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Community Core Values

Module: Community Core Values

AUDIENCE

All community groups

OVERVIEW

This is where biblical community starts. Whether you're a new community group, or an existing group looking to refocus on the fundamentals, there's something here to learn or be reminded of. The six core values of biblical community help lay the foundation of how to live together in biblical community, using God's Word as a guide.

WEEKLY SESSIONS: 8

1. **Introduction / Biblical Community**
2. **Devote Daily**
3. **Pursue Relationally**
4. **Counsel Biblically**
5. **Live Authentically**
6. **Admonish Faithfully**
7. **Engage Missionally**
8. **Aligning Expectations**

PREPARATION

To prepare for each meeting, read that week's chapter from the curriculum on your own, and answer the personal reflection questions. When you meet as a group, watch the accompanying video together (posted on our Community webpage). Share your answers to the personal reflection questions for that week, and process through the group discussion questions together.

Visit our website: Watermark.org/community

“Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor. For if either of them falls, the one will lift up his companion. But woe to the one who falls when there is not another to lift him up. Furthermore, if two lie down together they keep warm, but how can one be warm alone? And if one can overpower him who is alone, two can resist him. A cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart.”

(ECCLESIASTES 4:9-12, NASB)

Imagine having friends who are committed to following Jesus with you, who know you and love you, who encourage you and remind you of God’s best for you, and who help you use your gifts and abilities in impactful ways. You laugh together, sometimes cry together, and invest deeply in each other, united by your common bond in Christ.

That’s biblical community. Does it sound like something you’d like?

BIBLICAL COMMUNITY – WHAT’S THAT?

Put simply, biblical community happens when Christians commit to being intentional with each other for the purpose of growing in their love for God, each other, and others. It’s what life looks like when believers follow the Bible’s teachings on how they should live. That’s a pretty broad definition, but it’s a broad topic! God’s Word has many things to say about doing life together according to God’s plan.

Biblical community seeks to live out the greatest commandment in the Bible, which is to love God and love others (*Matthew 22:37-39*). Community is also a response to Jesus’ instruction to his followers, that they love one another like He has loved them (*John 13:34*).

If it’s as simple as loving God and loving others, though, you might be wondering why there are more pages to this book! The truth is that the Bible gives a lot more details and examples of how our love is expressed through action. Many of them are explained by about 50 verses in the Bible that are called the “One Anothers”. If you want to know how to love, these are for you.

While we may not often “greet one another with a holy kiss” in our culture (*Romans 16:16*), there are many practical verses that explain what it looks like to love those we’re in community with, such as:

- | | |
|--|--|
| Prefer (<i>Romans 12:10</i>) | Admonish (<i>Colossians 3:16</i>) |
| Accept (<i>Romans 15:7</i>) | Pray (<i>James 5:16</i>) |
| Encourage (<i>1 Thessalonians 5:11</i>) | Care (<i>Galatians 6:2</i>) |
| Comfort (<i>2 Corinthians 1:4</i>) | Confess (<i>James 5:16</i>) |
| Forgive (<i>Ephesians 4:32</i>) | Serve (<i>1 Peter 4:10</i>) |

We’ll cover some of the One Anothers in the following chapters of this module, but we’d also encourage you to spend some of your own time digging deeper into what God’s Word says in the One Another verses.

WHY LIVE LIKE THIS?

In the introduction, we said that biblical community connects people in authentic relationships that lead to spiritual transformation. We’ve heard countless testimonies of how God has used biblical community to radically change people’s lives, transforming them to be more like Jesus.

If you’re pursuing community to get Christian friends, to study the Bible, or to get an accountability partner, those are all great things, but you might be setting your sights too low. We’d encourage you to pray that God uses biblical community to make you more like Jesus (*Romans 8:29*)! That’s a lofty target, and it might mean some significant growth and change for you, but God will be with you every step of the way (*Hebrews 13:5*).

It’s important to remember that you can’t change yourself or other people through your own wisdom, power, or influence. God is the one who works in you to help you think and to act in ways that honor Him (*Philippians 2:13*). It’s God who began a good work in your life, and He’s the one who will complete that work (*Philippians 1:6*).

God is the source of the transforming power of biblical community, and He’s the reason we live this way. If your group tries to do community on your own, relying on yourselves, you’ll get nowhere. But if you trust God together, point each other to His Word for truth, and live according to His ways, that’s where the transformation happens!

COMMUNITY CORE VALUES

The remainder of this module will focus on some core values that we’ve identified for what biblical community should look like. We’ll provide the short list here, and then take a chapter at a time to unpack each one of them.

As we get started, though, it’s important to remember that we live in community out of love and obedience, not legalism. Jesus tells us that anyone who loves Him obeys His teaching (*John 14:23*). Part of loving Jesus is doing what His Word says. But we can’t forget why we obey—we love and obey God because He first loved us (*1 John 4:19*). So as we live in community, we’re responding to the love that God has first shown us, not earning His love by how we live.

As we mentioned above, there are many verses that talk about living in community with other Christians. Out of those, we’ve chosen six core values and verses that explain what authentic biblical community should look like:

1. **Devote Daily** (*John 15:5*)
2. **Pursue Relationally** (*Romans 12:10*)
3. **Counsel Biblically** (*2 Timothy 3:16-17*)
4. **Live Authentically** (*James 5:16*)
5. **Admonish Faithfully** (*Colossians 3:16*)
6. **Engage Missionally** (*Matthew 28:19-20*)

We’ll unpack each of these in more detail in the following chapters of this module. Journey on with us!

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Before reading this chapter, how would you have defined Biblical community? How has your definition changed?
2. Do you have a testimony of how your life or the life of someone you know has been changed by living in biblical community?
3. In your own words, explain what you believe is the heart behind living in biblical community.
4. Which of the “One Anothers” above stood out to you, and why?
5. What excites you most about in getting into community? What are you most nervous about?

"I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing."

(JOHN 15:5)

COMMUNITY CORE VALUE #1: Devote ourselves daily to a personal relationship with Jesus.

IT STARTS WITH YOU AND JESUS

If you've ever flown on an airplane, you've heard the safety message about oxygen masks that will deploy in the event of an emergency. After explaining the function of the masks, the flight attendants add another message: first put the mask on yourself, and then help others. In other words, first make sure that you're connected to the source of life, and then you'll be able to help others do the same.

Community works the same way. When you're first connected to Jesus, the source of life, you will be able to help others connect to Him and receive life from Him as well. But unless you're walking with Jesus, building intimacy with Him, and drawing your strength from Him, you won't have anything to offer others.

Apart from Jesus, you can do nothing and will bear no fruit (*John 15:5*). Like a branch disconnected from the life-giving vine, you will wither once your own resources are exhausted. But if you are connected to Jesus, He will breathe continual life, love, and joy into you (*John 15:10-11*), and you'll be able to pass that on to others.

INVESTING IN YOUR RELATIONSHIP DAILY

When you read the word “devote,” that may bring up thoughts of “doing your devotional,” or “having a quiet time,” which may or may not be positive, depending on your experience. The dictionary defines devotion as love, loyalty, or enthusiasm for a person. In being devoted to Christ, what you’re really doing is expressing love, loyalty, and enthusiasm for Him! That’s truly lifegiving and anything but stale.

Just like in your relationships with others , your relationship with Christ requires an investment of time and energy on your part. In His case, it should be a priority every day. The greatest commandment that Jesus gave is to love God with everything you have (*Matthew 22:37*). The best thing you can do for yourself and for those in your community group is to be fully invested in your relationship with Jesus, and fully devoted to following Him.

DEVOTING THROUGH DISCIPLINE

One of the ways you can invest in your relationship with Jesus is to discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness (*1 Timothy 4:7b*). “Discipline” is another one of those words that can bring up pleasant or unpleasant thoughts, depending on your experience. Put simply, discipline means forming and practicing habits that help you grow spiritually. These are God-given means to grow in godliness, and are not a spiritual to-do list that measures your love for God or makes God love you more. The reason we need to practice the disciplines is that it’s not enough for us to TRY to be like Jesus; we must TRAIN to be like Jesus.

You can practice spiritual disciplines together as a community group, but they first have to take root in your own life. Some examples of spiritual disciplines include reading and memorizing the Bible, praying, worshiping, serving, fellowshiping with other believers, and pursuing solitude. These are valuable ways that you can invest in your relationship with Jesus daily.

SHARE WHAT YOU'RE LEARNING

As you grow in godliness, share that growth with others! God can use what He's teaching you to encourage and challenge your community group as well. Make a point of sharing what God is teaching you and how you are applying those teachings to impact your life. Ask others what they are learning as well. You will encourage each other, challenge each other, and help one another become more fully devoted followers of Christ.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

1. How have you grown spiritually in the past year? In what areas would you like to keep growing?
2. What spiritual disciplines do you practice? Which are the most life-giving to you? Why do you think that is?
3. What have been your motivations for developing spiritual disciplines in your life? Have they been for legalistic reasons, or for true devotion?
4. Are you a naturally disciplined person, or do you struggle to be disciplined?
5. How do you see community helping you with spiritual discipline?

GROUP DISCUSSION

1. What impact does your personal devotional life have on your community group?
2. Discuss the difference between practicing spiritual discipline and abiding with Christ. Share how you feel you're doing in these two areas.
3. Describe a time when you were practicing spiritual disciplines but not necessarily experiencing intimacy with Jesus.
4. How can we as a group help each other abide more intimately with Jesus? Be specific.

IDEAS FOR LIVING OUT THE CORE VALUE

- Intentionally set aside time to spend with Jesus on a daily basis. Have a time, place, and plan.
- Keep a journal of what you're reading and what God is teaching you. Share this regularly with your group, and also ask others what God is teaching them.
- Keep a list of things that you are praying for yourself and for others. Share with your group as God answers those prayers!
- Choose passages of Scripture to memorize and meditate on as a group. Help keep each other accountable.

