

THE LOCAL CHURCH, GOD'S KINGDOM COMMUNITY

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GETTING THE MOST OUT OF THE LOCAL CHURCH & GOD'S KINGDOM COMMUNITY

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GETTING THE MOST OUT OF THE LOCAL CHURCH & GOD'S KINGDOM COMMUNITY

The world is moving at warp speed in the direction the apostles and prophets spoke of as they were divinely inspired by the Holy Spirit (2 Pet 1:21). We see our world growing - and shrinking at the same time. Even as our global village adds thousands more each day, over the past year technology has diminished the distance between us. Through a video screen we can be in two different locations at the same time. By going live on a cell phone a breaking news event can be shared in real time all around the world. Rapid air travel allows us unprecedented access to each other in distant lands. By computer modem, cell phone, and tablets we communicate with each other at will. Without much effort at all we can be in a corporate meeting, an academic classroom setting, a family prayer time, or a specialized support group. But in all of this, surveys still tell us that people believe loneliness is their greatest problem.

We all yearn for a sense of community. As the unprecedented Covid19 Virus shut down our world our world continues to urbanize virtually, we have more acquaintances and fewer real friends. We do not really know one another. Prior to Covid19 the small-town neighborhood and local church had given way to the high-rise condominium and megachurch but now since the pandemic we find ourselves facing yet another distancing obstacle, the Virtual World. Social distancing has filled our lives with virtual visits with grand kids, Doctor's appointments, online shopping and even virtual worship and a plethora of other options as we choose how to spend our time. But somehow at the end of the day do we wonder if anyone really *knows* us, if any one really knows how we are really doing.

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Because our heavenly Father is so “AWESOME” He has given us His Holy Word The Bible which describes a revolutionary community designed for any society, in any age under any conditions. It offers the blueprint for a spiritual kingdom where the King’s subjects are loved, nurtured and protected. In this kingdom, everyone has distinct gifts, yet differences bring people together. Anyone can be included, and no one is expendable. When the kingdom citizens are wounded, the kingdom community cares for them and restores their health. There is unconditional love, but uncompromising accountability. It’s a center of never-ending joy, celebration and worship in our Father’s Kingdom Community.

The Bible’s most pervasive image for this new Kingdom Community is *family*. Amazingly, the Creator of the universe chooses to approach us as Father and invites us to enter into relationship with Him as His children. And as the Father adopts us into His household, He introduces us to a wonderful extended family of brothers and sisters. The members of this family, like little children, make mistakes from time to time. They have quarrels, dishonor the family and disappoint their Father. Yet at other times they perform miracles. Ultimately, they constitute the most wonderful family we can ever claim. This is Kingdom Christian Community.

While you can certainly undertake this Bible study individually, *Kingdom Christian Community* will have much, much to offer to you in a life group. As you explore what it means to partake in the unique fellowship of the body of Christ, that fellowship can be enhanced in your life group. In study eight on confession, for example, the Lord might lead your life group to have a cleansing time of confession and healing amongst those your life group. The studies on worship and service provide similar opportunities where the Lord can really manifest Himself in y our life and fellowship.

My prayer is that this life group study guide will inspire, revitalize and empower Kingdom Christian relationships in your life so that we might have the experience of the early believers in Acts 2: the whole world will want the remarkable thing our kingdom community shares. For on our planet, every individual carries a deep desire to be “no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with dual citizenship as God’s people and members of God’s household” (Ephesians 2:19). May this study of God’s Word be a guiding source leading you further down the road as we journey to our heavenly home together.

Suggestions for your Individual Study

1. As you begin each study, pray that God will speak to you individually through his Word.
2. Read the introduction to the study and respond to the personal reflection question(s) or exercise. This is designed to help you focus on God and on the theme of the study.
3. Each study deals with a particular passage of scripture so that you can delve into the author’s meaning in that context. Read and reread the passage to be studied. The questions are written using the language of the New International Version, so you may want to use that version of the Bible however it’s not mandated. I also recommend the New Revised Standard Version.
4. This is an inductive Bible study, designed to help you discover for yourself what Scripture is really saying. The study includes three types of questions. **Observation** questions ask about

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the basic facts: who, what, when, where and how. *Interpretation* questions delve into the meaning of the passage. *Application* questions help you discover the implications of the text for growing in Christ. These three keys unlock the treasures of Scripture.

