

STUDY GUIDE



gospelⁱⁿlife

Grace Changes Everything

EIGHT SESSIONS

TIMOTHY KELLER

gospel in life

STUDY GUIDE

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Introduction

Gospel in Life is an eight-session course on the gospel and how to live it out in all of life—first in our hearts, then in community, and ultimately out into the world.

Session 1 opens the course with the theme of the city, our home now, the world that is. Session 8 closes the course with the theme of the eternal city, our heavenly home, the world that is to come. In between we will look at how the gospel changes our hearts (Sessions 2 and 3), changes our community (Sessions 4 and 5), and changes how we live in the world (Sessions 6 and 7).

Session 1 City: The World That Is



Bible Study

[Pray as you begin, asking God to be at work in the group.]

[In 586 BC, Jerusalem was destroyed and the elite of Jewish society—the artisans and professionals and leaders—were taken to Babylon by force. The prophet Jeremiah received a word from the Lord and wrote these exiles a letter. Read aloud Jeremiah 29:4–14, and then work through the questions below.]

1. What specific directions does God give the exiles for relating to the city of Babylon in verses 4–7? How do you think the exiles felt about this?

[Your Response]

2. What is the relationship between the “prosper you” of verse 11 and the “prosperity of the city” of verse 7?

[Your Response]

3. What was the purpose of the exile, according to verses 11–14? Why do you think these verses were included in the letter?

[Your Response]

4. Rodney Stark, a sociologist of religion, writes,

Christianity served as a revitalization movement that arose in response to the misery, chaos, fear, and brutality of life in the urban Greco-Roman world ... Christianity revitalized life in ... cities by providing new norms and new kinds of social relationships able to cope with many urgent urban problems. To cities filled with the homeless and impoverished, Christianity offered charity as well as hope. To cities filled with newcomers and strangers, Christianity offered an immediate basis for attachments ... To cities torn by violent ethnic strife, Christianity offered a new basis for social solidarity. And to cities faced with epidemics, fires and earthquakes, Christianity offered effective ... services.¹

Is this still true of Christianity today? If not, why not? In what ways does Christianity “revitalize life” in your area?

Discussion Questions

[Remember a city is defined as “any place of density, diversity and cultural energy.”]

1. Was there anything from the video that was new to you, or had an effect on you? Did you hear anything that raised more questions in your mind?

[Your Response]

2. J.N. Manokaran, a pastor from India, writes in his book *Christ and Cities*, “Cities should not be seen as monsters ... but communities of people with need.”² How do you view the place in which you live? What emotions come to mind? What do you value about it?

[Your Response]

3. We heard in the video that,

In the city you are going to find people that appear spiritually hopeless. You’re going to find people of no religion, people of other religions, and people with deeply non-Christian lifestyles, and you’re going to discover that many of them are kinder, deeper, and wiser than you. You will also find that many of the poor and the broken are much more open to the gospel of grace and more dedicated to its practical out-working than you are.

Has this been the case in your own experience or in the experience of people you know? Share examples.

[Your Response]

4. It is often said that Christians today have little impact on the world around them. Is that a correct assessment? Why? What prevents us from becoming more engaged in the world around us?

[Your Response]

5. The Hebrew word translated “prosper” means “to be healthy, to increase, to have things go well.” It means growth in all its dimensions. What types of growth within the Christian community can prosper the places in which

we live?

[Your Response]

6. In what specific ways can you and your group seek to serve and love your place of residence, rather than resemble it, or remove yourselves from it? What can you and your group do to become genuinely interested in its peace and prosperity?

[Your Response]

Prayer

As you begin this course, pray that the Holy Spirit will empower you inwardly, that Christ may dwell in your heart, and that you will know the love of Christ and be filled with all God's fullness. Pray also that through this course you may be able to grasp more and more of what it means to live out the gospel in your own life, through your community, and for the benefit of the world.

Thank God for the place where you live. Pray for God's peace and prosperity for it, and that you would have love for it and its inhabitants.

Session 2 Heart: Three Ways To Live



Summary Of The Previous Session

[Pray as you begin, asking God to be at work in the group.]

[Read the paragraphs below aloud to summarize the main points of the previous session.]

Last session we saw that we are not just to seek prosperity and peace in the places where we live, but we are to seek prosperity and peace *for* the places where we live. God says in Jeremiah chapter 29 verse 7, “Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.” We are to serve and love our place of residence, rather than resemble it, or remove ourselves from it.

We saw that cities were designed to be places of refuge and safety, places of justice, places of culture development, and places of spiritual seeking and finding. So, to seek their peace and prosperity we: serve and love those who need help and protection, bring God’s love and justice to bear on a broken world, create and cultivate culture, and hold out Christ as the ultimate satisfaction of people’s spiritual search. We are going to look at each of these themes in more detail in the sessions that follow.

This session’s theme is the gospel and the heart.

[Take 3 to 5 minutes to briefly discuss the Session 2 Home Study. Mention anything you found helpful, new, exciting, or confusing.]

Bible Study

[Read aloud Luke 18:9–14 and then work through the questions below.]

1. Look at what the Pharisee says about himself in verses 11 and 12. Is the Pharisee a hypocrite? Discuss.

[Your Response]

2. What does the Pharisee understand righteousness to be and how to achieve it?

[Your Response]

3. The tax collector does not actually say what you see in the English translation of verse 13, “God, have mercy on me, *a* sinner.” He uses a definite article in the Greek. He says, “God, have mercy on me, *the* sinner.” What can we learn about repentance from the attitude of the tax collector?

[Your Response]

4. Pastor and author John Stott writes,

‘Justification’ is a legal term, borrowed from the law courts. It is the exact opposite of ‘condemnation’. ‘To condemn’ is to declare somebody guilty; ‘to justify’ is to declare him ... righteous. In the Bible it refers to God’s act of unmerited favor by which He puts a sinner right with Himself, not only pardoning or acquitting him, but accepting him and treating him as righteous.¹

Jesus says the tax collector went home “justified” before God. Why? What does this passage teach us about justification?

[Your Response]

[Read aloud Luke 15:11–32 and then *watch the video for Session 2.*]

Discussion Questions

1. Was there anything from the video that was new to you, or had an effect on you? Did you hear anything that raised more questions in your mind?

[Your Response]

2. Which of the two brothers is easiest for you to identify with, and why?

[Your Response]

3. What emotions and attitudes does the elder brother display, and what does this show about his relationship with God?

[Your Response]

4. What do you think it means “to repent not only of our bad things, but also for the reason we did our good things”?

[Your Response]

5. “If I gave you a test on justification by grace alone through faith alone through the substitutionary work of Christ alone, you’d probably get 100 percent.” If we’re justified by grace alone, not by our good works or our moral efforts or anything we can do, what motivates us to live an obedient, repentant life?

[Your Response]

6. If Jesus is our true elder brother, how does it change the way we live on a daily basis?

[Your Response]

Prayer

Praise God that he is the Father who loves and pursues both types of sons. Thank him for his initiating love as well as the costly search of the true elder brother, Jesus Christ. Confess the occasions when it is easy to forget that God is like this, and pray that you would live by grace alone. Ask for God's grace to lead you to a repentance that brings new freedom from sin and from self-righteousness, as well as a greater appreciation of God's love and forgiveness.

Session 3 Idolatry: The Sin Beneath The Sin



Summary Of The Previous Session

[Pray as you begin, asking God to be at work in the group.]

[Read the paragraphs below aloud to summarize the main points of the previous session.]

Last session we looked at the parable of the two lost sons in Luke 15 and saw that there are two ways to be your own savior and lord, just as there were two ways the sons tried get the father's things. One son tried to do it by living a bad life, the other by living a good life. We concluded that there are three ways to relate to God—irreligion, religion, and the gospel. The irreligious don't repent at all. The religious only repent of sins. But Christians repent of both their sins and of their righteousness.

We also saw that religion is the default mode of the human heart and that behavioral compliance to rules without heart-change will be superficial and fleeting. It is only an ever deepening faith in the gospel that restructures our motivations, our self-understanding and identity, and our view of the world. Only the gospel changes our hearts.

This session we continue the theme of gospel and the heart by looking at how and why our hearts construct idols.

[Take 3 to 5 minutes to briefly discuss the Session 3 Home Study. Mention anything you found helpful, new, exciting, or confusing.]

Bible Study

[Read aloud Romans 1:18–25 and then work through the questions below.]

1. What is the reason that our minds and hearts become “futile” and “darkened”? (Look especially at verse 21a.)

[Your Response]

2. According to these verses, what are some of the results of idolatry in our lives? Has this been true in your own experience? Share examples.

[Your Response]

3. What do these verses tell us about the wrath of God?

[Your Response]

4. John Calvin describes us as “a perpetual factory of idols.”¹ What are some examples of personal idols?

[Your Response]

[Watch the video for Session 3.]

Discussion Questions

1. Was there anything from the video that was new to you, or had an effect on you? Did you hear anything that raised more questions in your mind?

[Your Response]

2. “If you really want to change ... Jesus Christ must become your overmastering positive passion.” When and how have you found this to be true in your experience or in the lives of people you know?

[Your Response]

3. Archbishop William Temple said, “Your religion is what you do with your solitude.”² When you are alone what do you tend to think about most? Where do your thoughts go naturally, instinctively, habitually? How does this help identify your idols?

[Your Response]

4. “Under every behavioral sin is the sin of idolatry, and under every act of idolatry is a disbelief in the gospel.” Do you agree? Why or why not? What are the implications for how we really change our hearts and lives?

[Your Response]

5. In his book *Gods That Fail*, Vinoth Ramachandra quotes Psalm 115 on idols: “Those who make them will be like them, and so will all who trust in them.” He writes, “Note the shattering conclusion: we become like what we worship.”³ Do we? In what way and why?

[Your Response]

6. What are some of the concrete ways we can make Christ King and Lord of our entire lives?

[Your Response]

Session 4 Community: The Context For Change



Summary Of The Previous Session

[Pray as you begin, asking God to be at work in the group.]

