



DISCIPLESHIP
BOOT CAMP



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WHY



WHY?

WHAT IS GOD CALLING US TO?

Scripture is calling us to obey Jesus, and therefore Scripture is calling us to a lifelong change project, a lifelong process of looking more and more *like* Jesus and looking more and more *to* Jesus! There's no such thing as standing still in *any* relationship, human or divine. Look at the Great Commission: *Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you* (Matt 28:19-20). Kevin DeYoung observes, "The Great Commission is about holiness. God wants the world to know Jesus, believe in Jesus, and obey Jesus. We don't take the Great Commission seriously if we don't help each other grow in obedience."

Consider also Hebrews 12:14, which reads, "Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord." Again, in 1 John, we find these words: "And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he appears we may have confidence and not shrink from him in shame at his coming. If you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who practices righteousness has been born of him" (1 John 2:28-29).

DISCIPLESHIP IS...

- 1 **...a call to grow and change.** Further, we won't have any desire to commit to relationships of mutual discipleship unless we believe there is power available to change—that change is even a remote possibility! We need the Bible to tell us what's true, even if it flies in the face of our experience and perception. In other words, understanding Scripture's imperatives to us is a way of building our confidence that we can change, because where God guides, God provides. Or, in the words of St. Augustine, "He bids us do what we cannot so that we may know what we ought to seek from him."
- 2 **...an all-out war.** John Owen writes: *If, then, sin will be always acting, if we be not always mortifying, we are lost creatures. He that stands still and suffers his enemies to double blows upon him without resistance will undoubtedly be conquered in the issue. If sin be subtle, watchful, strong, and always at work in the business of killing our souls, and we be slothful, negligent, foolish, in proceeding to the ruin thereof, can we expect a comfortable event? There is not a day but sin foils or is foiled, prevails or is prevailed on; and it will be so while we live in this world.*
- 3 **...a relationship.** In 2 Cor 11:2, Paul writes, "For I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ." Time and time again, the way Scripture calls us to holiness is by saying basically, "You are married, so act married! Don't live like a bachelor and expect a healthy marriage." Growing in holiness is not just growing in outwardly biblical behavior, but primarily growing in affection for and intimacy with Jesus.
- 4 **...what we say and do *and* what we believe and desire.** There's no such thing as outward change without inward change. All lasting change ultimately moves from the inside out. What we do and say matters, but its greatest significance is what it reveals about what's in our hearts. The truest part of us is inside us. Scripture calls that inner self "the heart" and it's made up of what we think and want, or, to say it another way, what we believe and desire.

TEN COMMON REASONS WE GET STUCK

1 Downward drift...

- 1.1 *One of the most striking evidences of sinful human nature lies in the universal propensity for downward drift... People do not drift toward holiness. Apart from grace-driven effort, people do not gravitate toward godliness, prayer, obedience to Scripture, faith, and delight in the Lord. We drift toward compromise and call it tolerance; we drift toward disobedience and call it freedom; we drift toward superstition and call it faith. We cherish the indiscipline of lost self-control and call it relaxation; we slouch toward prayerlessness and delude ourselves into thinking we have escaped legalism; we slide toward godlessness and convince ourselves we have been liberated. (D.A. Carson)*
- 1.2 *When sin lets us alone we may let sin alone; but as sin is never less quiet than when it seems to be most quiet, and its waters are for the most part deep when they are still, so ought our contrivances against it to be vigorous at all times and in all conditions, even where there is least suspicion. (John Owen)*

2 Despair of ever being able to change...

- 2.1 However, we don't just *tend* towards downward drift; we even often *resign* ourselves to it! We often don't realize that God's grace doesn't just forgive us, it immediately sets to work *changing* us. Discipleship implies the possibility of growth and change. At the barest level, we're talking about movement from point A to point B. Change. Because of Philippians 1:6 we can and should expect, strive for, and pray for movement in our lives... We *can* change.
- 2.2 *And finally, many Christians have simply given up on sanctification. I frequently hear from believers who doubt that holiness is even possible. And it's not just because the process is difficult. It's because we imagine God to be difficult. If our best deeds are nothing but filthy rags (Isa. 64:6, KJV), why bother? We are all hopeless sinners. We can do nothing to please God. No one is really humble or pure or obedient. The pursuit of holiness is just bound to make us feel guilty. So we figure all we can really do is cling to Christ. We are loved because of the imputed righteousness of Christ, but personal obedience that pleases God is simply not possible. The truly super-spiritual do not "pursue holiness"; they celebrate their failures as opportunities to magnify the grace of God. (Kevin DeYoung)*
- 2.3 **D-Group:** See if you can spot the way in which the following paragraph could be more careful.

I am a spiritual failure, but, praise God, Jesus came to save spiritual failures like me! I cannot obey God's commands for one nanosecond. I never truly love God with all my heart or my neighbor as myself. Even my righteous deeds are like filthy rags. If you could see my heart, you'd see that my sins are as bad as anyone else's or worse! I am a spiritual screw-up through and through, unfaithful to my faithful God. But the good news is, God has saved me because of Christ's death and resurrection. I am his adopted child, forgiven and clean. Nothing I ever do can make God love me any more—or any less—than he already loves me in Christ. Even though I continue to sin, I can never disappoint my heavenly Father, for he looks at me and sees the righteousness of his beloved Son. What unspeakable good news!

- 2.4 **Q:** Take a moment and ask yourself, "Where in my life have I felt stuck for so long that I've become resigned to it?"

3 Forgetting that position precedes progress... In other words, the finality of our *positional* holiness grounds and energizes our pursuit of *progressive* holiness.

3.1 *[E]very Christian is sanctified. We are already set apart, no longer common or profane. Some theologians call this gift of holiness through union with Christ our "definitive sanctification." But this definitive sanctification does not eliminate the need for continuing "progressive sanctification." In Christ every believer has a once-for-all positional holiness, and from this new identity every Christian is commanded to grow in the ongoing-for-your-whole-life process of holiness (Phil. 2:12–13). As David Peterson puts it, "Believers are definitively consecrated to God in order to live dedicated and holy lives, to his glory." In other words, sanctified is what we are and what we must become. (Kevin DeYoung)*

3.2 In other words, this whole "pursue the (progressive) holiness without which no one will see the Lord" thing only works if we're constantly reminding ourselves of and encouraging ourselves with the unwavering and certain fact that we're already (positionally) holy! All that summed up in a sentence? In fact, every exhortation towards holiness in the NT summed up in a sentence? "Act who you are!"

4 Forgetting that progress doesn't preclude struggle...

4.1 When we pursue progressive holiness in light of our positional holiness we'll experience both *genuine progress* as well as *ongoing struggle*. Former history professor at Westminster Theological Seminary, Clair Davis, gives a helpful illustration here. Picture yourself as a yo-yo held in the hand of a man walking up a flight of stairs. The man is going upstairs—there is genuine progress. And yet you are a yo-yo—there's ongoing struggle. Genuine progress, but ongoing struggle. Within that picture, our goal becomes to shorten the string—to endeavor to return ever more quickly to the hand of the man going upstairs. That's what it means to live a life of repentance. It's been well said that sanctification is a direction we're headed, and repentance is the lifestyle we're living. We're not sinless, but we should be sinning less!

4.2 This picture reminds us that we will not be done with sin this side of heaven—there will be ongoing struggle—and so our goal is not perfection this side of heaven, but greater repentance and greater trust in and affection for Jesus in addition to greater conformity to his commands. This picture also reminds us that we should not lose heart—there is genuine progress. In light of what Jesus has done for us, and in light of the fact that he's coming back soon to finish what he's started in us (Phil 1:6), we must, in the words of 2 Cor 4, "...[N]ot lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison..."

5 Forgetting that while true confession is always ultimately to God, it's still always through community...

5.1 Too often we believe the lie that vertical confession, as opposed to horizontal confession, is all that's necessary. Contrary to the way most of us men think about this issue most of the time, we often haven't truly confessed our sin to the Lord *until* we've confessed it to another brother. Here is some Scriptural support:

Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. (James 5:16)

But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. (Heb 3:13)

Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. (Eph 4:32)

David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the Lord," and Nathan said to David, "The Lord has also put away your sin; you shall not die." (2 Sam 12:13)

Why is it that it is often easier for us to confess our sins to God than to a brother? God is holy and sinless, He is a just judge of evil and the enemy of all disobedience. But a brother is sinful as we are. He knows from his own experience the dark night of secret sin. Why should we not find it easier to go to a brother than to the holy God? But if we do, we must ask ourselves whether we have not often been deceiving ourselves with our confession of sin to God, whether we have not rather been confessing our sins to ourselves and also granting ourselves absolution... Who can give us the certainty that, in the confession and the forgiveness of our sins, we are not dealing with ourselves but with the living God? God gives us this certainty through our brother. Our brother breaks the circle of self-deception. A man who confesses his sins in the presence of a brother knows that he is no longer alone with himself; he experiences the presence of God in the reality of the other person. (Bonhoeffer)

5.2 We can have *religious* repentance by confession to God only. However, without confession to other believers, religious repentance can sometimes turn into moralistic self-atonement, where we try to skip right over the pain of exposing our sin to others by busying ourselves paying for our sin by redoubling our self-effort to change. In so doing we are really just curating our image until such a time as we feel it's presentable for public viewing again!

6 Why am I asking for forgiveness if I'm already forgiven?

6.1 When we confuse judicial wrath (God as judge) and fatherly displeasure (God as a loving Father disciplining the sons he loves), we either mistakenly *continue* to seek forgiveness for judicial wrath or mistakenly *fail* to seek forgiveness for fatherly displeasure. In other words, most of us are either seeking forgiveness for the *wrong* thing, or failing to seek forgiveness at all for the *right* thing. You don't need your relationship to be restored, but you do need your intimacy to be restored!

6.2 *This new covenant commitment was purchased by Christ for us (Luke 22:20) and applied to us through faith so that, though we incur our Father's displeasure, we, who are justified believers, never incur the judicial wrath of God to all eternity. Or to put it another way, since the forgiveness of all our sins is purchased and secured by the death of Christ, therefore God is totally committed to bring us back to confession and repentance as often as necessary so that we may receive and enjoy that forgiveness in the removal of his fatherly displeasure. It is our Father's pleasure to restore us to his pleasure until such restorings are needed no more. (John Piper)*

6.3 **D-Group:** Read the Piper article in the *Resources* section of the handbook entitled "Justified but not Forgiven" and discuss.

7 Failing to understand that self-improvement motivated by self-effort is miserable...

7.1 John Owen writes, "Mortification from a self-strength, carried on by ways of self-invention, unto the end of a self-righteousness, is the soul and substance of all false religion in the world." Those of us who have tried self-improvement by means of self-effort have found it miserable!

7.2 *The ordinary idea which we all have before we become Christians is this. We take as a starting point our ordinary self with its various desires and interests. We then admit that something else—call it "morality" or "decent behaviour," or "the good of society"—has claims on this self: claims which interfere with its own desires. What we mean by "being good" is giving in to these claims. Some of the things the ordinary self wanted to do turn out to be what we call "wrong:" well, we must give them up. Other things, which the self did not want to do, turn out to be what we call "right:" well, we shall have to do them. But we are hoping all the time that when all the demands have been met, the poor natural self will still have some chance, and some time, to get on with its own life and do what it likes. In fact, we are very like an honest man paying his taxes. He pays them all right, but he does hope that there will be enough left over for him to live on. Because we are still taking our natural self as the starting point. (C.S. Lewis)*

7.3 **Q:** What does self-improvement motivated by self-effort even look like? How do you recognize it in yourself?

8 Mistaking religious repentance for true repentance...

8.1 *It is important to consider how the gospel affects and transforms the act of repentance. In 'religion' the purpose of repentance is basically to keep God happy so he will continue to bless you and answer your prayers. This means that religious repentance is selfish, self-righteous, and bitter all the way to the bottom. In the gospel, however, the purpose of repentance is to repeatedly tap into the joy of our union with Christ to weaken our impulse to do anything contrary to God's heart.*

8.2 *Religious repentance is selfish... In religion we are sorry for sin only because of its consequences for us. Sin will bring us punishment—and we want to avoid that, so we repent. The gospel tells us that, as Christians, sin can't ultimately bring us into condemnation (Rom 8:1). Its heinousness is therefore what it does to God—it displeases and dishonors him. Thus in religion, repentance is self-centered; the gospel makes it God-centered. In religion we are mainly sorry for the consequences of sin, but in the gospel we are sorry for the sin itself.*

8.3 *Religious repentance is self-righteous... Repentance can easily turn into an attempt to "atone" for one's sin—a form of self-flagellation, in which we convince God (and ourselves) that we are so truly miserable and regretful that we deserve to be forgiven. In the gospel, however, we know that Jesus suffered for our sin. We do not have to make ourselves suffer to merit God's forgiveness. We simply receive the forgiveness earned by Christ. God forgives us because he is "just" (1 John 1:9). That is a remarkable statement. It would be unjust of God to ever deny us forgiveness, because Jesus earned our acceptance! In religion we try to earn our forgiveness with our repentance. In the gospel we simply receive it.*

8.4 *Religious repentance is bitter all the way to the bottom... In religion our only hope is to live a life good enough to require God to bless us. Every instance of sin and repentance is therefore traumatic, unnatural, and horribly threatening. Only under great duress do religious individuals admit they have sinned, because their only hope is their moral*

goodness. In the gospel the knowledge of our acceptance in Christ makes it easier to admit that we are flawed, because we know we won't be cast off if we confess the true depths of our sinfulness. Our hope is in Christ's righteousness, not our own, so it is not as traumatic to admit our weaknesses and lapses.

8.5 *In conclusion... whereas in religion we repent less and less often, the more we feel accepted and loved in the gospel, the more and more often we will be repenting. Although there is some bitterness in any repentance, in the gospel there is ultimately a sweetness. This creates a radical new dynamic for personal growth. The more we see our own flaws and sins, the more precious, electrifying, and amazing God's grace appears to us. On the other hand, the more aware we are of God's grace and our acceptance in Christ, the more able we are to drop our denials and self-defenses and admit the true dimensions of our sin. The sin underlying all other sins is a lack of joy in Christ. (Tim Keller)*

9 It's just plain hard work...

Then there's the reality that holiness is plain hard work, and we're often lazy. We like our sins, and dying to them is painful. Almost everything is easier than growing in godliness. So we try and fail, try and fail, and then give up. It's easier to sign a petition protesting man's inhumanity to man than to love your neighbor as yourself. It's one thing to graduate from college ready to change the world. It's another to be resolute in praying that God would change you. (DeYoung)

10 We don't know how to work hard without being legalists...

10.1 *Among conservative Christians there is sometimes the mistaken notion that if we are truly gospel-centered we won't talk about rules or imperatives or moral exertion. We are so eager not to confuse indicatives (what God has done) and imperatives (what we should do) that we get leery of letting biblical commands lead uncomfortably to conviction of sin. We're scared of words like diligence, effort, and duty. Pastors don't know how to preach the good news in their sermons and still strongly exhort churchgoers to cleanse themselves from every defilement of body and spirit (2 Cor. 7:1). We know legalism (salvation by law keeping) and antinomianism (salvation without the need for law keeping) are both wrong, but antinomianism feels like a much safer danger. (DeYoung)*

10.2 Obeying and seeing if it will lead to delight is not the same as trying to earn God's approval. In the words of Dallas Willard, "Grace is not opposed to effort; it's opposed to earning."

10.3 *Sometime we sink so low we must worship to joy and not from joy. It is often "out of the depths" that we praise God, and not always from "atop the heights." Worship your way into the experience of His love. (Sam Storms)*

GOD GIVES TONS OF REASONS WHY WE SHOULD PURSUE HOLINESS

Fullness of joy. "If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full" (John 15:10–11).

The world is not our home. "Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul" (1 Pet. 2:11).

To win over our neighbors. "Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation" (1 Pet. 2:12).

God knows all and sees all. "For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil" (Eccles. 12:14).

It's right. "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right" (Eph. 6:1).