If you really want the most out of this study, write your answers to the questions in the spaces provided or in a personal journal. Your writing out your answers can bring clarity and deeper understanding of yourself and of God's Word.

5. It might be good to have a Bible dictionary handy, this is a good practice to get into when studying God's word for growth. Use it to look up any unfamiliar words, names or places.
6. Use the prayer suggestion to guide you in thanking God for what you have learned and to pray about the applications that have come to mind.
7. You may want to go on to the suggestion under "Now or Later," or you may want to use that idea for your next study.

Suggestions for maximized benefits as Members in our Life Groups Study

1. Come to the study prepared for the Lord to use each of you in your life group. Many of us struggle with a consistent devotional time. Make this a part of your personal devotional time through the week reading, studying, and praying. Make it your devotional time and see what God does. Follow the suggestions for individual study that I mentioned above. You will find that careful preparation will greatly enrich you spiritually in your time spent in devotion and in life group discussion. Carve out at least 30 minutes each day somehow for your spiritual growth. Just like you feed yourself physically feed your soul.
2. Be willing to participate in the discussion. The leader of your life group will not be lecturing. Instead, he or she will be encouraging the members of the group to discuss what they have learned. The leader will be asking the questions that are found in this guide.
3. Stick to the topic being discussed. Your answers should be based on the verses which are the focus of the discussion and not on outside authorities such as commentaries or speakers. These studies focus on a particular passage of Scripture. Only rarely should you refer to other portions of the Bible. This allows for everyone to participate in in-depth study on equal ground.
4. Be sensitive to the other members of the group. Listen attentively when they describe what they have learned. You may be surprised by their insights! Each question assumes a variety of answers, in many cases there is no one right answer. Many questions do not have "right" answers, particularly questions that aim at meaning or application. Instead the questions should push us to explore the passage more thoroughly. When possible, link what you say to the comments of others. Also, be affirming whenever you can. This will encourage some of the more hesitant members of the group to participate.

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5. Be careful not to dominate the discussion. We are sometimes so eager to express our thoughts that we leave too little opportunity for others to respond. By all means participate! But allow others to also. In some of our groups we desire and need more participation from members.
6. Expect God to teach you through the passage being discussed and through the other members of your group. Pray that you will have an enjoyable and profitable time each time you come together, but also that as a result of the study you will find ways that you can take action individually and/or as a group.
7. Please remember that anything said in your group is considered confidential and should not be discussed outside the group unless specific permission is given to do so. This is a cardinal rule.
8. If you are the group leader, you will find additional suggestions at the back of the guide.

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Session 1

A Community Built to Last

Ephesians 2:11–22

My childhood memories of growing up in my grandparents home on Engman street are filled with warmth of love, laughter, and joy. As I think back the kitchen of that home was very interesting because when you entered the kitchen, there was a sensation of moving downhill. The floor was slanted downward, the house had a shifting foundation.

Much of life is as unstable as that house. “Secure” jobs evaporate in corporate downsizing. Friends move away or their values change, and they drift away from us. Even some churches divide over petty issues. How can we establish relationships that are built on a truly reliable foundation?

GROUP DISCUSSION. Have you ever belonged to an organization which, in your judgment, failed to be what you had envisioned? Discuss what elements may have contributed to its ineffectiveness.

PERSONAL REFLECTION. Think about negative experiences you’ve had with an organization or group. How did the experience affect your future involvement with organizations or groups?

The Christian community, according to the apostle Paul, has been built for us with strong and lasting materials. As you read, keep in mind that the first Christians were Jewish. As non-Jews (Gentiles) began to join the faith, they did not share the religious and cultural heritage of the Jewish people. The church decided very early that the Jewish rite of circumcision was not necessary for a Gentile who accepted Christ (Acts 15:1–21). *Read Ephesians 2:11–22.*

1. How would you describe Paul’s emotions about Christ and the church?

2. What was the relationship between Jew and Gentile before Christ came (vv. 11–13)?

3. What differences in background and culture threaten the unity of your own church?

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4. Explain what Paul means by the “dividing wall of hostility” (v. 14).

5. Christ himself “is our peace” (v. 14). How did he accomplish this peace (vv. 14–18)?

6. How do “dividing walls of hostility” keep people from hearing the gospel today?

7. What barriers stood in the way of your putting faith in Christ, and how did God overcome them?

8. In verse 19 Paul compares Christians to citizens and family members. In what ways does each of these two comparisons hold true?