[Read the paragraphs below aloud to summarize the main points of the previous session.]

Last session we saw that nothing is to be more fundamental than God to our happiness, meaning in life, and identity. We saw, however, that we easily create idols.

An idol is anything besides Jesus Christ that we feel we must have to be happy, anything that is more important to our heart than God, anything that is enslaving our heart through inordinate desires. Martin Luther said that under every behavioral sin is the sin of idolatry, and under every act of idolatry is a disbelief in the gospel.

As we look now at the idea of a Christian community, keep in mind that idolatry is also one of the key problems we face when it comes to creating community.

[Take 3 to 5 minutes to briefly discuss the Session 4 Home Study. Mention anything you found helpful, new, exciting, or confusing.]

Bible Study

[Read aloud *Philippians 2:1–11* and then work through the questions below.]

1. Looking at verses 2–4, what can we infer is the problem that Paul is addressing in the Philippian church?

[Your Response]

2. What are the four grounds for unity and humility that Paul lists in verse 1? How do these grounds lead to unity and humility?

[Your Response]

3. Verse 5 says, “Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.” What do we learn about Jesus’ attitude from verses 6–11?

[Your Response]

4. In his book *Love in Hard Places* Don Carson writes,

The church is ... made up of natural enemies. What binds us together is not common education, common race, common income levels, common politics, common nationality, common accents, common jobs, or anything else of that sort. Christians come together ... because they have all been saved by Jesus Christ and owe him a common allegiance ... They are a band of natural enemies who love one another for Jesus’ sake.¹

Do you agree with his assessment? Why or why not? Share examples.

[Your Response]

[Read aloud *1 Peter 2:9–12* and then watch the video for Session 4.]

Discussion Questions

1. Was there anything from the video that was new to you, or had an effect on you? Did you hear anything that raised more questions in your mind?

[Your Response]

2. We heard in the video that,

We are “a holy nation”—different, distinct from the world and the people around us. And yet at the same time, we’re supposed to be “a royal priesthood”—deeply involved in the lives of the world and the people around us.

Do you feel that you are part of the sort of community described in the video? If not, why not? What can you do to make this happen?

[Your Response]

3. “We will not know God, change deeply, nor win the world apart from community.” To what extent have you experienced this?

[Your Response]

4. What practices make a good, strong, healthy Christian community? Brainstorm practical ways by which your own group can deepen its life together as a community.

[Your Response]

5. How can we love people we do not naturally like?

[Your Response]

6. Look at the following list derived from Romans 12.

Love honestly, speaking out against what is wrong. (v. 9)

Love even unattractive people, because they are your brothers and sisters. (v. 10)

Love by making others feel honored and valuable. (v. 10)

Love by being generous in practical ways with your home, money, and time. (v. 13)

Love without bitterness. Don't "pay others back," or hold resentment against others. (v. 14)

Love with empathy. Be willing to be emotionally involved with others. (v. 15)

Love with humility. Be willing to associate with people who differ from you. (v. 16)

In which areas do you, as a group, tend to be the weakest, and why? What practical steps could you take to improve?

[Your Response]

Prayer

Thank God for your Christian community and pray for Christ's love to ignite your heart to love, share with, and serve others continually. Pray that you would be the sort of community you discussed through this study.

Session 5 Witness: An Alternate City



Summary Of The Previous Session

[Pray as you begin, asking God to be at work in the group.]

[Read the paragraphs below aloud to summarize the main points of the previous session.]

Last session we saw that the church is “a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God” (1 Peter 2:9). It is a new humanity, a new community of people under the lordship of Christ.

We need to create a great community because that is, according to Jesus in John 17 verses 20–23, a crucial way to show the world that we are truly followers of Christ. In fact, we saw that we will not know God, change deeply, or win the world apart from community.

This session continues the theme of gospel and community, and looks at how we witness as a community.

[Take 3 to 5 minutes to pray and discuss arrangements for the event you are planning (see the end of Session 4 and the Session 5 Home Study.)]

Bible Study

[Read aloud Acts 2:42–47 which describes the early church, and then work through the questions below.]

1. What do we discover about how the early church learned together? What do we discover about fellowship and service? What can we learn from this?

[Your Response]

2. The early church were so involved with each other that they had fellowship “every day.” Do you have fellowship with another Christian every day? Is this possible? Why or why not?

[Your Response]

3. What do we discover about how the early church worshiped and how they witnessed to others? What can we learn from this?

[Your Response]

4. British theologian Lesslie Newbigin observes:

The gospel does not become public truth for a society by being propagated as a theory or as a worldview and certainly not as a religion. It can become public truth only insofar as it is embodied in a society (the church) which is both “abiding in” Christ and engaged in the life of the world.¹

Do you agree with his assessment? Why or why not? Share examples.

[Your Response]

[Watch the video for Session 5.]

Discussion Questions

1. Was there anything from the video that was new to you, or had an effect on you? Did you hear anything that raised more questions in your mind?

[Your Response]

2. “An alternate city is gospel-speaking.” What intimidates us about telling other people about Jesus? Are some people more intimidating than others? Why? What motivates us to tell people about Jesus?

[Your Response]

3. “There is a credibility that comes if you are consistent in your behavior, there is a credibility that comes if people see the gospel transforming you.” Do people notice your lifestyle and that of your community? Do they appreciate it, even if they don’t understand it? Share examples.

[Your Response]

4. Frank Retief, a pastor and church planter in South Africa, writes, “people without Christ go to hell—if you really believe that you’ve got to take risks, take a chance and be prepared to fail.”² What do you think of his statement?

[Your Response]

5. A leading missiologist, C. Peter Wagner, writes, “Planting new churches is the most effective evangelistic methodology known under heaven.”³ Think of some reasons why starting new churches is a good way to reach people.

[Your Response]

6. “When Christ returns to earth, the present age will end completely and the age to come will come fully. Meanwhile, we actually live between the two ages—in what’s been called the overlap of the ages.” What mistaken thoughts, distorted emotions, or wrong practices result when we don’t focus enough on the age to come? What about when we don’t focus enough

on the present age?

[Your Response]

Prayer

Thank God that in the future he is going to unite and heal all things under the lordship of Christ. Pray that your community would be “a city on a hill” (Matt. 5:14). Pray that you, as the community of God’s people, would evidence the beauty and visible reality of God. Ask for opportunities to build relationships with and witness to people who don’t believe in Christ, and for courage to live the gospel before others.

Session 6 Work: Cultivating The Garden



Summary Of The Previous Session

[Pray as you begin, asking God to be at work in the group.]

[Read the paragraphs below aloud to summarize the main points of the previous session.]

Last session, we saw that our community is to be a “city on a hill” (Matt. 5:14). The world must see in our community what life can be in all its beauty under the kingship of Jesus Christ.

We also saw that it is important to have gospel-speaking, neighborhood-loving, community-transformed congregations everywhere. Only the gospel enables us to build an alternate city together.

This session’s theme is the gospel and our work.

[Take 3 to 5 minutes to briefly discuss the Session 6 Home Study. Mention anything you found helpful, new, exciting, or confusing.]

Bible Study

[Read aloud Matthew 6:19–21 and then work through the questions below.]

- 1. Why does Jesus tell us to store up “treasures in heaven” (v. 20) rather than “treasures on earth” (v. 19)? What does Jesus mean when he says, “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also”?**

[Your Response]

- 2. How do most people you know tend to spend their time, energy, and money? What do you spend money on most effortlessly and joyfully?**

[Your Response]

- 3. How might you and your group go about storing up “treasures in heaven”?**

[Your Response]

- 4. One way to ensure that we store up treasures in heaven is to celebrate, reflect on, and give thanks for our treasures on earth. This is part of what we do on the Sabbath. In an article called “Bring Back the Sabbath” in *The New York Times Magazine* we read,**

There is ample evidence that our relationship to work is out of whack. Let me argue on behalf of an institution that has kept workaholism in reasonable check for thousands of years. Most people mistakenly believe that all you have to do to stop working is not work. The inventors of the Sabbath understood that it was a much more complicated undertaking. You cannot downshift casually and easily. This is why the Puritan and Jewish Sabbaths were so exactly intentional. The rules did not exist to torture the faithful. Interrupting the ceaseless round of striving requires a surprisingly strenuous act of will, one that has to be bolstered by habit as well as by social sanction.¹

This quote explains that scheduled rest will not work without a great deal of intentionality and discipline. Brainstorm the kind of practical habits and useful practices that can help us observe Sabbath.

[Your Response]

Discussion Questions

1. Was there anything from the video that was new to you, or had an effect on you? Did you hear anything that raised more questions in your mind?

[Your Response]

2. What are some of the practical implications of the biblical teachings that work is good and has dignity?

[Your Response]

3. What are some of the practical implications of the biblical teachings that we must not separate God from our work?

[Your Response]

4. Besides telling coworkers about Christ, what does it mean to “bring the gospel into your work”? Brainstorm some ways that you can work with Christian distinctiveness in your workplace.

[Your Response]

5. In Matthew 11, Jesus promises to “give us rest” (v. 28). How can the deep rest Jesus gives us in the gospel change our relationship to our work?

[Your Response]

6. “Do you see your workplace as a place to share the gospel as well as a place to let the gospel shape how you work”? What can you bring into your profession that is uniquely helpful?

[Your Response]

Prayer

Thank God that "... there is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: 'Mine!'" Ask God to show you ways in which you don't represent Christ as you should in your relationships, in your workplace, in your family life, in your habits and attitudes, and in your relationships within the church. Pray also that you would be able, again within community, to learn better how to "bring the gospel into your work."

Session 7 Justice: A People For Others



Summary Of The Previous Session

[Pray as you begin, asking God to be at work in the group.]

[Read the paragraphs below aloud to summarize the main points of the previous session.]

Last session we saw that Christian living is a continual process of bringing everything in line with the truth of the gospel. It means that all of our jobs and gifts and skills are to be realigned in light of the mission of the kingdom of Christ.

