do we prefer to earn what we get rather than rest in God's grace? What is better: the prize of our efforts or what we gain through dependence on God?

Read Isaiah 55:6-11. How can we seek the Lord? Why is it good news that His ways are not like ours?

When we submit our ways to God's ways, He completes His work in us. In what area of life do you need to practice submitting your thoughts and ways to God's thoughts and ways?

Read Isaiah 55:12-13. Describe what God's future kingdom will be like. Is this something you regularly imagine? Why or why not?

Think about some of the attributes of God you have talked about so far. How does knowing God help you depend on Him? How can this group practice dependence on God together?

Looking Forward: How will you take what you learned today and apply it to your life this week? Take a few moments to pray together and ask God to help you do those things.

WEEK 3: NOT LIKE US

DAY 1—READ ISAIAH 55:8-9

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

Ants are impressive little creatures. One ant can carry ten to fifty-times its body weight, and the whole colony of ants is remarkably organized and an efficient team. But you'd never ask a team of ants to help you move a chest of drawers upstairs. No matter how impressive they are, they're too small to carry such a heavy load.

Pretending we can grasp the immensity of God, or comprehend His ways, is just as silly as furniture-carrying ants. God is infinite, we are finite. God knows every detail about every person across the globe, spanning all of time. We barely know ourselves or what's going on with the family down the street. God is holy and good, the definition of love and the giver of life. We are prone to sin that leads to death, and we rebel against God's goodness. His ways are not like our ways, nor His thoughts our thoughts. And that's good news for us.

We only see a small fragment of the big picture, so dependence on God is wisdom. His ways are incomprehensible to us, but He hasn't left us guessing for how to find our way to Him. He has revealed Himself to us. He's given us the Scriptures that reveal His character, the Son who gives us access to God, and the Spirit who unites us to the Son. We practice our dependence on God when we follow the commands of Scripture, when we pray for God's wisdom and trust in His character, and when we keep in step with the Spirit by participating in God's love.

Think of a time when you refused to do what the Scriptures commanded. Did it leave you feeling nearer to God or like you put up a wall with Him? Why?

Read Isaiah 55:12-13. Describe the place God will lead us when we submit our ways to His ways. Do you desire that place?

What is something you need to submit to God's ways and trust that He knows best? What might you gain when you do?

Thank God for being holy and set apart from a sinful world. Pray the Spirit will help you trust God even when you don't understand fully.

DAY 2—READ 1 THESSALONIANS 1:9

For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God . . .

In Exodus, while Moses was on Mount Sinai talking with God, the Israelites grew impatient. God had just delivered them from slavery. They saw God part the Red Sea and then collapse it on the Egyptian soldiers that pursued them. God saved Israel, but now they were tired of waiting on Moses to come down with instruction from God. So they collected the gold they stole from Egypt, melted it, and made it into a cow that resembled Egypt's god. Then God's people worshiped it!

After seeing miraculous signs of God's love and compassion for them, how could they turn to a golden calf? We like to snicker at their foolishness but we're not much different. We may not pray to a metal statue, but we have our own idols. We concoct images of pride and greed we spend our days working toward. We make idols of things that entice us, make us afraid, or that we believe we need. We sacrifice ourselves in service to money, jobs, influence, or applause. We grow tired of waiting for God's ways and search out something else to depend on.

In Thessalonians, Paul commended a church for abandoning such idols and turning to the only living and true God. They got this reputation of turning away from idols because others saw how they clung to faith through hardship and continued to welcome people with love. Idols always seek selfish gain, but this church displayed their belonging to the God who revealed Himself in Christ. If we serve idols, we display greed and pride. If we turn instead to the triune God, we exhibit faith in the sacrificial love of Christ.

We make idols of things like temptations, fear, control, and needs. What idols of your own creation are you drawn to, and how do you sacrifice for them?

Read Galatians 4:8-9. Why do you think so many people of God return to idols even after knowing God?

What reputation would Paul report back concerning you and our community? What evidence would he give to show that you have turned away from worthless idols to serve the living God?

Praise God for being the only living and true God. Ask the Spirit to help you turn away from your selfish ways and serve God.

DAY 3—READ MARK 4:20

“But those that were sown on the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.”

A calculus professor who shows up late to class, scribbles problems on the whiteboard, and leaves without taking any questions shows little concern for the students’ understanding. At best, he wants you to logically comprehend. At worst, he doesn’t care about your learning at all.

Jesus shows concern for your understanding. He wants His teachings to change who you become. In Mark 4, Jesus taught His disciples through a parable about a seed and different types of soils. The seed, He said, is the Word of God and the soils are the different types of people who hear His Word. Some people will hear His Word and immediately disregard what it says. Others will accept God’s Word but won’t let it take root. Trials and tribulation will make them fall away from the word they heard. Still others will receive God’s Word but won’t let it reorient what they love. Eventually desires and temptations will choke out God’s Word in them. But, in the good soil, in those who accept, receive, and let God’s Word change their hearts, it will grow and produce fruit, thirty-, sixty- and a hundred-fold.