9. In our own church, who are some people you would describe as “good citizens” or “good family members” (v. 19)?

10. What building materials make up the construction described in verses 20–22?

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11. The apostles and prophets (v. 20) can represent the New Testament and Old Testament. Why are the Scriptures vital as the foundation of our Christian community?

12. Verse 22 identifies the true resident of the "building." How does his presence affect your attitude toward the church?

13. In your relationship to your own church, consider ways in which you might resemble a pile of stones lying off to one side, instead of an integral part of the building. How will you become a more functional part of this dwelling place of God that is under construction (v. 21)?

Pray that our church will grow into the kind of spiritual temple that Paul evokes. Pray especially that your own involvement in the church will further that growth.

Practical Application

This week try to be aware of what sort of "brick" or "stone" you are in the spiritual dwelling which is the church. Ask yourself, *Am I too much of an individual, not fitting into the whole? Do I take on too great a role as though I want to control the entire building? Do I appreciate the value of the other parts of the building?*

Take Away(s)

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Session 2

Everyone's Involved

1 Corinthians 12

Melba is totally dedicated to developing her gift of playing the oboe. An orchestra is too restrictive for her progress in “oboism” because she has to yield to too many other instruments. So she has sought out other oboists and created an all-oboe orchestra. Not surprisingly, tickets for the first concert have moved very slowly.

GROUP DISCUSSION. What abilities do you appreciate about each other? Take a few minutes to name some things. You might praise talents such as musical or athletic ability, but also try to concentrate on character qualities such as encouragement, hospitality or compassion.

PERSONAL REFLECTION. What unique ability or talent do you most enjoy using?

The church in Corinth was a collection of “soloists” who needed to learn to play in harmony. They had a nightmarish list of problems, including bitter strife, sexual immorality and drunkenness at the Lord’s Supper! Paul sets forth the picture of a church where everyone has a part and all parts fit together into a whole. *Read 1 Corinthians 12:1–11.*

1. What is Paul’s central message for the Christians in Corinth?

2. When have you needed the same sort of advice Paul gave the Corinthians?

3. Contrast the Corinthians’ previous lives as pagans and their present lives as Christian believers (vv. 1–3).

4. Given the common source of all spiritual gifts, what should be their results (vv. 4–7)?

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What factors might cause the outcome to be otherwise?

5. How do each of the gifts mentioned in verses 8–10 contribute to the unity of the church?

6. *Read 1 Corinthians 12:12–31.* In what ways is the human body an appropriate metaphor for the church of Jesus Christ?

7. How should each of us be personally encouraged by the truth about gifts in verse 18?

8. According to Paul, how can we avoid divisions in the church (vv. 21–25)?

9. Look again at verses 21–25. In what ways have you failed to give honor to the weaker parts of the body of Christ?

10. What are some practical ways to give honor to those “parts of the body” which are typically regarded as “less honorable” (v. 23)?

11. Focus on verses 27–31. What do you consider to be your spiritual gift(s)?

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12. How will you seek "the greater gifts" (v. 31)?

Ask for the Lord's forgiveness for any selfish ways you have used your gifts. As you are studying in a group, express prayers of thankfulness for one another's gifts.

Practical Application

How are you currently using your spiritual gifts to strengthen community in your church?

This week, how will you seek to use your gifts to serve others?

Take Away(s)

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Session 3

Everyone’s Invited

Philemon

My friend Ricky was a drug dealer, but meeting Christ brought radical change to his life. He is now one of his church’s most enthusiastic members. Well-dressed and socially adept, Ricky found quick acceptance and blended easily.

One day Ricky brought with him two friends struggling with substance abuse. Their hair was unkempt, they wore “street clothing,” and they were wary of unfamiliar church surroundings. As Ricky introduced them to a few people during the service, they didn’t give them a warm reception and one woman coldly turned away without speaking. Their suspicions confirmed, the pair hasn’t returned.

GROUP DISCUSSION. Compose an invitation which you would like very much to receive:

invites you to

on

at

PERSONAL REFLECTION. Think of a time you failed to get an invitation when it seemed everyone else was invited. How did you feel?

The fellowship of believers is intended to be a place of healing, forgiveness and equality. In a short letter, Paul urges Philemon and his church to restore to their membership a runaway slave, Onesimus. *Read Philemon.*

1. What does Paul hope to accomplish by writing this letter?

2. Paul’s other writings show he could express himself in a very authoritative manner. How would you describe the tone of this letter?