SUGGESTED RESOURCES

- Watermark's "InTIMEasy" series: <http://www.watermark.org/media/series/351/>
- Join the Journey: <http://www.jointhejourney.com>
- Scripture Typer Bible memory app: <http://www.scripturetyper.com>

“Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor.”
(ROMANS 12:10)

COMMUNITY CORE VALUE #2: Pursue deep relationships with one another, based on love and acceptance.

DEVOTED TO ONE ANOTHER

Has anyone in your life been devoted to you? They probably showed it by caring for you, putting your needs before their own, learning and doing things that brought you joy, and investing time in getting to know you better. Sounds great, doesn't it? Biblical community gives us all an opportunity to practice devotion to one another and experience the joy and growth that it brings.

The first community core value talks about being devoted to God. Here we also see that Scripture calls us to be devoted to one another. Being devoted to someone else means investing time and energy into the relationship, loving them as a brother or sister, and putting their needs above your own (*Philippians 2:3*). There's also a commitment to be devoted even when it's difficult, because a friend should love at all times (*Proverbs 17:17*).

LIFE BEYOND THE GROUP MEETING

Typically, groups meet together for a few hours every week for their “official” group time. Those are really important times, but your group's relationships can't stop there. To grow your relationships, you must engage in one another's lives outside of the group meeting. This takes effort and intentionality, since everyone is busy and time is at a premium, but it's incredibly important. Don't just settle for a weekly meeting—build purposeful relationships! We are called to share life together, not just meet for a few hours each month.

One of the best ways that your group can do this is by regularly initiating with one another outside of official group time. Initiators don't wait for the phone to ring; they make the call! Don't compartmentalize community into just the few hours that you meet together; expand it to include other parts of your life, building in as much overlap as possible.

PRACTICAL PURSUIT

Here are some practical ways that your group can pursue deep relationships with one another. The possibilities are limitless, but these four will get you started.

Fellowship. Acts 2:42 describes how believers in the early church did life together. Among other things, they devoted themselves to fellowship with one another. Fellowship can be defined as “a friendly relationship among people.” In other words, be friends! Don't view the people in your group as only your community group but not your “real” friends. Treat each other like you would treat your good friends. You may not feel like you are good friends with those in your community group. It might even be hard to build those friendships. In fact, the Greek word translated “devote” in this verse implies persistence, perseverance, and endurance despite difficulty. It will take work! But intentional fellowship will grow into true and lasting friendship as you continue pursuing and investing in each other.

Care. The Bible says that God has made the body of Christ in a special way so that the members can care for one another (*1 Corinthians 12:24-26*). Your community group is a smaller expression of the larger local body of Christ, and you are called to care for each other like you would care for yourself. Look for practical ways to meet one another's needs. Follow up on something that was shared, write an encouraging note, bring a meal, help with an errand, or find a way to assist in times of crisis.

Prayer. Prayer is something that all Christians should devote themselves to (*Colossians 4:2*). You should pray for the members of your group on your own, but you should also pray with each other. Seeking God together is a powerful way to grow your relationships. Be intentional in noting prayer requests that each person has, pray for them right there in group time, and be faithful in following up on those requests.

Fun. Just because community has some serious intentionality doesn't mean that it can't be a lot of fun! There is definitely a time to laugh together (*Ecclesiastes 3:4*). Play together often. Find out what each other likes to do, and do those things together. Take a weekend retreat together to a fun place, or find a fun activity in town that everyone can participate in. Creativity is an expression of love, and a great way to intentionally pursue each other is to get creative in how you have fun together.

EMBRACING IMPERFECTION

As you read about ways to build and pursue relationships with your community group, you may be thinking, “That's all great, but I'm not sure I even like these people.” We all have expectations that we bring into community, and one of those may be to spend time with others who are just like us, who are easy to know and like, who don't have problems, and who won't require us to get outside of our comfort zone. That's pretty idealistic, and usually isn't how it works in real life.

Jesus said that it's not healthy people who need a doctor, but the sick (*Matthew 9:12*). It's not the perfect people who need community, but the broken, the needy, and the imperfect. And that's all of us! It means that things can get messy at times, and people won't be exactly who you expect or want them to be. Remember, you may not be exactly what someone else is expecting or looking for either!

When we're practicing real, biblical community, we get a firsthand look at the struggles, pitfalls, and challenges that all of us experience in our day-to-day lives. Community can be messy, but we experience true life when we are known and cared for by others. God will connect your hearts together as a group. When that happens, you will move past being frustrated by your differences to seeing the beauty in them and fully embracing them by God's grace. You will be able to accept and pursue one another in the same way that Jesus accepts and pursues you (*Romans 15:7*).

PERSONAL REFLECTION

- 1. Are your expectations for community more idealist or messy? Why?
- 2. What's a relationship where you have experienced real acceptance?
- 3. When is the best time during the day for you to initiate with others (e.g. during your commute, over mealtime, before bed, etc.)? What makes that the best time?
- 4. What has been your excuse for not initiating with people in your group throughout the week?

GROUP DISCUSSION

- 1. What are some practical ways that our group can show that we're devoted to one another? What would it look like to stay connected in real time?
- 2. Who models initiation and pursuit in the group? What things do they do to initiate?
- 3. Does being your “brother's keeper” motivate you or scare you? Explain.

- 4. Share where you would most like to grow in the area of pursuing others. Be specific.

IDEAS FOR LIVING OUT THE CORE VALUE

- Make a plan on how you can stay connected throughout the week. Follow up with one another regularly.
- Nominate a “social chair” in the group who helps to coordinate time together outside of the group.
- Build in as much natural life overlap as possible (e.g. going to church together, sharing meals, going to kids' games, etc.).
- Share ownership of pursuing one another, with each person showing initiative.
- Go on a group retreat to spend extended time with one another.

SUGGESTED RESOURCES

- GroupMe app: <http://www.groupme.com>
- FaithGroup app: <http://www.faithgroupapp.com>

"All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."

(2 TIMOTHY 3:16-17)

COMMUNITY CORE VALUE #3: Offer and receive biblical counsel in all areas of life.

THE BIBLE OVER OPINION AND EXPERIENCE

If God spoke to you, would you listen? A well-known pastor said, “If you want to hear God speak, just read the Bible out loud.” That’s an amazing thought! When you read the Bible, you’re not reading stale truths written down thousands of years ago—you’re hearing the very words of God, spoken to you today.

Scripture being inspired by God means that He is the source of all of it (2 *Timothy* 3:16-17). As such, it has the authority to speak into our individual lives, but also into how life works in general. Jesus said that all authority in heaven and on earth belongs to Him (*Matthew* 28:18). Since all authority belongs to Him, and His Word expresses His will for our lives, every part of our lives is subject to the authority of Scripture. Nothing is off limits to God and His Word!

When discussing the things that come up in community, you may be prone to leading with your own opinions and experiences to offer advice or counsel. That can feel easier at times than to dig into what the Bible says about a particular topic. Your opinions and experiences may be valid, but it's important to remember that God is the authority on ALL topics, and that His thoughts are not our thoughts, and His ways are not our ways (*Isaiah 55:8*). We shouldn't supplement our opinions with Scripture; we must form our opinions based on Scripture. This is critically important! The effectiveness of your community rises and falls on the biblical literacy of those you commune with.

OFFERING BIBLICAL COUNSEL

The Bible says that as Christians, we should be able to counsel and instruct one another (*Romans 15:14*). You may be thinking, “How can I offer counsel from God’s Word? I’m not a professional counselor!” The good news is that you don’t have to be; you simply have to be a student of God’s Word. If you don’t know the answers, you can ask the question: “What does the Bible say about that?” Search for the answers

together during group time, or give yourselves a little homework to research and come back with God's perspective from His Word.

You might also be hesitant to share what the Bible says on a given topic because you aren't living perfectly in that area either. If that's the case, you should certainly examine your own life and deal with any areas that don't line up with Scripture before pointing out the same in someone else's life (*Matthew 7:5*). But that doesn't mean you should stay silent! Be honest about where you're struggling, and then point others to the truth of God's Word.

It can be hard, but we've got good news for you: God will give you the ability to do it (*2 Peter 1:3*)! His Word is living, active, and sharp, able to determine and judge our thoughts and intentions (*Hebrews 4:12*). Share God's Word in a situation, then watch Him work.

As you're offering counsel, it's important to be sure that you're using Scripture correctly, and not just grabbing verses out of context. Study God's Word so that you understand its true meaning, then apply it generously to life!

RECEIVING BIBLICAL COUNSEL

The Bible is full of encouragement to listen to counsel. The Proverbs tell us that not having guidance leads to failure, but having an abundance of counselors brings victory (*Proverbs 11:14*). They also tell us to listen to counsel and accept discipline, so that we can be wise (*Proverbs 19:20*). Wisdom is available to us from God's Word, and from God's people sharing His Word with us—we should listen.

Sometimes you might hear counsel from others that isn't what you wanted to hear. If it's from God's Word and lines up with what Scripture teaches, then there may be times that you need to humbly accept the truth (*James 1:21*). Humbly receiving biblical counsel isn't always easy, but it's wise. Humility is the fear of the Lord (*Proverbs 22:4*), and the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (*Proverbs 9:10*). If you want to be wise, humble yourself and listen to what God is saying through His Word and His people.

DOERS, NOT JUST HEARERS

It doesn't stop at just listening to God's Word—we must put it into practice in our daily lives. This is a process called application. You're answering the question, "How can I make this truth from God's Word become reality in my life?" Your community group can help you process and answer this.

If we don't apply God's Word to our lives and follow its teachings, we're just fooling ourselves (*James 1:22*). Jesus said that those who hear His words and put them into practice are wise and have a solid foundation, but those who hear and don't respond are foolish people who will collapse when tough times come (*Matthew 7:24-27*).