It's for our good. "Be careful to obey all these words that I command you, that it may go well with you and with your children after you forever, when you do what is good and right in the sight of the LORD your God." (Deut. 12:28).

God's example. "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you" (Eph. 4:32).

Christ's example. "And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (Eph. 5:2).

Assurance. "Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall" (2 Pet. 1:10).

Being effective as a Christian. "For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 1:8).

Jesus' return. "Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn!" (2 Pet. 3:11–12).

The futility of sin. "And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life?" (Matt. 6:27).

We were created for good works. "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:10).

The fear of the Lord. "Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others" (2 Cor. 5:11a).

To make God manifest. "No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us" (1 John 4:12).

For the glory of God. "Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body" (1 Cor. 6:19–20).

To avoid the devil's snares. "Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil" (Eph. 4:26–27).

For an eternal reward. "They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, thus storing up treasure for themselves as a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is truly life" (1 Tim. 6:18–19).

Love for Christ. "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15).

To experience God's favor. "A good man obtains favor from the LORD, but a man of evil devices he condemns" (Prov. 12:2).

Our union with Christ. "For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin" (Rom. 6:5–6).

You could probably find a hundred biblical reasons to be holy. And the sooner we explore and apply those reasons, the more equipped we'll be to fight sin, the more eager to make every effort to be more like Christ, and the more ready to say with the apostle John, "his commandments are not burdensome" (1 John 5:3). (DeYoung)

D-Group: From the above list, choose one Scriptural reason for pursuing holiness that resonates most with you personally. Why?

WHY IS CHANGE OR 'HOLINESS PART TWO' A COMMUNITY PROJECT?

- 1 If you noticed, several things on that list of ten reasons we get stuck related to believing lies and forgetting truths. Other believers will do a better job than we will of exposing our false beliefs, and reminding us what we've forgotten!
- 2 If Scripture is commanding us to walk in the light by confessing our sins, in the way that 1 John 1 and James 5:16 are describing, then you really can't do that without other people!

- 3 If you agree with what Carson said about downward drift, then you will recognize that you will need other people to help you notice when you drift, and to encourage you to begin running in the other direction.
- 4 Humbling ourselves stays strictly theoretical when the only place we're humbling ourselves is in our heads. We will always sin against our friends, coworkers, roommates, siblings, spouses, and kids. We're always relating to them spiritually—whether positively or negatively. It's just a question of whether we're coupling the sinning against them we *already* do, with confession, repentance, and encouragement we so often *fail* to do.
- 5 Short answer? Why is change a community project? That's just the way God designed it! He can do anything he wants all by himself but he usually chooses to use *means*. That means God usually answers your prayers for change *indirectly, through* community. "Lord, encourage me... Lord, help me to move beyond this paralyzing guilt and shame... Lord, help me to get unstuck..." These are all prayers he chooses to *usually* answer through other believers ministering to you! That is what is being described for us in Ephesians 4; that is Jesus' magnum opus. Going back to Nathan and David, would David have repented without Nathan's loving rebuke? At the very least, he was obviously stuck in his sin when Nathan reached out to him!

CHANGE AS A COMMUNITY PROJECT: CHALLENGES & BENEFITS

Our goal is to make you all "lifers"—people who have tasted healthy mutual discipleship, who know what it feels like to benefit from it and thus who know what it feels like to go without it. We want you to miss it when you neglect it, and see the relationship between isolation and hiddenness and being stuck and hurting...

In counting the cost of this commitment to mutual discipleship, it's important to tease out the experience of joy, the experience of coming into the light, and the personal benefit to be received by responding to this call, while also being mindful of how hard, pride-killing, and counter-intuitive it will be.

D-Group: Individually respond to the following question. In your personal experience, what have you found 1) *hardest to overcome* in embracing change as a community project, and how have you 2) *benefitted most* from doing so?

WHAT



WHAT?

D-GROUP CHEMISTRY

If you're not in community at all, what follows will be frustrating for you. Without community, you can't make friends, and therefore you can't engage in mutual discipleship. You have to know people on a scale smaller than one to 1,000 in order to have community. You have to know people on a scale smaller than one to 20 in order to have robust mutual discipleship of the kind we're talking about in this boot camp. Community alone is not the silver bullet—community that never moves deeper into mutual discipleship can become a place to hide in plain sight. *But* until you move out of anonymity into community, you won't be able to move into mutual discipleship. Having said all that, *in* seeking to move from community into mutual discipleship it's important to be mindful of the four components of discipleship group chemistry.

1 Commonality... It's helpful if you have things in common with each other.

The very condition of having Friends is that we should want something else besides Friends. Where the truthful answer to the question "Do you see the same truth?" would be "I see nothing and I don't care about the truth; I only want a Friend," no Friendship can arise—though Affection of course may. There would be nothing for the Friendship to be about; and Friendship must be about something, even if it were only an enthusiasm for dominoes or white mice. Those who have nothing can share nothing; those who are going nowhere can have no fellow-travelers. (C.S. Lewis)

2 Connection... Once you've identified people with whom you have things in common, it's helpful to ask yourself honestly if you *like* them! You could share an affinity for basketball, or Mexican food, or good coffee with someone, and still not necessarily want to spend time with them.

3 Commitment... If you find someone with whom you have things in common—who you also happen to like—then you're on the right track, but you still won't have a relationship of mutual discipleship until you *commit* to consistently and intentionally seek each other's spiritual growth and health.

4 Confession and repentance... You can have commonality, connection, and even be committed to each other, but if you don't actually confess your sins to each other, for the purpose of the repentance that leads to joy in Jesus, you won't see much growth at all. *Repentance is the way we grow.*

D-GROUP CHEMISTRY AND CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

1 However, we have to be careful here, because the pursuit of chemistry can quickly become idolatry. If *no one* you spend time with ever requires you to bear with them in love, then you might be spiritually selfish. On the other hand, if *everyone* you spend time with constantly requires you to bear with them in love, then you might be a spiritual masochist!

Friendship and Christian community are not synonymous. If you believe God only selects others *for* you, then you've misunderstood friendship. If you believe God only selects others *through* you, then you've misunderstood Christian community.

Friendship and community complement and make each other healthy. Friendship flows into community and community into friendship. Without community flowing into it, friendship becomes an ingrown clique. Without friendship flowing into it, community becomes a crushing weight.

Therefore, in summary, have the *confidence* to choose your friends; have the *humility* to let God lead you into Christian community.

2 A simple way to say all this is that a good mix is not necessary, but it's often helpful. Entering into a d-group relationship with at least one person you consider a friend can give you enough momentum to deepen your relationship with the other one or two people in the group that you may consider mere acquaintances. The experience of fighting shoulder to shoulder with other fellow-travelers often forges new friendships.

A Christian fellowship lives and exists by the intercession of its members for one another, or it collapses. I can no longer condemn or hate a brother for whom I pray, no matter how much trouble he causes me. His face, that hitherto may have been strange and intolerable to me, is transformed in intercession into the countenance of a brother for whom Christ died, the face of a forgiven sinner. (Bonhoeffer)

STORIES

In light of this healthy tension between friendship and Christian community, one of the most important strategic choices you can make as a group is to begin your journey together by sharing your life stories with each other. Don't feel a lot of urgency to try and squeeze the stories in quickly in order to get down to the business of 'really doing the stuff'. Growing in knowing each other well *is* the stuff. Even if you only hear one story each time you meet, for the first several meetings, and they take up the entirety of those meetings, that's great! Be sure and thank the person who shares when the things that are shared are painful, as it is a great honor for them to entrust you with the fine china of their lives. **Also be sure and gather around the person who has just shared and lay hands on them and pray for them. Invite the Holy Spirit to minister to them in that moment. Pray prayers of encouragement and thanksgiving for their life.**

CONSISTENCY

Strive to meet frequently, keeping in mind that each of you will inevitably miss a meeting occasionally. In other words, you will tend to meet a little bit less than you are actually scheduled to meet. If you're only meeting once a month, and someone misses a meeting, now you're now struggling to reconnect with them after sixty days! In our observation, d-groups in which men are keeping pace with the unfolding sanctification, suffering, and sin in each other's lives typically tend to meet bi-weekly or weekly. At least for our culture here at Bridgeway, one of most typical reasons people have a negative d-group experience is lack of consistency.

A Note to Men: While meeting frequently is important, for those of you men who are married with kids, it's *also* important to hold in tension the priority of being present to serve your wife and children. For this reason, we encourage you to try and meet early in the morning whenever possible, in order to be considerate of your wives, who are often tired after a long day and looking forward to your help at home.

Put a stake in your calendar at the outset. As much as is realistically possible, try and meet on the same day at the same time in the same place. If you're having a hard time nailing those things down at the outset, you may have a scheduling incompatibility. It's better to realize that before you begin attempting to meet, and face frustration and loss of momentum due to one member's inability to make time in their schedule. Clarify expectations, communicate clearly, and confront lovingly.

Recognize that consistency not only serves to cultivate relational momentum, but it also serves as a preventative guard against temptation and sin. The less you meet, the more opportunity the Enemy has to cut one of you out of the pack and begin gaining a foothold in your life through unconfessed sin, isolation, and shame.

Be intentional in your conversation. Seek to grow in your understanding of the importance of 'small talk' on the one hand, as well as the need for facilitating an eventual takeoff from the runway on the other hand. In other words, it's rarely wise to dive right into intense sharing, but it's equally important to ensure that a space is eventually created in the meeting time by intentionally shifting the conversation to deeper things.

Strive to start and end on time.

WHAT DO YOU TALK ABOUT? WHAT DO YOU LISTEN FOR? (The following material is taken from David Powlison.)

There's a proper order of listening and sharing in a d-group, if we let Scripture guide us. It corrects for our natural tendencies to get off course, and spend too much time focusing on and discussing some things, and far too little time focusing on and discussing other things. Think of this almost like the "food pyramid" of a healthy d-group.

- 1 Sanctification...** (They reflect God.) Are you always scanning for the work of the Spirit? A grace-hunt more than a sin-hunt? What is the Spirit doing in the person's life? What evidences of grace can you see in them?
- 2 Suffering...** (They suffer.) Do you pick up on troubles? Troubles come in the form of sin, suffering, or both. Do you know how to love those who suffer? Do you feel like you have to give an answer? Advice is a thorny matter. Do you handle other people's trouble with care—like fine china?
- 3 Sin...** (They sin.) When they confesses sin, how do you respond? Confrontation and rebuke are thorny matters. Do you confront and rebuke gently and humbly, as a fellow-sinner? Do you couple your confrontation and rebuke with encouragement and affirmation? When in doubt, think "we".

At the risk of making an overly broad stereotype, women tend to do well at the first and second (sanctification and suffering), and sometimes neglect the third (sin). Men, on the other hand, can tend to press into sin, and sometimes hurry past sanctification and suffering.

It's often easy to identify the ongoing struggle—the bad fruit. The real challenge is to push ourselves to turn the lights on in the rest of the picture, and dig down deep into the details. Often the good fruit we envision is pretty "thin" (e.g. no more than an absence of the bad—"I didn't lust this week"). But the Holy Spirit is committed to work in our lives, and every inch we grow will be useful to other people. The goal is not moral self-improvement, but being made over in the image of Christ so that we can increasingly learn what love looks like in the moment. We so often fail to see the ways in which God is on the move in our *own* lives, so it's crucial that we point out the good fruit that we see God producing in our brother that he may not see at all.

D-Group Action Step: Here's something you can do in light of all this. Make it a stated goal in your d-group, that the good fruit would be just as rich, detailed, and graphic as your description and awareness of what goes wrong. Be very intentional to involve each other in the process of growing in your awareness of the evidences of grace in your lives. Even in the midst of ongoing struggle, there is always genuine progress. Hebrews 3:13 is a call to concretely encourage each other as a means of killing sin and increasingly looking to Jesus.

Exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. All too often we think our only goal when we come together in d-group is to talk about the bad fruit. Hopefully you can now see how that's a distortion of biblical discipleship.

Q: Have you been in discipleship relationships where only the bad fruit was discussed—to the neglect of seeking out and highlighting the good fruit? What was that like?

WHAT KINDS OF QUESTIONS DO YOU ASK? (The following material is taken from Paul David Tripp.)

OK. Now you've gathered a group together. You've put a stake in your calendars. You've shared your stories and prayed with each other. You're seeking to share evidences of grace, troubles, and temptations. All this is good. But what kinds of questions should you be asking yourselves and each other to prompt further reflection and greater growth? The good news is, at the simplest level, there are really only two questions! We can ask them in 10,000 ways, but there are really only two questions. Here they are:

1 What are you facing in life? To put it more pointedly, what is your greatest struggle and need right now?

2 Second, what does the Lord say that speaks directly into what you are facing? Who is he? What is he doing? What does he promise? What does he will? And what does he call you to believe, need, trust, hope, and obey? (These questions explore a person's current perceptions of the God who is there. Is what God says and does immediately relevant or basically irrelevant?)

D-Group: Together, read the one-page article by David Powlison included in the *Questions* section of the handbook that unpacks and explains these two questions and discuss your reactions to the article.

D-Group: Use the accompanying 25 questions in the *Questions* section to jump start conversation and guide you in the kinds of questions to begin asking yourselves and each other that will promote a lifestyle of repentance.

SENSITIVITY TO THE SPIRIT VS. SLOPPINESS

Healthy d-groups cultivate sensitivity to the Holy Spirit in the moment—praying and listening and taking risks if they are sensing the Holy Spirit nudging them in a particular way. This leads the group into a trialogue instead of a dialogue—going vertical when the members of the group feel stuck, lost, overwhelmed, or confused by each other's struggles and needs. We must never forget that it's the Spirit who convicts us of sin, stirs our affections, gives us the ability to trust the promises of Scripture and heed the warnings of Scripture, and ultimately enables us to repent and change!

The Spirit will draw our attention to when he's doing something, and we would do well to heed his guidance. This might mean focusing almost entirely on one person, or setting aside our careful plans for that particular meeting time, or stopping to cry out to the Lord in prayer in the face of someone's particularly painful or overwhelming situation, *or* pressing on someone that you sense needs to come into the light or take violent action against their sin.

But the rubber band should always snap back. In sensitivity to the Spirit, and in response to the acute needs of any particular member, you stretch to make space, but if after four weeks one particular person is still dominating the group's time, such that no one else is able to confess sin or receive care, the group's health will begin to suffer. No matter how extreme that

person's sin or suffering might be, moving on to the other members of the group sends a healthy signal to that person that they're not the center of the universe and part of their healing will come in serving, not just in receiving.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Discuss confidentiality at the outset. Give each person in the room the opportunity to out loud describe how they understand the mutual commitment you're making to confidentiality. Decide what you will share or not share with your spouses, if any of you are married. It's incredibly important that you not repeat anything that was shared with you in confidence in the context of a d-group unless you 1) first get the permission of the person, or 2) believe there is some criminal act being perpetrated, or 3) determine someone is consistently defiant and unrepentant in their sin (in that case, seek outside help by encouraging them to reach out to one of us in leadership, and if they refuse, tell them you will approach Bridgeway leadership on their behalf).

LEADERSHIP VS. FACILITATION

Who leads, and how? Leadership should be primarily facilitation. The leader functions in the group by leading out in repentance rather than maintaining the qualification of leadership by failing less than the other members of the group!

How do you know when you've stopped saying 'we' and your leadership has become unhealthy hierarchical? When confessing your sin feels violently out of place and changes your demeanor. Your demeanor in the group should not change dramatically depending on whether you, by your own standards, had a great week or a bad week. In the gospel, we are humbly confident—neither swaggering nor sniveling (see the article in the Resources section on the gospel versus religion). Leadership in a d-group is facilitation and leadership by *example*—outdoing your brothers in repenting more quickly and more often. If you're going to insist on posturing yourself as the leader but you're not going to confess sin, get out of the group. You're going to do damage to your brothers by presenting a false spirituality to them. There are exceptions to this rule of course (e.g. an older mentor disciplining a group of younger people), but in the kind of peer-discipleship group that we're describing, this rule almost always applies.