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3. Think of a time you were asked (or expected) to include someone who was undesirable. How did you respond?

4. How does Paul encourage his readers (vv. 1–7)?

5. What appeal does he then make to them (vv. 8–11)?

6. Onesimus's name means "useful." How does Paul play on this name in verse 11?

Why do you think Paul made this pun in a serious letter?

7. What changes are implied in Onesimus's life (vv. 10–12)?

8. Despite the changes, why was Onesimus an unlikely candidate for full acceptance into the church?

9. How does Paul build a case for reconciliation in verses 12–22?

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10. What types of people are unlikely candidates for acceptance in our church?

11. Martin Luther wrote, “Even as Christ did for us with God the Father, thus Paul also does for Onesimus with Philemon.” How does Paul use his own standing with his readers to further the cause of Onesimus? (See especially vv. 17–18.)

12. How can you stand up for those whom your church might overlook or even reject?

Pray for those who need to feel included in your group or church. Avoid general prayers and consider specific names of people.

Practical Application

Make plans to get to know someone in our church whom you have overlooked. Also make plans to reach out to someone who is not yet part of our church but who needs to find welcome there and invite them.

Take Away(s)

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Session 4

We Gather Together

Psalm 100

Of course, you’ve heard this line prior to Covid19 and our virtual services. A seeker is invited to church but politely declines: “I can worship just as well while working in my garden or away at the lake. I don’t need to be sitting in some expensive church sanctuary.” And now that we’re free to regather for in person worship again many remain absent from our in-person worship services.

It’s a common notion: worship, even religious faith itself, is a personal and private matter. Certainly worship must come from one’s own heart, and anyone can praise God in solitude. But the Bible teaches that God is pleased by worship that occurs together, in community. Any family has a traditional, meaningful place to gather, such as at the dinner table or around the Christmas tree. God’s family is no different.

GROUP DISCUSSION. Describe a worship service that was particularly meaningful to you. Try to get beyond features of “worship style” and talk about why that time touched you especially deeply.

PERSONAL REFLECTION. What are the most important aspects of worship for you?

Some of the psalms are personal; others express and encourage group worship. While Psalm 23 is the most cherished personal psalm, Psalm 100 is the best-loved “community” psalm. *Read Psalm 100.*

1. What evidence do you find that this psalm encourages group worship rather than individual worship?

2. Who or what encourages you to gather with other believers in worship?

3. Where is the focus of this psalm?

4. In this psalm, what are worshipers urged to do? (Look for specific commands or instructions.)

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5. The “gates” and the “courts” of verse 4 refer to the temple of the Lord in Jerusalem. Why is it important to have a special place of worship?

6. For what reasons are we to “enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise” (vv. 4–5)?

7. Why are thanks and praise essential elements of worship?

8. How can corporate worship help our personal worship when we don't feel particularly thankful or full of praise?

9. Why do you think some Christians avoid corporate worship?

10. The psalms are actually songs, although the tunes are lost to us. How do the songs you sing tell of God's love and faithfulness?

11. What story of God's love and faithfulness can you share, perhaps from your own family history?

12. What opportunities do you have this week to join in corporate worship?

13. How will you take advantage of those opportunities?

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Pray that your experiences of community worship will be marked with joy and dedication to Christ. Ask the Lord to protect our church from strife that distracts from and interferes with worship.

Practical Application

Taking off from question 11, write a psalm which tells a story of the Lord’s goodness in your life, the life of your family, your church or someone else you know. Share this as time permits when your life group gets together and read your psalms to one another. Make this a time of mutual encouragement and corporate praise.

Take Away(s)

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Session 5

Community Commissioned

Luke 10:1–20

The word *evangelism* summons many colorful images. Some think immediately of the street-corner character, preaching and pounding his Bible as folks quickly walk by. Some picture the television preachers who inhabit certain cable channels. Others think about a big arena crusade, with the converted pouring down the aisles as the “invitation” music plays. For many of us, the word *evangelism* inspires feelings of vague uneasiness and guilt.

GROUP DISCUSSION. Which of these words or phrases come to your mind when you think of the word *evangelism*?

- pressure
- sharing the good news
- TV preachers
- guilt that I don't do it enough
- a crusade in a big arena with a famous preacher
- going out on the streets talking to strangers
- fear
- a church committee
- other: _____

PERSONAL REFLECTION. What are some reasons you may hesitate to share your faith with someone?