Be wise! Help one another know what God's Word says, and apply it to your lives.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

1. What's your background with the Bible? How familiar are you with what it says?
2. In what ways do you see the Bible as applicable to your life and authoritative over your life? How does this work itself out in your daily life?
3. Do you feel competent to offer counsel to others using God's Word? How can you continue to grow in this area?
4. How are you at receiving biblical counsel from others? Is it easy or hard for you to humbly accept truth from the Bible?

GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Knowing that the health of your group depends in large part on the biblical literacy of its members, how does this convict or motivate you?
2. How are we doing as a group in offering biblical counsel to one another? In what areas are we most prone to rely on worldly wisdom?
3. Which topics are the easiest for us to counsel one another from Scripture? Which are the hardest?
4. How can we as a group help one another counsel from Scripture? Be specific.

IDEAS FOR LIVING OUT THE CORE VALUE

- Set the expectation for the group that Scripture will be the absolute authority and guide for all counsel given to one another.
- Make sure you regularly ask the question, “What does the Bible say about that?” Find that answer before giving advice to one another.
- Search the Scriptures yourself, before asking the group for counsel.
- Don’t give reactionary advice. Give yourselves an opportunity to pray and process with Scripture.

- Memorize Scripture that addresses situations that commonly arise in community.

SUGGESTED RESOURCES

- Counseling Through Your Bible Handbook by June Hunt
- <http://www.GotQuestions.org>

“Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.”
(JAMES 5:16)

COMMUNITY CORE VALUE #4: Live authentically, sharing our struggles.

HOW ARE YOU DOING, REALLY?

Have you ever worn a mask? Maybe you dressed up as a superhero when you were a kid or have gone to a party in costume. Those masks can be fun, but when it comes to community, having a mask on isn't a good thing.

It may not feel like you're wearing a mask right now. We can all be tempted, though, to make ourselves appear to be something that we're not, or to make it seem like we're doing just fine when in reality we're struggling or walking in sin. The result of that kind of mask is isolation, which destroys community and goes against all sound wisdom (*Proverbs 18:1*).

Community helps us take off the mask of appearing to having it all together, and helps us be fully known and fully loved. A big way you can do that is to commit to being completely honest with one another. This means giving others permission to know the real you by sharing authentically. This lets your community encourage and lovingly challenge you to move toward Christ (*Hebrews 10:24-25*), and to not be hardened by the presence of sin in your life (*Hebrews 3:13*). Sharing your true condition with others isn't about shame, punishment, or condemnation; it's about love, joy, and freedom (*Romans 8:1, John 8:32*)!

KNOWING THEIR CONDITION

In addition to sharing how you're really doing, part of living in community is to know how the other members of your group are doing. Just as you should strive to be fully known, you should strive to fully know others (*Proverbs 27:23*), so that you can understand how to best love, care for, and support them. In this, you are your "brother's keeper" (*Genesis 4:9*), and can help bear one another's burdens (*Galatians 6:2*).

TIME AND TRUST

If the idea of sharing how you're really doing with your group gives you the cold sweats, you're not alone. It can feel scary and vulnerable to present a view of yourself to others that isn't perfect and might be really broken. That kind of sharing takes a level of trust with each other, which usually takes time to build. And that's okay! If you have the foundation of love and acceptance (see core value "Pursue Relationally"), you can take steps towards being really honest with each other. As you share, and your group responds in a loving way, you'll find that it builds trust, and that it becomes easier and more natural to be completely transparent.

BRING IT INTO THE LIGHT

With that in mind, what does it mean to actually share the sin and struggles that we like to keep in the dark? It means bringing those things to the light (*Ephesians 5:11*). That isn't easy to do, since it goes against our sin nature to expose those things (*John 3:20*). But as Christians, the Bible calls us to live as children of God who walk in the light as we follow Him (*Ephesians 5:8, John 3:21*).

This means that we need to confess our sins to each other (*James 5:16*). Each of us has the responsibility to quickly and fully confess our sins to others. Confession may feel like punishment, but it's actually a gift from God! Confession brings mercy, forgiveness, fellowship, healing, purification, and restoration.

You should be honest about what you're struggling with and why. Don't just focus on the behavior, but also on what's going on in your heart, which is where sinful behavior comes from (*Matthew 15:19*). Since the way you live comes from your heart (*Proverbs 4:23; 27:19*), if you only confess your actions, the root of the problem will remain unaddressed and in the dark.

I CONFESSED – NOW WHAT?

In response to any sin that is confessed, the Bible tells us that we should pray for healing (*James 5:16*). This is a powerful way to support one another as a community group. When someone confesses sin, pray for them right away. Ask God to heal their heart. Share verses from Scripture that speak to what they shared (see core value "Counsel Biblically"). Celebrate the fact that God is working in their heart! Remember to accept each other, just as Christ has accepted you (*Romans 15:7*). Be kind to each other, be compassionate, and forgive each other in the same way that God has forgiven you (*Ephesians 4:32*).

After you confess, you'll probably feel like a weight has been lifted from your shoulders. You experience forgiveness, and fellowship is restored (*1 John 1:7,9*). The next step is repentance, which is actively turning away from the sin that you confessed (*Acts 3:19*). Your group should help each other process through what repentance looks like, and how you can continue to turn towards God and away from your sin.

The last step is to move forward. The Bible says that when a righteous person falls, they get back up and keep going (*Proverbs 24:16*). By God's grace, we can move past what we've done, and press on towards Christ (*Philippians 3:13-14*), being confident that nothing we do could ever make God stop loving us (*Romans 8:38-39*).

Don't isolate yourself in the dark with your sin. Come out of hiding, confess to your community, and enjoy the life and healing that follow.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

- 1. When have you felt comfortable sharing a real struggle with someone? What was it about them that made them feel safe?
- 2. Has someone in your past broken trust with you after you shared something personal? How did you respond to that broken trust?
- 3. What excites or scares you about giving someone permission to see the real you?
- 4. Are you ready to live authentically and be accountable to and for others?
- 5. How convinced are you that you are to confess your sin and struggles with others in your community group? If you're not completely comfortable with that idea, what steps can you take to prepare your heart?
- 6. Is there anything you're currently struggling with that God is prompting you to share or confess?

GROUP DISCUSSION

- 1. Celebrate someone in your group who has modeled authenticity when it comes to their sin and struggles.
- 2. On a scale from 1-10, share your individual anxiety/fear level concerning this topic (10 being scared to death). Rate the feeling of the group as a whole.
- 3. What are the excuses that we might use for not taking the next step of obedience in confessing our sin to one another?
- 4. How can we help each other live authentically? Be specific.

IDEAS FOR LIVING OUT THE CORE VALUE

- Share your detailed stories and testimonies to gain an appreciation for each other's unique background, wiring, and struggles.
- Be willing to proactively self-disclose what's going on in your heart; don't wait for people to ask the perfect question. Be willing to go first.
- Set aside intentional time for accountability in between regular all-group meetings.
- Share struggles and celebrate victories as they happen in real time. Don't wait for the next meeting.
- Pray for healing and victory in the moment sins are confessed. These prayers are powerful!

“Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God.”

(COLOSSIANS 3:16)

COMMUNITY CORE VALUE #5: Encourage and admonish one another faithfully towards maturity.

GO! FIGHT! WIN!

If you’ve ever been to a sporting event, you know how important it is to have encouragement. Whether it comes from cheerleaders, fans, a teammate, or a coach, being encouraged helps athletes perform to their best potential, drawing strength from those who are supporting them.

The same thing is true in community. Life can be hard, and we need reminders and encouragement from those around us, such as:

- **Be bold, be strong** (*Ephesians 6:10, 19*).
- **Keep your eyes on the prize** (*Philippians 3:14*).
- **Don’t lose heart** (*1 Thessalonians 5:14*).
- **Keep doing good** (*Galatians 6:9*).
- **Finish well** (*1 Corinthians 9:24*).

We need other believers to encourage us to be all that God has created us to be, and to remind us that true life can only be experienced in Christ and through obedience to Him.

REMINDING OF GOD’S BEST

The word “admonish” from Colossians 3:16 means reminding one another about life in Christ. It means telling others God’s truth, and exerting loving, positive influence to help them walk in that truth.

It doesn’t mean controlling their behavior, or beating them up for their sin. Any admonishment should be delivered with patience, grace, and compassion. If someone doesn’t respond initially, it could become a warning, or even a loving rebuke or strong correction (*1 Thessalonians 5:14a, 2 Timothy 4:2*). But the motivation should always be someone’s growth, not their shame. God is patient, slow to anger, and abounding in love (*Psalms 103:8*), and it’s His kindness that leads us to repentance (*Romans 2:4b*). As you admonish one another and seek to restore one another from sin, it must be done in a spirit of gentleness (*Galatians 6:1*).

It can take courage to do this well and fully. It might be easy to speak into the 98% of someone’s life that is relatively straightforward to address. There might be the “last 2%,” though, that you’re hesitant to speak into because you don’t know what their reaction will be, or what deeper issue that might be uncovered, or you’re afraid of hurting their feelings. You should always deliver the message with love and grace, but the most loving thing you can do for someone in those moments is to share with them the “last 2%” of what you see. Base your admonishment on Scripture, be rooted in love (*Ephesians 4:15*), and remember that wounds from a friend can be trusted (*Proverbs 27:6*).

Before admonishing someone, you should ask yourself a few questions: Does this person really need to be admonished? Am I the right person to do it? When would be the best time to admonish them? Does this person know that I love them?

KEEP / STOP / START

A practical way to think about encouragement and admonishment is to answer three questions for yourself, and to help others answer for themselves. Something like this: “In order to fully obey God’s Word and pursue His best for me, what do I need to:

- **Keep doing?** (*Encourage one another to keep up the good work.*)
- **Stop doing?** (*Point out sin or unproductive behaviors to turn away from.*)
- **Start doing?** (*Suggest new opportunities to pursue Christ more fully.*)

Processing these questions in a thorough and loving way will help your group point one another toward Christ.