Jesus wants more than rote memorization or logical comprehension; He wants a knowledge that sinks from our minds, into our hearts, and fuels the work of our hands. God’s Word, revealed in the Scriptures and Christ, is meant to change who we are and how we operate in the world. When it takes such deep root in us, we are formed into a new people whose ways are more aligned with God’s ways. We become those who multiply the goodness of God.

When has God's Word helped you endure trials or resist temptations?

Read Galatians 5:16-17. How can you hold fast to God's Word and resist sinful desires? What fruit will be produced (for help, read the rest of Galatians 5)?

What can you do this week to seek God's Word taking deeper root in your heart and mind?

Praise God for revealing Himself through His Word. Ask the Spirit to make God's Word abound in and through you.

DAY 4—READ JOHN 15:9-10

“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love.”

Love always has boundaries, or else it would no longer be loving. At weddings, couples commit to be faithful in sickness and in health, which is also a boundary to not be with other people. We let our kids play at the park, but not in a busy street. Without such boundary lines, love would be shallow, inconsistent, risky, and unpredictable.

God loves us by drawing boundary lines that outline the pathway to enjoying more of Him. He shows us how to turn from our ways and reach for His. God loves us by giving us His commands. We are selfish and our default is turning inward. God is holy and His way is love. Jesus said the way He remained in the love He shares with His Father was through obedience. How much more, then, might we—a sinful people—rely on obedience to participate in that love? We remain in God’s love by keeping God’s commands.

Obedience isn’t a prerequisite to God’s love, His love is the reason and the fuel for obedience. We could never earn God’s love, but God loved us anyway, even while we were still sinners. Yet, He invites us to participate in that love by being obedient. He draws the boundary lines so that love is multiplied. In the Scripture, God tells us to not hate others, not become drunk, nor lust after another. He said to keep sex within marriage, to not steal, lie, or cheat. These are the boundary lines He has drawn. When we trespass, we are refusing His invitation to delight in His love.

**What would love look like if it had no boundaries?
Without boundaries, how would those you love know it?**

**Read Matthew 22:36-40. What two commandments
fulfill the whole law according to Jesus?**

**What sin in your life makes you resistant to obedience?
How does knowing God's commands are loving help
you trust God's ways instead of your own?**

**Ask the Spirit to help you imagine how God's
commands display God's love for you.**

DAY 5—READ ISAIAH 55:12-13

“For you shall go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall break forth into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands . . . it shall make a name for the Lord, an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.”

The Silmarillion by J.R.R. Tolkien is the prequel story to *The Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien begins the book by describing how the majestic and intricate worlds of hobbits and elves came into being. He says it began with songs, or the music of the spiritual creatures.¹

In Isaiah 55:12-13, God gave a similar image of singing, but instead of introducing a land of make-believe, He gives an image of the kingdom He will one day bring to fruition. When God’s work is done, even the mountains will burst forth in praise and the trees will clap their hands. The joy and peace we desperately search for in idols and lesser gods will not require effort and endurance to find. Joy will lead us and peace will burst forth from us. Trials and temptations will no longer threaten to choke out God’s Word in us. Instead, signs of God’s everlasting goodness will spring up, and they will never be cut off nor hidden from His people’s sight.

We use our imaginations all the time to picture a better life, an easier life, or the life we’re aspiring to. We imagine what’s best for us and how we get there, but apart from the Spirit, those imaginings rely on our own desires and ways. God’s ways are infinitely better. He leads us nearer to Him so that we might delight in His character and catch glimpses of His kingdom to come. Our ways lead to sorrow and chaos. His ways lead to an everlasting kingdom of joy and peace.

What future captures your imagination? Is it a future of your own making or one of God's?

Read John 10:9-10. What reason did Jesus give for why He came to earth?

When considering God's future kingdom, what are you most excited about being removed? What are most looking forward to finally attaining?

Pray for more glimpses into God's future kingdom. Ask the Spirit to lead you there and to help you to find joy and peace along the way.

WEEK 4: GIFTS OF GRACE

Looking Back: What did God teach you this past week as you read the daily devotions? What opportunities did you have to apply what you learned?

Looking Up: Play the video and consider the discussion questions together.

How do you feel about serving the church? What is encouraging about serving the church? What is challenging?

What talents, abilities, and strengths do you see in others in our group? Tell someone how you think God has uniquely equipped them for good work.

Read 1 Corinthians 12:4-7. According to these verses, what do we have in common with all Christians? What differences do we have? Give examples.

The same Spirit empowers our differing work. How will we recognize if our work is done in the Spirit or depends entirely on our own strength?

