



COMMUNITY GROUP BASIC TRAINING

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LESSON ONE - THE “WHY” OF COMMUNITY	1
LESSON TWO - THE MISSION	5
LESSON THREE - OUR DISTINCTIVES	8
LESSON FOUR - THE “HOW” OF COMMUNITY	12
LESSON FIVE - GOSPEL-CENTERED UNITY	16
LESSON SIX - SPENDING TIME WITH GOD	20
LESSON SEVEN - SPIRIT-FILLED COMMUNITY	23
LESSON EIGHT - DISCIPLESHIP GROUPS	27
LESSON NINE - FAMILY MEAL	30
LESSON TEN - MISSIONAL GATHERINGS, PART 1	35
LESSON ELEVEN - MISSIONAL GATHERINGS, PART 2	38
LESSON TWELVE - NEXT STEPS	42

HOW TO USE THIS STUDY

The Community Group Basic Training guide is designed for small group study, although it is possible to work through the study independently or in a larger group. The tone of the material assumes a small-group format, because this is the setting we've found to be the most effective.

Each lesson is designed to take around an hour and a half to complete. If your group has more time available, you can simply spend a little longer in the discussion and exercise sections. Our experience has shown that this content often creates deep and substantive conversation that can easily last longer than an hour and a half. So, plan accordingly, and be sure to honor the time commitment that your group has made.

There is no outside work required by group members to participate. Each person should simply receive a copy of the guide. The content will often stimulate further reflection over the following days, but no preparation is needed for subsequent lessons.

Likewise, it is not assumed that the group leader will be an expert theologian or longstanding Christian. Ample direction and content is provided in this guide to help the leader facilitate the group's time together. The material also provides the content for the study, so there is no need for the group leader to try and "teach" the group. Just relax and guide a good conversation.

Each of these lessons follows a similar format including these elements...

BIBLE CONVERSATION - 10 MIN

We want to start by talking about the Bible together. As the name suggests, this section is designed to stimulate your thinking and prepare you and your group for the ideas that will be presented in each lesson.

ARTICLE - 10 MIN

The written articles are the primary source of the teaching content for each lesson. They are short, clear teachings of the concepts being presented in the lesson. Each week, your group will take a few minutes and read the article out loud together, taking turns at the paragraph breaks.

DISCUSSION - 15 MIN

This section is where we communally process the concepts being taught in the article. Often the discussion will work in conjunction with the exercise section to help flesh out the teaching and apply it to our lives in concrete ways.

EXERCISE - 20 MIN

Each of the exercises in this study are designed to help you make practical applications of the concepts being taught, or help you understand the content at a deeper heart level. Be sure you allow enough time for your group to adequately work through and discuss the exercises as directed.

SHARING LIFE STORIES - 35 MIN

We will conclude each lesson with an opportunity for one person from the group to share their life story. Here are a few guiding principles for engaging this time in a meaningful way:

- Identify who will share their story next week. In other words, don't ask people to share right on the spot. To tell their story well, people need time to reflect and pray.
- Write your story down to help you to reflect and share. You may even need to simply read what you have written when your turn comes. Sharing your story may take up to twenty minutes.
- If you have a story you have never told anyone—or told very few people—and you are wrestling with what to share or how to share it in a way that will protect you and edify others, reach out to one (or both) of the group leaders and ask if you can process your story with them in private ahead of time. That way, when you tell the group your story, it will be the second time you share, and it will also allow you, with the help of your leader(s), to discern what to share or not share and how best to share it.
- As you prepare to tell your story, it's best to examine and talk about your life in three ways: 1) you are being sanctified (or being made holy), 2) you suffer, and 3) you sin. It's easy to fall into a "just the facts" format when sharing our life stories, but if you think of your story as just a list of dates, places, and names, you won't end up sharing the parts of your story that are most meaningful and that help others begin to really know you. Instead, think about how you would answer the following questions: How has God used the good, bad, and really difficult things in your life to form you into the person you are today? Who were you before you met Jesus? How has Jesus changed you? Who are you becoming?

- After someone has shared, be sure you immediately and vocally thank the person who shared their story and affirm their courage and vulnerability, especially if it was a hard or painful story to share. If it moved you, blessed you, or broke your heart, respond and say those things out loud to that person.
- Finally, gather around the person who has shared and pray for them. Have multiple people lay hands on them—asking their permission first, if that is a new experience for them, or if they are particularly emotional. If someone has shared something especially vulnerable, make sure multiple people of the same gender move towards them, lay hands on them, and pray vocal and compassionate prayers over them. Invite the Holy Spirit to minister to them in that moment. Pray prayers of encouragement and thanksgiving for their life. Provide tissues if needed.

LESSON ONE: THE “WHY” OF COMMUNITY

BIBLE DISCUSSION – 10 min

Read John 13:34-35.

- What is your initial reaction to this passage? What stands out to you?
- What does this say about God—and us?
- How does this passage apply to gospel community?

ARTICLE – 10 min

The short answer

Why community? The short answer is, *we were made for it*. Deep within us is the desire to belong to something bigger than ourselves. This desire is the driving motivation behind every club, team, social group, and even places we eat and buy groceries. But that desire is more than a mere social construct; it's in our very DNA.

The God who created us has eternally existed in community. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have dwelt together in perfect unity, love, and joy before and throughout time. This triune God created humanity as the chief of his creations for the display of this relationship. In short, the reason we instinctively long for community is because we have been created in the image of God.

The long answer

So, that's the short answer...but we haven't even made it to Genesis 3 yet. To be sure, prior to the fall of man (Gen 3:1-24), mankind dwelt in unity (Gen 1:27, 2:18) and God himself dwelt with man (Gen 3:8). All creation existed in a state of "shalom"—things were the way they were *supposed* to be (Gen 1:31). It wasn't until sin entered the world that isolation from community came into the picture, fracturing, not only the relationship between man and God, but the relationship between man and man as well.

Throughout the rest of the Biblical narrative, we see God at work pursuing, redeeming, and restoring. This work culminates in the book of Revelation as people from every tongue and tribe and race gather to worship (Rev 7:9-10), feast (Rev 19:9), and, ultimately, experience the shalom of God once again as he makes his dwelling place with man (Rev 21:3). But here's the rub: even though that day is coming (and we long for it to come!), it's not here yet. Instead, we find ourselves in a culture characterized by the “unholy trinity” of individualism, materialism, and consumerism.

Unfortunately, the worldview of the culture has also pervaded the worldview of the local church. Many of the people who engage in our worship services and participate in our ministries are more formed by their unconscious desire to consume than what the Scriptures teach about what is true. We are systemically “disciplined” by the culture we inhabit, and, because of this, the church must have a systematic response to disciple its people in the way of Jesus.

The American church has often recognized the problem of individualism, presenting small groups as the typical solution for isolated people. Similarly, we recognize the problem of materialism, and have

presented opportunities for radical generosity. It is very rare, however, for the church to have a response to consumerism. We are still plagued by systems of thought that cater to consumers rather than encourage individuals to be self-feeding, self-leading, self-multiplying disciples of Jesus.

In order for the church to be effective in discipling the people whom God has entrusted to us, we need to have a systematic response to this pervasive worldview. We cannot expect to confront idolatry on a deep level if our systems are reinforcing consumerism. The "typical" small group is highly driven around the needs of the Christian, is often centered around teaching or Bible study from an outside source, and rarely asks for more than one meeting per week.

At Frontline, we've chosen to pursue life in community and respond to the worldview of the culture through community groups as the primary context for discipleship, care, and mission. Together we learn to listen, love, and serve one another to grow in our affections for Jesus Christ. In these gospel-saturated gatherings all across our cities and towns, we live out our mission to multiply gospel communities that love God, love people, and push back darkness.

Community Groups

Community groups are small expressions of gospel truth; missional outposts, if you will. A community group is a diverse collection of individuals committed to the gospel and one another, meeting in homes around the city throughout the week. Having a lot of things in common, or even enjoying the same hobbies, does not define true community. True community is living life together, pointing each other to our hope in God, and pushing each other to grow as disciples of Jesus. Through these relationships we receive and respond to grace, imaging our Creator and lifting up the name of Christ.

Community groups at Frontline are groups of people together:

- ***Because of Jesus.*** We are a community of people gathered not because of stage of life, affinity, race, or culture. Gospel community transcends those things. At Frontline, we are united because of Jesus.
- ***With Jesus.*** We are a community of people who don't just sing or talk about him. Rather, we long to be with Jesus through the Holy Spirit and we believe that Christ is present in our gatherings through his Spirit. We want the Spirit of Christ to empower us for ministry and mission. This is why we believe that ministry apart from Jesus is pointless, and we emphasize our need for the Holy Spirit.
- ***Under Jesus.*** We are a community of people that live under the authority of Jesus by his Word. The Bible stands over us as the supreme court of authority for all matters of faith and practice. You can see this at Frontline in that everything we do, we want to come under Jesus in the Scriptures.
- ***For Jesus.*** We are a community that lives on mission in our city for Jesus. As a community group, we care for the good of our city, and we are passionate about people meeting Jesus.

Through community groups we are brought back into the relationships we were made to experience with God and each other.

For the city

In order to embody the church in unique neighborhoods across our city, we must have gospel communities who are uniquely expressing the gospel all over our city. Most people in the OKC metro area, if asked to come to a worship gathering, would decline. However, the majority of those same people

would study the Bible if a friend asked them to, and most of them would be willing to listen if someone wanted to tell them about their Christian beliefs. To sum up, if we want to engage the entire city with the gospel of Christ, we have to take the church to them.

This requires every single member of the body of Christ to live a missionary life, not simply some people doing ministry on Sundays. Community groups provide the vehicle by which the church scattered can engage every sphere of society. Thousands of people gathered on a Sunday can make a small dent in reaching the lost in our city, but thousands of missionaries living out the gospel together in our city has the power to radically change it for the sake of the gospel.

DISCUSSION - 15 min

- After reading the article, what did you learn about Jesus and community?
- Why is gospel community important to you? What are your hopes and/or apprehensions for this group?

EXERCISE - 20 min

Someone read the following quote, from Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Life Together*, aloud:

Those who love their dream of a Christian community more than they love the Christian community itself become destroyers of that Christian community even though their personal intentions may be ever so honest, earnest and sacrificial. God hates this wishful dreaming because it makes the dreamer proud and pretentious. Those who dream of this idolized community demand that it be fulfilled by God, by others and by themselves. They enter the community of Christians with their demands set up by their own law, and judge one another and God accordingly. It is not we who build. Christ builds the church. Whoever is mindful to build the church is surely well on the way to destroying it, for he will build a temple to idols without wishing or knowing it. We must confess, he builds. We must proclaim, he builds. We must pray to him, and he will build. We do not know his plan. We cannot see whether he is building or pulling down. It may be that the times which by human standards are the times of collapse are for him the great times of construction. It may be that the times which from a human point are great times for the church are times when it's pulled down. It is a great comfort which Jesus gives to his church. You confess, preach, bear witness to me, and I alone will build where it pleases me. Do not meddle in what is not your providence. Do what is given to you, and do it well, and you will have done enough....