It is not a good thing for one person to be the confessor for all the others. All too easily this individual will become overburdened, one for whom confession becomes an empty routine, giving rise to the unholy misuse of confession for the exercise of spiritual tyranny over souls. Those who do not practice confession themselves should be careful not to hear the confessions of other Christians, lest they succumb to this most frightening danger for confession. Only those who have been humbled themselves can hear the confession of another without detriment to themselves. (Bonhoeffer)

Caveat: If you're *completely* stuck in a particular besetting sin, you're not going to be able to sustain leading healthfully. In that season of instability and constant setbacks, you've probably got energy only for participation. Someone else should probably be facilitating. (You're also going to be more prone to either lash out in legalistic anger at the failures of others, because of the weight of condemnation you yourself are stewing in, or you're going to be soft on sin due to your accommodation of your own sin, and you'll fail to plead urgently with your brothers to flee from *their* sin.)

OTHER STRUCTURAL ELEMENTS

Size... We believe after much personal trial and error that three to four is an ideal size for a d-group.

Multiplication... How will your d-group multiply? It's important to be praying and asking yourself that question. How can those close to you be drawn into what you're benefitting from, without destroying what you're benefitting from?

Addition... Make sure and carefully process any new additions to the group with the entire group. A hasty or ill-advised addition to the group could set back the trust that you've worked so hard to build with each other. Also, when bringing someone new into an already-established group, cement them in through that same process of story and prayer that you yourselves engaged in at the beginning.

Authority... In light of our earlier observations about commonality and connection preceding commitment, discipleship groups are *traditionally* formed inside a community group. However, groups can also just as easily be formed *nontraditionally*, outside of a community group. For groups formed inside a community group, the structure of pastoral care is relatively clear (e.g. the discipleship group facilitator is being supported by the community group leader, the community group leader by a coach, and the coach by the elders). For groups formed outside of a community group, the simple rule of thumb is to strive to place yourselves under loving, biblical authority. In other words, it's helpful if at least the facilitator of the group is connected in a community group here at Bridgeway, so they can receive pastoral care from their community group leader, who in turn is receiving pastoral care from their coach and the pastors and elders.

HEALTHY AND UNHEALTHY GROUP HABITS

Unhealthy d-groups alternately offer cheap peace and punishment. Although accountability starts with a noble aim—commitment to confession, encouragement, and prayer for one another—good intentions often slide into legalistic or loose obedience, whereby we punish or absolve each other for not keeping the rules.

Cuss jar accountability... With legalistic, “cuss jar” accountability, the main motivation for not sinning is punishment or embarrassment. We refrain from sinning because we don't want to lose something or to be embarrassed by confessing sin to a friend.

Confession booth accountability... With loose, “confession booth” accountability, the motivation for killing sin slips away. At most we fear the frown of our fellow confessor. Our motivation for obedience to Jesus hollows out. Earnestness for holiness is replaced by ritual regurgitation of sin. Confessing sin to purge our conscience becomes most important, while we play fast and loose with our devotion to Jesus.

Healthy d-groups evaluate their group health periodically... by asking the simple question, "How are we doing?" This works even better if after noticing that things have gotten off track you examine your own heart ahead of time and come prepared to confess any ways in which you've contributed to a coldness or deadness in the group. This will help others in the group to open up and discuss how to help make the group healthy again. [See the article entitled *Questions to Help Diagnose the Health of a Group* in the *Resources* section of this handbook.]

Healthy d-groups introduce fresh content when the conversation begins to lag. Whether that's reading through the articles in the *Resources* section and discussing them, or reading through a chapter of Scripture and seeking to apply to your lives, there are many ways to infuse fresh content into your conversations.

1 Read through the articles in the *Resources* section of the d-group handbook and discuss them. Once you've finished sharing your stories with each other, and have prayed for each other, especially consider spending the next nine meetings reading out loud (taking it in

turn, a paragraph at a time) the nine-part series of articles excerpted from *The Gospel Centered Life* located at the back of the *Resources* section. Reading each article out loud will only take approximately ten minutes, and the conversation it will generate should prove fruitful.

2 Read through a chapter of Scripture and seek to apply it to your lives. The epistles can be especially helpful here.

Ask 1) How does this passage help me adore God?

Ask 2) How does it lead me to see and hate my sin?

Ask 3) How does it lead me to ask for grace?

3 Each of you choose one of the questions from the *Questions* section of the handbook that is especially convicting and/or relevant to your current struggles.

4 Choose some or all of the community group questions from the previous week's sermon and discuss them.

HOW



HOW?

AIM FOR THE HEART (The following material is taken from Paul David Tripp.)

- 1 What are we doing? Aiming for the heart. Why? Because our hearts are always being ruled by someone or something. In other words, whatever controls my heart will control my reactions and responses to the people and situations in my life. What I do and say is not caused by the people and situations around me. Rather, what I do and say is caused by what I believe and desire. Scripture calls that the heart.
- 2 Therefore, the way God changes us is to recapture our hearts to serve him alone.
- 3 The deepest issues we need to address in d-group are not issues of pain and suffering. The deepest issue is the issue of *worship* (What really rules my heart?) because what rules our hearts will control the way we respond to both suffering *and* blessing!

FIRST, CONSIDER YOUR OWN HEART AND LIFE STORY (The following material is taken from Ed Welch.)

Can you make the connection between the details of your daily life and your relationship with the Lord? Your daily life—your work and relationships—gives you an accurate read on your relationship with Jesus. How are your best relationships? Your worst relationships?

- 1 How are your spiritual disciplines? How are you growing in your battle with sin?
- 2 Do you **ask for help**? Are you needy? Here's a homework assignment for this coming week. Ask someone to pray for you.
- 3 Do you encourage other people to do things you don't do?
- 4 Are you personally turning to Jesus in the midst of suffering and hardship? In Hosea 7:14, the Lord accuses the Israelites in this way: *They do not cry to me from the heart, but they wail upon their beds...*
- 5 What are your weaknesses or common mistakes in everyday conversation? Do you tend to interrupt? Do you tend to bully? Do you stay silent out of fear of what others might think about you?

TEN WAYS TO AIM FOR THE HEART (The following material is taken from Ed Welch.)

When we finish walking through these, we're going to ask you to take a moment and circle just *one* of these ten principles that you feel would be most helpful for you to prayerfully begin practicing. You certainly won't remember all ten of these principles, and even if you did, you wouldn't be able to begin growing in all of them simultaneously. So take a small step and choose one.

- 1 Seek to **move conversations one step deeper**. Refer to the handout entitled *Aim for the Heart* in the *Resources* section of the handbook for the kinds of questions you'll ask each other as you move towards each other. These questions concretely show what moving the conversation one step deeper actually looks like.
- 2 **Move towards them** and **know them well enough to pray with them**. What's the ultimate goal? To know them well enough to pray for them right then and there!
- 3 **Listen!** What do you listen *for*?
Sanctification

Suffering
Sin

- 4 Strive to **be personal**. In other words, do you care about the other person? Do you like them? Do you look forward to seeing them? If not, why not? If necessary, repent.
- 5 **Follow up**. So much of what we do in a d-group is following up—keeping track of the other person's story.
- 6 **Listen until you're moved**. That's the answer if you're wondering *how long* you should listen, as well as if you're wondering what the *purpose* of listening is.
- 7 **Think “we”** and walk alongside as a friend. When we become facilitators, does our model of ministry imperceptibly begin to change from a talk over coffee? The tendency is to become an expert, but we must guard against this. Who are we? Brother, sister, friend, becoming a friend, sinner, strong in weakness, shoulder to shoulder.
- 8 When in doubt, **edit yourself**.
- 9 As you get to know them, **mingle your conversation with words of encouragement and comfort**.
- 10 **Be slow to give advice**. Advice is “speed-discipleship”. Something you say may emerge out of Scripture, but what makes it advice is that it's a narrow application of that Scripture. Advice tends to not be strong on listening, and certainly isn't strong on compassion. Advice is simply waiting to identify the problem, and once it identifies the problem it is off and running on a possible solution. For the advice-giver, compassion is just extra time that impedes efficiency. It doesn't tend to be personal; it isn't moved by what the other person has to say. There tends to be a lack of entering into the other person's world and seeing it through their eyes. Rather, advice says “This is what I would do in your situation.”

It tends to put the relationship at risk a bit, because when you start receiving advice from another person, especially a close friend, it suddenly feels as if the relationship has taken a hierarchical turn. The person giving the advice is the expert, who's speaking down to the student who's intended to receive the advice.

Advice doesn't say “That's a great question. Tell me what you're thinking. I know you've thought about this. You wouldn't ask the question if you weren't thinking about these things.” This is a theological concept. They have been thinking about this, and they have the Spirit of Christ in them! Simply put, first ask “What have you done?” and then “What are you thinking about doing?” When in doubt, move in a collegial direction and speak ‘we’.

Action: Take a moment and circle just *one* of these ten principles that you feel would be most helpful for you to prayerfully begin practicing.

THE PRIMACY OF PRAYER

1 Don't let prayer remain the last bastion of legalism...

We know that to become a Christian we shouldn't try to fix ourselves up, but when it comes to praying we completely forget that. We'll sing the old gospel hymn, “Just as I Am,” but when it comes to praying, we don't come just as we are. We try, like adults, to fix ourselves up. Private, personal prayer is one of the last great bastions of legalism. In order to pray like a child, you might need to unlearn the non-personal, non-real praying that you've been taught.

The most common frustration is the activity of praying itself. We last for about fifteen

seconds, and then out of nowhere the day's to-do list pops up and our minds are off on a tangent. We catch ourselves and, by sheer force of the will, go back to praying. Before we know it, it has happened again. Instead of praying, we are doing a confused mix of wandering and worrying. Then the guilt sets in. Something must be wrong with me. Other Christians don't seem to have this trouble praying. After five minutes we give up, saying, "I am no good at this. I might as well get some work done."

...The only way to come to God is by taking off any spiritual mask. The real you has to meet the real God. He is a person. Come overwhelmed with life. Come with a wandering mind. Come messy. So, instead of being frozen by your self-preoccupation, talk with God about your worries. Tell him where you are weary. If you don't begin with where you are, then where you are will sneak in the back door. Your mind will wander to where you are weary...
(Paul Miller)

D-Group: Work through the discussion sheet based on Paul Miller's *A Praying Life* in the *Prayer* section of the handbook.

2 Do pray beyond the sick list... This is prayer as more than "Joe, would you pray us out?" This is prayer that has as its goal including God in the conversation. We can broadly categorize three emphases of biblical prayer: circumstantial prayers, wisdom prayers, and kingdom prayers... **Sometimes we ask God to change our circumstances... Sometimes we ask God to change us... Sometimes we ask God to change everything** by revealing Himself more fully on the stage of real life, magnifying the degree to which His glory and rule are obvious... When any of these three gets detached from the other two, prayer tends to go sour.

D-Group: Read the article entitled *Pray Beyond the Sick List* included in the *Prayer* section of the handbook prior to your d-group meeting, and then come together and discuss what stood out to you.

3 Do pray for the Spirit's power...

Not only is Jesus [our] Savior because of who he was and because of his own complete obedience to the Father's will (cf. Heb. 10:5-7), but he is the supreme example for [us] of what is possible in a human life because of his own total dependence upon the Spirit of God. Jesus is living proof how those who are his followers may exceed the limitations of their humanness in order that they, like him, might carry to completion against all odds their God-given mission in life—by the Holy Spirit. (Gerald F. Hawthorne)

NOW



NOW?

DON'T ASSUME YOU WANT TO CHANGE (The following material is taken from Ed Welch.)

After surrendering to our cravings for awhile, *of course* we want to change. We feel guilt... Do you want to change? Yes. But pause for a moment. Human beings want freedom. Change means putting up boundaries, and that doesn't feel very free. Add to this the fact that we crave something *because we like it*. Do you really think that a casual flirting with change will be enough? So think about it. Are you ready to change? Do you actually *want* to change? You are open to the idea of change, but what are your conditions?

- You want it, but without having to break a sweat.
- You want it because you are *supposed* to want it. Maybe you are not really thinking yet. You are moving around like a robot, just trying to please people.
- You want it, but not at the cost of saying goodbye to something you love.
- You want it—sometimes.
- You want it—tomorrow.
- You want it simply because it will make life a little easier or bring hope back to a relationship.
- You want it, but you are waiting for God to take away your cravings. Until he does, you feel as if there is nothing you can or should do, which is a convenient excuse for continuing.

GET TACTICAL (FOUR TACTICS FOR FIGHTING TEMPTATION) (The following material is taken from Sam Storms.)

Healthy d-groups strive to avoid confession without repentance. Nothing changes if nothing changes! Here are four tactics for resisting temptation that illustrate how to bridge the gap between mere confession and active repentance. This is how to validate the genuineness of your repentance with your actions.

- 1 The first and perhaps most important tactic for facing temptation is to immerse oneself in the joys and eternal pleasures that are found in God alone (Ps. 16:11).** Satan's "fiery darts" do not easily penetrate a mind whose only thought is "Oh! Wow! What a God!" When our hearts beat with perpetual fascination and our thoughts are filled with the beauty and splendor and adequacy of God, little room is left for the devil to gain a foothold (see Phil. 4:8).
- 2 Know yourself.** Ask the question often: "If I were the devil, where would I attack me?" In other words, be quick to identify your weaknesses, your vulnerable spots, areas where you've failed before, and take extraordinary steps to protect yourself in the future. If you are susceptible to the effects of alcohol, don't toy with a casual drink. If your fantasies are easily fueled by visual images, stay away from R-rated movies.
- 3 Deal radically with sin (see Matt. 5:29).** The point is that we must deal drastically with sin. "We must not pamper it, flirt with it, enjoy nibbling a little of it around the edges. We are to hate it, crush it, dig it out" (D.A. Carson).
- 4 Confront and conquer temptation at the beginning, not at the end.** In other words, the best and most effective tactic against temptation is to deal with it from a position of strength, before it has an opportunity to weaken you. Better to take steps up front to eliminate temptation altogether (if possible), than to deal with it later when your defenses are down.

Place these four action steps in the context of what we've already been talking about. As you seek to listen well, and as you aim for the heart, and as you seek to notice when sanctification, suffering, and sin are shared, and as you seek to refrain from mere advice-giving, you will still eventually come to moments when you find yourselves asking, "Now

what?" You'll find yourself thinking, "I've confessed/heard their confession, I've sought to cultivate increasing hatred of my sin/encouraged them to cultivate increasing hatred of their sin, so now what do I *do*/encourage them to *do*?" Well, these four tactics are a great place to start! Ask yourself how you can concretely stir up your affection for all that God is for you in Jesus. Ask yourself how you can proactively grow as a student of your own weaknesses—ways in which you are uniquely "prone to wander"? How can you take immediate and violent action to increasingly flee temptation? How can you now, in the bright light of godly remorse, take steps to prepare for, and if possible, eliminate future temptation? Asking yourself and each other these questions prayerfully, graciously, and firmly will lead to practical, genuine progress in the midst of ongoing struggle, by the power of the Spirit.

FIGHT TO FEED ON SCRIPTURE

1 Start by seeking to read Scripture more days than not in a given week. If you continue to fail in doing that, be honest about your failure to do so until you do.

2 Choose a plan for the regular reading of all of Scripture and use it.

Now . . . I would give a few hints to my younger fellow-believers as to the way in which to keep up spiritual enjoyment. It is absolutely needful . . . we should read regularly through the Scriptures, consecutively, and not pick out here and there a chapter. If we do, we remain spiritual dwarfs. I tell you so affectionately. For the first four years after my conversion I made no progress, because I neglected the Bible. But when I regularly read on through the whole with reference to my own heart and soul, I directly made progress. Then my peace and joy continued more and more. Now I have been doing this for 47 years. I have read through the whole Bible about 100 times and I always find it fresh when I begin again. Thus my peace and joy have increased more and more. (George Mueller)

3 Don't just read, *meditate*.

At the age of 76, George Mueller wrote these words: I saw more clearly than ever, that the first great and primary business to which I ought to attend every day was, to have my soul happy in the Lord... I saw that the most important thing I had to do was to give myself to the reading of the word of God, and to meditation on it. . . . What is the food of the inner man? Not prayer, but the word of God; and . . . not the simple reading of the word of God, so that it only passes through our minds, just as water runs through a pipe, but considering what we read, pondering over it, and applying it to our hearts.