RESPONDING TO REMINDERS

The same principles discussed earlier about receiving biblical counsel apply here (see core value “Counsel Biblically”). We should respond humbly, not with anger or by trying to deflect attention to someone else’s issues.

Chances are good that someone in your group will admonish you in a way that isn’t perfect and might even be really frustrating to you. You may be tempted to respond with one of these four destructive communication patterns:

- **Withdrawal** (*simply ending the discussion or leaving the situation*)
- **Escalation** (*adding fuel to the fire, responding with anger and intensity*)

- **Negative Interpretation** (*assuming they meant to hurt you*)
- **Invalidation** (*denying the significance of what they’re sharing*)

Instead of responding in one of those ways, we need to honor these reminders of God’s perfect truth delivered by imperfect people, by responding in a way that’s humble, gentle, patient, and loving (*Ephesians 4:2*).

CONFLICT, GOD’S WAY

If a negative response to something escalates into a conflict, that isn’t the end of the road for your group! Handing conflict biblically is an excellent way for your group to love one another and grow closer together. Don’t stop when things get tough.

During conflict, healthy community groups commit to responding according to the following principles:

- Keep short accounts; don’t let your anger stew (*Ephesians 4:26*).
- Look at your own heart; get the log out of your own eye (*Matthew 7:3-5*).
- Go and show your brother his fault (*Matthew 18:15*).
- Go and be reconciled (*Matthew 5:23-24*).

There might be some sparks as you sharpen each other (*Proverbs 27:17*), but your group can grow and sharpen each other by how you remind one another of God’s truth, and respond to any conflict in a way that honors Him.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

1. Who’s an encourager in your life? How can someone encourage you best?
2. Who was the last person who “sharpened” you through a loving, hard conversation?
3. How have you handled conflict/miscommunications in the past? How was conflict handled in your family? What’s your typical response now?
4. How are you doing at reminding others of God’s truth in a loving way? In what ways can you grow?
5. Does anything come to mind that you need to keep doing, stop doing, or start doing?
6. What’s your typical response when someone tells you something that is true, but you might not want to hear?

GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Discuss this statement: If the motivation is love, it’s a greater sin to say nothing than to say it wrong.
2. How much ground could we take as a group in sharing the “last 2%” with one another?
3. How are we doing at inviting feedback into our lives? How are we doing at receiving constructive feedback?
4. What are some excuses we hide behind instead of lovingly admonishing one another?
5. What can we do to help each other admonish one another in love?

IDEAS FOR LIVING OUT THE CORE VALUE

- Take and talk through a community group assessment (contact your director).
- Find out each other’s plans and goals, and be active in helping one another reach them.
- Celebrate large and small victories frequently in all areas of life.
- Write someone a note telling them how you have seen them grow.
- Don’t just admonish and then leave; be willing to walk through the situation deeply with one another.

SUGGESTED RESOURCES

- Conflict Field Guide (in the appendix of this book)

“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

(JESUS, IN MATTHEW 28:19–20)

COMMUNITY CORE VALUE #6: Engage intentionally with our communities and the world to make disciples.

GET OUTSIDE THE LIVING ROOM

Picture this: a group of athletes want to perform at a high level in their sport. They’ve committed themselves to their training. They’ve received instruction from their coach and encouragement from friends. They’ve been honest about their weaknesses and have disciplined themselves to strengthen them. They’ve been reminded of their potential, and everyone is supporting them.

And then, when the big moment comes, they are unwilling to leave the huddle.

That would be tragic. All the work that they put in would be negated by the fact that they didn’t get in the game when it actually mattered.

In community, it would be equally tragic if all the investments we make in each other’s growth didn’t “leave the living room,” so to speak. If your group is only inwardly focused, looking to your own needs instead of those around you, you’re missing a big part of what God wants for you. We are all God’s workmanship, created to do good works, which God has prepared in advance for us to do (*Ephesians 2:10*). If your community group doesn’t impact the way you believe, think, and act outside of group, then it isn’t working fully as it should.

Getting outside your living room could mean something as nearby as having a conversation with your neighbor, or it could mean something as far as taking a trip to the other side of the world. Wherever “there” is, you should engage intentionally for the cause of Christ. It’s no accident that you’re alive when you are, and living where you are—it’s God-ordained (*Acts 17:26*).

THE GREAT COMMISSION

In the Great Commission (*Matthew 28:18-20*), Jesus tells His followers to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them, and teaching people to obey everything He had taught.

This commission applies to every believer; therefore it applies to your group.

You are called to multiply yourselves and create other fully devoted followers of Jesus. This means sharing the gospel, loving others, and teaching them God’s truth. This may feel daunting, but you aren’t doing it alone! Jesus will go with you (*Matthew 28:20*), and your group can support you as well.

KNOW YOUR GIFTS, USE YOUR GIFTS

Fulfilling the Great Commission might look different for everyone. Each one of you has special gifts and should use them to serve others as a good steward of God’s grace (*1 Peter 4:10*). You are uniquely wired to serve God in the way that He wants you to. You may not feel particularly gifted, but God can use you in significant ways.

As you get to know each other, your community group can help identify and build upon your spiritual gifts, which God has given to each of you for the common good (*Romans 12:3-8, 1 Corinthians 12:4-11*). You can encourage each other to serve individually, and you can also leverage your collective gifts to serve together.

With your group, talk through how you can love and serve:

- **The local body of Christ** (*Galatians 6:10*)
- **Other believers** (*1 Peter 4:10*)
- **Non-believers** (*Luke 19:10*)
- **The poor and needy** (*James 1:27, Proverbs 14:31*)
- **People in other nations** (*Acts 1:8, Matthew 28:19*)

Pray for one another that you would be effective in ministry and service, and pray with one another that God would use you to build His kingdom!

PERSONAL REFLECTION

1. How comfortable are you with sharing the gospel with others? What, if anything, makes you uncomfortable to share (e.g. fear, lack of knowledge, etc.)? What are some steps you could take to grow in this area?
2. Do you know what your spiritual gifts are? If not, how can you begin learning what they are?
3. Is it easy or hard to believe that God wants to use you uniquely to love other s and serve Him? Why?
4. What are some ways that you could love and serve others in the areas noted above? Who do you need to share the gospel with?

GROUP DISCUSSION

1. If you could choose three people to come to know Jesus as Savior today, who would they be (e.g. neighbor, co-worker, family member, etc.)? Why did you pick them?
2. What are you doing, or what is your plan, to engage those people in a spiritual conversation?
3. What gifts and talents has our group been blessed with? How will we best deploy them in engaging those who are far from Christ? Brainstorm some ideas together.
4. How will we encourage and hold one another accountable to share our faith regularly? Be specific.

IDEAS FOR LIVING OUT THE CORE VALUE

- Identify the “top 10” people that you would like to intentionally engage with about Jesus, and pray for those interactions.
- Practice sharing your testimonies with each other to get comfortable in sharing with others.
- Spend time intentionally sharing the gospel with others as a group or as partners.
- Build relationships with people who don’t know Jesus, and invite them to group activities.
- Share stories of where God provided opportunities to serve others and share the gospel.

SUGGESTED RESOURCES

- Watermark message series on sharing your faith (<http://www.watermark.org/media/series/27/>)

“Then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind.”
(PHILIPPIANS 2:2)

“Community group is great!” “Community group is terrible!” These statements are obviously quite different, but they could actually come from two people in the same group. In that case, it would likely be that each person had very different expectations of what the community group experience would be like.

Aligning expectations with your entire group is an important part of caring for one another well. It prioritizes intentional communication, helps avoid hurt feelings and conflict, and provides a sense of security that the group is functioning as intended.

ALIGNMENT QUESTIONS

Here are a few questions that you can discuss and process as you set expectations for what your group will look like moving forward. Your group should be able to arrive at an agreement for each of these as you pray through where God is leading you. If it feels difficult to come to agreement, keep at it! Remember and apply the principles discussed in this book, such as making decisions based on God’s Word, putting others’ interests before your own, being kind and patient with one another, and handling any conflict in a biblical way.

- 1. How frequently will we meet? When and where? Will it change?
 - a. Typically, some form of weekly meeting works for most groups. For some married groups, meeting once every two weeks works better for the entire group, but the men and women still get together every week for accountability.
 - b. Many groups meet in homes, which can be more conducive to Bible study and having intentional conversations than a public place like a coffee shop or restaurant. Someone may agree to host full-time, or you could rotate where you meet.
- 2. What kind of study will we do, if any? What will a typical meeting look like?
 - a. Not all groups have the same spiritual needs, so what each group studies might look different. There are many resources available for all kinds of groups and topics.

- b. A typical meeting consists of fellowship, Bible study, accountability, and prayer.
- 3. (Married Groups) Will our kids come to community group?
 - a. Not having kids in community group generally helps couples connect and engage deeper and without distraction. Sometimes groups will pool their resources to have someone outside the group take care of all their kids.
- 4. How much interaction will we have together outside of group time? What are our expectations for what that will look like (e.g. phone calls, texts, hanging out, being checked on, etc.)?
 - a. The intent of this question isn’t to script all of your interactions outside of group time, but to set expectations for your relationships as they grow, especially if your group didn’t really know each other before forming. As your friendships grow, time spent together outside of group will feel increasingly natural.
- 5. Where will community group rate in relation to other activities and priorities? When might it be okay to miss group meetings?
 - a. Everyone should expect to attend every meeting that they possibly can. But it would be unrealistic to think that life doesn’t bring unexpected circumstances that might prevent you from making it on a given week.
 - b. For situations that could reasonably be expected (e.g. having tickets to the game, a favorite TV show being on during group time, friends coming in town, having to work late, etc.) it’s helpful to have a pre-existing framework for processing the decision whether or not to miss group. Some groups have a standard of not missing the group meeting unless it’s something they would miss work for.
- 6. What will it look like to counsel one another from Scripture? How will we handle opinions and experiences that may not come from God’s Word?
 - a. Refer to Chapter 4, “Counsel Biblically”.
- 7. How will we define authenticity and accountability? How should we approach accountability in this group? Should any topics be off limits to discuss with the group (e.g. relationships, finances, parenting, etc.)?
 - a. Refer to Chapter 5, “Live Authentically”.
- 8. Will we serve together as a group or as individuals? Will we adopt a cause?
 - a. Refer to Chapter 7, “Engage Missionally”.