Read 1 Corinthians 12:14-19. Since God arranged each member of the body for His purposes, why is it important to become experts in each other's strengths? How can we become this sort of expert?

How might viewing your strengths, talents, and abilities as gifts of grace from a generous God change your perspective on the work you have been given to do?

Read 1 Corinthians 12:21-27. Every member of the body is necessary, and God honors our work, no matter how seemingly big or small the contribution. Do you see your work as necessary and an honorable contribution? Why or why not?

How do you participate in the work of God? How do you seek the good of others in the church or the common good of the community?

Looking Forward: How will you take what you learned today and apply it to your life this week? Take a few moments to pray together and ask God to help you do those things.

WEEK 4: GIFTS OF GRACE

DAY 1—READ 1 CORINTHIANS 12:4-6

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone.

Imagine someone loves you exactly how you want to be loved. They know you completely, seemingly better than you know yourself sometimes. And imagine today is your birthday. This person goes out and buys you a gift made especially for you. After you open it, do you hide it under the mattress for safe keeping? Or do you make sure everyone sees it?

God has given us a variety of gifts that we use to serve in various of ways, but every person who belongs to Christ shares the same Spirit. God gives these gifts to empower us for the specific work He's given each of us to do.

God is not tapping His watch and crossing His fingers that you'll eventually discover some future dream calling. He's not laying out breadcrumbs, hoping you'll discover what you're meant to do. He has equipped you right now for the work you have today. In His infinite love, He has ordained the gifts you have, and He's given you the Spirit to empower you to use them. God knows you completely and—by grace through faith—He joined you to Himself so you could enjoy new life in Him. Every good thing you have is a gift of grace and God has called you to serve and spread His goodness.

What gifts, talents, and abilities did God uniquely give to you?

Read Ephesians 2:8-10. By grace, God has formed you to do good works. How do these verses describe God's people, and when did God begin preparing us for good work?

Think of the work you do each day. Why might God have given you that work? How does the Spirit empower you to do good there?

Thank God for the work He has given you. Ask the Spirit to show you how your work can be done for the good of people around you and for God's glory.

DAY 2—READ 1 CORINTHIANS 12:2,7

²You know that when you were pagans you were led astray to mute idols, however you were led.

⁷To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

According to 1 Corinthians, before Christ we were like pagans led by mute idols. We looked to creations of our own making to give us a life of satisfaction and completion. We expected dead things to make us feel alive. We made idols of things like money, fame, control, and safety that could never live up to the expectations we placed on them. Worshipping anything other than God will always lead us astray.

Now we are—by grace through faith—in Christ, and we have the Spirit of the living God. Theologians have referred to God as the fons divinitas, or the fountain of all life. In the Spirit, we are united to Christ and partakers of a never-ending fountain of life. Dead idols can't give us life, but God has given us Himself. This is more than a truth relegated to our minds, it's a reality we live out with our lives. God has given us work to do and His Spirit to empower our doing. Sin divides, fractures, and stirs up chaos. The Spirit enables us to mend what sin broke. In the Spirit, our work is a divine opportunity to participate in the redeeming work of God. Rather than seek applause for our service, we seek out how we can contribute to the flourishing of those we serve.

Think back on a time in your life when you felt God's favor or that He was pleased with you. What were you doing? Why do you think God approved?

Read Romans 14:17-18. What is the result of faithful service in Christ?

How will you pursue peace and the common good in your work? What will you start doing, and what will you stop doing?

Pray that the Spirit will empower you to bring peace and goodness in your daily routines of work and service.

DAY 3—READ 1 CORINTHIANS 12:18-19

But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as He chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be?

A body cannot be made up of all hands, or all feet. A body needs eyes, ears, a brain, a heart, arms, legs and lungs. Scripture calls the church the body of Christ, made up of many members, doing a variety of activities, and working together in the Spirit. Just as a body cannot be all hands, or all feet, neither can the church be made of all the same parts. We need our differing contributions.

God did not design us to all look the same, act the same, and share the same preferences. God forms us into community made to reflect Christ with our many unique designs. Our differences, working together, allow for the flourishing of the church. If we were all copy-and-paste images of each other, where would the body be? Everyone is necessary. Your participation is necessary, and so is the contribution of others.

Since everyone's work is necessary, we contribute, and we make space for other's contributions. God gifted each of us on purpose, so we each receive unique opportunities to enjoy God together. When self-obsession guides us, we take each other for granted. We think we deserve another's good deeds or someone else's good deeds make them superior to us. In sin, we make other's work all about us. In the Spirit, we neither take each other for granted or think too little of ourselves—we let each person's good work lead us to praise the God who enabled it. We encourage one another. We spur each other on to love and good deeds. We express gratitude for each other so we might delight in God's unique design of every person.

What would our community lack if every person was a copy-and-paste image of each other? What would the dangers be?

Read Hebrews 13:18-19. What does it look like to act honorably in all things? How would a community that honors every member reflect Christ?