What is your reaction or response to this?

We're often tempted to be nostalgic about the past or idealistic about the future. When you think about your "wishful dreaming" about community, what do you need to let go of to be able to celebrate and embrace the community you have here?

Pray that Jesus would build his church, and that, as a community group, you would "do what is given to you, and do it well."

SHARING LIFE STORIES - 20 min

PRAY - 15 min

LESSON TWO: THE MISSION

BIBLE DISCUSSION – 10 min

Read Matthew 28:16-20.

- What is your initial reaction to this passage? What stands out to you?
- What does this say about God—and us?
- How does this passage apply to gospel community?

ARTICLE – 10 min

Frontline's mission

The whole reason we pursue community groups at Frontline comes from our mission as a church: *multiplying gospel communities that love God, love people, and push back darkness*. This is the heart and soul of our church. It is why we exist. Every aspect of our church is driven by this mission. It brings us together with one goal and purpose. It centers us on why God has placed us here, and sets our eyes on what we collectively strive for. At the end of the day, this is who we are. Gathered or scattered, this mission is what we are called to do.

Multiplying gospel communities

Our mission begins with our aim to *multiply gospel communities*. In the previous lesson, we began learning about one kind of gospel community: community groups. Community groups, and gospel communities in general, are groups of people together (1) because of Jesus, (2) with Jesus, (3) under Jesus, and (4) for Jesus. There are four kinds of gospel communities that we long to see multiplied.

- **Community groups.** Community groups are small, diverse groups that meet in homes around the city throughout the week. We eat together, disciple one another, and live on mission for Jesus.
- **Hubs.** Hubs consist of 3-5 community groups that are geographically connected. Each hub is led by a hub leadership team who oversees, trains, and shepherds the groups. Within a hub, multiple community groups engage and serve the same neighborhoods and areas of our city.
- **Congregations.** Multiple hubs that are geographically connected form a congregation. Frontline is one church with multiple congregations located throughout central Oklahoma. These congregations allow members of Frontline to gather and live on mission in their local contexts.
- **Churches.** Churches should aim to start new churches; we call these “church plants”. Frontline is a church-planting church because we want to build the Kingdom of Jesus, not the kingdom of Frontline. Our church is just one community of a much larger community of believers. As a church, we have a desire to see churches planted all over the world to reach more people for Jesus.

Multiplication of a community group

There is no question that the church of God, both in seasons of great triumph and great struggle, continues to make and multiply disciples through power of the Spirit in accordance with the Word. As we make more disciples, it will naturally lead to multiplying community groups and ultimately multiplying churches. Growth through multiplication is the natural outcome of obedience to the Holy Spirit and the

Scriptures. It is likely that your group has multiplied out of another community group, or that some of your group members have walked through a group multiplication before. Multiplication may be a ways off for you, but to have a vision for the purpose of community groups, we need to understand the vision of multiplying.

Multiplying disciples

Every follower of Jesus is called to be both a disciple and a disciple maker. Jesus commanded his people—even those who doubted (Matt 28:17)—to go and make disciples who make disciples (Matt 28:16-20). As we grow in the context of community, we go from consumer to contributor. This is gospel multiplication.

We multiply disciples in two ways. First, we tell people who don't know Jesus about Jesus. Second, we teach people who do know Jesus how to follow and obey him. This is the heart of the Great Commission. As a follower of Jesus, you are called to be a disciple-making disciple.

Multiplying leaders

We want to see leaders raised up and developed in our community groups to be leaders in the church and the city. Every leader in our church is thinking about how to disciple others into their calling. Our community groups are one significant way we build people up into their gifts and leadership.

Multiplying groups

As our community groups grow—to stay on mission and to serve and love each other and the city well—our groups must multiply. As more community groups spread throughout our cities, we can make an impact on more neighborhoods and more people who are far from God. We want to see these gospel communities flourishing in every dark corner of our city.

Love God, love people, push back darkness

As we have said, our mission is to multiply gospel communities that love God, love people, and push back darkness. As a result, these three things should mark all forms of gospel community in our church, especially community groups:

- **Love God.** Our love for God is a response to his great love for us. In the gospel, we clearly see the markers of God's overflowing, life-giving, sacrificial love detailed. God shows the depths of his love by sending Jesus to reconcile us back to him. In response to God's love for us in the gospel is to love him in return. "In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins... We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:10, 19).
 - The primary way we love God in community is through *discipleship*. As we center our efforts on being formed by the gospel, we believe leaders and participants will grow in their love for God. Discipleship groups are designed toward this end, but there are many other ways that God will accomplish this outcome.
- **Love people.** As we live in gospel community with one another, people will see and know that we have been changed by Jesus. Our love for others is not love in word or talk, but in deed and in truth. Just as Jesus loved us and served us, we love and serve each other.
 - In community, the main way we love people is to *care* for one another. Care is the practice of gospel hospitality. It is sharing our needs and meeting them together. It is mutual oversight and accountability. It's restoration, reconciliation, and doing good to everyone, especially those who are of the household of faith (Gal 6:10). The family meal is designed to facilitate this kind of community, but the providential circumstances of each

person's life, along with many other factors will contribute to deep, Christ-centered relationships.

- **Push back darkness.** God's love drives us to love those who live in darkness without him. It also calls us to care about what God cares about. As God pushes back darkness in our cities and world, we want to partner with him to see restoration and reconciliation in people's lives by proclaiming the gospel and demonstrating the Kingdom.
 - To push back darkness in community is to gather for *mission*. By the grace of God, we hope to see new Christians enter the Kingdom and immature disciples grow in maturity, flourish, and multiply. Missional gatherings are designed to help us interact with people who are far from God, but, in every way we gather, our resources and strengths are multiplied, and our effectiveness increases.

DISCUSSION - 15 min

- What are some tangible ways that you see our church loving God, loving people, and pushing back darkness? What are ways we can grow in this, specifically in the context of community?

EXERCISE - 20 min

Part of being a good missionary is understanding the context in which God has placed you. As a group, spend some time brainstorming and identifying ways to love God, love people, and push back darkness in your neighborhood. As you do, think about actual people, not caricatures. What do they believe in? What are their idols? How do they spend their time? What things are important to them?

As you discover new ways to live on mission in your community, write them down below.

Love God:

Love people:

Push back darkness:

SHARING LIFE STORIES - 20 min

PRAY - 15 min

LESSON THREE: OUR DISTINCTIVES

BIBLE DISCUSSION – 10 min

Read Matthew 5:14-16.

- What is your initial reaction to this passage? What stands out to you?
- What does this say about God—and us?
- How does this passage apply to gospel community?

ARTICLE – 10 min

Frontline's distinctives

Our distinctives are the core beliefs that set Frontline apart as a uniquely beautiful church in our city. Not every church is the same, and these distinctives are the most important differences for us. We are NOT saying that only “true Christians” believe these distinctives. Nor are we saying that in order to be a part of Frontline, you have to believe these distinctives. We ARE saying that these distinctives are core to the church and drive everything we do. You can expect all of the elders at Frontline to believe, preach, and embrace each of these five distinctives, and you can expect this community group to be marked by these distinctives as well.

Gospel-Centered

The gospel is the good news of the person and work of Jesus (1 Cor 15:1-4). Everything that we do as a church is grounded in this good news.

When he came to earth in flesh, Jesus took on a body and became fully man while remaining fully God. Jesus has two natures (divine and human), yet he is one person. Jesus lived on earth as a man without sin, walking fully in communion with his Father. He experienced what we experience as human beings, which allowed him to sympathize with our weaknesses. On the cross, Jesus took the penalty for our sin and suffered as our substitute, reconciling us back to God. After his crucifixion, Jesus literally rose from the dead. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God (1 Cor 15:20-22).

Jesus defeated death, showing it had no power to hold him. Jesus' resurrection leads to our spiritual resurrection. Jesus is now ruling and reigning as king above every authority. In the end, Jesus will physically return to earth to bring about a new creation. Jesus' return will bring about the resurrection of the dead and death will be no more; and he will restore all things in a new heavens and new earth. The truth of Jesus' life and resurrection is what we shape our faith around. It is what we hold to as truth and what leads us to obedience and love of the Father.

Bible-Honoring

In the church today, a passion for the Bible and a passion for the Holy Spirit can seem at odds with one another. At Frontline, we strive to be a Word *and* Spirit church.

- We believe the Bible is revelation from God. In the Scriptures, God has revealed himself to us. We cannot come to truly know God apart from the Bible.

- The Bible is inspired by God. The Scriptures are the very Word of God, infallible and without error. They are God-breathed, and the message of God to us (2 Tim 3:16).
- The Bible has the highest authority for us as a church. It is the “Supreme Court” of authority for all matters of faith and practice.
- Jesus himself saw the Scriptures as revelation, inspired, and authoritative (Matt 5:18-19).

Reading our Bible is a way we draw near to God and hear his voice. The Spirit helps us and speaks to us through his Word. The Bible should not be a barrier to communion with God, but a means of it. The whole Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, is about the good news of the person and work of Jesus. We cannot read Scripture rightly without seeing Jesus in the passage.

Spirit-Filled

The Bible and the Spirit are not at odds with each other. We believe they come together as we seek to faithfully follow Jesus. When we trust in Jesus for salvation, the Holy Spirit comes and dwells in us. He guides us and leads us and empowers us to follow and love Jesus (Eph 1:13). Additionally, the Bible encourages believers to be “filled” with the Holy Spirit. We are called to continuously pursue this filling throughout our lives. All Christians have the Spirit, but not all Christians are “filled” with the Spirit (Eph 5:18).

The ministry of the Church is marked by the power of the Holy Spirit. He empowers the church for gospel proclamation and kingdom demonstration through spiritual gifts. These gifts are manifestations of the Spirit’s presence, given for the good and upbuilding of the church. The Holy Spirit gives spiritual gifts to every Christian. Each one is vital for the health and growth of the church (1 Cor 12:4-7). We believe that all the gifts mentioned in the New Testament are still active today, including tongues, healing, and prophecy. The Scriptures call us to pursue these gifts because they demonstrate the power and presence of the Spirit among his people.

Kingdom-Focused

God has promised a Kingdom that would restore what was lost in the beginning. A king would come to reign over the whole earth, and his kingdom would last forever. This Kingdom would be founded on justice and righteousness, bringing God’s blessing and presence once again (Dan 7:13-14, Eph 1:20-22).

King Jesus is the promised King, who is sovereign over all. There is nothing outside of his control, and there is nothing he cannot do. Nothing, not even evil, can thwart his purposes. Today, Jesus is ruling and reigning as King, bringing heaven to earth. He heals, redeems, liberates, and rescues. He is actively setting all things right, just as he promised he would do.