4 Don't just meditate, *memorize*.

Bible memorization is absolutely fundamental to spiritual formation. If I had to choose between all the disciplines of the spiritual life, I would choose Bible memorization, because it is a fundamental way of filling our mind with what it needs. This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth. That's where you need it! How does it get in your mouth? Memorization. (Dallas Willard)

EVALUATE YOURSELVES AS HELPERS

1 Do you notice small steps?

2 Do you agree on small steps?

3 Are you specific?

4 Do you follow up?

READ WISE & BIBLICAL BOOKS ON SANCTIFICATION

Laying the Foundation

- *Gospel: Recovering the Power that Made Christianity Revolutionary*
J.D. Greear

Stirring Affections

- *The Singing God: Feel the passion God has for you... just the way you are*
Sam Storms
- *One Thing: Developing a Passion for the Beauty of God*
Sam Storms
- *When I Don't Desire God: How to Fight for Joy*
John Piper

Methods of Change

- *The Mortification of Sin* (read the edition contained in *Overcoming Sin and Temptation*, a collection of three of Owen's books, edited for readability by Kelly Kopic & Justin Taylor)
John Owen
- *How People Change*
Timothy S. Lane & Paul David Trip
- *Seeing with New Eyes: Counseling and the Human Condition Through the Lens of Scripture*
David Powlison
- *Addictions: A Banquet in the Grave*
Edward T. Welch
- *Closing the Window: Steps to Living Porn Free*
Tim Chester

Spiritual Disciplines

- *A Hunger for God: Desiring God Through Fasting and Prayer*
John Piper
- *Simplify Your Spiritual Life: Spiritual Disciplines for the Overwhelmed*
Donald S. Whitney
- *A Praying Life: Connecting with God in a Distracting World*
Paul E. Miller

Sanctification

- *Holiness*
J.C. Ryle
- *Rediscovering Holiness*
J.I. Packer
- *The Hole in Our Holiness: Filling the Gap Between Gospel Passion and the Pursuit of Godliness*
Kevin DeYoung

QUESTIONS



GENERAL QUESTIONS TO PROVOKE REFLECTION & DISCUSSION

1. **What are you facing in life?** To put it more pointedly, what is your greatest struggle and need right now?
2. **Second, what does the Lord say that speaks directly into what you are facing?** Who is he? What is he doing? What does he promise? What does he will? And what does he call you to believe, need, trust, hope, and obey? (These questions explore a person's current perceptions of the God who is there. Is what God says and does immediately relevant or basically irrelevant?)

Both questions help us to work on the things that count. Ministry is always helping people make connections they haven't been making. It's always reinterpreting what's going on, identifying redemptive opportunities in what seem like the same old ruts. It traces out previously unseen practical implications of life in Christ. It's always remaking minds, hearts, and lifestyles that are still misshapen. These questions will help you to say the timely, significant, and appropriate words that encourage such a discipling of lives.

The first question helps us grasp the environment (providentially arranged by the Vinedresser) in which growth (or hardening) takes place daily. It makes discipleship relevant. Occasionally there is a big issue, a major choice of life direction. But usually the watershed moments occur in the tiny choices of life: the words we say or don't say; the attitudes we adopt or resist; the tasks we pick up or neglect; the ways we love or ignore another; our reaction to some typical trouble. If love is the Spirit's fruit, we need him right then and there.

The second question helps us grasp what this person does (or does not) understand about God and how he meets us. It enables discipleship to build on what someone already knows. (But how easily we forget, get distracted, or turn willfully away!) You can then judiciously add what someone doesn't yet know that makes a difference. Often people we disciple already know significant truth, but they don't know it in a way that changes their lives. Discipleship does the hard work of kneading what is true into how we actually live.

You will ask these two questions in a hundred different ways. They are things that you the discipler must continually be asking of everything you see and hear, whether or not you actually pose these questions aloud. You are looking for the significant real-time turning points—today, this week, during this season of this person's life. You are looking for the places where you can say to another, "Here is where you need this grace and truth." I'll often say to someone, "The Vinedresser uses pruning shears, not a chain saw. He's not going to work on everything all at once. He's not going to make you face every kind of trouble right now. He's not going to teach you everything about himself. But something about who he is and what he says to you can make a decisive difference in some challenge you are facing right now." In discipling another, I am doing nothing more than pursuing the same line of questioning and reasoning that I need myself. God meets you—and me—exactly where we are. That's all these questions are about.*

* The content of this page is taken directly from: Powlison, David. *Speaking Truth In Love*. New Growth Press.

SPECIFIC QUESTIONS TO PROVOKE REFLECTION & DISCUSSION

- 1) Have you been a testimony this week to the greatness of Jesus Christ with both your words and actions?
- 2) Have you been honoring, understanding and generous in your important relationships this past week?
- 3) Have you been exposed to sexually alluring material or allowed your mind to entertain inappropriate thoughts about someone who is not your spouse this week? Have you withheld intimacy this week?
- 4) Have you consciously or unconsciously created the impression that you are better than you are? In other words, are you a hypocrite? Are you a slave to dress, friends, work, or habits?
- 5) Have you lacked any integrity in your financial dealings this week, or coveted something that does not belong to you? Have you given graciously?
- 6) Have you continued to remain angry toward another?
- 7) Have you given in to an addictive behavior this week? Apathetic behavior?
- 8) Have you grumbled? Are you complaining constantly? Have you been a people pleaser?
- 9) Have you controlled your tongue?
- 10) Has technology or work stolen attention from your family? What did you do this week to enhance your relationship with your family?[†]
- 11) What do you desire more than anything else?
- 12) What do you find yourself daydreaming or fantasizing about?
- 13) What lies do you subtly believe that undermine the truth of the gospel?
- 14) Are you astonished with the gospel?
- 15) Where have you made much of yourself and little of God?
- 16) Is technology interrupting your communion with God?
- 17) Is work a source of significance? How?
- 18) Where do your thoughts drift when you enter a social setting?
- 19) What fears keep you from resting in Christ?
- 20) What consumes your thoughts when you have alone time?[‡]
- 21) When people see how you spend money, do they conclude that God is a priceless treasure, exceedingly valuable above all worldly goods?
- 22) When people observe your relationship with others, are they alerted to the power of Christ's forgiveness of you that alone accounts for your forgiveness of them?
- 23) If you are complimented for some accomplishment, does the way you receive it drive onlookers to give thanks to the Lord?
- 24) Is your use of leisure time or devotion to a hobby or how you speak of your spouse the sort that persuades others that your heart is content with what God is for you in Christ?
- 25) Does your reaction to bad news produce in you doubt or fear, or does it inspire confidence to trust in God's providence?[§]

[†] Questions 1–10 adapted from Park Church's *Transformation Groups* document. www.parkchurchdenver.org

[‡] Questions 11–20 adapted from Jonathan Dodson's book, *Gospel-Centered Discipleship*.

[§] Questions 21–25 adapted from Sam Storms's book, *A Sincere and Pure Devotion to Christ, Vol. 1*.

PRAYER



A PRAYING LIFE by Paul Miller

1) What principles for prayer can you draw from Jesus' words in Matthew 11:28-30? *Begin by reading the passage out loud together. Have a member of your group jot your observations down as you share them.*

28 Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

2) *Read the following observations from Paul Miller out loud, taking turns as you read. After reading, take turns sharing what stood out to you.*

Jesus wants us to be without pretense when we come to him in prayer. Instead, we often try to be something we aren't. We begin by concentrating on God, but almost immediately our minds wander off in a dozen different directions. The problems of the day push out our well-intentioned resolve to be spiritual. We give ourselves a spiritual kick in the pants and try again, but life crowds out prayer. We know that prayer isn't supposed to be like this, so we give up in despair. We might as well get something done. What's the problem? We're trying to be spiritual, to get it right. We know we don't need to clean up our act in order to become a Christian, but when it comes to praying, we forget that. We, like adults, try to fix ourselves up. In contrast, Jesus wants us to come to him like little children, just as we are.

The difficulty of coming just as we are is that we are messy. And prayer makes it worse. When we slow down to pray, we are immediately confronted with how unspiritual we are, with how difficult it is to concentrate on God. We don't know how bad we are until we try to be good. Nothing exposes our selfishness and spiritual powerlessness like prayer. In contrast, little children never get frozen by their selfishness. Like the disciples, they come just as they are, totally self-absorbed. They seldom get it right. As parents or friends, we know all that. In fact, we are delighted (most of time!) to find out what is on their little hearts. We don't scold them for being self-absorbed or fearful. That is just who they are...

Jesus does not say, "Come to me, all you who have learned how to concentrate in prayer, whose minds no longer wander, and I will give you rest." No, Jesus opens his arms to his needy children and says, "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28, NASB). The criteria for coming to Jesus is weariness. Come overwhelmed with life. Come with your wandering mind. Come messy. What does it feel like to be weary? You have trouble concentrating. The problems of the day are like claws in your brain. You feel pummeled by life. What does heavy-laden feel like? Same thing. You have so many problems you don't even know where to start. You can't do life on your own anymore. Jesus wants you to come to him that way! Your weariness drives you to him.

We know that to become a Christian we shouldn't try to fix ourselves up, but when it comes to praying we completely forget that. We'll sing the old gospel hymn, "Just as I Am," but when it comes to praying, we don't come just as we are. We try, like adults, to fix ourselves up.

Private, personal prayer is one of the last great bastions of legalism. In order to pray like a child, you might need to unlearn the non-personal, non-real praying that you've been taught.

3) *Read the following observations from Paul Miller out loud, taking turns as you read. Then take turns answering the following question: In light of what you've read, what specific challenges are you currently facing in seeking to make room in your day to day life for intimacy with Jesus?*

Because we can do life without God, praying seems nice but unnecessary. Money can do what prayer does, and it is quicker and less time-consuming. Our trust in ourselves and in our talents makes us structurally independent of God. As a result, exhortations to pray don't stick...

The glib way people talk about prayer often reinforces our cynicism. We end our conversations with "I'll keep you in my prayers." We have a vocabulary of "prayer speak," including "I'll lift you up in prayer" and "I'll remember you in prayer." Many who use these phrases, including us, never get around to praying. Why? Because we don't think prayer makes much

difference. Cynicism and glibness are just part of the problem. The most common frustration is the activity of praying itself. We last for about fifteen seconds, and then out of nowhere the day's to-do list pops up and our minds are off on a tangent. We catch ourselves and, by sheer force of the will, go back to praying. Before we know it, it has happened again. Instead of praying, we are doing a confused mix of wandering and worrying. Then the guilt sets in. Something must be wrong with me. Other Christians don't seem to have this trouble praying. After five minutes we give up, saying, "I am no good at this. I might as well get some work done."

...The only way to come to God is by taking off any spiritual mask. The real you has to meet the real God. He is a person. Come overwhelmed with life. Come with a wandering mind. Come messy. So, instead of being frozen by your self-preoccupation, talk with God about your worries. Tell him where you are weary. If you don't begin with where you are, then where you are will sneak in the back door. Your mind will wander to where you are weary...

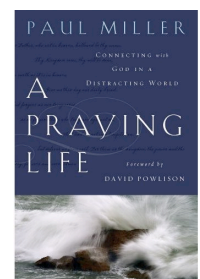
You don't create intimacy; you make room for it. This is true whether you are talking about your spouse, your friend, or God. You need space to be together. Efficiency, multitasking, and busyness all kill intimacy. In short, you can't get to know God on the fly.

4) Read the following observations from Paul Miller out loud, taking turns as you read. Then take turns answering the following question: What are one or two recommendations from this list that would have the greatest positive impact on your own prayer life, and why?

When it comes to spending time with God, take baby steps. Don't set impossible goals and then collapse. If you can remember a time in your life when you had a great half hour of prayer, don't make that your standard. Start slowly. Take a baby step of five minutes.

There is no one way to do this. Some people pray on their way to work. My one caution is that it is tough to be intimate when you are multitasking. It would weaken a marriage if talking to your spouse in the car was the only time you communicated. It will do the same to your relationship with God. Here are seven simple suggestions for how you can spend time with your Father in the morning:

1. *Get to bed.* What you do in the evening will shape your morning. The Hebrew notion of a day as the evening and morning (see Genesis 1) helps you plan for prayer. If you want to pray in the morning, then plan your evening so you don't stay up too late. The evening and the morning are connected.
2. *Get up.* Praying in bed is wonderful. In fact, the more you pray out of bed, the more you'll pray in bed. But you'll never develop a morning prayer time in bed. Some of my richest prayer times are at night. I'll wake up praying. But those prayer times only began to emerge because I got out of bed to pray.
3. *Get awake.* Maybe you need to make a pot of coffee first or take a shower.
4. *Get a quiet place.* Maybe a room, a chair, or a place with a view. Or maybe you do better going for a walk. Make sure that no one can interrupt you.
5. *Get comfortable.* Don't feel like you have to pray on your knees. For years I was hindered from praying because I found it so uncomfortable to pray on my knees.
6. *Get going.* Start with just five minutes. Start with a small goal that you can attain rather than something heroic. You'll quickly find that the time will fly.
7. *Keep going.* Consistency is more important than length. If you pray five minutes every day, then the length of time will slowly grow. You'll look up and discover that twenty minutes have gone by. You'll enjoy being with God. Jesus is so concerned about hanging in there with prayer that he tells "his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up."



Pray Beyond the Sick List



By David Powlison

It sounds so simple. But it must not be that easy. Many pastoral prayers from the pulpits of many churches do not pray beyond the sick list—and they do not even pray very pointedly or intelligently for the sick. Many pastoral prayers sound uncannily like a nursing report at shift change in your local hospital: "The colon cancer in room 103 with uncertain prognosis... the lady in 110 with a gall bladder that's not yielding to treatment... the broken leg that's mending well... the heart patient going into surgery on Tuesday under Dr. Jones's skilled hands..." Such public prayers are often medically informative, but spiritually impoverished. Usually physical healing is the sole goal of prayer. At the most debased, a prayer might be nothing more than requests for doctors, procedures, and medicines to be effective.

Visitors to many of our churches might be pardoned if they get the impression that God is chiefly interested in perking up our health, and that the thing all of us most need is radiant good health. They might also be pardoned if they get the impression that God isn't very good at doing what we ask. The prayer list in many churches progressively fills up with chronic illnesses. And

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deep down we know that every person in every pew will die sooner or later, usually from progressively worsening ill health. Pastoral prayers, prayer meetings, and prayer lists too often have the net effect of actually disheartening and distracting the faith of God's people. Prayer becomes either a dreary litany of familiar words, or a magical superstition verging on hysteria. It either dulls our expectations of God, or hypes up fantasy expectations. Prayers for the sick can even become a breeding ground for cynicism: the people who get better—wouldn't they have gotten better anyway, as nature takes its course, or as medical interventions bring about their often predictable results? Or prayer can become a breeding ground for many bizarre ideas and practices: a spiritually sanctioned version of the exact same obsession with health and medicine that characterizes the wider culture; naming and claiming your healing; superstitious belief that the quantity or the fervency of prayer is decisive in getting God's ear; the notion that prayer has some intrinsic "power"; questioning the faith of a person who doesn't get better.

Changing Our Prayers

It's hard to learn how to pray. It's rare enough that we make an intelligent, honest request from capable friends whom we trust for something we very much need. That's all prayer is. But somehow when the making of a request

is termed “praying” and the capable party is termed “God,” things tend to get tangled. You’ve seen it, heard it, done it: the contorted syntax, formulaic phrasing, meaningless repetition, “just reallys,” vague non-requests, artificially pious tone of voice, air of confusion. If you talked to your friends or parents that way they’d think you’d lost your mind!

But if your understanding of prayer changes.... If your practice of prayer then changes.... If the prayer requests you make—and the ones you ask others to make—change.... If the model of prayer that you evidence with and before others changes.... If your teaching on prayer changes....