We saw that the gospel changes the motivation, ethics, and conception of our work. And that we must take the gospel with us to work.

This session's theme is the gospel and our neighbor.

[Take 3 to 5 minutes to briefly discuss the Session 7 Home Study. Mention anything you found helpful, new, exciting, or confusing. Take a few minutes to pray and discuss arrangements for the volunteer opportunity you are planning.]

Bible Study

[Read aloud Luke 10:25–37 and then work through the questions below.]

1. On the basis of Jesus' teaching, who is our neighbor?

[Your Response]

2. Shouldn't we help members of our own family and of our own Christian community first?

[Your Response]

3. How does Jesus illustrate what the true motive should be for showing mercy to our neighbor?

[Your Response]

4. The following quotes are cited by Rodney Stark, a historian and sociologist who studied the reasons why Christianity spread in the Roman Empire. The Greco-Roman world was struck by several huge plagues or epidemics. Stark traces how the Christians' reaction to the plagues differed dramatically from that of those who maintained faith in traditional, polytheistic paganism.

The impious Galileans [Christians] support not only their poor, but ours as well, everyone can see that our people lack aid from us.

Roman Emperor Julian (around 360 AD)¹

[During the great epidemic] most of our brother Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves ... Heedless of danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ ... Many, in nursing and curing others, transferred their death to themselves and died in their stead ... The [pagans] behaved in the very opposite way. At the first onset of the disease, they pushed the sufferers away and fled even from their dearest, throwing them into the roads before they were dead.

Dionysius, Bishop of Alexandria (around 260 AD)²

Having read these quotes, what is the effect of unselfish service on others? Have you found this to be true in your own experience? Give examples.

[Your Response]

[Watch the video for Session 7.]

Discussion Questions

1. Was there anything from the video that was new to you, or had an effect on you? Did you hear anything that raised more questions in your mind?

[Your Response]

2. “*Shalom* means total flourishing in absolutely every dimension: physically, relationally, socially, and spiritually.” In what practical ways can you and your group “resolve to have shalom felt everywhere ... and begin to reweave the broken fabric of creation”? What can you as a group (or a church) bring into your neighborhood that is uniquely helpful?

[Your Response]

3. Benjamin Fernando from Sri Lanka writes,

There is no such thing as a separate individual gospel and a separate social gospel. There is only one gospel—a redeemed man in a reformed society ... Social problems assume greater importance in Christianity than in Buddhism or Hinduism. The theory of Karma and rebirth gives a fairly reasonable explanation for social inequalities of this life which on the one hand are consequences of the previous life and on the other hand can be compensated for in the next life. But to a Christian there is only one earthly life and so social problems have to be dealt with now or never.³

Do you agree with his assessment that “social problems have to be dealt with now or never”? Why or why not?

[Your Response]

4. The Bible reveals at least three causal factors for poverty: injustice and oppression; circumstantial calamity; and personal failure. Do you agree? Can you give examples of these from the Bible or from your own experience?

[Your Response]

5. “It’s natural to want to help people who are like you, who like you, and

who you like.” What would it mean for you, specifically, to help people who are not like you, who do not like you, and who you do not like?

[Your Response]

6. Jonathan Edwards once was preaching on how important it was to give to the poor. Someone later objected, “I can’t afford to give to the poor.” Edwards responded with an application of Galatians 6:2.

In many cases, we may, by the rules of the gospel, be obliged to give to others, when we cannot do it without suffering ourselves ... If our neighbor’s difficulties and necessities be much greater than our own, and we see that he is not like to be otherwise relieved, we should be willing to suffer with him, and to take part of his burden on ourselves; else how is that rule of bearing one another’s burdens fulfilled? If we are never obliged to relieve others’ burdens, but when we can do it without burdening ourselves, then how do we bear our neighbor’s burdens, when we bear no burden at all?⁴

Do you agree that we are not only to help others with our excess time, money, and emotional resources, but that we are to give until it burdens us? What will this mean for you and your group?

[Your Response]

Prayer

“Justice is the index of real faith, the index of a real relationship with God—of the real spiritual condition of your heart.” Confess fears, weaknesses, and indifference to all those Jesus would identify as your neighbors. Pray for the poor, and pray as well that you and your community would help the poor and marginalized, even when it is risky and costly to you.

Session 8 Eternity: The World That Is To Come



Summary Of The Previous Session

[Pray as you begin, asking God to be at work in the group.]

[Read the paragraphs below aloud to summarize the main points of the previous session.]

Last session we saw that we are to bring shalom to the world. We need to “act justly” and “love mercy.” We are to be engaged with our neighbors and with the poor and marginalized.

We saw that a deep social conscience and a life poured out in deeds of service to others, and especially to the poor, is the inevitable sign of real faith and a real relationship with God.

In this final session on the course we will be thinking about eternity.

[Take 3 to 5 minutes to briefly discuss the Session 8 Home Study. Mention anything you found helpful, new, exciting, or confusing.]

Bible Study

[Read aloud Isaiah 60:15–22 and then work through the questions below.]

- 1. What will heaven be like according to Isaiah’s description in verses 17–21? How does this compare with the description in Revelation 21:1–4, 22–27?**

[Your Response]

- 2. How can the knowledge that there will be no violence or destruction in the future kingdom help us, and those we come into contact with, to cope with the violence and destruction we experience around us?**

[Your Response]

- 3. God is described in a variety of ways and given a variety of titles in this passage. What do we learn about God and what does it mean for our relationship with him?**

[Your Response]

- 4. Richard Mouw writes:**

My own hunch is that God has provided us with a rich storehouse of diverse images of the afterlife, all of them hints in the direction of something that is beyond our present comprehension, so that we can be free to draw on one or another of them as a particular situation in our life may require.¹

- In what situations might we draw on the description of heaven in Isaiah 60? What other descriptions of eternity have you drawn on in the past and why?**

[Your Response]

[Read aloud Isaiah 60:1–14 and then watch the video for Session 8.]

Discussion Questions

1. Was there anything from the video that was new to you, or had an effect on you? Did you hear anything that raised more questions in your mind?

[Your Response]

2. Isaiah 60 describes a vision of the New Jerusalem as incorporating the cultural achievements of all people and all nations. What aspects of your work do you think might be incorporated into this final kingdom? How does this affect your understanding of your work?

[Your Response]

3. The community described here is one of perfectly restored shalom. What are some tangible ways that the church can be a better foretaste of that community?

[Your Response]

4. What are some things that are competing with God as your “glory” and your “everlasting light”? What do you think would change if God were your only glory and everlasting light?

[Your Response]

5. Now that you have completed the *Gospel in Life* course, take a few minutes to look back through your notes and then share with the group one thing that changed or affected you, and explain why. Pray about these discoveries and realizations during your time of prayer together.

[Your Response]

Prayer

Thank God for the amazing vision we have of the New Jerusalem. Pray that this vision would drive you and your community to action. Ask God to give you insight into his specific kingdom plans and purposes for your city and community. Ask to fit into his plan.

Pray that you would be able to put into practice all you have learned in these eight sessions, and that you would continually seek to transform your heart, community, and the world. Pray for each other in light of your answers to question 5 above.

Notes for Leaders



Introduction

Session 1 City: The World That Is



Session 2 Heart: Three Ways To Live



Session 3 Idolatry: The Sin Beneath The Sin



Session 4 Community: The Context For Change



Session 5 Witness: An Alternate City



Session 6 Work: Cultivating The Garden



Session 7 Justice: A People For Others



Session 8 Eternity: The World That Is To Come



Session 1 City: The World That Is



Bible Study Notes For Leaders

[In 586 BC, Jerusalem was destroyed and the elite of Jewish society—the artisans and professionals and leaders—were taken to Babylon by force. The prophet Jeremiah received a word from the Lord and wrote these exiles a letter. Read Jeremiah 29:4–14, and then work through the questions and notes below ahead of time to help you prepare to lead your group. The notes beneath the questions are not intended as answers to be read aloud. They are notes to help you facilitate the discussion.]

1. What specific directions does God give the exiles for relating to the city of Babylon in verses 4–7? How do you think the exiles felt about this?

Settle in the city

They are to “settle down” (v. 5). They are to plan for long-term involvement and invest in the community: “Build houses” and “plant gardens” (v. 5).

Grow in the city

They are to “Increase in number there; do not decrease” (v. 6b). This means they are to get stronger and more numerous, but it also means that they are not to lose their unique identity. They must stand firm in their faith.

Seek the city’s peace and prosperity

When Jeremiah says, “Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city” (v. 7), he means they are to seek their own prosperity in such a way that it benefits the city. They are to use their gifts and resources in such a way that helps the whole city. They are not to use the city for their own advancement, but are to seek its advancement.

Pray for the city

They are to “Pray to the LORD for it” (v. 7b). God calls them to pray for the city.

Note that God’s denunciation of the false prophets in verses 8 and 9 comes immediately after the directions in verses 4 through 7 to (a) settle and be involved

in the city, and (b) seek its peace. The prophets' advice is contrasted with God's; therefore, we conclude that these false prophets were telling the exiles the opposite of the directions of verses 4 through 7—namely to (a) stay detached and outside the city and (b) remain hostile to it.

To get an idea of what the prophets were promoting, see Jeremiah 28:2–4, where Hananiah prophesies, “Within two years I will bring back to this place all the ... exiles from Judah who went to Babylon ... for I will break the yoke of the king of Babylon.” Jeremiah contradicts this prediction (see Jer. 29:28) and says, “It will be a long time. Therefore build houses and settle down.”

2. What is the relationship between the “prosper you” of verse 11 and the “prosperity of the city” of verse 7?

They are cause and effect. When we put verses 11 and 7 together, we see a dynamic principle at work. The believers will find their own peace and prosperity not in seeking their own prosperity, but in seeking the prosperity of the city. It is only as the Jews give up their resentment and scorn of Babylon and seek to serve it and prosper it that, paradoxically, they will find their own prosperity. Verse 7b says it quite directly: “If [Babylon] prospers, you too will prosper.” If they concentrate on bringing peace and prosperity *to* this pagan city (v. 7a), God will bring them peace and prosperity *through* this pagan city (v. 7b). God ties, as it were, the fortunes of the people of God to the effectiveness of their urban ministry.