But the Kingdom is not here in its fullness, and won’t be until the King returns. We live in a world where evil is present and has sought to establish a kingdom of darkness. Until the day that God’s Kingdom is fully realized, we seek to advance his Kingdom to the ends of the earth. This means that the Church is THE instrument for expanding the Kingdom of God into the darkness. We can’t separate Jesus from what he is doing through the Church. Every member in the Church is vital for the mission of God, to see his Kingdom spread (Eph 4:11-12).

The Church is meant to be a place where we experience a foretaste of the Kingdom to come. He is calling all different types of people to come together as the family of God; people from all backgrounds, races, ages, and socio-economic statuses. The Kingdom of God brings the peace, justice, reconciliation and

righteousness of God to earth. God cares about the practical needs of the people in our cities and we should pray for the city and work for its good.

We want to establish the Kingdom of Christ, not the kingdom of Frontline. Our church cannot fulfill the mission of God alone. We want to see the Kingdom of God spread as more churches live under the lordship of Jesus. We can pray big prayers with the expectation that Jesus will answer. We can pray for the world in hope that the Kingdom will come on earth. There is nothing that can stop this kingdom. Even in the midst of suffering and chaos, we can be hopeful that the gospel will have the victory. Heaven will come to earth, and all will be set right.

Gender-Redeeming

Our culture is more confused about gender than ever before. At every turn, we see varying ideas of what gender and sexuality ought to be. In Scripture, we get a consistent and clear picture of God's intention for gender and sexuality. In a culture that is increasingly questioning the very nature and essence of gender, can we look to Scripture for a view of gender that leads to joy, hope, and flourishing? YES!

In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, he made humans as the pinnacle of his creation. They were to be the Image of God. God designed two genders to image himself: man and woman. All humans, whether male or female, bear the image of God (Gen 1:27). As Images of God, both men and women were called to obey God and mirror his character by filling, cultivating, and ruling creation with his presence and rule.

Men and women are to partner together to see this mission fulfilled. Since we are all created in the Image of God, women and men are equal in our dignity, value, and worth. No human being, especially women, should be subjugated or diminished in their value.

As humans were created to image God's character, each gender was designed to do so in a unique and beautiful way. These characteristics are not exclusive to a particular gender, but they are designed to be uniquely displayed in a particular gender. Masculinity and femininity together, when fully embraced, reveal more fully to all creation what God is like. From the very beginning, we see masculinity and femininity fitting together, each providing unique strengths as they come together. As women and men live in harmony with one another, everyone benefits. Our gender becomes a beautiful gift of God that brings flourishing to all creation.

Sometimes gender is only seen in light of our various roles, as husband or wife, as mother or father. But the Bible upholds the beauty of gender in all people, even those called to singleness. Whether we find ourselves married or single, a parent or childless, we are designed to relate to one another in our God-given gender. We are to restore the dignity of gender in a posture of love, service, and mutuality. This is especially true of those in the church (1 Tim 5:1).

When we have a healthy view of gender, we can begin to interact with one another first and foremost as brothers, sisters, mothers, fathers, sons, and daughters. As we live in a gender redeeming community, the glory of God will be seen, and both men and women will flourish. Our gender is a beautiful gift of God that is crucial to our purpose as humans to image our Creator. Being a man or woman is a good gift from a good God that should be received with joy and hope.

DISCUSSION - 15 min

There isn't really a formal discussion for this article because the concepts are worked out in the exercise below. However, it is a good idea to make sure everyone understands the concepts in the article.

- Does everyone understand the concepts of the five distinctives?

If anyone answers "No," go back and read that section of the article again.

EXERCISE - 20 min

Someone read Matthew 5:1-16 aloud. Let's take a few moments to think through the following questions and then share some of our responses.

1. As Jesus begins his sermon, he lists out nine things that he describes as the blessed life. This word for "blessed" means happy or flourishing, and is used to describe someone living the Good Life. How would our culture describe the Good Life or being "blessed"? In what ways does Jesus' message contrast to our cultural ideas of flourishing and blessing?
2. As Jesus lists these blessings, he is not just stating realities, but also describing the ethics that his disciples are to pursue. As you read through Jesus' beatitudes, where do you feel confronted with the ethics of Jesus and his kingdom? Where are you putting your vision of blessedness above Jesus' vision?
3. Jesus describes his disciples, who live according to these values, as salt and light. He doesn't tell them to try to be salt and light. Rather, he tells them they are salt and light. The culture of his disciples is contrary to the culture of the world. How is this salty-brightness attractive and missional to the world? How does the gospel empower us to live in the way of Jesus?

SHARING LIFE STORIES - 20 min

PRAY - 15 min

LESSON FOUR: THE “HOW” OF COMMUNITY

BIBLE DISCUSSION – 10 min

Read Acts 2:42-47.

- What is your initial reaction to this passage? What stands out to you?
- What does this say about God—and us?
- How does this passage apply to gospel community?

ARTICLE – 10 min

The three goals community groups

At Frontline, community groups exist to *love God, love people, and push back darkness*. Subsequently, the three goals of community groups are *discipleship, care, and mission*. We accomplish these goals in community through the three rhythms of *discipleship groups, family meal, and missional gatherings*. This all means that a community group is more than just a bible study or a social club. Community groups exist for multiple purposes and attempt to achieve those purposes simultaneously.

This means a few things:

- Just like the early church devoted themselves to the Apostle’s teaching, community groups are devoted to the Word of God.
- Just like the early church was devoted to fellowship, the breaking of bread, prayer, and living sacrificially, community groups are devoted to caring for one another over meals, through prayers and sacrificial living.
- Just like the early church experienced the work of Lord adding to their number those who were being saved, community groups exist for the purpose of mission and will see outsiders coming to faith and being added to their group.
- Just like the early church multiplied for the sake of the gospel, community groups multiply for the sake of the gospel.

We, as a local church in Oklahoma, are an expression of the new and glorious community that is described in the New Testament and, as we’ve already seen, exemplified in Acts 2. In this lesson, we’ll spend our time answering the question of “how.”

The three rhythms of community groups

Frontline community groups gather in three varied ways that we call “rhythms”—family meals, discipleship groups, and missional gatherings.

- **Discipleship groups.** In the rhythm of discipleship groups, we learn to love God as we gather in groups of three to four men or women to apply one bit of Scripture to one bit of our lives, to share what’s good, hard, and bad, and to pray—for each other and our lost friends.
- **Family meal.** Family meals are casual gatherings where we can invite friends, family, co-workers, and non-believers to meet our group and experience God’s grace in a less intimidating setting. In

the rhythm of family meal, we learn to love people as we gather around the common table for the sake of community. We set aside an entire evening to prepare, eat, and clean up a meal together. As we linger over the meal, we listen, we talk, and we pray. Consequently, slowly, over time, we become friends.

- **Missional gatherings.** In the rhythm of missional gatherings, we learn to push back darkness as we gather for the sake of people far from God. While there are a potentially infinite number of ways to gather missionally, Frontline prioritizes three. We gather missionally: (1) by extending gospel hospitality at the family meal whenever we are privileged to be joined by people far from God, (2) by locking arms with city partners thoughtfully chosen by each congregational leadership team and serving shoulder to shoulder. and (3) by regularly spending intentional time together in natural and neutral “third places” (coffee shops, gyms, parks, barber shops, neighborhood association meetings, etc.)

A community group schedule

You will learn more about these rhythms in coming weeks, but, in order to accomplish the three goals community groups simultaneously, you will need to observe the different rhythms on different weeks throughout each month. An ideal community group schedule may look like this:

- Week 1 - Family meal
- Week 2 - Discipleship groups
- Week 3 - Family meal
- Week 4 - Discipleship groups
- Week 5 - Missional gathering

Semesters and breaks

God has created our world and bodies with rhythmic cycles of work and rest. Community groups take two breaks throughout the year in July and December. These are natural moments where people are scattered on vacations or celebrations. This is a healthy time for leaders to recuperate as well as gather new vision for the next semester. Often during these breaks, the community group will still spend relaxed time together, but the leader will take no initiative to plan this. These are also healthy moments for groups to consider multiplication.

How community group leadership is structured

The following is a helpful breakdown of both the leadership structure and the flow of communication in community groups:

- Member >> Community Group Leaders >> Hub Leaders >> Community Director >> Elders

Hub leaders and care

Community Groups are gathered into “hubs” which are three to five community groups connected geographically for (1) more efficient mission (2) more effective pastoral care and (3) more exact equipping. Each hub is overseen by hub leaders who cast vision, coach, and provide pastoral care for the community group leaders and people in the hub.

Every week, community group leaders will fill out a weekly report to take attendance, record notes, and pass along any prayer requests or important information. These reports are confidential and seen by the community director and hub leaders. These weekly reports are how a community group leader is able to

notify the leaders of the church about important seasons of care like marriage, pregnancy, miscarriage, suffering, etc.

Community group leadership

Community group leaders are a vital piece of our church. They are also living as examples of healthy disciples for the rest of the group and actively making disciples. For this reason, we have certain qualifications and expectations for our leaders, that they would model well for others.

- **Qualifications of a leader.** The following expectations should be true of every community group leader:
 - Believing and baptized Christian
 - A covenant member in good standing with the church
 - Completed the community group leader evaluation & assessment process. This process equips and assesses the potential leader in categories such as, devotion to Jesus, character, theology, scenarios, and many others.
- **Responsibilities of a leader and the group.** Community groups are where 80% of discipleship, care, and mission occurs at Frontline. Thus, being a community group leader is a serious commitment. A community group leader is accountable for the rhythms, discipleship, care, mission, administration and reporting of their group. This does not mean, however, that they themselves will directly do each of these things. It is the leader's role to make sure that each area is covered and that what is being expected is inspected regularly. A leader exercises good discipleship by inviting each member of the group into carrying the load together and sharing these responsibilities. Although the leaders set the pace, it is always important to remember that each member of the group is responsible for others in the group, as well as group culture. If a leader does not have apprentices and leadership support, leading will be too much to bear.
- **Apprenticeship.** In Matthew 9:37, Jesus says, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore to send out workers into his harvest field." Leadership is a crucial resource in a church. The most important role behind the community group leader is the *apprentice*. One of a community group leader's major responsibilities is to identify, equip, develop, and deploy leaders. Therefore, we ask that every leader be committed to replacing themselves by recruiting one or two apprentices. Every group should have an apprentice almost immediately upon conception. The apprentice, depending on skill and experience, would likely be the person to multiply into a new group. The leader disciplines an apprentice to do what they do just as their hub leader is ideally discipling them. An apprentice helps shoulder the leadership load with the leaders.

Conclusion

Living life together in the way we have defined is a summary of what we believe is the New Testament vision of community. Vision rarely matches reality, however, and in community groups we contend with sin, Satan, and the world's impact on the individual lives of everyone involved in a community. It is always important to have a vision for where you are going in, but it's equally important to understand how to start pursuing that vision in small steps.