Consider a few factors that can bring about such change.

Keep Spiritual Issues in View

First, notice a few things about James 5:13-20. This passage is *the* warrant for praying for the sick. It is certainly significant that James explicitly envisions prayer not in a congregational setting, but in what we might think of as a counseling setting! The sick person asks for help, meets with a few elders, honestly confesses sins, repents, and draws near to God. Earnest prayer is described as affecting both the physical state and the spiritual state of that person. This doesn’t mean it’s wrong to pray from the pulpit for sick people. Of course not. But it at least ought to make us think twice that the classic text on praying for the sick imagines something highly personal and interpersonal taking place.

Notice also how pointedly James keeps spiritual issues in view. His letter is *about* growing in wisdom, and he doesn’t change that emphasis when it comes to helping the sick. What he writes is predicated on his understanding that suffering presents an occasion to become wise, a very good gift from above: “Count it all joy when you meet various trials.... If anyone lacks wisdom, let him ask....” He has already illustrated this regarding the issues of poverty, injustice, and interpersonal conflict. Now he illustrates it regarding sickness.

James’ focus on the spiritual issues operating within any experience of suffering does not mean that people get sick because they’ve sinned. That’s sometimes so: e.g., IV drug use and sexual immorality do lead to AIDS

on occasion. People do reap in sickness what they sow in sin. But made into a universal rule, that idea is mere superstition, or the heartlessness of Job’s counselors.

At least two other dynamics also play out in the way God meets us in sickness. Sickness, like any other weakness and trouble, can force us to stop and face ourselves, to stop and find the Lord. I may find sins I’ve been too busy to notice: neglectfulness, irritability, indifference, self-indulgence, unbelief, joylessness, worries, complaining, drivenness in work, trust in my own health and ability. I may find my need for Jesus’ mercies quickened, my delight in God deepened. I may develop fruit of the Spirit that can develop no other way than by suffering well: endurance of faith; hope and joy that transcend circumstances; mature character; richer knowledge of the love of God; living for my God not my self-absorbed pleasures; the humility of weakness; the ability to help other people who suffer.¹

And sickness, like any weakness or trouble, is itself a temptation. Whether you face life-threatening disease or just feel lousy for a couple days, it is amazing what that experience can bring out of your heart. Some people complain and grumble, getting grouchiest with the people who most care. Others get angry—at God, at themselves, at others, at the inconvenience. Others pretend nothing is wrong, denying reality. Others pretend they’re sicker than they are, seeking an excuse to avoid responsibilities of job, school, or family. Others invest vast hopes, time, and money in pursuing doctor after doctor, book after book, drug after drug, diet after diet, quack after quack. Others try to find someone or something to blame, even getting litigious. Others just keep pressing on with life, doing, doing, doing—when God really intends that they stop and learn the lessons of weakness. Others become deeply fearful—“Perhaps this is the big one”—imagining the worst, playing mental videotapes of their upcoming demise and funeral. Others milk weakness for all the extra attention and pity they can get. Others shirk responsibilities that they could fulfill even while feeling a bit subpar.

¹ See Jam. 1:3; Rom. 5:3-5; 1 Pet. 1:6-8, 4:1-3; 2 Cor. 12:9f.

Others plunge into a gluttony of utter self-indulgence: TV, games, food, reading. Others get depressed. Feeling lousy physically becomes an occasion to question the meaning and value of their entire existence. Others are too proud or embarrassed to ask for help. Others manipulate everyone within reach to serve their every need. Others brood that God must be out to get them, becoming morbidly introspective about every real or imaginary failing.

You get the picture! Sickness provides one of the richest opportunities imaginable for spiritual growth and pastoral counseling, as James 5 makes clear. Is God interested in healing any particular illness? Sometimes, sometimes not. But is He always interested in making us wise, holy, trusting, and loving, even in the context of our pain, disability, and dying? Yes, yes again, and amen.

People learn to pray beyond the sick list when they realize what God is really all about.

Long for Christ's Kingdom

Second, consider in a few broad strokes some of the vast biblical teaching on prayer. How many of Scripture's prayers focus on sickness? A significant few, giving good warrant to plead passionately with God for healing. We've already mentioned James 5. In Isaiah 38, Hezekiah pleads for restoration of health, and he is healed. In 2 Corinthians 12, Paul prays earnestly three times to be delivered from a painful affliction—but this time God said No. Psalm 35:12-14 mentions heartfelt prayer for the restoration of the sick, and portrays this as a natural expression of loving concern. Both Elijah and Elisha passionately supplicate God on behalf of only sons whose sicknesses ended in death, devastating their mothers (1 Kings 17; 2 Kings 4). In both cases God mercifully restored them. Coming at the issue from the opposite direction, the Bible's last word on Asa is negative because "his disease was severe, yet even in his disease he did not seek the LORD, but the physicians" (2 Chron. 16:12). He is chided for failing to pray through sickness. Prayer has many degrees of intensity, with supplication and outcry being the strongest. It is striking how passionate and blunt the prayers for healing are. These passages vividly challenge the perfunctory and medicine-centric prayers that often are said, even by people overly

preoccupied with praying for the sick! When you pray for the sick (and as you teach the sick to seek God for themselves), it ought to be a fiercely thoughtful firestorm.

It is clear, however, that the vast majority of prayers in the Bible focus on other things. As shorthand, let me broadly categorize three emphases of biblical prayer: circumstantial prayers, wisdom prayers, and kingdom prayers. Praying for the sick is one form of the first.

1. Sometimes we ask God to *change our circumstances*: heal the sick, give us daily bread, protect me from suffering and evildoers, make our political leaders just, convert my friends and family, make our work and ministries prosper, provide me with a spouse, quiet this dangerous storm, send us rain, give us a child.

2. Sometimes we ask God to *change us*: deepen my faith, teach us to love each other, forgive our sins, make me wise where I tend to be foolish, make us know You better, enable me to sanctify You in my heart, don't let me dishonor You, give us understanding of Scripture, teach me how to encourage others.

3. Sometimes we ask God to *change everything by revealing Himself* more fully on the stage of real life, magnifying the degree to which His glory and rule are obvious: Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven, be exalted above the heavens, let Your glory be over all of the earth, let Your glory fill the earth as the waters cover the sea, come Lord Jesus.

In the Lord's prayer you see examples of all three. They are tightly interwoven when we pray rightly. The Lord's kingdom (#3) involves the destruction of our sins (#2) and our sufferings (#1). His reign causes a flourishing of love's perfect wisdom and a wealth of situational blessing. Prayers for God to change my circumstances and to change me are, in their inner logic, requests that He reveal His glory and mercy on the stage of this world.

When any of these three gets detached from the other two, prayer tends to go sour. If you just pray for better circumstances, then God becomes the errand boy (usually somewhat disappointing) who exists to give you your shopping list of desires and pleasures—no sanctifying purposes, no higher glory. Prayer pursues self-centered gimme, gimme, gimme. If you only pray for personal change, then it tends

to reveal an obsession with moral self-improvement, a self-absorbed spirituality detached from engagement with other people and the tasks of life that need doing. Where is the longing for Christ's kingdom to right *all* wrongs, not just to alleviate my sins so I don't feel bad about myself? Prayer pursues self-centered, morally-strenuous asceticism, with little evidence of real love, trust, or joy. If you only pray for the sweeping invasion of the kingdom, then prayers tend towards irrelevance and overgeneralization, failing to walk out how the actual kingdom rights real wrongs, wipes away real tears, and removes real sins. Such prayers pursue a God who never touches ground until the last day.

Practice the Three Strands of Prayer

We could give countless examples of these three strands of prayer operating wisely. Let me note a few. Consider the psalms, *the* book of talking with God. About 90 psalms are "minor key." Intercessions regarding sin and suffering

wisdom (in the light of the coming glory of God's kingdom). Such wisdom expresses itself in two dimensions, vertical and horizontal, love for God and love for neighbor. These two prayers plead with God on behalf of other people that both kinds of love would deepen: May God make you know Him better. May God make your love for people more intelligent.

Finally, consider Ephesians 1:15-23 and 3:14-21. Here, too, the intercessions focus on wisdom in the light of Christ's glory. Again, there are no circumstantial requests. In fact, there aren't even requests to grow in intelligent love for others. But Paul zeroes in on what we most need: I ask that God would make you know Him better.

Why don't people pray beyond the sick list? We tend to pray for circumstances to improve so that we might feel better and life might get better. These are often honest and good requests—unless they're the *only* requests. Unhinged from the purposes of sanctification

Unhinged from the purposes of sanctification and from groaning for the coming of the King, prayers for circumstances become self-centered.

predominate—always in light of God revealing His mercies, power, and kingdom. The battle with personal sin and guilt appears in about 1/3 of these intercessions. Often there are requests that God make us wiser: "Teach me"; "Make me understand"; "Revive me." God reveals Himself ("for your name's sake") by changing me. In many more psalms you see requests to change circumstances: deliver me from evildoers; be my refuge and fortress amid suffering; destroy Your enemies. These, too, are always tied to requests that God arrive with kingdom glory and power. God reveals Himself by making all these bad things and bad people go away! Then there are the sixty or so "major key" psalms. In these you see much emphasis on the joy and praises that mark the God's kingdom reign revealed.

Consider also the prayers of Philippians 1:9-11 and Colossians 1:9-14. Here we see no mention at all of circumstances. No request to be healed, fed, protected, or for other people to change. The requests entirely focus on gaining

and from groaning for the coming of the King, prayers for circumstances become self-centered.

Learn to pray with the three-stranded braid of our real need. Teach others to pray the same way. They will pray far beyond the sick list. And they will pray in a noticeably different way for the sick.

* * *

WALKING THROUGH THE VALLEY OF VISION

LEATHER-BOUND VERSION

WALKING THROUGH THE VALLEY OF VISION

9:00	12:00	3:00		9:00	12:00	3:00		9:00	12:00	3:00
122	94	2	M	172	180	52	M	286	292	294
134	106	14	T	262	186	58	T	132	104	12
130	102	10	W	366	358	392	W	142	230	22
168	90	48	T	398	20	400	T	152	240	32
264	188	362	F	390	320	354	F	340	346	348
154	242	34	M	278	116	76	M	386	214	388
144	232	24	T	266	190	64	T	164	326	44
270	194	68	W	316	208	380	W	288	302	296
138	110	18	T	268	192	66	T	176	184	56
308	314	304	F	274	198	364	F	322	342	344
128	100	8	M	124	96	4	M	216	250	222
126	98	6	T	148	236	28	T	370	118	78
136	108	16	W	276	114	74	W	372	200	80
146	234	26	T	156	244	36	T	158	246	38
140	112	360	F	160	248	40	F	284	258	206
220	254	226	M	218	252	224	M	174	182	54
378	210	300	T	272	196	70	T	306	312	14
162	84	42	W	382	212	384	W	350	72	352
330	328	332	T	282	256	204	T	166	88	46
150	238	356	F	324	86	338	F	374	202	82
			M	336	350	334	M			
			T	290	310	298	T			
			W	402	62	404	W			
			T	394	30	396	T			
			F	170	92	50	F			

www.joethorn.net/valley

How to use this prayer schedule

1. Print this page, cut out the schedule to fit your copy of **The Valley of Vision** and tuck or tape it inside. The inside of the back cover is a great place for it.
2. Set email or phone reminders to alert you at 9 a.m., 12 p.m. and 3 p.m., Monday through Friday.
3. Follow the scheduled prayers by page number according to the day of the week and the time. Begin with the page numbers in the upper left, and move downward each day.
4. Pray these prayers; do not merely read them. Consider these appointments in your day as intense, concentrated times of prayer and worship.
5. If you find it helpful, share it with others! This file (and a parallel version for the paperback copy) is available at www.joethorn.net/valley.

WALKING THROUGH THE VALLEY OF VISION

PAPERBACK VERSION

WALKING THROUGH THE VALLEY OF VISION

9:00	12:00	3:00	DAY	9:00	12:00	3:00
69	53	3	MON	118	138	121
75	59	9	TUE	150	107	39
73	57	7	WED	211	115	212
92	50	27	THU	157	140	111
146	103	198	FRI	179	48	186
85	133	19	MON	185	192	184
80	128	14	TUE	161	171	165
149	106	38	WED	222	35	223
77	61	11	THU	217	17	218
170	173	168	FRI	93	51	28
72	56	6	MON	159	162	163
71	55	5	TUE	74	58	8
76	60	10	WED	79	127	13
81	129	15	THU	84	132	18
78	62	197	FRI	187	190	191
119	139	122	MON	213	116	214
209	114	166	TUE	90	180	25
89	47	24	WED	160	167	164
182	181	183	THU	96	101	31
83	131	195	FRI	178	185	189
94	99	29	MON	117	137	120
145	102	32	TUE	203	65	44
200	196	216	WED	204	109	45
219	12	220	THU	87	135	21
215	177	194	FRI	158	141	112
153	64	42	MON	95	100	30
147	104	36	TUE	169	172	9
174	113	210	WED	192	40	193
148	105	37	THU	91	49	26
151	108	199	FRI	205	110	46
70	54	4	MON			
82	130	16	TUE			
152	63	41	WED			
86	134	20	THU			
88	136	23	FRI			

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2. Set email or phone reminders to alert you at 9 a.m., 12 p.m. and 3 p.m., Monday through Friday.
3. Follow the scheduled prayers by page number according to the day of the week and the time. Begin with the page numbers in the upper left, and move downward each day.
4. Pray these prayers; do not merely read them. Consider these appointments in your day as intense, concentrated times of prayer and worship.
5. If you find it helpful, share it with others! This file (and a parallel version for the leather-bound copy) is available at www.joethorn.net/valley.

RESOURCES



Aim for the Heart *Going Deeper*¹

Here are everyday questions.

How ya doing? a.k.a. How are you doing? What's happening? What's hard? What's good? How's your marriage? How are your kids? How are you *really* doing? How's work? Things I can pray for?

These get a little closer to the heart.

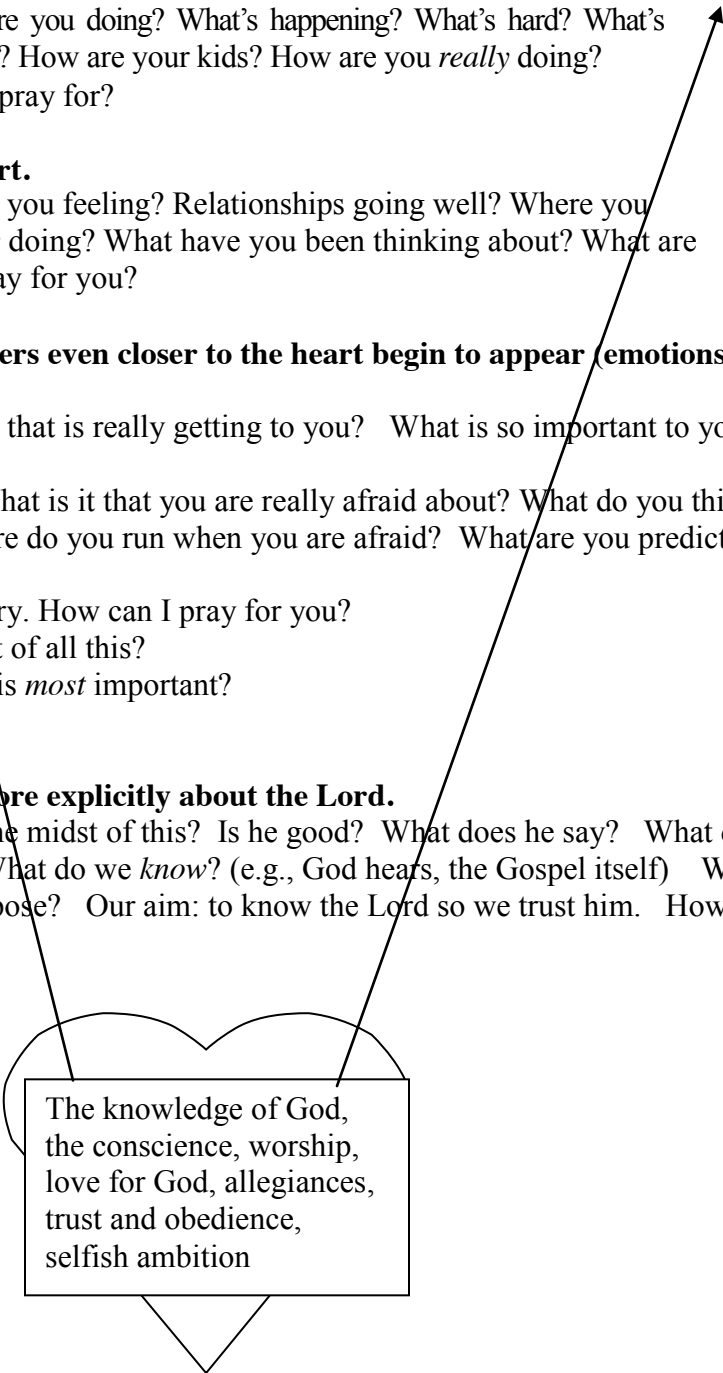
What are you into? How are you feeling? Relationships going well? Where you headed? How are you *really* doing? What have you been thinking about? What are you learning? How can I pray for you?