Few associate evangelism with community activity. In the New Testament, however, it is almost always a pair or group of believers who share their faith. Even Paul traveled with partners. Luke's Gospel gives an account of Jesus commissioning his Kingdom community to spread their faith (Luke 9:1–6). Later he sent out a larger group of followers on a similar mission. *Read Luke 10:1–20.*

1. What are some appealing and unappealing features of the work Jesus gave these seventy-two people?

2. When has the Lord given you a job that had both blessings and dangers?

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3. Why do you think Jesus sent these people out in pairs (v. 1)?

4. How do you account for Jesus' two prohibitions in verse 4?

5. How do those cautions apply to believers today who want to carry out Jesus' mission?

6. Consider the responsibility given to believers in verse 16. How should that encourage us?

7. How should that responsibility humble us?

8. What was the response of the seventy-two to their completed mission (v. 17)?

9. How did Jesus characterize the nature of their mission (vv. 18–19)?

10. Jesus cautioned against an attitude of spiritual arrogance in verse 20. How might a Christian who is active in witnessing fall into such arrogance?

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11. What are some ways your community of believers reaches out to others in active witness?

12. How can your kingdom community of believers work together to better carry out the work of evangelism?

13. What role do you see yourself playing in the evangelistic work of our fellowship?

Pray for people who need to come to faith in Christ. Pray also for each other, that you will encourage each other in the work of evangelism. Ask the Lord to give our fellowship opportunities to witness and the courage and wisdom to follow through.

Practical Application

Brainstorm ways your group can plan an outreach activity. It can be anything that brings you into positive and friendly contact with people who need your witness.

Take Away(s)

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Session 6

Servant’s Entrance

Matthew 25:31–46

Church life is full of opportunities to serve. Scan the Sunday bulletin or listen to the announcements, and you’ll hear many appeals for help. It seems there are always more jobs than people willing to do them. Soon opportunity begins to look like obligations. How often has someone approached you with a look of desperation and asked “Can you help with this job, you’re the perfect person for this, and besides, nobody else will do it”?

By contrast, we usually jump at opportunities to get together and have fun. We’re quick to sign up for a church picnic or camping trip or movie night. Ironically, nothing builds true community like selfless service together. Many Christian groups form strong bonds of fellowship as they give of their time and sweat in ministry together.

GROUP DISCUSSION. What is the most meaningful act of service that a group has ever provided to you or your family?

PERSONAL REFLECTION. Which have you found more rewarding, being served or serving? Why?

In the last week of Jesus’ earthly life he came to Jerusalem, the center of Jewish spiritual and political life and the site of God’s temple. Sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, he talked about his future return and how Christians should behave in the interim. Then he painted a vivid word picture of future judgment. *Read Matthew 25:31–46.*

1. What contrasts are made throughout this passage?

2. In Jesus’ story, what is the setting (v. 31)?

3. On what basis are the “sheep and goats” divided (vv. 34–36)?

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4. What thoughts and feelings do you have as you think about the division of the sheep and the goats?

5. As you imagine yourself before the throne on that day, with which group do you see yourself being put, and why?

6. What do the services described in verses 35–36 have in common?

7. Why do you think those on the king's right are surprised by what he says (vv. 37–39)?

8. It is possible to read this story and conclude that we must earn salvation through our actions. How do you respond to that interpretation, and why?

9. In what sense is Jesus hungry, thirsty, a stranger, in need of clothing, sick and in prison (vv. 40, 45)?

10. What, for you, would be the effect of seeing Jesus himself in the faces of helpless people?

11. What does this passage say to you about the priority of service in our own Kingdom community?

12. What practical changes can you and our church bring about to make service a higher priority?

Pray for God to create in you the heart of a servant. Pray for faithful servants of God in your church and community.

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Practical Application

Come up with more answers to question 12, and consider how to put one or more of them into practice. Identify resources you will need and people to invite on board. As you plan, keep in mind the need to develop a servant's heart rather than to work for any selfish motives or to earn salvation.

Take Away(s)

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Session 7

And They'll Know We Are Christians

John 13:1–17, 34–35

I ♥ NY. I ♥ skiing. I ♥ my pet. Our society is obsessed with the concept of love. We've enshrined it and romanticized it. At the same time, we have trivialized it and reduced it to a bumper sticker symbol. The Bible's definition of *love* is radically different from our culture's prevailing idea of love. The biblical idea liberates us from the shifting whims of popular opinion.