Who will you encourage this week? How will you do this specifically?

Ask the Spirit to bring someone to mind that needs encouragement. Thank God for the unique gifts of grace that shape you.

DAY 4—READ 1 CORINTHIANS 12:25-26

That there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.

In a community of diverse people, life doesn't look the same for everyone. Some celebrate new births at the same time others mourn the death of a loved one. Some are establishing roots, while others are moving on to new seasons of life. Some are rejoicing in personal victories while others are enduring hardships. Still, in every season, whether in ease or difficulty, the Spirit is molding the community of God into the body of Christ.

There is no division in Christ's body. We show the same care and concern for every member. We do not prioritize those who are like us. We do not favor those we can get something from in return. We see each person as an extension of Christ, and we reflect Christ in the way we love and honor one another. Christ showed His love for us by drawing near to us and suffering for our sake. As the body of Christ, we carry each other's burdens like Christ carried ours. If one suffers, we suffer together—even when the suffering is long.

Rather than pulling away in discomfort, we draw near to each other the way Christ came near to us. Suffering with others looks like being present, praying with and for them, and listening to their concerns, even when circumstances don't change. We are united to each other, without division, in grief and rejoicing. We belong to each other. Those who are suffering need the care and intercession of those whose faith helps carry their burdens.

Think of a time you endured suffering. How did others show you love and support? How did you want them to?

Read 2 Corinthians 1:3-7. What is the relationship between knowing Christ's suffering and showing comfort to each other?

What stops you from entering another person's suffering? How does Christ show us a more loving way?

Pray, reflecting on how the cross of Christ has been your comfort. Ask the Spirit to make you more like Christ and give you wisdom in how to suffer alongside others.

DAY 5—READ 1 CORINTHIANS 12:27

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

As children grow into adults, they discover new roles and responsibilities. A two-year-old learns not to rely on diapers. An elementary-aged kid might start to make his bed. A teenager juggles homework and after-school activities. Eventually an adult learns budgeting and how to hold a job. As we mature, so do our capabilities.

In a similar way, we grow up—together—into the body of Christ. God is molding us into the people He intends us to be as we follow the Spirit's lead. We are still being formed into Christlikeness. The moment we place our faith in Christ, we are brought into the body of Christ, but we are still maturing in Christ until the day Christ completes the work of His kingdom. As we grow and mature, we learn to be responsible for each other. God brought us together on purpose to further His goodness, and each of us is necessary for that work. Whether you're in a season of celebration or suffering, young or old, wealthy or poor, you are not alone, and you are needed. You belong to the church and the church belongs to you. We belong to each other the way we belong to Christ.

Therefore, you cannot operate in isolation. You are God's gift to the body and the body is God's gift to you. Community is rarely easy or comfortable. It's messy and awkward because it's made up of sinners. But the church is also a community being redeemed by God through the Spirit. In God's good design, sanctification happens in community. God designed each of us in such a way that we would be shaped into the image of Christ alongside others in His body.

Do you see yourself as an essential member of the church community? Why or why not?

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:17-20. Why did Paul express eagerness? Is this how you feel about the body of Christ? Why or why not?

How could the body of Christ be a gift to you? How could you be a gift to the body of Christ?

Thank God for the community of faith He has brought you into. Ask the Spirit to give you wisdom for how to build up the church in love.

WEEK 5: THE USE OF GIFTS

Looking Back: What did God teach you this past week as you read the daily devotions? What opportunities did you have to apply what you learned?

Looking Up: Play the video and consider the discussion questions together.

What is the effect of holding a diamond up to the light? In what ways is that like a group of people using their different gifts in the church?

Which trap are you more likely to fall into: pride in your gifts, not valuing your gifts, or wishing you had someone else's gifts? Why?

Read Romans 12:3. How does grace keep us from thinking too highly of ourselves? Why does grace give us confidence in our gifts?

God gave the gifts you have, in the measure you have them, for His good purposes. What might you miss out on if you don't use your gifts or hide them away?

Read 2 Timothy 1:6-7. What reminder did Paul give Timothy regarding his gifts? Does this ring true for when you put your gifts to use?

Rather than a spirit of timidity, how can you walk in power, love and self-discipline when using your gifts? How would this “fan the flame” of your faith?

Read Romans 12:4-9. How does using your gifts build up the body of Christ?

Where will you use your gifts to serve the church? How can this group encourage you?

Looking Forward: How will you take what you learned today and apply it to your life this week? Take a few moments to pray together and ask God to help you do those things.

WEEK 5: THE USE OF GIFTS

DAY 1—READ ROMANS 12:3

For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.

Jackson Pollock made modern art that many critique as chaotic. His paintings look like drips and splatters on a canvas. It's the kind of modern art that some look at and think, "I could do that!" Yet, where some see chaos, others see a purposeful layering of colors and textures to create abstract expressions.