Derek Kidner in his commentary on Jeremiah writes of Jeremiah 29:7, “Even the New Testament, with its instructions to overcome evil with good (Rom. 12:21) and to ‘adorn the doctrine of God’ by ‘perfect courtesy toward all men’ (Titus 2:10; 3:2; 1 Peter 2:18), hardly outstrips the boldness of this teaching ... To set themselves something to live for, and something to give their captors ... was ... the surest way—and still is—to the givers’ own enrichment, as verse 7b points out.”¹

Ask the group to take a moment to make this personal—i.e., ask the group to come up with personal examples and to apply this to their own life. What is this text in Jeremiah 29:7 saying? That through you, God can bring his peace and prosperity to the city, and through ministry to the city, he will bring his peace and prosperity to you.

3. What was the purpose of the exile, according to verses 11–14? Why do you think these verses were included in the letter?

Three times God spells out that he “carried” the exiles to the city (verses 4, 7, and 14). “Carried” is a very active word—it says far more than that God just “allowed” them to be deported. In other words, their life in the pluralistic city of Babylon is not a senseless disaster—it is part of God’s design for them.

Also, God says that he has set times and a schedule for them. He has put them there for seventy years, two or three generations (v. 10). The seventy-year exile allows two things to happen.

First, the seventy years are “for Babylon” (v. 10a) itself. This seems to mean that God had plans for what he wanted to do in the world through Babylon. But, there is another way in which the seventy years are “for” Babylon. When the Jews came to Babylon they, of course, brought their faith in God with them. The Babylonians would therefore be brought into contact with people who believed in the true and living God.

Second, the purpose of the seventy years is for the spiritual purification and renewal of Israel. God’s people were in a state of spiritual disintegration (see verses 19 and 23), but the exile would change all that. They will develop a rich life of prayer, according to verse 12: “Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you.” They will seek fellowship with God in wholehearted openness to him—verses 13–14 say: “You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you.” In fact, God goes so far as to say that the final result of the exile will be to “prosper you and not to harm you” (v. 11).

4. Rodney Stark, a sociologist of religion, writes,

Christianity served as a revitalization movement that arose in response to the misery, chaos, fear, and brutality of life in the urban Greco-Roman world ... Christianity revitalized life in ... cities by providing new norms and new kinds of social relationships able to cope with many urgent urban problems. To cities filled with the homeless and impoverished, Christianity offered charity as well as hope. To cities filled with newcomers and strangers, Christianity offered an immediate basis for attachments ... To cities torn by violent ethnic strife, Christianity offered a new basis for social solidarity. And to cities faced with epidemics, fires and earthquakes, Christianity offered effective ... services.²

Is this still true of Christianity today? If not, why not? In what ways does Christianity “revitalize life” in your area?

Discuss with your group.

[Watch the video for Session 1 to help you prepare to lead your group through the discussion that follows.]

Discussion Questions Notes For Leaders

[After watching the video with your group, use these questions to encourage discussion. The notes beneath the questions are not intended as answers to be read aloud. They are notes to help you facilitate the discussion.]

[You do not need to complete all the questions. Depending on the dynamic of the group and your time limit, you may find it helpful to choose in advance the questions that will be of most value to your group and start with those.]

[Remember a city is defined as “any place of density, diversity, and cultural energy.”]

1. Was there anything from the video that was new to you, or had an effect on you? Did you hear anything that raised more questions in your mind?

Discuss with your group.

2. J.N. Manokaran, a pastor from India, writes in his book *Christ and Cities*, “Cities should not be seen as monsters ... but communities of people with need.”³ How do you view the place in which you live? What emotions come to mind? What do you value about it?

Professor of world missiology Roger Greenway writes, “It may be helpful to those who harbor misgivings about cities ... to reflect on the fact that urbanization as a present fact of life for most of the human family is a reality under the providential control of God ... By means of these enormous gatherings of people, God provides the church with one of history’s greatest opportunities for evangelization. Pressed together in metropolises, the races, the tribes, and diverse groups are geographically more accessible than ever before ... God in our time is moving climactically through a variety of social, political, and economic factors to bring earth’s peoples into closer contact with one another, into greater interaction and interdependence, and into earshot of the gospel. By this movement God carries forward his redemptive purposes in history. A sign of our time is the city. Through worldwide migration to the city God may be setting the stage for Christian mission’s greatest and perhaps final hour.”⁴

3. We heard in the video that,

In the city you are going to find people that appear spiritually hopeless. You’re going to find people of no religion, people of other religions, and

people with deeply non-Christian lifestyles, and you're going to discover that many of them are kinder, deeper, and wiser than you. You will also find that many of the poor and the broken are much more open to the gospel of grace and more dedicated to its practical out-working than you are.

Has this been the case in your own experience or in the experience of people you know? Share examples.

Discuss with your group.

4. It is often said that Christians today have little impact on the world around them. Is that a correct assessment? Why? What prevents us from becoming more engaged in the world around us?

God calls us to be deeply engaged in the world so we may serve the world—yet we must not lose our own distinctive spiritual identity. As the culture becomes more secular, the task of being “in but not of” the world becomes complex and difficult.

Consider the following:

- It is far easier not to publicly proclaim the gospel, and particularly to avoid preaching the tougher parts about sin, hell, and repentance. A lack of preaching the complete gospel is no gospel at all, and therefore has no power to transform lives.
- It is difficult to engage and attract secular people. Doing so requires thought, time, and effort.
- It is far simpler to either reflect the surrounding culture or to disdain it. It is hard to avoid simple cultural confrontation or cultural assimilation and instead become agents for cultural renewal and enrichment.
- It is sometimes hard not to be judgmental and exclusive toward those who differ from us. Others can sense this in us.

Christianity is not simply a set of beliefs to be held in order to save my individual soul. It is also an interpretation of—and a distinct way of understanding—everything in the world. Both ancient Greek and modern thought, however, tend to separate faith and beliefs from the rest of life in what is known as “dualism.” Dualism seals off personal beliefs and faith from the way we actually live and work in the world.

Moreover, it leads to a widespread assumption that the only way to truly serve God is through direct ministry—teaching, evangelizing, discipling. The church and its activities are seen as good and untainted, while the secular world is bad and polluting. This feeling is understandable. Many workplaces are so filled with excessive competition, superficiality, politics, greed, and cruelty that it is tempting to leave a secular job and just minister within the context of Christian community. Even if we don't do that, we may still simply opt to spend our life in more traditional, less difficult environments. This has effectively removed Christians from places of cultural influence.

The Bible does not support a sacred versus secular distinction. We cannot separate our faith from our work and our life in the public sphere. Every part of our lives—work, family, civic involvement, recreation—is to be done for God's glory. The Bible tells us that Jesus has to be Lord of every area of life, not just of our private lives. The gospel shapes and affects the motives, manner, and methods with which we carry out every task in life. Living like this is not easy, but it offers a profound way to have an impact on the world around us.

5. The Hebrew word translated “prosper” means “to be healthy, to increase, to have things go well.” It means growth in all its dimensions. What types of growth within the Christian community can prosper the places in which we live?

We are to grow into the character of Christ. “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control ... Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires” (Gal. 5:22–24). We are also to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18) and “overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 15:13).

A church should also grow in the maturity of its fellowship and relationships within the body. Through Christ “the whole body ... builds itself up in love, as each part does its work” (Eph. 4:16).

As we grow in these ways, we will also grow in Christ's passion for the lost. And so we will reach out in love to those who don't believe.

As we grow in these ways, we, as a community, will be better able and willing to discern the needs occurring in our neighborhoods and the gifts Christ has given us

for meeting them. We will have a vision for what our neighborhoods should look like, not just a vision for our church. We will show in our words and our deeds that we want to promote the welfare of our neighborhoods in every way.

Also, we will live out our lives in love and service to others. We will seek to help the poor, the broken, and the marginalized and work for social justice.

6. In what specific ways can you and your group seek to serve and love your place of residence, rather than resemble it, or remove yourselves from it? What can you and your group do to become genuinely interested in its peace and prosperity?

To quote the video, “If we are to seek the peace and prosperity of our cities (and by city I mean any place of density and diversity and cultural energy) then we need to think about how to restore the city’s original purposes. So, firstly, we serve and love those who need help and protection. We seek to serve the needs of others, no matter what their race or class, instead of seeking to use others to meet our own needs. Second, we need to “do justice”—we need to bring God’s love, peace, and justice to bear on a broken world. Third, we create and cultivate culture with all that involves in terms of creativity and relationships and excellence and how we live out our faith in the workplace. And, fourth, we need to be a people who encourage others to seek spiritually—but hold out Christ as the ultimate satisfaction of that quest.”

If the Jews—brought to Babylon in chains by a violent oppressor nation—were to see themselves as “carried” by God to seek the city’s peace and prosperity (Jer. 29:7), then surely we are! We must see that God has specific ministry purposes for us in the place in which we live.

Examples include:

- Becoming involved in a ministry that helps people in need.
- Beginning a specific and consistent prayer ministry. Praying for specific neighborhoods, for particular people groups, and for specific problems. Using local newspapers to find things to pray for.
- Becoming more conscious of how the gospel can shape the way we work.
- Considering how to share our faith with colleagues and neighbors more boldly, persistently, lovingly, and joyfully.

[Remember that at the end of this study you will need to briefly describe the purpose of the Home Studies to your group. Be enthusiastic about these studies—if you are eager to complete them, your group will be too.]

[Pray for your group.]

Notes for Leaders

[Your Notes]

¹ Derek Kidner, *The Message of Jeremiah* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 1987), 100.

² Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (New York: Harper, 1997), 161.