As we walk with each other, matters even closer to the heart begin to appear (emotions, loves).

You seem angry. What is it that is really getting to you? What is so important to you?
What are you saying?
That sounds frightening. What is it that you are really afraid about? What do you think you might lose? Where do you run when you are afraid? What are you predicting with your fear?
That is so hard. I am so sorry. How can I pray for you?
How do you make sense out of all this?
What is important? What is *most* important?
Can I pray for you [now]?

As you get closer still, you talk more explicitly about the Lord.

Who is the Lord to you in the midst of this? Is he good? What does he say? What does he say that sounds good? What do we *know*? (e.g., God hears, the Gospel itself) Who are we, and what is our purpose? Our aim: to know the Lord so we trust him. How can we pray?



The knowledge of God,
the conscience, worship,
love for God, allegiances,
trust and obedience,
selfish ambition

¹ This material is taken from the course notes of *Helping Relationships*, taught by Ed Welch, through CCEF.

BIBLICAL DATA GATHERING

This is a simple tool to help you sort the information you receive as you get to know someone. Ask yourself these four questions to organize what they tell you, especially when you're feeling overwhelmed.

The Situation: *What is going on?* Here you place all the information that describes what the person's world is like. You must include both past and present. (For example, in the past, they may have been raised by a negative, cynical father. In the present, they may be an increasingly angry, critical, and distant spouse.)

The Responses: *What does the person do in response to what is going on?* Here you include facts that describe the person's behavior. (They may be yelling at their family, spending more time at work, and staying on the computer at home.)

The Thoughts: *What does the person think about what is going on?* Include information on how they have been interpreting their world. ("Life stinks.")

The Motives: *What does the person want out of, or in the midst of, what is going on?* Include what you know about the person's desires, goals, purposes, treasures, motives, values, and idols. What do they live for? What really rules their heart? ("Just give me space so I can breathe.")

What Is/Was **Going** On?

What Does the Person **Do** in Response to What Is Going On?

What Does the Person **Think** About What Is Going On?

What Does the Person **Want** Out of What Is Going On?

Situation **Responses** **Thoughts** **Motives**

ALL OF LIFE IS REPENTANCE

Martin Luther opened the Reformation by nailing the “Ninety-five Theses” to the door of Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. The very first of the theses stated that “our Lord and Master Jesus Christ . . . willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.”¹ On the surface this looks a little bleak. Luther seems to be saying Christians will never make much progress in life. That, of course, wasn’t Luther’s point at all. He was saying that repentance is the *way* we make progress in the Christian life. Indeed, pervasive, all-of-life-repentance is the best sign that we are growing deeply and rapidly into the character of Jesus.

The Transformation of Repentance

It is important to consider how the gospel affects and transforms the act of repentance. In “religion” the purpose of repentance is basically to keep God happy so he will continue to bless you and answer your prayers. This means that religious repentance is *selfish, self-righteous, and bitter all the way to the bottom*. In the gospel, however, the purpose of repentance is to repeatedly tap into the joy of our union with Christ to weaken our impulse to do anything contrary to God’s heart.

Religious Repentance is Selfish

In religion we are sorry for sin only because of its consequences for us. Sin will bring us punishment—and we want to avoid that, so we repent. The gospel tells us that, as Christians, sin can’t ultimately bring us into condemnation (Rom 8:1). Its heinousness is therefore what it does to *God*—it displeases and dishonors him. Thus in religion, repentance is self-centered; the gospel makes it God-centered. In religion we are mainly sorry for the consequences of sin, but in the gospel we are sorry for the sin itself.

Religious Repentance is Self-Righteous

Furthermore, religious repentance is self-righteous. Repentance can easily turn into an attempt to “atone” for one’s sin—a form of self-flagellation, in which we convince God (and ourselves) that we are so truly miserable and regretful that we deserve to be forgiven. In the gospel, however, we know that Jesus suffered for our sin. We do not have to make ourselves suffer to merit God’s forgiveness. We simply receive the forgiveness earned by Christ. God forgives us because he is “just” (1 John 1:9). That is a remarkable statement. It would be unjust of God to ever deny us forgiveness, because Jesus earned our acceptance! In religion we try to earn our forgiveness with our repentance. In the gospel we simply receive it.

Religious Repentance is Bitter All the Way to the Bottom

Last, religious repentance is bitter all the way down. In religion our only hope is to live a life good enough to require God to bless us. Every instance of sin and repentance is therefore traumatic, unnatural, and horribly threatening. Only under great duress do religious individuals admit they have sinned, because their only hope is their moral goodness. In the gospel the knowledge of our acceptance in Christ makes it easier to admit that we are flawed, because we know we won’t be cast off if we confess the true depths of our sinfulness. Our hope is in Christ’s righteousness, not our own, so it is not as traumatic to admit our weaknesses and lapses.

Whereas in religion we repent less and less often, the more we feel accepted and loved in the gospel, the more and more often we will be repenting. Although there is some bitterness in any repentance, in the gospel there is ultimately a sweetness. This creates a radical new dynamic for personal growth. The more we see our own flaws and sins, the more precious, electrifying, and amazing God’s grace appears to us.

On the other hand, the more aware we are of God’s grace and our acceptance in Christ, the more able we are to drop our denials and self-defenses and admit the true dimensions of our sin. The sin underlying all other sins is a lack of joy in Christ.

An Order for Gospel-Grounded Repentance

If you clearly understand these two different ways to go about repentance, then (and only then!) you can profit greatly from a regular and exacting discipline of self-examination and repentance. I've found that the practices of eighteenth-century Methodism and its leaders, George Whitefield and John Wesley, have been helpful to me here. Whitefield, who ordinarily conducted his personal inventory at night, laid out an order for regular repentance. He once wrote, "God give me a deep humility, a well-guided zeal, a burning love and a single eye, and then let men or devils do their worst!"² Following is one way to use this order in gospel-grounded repentance:

Deep Humility (vs. Pride)

Have I looked down on anyone? Have I been too stung by criticism? Have I felt snubbed and ignored?

Repent like this: Consider the free grace of Jesus until I sense (1) decreasing disdain, since I am a sinner too, and (2) decreasing pain over criticism, since I should not value human approval over God's love. In light of his grace, I can let go of the need to keep up a good image—it is too great a burden and is now unnecessary. I reflect on free grace until I experience grateful, restful joy.

Wise Courage (vs. Anxiety)

Have I avoided people or tasks that I know I should face? Have I been anxious and worried? Have I failed to be circumspect, or have I been rash and impulsive?

Repent like this: Consider the free grace of Jesus until there is (1) no cowardly avoidance of hard things, since Jesus faced evil for me, and (2) no anxious or rash behavior, since Jesus' death proves that God cares and will watch over me. It takes pride to be anxious, and I recognize I am not wise enough to know how my life should go. I reflect on free grace until I experience calm thoughtfulness and strategic boldness.

Burning Love (vs. Indifference)

Have I spoken or thought unkindly of anyone? Am I justifying myself by caricaturing someone else in my mind? Have I been impatient and irritable? Have I been self-absorbed, indifferent, and inattentive to people?

Repent like this: Consider the free grace of Jesus until there is (1) no coldness or unkindness, as I think of the sacrificial love of Christ for me, (2) no impatience, as I think of his patience with me, and (3) no indifference, as I think of how God is infinitely attentive to me. I reflect on free grace until I show warmth and affection.

Godly Motivations (a "Single Eye")

Am I doing what I do for God's glory and the good of others, or am I being driven by fears, need for approval, love of comfort and ease, need for control, hunger for acclaim and power, or the fear of other people (Luke 12:4–5)? Am I looking at anyone with envy? Am I giving in to even the first motions of lust or gluttony? Am I spending my time on urgent things rather than important things because of these inordinate desires?

Repent like this: Consider how the free grace of Jesus provides me with what I am looking for in these other things. Pray, "Oh Lord Jesus, make me happy enough in you to avoid sin, and wise enough in you to avoid danger, that I may always do what is right in your sight. In your name I pray, Amen."

Notes

¹ Martin Luther, "Disputation of Doctor Martin Luther on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences" (1517), Thesis 1.

² George Whitefield, quoted in Arnold A. Dallimore, *George Whitefield: The Life and Times of the Great Evangelist of the 18th Century Revival*, 2 vol. (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1970), 1:140.

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JUSTIFIED, BUT NOT FORGIVEN?

Pondering the Difference Between Judicial Wrath and Fatherly Displeasure

How can we be justified by faith, once for all, and yet need to go on confessing our daily sins so that we will be forgiven? On the one hand, the New Testament teaches that, when we trust Christ, our faith is reckoned to us as righteousness (Romans 4:3, 5–6); the righteousness of God is imputed to us (Philippians 3:9). We stand before God “in Christ” as righteous and accepted, yes, even “forgiven,” as Paul says, “David [in Psalm 32:1] pronounces a blessing upon the man to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works: ‘Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered’” (Romans 4:6–7, RSV). Thus justification, in Paul’s mind, embraces the reality of forgiveness.

But, on the other hand, the New Testament also teaches that our ongoing forgiveness depends on confession of sins. “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9, RSV). Confessing sins is part of “walking in the light,” which is what we must do if the blood of Jesus is to go on cleansing us from our sins: “*If we walk in the light as He Himself is in the light . . . the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin*” (1 John 1:7, emphasis added). And Jesus taught us to pray daily, “Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Matthew 6:12).

How then shall we see ourselves in relation to God? Are all our sins already forgiven, or are they forgiven day by day as we confess them? Does justification mean that all sins are forgiven—past, present, and future—for those who are justified? Or is there another way to see our sin in relation to God? Let’s listen first to a pastor and theologian from 350 years ago, Thomas Watson.

When I say God forgives all sins, I understand it of sins past, for sins to come are not forgiven till they are repented of. Indeed God has decreed to pardon them; and when he forgives one sin, he will in time forgive all; but sins future are not actually pardoned till they are repented of. It is absurd to think sin should be forgiven before it is committed. . . .

The opinion that sins to come, as well as past, are forgiven, takes away and makes void Christ’s intercession. He is an advocate to intercede for daily sin (1 John 2:1). But if sin be forgiven before it be committed, what need is there of his daily intercession? What need have I of an advocate, if sin be pardoned before it be committed? So that, though God forgives all sins past to a believer, yet sins to come are not forgiven till repentance be renewed. (*Body of Divinity* [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979], 558)

Is Watson right? It depends. Yes, I think one can talk this way about forgiveness if one keeps firmly in mind that the purchase and ground and securing of all (past, present, and future) was the death of Jesus, once for all. The ambiguity comes in the question, When do we *obtain* forgiveness for all the sins we will ever commit? Does this question mean, When was our forgiveness purchased and secured for us? Or does it mean, When will our forgiveness be applied to each transgression so as to remove God’s displeasure for it? The answer to the first question would be, at the death of Christ. And the answer to the second question would be, at the renewal of our repentance.

Which raises another question: Does God feel displeasure toward his justified children? If so, what kind of displeasure is this? Is it the same kind of displeasure he has toward the sins of unbelievers? How does God see our daily sins? He sees them as breaches of his will that grieve him and anger him. This grief and anger, however, while prompted by real blameworthiness and real guilt, is not “judicial wrath,” to use Thomas Watson’s phrase. “Though a child of God, after pardon, may incur his fatherly displeasure, yet his judicial wrath is removed. Though he may lay on the rod, yet he has taken away the curse. Corrections may befall the saints, but not destruction” (*Body of Divinity*, 556).

God also sees our sins as “covered” and “not reckoned” because of the blood of Christ (Romans 4:7–8). Thus, paradoxically, he sees our sins as both *guilt-bringing* (and thus producing grief and anger) and *guaranteed-of-pardon* (though not yet pardoned in the sense of his response to confession and the actual removal of his fatherly displeasure). What is it that distinguishes God’s *judicial wrath* toward the unbeliever’s unconfessed sin from God’s *fatherly displeasure* toward the believer’s unconfessed sin? The difference is that the believer is united to God in Christ by a new covenant. The promise of this covenant is that God will never turn away from doing good to us and will never let us turn away from him, but will always bring us back to confession and repentance. “I will make with them an everlasting covenant, that *I will not turn away from doing good to them*; and I will put the fear of me in their hearts, *that they may not turn from me*” (Jeremiah 32:40, RSV, emphasis added).

This new covenant commitment was purchased by Christ for us (Luke 22:20) and applied to us through faith so that, though we incur our Father’s displeasure, we, who are justified believers, never incur the judicial wrath of God to all eternity. Or to put it another way, since the forgiveness of all our sins is purchased and secured by the death of Christ, therefore God is totally committed to bring us back to confession and repentance as often as necessary so that we may receive and enjoy that forgiveness in the removal of his fatherly displeasure. It is our Father’s pleasure to restore us to his pleasure until such restorings are needed no more.

RELIGION VS. THE GOSPEL

Sam Storms on the difference between religion and the gospel:

- Most Christians live in an “if / then” relationship with God. If I do what is right, then God will love me. If I give extra money to missions, then God will provide me with a raise at work. If I avoid sinful habits, then I will be spared suffering and humiliation, etc. It’s a conditional relationship that is based on the principle of merit.
- The gospel calls us to live in a “because / therefore” relationship with the Lord. Because we have been justified by faith in Christ, therefore we have peace with God (Rom. 5:1). Because Christ died for us, therefore we are forgiven. Because Christ has fulfilled the law in our place, therefore we are set free from its demands and penalty, etc. This is an unconditional relationship that is based on the principle of grace.
- The difference between these two perspectives is the difference between religion (“if / then”) and the gospel (“because / therefore”). The “religious” life is not the “gospel-centered” life.

Tim Keller on the difference between religion and the gospel:

Religion

- “I obey, therefore I’m accepted.”
- Motivation is based on fear and insecurity.
- I obey God in order to get things from God.
- When circumstances in my life go wrong, I am angry at God or myself, since I believe, like Job’s friends, that anyone who is good deserves a comfortable life.
- When I am criticized I am furious or devastated because it is critical that I think of myself as a ‘good person’. Threats to that self-image must be destroyed at all costs.
- My prayer life consists largely of petition and it only heats up when I am in a time of need. My main purpose in prayer is control of the environment.
- My self-view swings between two poles. If and when I am living up to my standards, I feel confident, but then I am prone to be proud and unsympathetic to failing people. If and when I am not living up to standards, I feel humble, but not confident. I feel like a failure.
- My identity and self-worth are based mainly on how hard I work, or how moral I am, and so I must look down on those I perceive as lazy or immoral. I disdain and feel superior to ‘the other.’
- Since I look to my own pedigree or performance for my spiritual acceptability, my heart manufactures idols. It may be my talents, my moral record, my personal discipline, my social status, etc. I absolutely have to have them so they serve as my main hope, meaning, happiness, security, and significance, whatever I may say I believe about God.