REALIGNMENT

Aligning expectations early as a group is a great step, but it doesn’t mean that the process should never happen again. As relationships grow, healthy groups periodically discuss their expectations and assess how they are doing. You can informally discuss expectations as needed, but consider setting a time within the next six months to sit down together and talk through expectations again and how the group is working (for a helpful resource, see the Community Group Assessment in the appendix).

A LIFELONG JOURNEY

Congratulations! You’ve made it through the six core values of biblical community. We hope that processing through the chapters and Scriptures referenced in this book has brought your group closer together, and that even now you are walking together in authentic biblical community. It won’t always be easy, but it will always be worth it, as God uses these authentic relationships to transform you.

One thing we recommend as you continue to journey together is to share your story and testimony with one another at a deeper level. Use the Life Maps resource in the appendix as a guide for this. Set aside time in the coming weeks for each of you to work on and share your life maps with one another.

You’ve got a lifetime of walking in community ahead of you. It may not always be with this current group, but these truths apply to whatever community situation you find yourself in. There’s a valuable reward to be gained from these relationships. Press on to win the prize (Philippians 3:14)!

Identity in Christ

Module: Identity in Christ

AUDIENCE

All community groups

OVERVIEW

This module focuses on who we are as followers of Christ. Our identity influences our actions, just as our beliefs dictate our behaviors. If we want to live the abundant life as true followers of Jesus, we need the proper understanding of our identity in Christ.

WEEKLY SESSIONS: 4

1. Who Am I?
2. Living As a New Creation
3. A Love That Sacrifices

PREPARATION

Read through the weekly material in advance of your group meeting, and answer the discussion questions in the chapter. When you come together as a group, discuss your main takeaways from the reading, and process through everyone’s answers to the discussion questions together.

Identity in Christ CHAPTER 1: WHO AM I?

name
words by which a person is designated, called, or known

i· den· ti· ty
1. the state of being the same one as described
2. the sense of self; providing sameness in personality over time

How did you get your **name**? Most people were named at birth by their family. Some people add or change names when they become united with others by marriage, adoption, or religion. Others alter names to separate themselves from those who share it. Names carry **identity**: who you are, where you are from, and with whom you are joined.

Since the moment you were born, people have tried to name you according to their view of you. Think of all the names you have been called (possibly: beautiful, ugly, smart, stupid, rich, poor, priceless, worthless, good, bad, successful, loser, addict, etc.). You have even named yourself. Perhaps you have adopted titles that you have earned or maybe you have embraced a cultural identity. Some have secretly named themselves out of shame because of a hidden sin, failure or weakness.

You have probably identified with many names from various sources as you have tried to discover who you are and find your purpose in life. Some of the names you have accepted represent you well, while others do not. Regardless of its source or how well it represents you, the identity you embrace influences every aspect of your life.

Q1: List some names or “labels” which you have accepted or rejected.

Who does God say that you are? Read 1 John 3:1–3 below
“See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are...” (1 John 3:1).

“But now he has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation...” (Colossians 1:22)

By the Spirit, through the Son, the Father has reclaimed you and named you his child. He did this because he loves you. He wants you to know him for who he is and to reflect his image. You are being restored to the purpose God intended for mankind before Adam and Eve’ sinful fall.

When you trusted Jesus to save you from sin, God gave you a new identity with his own nature, the Holy Spirit. The list below briefly describes this new identity. This is who God says you are:*

loved	a new creation	united in Spirit with him
accepted	his child	one in fellowship with him
chosen	an heir	one who bears spiritual fruit
forgiven	a friend	a sharer of his nature
blameless	a saint	someone with direct access
righteous	a co-worker	able to know God
holy	his temple	able do God’s will
free	a member of his body	set apart for his good work

“For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. (Ephesians 1:4)

You are God’s chosen child, forgiven and made righteous through Christ. You are now righteous, adopted, accepted, and free. You are also an heir to everything that belongs to Christ. Your sin, weakness, and failures do not define who you are. Because God’s Spirit is in you, you are able to experience intimacy with him. Embrace the identity given to you through Christ and live as a new creation.

COMMUNITY DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

Q1: What two things about your new identity in Christ mean the most to you? Why?

Q2: How can we remind each other to embrace our new identity in Christ? During confession? During trials?

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!”
(2 CORINTHIANS 5:17)

con • demned
pronounced to be guilty; sentenced to punishment

God loves you.

If you have turned your life and your will over to God by trusting in Christ to save you, you have eternal life! The debt of all your sins (past, present and future) is paid in full—nailed to the cross with Jesus. You are no longer condemned for your sin. You have peace with God.

“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.” (Romans 8:1-2)

“...God made [us] alive together with [Christ], having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.” (Colossians 2:13-14)

“Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” (Romans 5:1)

jus • ti • fied
declared innocent or guilt- less; acquit

Jesus set you free from the eternal penalty of sin the moment you trusted in him. But there is more: God also credited you with Christ’s righteousness and adopted you as his own son or daughter. Finally, as his seal of your adoption, God gave you a new spirit, his own Spirit. You are a new creation through Christ Jesus! See his words in 2 Corinthians 5:17 above.

“For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!” (Romans 8:15)

“Abba”— In Israel, this was a commonly used term to lovingly address a father much like “Papa” or “Daddy” is used in the English language today.

As a child of God, His Spirit is changing you from the inside out. You may have noticed some differences (like feelings of relief, peace, joy, displeasure with sin, etc.) immediately after you trusted Christ, while other changes (like new desires to

read the Bible, attend church, love for others, etc.) may have happened over time. Jesus described the Spirit as a “Helper,” sent to make you new and bring transformation. Read John 14:16-17, 26 in the margin.

“And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you... the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.” (John 14:16-17, 26)

The Holy Spirit is essential for transformation. He is God’s Spirit living in you. He will write God’s truth on your heart so that you can know his wisdom intimately and delight in it. The Spirit will give you God’s desires and strength as you continue to yield to his influence, allowing you to experience abundant life. He will produce “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23).

COMMUNITY DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

Q1: Abba is a term which God uses to describe how we are to relate to him. In what ways is this meaningful to you?

Q2: Describe some areas where you have experienced God’s transformation (e.g. your language, your ambitions, your demeanor, your view of others, etc.).

Q3: Describe some ways God is using your community group in His transformation process.

God loved you first (1 JOHN 4:19).

Before anyone else loved you and before you loved him, God loved you. His love did not depend upon something good you did. His love did not rely upon your love for him. He even loved you while you were helpless and rebelling against him. Before you were born, the Father gave the greatest price a loving parent can give—the life of his beloved only Son so that you could know his love and become his child.

The Son of God also loved you first. He considered your needs above his own glory, honor and comfort. He willfully sacrificed his life to pay for your sins. He came as a humble servant to reveal God’s love and offer you a new life at the expense of his own.

“For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:6–8).

“For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45).

As Jesus approached his death, he gave this command to those who would follow him and carry on his mission:

“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:34-35)

The world will know you follow Christ by your Christ-like love. Jesus was a servant who loved with humility, sacrifice and purpose. Read the following story of Christ’s final supper with his disciples:

WASHING FEET
The use of sandals made it necessary to wash feet repeatedly every day. This was always done when entering a house. It was a sign of hospitality and good manners to perform this duty to a visitor. This service was considered one of the lowest tasks of servants. If done voluntarily by a host, it was a sign of complete devotion.

...Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.² During supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot,

Simon’s son, to betray him,³ Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God,⁴ rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist.⁵ Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him.⁶ He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, “Lord, do you wash my feet?”⁷ Jesus answered him, “What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand.”⁸ Peter said to him, “You shall never wash my feet.” Jesus answered him, “If I do not wash you, you have no share with me.”⁹ Simon Peter said to him, “Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!”¹⁰ Jesus said to him, “The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean. And you are clean, but not every one of you.”¹¹ For he knew who was to betray him; that was why he said, “Not all of you are clean.”¹² When he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments and resumed his place, he said to them, “Do you understand what I have done to you?”¹³ You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am.¹⁴ If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet.¹⁵ For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you.” (John 13:1–15)

One of Jesus’ final illustrations for his disciples was an act of service, fit for a slave. The Teacher and Lord (God in the flesh!) lowered himself to a position of servant by washing the disciples’ feet. It demonstrated the Father’s love and foreshadowed Christ’s sacrificial death on the cross. At first, Peter rejected Jesus’ act of humiliation, but when told that he must receive Christ’s offering to be clean and have a share with him, Peter accepted. Judas, Jesus’ betrayer, was present. Though washed, Judas was not clean—he had rejected Christ in his heart. Jesus set an example of humble love and service to all—even enemies and betrayers. Christ instructed his followers to do the same for one another. Read 1 John 4:10–14, 19 in the margin.

“In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us. By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. . . .We love because he first loved us.” (1 John 4:10–14,19)

For believers, there are no random acts of kindness, but rather acts of intentional kindness led by the Holy Spirit. We love others because God first loved us. We serve with humility because the Son of God humbled himself to serve us. We love enemies because Jesus loved us when we were enemies.

COMMUNITY DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Q1: Describe a time when the radical love of a Christian or a Christian's poor behavior altered your opinion of Jesus. How did this affect your own relationship with God?

Q2: What would be an equivalent of washing feet in today's culture?