Whether you're a Pollock fan or not, the Christian perspective of our talents, gifts, and abilities is that they aren't by chance. They're purposefully given from God. God gave us these gifts in differing measures for His good purposes. He is molding and forming us into the type of people who are prepared to promote the common good and edify the church. We lack nothing because God knows us and everything else perfectly. In the Spirit, we are empowered to reflect Christ in our work.

Since our ability to work is a gift of grace, we walk in humility and confidence. There is no room for pride. Pride assumes our work is all about us. Pride makes us think anything good is based on our merits and achievement. Pride produces hierarchies, divisions, and self-righteousness. Pride breeds chaos, but humility brings rest. Rather than striving to seek our own glory, humility produces a confidence that trusts in the faithfulness of God. Humility reminds us God has given us these abilities on purpose, and He intends for us to use them to multiply His goodness. Humility produces faith, thanksgiving, and love. We rest not in our abilities but in the confidence that our gifts are purpose-filled gifts of grace from a good God.

How can you foster humility, instead of pride, as you put your gifts to use?

Read Ephesians 4:1-7. Describe the person who is formed by grace.

Why do you think God assigned you the talents, abilities, and strengths He has?

Thank God for the way He has designed you. Ask the Spirit to protect you from thinking too highly, or too low, of yourself.

DAY 2—READ 2 TIMOTHY 1:6-7

For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands, for God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control.

Fear can make us timid. We're afraid to look foolish, so we shy away from things like public speaking. We think we're not good enough, smart enough, or funny enough, so we keep ourselves hidden away. We put on masks or pretend we're someone else. We let fear rob us from walking in confidence.

But the Spirit of God enables us to walk in power, love, and self-control instead. Fear convinces us to keep our gifts hidden from sight, but the Spirit makes us bold in putting them to use. To hide away our gifts like a personal possession is to quench the Spirit's work in us. Not using our gifts keeps us from enjoying the fullness of God. Instead, Paul encourages us to "fan into flame the gift of God," by using our gifts as if they are the power of God in us—because they are!

When we see our gifts as an opportunity make a name for ourselves, fear will always keep us timid. If our gifts are simply a means to earn the applause of others, we will always be captive to the opinions of others. But, if our gifts are a means to glorify God, then we're free from that fear. When using our gifts is an act of worship, then we're not burdened by the outcomes we produce. Work itself becomes an act of love—love for the God who empowers our work and love for those our work serves. Your gifts cannot be loving or self-disciplined if their use is all about you. Your gifts were given to glorify God and build up His church. So, fan the flame of the gifts God gave you and put them to use.

Are you more tempted to hide your gifts or to use your gifts to make your name known? Why?

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:15-19. List at least three ways you can actively encourage the Spirit's work in you according to this passage.

Which do you need to walk in further: power, love, or self-discipline? How will you seek this?

Pray that the Spirit will teach you to walk in power, love, and self-discipline. Commit to using your gifts in this way.

DAY 3—READ ROMANS 12:6A

Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them . . .

Many of us wait to use our gifts as if we need some secret, magic decoder ring. We want to have a list of possible gifts to choose from, then read five books on how to use them most effectively. Or we want others to affirm a gift in us, to put it in writing with evidence and case studies. We treat our gifts like a puzzle to be solved and mastered before we actually use them.

But Paul said anyone who has faith in Christ has evidence enough that the Spirit is at work in them. Everyone in the Spirit has a gift of grace and is empowered for work that builds up the church. How do you confirm the gifts in your life? You simply put them to use. If teaching, then teach. If serving, then serve. If encouraging, then encourage others. If giving, then give generously. If you are in Christ, God has given you a gift, and He means for you to use it.

Using your gifts isn't something tricky or novel. It doesn't mean creating a program from scratch or only using your gifts in exactly the way you want. Often it simply means stepping into spaces where the church needs someone to do the things that you're strong at. A part of knowing and discovering your gifts is putting them into practice. God gave you gifts for a purpose, but that purpose may not be evident until you actually put your gifts to use.

Where does the church need help? How can you put your gifts to work?

Read Colossians 1:10-11. What's the relationship between knowledge, work, and joy?

Using your gifts in the church often requires endurance and patience. How might God strengthen your faith through service?

Thank God for the gifts of grace He's given you. Ask the Spirit to lead you to opportunities to put them to use.

DAY 4—READ 1 PETER 4:9-10

Show hospitality to one another without grumbling. As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace.

A good gardener prepares the soil and plants the seeds, but in the end, he has no control over the growth of a plant. He can tend to the plant, but he can't make the seed sprout or turn it into a tree. Nor can he force that tree to produce fruit. The gardener is never the creator or sustainer of the plant; he's simply a steward.