Gospel

- “I’m accepted, therefore I obey.”
- Motivation is based on grateful joy.
- I obey God to get to God: to delight and resemble Him.
- When circumstances in my life go wrong, I struggle but I know all my punishment fell on Jesus and that while he may allow this for my training, he will exercise his Fatherly love within my trial.
- When I am criticized I struggle, but it is not critical for me to think of myself as a ‘good person.’ My identity is not built on my record or my performance but on God’s love for me in Christ. I can take criticism. That’s how I became a Christian.
- My prayer life consists of generous stretches of praise and adoration. My main purpose is fellowship with Him.
- My self-view is not based on a view of myself as a moral achiever. In Christ I am simul iustus et peccator—simultaneously sinful and lost yet accepted in Christ. I am so bad he had to die for me and I am so loved he was glad to die for me. This leads me to deeper and deeper humility and confidence at the same time. Neither swaggering nor sniveling.
- My identity and self-worth are centered on the one who died for His enemies, who was excluded from the city for me. I am saved by sheer grace. So I can’t look down on those who believe or practice something different from me. Only by grace I am what I am. I have no inner need to win arguments.
- I have many good things in my life—family, work, spiritual disciplines, etc. But none of these good things are ultimate things to me. None of them are things I absolutely have to have, so there is a limit to how much anxiety, bitterness, and despondency they can inflict on me when they are threatened and lost.

QUESTIONS TO HELP DIAGNOSE THE HEALTH OF A GROUPⁱ

THE QUALITY OF THE GROUP'S PURPOSE AND COMMUNITY LIFE

1. *Is the purpose of the group clearly understood by the leader and by the group? Is the purpose regularly being mentioned within the group?* One of the main reasons people drop out of discipleship groups is that they lack a clear sense of purpose. Attendance problems can often be accounted for by a failure to communicate the purpose of the group to the members or a failure to achieve the communicated purpose. When the purpose of the group is known and clearly articulated it not only affects the way in which the leader leads, it also affects the expectations, attitudes and actions of the group members.
2. *What is the quality of the group's prayer life?* A group which is maturing in prayer will find that its prayer is kingdom-centered—focused on God's purposes and their accomplishment. Even personal prayer requests will have God's glory as their chief concern. The group will also be praying for the ministries of the church. The prayer ought not to be self-absorbed and ingrown.
3. *Do you sense that people in the group are growing into maturity?* What is the evidence for this? Groups do not meet just for the sake of meeting. The groups exist so that through them our lives and communities might be changed. With some reflection, you ought to be able to point to particular ways in which individuals have grown.
4. *Is the group growing as a community?* When a group is growing in their sense of belonging to one another a number of things will be happening. Individuals will feel a sense of responsibility for one another. They will be praying for one another outside of the group time. They will be spending time with one another outside of the group meeting. They will be talking to one another at church. Individuals will have a sense of being stronger when they are with the group.
5. *Is there an atmosphere of openness, warmth, honest, sincerity and genuineness?* Usually the group facilitator sets the tone in the group for everyone of these things. If he or she leads with openness, warmth, honesty, sincerity and genuineness, the group will usually follow and duplicate what they have seen. A stiff, wooden, flat or cold atmosphere will tend to drive people away.
6. *Does the group have a sense of being a part of the larger church?* The group should feel connected to the larger church, not isolated. If they do feel connected they will be enthusiastic about what is going on in the church. They will be praying for the ministries of the church. Individuals in the group will be becoming members.

GROUP ELEMENTS

1. *Does the group begin and end on time?* People will be far more likely to faithfully come to the group if they can count on it beginning and ending on schedule. It is inconsiderate and breaks trust with people if you regularly go over your announced ending time.
2. *What is the time break-down among the various elements (Bible study, sharing, prayer) within your group?* A group should provide a balance between these elements. If it is dominated by Bible study and gives sharing and prayer the leftovers of the meeting this will have an adverse effect on the group. Prayer should not be an addendum to the meeting but should be a substantive portion of the meeting.
3. *If you spend time studying Scripture, what is your method for leading the study time?* Do you speak much more than everyone else? If you are giving a monologue rather than encouraging a dialogue about the Scripture passage, then people's satisfaction with the group will decrease and they will stop participating. The Bible study is not a time for you to display your teaching gifts, however good they may be. Instead, it provides an opportunity for people to discuss together what the text means, apply it to their lives and to articulate and develop their own beliefs.

4. *What is the size of your group?* Once a group gets larger than 3 to 4 people, one's ability to participate gets reduced. Inability to participate decreases satisfaction with the group and leads to drop out.

GROUP INVOLVEMENT

1. *Do you sense that people bring enthusiasm and expectancy to the group meetings?* Why or why not? Usually a lack of expectancy and enthusiasm is a function of the other issues raised under these diagnostic questions. This is a helpful question to ask to prevent us from being dishonest about some of the other categories. A lack of purpose, a lack of participation, a failure to be ministered to or be able to minister to others, etc. can all lead to a lack of enthusiasm in the group. Then again, maybe everyone got to bed too late!
2. *Does everyone participate in the group?* If not, why not? If people do not have the opportunity to participate, their sense of satisfaction with the group will be greatly diminished. There are many potential reasons for a lack of participation. The group may be too large. The group may not perceive that there is an atmosphere of openness. You will have to determine the cause is and how to address it.
3. *What is the quality of participation in the group?* Are people actively listening to one another? Are people speaking the "truth in love" to one another or is all the conversation superficial? Are people listening to each other's heart and speaking out of a desire to build others up and minister to them, or are they "speaking to hear themselves speak?"
4. *Do people sense that they are valuable to the group?* Are they given ownership in the group through being encouraged to use their gifts? Are they able to contribute to the group by helping with various tasks? A community is marked by everyone being involved and contributing to the life of the group. A person's sense of belonging is greatly enhanced when they believe they are doing things that are significant for the wellbeing of the group. A person should have a sense that they would be missed if for some reason he or she were not in attendance.
5. *Is your attendance fairly consistent?* If not, to what do you attribute the inconsistency? Perhaps it is just the lifestyle of the culture that leads to sporadic attendance. However, it could also be that people don't understand the importance and the nature of Christian community—that we need each other and are interdependent. Or perhaps they do not sense that they are valued.

PASTORAL CARE NEEDS

1. *Is there anyone attending the group who requires excessive attention or who disrupts the group with regularity? Is there someone who, because of their behavior, prevents the group from accomplishing its purpose?* People will often stop attending if a person is present who, through one behavior or another, dominates the group and prevents it from accomplishing its purpose. The problem is not that the person is in attendance but that they are given power to set the agenda of the group and thus regularly take it off course. This will frustrate the rest of the group members.
2. *What is your practice of follow-up when people don't show up for a few weeks?* A lack of follow-up shows a lack of concern for those who do not attend. When you do follow-up those who have missed the group meeting, they are given a sense that they are valued by the group and are important to it.

¹ This material was adapted with minor changes from *The Fellowship Group Handbook*, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, Version 2.0, 1997. Other additions and changes within this section are the sole responsibility of Bridgeway.

The Discipleship Journal Bible Reading Plan

The Discipleship Journal Bible Reading Plan

January

New Testament		Old Testament	
> MATTHEW	> ACTS	> PSALMS	> GENESIS
1	1:11-17	1	1:1-11
2	1:18-25	2	1:12-26
3	2:1-12	3	2:1-21
4	2:13-22	4	2:22-47
5	3:1-12	5	3:1-12
6	3:13-17	6	4:1-22
7	4:1-17	7	4:23-37
8	4:18-25	8	5:1-16
9	4:26-42	9	5:17-42
10	5:1-12	10	6
11	5:13-30	11	7:1-38
12	5:31-32	12	7:39-80
13	5:33-48	13	8:1-25
14	6:1-16	14	8:26-36
15	6:18-24	15	9:1-19
16	6:25-54	16	9:20-43
17	7:1-14	17	10:1-23
18	7:15-29	18	10:24-48
19	8:1-13	19	11:1-18
20	8:14-22	20	11:19-30
21	8:23-34	21	12
22	9:1-13	22	13:1-25
23	9:14-36	23	13:26-52
24	9:37-98	24	14
25	10:1-20	25	15:1-21

February

New Testament		Old Testament	
> MATTHEW	> ACTS	> PSALMS	> GENESIS
1	10:21-42	1	15:22-41
2	11:1-18	2	16:1-6
3	11:19-30	3	16:7-40
4	12:1-21	4	17:1-5
5	12:22-37	5	17:16-34
6	12:38-50	6	17:35-50
7	13:1-23	7	18:1-17
8	13:24-43	8	18:18-28
9	13:44-58	9	18:29-41
10	14:1-21	10	19:1-12
11	14:22-36	11	20:1-12
12	15:1-20	12	20:13-38
13	15:21-39	13	21:1-26
14	16:1-12	14	21:27-40
15	16:13-28	15	22:1-51
16	17:1-13	16	23:1-11
17	17:14-27	17	23:12-35
18	18:1-14	18	24:1-12
19	18:15-35	19	25:1-12
20	18:36-38	20	25:13-30
21	18:39-30	21	26:1-32
22	20:1-16	22	27:1-28
23	20:17-34	23	27:27-44
24	21:1-11	24	28:1-10
25	21:12-22	25	28:11-31

March

New Testament		Old Testament	
> MATTHEW	> ROMANS	> PSALMS	> NUMBERS
1	2:123-32	1	1:1-8
2	2:133-46	2	1:9-20
3	2:21-34	3	1:21-34
4	2:25-33	4	1:35-46
5	2:33-46	5	1:47-54
6	2:35-42	6	1:55-62
7	2:37-47	7	2:1-7
8	2:235-39	8	2:8-28
9	2:41-44	9	2:29-35
10	2:45-55	10	2:36-52
11	2:46-51	11	2:53-55
12	2:51-13	12	3:1-17
13	2:51-430	13	3:18-39
14	2:53-46	14	3:40-46
15	2:61-16	15	3:47-53
16	2:61-35	16	3:54-61
17	2:63-56	17	3:62-68
18	2:65-75	18	3:69-75
19	2:71-13	19	3:76-82
20	2:71-13	20	3:83-91
21	2:72-74	21	3:92-101
22	2:75-86	22	3:102-113
23	2:87-88	23	3:114-122
24	2:81-10	24	3:123-130
25	2:81-120	25	3:131-143

April

New Testament		Old Testament	
> MARK	> 1 COR.	> PSALMS	> JOSEPHUS
1	1:1-8	1	1:1-8
2	1:9-20	2	1:9-20
3	1:21-34	3	1:35-46
4	1:35-46	4	1:47-54
5	2:1-12	5	2:1-7
6	2:13-23	6	2:8-28
7	2:14-20	7	2:29-35
8	2:21-19	8	2:36-52
9	2:22-35	9	2:53-55
10	2:36-52	10	3:1-17
11	2:53-55	11	3:18-39
12	3:1-17	12	3:40-46
13	3:18-39	13	3:47-53
14	3:40-46	14	3:54-61
15	3:47-53	15	3:62-68
16	3:54-61	16	3:69-75
17	3:62-68	17	3:76-82
18	3:69-75	18	3:83-91
19	3:76-82	19	3:92-101
20	3:83-91	20	3:102-113
21	3:92-101	21	3:114-122
22	3:102-113	22	3:123-130
23	3:114-122	23	3:131-143
24	3:123-130	24	3:144-152
25	3:144-152	25	3:153-161

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May

New Testament		Old Testament	
> MARK	> 1 COR.	> PSALMS	> SAMUEL
1	9:35-50	1	1:1-11
2	10:1-16	2	1:12-24
3	10:17-34	3	1:25-34
4	10:35-52	4	1:35-46
5	11:1-11	5	1:47-54
6	11:12-26	6	1:55-62
7	11:27-33	7	2:1-7
8	12:1-12	8	2:8-28
9	12:13-27	9	2:29-35
10	12:28-34	10	2:36-52
11	12:35-44	11	2:53-55
12	13:1-13	12	3:1-17
13	13:14-31	13	3:18-39
14	13:32-37	14	3:40-46
15	14:1-11	15	3:47-53
16	14:12-31	16	3:54-61
17	14:32-42	17	3:62-68
18	14:43-52	18	3:69-75
19	14:53-65	19	3:76-82
20	14:66-72	20	3:83-91
21	15:1-15	21	3:92-101
22	15:16-32	22	3:102-113
23	15:33-41	23	3:114-122
24	15:42-47	24	3:123-130
25	15:48-58	25	3:131-143

June

New Testament		Old Testament	
> LUKES	> COLOSSIANS	> PSALMS	> 1 CHRON.
1	7:14-17	1	1:1-14
2	7:18-35	2	1:15-29
3	7:36-50	3	1:30-50
4	8:1-15	4	1:51-74
5	8:16-25	5	1:75-92
6	8:26-39	6	1:93-112
7	8:40-56	7	1:113-132
8	9:1-7	8	1:133-152
9	9:8-27	9	1:153-174
10	9:28-36	10	1:175-194
11	9:37-50	11	1:195-214
12	9:51-62	12	2:1-20
13	10:1-16	13	2:21-40
14	10:17-24	14	2:41-60
15	10:25-37	15	2:61-80
16	10:38-42	16	2:81-100
17	11:1-13	17	2:101-120
18	11:14-28	18	2:121-140
19	11:29-32	19	2:141-160
20	11:33-54	20	2:161-180
21	12:1-52	21	2:181-200
22	12:53-71	22	2:201-220
23	12:72-91	23	2:221-240
24	12:92-134	24	2:241-260
25	12:95-138	25	2:261-280

August

New Testament		Old Testament	
> LUKES	> 1 TIMOTHY	> PSALMS	> 1 KINGS
1	13:1-9	1	1:1-15
2	13:10-21	2	1:16-23
3	13:22-35	3	1:24-31
4	14:1-14	4	1:32-39
5	14:15-24	5	1:40-47
6	14:25-33	6	1:48-55
7	14:34-43	7	1:56-63
8	15:1-32	8	1:64-71
9	15:33-47	9	1:72-79
10	16:1-9	10	1:80-87
11	16:10-18	11	1:88-95
12	16:19-31	12	1:96-103
13	17:1-10	13	1:104-111
14	17:11-19	14	1:112-119
15	17:20-37	15	1:120-127
16	18:1-8	16	1:128-135
17	18:9-17	17	1:136-143
18	18:18-30	18	1:144-151
19	18:31-43	19	1:152-159
20	18:44-50	20	1:160-167
21	18:51-77	21	1:168-175
22	19:1-10	22	1:176-183
23	19:11-28	23	1:184-191
24	19:29-48	24	1:192-199
25	20:1-18	25	1:200-207

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How to Have a Quiet Time

What is a "quiet time"?

A quiet time is a time of direct contact between your mind and God's, using the Bible and prayer. It is a time of dedication, cleansing, instruction, strengthening, and delight. Bible study and prayer are not simply for our sake. God deeply desires our fellowship and worship—it gives Him joy and pleasure! (John 4:23). Think from this perspective. If you're not moved by this fact, you have not understood it.

Communication with God must be daily (Josh. 1:8, 9). To know God (not just to know about God) is the goal. How we pray, delight, and think on God is the only true measure of whether our relationship with Him is alive (John 15:4). God bought (in blood) personal access to His presence for us. Even Abraham and Moses did not have this (II Cor. 3:12-18; Matt. 27:51). Moses was denied (Ex. 33:18, 20; II Cor. 4:6) that which we may have each morning (John 4:21-23).

The maintaining of a daily quiet time is perhaps the most consistently difficult duty of the Christian life. Its difficulty is a humbling reminder of our lack of commitment to Him. There's no question but that a quiet time will greatly facilitate Christian growth and obedience.

What are the goals of a quiet time?

1. *Worship*: to get to know Him, to be humbled by His holiness, comforted by His love, and strengthened by His presence.
2. *Change*: to root out sins and establish biblical attitudes and actions in your life.

How do I have a quiet time?