GROUP DISCUSSION. Name some recent movies and popular songs on the theme of love. What message did they carry about the subject?

PERSONAL REFLECTION. Write two definitions of *love*: one from a worldly perspective and one from a Christian perspective.

The scene is the Last Supper. Jesus is about to die and knows it. He has tried to tell his disciples, but they don't want to hear it. At the time when they should be most united, they revive an old argument about which of them is the greatest (Luke 22:24). Jesus takes action to teach them about love. *Read John 13:1–17, 34–35.*

1. What filled Jesus' thoughts as this scene began (vv. 1–3)?

2. Picture yourself as one of the disciples. Describe Jesus' actions in verses 4–6 from your perspective.

3. How would you have reacted when you saw Jesus do the things in verses 4 and 5?

4. Why did Peter object so strongly (vv. 6–8)?

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5. What had Peter realized to make him respond as he did in verse 9?

6. Imagine that you are the next disciple after Peter. What do you say and do when Jesus kneels before you to wash your feet?

7. How did Jesus intend for the disciples to take his example and put it into action (vv. 12–17)?

8. What should be a Christian's standard for loving (v. 34)?

9. How will love affect the disciples' standing in the world (v. 35)?

10. What does this say about the world's own version of love?

11. What "foot washing" have members of our church performed for one another recently?

12. How can you do some "foot washing" for someone in our fellowship this week?

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Pray that God will build your fellowship's mutual love, to the point that outsiders will recognize without doubt that you are Jesus' followers.

Practical Application

None of the disciples expected their Teacher and Lord to do such a humble act of service as washing their feet. What is an act of service that you consider beneath you? Imagine Jesus doing that action, and then follow his example.

Take Away(s)

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Session 8

True Confessions

Nehemiah 9:1–5; James 5:13–20

The classic play and movie *Twelve Angry Men* deals with the jury in a murder trial. In the beginning, the twelve know nothing about each other. They are simply juror number one, juror number two and so on. They discuss the case with detachment. But as the hours wear on and the tension builds, the reserve of each begins to melt away. The jurors begin to share facts about themselves, facts that often reveal their biases. The seclusion of the jury room brings down barriers, encourages honesty and builds a community. The Christian community also involves transparency, and it may take stress to bring it about.

GROUP DISCUSSION. What group of people during the last few years have you been the most open and transparent with? Why?

PERSONAL REFLECTION. Do you find it helpful to tell your sins to another person? Why or why not?

The book of Nehemiah tells of the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls—and its community, after a generation of foreign exile and captivity in Babylon. When the walls were completed, Ezra the priest began to read the book of the Law to the assembled people. After celebrating the Feast of Tabernacles for seven days, the people regathered to confess their sins. *Read Nehemiah 9:1–5.*

1. What was the mood of this assembly?

2. How did the Israelites prepare for confession (vv. 1–2)?

3. Does the idea of public confession of sin appeal to you or repel you? Explain why you respond as you do.

4. How did the Israelites use their time at the confessional gathering (vv. 2–3)?

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5. The reading of the Law (the first five books of the Old Testament) was followed by confession and worship (v. 3). Why do both make sense as a response to hearing God's Word?

6. Levites (vv. 4–5) were the priests of Israel. How can church leaders be involved in helping the Christian community in confession?

7. Nehemiah 9 portrays people confessing sin with each other. Many years later, James wrote about confessing sin to each other—a more difficult and humbling challenge. *Read James 5:13–20*. What point does James make about trouble, happiness and illness in verses 13 and 14?

8. How are confession and corporate prayer connected (vv. 14–16)?

9. What example of righteous praying does James set forth in verses 17–18?

10. How does James stress the urgency of our accountability to each other (vv. 19–20)?

11. What are some helpful guidelines you've learned for when, how and what to confess to others?

12. In what areas do you need to become more transparent with your fellow believers?

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Pray for courage to confess your sins honestly and promptly before God. Pray for more honesty with others concerning your struggles with sin. At the same time, pray for wisdom that confession will never be inappropriate or self-serving.

Practical Application

If you are studying in a group, have a time of repentance when each person writes specific sins privately on paper. Some may be read aloud if appropriate. Pray for each other in your struggles with sin. Read aloud several Scriptures about the mercy of God in Christ. Then burn the papers together. Sing some songs of thankfulness for Jesus' death on the cross for you.