³ J.N. Manokaran, *Christ and Cities: Transformation of Urban Centres* (India: Mission Educational Books, 2005), 13.

⁴ Roger Greenway, “World Urbanization and Missiological Education”, in *Missiological Education for the 21st Century* (New York: Orbis, 1996), 145–146.

Session 2 Heart: Three Ways To Live



[*Complete the Session 2 Home Study.*]

Bible Study Notes For Leaders

[Read Luke 18:9–14 and then work through the questions and notes below ahead of time to help you prepare to lead your group. The notes beneath the questions are not intended as answers to be read aloud. They are notes to help you facilitate the discussion.]

1. Look at what the Pharisee says about himself in verses 11 and 12. Is the Pharisee a hypocrite? Discuss.

There were certainly people who said they were righteous, but were murdering people. There's no indication of that here. This is a good man. When he says he gives a tenth of all he gets, that means he's generous to the poor. When he says he doesn't commit adultery, that means he's a faithful husband.

When we look at the prayer, though, we see that what Jesus gives us is almost a caricature. Whenever you write a thank-you letter to somebody, aren't you thanking them for things that they have done? Whenever you start a prayer like this, "I thank you, Lord, that," what do you expect? When you say, "I thank you, Lord," afterward there's supposed to be a reference to the things that God has done.

But the Pharisee says, "God, I thank you," and that's it. That's the last reference to God. The prayer is all about the Pharisee himself. This is self-worship. Underneath the veneer of God-centeredness is utter self-centeredness. Underneath the veneer of all the God-talk and all the God-activity and all the morality is adoration of self.

2. What does the Pharisee understand righteousness to be and how to achieve it?

His approach to righteousness has two marks:

Externalism

The Pharisee's understanding of sin and virtue is completely external. It's completely focused on behavior and the violation of, or keeping of, rules. It's not looking inside; it's not looking at character. Sin is perceived completely in terms of discrete, individual actions.

He says, "I do not rob. I do not commit adultery. I do not cheat. I give my money away. I fast. I do my religious observances." Notice he doesn't say, "God, I thank

you that I'm getting more patient. I'm getting to be a gentler person. I'm able to love people I used to not be able to love. I'm able to keep my joy and my peace, even when things go wrong." He's not talking about those things. He is absolutely externally focused.

His understanding of sin and of virtue is completely oriented to external behavior—keeping and breaking rules.

Comparison

He says, "I'm not like other men," implying, "I am so much better." Verse 9 says he's looking down on "everybody else."

Notice something very interesting. The Pharisee thinks he is better than others because, "I am not a robber, evildoer or adulterer." Now, that's in the Bible—not stealing or doing evil or committing adultery. "Also I tithe." That's in the Bible.

And then he says, "I fast twice a week" (v. 12). There's nothing in the Bible about fasting twice a week. There's nothing in God's law that requires that. This is something he chose to do. He is taking a personal preference or a cultural custom, and he's elevating it and giving it moral significance, using it as a way of feeling more virtuous than other people.

3. The tax collector does not actually say what you see in the English translation of verse 13, "God, have mercy on me, *a* sinner." He uses a definite article in the Greek. He says, "God, have mercy on me, *the* sinner." What can we learn about repentance from the attitude of the tax collector?

If you think of sin externally and comparatively, like the Pharisee, there's always somebody who has committed more sins than you. You're only ever *a* sinner, you're never *the* sinner. This man, however, is thinking of sin in absolute terms. What he's saying is, "All I know is I'm lost, and where everybody else is doesn't matter."

The tax collector is not just looking at what he's done wrong; he's not just looking at his discrete individual actions, his whole understanding of himself is that he is *the sinner*—it is how he sees himself. It is a part of his identity. Ask the group to take time to make this personal. Is this a part of your and their identity?

He asks for "mercy." He sees his dependence on God's radical grace. Again, make

this personal—i.e., ask the group to come up with personal examples and to apply this to their own life.

In *The Doctrine of Repentance*, the seventeenth-century preacher and author Thomas Watson gives six characteristics of real repentance.¹ They are based closely on Psalm 51. It may be helpful to review them with your group.

1. Sight of sin

“My sin is always before me.” (v. 3)

2. Sorrow for sin

“Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight.” (v. 4a)

Real repentance involves real sorrow over sin and the way it has grieved God. False repentance is sorrow over the consequences of sin and the way it has grieved you. Self-pity may appear to be repentance, but it is not. You cannot really repent without the Holy Spirit giving you some illumination—making sin real to you.

3. Confession of sin

“You are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge.” (v. 4b)

Real repentance makes no excuses, shifts no blame, and takes full responsibility.

4. Shame for sin

“Surely I was sinful at birth.” (v. 5)

In real repentance there is a change in your whole attitude toward yourself. You see yourself, like the tax collector, as “the sinner.”

5. Hatred for sin

“What is evil in your sight.” (v. 4)

If there has been real sorrow for the sin (and not just the consequences), then you

will come to hate the sin in itself.

6. Turning from sin

“Grant me a willing spirit.” (v. 12)

If the other five elements are there, somewhat in this order, you will forsake the sin. Its power over you will be weakened, and you will at least make progress out of it.

4. Pastor and author John Stott writes,

‘Justification’ is a legal term, borrowed from the law courts. It is the exact opposite of ‘condemnation’. ‘To condemn’ is to declare somebody guilty; ‘to justify’ is to declare him ... righteous. In the Bible it refers to God’s act of unmerited favor by which He puts a sinner right with Himself, not only pardoning or acquitting him, but accepting him and treating him as righteous.²

Jesus says the tax collector went home “justified” before God. Why? What does this passage teach us about justification?

In the parable, Jesus introduces us to a universal problem, the problem of righteousness, and then gives us two figures, each of whom represents a particular solution to the problem. One solution does not work; one does.

You have the “good” man, the Pharisee; and you have a “bad” man, the tax collector. Tax collectors were collaborators, gangsters, shakedown artists. Yet, after they pray, Jesus concludes the “bad” man is the one who is justified before God.

Jesus is showing us something at the heart of the gospel. The Pharisee is trying to justify himself by his good deeds, by his religion. He is keeping God’s rules, but in such a way—focusing on the external—that it makes him feel good about himself and he can say, “Now, God, you owe me.” He is keeping God’s rules as a way of earning his justification—he is not depending on God’s radical grace.

The tax collector on the other hand shows by his words and actions (verse 13 says, “he would not even look up to heaven”) that he is utterly depending on God’s mercy.

We are justified, we are, as the quote says, treated as righteous, because of God’s

unmerited favor. God's love and acceptance of us is secured in Christ, and we obey God's law out of a desire to delight, resemble, and know him.

However, we often behave as if God's love and acceptance of us is based on the quality of our behavior and the purity of our hearts. We obey God's law out of a fear of rejection and out of a desire to create a good self-image through our moral efforts.

Some of the common ways we do this:

- If we cannot feel forgiven after a sin or failure until we have spent a great deal of time in misery and pain, we may be basing our acceptance with God on how much we have groveled, beaten ourselves up, and made ourselves miserable.
- If we are proud and harsh toward others, we may be basing our acceptance with God on moral standards that we believe we are fulfilling.
- If we feel like failures, filled with low self-esteem, we may be basing our acceptance with God on moral standards that we believe we are not fulfilling.

[Read Luke 15:11–32 and watch the video for Session 2 to help you prepare to lead your group through the discussion that follows.]

Discussion Questions Notes For Leaders

[After watching the video with your group, use these questions to encourage discussion. The notes beneath the questions are not intended as answers to be read aloud. They are notes to help you facilitate the discussion.]

[You do not need to complete all the questions. Depending on the dynamic of the group and your time limit, you may find it helpful to choose in advance the questions that will be of most value to your group and start with those.]

1. Was there anything from the video that was new to you, or had an effect on you? Did you hear anything that raised more questions in your mind?

Discuss with your group.

2. Which of the two brothers is easiest for you to identify with, and why?

Discuss with your group.

3. What emotions and attitudes does the elder brother display, and what does this show about his relationship with God?

“became angry” (v. 28)

He is filled with anger. One of the signs of a moralistic spirit is a feeling that God owes us a comfortable and good life if we live up to standards. This will lead to anger when life takes a bad turn. The anger can have one of two forms. If people feel they have been living right, they will be angry at God; if they feel that they have not been living right, they will be angry at themselves.

“I’ve been slaving for you” (v. 29)

He is full of joyless, mechanical obedience. Elder brothers don’t do good out of delight in goodness itself, or for the pleasure of God. They do it, therefore, joylessly, slavishly. Christians are filled with amazement at the grace of God, and so obey out of delight in pleasing God for his own sake. This is not how the elder brother relates to God—he feels like a slave.

“you never threw me a party” (v. 29 paraphrase)

He lacks assurance of the father's love. There is no dancing or festiveness about the elder brother's relationship with his father. As long as people are trying to earn their salvation by controlling God through their goodness, they will never be sure they have "made it." There will always be anxiety and fear and uncertainty in the relationship.

"this son of yours" (v. 30)

He is cold to younger brother-types. The older son will not even "own" his brother. He has no love for or longing to see his brother—unlike the father in the story. Elder brothers are disdainful of or ineffective in evangelism, whereas the person changed by the gospel is always disposed toward evangelism. First, if people believe they are sinners saved by grace alone, they will not feel superior to anyone else—not to other cultural or racial groups, not to other faiths, not to immoral people. Second, if people understand the gospel, they will treat others with hope. They will never look at anyone and say, "Here's someone who could never become a Christian," because they know that all "types" of people are equally unlikely to find God.

"who has squandered your property with prostitutes" (v. 30)

He has an unforgiving, judgmental spirit. He highlights the fact that the younger brother has been with "prostitutes," while he has been living a chaste life at home. Elder brothers lack two things necessary to forgive. On the one hand, they lack the emotional humility to say, "I'm no different." Instead they look at the sinner and say, "I would never do that!" On the other hand, they lack the emotional "wealth" to say, "I am so loved and forgiven by my father—what does it matter that I was slighted or wronged?" He cannot forgive the younger brother, unlike the father, who is so lavish in his forgiveness.