Like the gardener, we are stewards of the grace God has implanted in each of us. Each time we use our abilities and talents to edify the body of Christ, we are stewarding what belongs to God. The gifts we have are grace, the work we are given to do is grace, and the fruit of our work is grace. We have each received gifts, and when we use them to serve one another, we act as stewards of God's varied grace.

When you find a place to put your gifts to use in the church, you may find the work to be frustrating. You may expect the fruit of your labor to look and feel a certain way. You show up to serve but will be tempted to grumble and complain. But all of it is a gift. The gifts you use to serve are empowered by the Spirit, who is also a gift. By grace you have gifts, and by grace you put them to use. Why then do you think the fruit is based on your own merits? God has given you these gifts so His love will abound in and through you. Delight in God's gifts. He will be faithful to finish the work He began.

What is your role as a steward of God's grace? What's not your role?

Read Colossians 1:24-25. What reason did Paul give for why God gifted him the work of ministry?

How does using your gifts to serve your church still make God the center of the activity?

Confess to God where you are tempted to grumble. Ask the Spirit for wisdom in how to steward God's gifts for God's people.

DAY 5—READ HEBREWS 10:24-25

And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

Even if you are introverted and enjoy quiet evenings at home, there are some things that are worth the fuss. Imagine someone gave you free backstage passes to your favorite band, or front row seats to cheer on your sports team. Maybe a free meal at a fancy restaurant with your closest friends would be exciting enough to get you up and moving. We will sacrifice our preferences for things that bring more joy.

If we look at the church and think it's not worth the fuss, we've forgotten our identity. We are God's chosen people. In God's grace, we are saved by Christ and joined together by His Spirit. As those defined by our belonging to God, we are designed to replicate God's character. We are a people marked by the love and goodness that unites us to each other. This is who God has made us to be. Let us, then, stir up one another to love and good works. Since God has called us His people, let us come together and point each other to God's kingdom.

Love cannot be an isolated activity; it requires one another. God designed us to need and rely on each other. The church is imperfect, but our Savior is not. And, the way He has designed us to become more like Him is by learning to care for one another. This family of faith may be awkward at times, but that's because we are all sinners being redeemed by Christ together. We are not yet complete, but already the Spirit is active among us, bringing us nearer to the final day when Christ's work in us is done.

Why does love require being connected to others?

Read Acts 2:42-47. How did the early church stir up one another to love and good deeds?

What will God's people look like once we are finally in God's kingdom? How will you work toward that goal this week?

Praise God for His good design for His people. Ask the Spirit to sustain your work through love of God and Christ's church.

COMMENTARY

WEEK 1

PSALM 86:5

86:4-5 An appeal to the Lord's kindness, forgiveness, and covenant loyalty (faithful love) is a variation of the formula that occurs again in v. 15. Psalm 103:8 associates forgiveness of sin with the Lord's covenant loyalty.

RUTH 1:16

1:15–18 The intensity of Naomi's attempts to dissuade her Moabite daughters-in-law from accompanying her back to Bethlehem suggests that she was not completely motivated by concern for their well-being. Their presence would have been a constant and embarrassing reminder of her tragic sojourn in Moab. Yet Ruth was not so easily dissuaded. In a crescendo of commitment, she bound herself to go with Naomi and to live with her. In fact, she would even die and be buried where Naomi was—the greatest possible commitment in the ancient world. She sealed her commitment with a self-imprecatory oath, taken in the personal name of Naomi's God, the Lord, i.e., Yahweh. Naomi's response to this moving speech was remarkably curt: She stopped talking to her.

PHILIPPIANS 2:3-4

Selfish ambition or conceit recalls the problem Paul condemned (1:15, 17). Humility, the antidote for wrong attitudes, results in considering others as more important. Additionally, humility considers the interests of others. Proper relationships include the contrast "not only, but also." Personal responsibilities demand consideration, but the concerns of others are equally important.

ROMANS 15:5-6

Paul's prayer is that God will bring these house churches of Rome to the place of harmony, love, and unity that will enable them to best honor God.

TITUS 3:5-6

3:5 Salvation comes not by works but through the washing of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit. Some interpreters have understood this as saying that baptism (the washing) causes salvation, but in the context human deeds are clearly downplayed and the emphasis is on divine action and initiative. The washing described here is the spiritual cleansing that is symbolized outwardly by water baptism.

3:6–7 Part of our salvation involves receiving the Spirit whom Jesus poured out ... on us.

WEEK 2

MATTHEW 1:6

1:2–6 Matthew mentioned four women in his genealogy, all of them Gentiles. Tamar was a Canaanite. Rahab was from Jericho. Ruth was a Moabitess. Uriah's wife Bathsheba was probably a Hittite. The mention of these women signals God's intention to include Gentiles and women in his redemptive plan. Several kings are named also, but only David is explicitly given the title King. This highlights that the Son of David (Jesus) will likewise be a kingly figure.