In the coming weeks, we will talk about practical details of leading a community of people to live out this vision over time.

DISCUSSION - 15 min

- How is this different from small groups you have been a part of in the past and what excites you about what we just read?
- Why is it crucial for community groups to keep all three goals in focus rather than just one? What could be lost if the group focused on only one of these goals?

EXERCISE - 20 min

Take a moment in silence individually to ask God to help you dream about what a true gospel community is like. Dream about awe coming upon every soul and people being saved and added to your community. Dream about the impact this kind of community could have on those you know who are far from God. Dream about the impact this kind of sacrificial community could have on your neighborhood and city.

Take time as a group to pray aloud for the things you are dreaming about.

SHARING LIFE STORIES - 20 min

PRAY - 15 min

LESSON FIVE: GOSPEL-CENTERED UNITY

BIBLE DISCUSSION – 10 min

Read John 17:20-23.

- What is your initial reaction to this passage? What stands out to you?
- What does this say about God—and us?
- How does this passage apply to gospel community?

ARTICLE – 10 min

Gospel-centered unity

In the local church and in our community groups, gospel-centered unity is something we should all work towards. The gospel renews us internally, but it also flows out of us to bring renewal and restoration to our relationships with each other.

Handling conflict

There is nothing more common to relationships than conflict and unfortunately that rings just as true within the church as it does in culture. However, with God's help we can be set apart as we try to react to conflict in a way that guards unity and points others to Jesus. If you are a follower of Jesus, consider the following instructions as we hold ourselves and each other accountable for guarding unity when conflict arises.

1. ***Handle conflict directly.***
 - Know that conflict is going to happen and when it does, do not run from it, over spiritualize it, or deny it. Conflict can be something that helps us grow and love each other in new ways (John 13:35).
 - If you sense tension with someone, go to that person directly and ask, "Is everything ok between us?" (Rom 12:16).
 - If you are hurt or angered by a leader or another member, do the best and hardest thing by going privately to that person to talk about it. The worst and easiest reaction would be to talk about it to others in the church (Eph 4:29).
 - When someone sins against you, we ask that you follow the conflict-resolution guidelines in Matthew 18.
2. ***Handle other people's concerns wisely.***
 - Remember that every conversation has two sides. If you hear a negative report, go to the other person and ask to hear his or her perspective (Prov 18:17).
 - When you need to pass on information or criticism, do not do it anonymously or under the label "Many people feel..." With names attached, conflict can be directly assessed before it spreads (Eph 4:25).
 - If you hear someone speak an unkind word of criticism or slander against anyone, do not do the worst and easiest thing by listening and empathizing with how badly the speaker has been treated. Instead, do the best and hardest thing by asking the person to go directly to

whomever he or she is criticizing or complaining about. If the person hesitates, offer to go with him or her (Ps 15:1-3).

3. *Handle different convictions biblically.*

- When you are more permissive on an issue, do not exercise your freedom in a way that offends or distresses someone who is more restrictive on that issue. When you are more restrictive on an issue, do not condemn someone who is more permissive on that issue as less spiritual. Instead, hold and express your convictions in a way that “aims for harmony in the church and builds others up” (Rom 14:3, 21).

4. *Honor leaders.*

- Hebrews 13:17 says that we should “Obey [our] leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over [our] souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to [us].” This alone will prevent many conflicts.
- 1 Timothy 5:19 says “Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses.” Knowing that the most common accusations come against leaders, practice discernment and don’t overreact if someone in your group has an issue with someone in a position of leadership, particularly if the issue is an arbitrary complaint or something of that nature. However, if the issue is more serious in nature, especially if it is brought by two or three witnesses, you should reach out to a hub leader or an elder immediately.

5. *Uphold unity.*

- We ask that you hold dear the sacrament of communion by going before the service or during the welcome to ask forgiveness for the way you may have hurt someone (Matt 5:23-24).
- Since being divisive is one of the few things serious enough to warrant being separated from the communion of the Church, we ask that you work for unity in the following ways: “be subject to rulers and authorities, be obedient, be ready to do whatever is good, slander no one, be peaceable and considerate, and show true humility toward all men” (Titus 3:1). If you are thinking about leaving the church, we ask that you meet with a staff member to express honestly why you’re thinking about that. If you are disciplined by the church leaders, we ask that you stay and show by your repentance God’s power to restore (Titus 3:10).
- When you are hurt by another person in this church work to forgive the person fully (Eph 4:31-32, Matt 6:14-15).

6. *Seek healing and forgiveness.*

- Work to consider others better than yourself, since that attitude alone will build unity (Phil 2:3).
- Focus more on how you need to change than on how that other person (who is bothering you) needs to. Regularly confess your sin, both in public worship and in gospel community (1 Tim 1:15, Matt 7:1).
- Grow as a Christian in love, forgiveness, and handling conflict, through means such as healing prayer, counseling, resources on relationships, and seeking pastoral care (2 Thess 1:3).
- Know that you will often fall short, and when you realize you have not abided by these guidelines, ask for God’s forgiveness. Then also go to those who were affected and ask their forgiveness, too (1 John 1:9).

Conflict is not easy to navigate. It is messy and hard and very few naturally handle it well. Our sin is often at the root but it is also frequently woven all through it in how we handle it after it starts. However, conflict is also a beautiful opportunity for the Holy Spirit to steer our hearts towards God and for us to understand the promises of the gospel in new and deeper ways. If we have that perspective, and strive for unity, we can experience deeper worship than without.

Markers of gospel-centered unity

With gospel-centered unity in mind when we examine ourselves and our communities, we want to look for certain markers of true biblical community and genuine transformation:

1. **Belonging.** As human beings, we have a God given longing to be known. Our hope is that everyone who visits Frontline would experience a welcoming people, along with an invitation to belong. Where the gospel is genuinely at work in people, they will be genuinely hospitable. God has been made known to us, and we want to make God known. Jesus has befriended us, at great cost to himself; therefore, we want to be friends to others.

Throughout the week all around the city, we should be sowing seeds of belonging, regularly inviting the people we encounter in our day-to-day lives to witness the gospel at work in our community groups. During our Sunday worship gatherings, we want to assist our guests in connecting with other members by serving them and helping them find a community group in their area of town. Through the church, the world hears the gospel, and in community, they experience it. As they begin to belong, our prayer is that the Spirit will lead them to believe.

2. **Authenticity.** As God's people, we want to pursue genuine, honest, and integrated relationships, avoiding the cultural tendency to have scores of superficial affiliations. Community groups should be welcoming, as well as safe. Within these close, meaningful connections, because of the gospel and by the power of the Holy Spirit, we should feel confident to share, confess, confront, and repent of our sin in confidential, committed love.

To grow in our faith, we must be genuine about our struggles. Openness and honesty provide the context for transforming grace and strengthening encouragement. In order to be truly loved, we must learn to be candidly real.

Community groups, and corresponding discipleship groups, should be some of the most authentic, vulnerable, and real relationships we have. Where the gospel is present these will be evidenced.

3. **Health.** Discipleship is about growing up into Christ; which means we are becoming whole, being equipped, working properly, able to give and receive the truth in love. Community helps us to be healthy. It assists us in diagnosing the sin and idols that ail us, and contributes to our recovery and healing through truth and grace.

Healthy Christianity seeks to walk out all our rhythms, faithfully applying the whole gospel to every area of our lives together. We build each other up, learning to realize our new identities and reside in God's grace. Fit faith flows from submission to Christ's headship and flourishes in community that stirs up love and cares for others as themselves. Healthy community pursues the glory producing good of others by aiding them in growing up in every way to be all they are in

Christ.

4. **Transformation.** Fighting for gospel-centered unity involves transformation. Following Jesus means we are being personally changed by the gospel to be more like him in every area of our life. Additionally, pursuing unity includes helping others to be transformed by God's grace, to be more like Jesus in every area of their lives.

Transformation requires relationships of action and accountability. In community groups we are equipped to grow in and apply the gospel. Together we come to know God, repent of sin and respond to his commands. Through groups we are to "grow up in every way... into Christ." for his glory and our good. The greatest good God has for you and others, is that we would become more and more like Jesus.

DISCUSSION - 15 min

- Why do you think gospel centered unity is something to place great importance on when talking about our community group?

EXERCISE - 20 min

All of the above guidelines for preserving unity in a gospel-centered context seem great, but oftentimes it's harder to put them into action when it's our own hearts that are needing the molding. Let's take a few moments to think through the following questions and then share some of our responses.

1. When is a recent time that you've had a struggle as an individual in community? The struggle could be a conflict, disagreement, misunderstanding, or even a desire to avoid community altogether.
2. How does your sin affect your reaction to this struggle? What sin area of your heart do you see more exposed in these moments (It's really important to try to keep your reflection on your own heart and mind in these moments. Others involved in the conflict could very well have sin involved in the situation that they need to take a look at, but you can't change their heart. Right now let's stay focused on what the Lord is bringing to light in your own life.)?
3. How does Jesus's death and resurrection affect the way you respond to this struggle? Be specific. How does his death and resurrection set you free and meet your deepest needs?
4. What is your reaction to the knowledge and truth that through sanctification and the power of the Holy Spirit you can change your reactions and your heart can grow to closer resemble that of Jesus as he moves towards people in conflict?

SHARING LIFE STORIES - 20 min

PRAY - 15 min

LESSON SIX: SPENDING TIME WITH GOD

BIBLE DISCUSSION – 10 min

Read Psalm 1:1-3.

- What is your initial reaction to this passage? What stands out to you?
- What does this say about God—and us?
- How does this passage apply to gospel community?

ARTICLE – 10 min

Spiritual disciplines

When we think about *where we are* and *where Jesus is taking us* as individuals, it's important for us to think through the lens of both *gospel community* and *personal spiritual disciplines*. Cultural Christianity, the prevailing faux-Christian ideology of our day, invites us into a lifestyle of consumerism—looking to our favorite preachers, podcasts, and programs to feed us and lead us; content with where we are, we miss out on Jesus' invitation to deepen and form us.

As previously discussed, gospel community is vital to growth and maturity. Eric Mason rightly says, "You will never fully unleash the transformative, Spirit-empowered power of gospel growth in your life apart from a proper understanding and love of the local church." But all too often, we settle only for what a well-read preacher said about God or what an influential author wrote about God or what a very hip, bearded theologian tweeted about God—often we are more enamored with the giftbox than we are the gift itself; a gift that is available, not only to our pastors on Sundays, but to us during the six days in between as well. In short, yes we need to be formed in the context of gospel community, but we also need to be formed through personal spiritual disciplines wherein Jesus is inviting us to abide in him as we learn to be self-fed, self-led disciples of Christ.