4. What do you think it means "to repent not only of our bad things, but also for the reason we did our good things"?

What makes someone a Christian is not simply repenting of sin. Of course Christians must repent of their sins, but remember that the Pharisees also repent of their sins. When they break one of God's laws they repent—they repent often—but it doesn't make them Christians, only elder brothers.

Christians not only repent of what they've done that's bad, but they also repent of the very reason they've done good—their desire (like the elder brother's) to be their own savior and put God in their debt and therefore under control.

This means that we need to recognize that the reasons for our righteous deeds have been the same as the reasons for our sins—to seek to control our own lives and even God; to be our own savior and lord. The moment we begin to repent of that sin is the moment our whole life changes. It is called “new birth,” because it is a radical, utter transformation. It means a change of our foundational trusts and hopes. It means a change in our very identity—what gives us our basic value and distinctiveness. Born again!

People will never “find their way home” if they just repent of sins and try to live a better life. That does not bring fundamental heart change. It does not disturb the basic orientation of self-salvation that is the problem in both the lives of the “good” people and the “bad” people. We must not just repent for being bad, but also for the underlying reason we've been good.

5. “If I gave you a test on justification by grace alone through faith alone through the substitutionary work of Christ alone, you'd probably get 100 percent.” If we're justified by grace alone, not by our good works or our moral efforts or anything we can do, what motivates us to live an obedient, repentant life?

If you know that there is “no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1), there is all the motivation in the world to live an obedient, repentant life. Here are just some aspects of it:

We live an obedient, repentant life because we want to delight the Lord who saved us

Our continual experience of the grace and love of God in the gospel grows within us a desire to bring God delight and pleasure.

We live an obedient, repentant life because we want to honor and resemble the Lord

There is a deep human instinct to imitate what we admire and honor. To honor great people, for example, we make images of them—statues and paintings—and

we urge people to emulate them. A godly life is the deepest way to honor the one who lived and died to serve and save us. We want to be images of him.

We live an obedient, repentant life because we want to have fellowship with God

We want to sense God's presence, and living life for him is the way to do that.

6. If Jesus is our true elder brother, how does it change the way we live on a daily basis?

The following are only some of the wonderful and innumerable implications of the fact that Jesus Christ is our true elder brother:

- He should be the ultimate beauty and satisfaction for our hearts. He is not simply to be admired and respected, but worshiped, adored, and delighted in. The purpose of our lives is to behold his glory (John 17:24), and that certainly means more than simply believing in him or even obeying him. He is the ultimate object of worship. He is to be reveled in, savored, and rejoiced in.
- He is to be absolutely obeyed and given the central priority of our lives. He should be the preeminent concern of our choices, the ultimate Lord over our wills. We need to be reading the Bible to learn better how to do this.
- He should bring complete rest and assurance to our consciences. His salvation is of infinite value. His blood was shed as a ransom (Mark 10:45) to pay for our sins. This blood was the blood of God (Acts 20:28). Imagine how valuable that is. No sin is too great to be forgiven; no corruption is too great to be healed.
- We should not be impressed with glitz, physical beauty, status, and power. The incarnation means that God was willing to empty himself of his glory and power and live humbly as a servant. He associated with "undesirables." We should not rely on appearances or prefer the more privileged and elite circles. The incarnation should mean the end of our snobbery.
- We live with infallible hope. Jesus, the true King, has begun to put the world right with his power. Right now that healing is only partial, but some day all deformity, decay, sin, disease, and imperfection will be wiped away.

[Pray for your group.]

Notes for Leaders

[Your Notes]

¹ Thomas Watson, *The Doctrine of Repentance* (Carlisle, Penn.: Banner of Truth, 1668), 18.

² John Stott, *The Message of Galatians* (Chicago, Ill.: IVP, 1968), 60.

Session 3 Idolatry: The Sin Beneath The Sin



[*Complete the Session 3 Home Study.*]

Bible Study Notes For Leaders

[Read Romans 1:18–25 and then work through the questions and notes below ahead of time to help you prepare to lead your group. The notes beneath the questions are not intended as answers to be read aloud. They are notes to help you facilitate the discussion.]

1. What is the reason that our minds and hearts become “futile” and “darkened”? (Look especially at verse 21a.)

In verse 21, Paul tells us the basic reason is that even though deep down we know we owe God everything, we want to control our lives—so we create idols.

We do not “glorify” God. That is, we do not act toward him as if he really were as great, supreme, and central as he actually is.

We do not “thank” God. That is, we fail to act toward him as if we really were as totally dependent and indebted to him as we actually are. A lack of appropriate gratitude reveals a heart that does not want to admit its own limitations. It wants to think of itself as far more self-sufficient than it really is.

We “suppress” (v. 18) these facts because we don’t want to admit our complete allegiance to God. We want to be our own masters.

2. According to these verses, what are some of the results of idolatry in our lives? Has this been true in your own experience? Share examples.

In verse 25, Paul tells us that rejecting God’s control of our lives leads inevitably to constructing counterfeit gods or idols. We cannot simply deny the glory of God (v. 21); we must “exchange the glory of God” for the glory of something else (v. 23). We must glorify something—we must worship, adore, and build our lives on something as an ultimate value. Since we were created for worship, we cannot eliminate God without creating God-substitutes or idols.

Because God created the world, all created things have some of God’s glory in them, so it is appropriate to find these things great, wonderful, and admirable. The problem comes from giving any created thing inordinate affection—affection that is ultimate, like that which we owe God. If we do this:

We are deceived

“They exchanged the truth of God for a lie” (v. 25). Compare this with verse 21 where it says that as a result of rejecting God, “their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.”

At the base of every one of our life choices, our emotional structures, and our personalities is a false belief system centered on an idol, something besides God that we think can give us the significance and joy that only God can give. We look to something besides Jesus to be our “savior,” our “righteousness.”

Of course, nothing and no one but God can possibly hold this kind of power. Idols can never satisfy, but we live in denial of this. So every idol leads us to create a delusion, spinning out a whole set of false definitions of success, happiness, and worth.

Our hearts operate out of deep false beliefs, such as, “If I can just achieve ____, then I will be happy,” or “Because I lost ____, I can never be happy.”

Paul shows how comprehensive this delusion, blindness, and deception can be. It consists of intellectual confusion and frustration (v. 21, “their thinking became futile”), and of emotional confusion and frustration (v. 21, “hearts were darkened”).

Even so, we will never blame the idol itself. We will blame God, the world, our own failures, or the failure of others.

We are enslaved

“God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts” (v. 24). This tells us that our heart’s desires, growing inordinate and uncontrollable through idolatry, simply sweep us away. We are given over to them.

In verse 25, Paul says that we not only worship our idols, but we serve or obey them. Human beings are goal-oriented. To live in the world, we order our lives into priorities. Whatever becomes the bottom line—that which defines and validates all other things—we will feel absolutely driven to do. We are given over to it. It controls us. We have to have it in order to be happy, to like ourselves, to have meaning in life. And since this substitute does not satisfy, because our hearts were made to center on God, rather than on any created thing, we always need more and more. We are given over to our idols.

3. What do these verses tell us about the wrath of God?

Its existence

Some may question how this can be, or say, “I have trouble with this.” In this situation, a guiding question can be: “If you deeply love a person, does that preclude wrath?”

Its presence

It is here now. Note the present tense “is being revealed.”

Its object

It is against “godlessness” (a word which refers to disregard of God’s rights) and “wickedness” (which, strictly speaking, refers to disregard of human rights to love, truth, justice, etc.).

Its deservedness

It is against people who know better, who “suppress the truth.” This important idea of “suppressing the truth” shows that every person “down deep” knows there is a God to whom they owe allegiance. Verse 21 goes so far as to say all human beings, even the pagans “knew God.” (This doesn’t mean that they had a personal covenant relationship with him, but that their knowledge of God’s existence is very real, though repressed.)

It’s the reason we need the gospel

The NIV translation leaves out the word “for” which (in the Greek) starts verse 18. The word connects verse 18 with verses 16–17 and shows us that the gospel is necessary because there is such a thing as the wrath of God.

All of Paul’s confidence, joy, and passion for the gospel (Rom. 1:1–17) rests upon the assumption that all human beings are, apart from the gospel, under the wrath of God. If you don’t understand or believe in the wrath of God, the gospel will not

thrill, empower, or move you.

The justice of God's wrath can only be understood by looking at the self-destructive power of evil. Darkened hearts and minds are the direct results of a refusal of the truth (note the connection of vv. 21a and 21b). The bondage they experience emotionally is the result of worshiping false gods that cannot satisfy (note the connection of vv. 23 and 24). In other words, sin is violating the order God created (e.g., God created us to serve him; God created us to live unselfish lives; God created us to tell the truth).

God's wrath and punishment is to "give us over" (v. 24a) to the things we worship and the things we want. We see both the justice yet terror of God's wrath. It is just, because "down deep" we know that there is a God (v. 20, "without excuse") and he is only giving us what we want. It is terrible, because it means that the worst thing God can do to a human being is to let them reach their idolatrous goals.

Note: Don't let this discussion go on for too long.

4. John Calvin describes us as "a perpetual factory of idols."¹ What are some examples of personal idols?

Any thing can become an idol, including good things. Examples of personal idols:

Work and career

Work becomes the most important thing to you—to be productive and useful, or to feel successful and powerful.

Beauty and image

This can show itself in various forms, including the following:

- You are prone to eating disorders and to spending excessive time, effort, and concern on appearance.
- You need the "false intimacy" of pornography and other anonymous sex.

Family

This idolatry has many variations:

- Your children’s prospects, happiness, obedience, health, or godliness become the most important thing.
- Meeting your parents’ expectations becomes the most important thing.
- Getting married or having a “perfect” marriage becomes the most important thing.