1 JOHN 1:9-10

1:9 Confessing our sins does not mean a shallow reciting of misdeeds. It means owning up to wrongdoing and bringing our lives into line with God's goodness and commands. God can forgive and cleanse us from terrible transgressions.

1:10 Since God is light and there is no darkness in him (v. 5), to claim to be without sin is to claim to be on par with God, but God says there is no one like him (Is 45:18). If his word is not in us, the saving message of Christ has not taken root. There may be surface knowledge of Christian religion, but the heart has not been transformed.

2 SAMUEL 12:13

David's response—I have sinned—contrasts sharply with that of Saul when Samuel confronted him over his sin (1Sm 15:15, 20–21). Saul gave excuse after excuse, but David's heart (1Sm 13:14) would not let him do so. Nathan assured the king that his life would be spared. Psalm 51 commemorates this event and expresses David's repentance. Psalm 32 expresses David's joy in being forgiven.

EPHESIANS 4:31-32

4:25–32 Paul offered five examples of what living the new life means in the context of relationship with others. All of the examples include a negative command, a positive command, and a spiritual principle on which the commands are based. At the base of all of Paul's commands is a God-centered spiritual foundation.

4:32 Paul used a play on words to illustrate his point. Believers are urged to be kind (Gk *chrestos*) because of Christ (Gk *Christos*).

PSALM 32:10-11

32:10 This proverb means that although the one who trusts the Lord may find troubles, the Lord's faithful love will always be there.

32:11 After the psalmist confessed and experienced forgiveness, he became a conduit for God's praise and called on others to do the same (see 30:11–12).

WEEK 3

ISAIAH 55:8-9

God is far above humanity in thought and deed. God's people are called to turn from their sinful thoughts and deeds (v. 7) to God's exalted thoughts and deeds.

1 THESSALONIANS 1:9

1:7–9 The Thessalonians' faith and gospel message spread throughout Macedonia and Achaia. These two Roman provinces—Macedonia in the north and Achaia in the south—make up a large part of modern-day Greece. In NT times, these provinces included major cities such as Philippi, Athens, and Corinth. Thessalonica was the capital of Macedonia. It appears that Paul's missionary strategy worked. He evangelized the major cities with the expectation that the gospel would spread from there into the surrounding areas. The Thessalonians' predominantly Gentile background is evident from the false worship of lifeless idols, from which they turned to serve the living and true God.

MARK 4:20

4:14–20 In Jesus's explanation, the seed sown (cp. 1Co 3:5–9) is the word (cp. 2:2); the birds become Satan; the sun and its scorching become distress or persecution (i.e., religious persecution); withered becomes fall away; the choking from the thorns is specified as the worries of this age, the deceitfulness of wealth, and the desires for other things (i.e., from misplaced priorities, see Mt 6:24–34); and the good ground is identified as those who hear the word, welcome it, and produce fruit. Clearly Jesus's emphasis was on "the word" (Gk *logos*)—used eight times in these verses—and on hear—used four times. Those who hear the word, welcome it, and produce a crop are true disciples, even though they produce varying results (Mt 25:14–30).

JOHN 15:9-10

15:9–11 Obedience is not all gloom and doom; rather, it's a source of joy. The OT prophets envisioned a period of great end-time rejoicing (Is 25:9; 35:10; 51:3; 61:10; 66:10; Zch 9:9).

ISAIAH 55:12-13

55:12–13 Because of the redemption of God, his people and the rest of creation will break out in joyful singing, and wilderness terrain will turn into lush forests.

WEEK 4

1 CORINTHIANS 12:1-27

12:1–3 Allegiance to Jesus as “exclusive Lord” is made possible only through the working of the Holy Spirit. Pagan Gentiles enticed and led astray by mute idols in ceremonial procession could profess Jesus as one of many deities or else curse him as a fraud, but never could they abandon their false gods and devote themselves to Jesus unless the Spirit of God made it possible.

12:4–11a The Spirit according to his will distributes a diversity of gifts to the body for its common benefit. Verses 4–6 and the beginning of v. 11 have a variety of wordplays that frame this section.

12:4–6 The same triune God brings about a variety of gifts and manifests diverse ministries within the corporate body. The different gifts ... ministries, and activities within the unified church reflect the essential unity and unified work of the persons of the Godhead (vv. 6, 11, 24, 27–28)—the same Spirit, the same Lord, the same God.

12:7–10 Each manifestation of the Spirit in a believer is given by God for the mutual benefit of the whole body of believers (cp. vv. 12–31). “Manifestation of the Spirit” refers to gifts, ministries, and activities made possible by the Spirit’s enabling power (vv. 8–10).

12:11 The phrase one and the same Spirit is active in all these refers to the Spirit’s supernatural working through a diversity of gifted people to produce one cohesive relationship (cp. v. 7, “for the common good”).

12:12 Christ is compressed language for “the body of Christ,” the church (cp. vv. 27–28).