As we mature in faith, it's important that we cultivate spiritual disciplines of scripture reading, meditation, fasting, praying, and self-examination in our day-to-day life. This is more than just showing up on a Sunday to hear a sermon and it's more than just showing up to your community group a few times a month. To be sure, those rhythms will play a crucial role in your formation, but daily abiding in Jesus is where the rubber meets the road. Engaging in these disciplines will have a profound impact on life inside of community, and life in community will have a profound impact on how you engage in these disciplines. It would benefit you greatly to study all of the spiritual disciplines at length and the way they have historically formed Christians over the last 2,000 years and, in the coming weeks, we'll get into more of the mechanics of community, but, for now, let's take a look at how to spend time alone with God.

How do I spend time with God?

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 by reading through and looking 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. Spend time digesting and meditating on what you just read. 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, write it down, 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 to 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?

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.
 - *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.

Where do I start?

1. Make a commitment right now to begin spending time with God daily. 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.
2. 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.

3. Share what you are learning in your time with God with other Christians. As we'll see in a few weeks, discipleship groups provide the perfect opportunity to do this.
4. Finally, begin your time with God 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).

DISCUSSION - 15 min

- Jesus says, "I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). How have you struggled to abide in Jesus in the past? What barriers are keeping you from practicing spiritual disciplines? How could you adjust your priorities or even change your lifestyle in order to "seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness" (Matt. 6:33)?

EXERCISE - 20 min

The maintaining of a daily discipline of time with God is perhaps the most consistently difficult duty of the Christian life, but it is a crucial part of knowing God and experiencing transformation. Take the next few minutes and decide on a time, place, and plan for how you will spend time alone with God each day, and record it below. Discuss your goals with the rest of the group and commit to following through and holding each other accountable. If you already have consistent time with God, take this opportunity to encourage your group by discussing the fruit that has come from your time alone with God.

Time:

Place:

Plan:

SHARING LIFE STORIES - 20 min

PRAY - 15 min

LESSON SEVEN: SPIRIT-FILLED COMMUNITY

BIBLE DISCUSSION – 10 min

Read Acts 1:8.

- What is your initial reaction to this passage? What stands out to you?
- What does this say about God—and us?
- How does this passage apply to gospel community?

ARTICLE – 10 min

Power

At this point, you may feel like—given the makeup of your group and their natural skills and abilities—you could probably “pull off” a fairly adequate community group. But who really wants that? The fact is, the ministry of the Church has always been marked by power. But not just any old power; the power of the Holy Spirit. We believe the Holy Spirit is real and active, and that he is vital for transformation and fruitful gospel ministry. That he empowers the church for gospel proclamation and kingdom demonstration. So why would we want to be a community group that does “ministry” in our own power and wisdom? Francis Chan says it this way, “I don’t want my life to be explainable without the Holy Spirit. I want people to look at my life and know I couldn’t be doing this by my own power. I want to live in such a way that I am desperate for him to come through. That if he doesn’t come through, I am [in big trouble].”

So, how do we tap into this power? What should we even believe about the Holy Spirit?

The indwelling of the Spirit

We would not be followers of Jesus without the work of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit opens our eyes to the gospel and gives us faith to trust in Jesus. He causes us to be born again and gives us a new heart. Furthermore, when we trust in Jesus for salvation, the Holy Spirit comes and dwells in us. He guides us and leads us and empowers us to follow and love Jesus. Every person with faith in Jesus has the Holy Spirit indwelling them. There is nothing else we must do to receive the Spirit (Eph 1:13).

The filling of the Spirit

While every believer in Jesus has received the Holy Spirit, the Bible encourages believers to be “filled” with the Holy Spirit after their conversion. We are called to continuously pursue this filling throughout our lives (Eph 5:18). This means that all Christians have the Spirit, but not all Christians are “filled” with the Spirit. What is this filling? Sam Storms defines it as “coming under progressively more intense and intimate influence of the Spirit.” As we are continually being filled with the Spirit, we are empowered for life and ministry, and experience his presence, guidance, and influence in a powerful way.

The gifts of the Spirit

One way the Spirit empowers us is through spiritual gifts. The Holy Spirit gives spiritual gifts to every Christian for the good and upbuilding of the church. These gifts are manifestations of his presence among his people. Some of the gifts seem more “normal,” while others seem more miraculous. But all of

these gifts are empowered and given by the Holy Spirit and each one is vital for the health and growth of the Church (1 Cor 12:4-7).

All of the gifts mentioned in the New Testament are still active today, including tongues, healing, and prophecy. The Holy Spirit still works in these miraculous ways, and the Scriptures call us to pursue these gifts because they demonstrate his power and presence among his people. The Bible lists a number of spiritual gifts in a number of passages. These lists aren't meant to be exhaustive, but they do give us an idea of how the Spirit manifests himself through believers. Here is one of those lists:

For to one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues... And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of tongues. - 1 Corinthians 12:8-10, 28

By now, you've probably noticed that no two people in your group are alike. As you've listened to others tell their stories, you've realized—in more ways than one—you are distinctly different. Maybe you find that lack of homogeny frustrating or simply think it would be better if you were in a group where more people were wired just like you. But the diversity you see when you look around the room is actually evidence that Jesus is building his Church and, to the extent that there is variety—particularly in terms of spiritual gifts—we have the opportunity to be more fruitful and effective than if the goal was mere sameness (1 Cor 12:12-27). So, how do we find out what spiritual gifts we have? Is there a test? A survey? While tools like these can be helpful, the best way to know how God has gifted you is to pay attention to the ways he has been and is currently working in and through you. Here are a few things to take notice of:

- **Evidence of edification.** Gifts of the Spirit are ways in which the Holy Spirit works through us for the edification of others. So we should ask, "How is the Holy Spirit working through me for the common good? What are things I do that build up others?"
- **Passions and burdens.** Many times, the gifts that God gives us aligns with the passions and burdens he has placed in our hearts. So what makes you righteously angry? What do you want to fix? Do you find yourself regularly complaining about the same thing? Maybe that burden is an invitation from the Spirit to step into your gifting and build up, making no provision for the flesh (Rom 13:14).
- **Sovereign circumstances.** Often, we can see our gifts by looking at the circumstances God continually places us in. He tends to put us in places where our gifts are most active. Where has God placed you?
- **Clarity from community.** What do those closest to you see as your gifts? Others can typically see our gifts better than we can. Ask those in your community group, "What do you see as my gifts?" This can confirm what you suspect, or bring up something you were blind to.
- **Just do it!** Spiritual gifts are ways that we love others. The Bible encourages us to seek and pursue ways to love one another, and as we do this, our spiritual gifts will naturally manifest themselves. Sam Storms says it well, "Look for a need and meet it. Find a hurt and heal it. Be alert for a cry for help and answer it. Listen for the voice of God and speak it. Identify someone's weakness and overcome it. Look for what's missing and supply it. When you do, the power of God—the energizing, enabling, charismatic activity of the Holy Spirit—will equip you, perhaps only once,

but possibly forever, to minister hope and encouragement to those in need. So if you're still wondering what your gift(s) might be, act first and ask later."

DISCUSSION - 15 min

- What are your initial thoughts regarding the Holy Spirit? Is there a gap between what the Scriptures say about the Holy Spirit and you believe?

EXERCISE - 20 min

In Scripture, we see a lot of emphasis placed on the spiritual gift of prophecy. This is a gift that we are all called to pursue and earnestly desire. In 1 Corinthians 14:1, Paul urges believers to, "pursue love and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy."

We believe the Spirit still speaks today and we can hear his voice, if we listen. He speaks to us in and through the Scriptures, but he also speaks to us through other people for our encouragement and upbuilding. According to one prominent theologian, prophecy is "telling something that God has spontaneously brought to mind." As we listen to the Lord, we may get an impression, a picture, or a word that God brings to mind in the moment.

By way of caveat, we do not believe that prophecy is on the same level as Scripture. It comes underneath the authority of Scripture, and, as a result, there are times when we get it flat out wrong. Prophecy is not "thus saith the Lord." Nor is it doom and gloom, or predicting the future. Rather, prophecy is for encouragement and upbuilding.

Many times, the Spirit is speaking, but we aren't listening. Take the next five minutes to be silent and listen to God. Move to a secluded place where you can be alone, if you can. Ask if the Spirit would like to highlight someone in the group. If someone comes to mind, ask God to speak to you about that person and how he has gifted them to participate or serve in this community group. Write down what you hear him saying to you in the space below. If you do not feel like you hear anything from God, that's okay! Pray for them anyway and ask that God would show them how he has gifted them. After five minutes, regather for the rest of the exercise.

If you think you heard the Spirit speak to you, share what you heard. Don't feel pressure to get it right...just tell your group (or, if you're uncomfortable sharing with the entire group, you may privately tell the individual) what you think you heard and submit it to them to prayerfully consider. Rather than thinking, "what if I get it wrong?" ask, "what if God really wants to say something?"

If you don't feel like you heard from the Lord, but you have noticed evidence of the Spirit's work in the life of someone in the group, go ahead and share that. Often, we can see the gifts of others better than they can. You might actually confirm something they suspect, or bring up something they were completely blind to.

SHARING LIFE STORIES - 20 min

PRAY - 15 min

LESSON EIGHT: DISCIPLESHIP GROUPS

BIBLE DISCUSSION – 10 min

Read 2 Timothy 1:13-14 and 2:1-2.

- What is your initial reaction to this passage? What stands out to you?
- What does this say about God—and us?
- How does this passage apply to gospel community?

ARTICLE – 10 min

Discipleship groups

Discipleship groups of three to four men or women meet regularly to share the “fine china” of their lives. With a strong commitment to confidentiality, trust and safety are built over time as the members grow in friendship and discipleship. A discipleship group is ideally formed from within a community group and serves as one of the three rhythms of a healthy community group. At the end of this 12-week Basic Training curriculum, you will form your discipleship groups and they will follow what you will learn about in this session.

Three kinds of discipleship groups

There are three kinds of discipleship groups: gospel-centered, religious, and irreligious. According to Tim Keller, “the power of [a gospel-centered discipleship group] comes in two movements. It first says, ‘I am more sinful and flawed than I ever dared believe,’ but then quickly follows with, ‘I am more accepted and loved than I ever dared to hope.’” The first statement fends off irreligion, and the second fends off religion. The primary challenge for us is staying alert to the need to fend off both at the same time—to stay on the gospel road without driving into either ditch.

Religious discipleship groups traffic in “cuss jar accountability” where the members can only offer their fellow confessors shame and punishment. Instead of trusting by faith that Jesus took our punishment on the cross and atoned for our sin, we try and atone for our sins through mutual punishment. As a result, religious discipleship groups tempt people to start lying or stop coming. These groups don’t last long because eventually everyone gets bled to death.