Romance

This is not the same as pure sexual gratification. You live for “falling in love,” or for someone to love you, or for the dream of some true love that will fix everything.

Money

This idolatry has many variations:

- Having (and saving) lots of money may be your security, the main way you feel safe in the world.
- Having (and spending) lots of money may be your main way of feeling significant and important.

You may want to tie this study back to the previous session by mentioning that the younger and elder brothers in the parable in Luke 15 represent some very common idols. You may want to use the “Life only has worth” table to help the group identify those idols.

[Watch the video for Session 3 to help you prepare to lead your group through the discussion that follows.]

Discussion Questions Notes For Leaders

[After watching the video with your group, use these questions to encourage discussion. The notes beneath the questions are not intended as answers to be read aloud. They are notes to help you facilitate the discussion.]

[You do not need to complete all the questions. Depending on the dynamic of the group and your time limit, you may find it helpful to choose in advance the questions that will be of most value to your group and start with those.]

1. Was there anything from the video that was new to you, or had an effect on you? Did you hear anything that raised more questions in your mind?

Discuss with your group.

2. “If you really want to change ... Jesus Christ must become your overmastering positive passion.” When and how have you found this to be true in your experience or in the lives of people you know?

Below are some examples of ways to remember and pray that Christ is your overmastering positive passion when certain emotions crop up because some idol has gained ascendancy:

When you feel anxiety

Rejoice and pray, “All the things I have are gifts of grace because of Christ’s love and sacrifice. They aren’t here because of my performance, but because of his generosity. Christ loved me enough to sacrifice himself for me; he will continue to give me what I need. Be consoled, Self.”

When you feel pride and anger

Rejoice and pray, “All the things I have are gifts of grace because of Christ’s love and sacrifice. I have never received what I deserve—and I never will. If God gave me what I deserved, I’d be dead. Be humbled, Self.”

When you feel guilt

Rejoice and pray, “All the things I have are gifts of grace because of Christ’s love

and sacrifice. I never earned them to begin with, so I can't un-earn them. Christ loved and loves me, even though he knew I would do this. Be confident, Self."

When you feel boredom and lethargy

Rejoice and pray, "All the things I have are gifts of grace because of Christ's love and sacrifice. The very fact I am a Christian is a miracle. Be amazed. Be in wonder, Self."

3. Archbishop William Temple said, "Your religion is what you do with your solitude."² When you are alone what do you tend to think about most? Where do your thoughts go naturally, instinctively, habitually? How does this help identify your idols?

Temple's quote leads us to imagine ourselves standing on a corner, waiting for someone for a long time. We have nothing to read, to listen to, to look at, or to do. Here is the question: When your mind is completely unfettered and able to dwell wherever it wishes, what do you think about most naturally, instinctively, and habitually?

Do your thoughts go to God—to his excellence, his attributes, his glory, his beauty? Is that where your mind and heart go automatically? Wherever they go (Temple indicates), there you find your real god, your ultimate concern, the thing your heart most rests in and worships.

We should love God so much that he dominates our solitude. We should love God so much that we are content in any circumstance, because we always have what we most want in life. Of course, this is never true of us. Other things usurp God's place, and what we do with our solitude is one of the indicators of what those things, those idols, are.

4. "Under every behavioral sin is the sin of idolatry, and under every act of idolatry is a disbelief in the gospel." Do you agree? Why or why not? What are the implications for how we really change our hearts and lives?

Luther saw that the Old Testament law against idols and the New Testament emphasis on justification by faith alone are essentially the same.³ He says that failure to believe that God accepts us fully in Christ—and looking to something else for our salvation—is a failure to keep the first commandment, namely, having no

other gods before him. Why? If you try to earn your own salvation through works-righteousness, then you must be, by definition, looking to something else to be your savior, even if that “something else” is your own moral record and performance.

The Ten Commandments begin with two commands against idolatry, followed by the other eight. Why this order? It is because the fundamental problem in law-breaking is idolatry.

- In other words, we never break commandments three through to ten without first breaking commandments one and two.
- We would not lie, commit adultery, kill, etc. unless we were first making some other thing, or things, more of an ultimate hope and value to us than God.
 - We would not steal if God were our real wealth.
 - We would not commit adultery if God were our real beauty.
 - We would not lie unless there were something we needed to have—honor or power or approval or control—more than God.
- Though we may intellectually accept the gospel of salvation by grace alone through Christ alone, at the moment we sin our hearts are looking to something else as our hope and salvation.

Thus, beneath any particular sin is this sin of rejecting Christ-salvation and indulging in self-salvation.

In Colossians, Paul says, “Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires [*epithumiai*] and greed, which is idolatry” (Col. 3:5). The term “evil desires” is the Greek word *epithumiai*. The word means an “*epi*-desire”—a mega or inordinate desire—so Paul is saying, “Kill off your hearts’ over-desires, which are caused by idolatry.” We break the first commandment every day when we put more of our hearts’ trust for our significance and security in created things rather than in Jesus. This creates inordinate longings and emotional attachment to these things, even if they are good in themselves.

Paul goes on to say, “Set your minds on things above ... your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory” (Col. 3:2–4). Here we get a strategy to use on our own hearts. When you are wracked by *epi*-anger, fear, despondency, or some other inordinate

emotion, recognize the idol beneath it and say, “You are not my life. You do not define me. Christ is my life. You did not die for me, and you cannot redeem me. He did and can and will! So ultimately, I don’t really have to have you.” When Paul says we must “set our minds” on Christ, he certainly is talking about more than just thinking. He means we are to come into Christ’s presence in prayer and rely on the Holy Spirit to make him spiritually real to our hearts.

The only way we can really fundamentally change, then, is not simply through moral reformation but through ever deeper repentance for our idols, and ever deeper faith and joy in Jesus Christ as our Savior and Lord.

Only when Jesus, through the gospel, becomes the greatest object of our affection—because he is the source of our salvation, joy, hope, meaning, and worth—will we change. No one can change simply through “willpower.” We will always be controlled by our heart’s supreme affection and love, by our heart’s ultimate source of love and meaning, by our idols. There is no other way to truly change one’s heart and character than through the grace of the gospel.

5. In his book *Gods That Fail*, Vinoth Ramachandra quotes Psalm 115 on idols: “Those who make them will be like them, and so will all who trust in them.” He writes, “Note the shattering conclusion: we become like what we worship.”⁴ Do we? In what way and why?

Ramachandra continues, “The logic of this psalm follows from the biblical doctrine of humanness. We are created in the image of the God whose true likeness is disclosed to us in the human figure of Jesus Christ. Worship involves a restoration of our ‘fallen’ humanity to this true definition of what it means to be human. We may not notice this transformation into Christ-like humanness, but others will. Likewise, when we worship that in whose image we were *not* created it *will* show in our lives.”⁵

In his book *We Become What We Worship*, G.K. Beale writes, “God has made all people to reflect, to be imaging beings. People will always reflect something, whether it be God’s character or some feature of the world. If people are committed to God, they will become like him; if they are committed to something other than God, they will become like that thing, always spiritually inanimate and empty like the lifeless and vain aspect of creation to which they have committed themselves ... We become spiritually blind, deaf and dumb even though we have physical eyes

and ears. If we commit ourselves to something that does not have God's Spirit, to that degree we will be lacking the Spirit ... The point is that our lives become vain and empty when we commit ourselves to vain idols of this world."⁶

6. What are some of the concrete ways we can make Christ King and Lord of our entire lives?

To treat Jesus as King and Lord means:

Obeying

That is, to comply with God's commands in his Word unconditionally.

- An example of failing to obey unconditionally is Jonah. He could not see how preaching to Nineveh would help him or his nation.
- If Jesus is Lord, however, you must obey even if you don't understand why.
- The evaluation question to ask is, "Am I willing to obey whatever God says about this area of my life, no matter how I feel about it?"

Submitting

That is, to accept trials or suffering as part of God's plan.

- An example of failing to submit is Job. He thought God was unfair, that nothing good could come out of his suffering.
- If Jesus is Lord, however, you must submit to him in the things he sends your way.
- The evaluation question to ask is, "Am I willing to thank God for whatever happens in this area, whether I understand it or not?" (This is not the same as believing that God is happy to send tragedy. Rather, it is believing that God, in his overall purpose for your life, is always acting wisely and redemptively.)

Relying

That is, that Jesus should hold the title to your heart's deepest allegiance, loyalty, trust, and love.

- An example of failing to rely on God is Abraham. His temptation was to make Isaac an idol. Isaac could become what Abraham relied on more than God for his joy and meaning in life.
- If Jesus is Lord, however, you will rely on him and nothing else.
- The evaluation question is, “Is there something in this area I am relying on more than God for my hope and meaning in life?”

Expecting

That is, that you should expect God to use his power and resources on your behalf.

- An example of failing to expect great things is Moses. When he was called, his sense of incompetence prevented him from immediately embracing God’s charge.
- If Jesus is Lord, however, you need to expect that he would not call you to do something without supporting you.
- The evaluation question is, “Are there problems or limitations in my life that I think are too big for God to remove?”

[Pray for your group.]

Notes for Leaders

[Your Notes]

¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Battles Edition, Book 1, Chapter XI, Section 8 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 108.

² This quote is attributed to Sir William Temple, English diplomat, statesman, essayist and author (1628–1699).

³ See Martin Luther, *A Treatise on Good Works* (Whitefish, Mont.: Kessinger, n.d.).

⁴ Vinoth Ramachandra, *Gods That Fail* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 1996), 115.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ G.K. Beale, *We Become What We Worship: A Biblical Theology of Idolatry* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 2008), 302–308.

Session 4 Community: The Context For Change



[*Complete the Session 4 Home Study.*]

Bible Study Notes For Leaders

[Read Philippians 2:1–11 and then work through the questions and notes below ahead of time to help you prepare to lead your group. The notes beneath the questions are not intended as answers to be read aloud. They are notes to help you facilitate the discussion.]