Take Away(s)

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Session 9

Confrontation & Restoration

Matthew 18:15–35

There's the tale of the father who had fallen out with his son. After a time, he posted this sign in the town square: Son, all is forgiven. Meet me here at sunset. At the appointed time, seventy-five young men showed up.

How many broken relationships among our friends and families are never repaired? Why are church splits so common? Perhaps many of us don't know how to lovingly handle conflict, reconciliation and forgiveness.

GROUP DISCUSSION. How do you feel after an argument with a friend?

terrible
angry
embarrassed
justified
regretful
relieved
other:

PERSONAL REFLECTION. How do you tend to handle conflict?

Even when Jesus' followers were still few, they already had questions about how to get along with each other. *Read Matthew 18:15–20.*

1. In general, what sort of situation among Christians is Jesus talking about?

2. Without giving unnecessary detail, how have you experienced this type of situation in the church?

3. What wisdom is there in confronting an offender alone (v. 15)?

4. What might be added by involving one or two other people (v. 16)?

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5. To what additional levels of confrontation should we proceed, and why (v. 17)?

6. In the quiet of your own heart, consider a time when you have confronted someone about a wrong. How did your experience compare with verses 15–17?

7. How do verses 18–20 affirm the reconciling power of praying together?

8. In response to Jesus' teaching about how to approach someone who has done wrong, Peter asked a question. The query motivated Jesus to tell a parable. *Read Matthew 18:21–35.* What is the progression of events in the story?

9. Ten thousand talents (v. 24) would equal millions of dollars, a sum no one could have paid. Why do you think Jesus used such a staggering total in his story?

10. How would it be possible for the forgiven man to so quickly turn on his fellow servant without mercy?

11. In what ways are you like the angry servant in verse 28?

12. How can your church or fellowship group apply the wisdom of this passage to the conflicts you face?

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13. What step(s) will you take to put this passage into action?

Think about people you need to forgive. Pray for them. Ask God to help you show them the same mercy which Christ has shown to you.

Practical Application

Put on a dramatization of Jesus' parable in Matthew 18:23–34. The story has potential for humor, without neglecting its serious meaning.

Take Away(s)

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Session 10

A Haven for Healing

Ezekiel 34:1–16

I recently heard of a Sunday school class whose members really love each other. When one of them experienced a stroke and paralysis, she became homebound. She grieved for the fellowship of the class, and they missed her as well. So the members pooled their funds and purchased a laptop computer for her to join them on zoom. Each week, they tune in to the class lesson and discussion, making special comments and greetings to their absent friend. For her, it's almost as good as being there in person.

GROUP DISCUSSION. The last time you were ill for an extended period of time, how were you cared for and by whom?

PERSONAL REFLECTION. How do you feel when you have to depend on others?

In the King's community, the citizens are protected, loved and healed. The prophet Ezekiel offers a prophetic warning against forsaking that task. *Read Ezekiel 34:1–16.*

1. Describe the situation in Israel according to these verses.

2. According to verses 4–5, what were five responsibilities which Israel's leaders had failed to carry out?

3. What were the tragic results of the leaders' failure to carry out their mission (vv. 1–8)?

4. Consider a church or fellowship where the leaders do carry out faithfully the responsibilities of verses 4–5. What difference does their faithfulness make in the life of that group?

5. How did the Lord react to the unfaithful shepherds' behavior (vv. 7–10)?

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6. Count the number of times the word *I* occurs in verses 11–16 (God speaking). What does the repetition of that little word tell you about God?

7. What else do we learn about the Lord's character from his words in verses 11–16?

8. Although the Lord himself steps in to fill the leadership gap, it is clear from verses 1–8 that he desires his appointed leaders to do their jobs. What are your own God-given responsibilities in the church?

9. Where are you tempted to slack off in your responsibilities to God's "flock"?

10. How can you encourage the leaders of your fellowship to take more seriously their responsibilities to the weak, as suggested by this passage?

11. This week, what is one way you will personally address one or more of the responsibilities of verse 5?

strengthen the weak
bring back the strays
heal the sick
search for the lost
bind up the injured

12. What will you do to help your church carry out each of those tasks?

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Ask God to show you the weak, wounded and lost you've been called to heal, and to move you to positive action.

Practical Application

Draw a picture or write a description of what your church would look like if it were truly a "haven for healing." Keep it where you will see it frequently, so it reminds you to both pray and work toward making that vision reality. Feel free to revise the picture or written description as you get more insight into what makes a church that sort of healing fellowship.

Take Away(s)