Q3: How has your love for others depended upon how others love you, rather than upon how Christ loved you?

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Module: Forgiveness

AUDIENCE

All community groups

OVERVIEW

Conflict in relationships is inevitable. To continue in Christ-centered community with one another, forgiveness must follow any conflict. Every group walks through conflict as part of the process in establishing deep trusting relationships. Flowing out of our identity in Christ as forgiven sinners, this module examines the nature of true forgiveness. Whether your first conflict as a group is in the future or the past, this module will help you understand what it means to forgive as you've been forgiven.

WEEKLY SESSIONS: 5

1. **Forgiveness and Reconciliation**
2. **Forgiveness: Giving God Justice**
3. **Misunderstanding Biblical Forgiveness**
4. **Reasons Christians Forgive**
5. **How Do I Forgive?**

PREPARATION

Read through the weekly material in advance of your group meeting, and answer the discussion questions in the chapter. When you come together as a group, discuss your main takeaways from the reading, and process through everyone's answers to the discussion questions together.

for· give

- 1. to grant pardon for an offense; absolve.
- 2. to give up all claim on account of a debt or obligation
- 3. to [give up] resentment against another

rec· on· cile

- 1. to restore to friendship or harmony
- 2. settle, resolve, bring to agreement
- 3. to make consistent or conform to requirements of a situation

Sin creates deep wounds. The sins of others have hurt you. Your sins have wounded others as well as yourself.

Sin is costly. The Bible says, “... the wages of sin is death” (*Romans 3:23*). Sometimes the cost of sin is so high that it causes a physical death (for example, murder or drug overdose). Sin can also cause the death of trust in a relationship (for example, adultery or betrayal). Sin can cause the death of innocence (such as, exposure to pornography or sexual abuse). Sin can cause the death of a reputation (for example, lying or cheating).

God placed a sense of justice in all of us. This sense of justice longs for balance. We feel sins’ costs in big and small ways because sin creates debt in our relationships. When someone hurts us, we feel “owed” an apology. We look to “pay back” those who harm us to “balance the score.” Criminals “pay a debts to society.” When we sin against someone else, we may feel the need to “make up” for the damage we have caused. The damage of sin causes debt in relationships.

When sin occurs between people, the debt of sin puts the relationship out of balance—someone is owed justice. To bring the relationship into balance either the offender needs to make up for (payback) the losses caused by sin, or the offended must give up claim to (pardon) the payback. Sometimes we disagree about what will rebalance the relationship, but the process of pardon, payback and balance for an offense is the process of **forgiveness and reconciliation**.

Q1: Think of a time someone hurt you. What losses did you suffer? How was that debt balanced? Explain.

Q2: Think of a time you hurt someone. What harm did you cause? How did you balance that debt? Explain.

“For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:45)

“[Christ] is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.” (1 John 2:2)

“[Christ, our High Priest] has no need... to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself.” (Hebrews 7:27)

“[John the Baptist] saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29)

Sometimes, your wounds are so deep that you feel no payment can ever make up for the harm you suffered. Other times, you caused so much damage that you feel nothing you do can ever pay back your debt. Sometimes these feelings are correct. This is why forgiveness is critical for peace.

To know the peace of God and experience his peace in your relationships, you must first understand God’s peace process with you—his forgiveness and reconciliation in your life.

Every sin is foremost an offense to God’s holy standard. Sin not only creates debt with those you harm but also with God. There are no relationships to which sin indebts you more than your relationship with God. God’s holy nature requires that you pay for sin perfectly—something you are unable to do on your own.

Jesus paid your debt. He gave his sinless life as a perfect ransom (*Mark 10:45*) settling your account with God forever. The Father accepted Christ’s single sacrifice as sufficient payment for anyone who receives his payment as their own (*Hebrews 7:27*). Through the cross, God transferred his demand for justice from us to Jesus (*John 1:29*) and **forgave** all of our sin.

“And you, who were dead in your [sins] and [stuck in your sinful nature], God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our [sins], by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.” (Colossians 2:13–14)

Jesus’ perfect sacrifice allows God to maintain perfect justice for your sin. It also provides you an opportunity to receive God’s offer of forgiveness. *God’s forgiveness is not a denial of his justice; it is a transfer of his justice to Christ* so that you have opportunity for **reconciliation**.

Reconciliation, however, requires that *both* parties accept the terms of the settlement. God accepted Christ’s sacrifice as the only sufficient payment to cover our sin, but you must also accept this transfer of justice (forgiveness) yourself. It is not until you receive this free offering (grace) by trusting (placing faith) in Christ as payment for your sin that your guilt is released and you are reconciled to God (*Romans 3:23–26*).

“...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.” (Romans 3:23–26)

We all owe God a debt that we are unable to repay, but he initiated reconciliation with us anyway. With his blood, Christ paid the debt for all sin so that God’s justice would be satisfied and he could give up his demand for payback. God offers reconciliation to all who accept Christ as their own payment for sin and means of forgiveness.

God’s justice demands payment for all sin. Those who refuse Christ still owe God. They are not reconciled with him—their account is unsettled. They have declined Christ’s perfect offering as justice for their sin and have rejected God’s gift of forgiveness.

Q3: Do you fear that God has not forgiven all of your sins? As a result, do you struggle to embrace God’s forgiveness? Explain.

Q4: Do you still try to make up for sin by your own efforts? Explain.

FOUNDATION

Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children.” (Ephesians 4:32–5:1)

MEMORY VERSE

“Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.” (Colossians 3:12–13)

Christ paid for sin to offer you forgiveness and reconciliation long before you were able or willing to receive them. God initiated reconciliation with you. What, then, does God’s reconciliation mean for your relationships? If you have trusted Christ, you have accepted that Christ’s suffering was sufficient to pay your debt. Have you considered Christ’s suffering sufficient payment of the debt for the sins against you? Realizing the total debt paid by Christ on the cross and recalling that God offers peace to the entire world will help you initiate forgiveness and reconciliation with those who’ve hurt you—just as God did with you.

“Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no ‘root of bitterness’ springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled.” (Hebrews 12:14–15)

Imitating Christ means to show compassion, kindness and humility. It means striving for peace with everyone, letting no one fail to obtain God’s grace, and not allowing any root of bitterness spring up. It means to forgive others as God forgave you. God is making you into a peacemaker like Jesus so that you (and others) can experience his perfect peace.

Q5: If you have trusted Christ’s suffering as satisfaction for your sins, do you think you could also trust Christ’s suffering as satisfaction for the sins against you? What difficulties, fears or concerns does this bring up for you?

Forgiveness CHAPTER 1: FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION

Sin has deeply scarred many of us. We have suffered greatly, but Christ understands because he suffered with us. Just as peace with God was a supernatural work in us, so becoming a peacemaker will be a supernatural work. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, God will give us everything we need to follow Christ as He continues to transform us. God is for us. Read Romans 8:31–32.

...If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?" (Romans 8:31-32)

COMMUNITY DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

Q1: What has been most impactful for you during this lesson?

Q2: Who in your life has been the hardest person to forgive?
Why?

Q3: Did you see forgiveness and reconciliation modeled in your family growing up? Have you seen it modeled in the local church? If not, what has been modeled?

Q4: Share an example where forgiveness and reconciliation have happened with those in your community group.

Forgiveness CHAPTER 2: GIVING GOD JUSTICE

PRAY FIRST

God, help me understand the nature of Your forgiveness of sin.

The Father has shown you great love, mercy and grace, sacrificing his beloved Son for the forgiveness of your sins. One of obvious steps as a forgiven Christ-follower is to forgive others. Recall that Jesus taught us to pray the following:

"...and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors." **(Matthew 6:12)**

Q1: What if God forgave your sins in the same way you forgive sins against you? Would you be reconciled to God?

Jesus said there is a relationship between God's forgiveness of you and your forgiveness of others:

"For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." (Jesus Christ, Matthew 6:14)

Scripture is clear that salvation is a gift of God received by faith, and it does not depend upon your work of forgiving others (*Ephesians* 2:8–9). Therefore, the passage above is not adding the “work” of forgiveness as a requirement for salvation. Christ is saying that if you are not willing to forgive, your unforgiveness may reflect that you have not understood or accepted the enormity of God’s gift of forgiveness for your own sin.

Christ's forgiveness of sin was radical. Since Jesus is our example, let's study how he forgave his debtors (read *Luke* 23:33–35). They nailed Jesus to a cross. As he hung there naked, with jeering criminals on either side of him and religious rulers scoffing at him, he asked the Father to forgive them. Then, rather than saving himself, Jesus paid for their sins (and yours) with his life right before their eyes! As a result, one criminal crucified with Jesus, a soldier, and several rulers came to confess Jesus as God's Son. Forgiveness is a big deal to God.

**"For by grace you have been saved through faith.
And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not
a result of works, so that no one may boast."
(Ephesians 2:8-9)**

“[the soldiers] crucified [Christ], and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. And Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.’ And they cast lots to divide his garments. And the people stood by, watching, but the rulers scoffed at him, saying, ‘He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!’ (Luke 23:33–35)

Q2: Christ paid for the sins of his killers and persecutors. Are there sins against you that cannot or should not be forgiven? Why or why not?

**"Let every person be subject to the governing authorities...for [your ruler] is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer."
(Romans 13:1, 4)**

ven· geance
punishment inflicted [as pay back] for an injury or offense

Often, fears of injustice hinder us from forgiving others. While God has positioned governments to carry out justice (*Romans 13:1, 4*), justice systems can fail, and rarely do they deal with sin's relational debts. Yet, God remains holy even when justice systems fail. He cannot leave sin unpunished and remain holy. God punishes all sin perfectly. **Vengeance** belongs to God.