Irreligious discipleship groups traffic in “confession booth” accountability, where we confess our sins, pat each other on the back, and, in the words of Jonathan Dodson, “depart absolved of any guilt, fearing merely the passing frown of our fellow confessor.” Instead of passionately pursuing “the holiness without which no one will see the Lord” (Heb 12:14), irreligious discipleship groups devolve into what Dodson calls “circles of cheap grace, through which we obtain cheap peace from a troubled conscience.” Our confession stops short of real repentance as we confess the same sins over and over and refuse to take violent action against them. Irreligious discipleship groups don’t last long because eventually everyone gets bored to death.

Four movements

As we strive to establish healthy, gospel-centered discipleship groups, here are four movements to work toward. Starting out, you may need to take baby steps by adding one movement at a time for four weeks until your discipleship groups have incorporated all four movements. Even then, you may not have time to get to all of these every time you gather, but if you aim to practice these four movements regularly, your group can hopefully become more balanced, biblical, and fruitful.

1. **Scripture.** Come prepared to share what you have read in Scripture this past week, yes, but more particularly, make it a goal to bring one bit of Scripture that applies to one bit of your life. This will be the most difficult of the four rhythms to practice outside of your group, but it will be the single greatest determiner of the quality of what happens in your group.

In Colossians 3:16, Paul urges all Christians to “let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom...” How can we teach and admonish each other with “all wisdom” if the Word of Christ is not dwelling in us richly? It is likely that most members of any given group may not know how to meditate on Scripture or pray in a meaningful way. Even if they do, they are probably doing it no more than one or two days a week. In light of this normative cultural reality, expect to spend the first six to twelve months of a newly-formed discipleship group patiently, repeatedly returning to the discipline of spending time alone with God, and patiently, practically equipping each other to read, meditate on, memorize, and pray Scripture.

2. **Sharing.** There are three things to “share” in this movement: sanctification, suffering, and sin—in that order. Or, “good fruit,” “what’s hard,” and “bad fruit.” Some groups dive deep into the good fruit and what’s hard, and neglect honest and specific confession of sin. Other groups dive deep into confession of sin, but neglect to encourage each other by pointing out growth they see in each other—however small—as well as neglecting to join each other on the mourning bench. It is important to remember that all three are necessary for health. Additionally, this is a group effort. One person may be sharing at a time, but the other group members have a role to play. For example, when someone confesses sin, we shouldn’t simply commiserate. Instead, those in the group should aim for the heart, work to develop a plan, recognize the messy nature of growth and change, and lead in saying “thank you” to God for any good fruit we can spot.
3. **Spreading the gospel.** You should have three non-Christians within your sphere of influence for whom you will commit to pray and engage in intentional gospel relationships. These people could be your children, family, friends, co-workers, neighbors, or others. Identify and write down three people in each of your lives and then pray together, right on the spot, for God to give you the opportunity to: (1) build a deeper relationship with them, (2) introduce them to Christian community, and (3) share the gospel with them. Pray together that God would save them by opening their eyes to the beauty of Jesus (2 Cor 4:6). Naming and praying for your three every time you gather will guard your discipleship group against spiritual naval-gazing and self-obsession.
4. **Spirit-filled prayer.** Far too often, when Christians gather, prayer is tacked on at the end and rushed through hurriedly in five minutes or less, after the “real work” of talk therapy and unasked for advice-giving has dragged on for hours. Instead, strive to put heart-centered, Spirit-filled, Scripture-infused prayer at the center of your gathering, and you will never leave with a sense of having wasted your time. This will be the most difficult of the four rhythms to practice in the group, but it will be the single greatest determiner of the quality of what happens outside of the group.

Possible signs we are inviting the Spirit into our prayers are when (1) our prayers comfortably move

in and out of silence, (2) when we find ourselves praying more than once, and (3) when we pray Scripture, thoughts, pictures, and even gut impressions, spontaneously brought to mind by God—always filtering them by Scripture and weighing them in wise community. Further, do we know how to pray beyond the sick list? We should pray for (1a) physical healing for ourselves and others, and we can ask God (1b) to change our circumstances when they're hard. But we also need to pray for (2) hearts devoted to him right in the middle of our circumstances, and, (3) for his kingdom to come. We need to pray for each other that we would bear fruit in the year of drought (Jer 17:5–8). We must remember that our circumstances are significant but not determinative, and praying for changed hearts in the midst of our (possibly) unchanging circumstances is always praying according to God's will.

DISCUSSION - 15 min

There isn't really a formal discussion for this article because the concepts are worked out in the exercise below. However, it is a good idea to make sure everyone understands the concepts in the article.

- Does everyone understand the concepts of the four movements of discipleship groups?

If anyone answers "No," go back and read that section of the article again.

EXERCISE - 20 min

Which of the three kinds of discipleship groups have you experienced? It's very likely that most of us have been in groups that have fallen into one of the two ditches of religion or irreligion, if not both. As a result, you may be coming in with all the fears and hopelessness and wounds and twitches that come from having been a part of one of those groups. Without getting into too much detail about the group, church, ministry, etc. and descending into gossip, talk about your personal experience and what you've learned.

As you think about the two ditches of religion and irreligion, which one are you more afraid of falling into? Think about that for a minute and be honest in your heart. Share your answer with the rest of the group, then know the sobering truth that whichever ditch you're most afraid of—whichever ditch you've said, "Our group will never do that"—you're in the greatest danger of falling into the opposite ditch. What is your reaction to this?

Pray. To have gospel-centered discipleship groups means that we'll always be fighting to stay on the gospel road, regularly checking our blind spots, and constantly recalibrating our hearts. As a group, spend some time praying for God's help to reject guilt, punishment, and shame on the one hand, and cheap peace from a troubled conscience on the other, as we endeavor to have gospel-centered discipleship groups.

SHARING LIFE STORIES - 20 min

PRAY - 15 min

LESSON NINE: FAMILY MEAL

BIBLE DISCUSSION – 10 min

Read Ephesians 2:19-22.

- What is your initial reaction to this passage? What stands out to you?
- What does this say about God—and us?
- How does this passage apply to gospel community?

ARTICLE – 10 min

Family meal

For the family meal rhythm, the objective is to live out our identity as a *spiritual family*. The primary focus of this gathering is the meal—together as a community preparing, eating, and cleaning up from a shared meal. In this session, we'll look at three important components to the family meal that will, by God's grace, increase our hospitality, care for one another, and dependence on the Holy Spirit in community.

1. **Have a meal together.** The best conversations often happen around the dinner table. Real life conversation happens in real life situations. Eating a meal together will quickly reveal what kind of community you have. You'll need to learn one another's stories, vocations, and passions. Quite simply, you will need to become friends. Participating in a meal together—one that requires a recipe, not a microwave—is a symbol of your fellowship and relationship with one another. This is a helpful practice for every community group, because it's a regular practice of most families.

Sharing a meal together regularly is an important piece to community group life. Through the meal we have an opportunity to bless each other, and during the meal we have the opportunity to encourage one another toward Jesus and his mission. In fact, Jesus himself did a large majority of his ministry during meals. In his book, *A Meal With Jesus*, Tim Chester writes:

Jesus didn't run projects, establish ministries, create programs, or put on events. He ate meals.

Chinua Achebe similarly emphasizes the value of meals:

A man who calls his kinsmen to a feast does not do so to save them from starving. They all have food in their own homes.

Meals are significant, and when they are done well, they can affect the ministry of a community group significantly. One of the great advantages in gathering this way is that it frees people up to be people. You don't have to act a certain way or have a certain knowledge set. You don't need to have listened to a sermon or have a curriculum. Anyone can join in—even an outsider who doesn't know Jesus.

Notice a key point here. This is something even better than a potluck where everyone brings a

dish. This not merely eating together, but preparing a meal and cleaning up after that meal together. These subtle differences can make all the difference. We can easily turn the family meal into either a performance, which can lead to pride, or a duty, which can lead to despair. Pride or despair tend to happen when we entertain instead of practicing hospitality. But there is a third way—a gospel way—where we help each other, we're interdependent, and we let others into our lives. Instead of seeking to impress each other, or hide from each other, we can be known by each other, and loved in all our frailty and goofiness.

2. **Check-in together.** The second component of the family meal is intentional conversation and discussion. This can take many shapes and forms, but a key question we should be asking is “who is actually here?” One of the major aspects of being and making disciples in community is allowing those who aren't yet following Jesus the opportunity to *belong* before they *believe*, and part of that is considering what you talk about. Remember, this is family time, not a Bible study. Bible studies tend to make assumptions about the knowledge of those participating — that a person knows the basic storyline of the Bible, that a person knows how to study the Scriptures for themselves, or that they have a copy of the curriculum or heard the sermon, and so on. Assumptions can actually create significant barriers for new people entering your community. Often, rather than having a standard Bible study, you can invite people to “check in” by simply asking the question “What were your highs and lows over the past week or two?” This question works well because (1) it lowers the barrier of entry into the conversation in a way that doesn't require any minimum knowledge to meaningfully participate and (2) it fosters an environment where individuals are expected to contribute, not simply consume. As a result, our time is spent learning to be disciples of Jesus and interacting with one another as family, instead of pretending to have it all together and interacting with one another as strangers (albeit, very polite strangers).

When we enter into community with our true selves (the authentic version of you that represents who you *actually* are), rather than our ideal selves (the idealized version of you that represents who you want people to *think* you are), we are able to give and receive real care and practice the “one another” commands of Scripture. Consider what Tim Keller calls, “nine 'community-building practices'—specific behaviors that build Christian community.”

- Affirm one another's strengths, abilities, and gifts.
 - Romans 12:10: “Honor one another”
 - James 5:9: “Don't grumble against each other”
 - Romans 12:3-8: Confirm the gifts of one another
- Affirm one another's equal importance in Christ.
 - Romans 15:7: “Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you”
 - 1 Corinthians 12:25: “Have equal concern for each other”
 - 1 Peter 5:5: “Clothe yourselves with humility toward one another”
 - James 2:1: “Don't show favoritism”
- Affirm one another through visible affection.
 - Romans 16:16: “Greet one another with a holy kiss”
 - James 1:19: “Be quick to listen, slow to speak”
 - Ephesians 4:32: “Be kind and compassionate to one another”
 - 1 Thessalonians 3:12: “[May] your love increase and overflow for each other”

- Share one another's space, goods, and time.
 - Romans 12:10: "Be devoted to one another in brotherly love"
 - 1 Peter 4:9: "Offer hospitality to one another"
 - Galatians 6:10: "As we have opportunity, let us do good"
- Share one another's needs and problems.
 - Galatians 6:2: "Carry each other's burdens"
 - 1 Thessalonians 5:11: "Encourage one another"
 - Hebrews 3:13: "Encourage one another daily"
- Share one another's beliefs, thinking, and spirituality.
 - Colossians 3:16: "Teach and admonish one another"
 - Ephesians 5:19: "Speak to one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs"
 - Romans 12:16: "Live in harmony with one another"
 - 1 Corinthians 1:10: "Agree with one another"
- Serve one another through accountability.
 - James 5:16: "Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other"
 - Romans 15:14: "Instruct one another"
 - Ephesians 4:25: "Speak truthfully"
- Serve one another through forgiveness and reconciliation.
 - Ephesians 4:2: "Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love"
 - Colossians 3:13: "Forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another"
 - Galatians 5:25: "Don't provoke or envy one another"
 - James 4:11: "Do not slander one another"
 - Matthew 5:23-24; 18:15: Reestablish broken relationships with one another
- Serve one another's interests rather than our own.
 - Hebrews 10:24: "spur one another on toward love and good deeds"
 - Romans 15:1-2: "Don't please yourself but please others"
 - Galatians 5:13: "Serve one another"

If you decide to discuss the sermon or study the Bible together, consider doing it in such a way that anyone can meaningfully participate in the conversation. Rather than discussing the points of the sermon, focus on the points of the biblical text. The following questions can be a good standard to set:

- What did you like or not like about what we just read?
- Was there anything you didn't understand?
- What did you learn about God?
- What did you learn about humanity?
- What did you learn about Jesus?
- Regardless of where your faith is at right now, if you were to apply what we learned about God to something in your life this week, what would that look like?