1. First, *meet God*. Still your heart, ask for His presence, concentrate. You may wish to praise Him a bit with a psalm to "warm up" your heart. Take a psalm and look for things to praise Him for.
2. Second, *listen to God* by reading a passage from His Word. Don't choose more than a chapter! Read it carefully, reverently, intelligently; read it more than once. Pick out what you think is the central thought of the passage. Record that thought and/or some other truth that has struck you, in your own words. Then determine what God's message is for you. Once this is determined, record it, and think of some way to practice or act upon the message if possible. Is there:
 - A promise to claim?
 - A sin to confess?
 - A command to obey?
 - An example to follow?
 - An error to avoid?
 - A new thought about God?

Another simple way of feeding on the text is ask:

- How does this passage help me adore God?
- How does it lead me to see and hate my sin?
- How does it lead me to ask for grace?

Fold along the dotted line and tuck into your Bible or accompanying notebook

Once we have asked those questions, then we can ask:

- How is Jesus the best example of this attribute (character quality) of God that I adore?
- How is Jesus the ultimate solution to the sin that I am confessing?
- How is Jesus the ultimate source for the grace that I need?

3. Third, *talk to God* through prayer. The elements of prayer are:

- *Praise and thanksgiving*. Be specific. Search your life and mind for things to thank Him for and then praise Him for. ("Thank you for letting me lose that contest! I see how wise you are—it would have been bad for me! Thank you for forgiving me after the way I acted yesterday; how merciful you are.")
- *Requests for self and others*. Be specific. Unload your burdens and pour out your feelings. Paul Miller writes, "The only way to come to God is by taking off any spiritual mask. The real you has to meet the real God. He is a person. Come overwhelmed with life. Come with a wandering mind. Come messy. So, instead of being frozen by your self-preoccupation, talk with God about your worries. Tell him where you are weary. If you don't begin with where you are, then where you are will sneak in the back door. Your mind will wander to where you are weary." Also make a list of things to pray about for family and friends. Use the list daily to pray.
- *Confession*. Search your life for sins committed since yesterday. Search for good deeds you avoided doing as well. Ask for cleansing, and then thank him for his full forgiveness through Christ's blood.

How can I get started?

- Make a commitment right now to begin a daily quiet time. Be consistent in time and place. Start with about 20 minutes. It should be unhurried. The place for it should be quiet. Morning is ideal.
- Use a notebook. Expect dry periods! That's no excuse for stopping. Every so often change your format or the book of the Bible you are reading to avoid stagnation.
- Share what you are learning in your quiet time with other Christians. Get a hold of a good quiet time guide, if you wish. The pastoral team will be able to show you a variety of materials.
- Finally, begin your quiet time with a conscious appeal to the Holy Spirit to open the eyes of your heart, awaken your affections, and enlighten your mind to the beauty of God in Christ. Paul prays this way for the Ephesian believers, asking that *the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places...* (Eph 1:17-20).

This material, with a few subsequent alterations and additions, was produced by Tim Keller. Any alterations or additions are the sole responsibility of Bridgeway Church.

TGCL



THE GOSPEL GRID

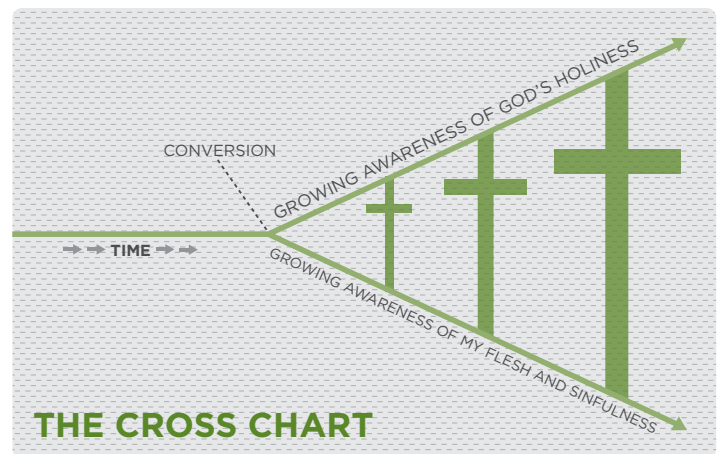
“The gospel” is a phrase that Christians often use without fully understanding its significance. We speak the language of the gospel, but we rarely apply the gospel to every aspect of our lives. Yet this is exactly what God wants for us. The gospel is nothing less than “the power of God” (Rom. 1:16). In Colossians 1:6, the apostle Paul commends the Colossian church because the gospel has been “bearing fruit and growing . . . among [them] since the day [they] heard it.” The apostle Peter teaches that a lack of ongoing transformation in our lives comes from forgetting what God has done for us in the gospel (2 Peter 1:3–9). If we are to grow into maturity in Christ, we must deepen and enlarge our understanding of the gospel as God’s appointed means for personal and communal transformation.

Many Christians live with a truncated view of the gospel. We see the gospel as the “door,” the way in, the entrance point into God’s kingdom. But the gospel is so much more! It is not just the door, but the path we are to walk every day of the Christian life. It is not just the means of our salvation, but the means of our transformation. It is not simply deliverance from sin’s penalty, but release from sin’s power. The gospel is what makes us right with God (justification) and it is also what frees us to delight in God (sanctification). The gospel changes everything!

The following model has been helpful to many people in thinking about the gospel and its implications. This diagram does not say everything that could be said about the gospel, but it does serve as a helpful visual illustration of how the gospel works.

The starting point of the Christian life (conversion) comes when I first become aware of the gap between God’s holiness and my sinfulness. When I am converted, I trust and hope in Jesus, who has done what I could never do: he has bridged the gap between my sinfulness and God’s holiness. He has taken God’s holy wrath toward my sin upon himself.

At the point of conversion, however, I have a very limited view of God’s holiness and of my sin. The more I grow in my Christian life, the more I grow in my awareness of God’s holiness and of my flesh and sinfulness. As I read the Bible, experience the Holy Spirit’s conviction, and live in community with other people, the extent of God’s greatness and the extent of my sin become increasingly clear and vivid. It is not that God is becoming more holy or that I am becoming

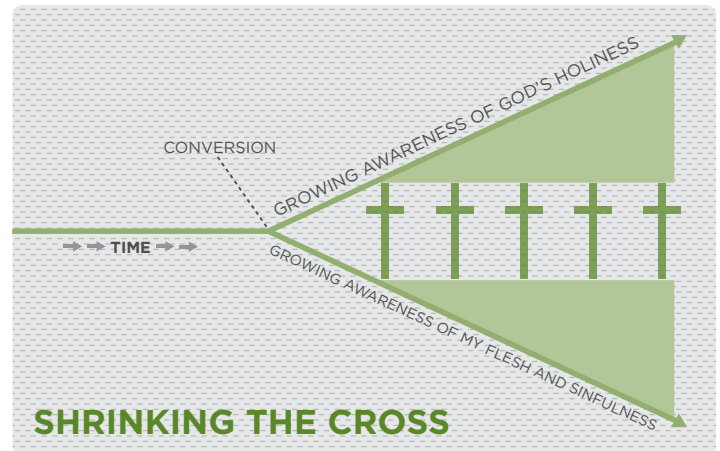


more sinful. But my *awareness* of both is growing. I am increasingly seeing God as he actually is (Isa. 55:8–9) and myself as I actually am (Jer. 17:9–10v).

As my understanding of my sin and of God’s holiness grows, something else also grows: my appreciation and love for Jesus. His mediation, his sacrifice, his righteousness, and his gracious work on my behalf become increasingly sweet and powerful to me. The cross looms larger and more central in my life as I rejoice in the Savior who died upon it.

Unfortunately, sanctification (growth in holiness) doesn’t work quite as neatly as we’d like. Because of the indwelling sin that remains in me, I have an ongoing tendency to minimize the gospel or “shrink the cross.” This happens when I either (a) minimize God’s perfect holiness, thinking of him as something less than his Word declares him to be, or (b) elevate my own righteousness, thinking of myself as someone better than I actually am. The cross becomes smaller and Christ’s importance in my life is diminished.

We’ll talk more about the specific ways we minimize the gospel in weeks to come. To counteract our sinful tendency to shrink the gospel, we must constantly nourish our minds on biblical truth. We need to know, see, and savor the holy, righteous character of God. And we need to identify, admit, and feel the depth of our brokenness and sinfulness. We don’t need to do these things because “that’s what Christians are supposed to do.” Rather, we make this our aim because it is the life God wants for us—a life marked by transforming joy, hope, and love.

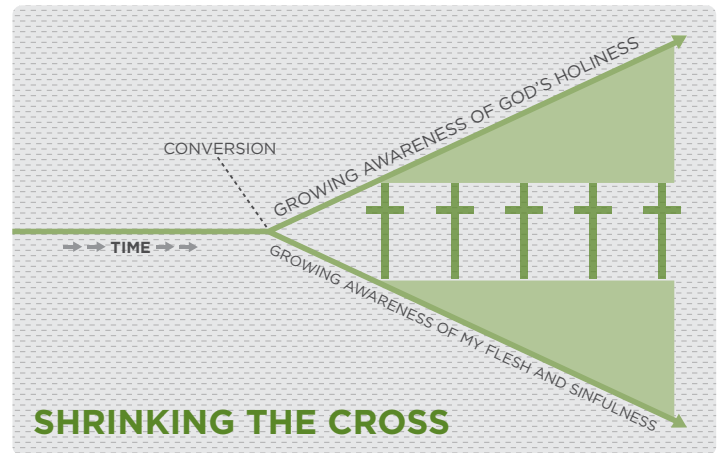


Growing in the gospel means seeing more of God’s holiness and more of my sin. And because of what Jesus has done for us on the cross, we need not fear seeing God as he really is or admitting how broken we really are. Our hope is not in our own goodness, nor in the vain expectation that God will compromise his standards and “grade on a curve.” Rather, we rest in Jesus as our perfect Redeemer—the One who is “our righteousness, holiness and redemption” (1 Cor. 1:30).

SHRINKING THE CROSS: PRETENDING & PERFORMING

Last week we looked at a model that illustrates what it means to live in light of the gospel. This week we want to look more closely at the ways we minimize the gospel and reduce its impact in our lives.

Notice that the top line of the chart is labeled “Growing Awareness of God’s Holiness.” As we stated last time, this does not mean that God’s holiness *itself* is increasing, for God is unchangeable in his character. He has always been infinitely holy. Rather, this line shows that when the gospel is functioning correctly in our lives, our *awareness* of God’s holy character is constantly growing. We realize in fuller and deeper ways the weight of God’s glorious perfections.



Likewise, the bottom line shows that when the gospel is functioning correctly in our lives, our *awareness* of our own sinfulness is consistently growing. This does not mean that we are becoming more sinful. (In fact, if we’re growing in Christ, we’ll be starting to see victory over sin.) But we are realizing more and more “how deep the rabbit hole goes” in our character and behavior. We are seeing that we are more profoundly sinful than we first imagined.

As these two lines diverge, the cross becomes larger in our experience, producing a deeper love for Jesus and a fuller understanding of his goodness. At least that’s the ideal. But, in reality, because of indwelling sin, we are prone to forget the gospel—to drift away from it like a boat loosed from its moorings. That’s why the Bible urges us not to be “moved [away] from the hope held out in the gospel” (Col. 1:23) and to “let the word of Christ dwell in [us] richly” (Col. 3:16). When we are not anchored in the truth of the gospel, our love for Jesus and our experience of his goodness become very small. We end up “shrinking the cross” by either **pretending** or **performing**.

Look again at the bottom line of the chart. Growing in our awareness of our sinfulness is not fun! It means admitting—to ourselves and others—that we are not as good as we think we are. It means confronting what Richard Lovelace called the complex web of “compulsive attitudes, beliefs, and behavior” that sin has created in us. If we are not resting in Jesus’ righteousness, this growing awareness of our sin becomes a crushing weight. We buckle under its load and

* Richard Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1979), p. 88.

compensate by **pretending** that we're better than we really are. Pretending can take many forms: dishonesty ("I'm not *that* bad"), comparison ("I'm not as bad as *those* people"), excuse making ("I'm not *really* that way") and false righteousness ("Here are all the *good* things I've done"). Because we don't want to admit how sinful we really are, we spin the truth in our favor.

Growing in our awareness of God's holiness is also challenging. It means coming face to face with God's righteous commands and the glorious perfections of his character. It means realizing how dramatically we fall short of his standards. It means reflecting on his holy displeasure toward sin. If we are not rooted in God's acceptance of us through Jesus, we compensate by trying to earn God's approval through our **performance**. We live life on a treadmill, trying to gain God's favor by living up to his expectations (or our mistaken view of them).

It's easy to talk about pretending and performing in the abstract. But let's consider how these tendencies find practical expression in our lives.

To discern your subtle tendencies toward pretending, ask yourself this question: *What do you count on to give you a sense of "personal credibility" (validity, acceptance, good standing)?* Your answer to that question will often reveal something (besides Jesus) in which you find righteousness. When we are not firmly rooted in the gospel, we rely on these false sources of righteousness to build our reputation and give us a sense of worth and value. Here are some examples.

JOB RIGHTEOUSNESS: I'm a hard worker, so God will reward me.

FAMILY RIGHTEOUSNESS: Because I "do things right" as a parent, I'm more godly than parents who can't control their kids.

THEOLOGICAL RIGHTEOUSNESS: I have good theology. God prefers me over those who have bad theology.

INTELLECTUAL RIGHTEOUSNESS: I am better read, more articulate, and more culturally savvy than others, which obviously makes me superior.

SCHEDULE RIGHTEOUSNESS: I am self-disciplined and rigorous in my time management, which makes me more mature than others.

FLEXIBILITY RIGHTEOUSNESS: In a world that's busy, I'm flexible and relaxed. I always make time for others. Shame on those who don't!

MERCY RIGHTEOUSNESS: I care about the poor and disadvantaged the way everyone else should.

LEGALISTIC RIGHTEOUSNESS: I don't drink, smoke, or chew, or date girls who do. Too many Christians just aren't concerned about holiness these days.

FINANCIAL RIGHTEOUSNESS: I manage money wisely and stay out of debt. I'm not like those materialistic Christians who can't control their spending.

POLITICAL RIGHTEOUSNESS: If you really love God, you'll vote for my candidate.

TOLERANCE RIGHTEOUSNESS: I am open-minded and charitable toward those who don't agree with me. In fact, I'm a lot like Jesus that way!

These are just a few examples. Perhaps you can think of many more. (Think of anything that gives you a sense of being “good enough” or better than others.) These sources of functional righteousness disconnect us from the power of the gospel. They allow us to find righteousness in what we do instead of honestly confronting the depth of our sin and brokenness. Furthermore, each of these sources of righteousness is also a way of judging and excluding others! We use them to elevate ourselves and condemn those who aren't as “righteous” as we are. In other words, finding righteousness in these things leads us into more sin, not less.

Now, to reveal your tendency toward **performance**, pause and answer this question: *As God thinks of you right now, what is the look on his face?*

Do you picture God as disappointed? Angry? Indifferent? Does his face say “Get your act together!” or “If only you could do a little more for me!” If you imagined God as anything but overjoyed with you, you have fallen into a performance mindset. Because the gospel truth is: In Christ, God is deeply satisfied with you. In fact, based on Jesus' work, God has adopted you as his own son or daughter (Gal. 4:7)! But when we fail to root our identity in what Jesus has done for us, we slip into performance-driven Christianity. We imagine that if we were “better Christians,” God would approve of us more fully. Living this way saps the joy and delight out of following Jesus, leaving us to wallow in a joyless, dutiful obedience. Our gospel becomes very small.

Performance-driven Christianity is actually a minimizing of God's holiness. Thinking we can impress God with our “right living” shows that we've reduced his standards far below what they actually are. Rather than being awed by the infinite measure of his holy perfection, we have convinced ourselves that if we just try hard enough, we can merit God's love and approval.

Our subtle tendencies toward pretending and performing show that failing to believe the gospel is the root of all our more observable sins. As we learn to apply the gospel to our unbelief—to “preach the gospel to ourselves”—we will find ourselves freed from the false security of pretending and performing. Instead we will live in the true joy and freedom promised to us by Jesus. We'll think more about that next time.