According to the Bible, God will execute his wrath for sin on a “day of vengeance.” Jesus suffered as a perfect sacrifice to satisfy God’s vengeance for sin to offer a gift of forgiveness to all. Christ’s payment satisfies God’s wrath for those who receive his sacrifice as their own payment for sin. But, those who reject Christ’s gift remain under God’s wrath—they

will suffer God's vengeance. They stand on their own merit against God's holy standard because they reject Christ's payment. As a result, they will be unable to meet God's standard. They will face God's judgment and suffer eternally for their sins. Read the verses below:

"The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand. Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him."
(John 3:35–36)

"How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was [made holy], and has outraged the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, "Vengeance is mine; I will repay." And again, "The Lord will judge his people." It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." (Hebrews 10:29-31)

“...the Lord Jesus [will be] revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might,” (2 Thessalonians 1:7-9)

Justice will be served—either by Christ’s sacrifice or by God’s wrath for those who reject Christ. A punishment that satisfies God will satisfy you.

Q3: Do you trust God's justice for the sins against you? Explain.

"The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise [to return] as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance." (2 Peter 3:9)

"...we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved." (Ephesians 2:3–5)

☪ You were once a “child of wrath” but God showed you kindness, mercy and love through Christ while you were still in sin—and not only for you, but everyone. It is God’s desire that none perish but all repent and receive forgiveness through Christ. Read the verses in the margin.

We love others because God first loved us. We forgive others because, through Christ, God forgave us. We want others to repent and avoid God's vengeance because Christ suffered vengeance in our place.

To forgive as Christ forgave you is to trust that Christ's blood was enough payment for both the sins against you and for your own sins. Forgiveness is not giving up your demand for justice; it is a decision to give your claim for justice to God through Christ. This decision to forgive is between you and God alone. It does not depend upon your offender's willingness (or ability) to change behavior or to repay you. Christ already suffered for sin. You can forgive the one who hurt you before they make amends, or even if they never make amends. You can forgive even if you are not reconciled with that person.

When you forgive others the debts of sin against you, releasing your claims for justice to God, you are free to love them rather than seek vengeance. They no longer owe you, but rather, they owe God. Forgiveness frees you to love others as Christ loved them.

"Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." (Romans 12:19–21)

Q4: Who are you afraid to love with a Christ-like love? Why?

Q5: What justice do you not want to transfer to God? Why?

CLOSING PRAYER:

Father, forgive my sins as I also have forgiven the sins
against me.

COMMUNITY DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

Q1: What has been most impactful for you during this lesson?

Q2: Is there anyone you have not fully forgiven? Share.

Q3: Have you ever been consumed with someone who hurt you or others getting justice through the legal and penal system? Describe to your community group what that season looked like. Was it marked by peace, joy, anxiety, worry, etc.?

29

PRAY FIRST
God, help me understand what forgiveness is and what it is not.

“Then Peter came up and said to [Jesus], ‘Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?’ Jesus said to him, ‘I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.’” (Matthew 18:21–22)

Misunderstandings about forgiveness often keep us from forgiving others. As a result, we can remain stuck in fear, bitterness and shame, and not experience the freedom of God’s forgiveness ourselves. Misunderstandings can even cause us to enable others’ harmful behavior or leave relationships broken. Some use misunderstanding as an excuse for sin. Forgiveness, however, is a command of Christ (see *Matthew 18:21–22*).

Q1: What outcomes do you fear if you release to God all your resentments and rights to repayment for the sins against you?

If we are to walk with Jesus and love others as he loved us, it is helpful to understand what forgiveness is not. Forgiving someone can be scary—especially, if that person is unrepentant and continues harmful behavior. We may feel that by forgiving someone, we are excusing sin or allowing that person to get away with a wrong, or we may think that forgiveness means we must deny pain and ignore the offense. We might fear that forgiveness means we reconcile with a person who is not trustworthy. But, these are misunderstandings of biblical forgiveness. Consider the common misunderstandings of biblical forgiveness listed below:

- **Forgiveness is not excusing sin or claiming that a wrong suffered is now okay.** There is no excuse for sin. God hates all sin (*Hebrews 1:9*). Sin is so serious that Christ died for it (*Hebrews 9:22–28*). Sin is never okay.
- **Forgiveness is not freeing the guilty of a demand for justice.** All sin must be paid for. Forgiveness transfers your demands for justice to God for him to execute in his time and his way (*Hebrews 10:29–31*).

“Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart.” (Corrie Ten Boom, holocaust survivor)

“Forgiveness is letting go of the past. Trust has to do with future behavior.” (Rick Warren)

- **Forgiveness is not denying your hurt or stuffing your anger.** You should be hurt and angered by sin—God is. Christ suffered greatly for the wages of sin. God’s wrath was poured out on Christ at the cross and his wrath will be poured out again on those who reject Jesus (*John 3:35–36; 2 Thessalonians 1:7–9*). Forgiveness frees you to work through the pain honestly, as you release your resentments to God.
- **Forgiveness is not a feeling and is not conditional.** It is an act of the will between you and God—a release of your claim for justice to God through Christ without conditions. See Corrie Ten Boom’s quote.
- **Forgiveness is not forgetting.** In fact, you must remember in order to forgive. You must remember the offense, Christ’s suffering for sin, how much God has forgiven you, the coming judgment of God, and your decision to transfer justice to God.
- **Forgiveness is not trust.** Forgiving the past does not mean someone is trustworthy for the future. Forgiveness is a gift but trust is earned (or rebuilt) by consistent trustworthy behavior. See Rick Warren’s quote.
- **Forgiveness is not reconciliation.** Forgiveness is a transfer of debts between you and God alone, but reconciliation requires that you and the other person agree. You can forgive someone who is unwilling or unable to reconcile. You may remain unreconciled until that person reconciles with God.

Q2: How does this list clarify your understanding of biblical forgiveness?

Q3: Does this list free you to be more forgiving towards others? Explain.

“[God’s] work is perfect, for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is he.” (Deuteronomy 32:4)

Another misunderstanding of forgiveness is the idea that we need to forgive God for evil that he allowed. The Bible says that God is perfect and all his ways are just (*Deuteronomy 32:4*). A perfect being has no need for forgiveness from anyone—he has done no wrong.

Usually, someone struggling to forgive God is wrestling with unresolved anger or pain. They blame God and struggle to understand why God allowed injustice or suffering. God, however, does not always answer “why” questions; in fact, he often responds to “why” questions by describing who he is (*Job 38–42*). He reminds us that he is powerful, in control, present, understanding, just and good.

We are in the middle of God’s rescue of a world damaged by the sinfulness of its people. Conflict, pain and confusion exist in the middle of rescue efforts. We were once God’s enemies, but Jesus suffered the punishment of sin to rescue us and make us God’s children. In the end, God will execute justice, we will see clearly, and peace will rule. Until then, people will get cancer, children will die, dictators will commit genocide, rich will exploit poor, and so on. God will get rid of all sin when he is finished turning enemies into children.

God intimately knows our pain and the cost of a broken world. The Father allowed the Son to suffer with us and for us. He promises eternal justice, healing and peace. He loves us. He is trustworthy even when we are hurt and things do not make sense. Read Spurgeon’s quote.

If you are struggling to “forgive” God, ask yourself, “Am I willing to trust God’s character in the midst of pain I do not understand?” “Am I willing to let God have my anger and suffering along with my sin?” When anger and pain over the damage of sin grows into resentment toward God, anger and pain have turned into sin. Read Ephesians 4:26–27.

“God is too good to be unkind and he is too wise to be mistaken. And when we cannot trace his hand, we must trust his heart.” (attributed to Charles Spurgeon)

Q4: Do you have resentments toward God? If so, confess them to God, ask him to take your anger and heal your pain. If not, write a short prayer thanking him for his goodness even in the midst of pain.

“Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil.” (Ephesians 4:26–27)

A final misunderstanding to consider is that, somehow, we need to forgive ourselves. Only God can forgive sin. If we could forgive ourselves we would not need Jesus; it would mean that Christ’s sacrifice is not enough to cover our sins. When someone says, “I cannot forgive myself,” it means he or she is holding onto guilt and shame.

God’s word is our final authority on truth and defining reality. The truth is that we are all great sinners, unable to overcome sin. We are capable of great harm. It is because God loves us that he offers forgiveness as a gift. God reclaims those who accept Christ’s undeserved, unearned gift and calls them *forgiven, righteous children*. When we falsely believe that we need to “forgive ourselves” we are not resting in the truth that God has forgiven all of our sins.

Forgiving yourself will never give you freedom from guilt and shame. You receive freedom from guilt and shame when you trust that Christ’s claims upon your identity are true.

Q5: How have you struggled holding onto the guilt and shame of sin?

Closing Prayer: Father, help me understand how to forgive as you have forgiven me.

Take Action: Try to recite Colossians 3:12–13. Then read over it five times and try again.

COMMUNITY DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

Q1: What has been most impactful for you during this lesson?

Q2: In the section about misconceptions of forgiveness, which of the seven misconceptions is the hardest for you to separate, practice, or to have a change of heart?

Q3: Have you lived for a season with the misconception that you needed to “forgive” God or were angry at God? Explain.

Q4: Is there anything you should share with the group in order for them to help you in this area?



PRAY FIRST

God, help me let go of sin and hold on to you.

If we are honest, sometimes we just do not want to forgive—especially someone who hurt us deeply in the past or can harm us in the future.

A wrong suffered can be used poorly for many things. We can use someone’s sin to build emotional walls to feel safe. We may use it to justify our own actions or as a weapon in a fight. We might use a wrong suffered to manipulate others to get what we want.

We may fear that by forgiving sin we become vulnerable, unprotected and powerless. Fears, however, do not direct Christian forgiveness. Christians forgive sin because we trust and obey God. Forgiveness is God’s desire. He forgave our sin and commands us to forgive sin.

God wants us to hold onto *him* for protection, safety and justice—not someone else’s sin. Christ came to put sin’s power to death. God wants us to live free of sin’s power not to use sin’s power for ourselves.

Q1: How have you used sin against you for your own benefit?