These questions give an opportunity to consider the gospel, and reinforce obedience to the Word rather than just learning.

3. **Pray together.** Many Christians have a “Bible-studies-equal-success” mentality, and this can be a barrier to living life in community on mission. The fact is, there are other disciplines that we can and should pursue as we gather together. Perhaps the most neglected is corporate prayer, which is one of the core values of biblical community. Therefore, in your family gathering, make a point of ending your night by praying heart-centered, Spirit-filled, scripture-infused prayers with one another as a large group or broken into smaller groups.

SUPPLEMENT

The following is taken directly, with a few minor changes of wording, from a series of blog posts written by Todd Engstrom, which can be found at toddengstrom.com/resources.

How do we handle kids at the family meal?

Kids can present some interesting challenges when it comes to life together. If you are primarily gathering around the event of a Bible study, then more often than not you’re going to want to keep the kids separate. But that’s not the primary purpose of the family gathering — it’s to be obedient to Jesus in acting like a family.

With that in mind, and a meal at the center of what we do, we would strongly encourage you to integrate children into this time. First, it presents the opportunity for them to see and hear other people’s stories of following Jesus, both the good and the bad. Second, it helps them see that they are part of a community that knows, loves, and serves one another frequently and often. Third, children learn to relate to people of all different ages and life-stages and are presented with examples of faithfulness that will equip them well for the future. Finally, it’s just a whole lot of fun having a mess of kids running around for dinner!

How does it work?

As far as involving kids in the family meal, there are two strategies that we have employed. The first is to keep them involved in everything we do — from prayer, to eating, to sharing Jesus stories, and all the way to cleaning up. We think it’s a great way for our children to learn what it looks like to have healthy, Jesus-centered relationships, and we get to learn things about the Lord from their struggles and successes throughout the week.

The second strategy is actually feeding the kids all together at a different time. I really like this strategy, especially with kids of a similar age. Kids really only hate the “kids table” when they are old enough to understand adults! Often we will set the kids up at a table outside, serve them dinner together, and let them make an absolute mess of themselves while we are inside preparing. It’s been fun to watch as occasionally the conversation will turn to more important things than what kids typically talk about. While the adults are eating, we let the kids go play in the backyard if it is nice outside, or upstairs in our playroom if not. It gives the adults a chance to focus on conversations that will last a little longer than 30 seconds.

How long does it last?

Our family gatherings were typically involved affairs, lasting for a good solid few hours. We have found that in order for the family meal to be successful with children, you need to give it plenty of time. Don’t

expect to have any sort of joy in the evening if you're trying to cram food down your throat while feeding your kids so you can get out of there in an hour. Take some time as a family, enjoy one another and the mess the kids are making, and joyfully clean it up when you're done!

DISCUSSION - 15 min

There isn't really a formal discussion for this article because the concepts are worked out in the exercise below. However, it is a good idea to make sure everyone understands the concepts in the article.

- Does everyone understand the concepts of the family meal?

If anyone answers "No," go back and read that section of the article again.

EXERCISE - 20 min

Discuss together what feels overwhelming or unrealistic about consistent rhythms of eating and praying together in the ways described here tonight. What might have to change in your life to make this more realistic and life-giving?

The goals of a community group are discipleship, care, and mission. How does the family meal rhythm accomplish these goals? What will not be accomplished at the family meal?

How could a family meal be a good opportunity to invite in those who are lonely, hurting or on the outside? Discuss someone you know, that you would like to join you at a family meal gathering. Pray for these people.

SHARING LIFE STORIES - 20 min

PRAY - 15 min

LESSON TEN: MISSIONAL GATHERINGS, PART 1

BIBLE DISCUSSION – 10 min

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:8.

- What is your initial reaction to this passage? What stands out to you?
- What does this say about God—and us?
- How does this passage apply to gospel community?

ARTICLE – 10 min

Pushing back darkness together

In response to God’s love, we care about people who live in darkness without God. We push back darkness in our city because God first pushed back darkness in us. “He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son...” (Col 1:13). At Frontline, we are committed to push back darkness through *gospel proclamation* and *kingdom demonstration*.

- **Gospel proclamation:** We push back darkness by proclaiming the good news about Jesus. This means we should move towards unbelievers and look for opportunities to tell them about the one who rescued us.
- **Kingdom demonstration:** We also push back darkness by demonstrating the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven. This means that we care about the spiritual and physical needs of those in darkness around us and we seek to right injustices and serve our city with the light of Christ.

Notice the use of the word “we” here. Pushing back darkness is not a call to Lone Ranger Christianity. We tend to remember that we won’t *grow* alone, but we frequently forget that we shouldn’t *go* alone. We gather because we’re a spiritual family (the family meal), and we gather to become more like Jesus (discipleship groups). But we also need to gather for the sake of people who are far from God—what we call “missional gatherings.”

In this rhythm, we learn to push back darkness as we gather for the sake of the lost. While there are many ways to gather missionally, Frontline prioritizes three. (1) Around the family meal whenever we are privileged to be joined at that meal by people far from God, (2) in natural, neutral, and regular “third places,” and (3) by locking arms with the four to five city partners thoughtfully chosen by each congregational leadership team. We’ll dig deeper into the mechanics of each type of missional gathering in the next section, but before we do, let’s take a step back.

Not only the gospel

Recalling his time living among and ministering to the believers in Thessalonica, Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians 2:8, “...being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us.”

According to this passage, a biblical pattern for Christians is to share not only the gospel but also our own selves because people far from God are becoming very dear to us. Pushing back darkness through gospel proclamation and kingdom demonstration is a beautifully balanced “both-and” that fends off activism on the one hand (the tendency to only perform acts of service for our neighbors in hopes that the gospel will be caught rather than taught) and pietism on the other (the tendency to only share the gospel abruptly with strangers—answering questions they may not even be asking—while at the same time never bothering to learn the names of one’s own next-door neighbors).

Finding your three

The mission of God is global in sweep and scope, but unavoidably local in how it unfolds. God is omnipresent, omniscient, and omnipotent, and is sovereignly saving people from every tribe, tongue, and nation; but we are embodied souls, bound by time and space. Wisdom recommends and notices small steps, so we pick three. Who are three people far from God, within your sphere of influence, for whom you will commit to pray and engage in intentional gospel relationships? These people could be your family, friends, co-workers, etc. As one author put it, whom would you most love to see become a disciple of Jesus? Commit to pray regularly and pursue these people. We will often refer to these people as “your three”.

Motivation before methods

If we only discuss strategies and techniques for reaching people far from God, and skip right over the motivation required to sustain that mission, we will never overcome the inconvenience and sacrifice required to gather for the sake of the lost. Identity precedes action. If we don’t have a settled sense that we are adopted sons and daughters of the Father who are also called and commissioned as missionaries, we will never be able to keep our hand to the gospel plow. Writer Wendell Berry famously asked “What are people for?” In Galatians 5, Paul gently reminds us that we have not been called to live as individualistic, autonomous, spiritual consumers. He writes, “You were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”

The Father’s invitation—through the work of Christ and the power of the Spirit—is to slowly begin to “walk by the Spirit, and... not gratify the desires of the flesh” (Gal 5:16). The call to join the mission of God is not a masochistic call to spiritual duty divorced from spiritual delight. Instead, God is giving us new desires, and inviting us to increasingly find our fulfillment and satisfaction in the interests of others. As the Spirit of God leads us outside of ourselves, we are freed more and more to love God, love people, and push back darkness. What are the people of God for? Paul says “we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us.” We have been called and commissioned to “implore” our friends and neighbors “on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God” because of the great good news that “for our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (1 Cor 5:20–21).

In short, as we “look not only to [our] own interests, but also to the interests of others” (Phil 2:4), we will find fulfillment, and we will increasingly serve as a sign, instrument, and foretaste of the in-breaking kingdom of God. As we demonstrate the kingdom of God, what the watching world sees will surprise them. As we proclaim the gospel of God, what the listening world hears will sound like good news.

DISCUSSION - 15 min

- How does the call to “share not only the gospel but also [your] own selves” with those who are far from God impact your understanding of mission?
- Are you more inclined to engage in activism (the tendency to only perform acts of service for our neighbors in hopes that the gospel will be caught rather than taught) or pietism (the tendency to only share the gospel abruptly with strangers—answering questions they may not even be asking—while at the same time never bothering to learn the names of one’s own next-door neighbors)? How does the one-two punch of gospel proclamation and kingdom demonstration correct this inclination?

EXERCISE - 20 min

Take five minutes and prayerfully and thoughtfully select and write down the names of three unbelievers you feel particularly called to pursue. Then, for each person in turn, answer the following questions posed by missiologist Alan Hirsch:

- Am I in close proximity with this person to whom I feel called?
- Am I spending regular time with this person? If not, why not?
- Am I too busy to develop a meaningful relationship with this person? If so, how could I create margin for mission?

Go around in order and briefly share at least one of the people you selected, and why you chose them. If any of you are struggling to identify someone in your life, invite the group to process with you who you might identify.

Conclude your time by praying out loud for the people you have named—especially for your relationships to grow and deepen with them, for God to give you all creativity in how to spend regular time with them, and for God to give your community group opportunities to collectively love them, serve them, and share the gospel with them.

SHARING LIFE STORIES - 20 min

PRAY - 15 min

LESSON ELEVEN: MISSIONAL GATHERINGS, PART 2

BIBLE DISCUSSION – 10 min

Read Matthew 28:19-20.

- What is your initial reaction to this passage? What stands out to you?
- What does this say about God—and us?
- How does this passage apply to gospel community?