12:13 Through the work of the one Spirit, individual believers become identified as one body of Christ (i.e., as the unified church). All believers are baptized into one body and are given one Spirit to drink.

12:14–20 Paul tackles the problem of self-deprecation for believers who view themselves as less useful to the corporate body.

12:15–16 Paul personified body parts as speakers to express the absurdity of envy and self-deprecation among members of the physical human body. Some Corinthians apparently fell into grading the gifts, attaching importance to public, showy gifts (such as the gift of utterance), and relative unimportance to less observable gifts.

12:17 A body reduced to just one member would be grotesque and useless.

12:18 The dispersion and diversification of gifts is no accident. God himself has given them just as he wanted.

12:19–20 Many parts, but one body encapsulates our identity as individuals enfolded into the corporate body of Christ.

12:21–22 Counter to Corinthian misperceptions, the weaker body parts are indispensable.

12:23–26 We clothe unrespectable parts (private areas) of the human body, which we regard as less honorable, thus according them greater respect. Similarly, God has arranged the body of Christ in such a way that the “less honorable” members are accorded “greater honor.” Humility is a pinnacle value in the kingdom of God (Mt 18:3).

12:27 Individual members becomes key in chap. 13 (cp. ek merous, translated “in part” at 13:9; “partial” at 13:10; “in part” at 13:12). It occurs nowhere else in the NT.

WEEK 5

ROMANS 12:3,6

12:3–8 As part of a renewed mind, the Christian is to think wisely about himself and what his function is to be in the body of Christ (the church; see 1Co 12:12–28). Measure of faith may mean a person should measure himself by the gospel. Others see it as different apportionments of faith. Either way, Paul exhorts Christians to be humble and to use what God has given for the good of the body. Based on Rm 12:3; 1Co 12:8–10; Eph 4:11; 1Pt 4:10, Christians are given gifts to use for the good of others.

The NT lists at least seventeen kinds of gifts. Christians are defined not just by their personal faith but also by their inclusion in local faith fellowships that are expressions of the body of Christ (see 1Co 12:12–31). Only some of the gifts are explained in this present passage. Prophecy in the NT churches was direct revelation from God before the canon was completed. This gift was to be used and measured in concert with the objective body of Christian truths. Service (Gk *diakonia*) is the origin of the word “deacon.” A deacon here is not a member of a board of directors but a servant. It describes not a title or office but a gift of ministry. Pastors should have this gift. Teaching is an essential gift. Parents teach children, older believers teach younger believers, vocational pastor-teachers are the primary instructors in a church, and elders should be able to teach also. All believers can teach to some level, but those who have a special facility for teaching are responsible to develop and use it. Exhortation is the gift of motivating and encouraging. This gift is similar to the Holy Spirit’s function. Giving is to be done with generosity. All can give, but capacities differ. Some delight to give out of very small means (Mk 12:41–44); others give a “reverse tithe”—they give ninety percent and live on ten percent. Leading is a gift of vision and direction that is effective but should not be overbearing. Mercy is helping the sick, the poor, and the sorrowful. This gift is to be exercised with cheerfulness. Practical assistance to needy members was a main emphasis of the early churches. This same emphasis should characterize churches today.

2 TIMOTHY 1:6-7

1:6 The phrase rekindle the gift of God did not mean that Timothy had “let the fire go out.” It was a call to action lest sluggishness set in. On “gift of God,” see 1Tm 4:14. The laying on of ... hands probably refers to Timothy’s ordination (1Tm 4:14). This passage focuses on Paul’s part in the event while 1Tm 4:14 focuses on the involvement of the full group of elders.

1:7 Spirit here probably refers to the Holy Spirit. The Greek word translated fear is used in extrabiblical literature to refer to a person who fled from battle. It is a strong term for cowardice. Boldness, not cowardice, is a mark of the Holy Spirit (Pr 28:1; Ac 4:31).

1 PETER 4:9-10

4:9 When being persecuted, it is easy to snipe and complain even at other believers; thus Peter’s command to be hospitable to one another.

4:10 The gift that each one has received refers to a spiritual gift. Spiritual gifts are divine endowments that God entrusts to believers as stewards.

HEBREWS 10:24-25

10:19–39 The author again exhorted his brothers and sisters to faithfulness (see 6:4–20). This exhortation contains commands, a warning, an encouraging reminder, a promise, and an expression of confidence. Due to the boldness that believers have to enter the divine presence through the perfect sacrifice of Christ, the author commands his readers to: (1) draw near to God with assurance, (2) hold on to their confession without wavering, and (3) watch out for one another and not forsake the gathering of the church. The warning is a reminder that there is no effective sacrifice for sin apart from that provided by Christ. If Christians turn their backs on Jesus, they have no hope—only the expectation of terror. On their sympathizing with the prisoners, see 13:3. According to vv. 32–34, the readers had endured persecution—even to the point of having their property confiscated.