Q2: How have you trusted sin’s power or unforgiveness more than God?

Reflect and Memorize:

FORGIVE BECAUSE OF CHRIST:
“Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.”
(Colossians 3:12–13)



TALENTS AND DENARII

One talent was a huge sum of money, equal to 6,000 denarii. One denarius was the usual day’s wage for a worker. Therefore, a debt of one talent would take over sixteen years of labor to repay. A debt of 10,000 talents could not be repaid over thousands of lifetimes of labor.

The forgiveness module memory verse says that we must forgive others as God forgave us (see *Colossians 3:12–13*). Rarely do we fully grasp, however, how much God forgave us. To illustrate the extent of God’s forgiveness and the response this forgiveness demands, Christ told this story:

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

With death, Jesus, your Lord, paid your debt for each sinful deed, word and thought. He paid for sins you are aware of and for sins of which you are not aware. He did this so that God could forgive you while satisfying his perfect justice. He showed you mercy and kindness.

God forgave you so that you could know his peace. You become his peacemaker by showing his love to others. Who better to show the love of the King than to those who need your forgiveness?

We forgive others because of how much God forgave us. We forgive others to share God’s work in our lives. We forgive others because it is God’s desire. We forgive others so that they may get a glimpse of God’s love and be drawn to him.

If you remain unwilling to forgive, you remain unwilling to follow Christ.

Q3: Is it easy or hard to see how God forgiving all your sin is greater than you forgiving someone else’s sin? Explain.

Just as your own sin can cause pain and keep you distant in relationships, holding onto a person’s sin against you can do the same. You can use someone’s sin against you powerfully: as a shield, a weapon, a tool, an excuse for your sin, etc. The power sin offers, however, is deceptive and it leads to death.

When you hold onto a sin, you give it a place to grow into anger, bitterness, resentment and fear. Often, your first thoughts toward someone you have not forgiven are negative thoughts about their sin or your pain. You may think of ways to keep your distance, get revenge, or control their behavior. You may feel suspicion or take pleasure in their pain. Unforgiveness may offer some illusions of power in a relationship but it leaves your thoughts, feelings and responses toward a person controlled by the influence of their sin.

In some instances, you may even begin to project your thoughts, feelings and fears toward your offender onto others. For example, you may think, “Since that man was unfaithful, all men are unfaithful,” or “Since my father abandoned me, I bet God will probably abandon me too.”

Unforgiveness can greatly affect how you relate to the world and to God. Read Lee Strobel’s quote in the margin.

Forgiveness frees you from the power of others’ sin and prevents hurt and anger from turning into your own sin. When you surrender the debts of sin against you to God, you are set free to see people through God’s eyes rather than through the fog of sin. Read the quote, below.

“If you’re a follower of Jesus but you feel distant from him during this era of your life, if you’re having difficulty resting easy in his forgiveness, could it be because you’re blatantly refusing to let go of your animosity toward another person?”
(Lee Strobel)

Now, reread Ephesians 4:31-5:1

“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. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children.”
(Ephesians 4:31–5:1)

The way to be free of bitterness, anger and hatred is to forgive others in kindness and mercy with the heart of Christ. God’s commands are freeing, not burdensome. Sin is a burden—a weight that holds you down and keeps you trapped in pain. Do not hold onto sin (yours or anyone’s). Hold onto God. He is a God of justice and love. You can trust him.

Yes, you should forgive others to obey God, but also forgive others to enjoy the freedom and blessings of living on the path of life. God’s commands lead to life—for you and those who have harmed you.

“Forgiveness is the key which unlocks the door of resentment and the handcuffs of hatred. It breaks the chains of bitterness and the shackles of selfishness.”
Corrie Ten Boom (Holocaust survivor)

Take a minute to try to think of people toward whom you still hold some resentment or anger. The questions below may bring names to mind.

- Is there anyone for whom you still wish ill will?
- Is there anyone whose sin (against you, a friend or loved one) is the first thing that comes to mind when you think of him or her?
- Is there anyone whose name generates feelings of bitterness?
- Is there anyone you would try to avoid if you saw them in a public place because of something that happened between you?
- Is there anyone who you would not like contact from if they were seeking your forgiveness?
- Is there anyone who you would be sad to learn that they had received Christ as their savior?

Q4: How has unforgiven sin affected your relationship with someone? Describe how their sin affected your thoughts about him or her.

Q5: Was there a time when you forgave a sin and experienced the blessings of God? Explain.

Closing Prayer: God, thank you for forgiving me more than I can understand. Help me live in the freedom and blessing of forgiving others.

COMMUNITY DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

Q1: What has been most impactful for you during this lesson?

Q2: In reading the parable of the unmerciful servant in Matthew 18:23-34, do you connect emotionally or cognitively with the concept that you have been forgiven much? Do you naturally want to deal with other’s sin more or your own?

Q3: The statement, “If you remain unwilling to forgive, you remain unwilling to follow Christ.” How does that sit with you? Does it frustrate you? Does it motivate you? Explain.

Q4: When have you held onto a sin, and your lack of forgiveness grew into anger, bitterness, resentment and fear?

PRAY FIRST
God, show me how to forgive others through Christ.

Sometimes it is not selfishness, sin or fear that prevents us from forgiving someone. Sometimes, we just do not know how to forgive.

You may have grown up in a home where it was not safe to be honest about sin or pain. Perhaps hurts were used to excuse bad behavior. Maybe you were trained in an environment where you were only as good as your last mistake. Possibly you live in a culture where long-held resentments fuel political battles and are used as an excuse to abuse power. You might not have ever seen Biblical forgiveness modeled in human relationships.

Q1: What did your past environments teach you about forgiveness?

Q2: Who, if anyone, modeled forgiveness for you? Explain.

“Forgiveness doesn’t make the other person right, it makes you free.” (Stormie Omartian)

Without forgiveness, you will never experience the peace, unity or love God intended for relationships. Unforgiveness traps you in a cycle of pain fueled by hurts of the past and fear of the future.

Read the quote in the margin. In the same way that repentance frees you from the cycle of your own sin, Biblical forgiveness releases you from the cycle of someone else’s sin as you entrust it to God. Forgiveness frees you to relate to others in response to Christ’s love rather than in response to their sins.

Q3: How would life change if you were never again controlled, protected or empowered by someone’s sin against you... if you lived free of the wounds you’ve suffered?

Face
1. to confront [with great boldness]
2. to recognize and deal with straightforwardly
Re• lease
1. to set free from restraint, confinement, or servitude
2. to relieve from something that confines, burdens, or oppresses
3. to give up in favor of another
En• trust
1. to deliver in trust to
2. to commit to another with confidence
Ex• alt
1. to raise in rank, power, or character
2. to elevate by praise: glorify

Biblical forgiveness frees you to love others in the Spirit and truth of Christ. Look over the acronym F-R-E-E. You can use it to understand how to forgive and to remember forgiveness during times when you are struggling with hurts of the past:

Face the truth: Be honest. Evaluate sin by the truth of God’s word. Do not deny sin or minimize it. Do not define, excuse or justify sin by any standard other than God’s word.

Release the hurt: Honestly give your hurt to God. God cares. Christ knows your pain; he too suffered for sin. Feel the pain and sadness of sin. Grieve sin’s losses as you surrender it to God. Ask him to heal you.

Entrust justice to God: Transfer your claims to God and let him repay the debt—he will judge and avenge all sin. Give away your right for an apology, payback and bitterness along with the right to dwell upon or use the offense to your advantage. Receive God’s judgment and vengeance for sin as your own.

Exalt Christ: Thank Christ for paying for your sins and loving you when you were lost. Praise him that his sacrifice is enough to cover every sin. Thank Jesus for loving your offender enough to offer him or her forgiveness through the cross. Ask him to help you love your offender with the Spirit’s love in you. Praise him for freedom from all sins—yours and the sins against you.

God loves you. Your heart and mind do not have to be controlled by sin. Entrust every sin (yours and others’ sins) to God. Let the wounds of sin remind you of Jesus’ wounds for you and of God’s goodness, justice and love for the world. Through Christ, your heart and mind can rest in God’s peace even when someone continues to sin against you. You can experience freedom in Christ through every broken circumstance.



Q4: What fears do you have of releasing your claims to God for justice?

Q5: What doubts do you have about being able to experience God’s peace even in the midst of suffering and broken circumstances?

PAUSE TO PRAY: “God, you know my fears and doubts. Give me the courage to trust you when I am afraid and give me the faith to follow you when I cannot see where you are going.”

Use the acrostic **F-R-E-E** to guide you through the forgiveness prayer below.

Forgiveness Prayer:

“Dear God, I am **F**acing the truth of how I have been hurt by [list the offense]. I know you are intimately aware of my suffering and care about my pain. Please heal me; I am **R**eleasing my wounds to you. I know that your judgments are perfect and that you desire for everyone to repent of sin to receive forgiveness through Christ, just as I received your gift of forgiveness. So, I choose to forgive [name]. I **E**ntrust my claims for justice to you. I surrender my rights for apologies, paybacks, bitterness or using this sin to my advantage. These debts are now yours to repay. Your justice and vengeance for sin are perfect. I accept them as my own. Jesus, I praise and **E**xalt you for paying my debts and becoming a peace offering to the world—even to those who have hurt me! Help me love [name] with your love by the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit who lives in me.”

Closing Prayer: God, help me live free of the wounds of sin I have suffered.

Take Action:

Try to quote, Colossians 3:12–13, from memory.

COMMUNITY DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

Q1: What has been the impactful for you during this lesson?

Q2: When was a season of injustice or a time in your life that you felt like life was not fair? Was it a season marked by peace or confusion?

Q3: Walking through the acronym F-R-E-E, what was the most helpful step in the process and what was the most difficult step?

Q4: Did you pray the forgiveness prayer for anyone? Who and for what? Who are you struggling to forgive?