ARTICLE – 10 min

Missional gatherings

In our last session we discussed the aim and motivation behind our missional gathering rhythm. Today we will spend time identifying the proverbial arrows in our quiver as we learn to push back darkness by gathering for the sake of people who are far from God: (1) by extending gospel hospitality at the family meal whenever we are privileged to be joined by people far from God, (2) by regularly spending intentional time together in natural and neutral “third places” which are part of the fabric of knowing and being known in our city (coffee shops, gyms, parks, barber shops, neighborhood association meetings, etc.) and (3) by locking arms with city partners thoughtfully chosen by each congregational leadership team and serving shoulder to shoulder as we meet needs and build new relationships.

Push back darkness together...around a family meal

Confusing as it may seem, notice that the family meal serves as one of Frontline’s three community group rhythms—alongside discipleship groups and missional gatherings—while at the same time also serving as one of the three kinds of missional gatherings. The family meal serves to strengthen spiritual family ties, but whenever someone far from God pulls up a chair, the family meal instantly shifts and unfolds in order to embrace the outsider. In this way—through the warmth and hospitality of table fellowship—an appetite for spiritual family is awakened and sharpened in those far from God.

In short, the family meal affords us unique opportunities to proclaim the gospel. Natural conversations unfold at the dinner table. Hospitality builds trust. Conversations go deeper. Acquaintances become friends. Before we know it, we’re naturally sharing the good news about Jesus over a meal. Maybe, to you, that sounds too simple. But in the words of Eugene Cho, “What brings credibility to the gospel is not more hour-long sermons. What brings credibility, passion, and, ultimately, belief is seeing the gospel at work...the incarnate gospel. What will move skeptics, cynics, and critics are Christians who love God and love their neighbors...by willingly and humbly serving their needs.”

Push back darkness together...in a third place

We gather in community (family meal) and discipleship (discipleship groups), but Todd Engstrom suggests there is a third way we need to gather—as missionaries in a third place. Engstrom writes that a third place is where a healthy group becomes intentionally oriented around those who don’t know Jesus. The truth is, unless we intentionally make time for people outside our community, we often won’t do it. Few of us naturally drift into mission. This means we must think through ways we can integrate people into our communities by inviting them into spaces that are: (1) natural, (2) neutral, and (3) regular.

Engstrom concludes that an effective third place is neutral ground that is informal and non-committal, naturally fitting into the rhythms of your lost friends' lives.

If you grew up in church, you probably heard a lot about the need to (1) build relationships with people far from God, and (2) look for opportunities to share the gospel with them. However, you probably didn't hear much about the need to (3) introduce them to the Christian community. Your non-Christian friends need to be invited to hang out with Christians who are hanging out with other Christians in a third place. That is one of the primary ways in which they will experience Jesus' vision for melting their hearts. "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35).

Push back darkness together...with city partners

Eric Mason reminds us that "defending the cause of the needy and oppressed is a huge role that we are to be known for as the people of God," and, while we might know we're called as Christians to serve and care for the poor, identifying opportunities and overcoming the inherent challenges often stop us in our tracks. We don't know what to do, whom to do it with, and even if we knew that, we're crippled by our own fear and hang-ups. All too often, we think we need to have a long-term plan for city renewal before we can even take a step. But, the truth is, we just need to take a step. Your group can begin in one of two broad ways: (1) by coming alongside the established work of a trusted ministry in our city and looking for opportunities to develop meaningful relationships along the way—ministries we refer to as Frontline's "city partners," or, (2) by extending hospitality and friendship to someone you already know personally or have the opportunity to grow in knowing personally, and then organically meeting their needs as they grow in their trust of your gospel community, and you grow in awareness of their needs. The first approach moves from meeting needs to building relationships, and the second approach moves from building relationships to meeting needs.

Regardless of your approach, the people of God are called to move toward, not away from, the marginalized. The marginalized in your city are those who don't get to experience the full life of your city. They are overlooked, unheard, isolated, or pushed to the fringes of your city's culture. Neglected children and orphans exist in every city. Few will visit the elderly, shut-ins, Alzheimer patients, and retirement homes in your city because our culture tends to view them as past their usefulness and relevance. Every day, your city welcomes refugees and immigrants who hope to build a new life and experience freedom. Your city is made up of single parents, people struggling with mental disorders, teenage runaways, and those struggling with substance abuse. These are the people your city tends to ignore—the poor and powerless. But they are not ignored in the kingdom of God.

Start slowly and pick one

Your community group will not be able to magically begin pulling off all three types of missional gatherings (family meal, third place, and city partners) right out of the gate. Pick just one to start. Then prayerfully and patiently begin walking it out together. Slowly start pushing back darkness together at the family meal, or in a third place, or with a city partner.

DISCUSSION - 15 min

There isn't really a formal discussion for this article because the concepts are worked out in the exercises below. However, it is a good idea to make sure everyone understands the concepts in the article.

- Does everyone understand the concepts of the three types of missional gatherings?

If anyone answers “No,” go back and read that section of the article again.

EXERCISE - 20 min

Overcoming barriers

Jesus pursued people both because they were created in his image and because he loved them. These people were welcomed into Jesus’ community as his beloved ones and his disciples. In fact, he not only welcomed them but also pursued them on their turf. Jesus calls his people to not only meet needs (clothe, visit, and feed) but also welcome people into relationship. Jesus healed people and even raised the dead, but some of the most powerful expressions of his love occurred when he invited people to his dinner table. Sometimes, one of the biggest challenges with pursuing relationships with the poor is the distance between the poor and ourselves. Tim Chester describes this reality well in his book *Unreached*.

Friendship evangelism is great, but it does not enable the gospel to travel beyond our social networks, unless there are intentional attempts to build friendships with people who are not like us.

John Mark Hobbins of London City Mission similarly observes:

Many people live in networks which take precedence over their address, and many churches have grown because of this. But the reality for many people living in social housing or in cheaper housing is that their address is very likely to define their daily life.

Brainstorm. How can your community share meals with the marginalized? Try to think of as many ideas as possible.

What are the barriers to relationship with the poor for your community and in your context?

What organizations can you partner with to walk through some of those barriers? What is one step you could take or experiment you could do as a group to seek to share a meal with the marginalized in your community? How can everyone participate in that step? What will you ask people in your community to do? When will you do it? How will you reflect and learn from this step?

Gather in a third place

Where should community groups on mission gather in a third place? It depends on the people you're trying to reach! Spend some time brainstorming as a group. Ask questions like (1) "Where do the people we want to reach already spend time and naturally go?" (2) "How can we gather there?" and (3) "Does it make sense for us to invite our three into this kind of space?" Discuss and throw out ideas as a group. When you come up with something that seems like it would be a fun, effective, third place gathering, pick a date, make a plan, and invite some friends!

SHARING LIFE STORIES - 20 min

PRAY - 15 min

LESSON TWELVE: NEXT STEPS

BIBLE DISCUSSION – 10 min

Read Hebrews 10:23-25.

- What is your initial reaction to this passage? What stands out to you?
- What does this say about God—and us?
- How does this passage apply to gospel community?

ARTICLE – 10 min

What now?

The time has come for your group to leave the nest, spread your wings, and fly! By now, you should have a clear understanding of the ins and outs of community groups as well as the practices employed to execute the mission: family meal, discipleship groups, and missional gatherings. Executing all three gatherings can be challenging, and, while we've done our best to answer many of the most common questions, we would recommend three things as you get underway.

- **First, take it slow.** You're not running a sprint in community, you are running a marathon. Take time to learn and develop these rhythms and don't try to smash them all together in a week.
- **Second, talk to a hub leader.** Your hub leaders are here to help you along the journey. Our hub leaders and other community group leaders have encountered quite a few things and can help you through. Just give them a call!
- **Third, pray and seek the Lord.** While the practices outlined in the previous lessons are helpful, every community group is different and the Holy Spirit will give guidance to you and your group. We encourage you to pray and seek God's help as you lead!

Seasons and rhythms

Let's discuss two important concepts that shape our approach to community: seasons and rhythms. We are often asked, "How can we do all of this in our already busy lives?" And it's a great question to ask! While we want to pursue greater commitment and devotion to one another and God's mission, we also need to think practically about cultivating seasons and rhythms in our group life.

- **Seasons.** Consider what season of life and ministry you and your group members are in before defining how you will gather together.

There are always seasons in the life of a community. Some seasons are full of fun and laughter, some are full of heartache and sadness, and some are naturally busier than others. Before you try to fit together the practices we lined out, make sure you consider what season of life you are in and adjust expectations accordingly.

If you are just starting out and your group members are incredibly busy with small children,

consider that demand of life and feel free to adjust the ways you gather. If you are in a season of getting to know each other, take the time to focus on cultivating healthy relationships before you ask people to sacrificially go on mission. If it is the summer time and people are in and out of town, adapt the rhythms of the community and try different approaches.

- **Rhythms.** After determining the season of the group, think through applicable rhythms and how frequently you might gather. For groups with more free time available, consider gathering more often. For community groups that are spread out and stretched thin, once a week may be all you can manage in that season.

We suggest leaders think through the lens of a month rather than a single week. As you think through the practices of your group, consider they don't have to happen the same way all the time and every member of your community will not always be able to participate. In the same way a nuclear family has different seasons of life with unique needs at different times, so too do community groups.

We recommend community groups, at minimum, gather in these rhythms:

1. Sundays to worship corporately
2. First and third weeks for a family meal
3. Second and fourth weeks in discipleship groups
4. Quarterly for a missional gathering
5. Yearly in equipping environments

Community does not have to be overwhelmingly complex. Think outside the box of a week and ask, "How might we creatively pursue these practices over time?" Feel free to mix up the practices so they flow with different rhythms during different seasons.

Outcomes of community groups

After spending time in the mechanics of groups, it can be easy to forget what you hope will happen. When we think about the success of a community group, it looks different in different seasons. Yet over time, as we labor together, there are four consistent outcomes we hope to see.

- **Gospel Transformation.** God uses life in community for the discipleship and growth of everyone involved. As we center our efforts on the gospel of Christ and the Word of God, we believe leaders and participants will grow in Christ-likeness. Discipleship groups are designed toward this end, but there are many other ways that God will accomplish this outcome.
- **Biblical Community.** A community group led by capable leaders will facilitate an environment where Christ-centered relationships grow and gospel hospitality is possible. Rich relationships are the fruit of intentional time spent together. Stories of friendship, encouragement, support, and care will all arise as we live alongside each other in authentic relationships. The family meal is designed to facilitate this kind of community, but the providential circumstances of each person's life, along with many other factors will contribute to deep, Christ-centered relationships.

- ## DISCUSSION - 15 min

- ## EXERCISE - 20 min

[illegible]

Time of blessing

As we celebrate what God has done in our time together over the last few months, let's end with a time of blessing for one another. In 1 Thessalonians 5:11, Paul exhorts believers to "encourage one another and build one another up." Dallas Willard defines blessing as "the projection of good into the life of another." Take this opportunity to make space for those in the group to share how somebody else's story has impacted them, affirm the spiritual gifts of someone in the group, or share a prophetic word that might build up another group member.

SHARING LIFE STORIES - 20 min

PRAY - 15 min