1. Looking at verses 2–4, what can we infer is the problem that Paul is addressing in the Philippian church?

We can imagine what the problems are by looking at the positive exhortations. First, in verse 2, he asks them to be “like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose.” This is a call to unity, but it is a threefold call, to mind, heart, and will. He wants them to agree on the truth (“like-minded”), love one another (“having the same love”), and work together toward the same goal (“being one in spirit and purpose”).

Verses 3 through 4 are a call to humility, to putting others’ interests ahead of their own. While verse 2 addressed the Christians as an entire body, verses 3 and 4 address each one as an individual. They are to turn from two things: “selfish ambition” (which is putting their own needs ahead of others) and “vain conceit” (which is an unrealistic assessment of themselves).

It seems that self-centeredness was leading to disunity in this church.

2. What are the four grounds for unity and humility that Paul lists in verse 1? How do these grounds lead to unity and humility?

The “encouragement from being united with Christ”

The word “encouragement” is the Greek word *paraklesis*, which means to be “strengthened” and given courage from our salvation in Christ.

The “comfort” of Christ’s love

The word “comfort” connotes the consolation you give someone who is grieving.

The Spirit’s “fellowship”

The word means “participation.”

“Tenderness and compassion”

These two words are used frequently in the Bible to describe God’s mercy.

Paul is saying that they have strength and deep consolation from Christ. They have been bound together by the participation in one Spirit, and they have been freely forgiven by the mercy of the Father.

There are many ways these grounds lead to unity and humility. Here are just a few:

- The strength and deep consolation from Christ should make us less needy. The term “vain conceit” connotes being hungry for honor, recognition, and status. If we have profound joy, encouragement, and consolation from Christ, we should not need the approbation of others.
- The “participation of the Spirit” means that all Christians are one, despite their differences. We may have diverse opinions, temperaments, or cultural mindsets—but the fact that we all participate in the Spirit should be more important than political, intellectual, or cultural differences.
- The remembrance of the mercy of God should first humble us and second be a model for us. God’s care and provision for us was completely unmerited and undeserved, so we should humble ourselves before others.

3. Verse 5 says, “Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.”

What do we learn about Jesus’ attitude from verses 6–11?

The incarnation (vv. 6–7)

Here we see that Jesus, though he had a divine nature (v. 6a, “being in very nature God”), made himself nothing by “taking the very nature of a servant” (v. 7). Paul does not say that Jesus shed his nature as God, but rather he assumed a human nature. Jesus was, then, both divine and human at the same time.

The atonement (v. 8)

Jesus did not simply humble himself into being a man, but he also humbled himself to a particular task. He “became obedient to death—even death on a cross!” Despite

the fact that he retained his divine nature when on the earth, he voluntarily did not exercise his rights, but instead became weak and vulnerable and died on the cross for us.

The future kingdom (vv. 9–11)

This section tells us that God exalted Jesus “to the highest place” (v. 9). He is exalted and ruling from heaven. Paul looks all the way forward to the day when everyone and everything in the world will bow the knee to Jesus.

Jesus’ life was marked by not just one but two self-humblings: the incarnation and the cross. He *was* exalted—but by God, and only through and after his humbling.

Jesus turned away from personal glory and gain voluntarily, deliberately, and decisively. He shows us that the way to lead is to serve. The way to find fulfillment is not to seek fulfillment but look to the fulfillment of others.

4. In his book *Love in Hard Places* Don Carson writes,

The church is ... made up of natural enemies. What binds us together is not common education, common race, common income levels, common politics, common nationality, common accents, common jobs, or anything else of that sort. Christians come together ... because they have all been saved by Jesus Christ and owe him a common allegiance ... They are a band of natural enemies who love one another for Jesus’ sake.¹

Do you agree with his assessment? Why or why not? Share examples.

One of the most important ways that the Christian church embodies the gospel is in the unity of Christians who are different from one another—temperamentally, culturally, and racially. We need to show the world that people who cannot live in love and unity outside of Christ can do so in Christ.

When it comes to building actual relationships across racial and cultural barriers, we quickly come up against a host of attitudes, rooted deeply in our own cultural customs and ways of thinking, that make it hard to accept and respect people of other groups. We are “natural enemies.” The gospel works to overcome these attitudes. We are sinners saved by sheer grace, and we need to draw out the implications and live in total consistency with that.

Discussion Questions Notes For Leaders

[After watching the video with your group, use these questions to encourage discussion. The notes beneath the questions are not intended as answers to be read aloud. They are notes to help you facilitate the discussion.]

[You do not need to complete all the questions. Depending on the dynamic of the group and your time limit, you may find it helpful to choose in advance the questions that will be of most value to your group and start with those.]

1. Was there anything from the video that was new to you, or had an effect on you? Did you hear anything that raised more questions in your mind?

Discuss with your group.

2. We heard in the video that,

We are “a holy nation”—different, distinct from the world and the people around us. And yet at the same time, we’re supposed to be “a royal priesthood”—deeply involved in the lives of the world and the people around us.

Do you feel that you are part of the sort of community described in the video? If not, why not? What can you do to make this happen?

Discuss with your group.

3. “We will not know God, change deeply, nor win the world apart from community.” To what extent have you experienced this?

Discuss with your group.

4. What practices make a good, strong, healthy Christian community? Brainstorm practical ways by which your own group can deepen its life together as a community.

The idea of community cannot be squared with merely attending church on Sunday—even regularly. The biblical texts imply a far deeper involvement. Our community needs to be marked by:

Cross-cultural unity

- When we believe the gospel, we receive a profound union with others who believe, even though they may be radically different from us in every other way. We should be making close friends with people from groupings, classes, or races who, apart from the gospel, we'd never know or care to know.
- It is worth noting that the unity of the church is a deeply missional factor (John 17:23). The early churches of the Mediterranean world were multi-ethnic, consisting of at least Jews and Greeks but often Africans and Asians too (see Acts 13:1 and following). Peter speaks of them collectively as “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God” (1 Peter 2:9).

Counter-cultural distinctiveness

- When Peter calls us a “holy nation,” he is saying, literally, that we are a distinct, unique community—a group of people who have distinct ways of doing nearly everything. We are a counter-culture in which we help each other become distinctive in everything we do:
 - how we use money and possessions
 - how we conduct relationships and family life
 - how we do our work
 - how we love and serve the poor and marginalized, and so on.

Corporate spirituality

- We should be praying with others.
- We should experience God with other people with some consistency.

Personal accountability

- We should be accountable personally to some others. We should have shared enough of our lives with others so that they see whether we are growing in Christ and can support us.

As well as all the other factors you may mention, including those from Philippians

that you considered earlier, make sure to note that the “one another” commands that were examined in detail in the *Home Study* (the nine community-building practices) also contribute to a good, strong, healthy Christian community. You may want to review these briefly together as a group.

Some practical ways by which your own group can deepen its life together as a community include:

Common time

- Community requires availability. You must not be too hard for others to reach.
- Community requires frequency. There must be plenty of time shared together regularly.

Common practices

- Community requires a variety of practices:
 - eating together
 - recreation and often attending church together
 - learning together (Bible study, reading, and reflection in general)
 - personal counsel, comfort, and specific accountability for behavior
 - commitment to constant reconciliation and forgiveness
 - deeds of service and justice and witness done together
 - prayer, worship, and making music together

Common resources

- Community requires sharing home and living space through hospitality with others.
- Community requires sharing our resources, and feeling a sense of responsibility to others.

Being patient, forgiving, empathetic, and affectionate toward one another

- To be involved deeply in people’s lives is hard spiritual work. C.S. Lewis said that the only way to be sure not to have your heart broken is to never give it to anyone.² As Christians, we will and must give our hearts to others. Love is not only an action, but must also be an inner attitude of good will, patience, forgiveness, and warmth toward others.

5. How can we love people we do not naturally like?

Can we do loving deeds even when we don’t “feel” loving? As we carry out loving deeds in spite of how we feel, can we work on our hearts to put aside condescension, irritability, bias, and selfishness?

We must remember Jesus’ sacrifice for us when we try to “love people we do not naturally like.” How does this work?

- The gospel is this: we are not loved because we are lovely, but in spite of our unloveliness. We are not loved because we have made ourselves worthy of love, but because Jesus died for us when we were unattractive in order to make us attractive.
- If Christians think of this as they are serving unattractive people, they will find a growing degree of repentance. “Loving Father, I was so much more unattractive to you than this person is to me, yet you were tortured and killed—you gave up your life for me! And all I need to do is to give up some time and effort for this person.”
- A person who does not understand the gospel cannot do this. People who are just generally moral and nice cannot do this. They have to choose between the two inadequate alternatives, either phony love (niceness toward people you dislike) or sporadic love (kindness only toward people you like).
- If you show love as you repent, however, your heart is softened as you serve. Your service is sincere toward God at that moment and becomes more sincere toward people as you go along.

Pastor and author John Piper gives the following six guidelines for loving each other amid differences:

- Let’s avoid gossiping.
- Let’s identify evidences of grace in each other and speak them to each other and about each other.

- Let's speak criticism directly to each other if we feel the need to speak to others about it.
- Let's look for, and assume, the best motive in the other's viewpoint, especially when we disagree.
- Let's think often of the magnificent things we hold in common.
- Let's be more amazed that we are forgiven than that we are right. And in that way, let's shape our relationships by the gospel.³

6. Look at the following list derived from Romans 12.

Love honestly, speaking out against what is wrong, (v. 9)
Love even unattractive people, because they are your brothers and sisters, (v. 10)
Love by making others feel honored and valuable, (v. 10)
Love by being generous in practical ways with your home, money, and time. (v. 13)
Love without bitterness. Don't "pay others back," or hold resentment against others, (v. 14)
Love with empathy. Be willing to be emotionally involved with others, (v. 15)
Love with humility. Be willing to associate with people who differ from you. (v. 16)

In which areas do you, as a group, tend to be the weakest, and why? What practical steps could you take to improve?

Discuss with your group.

[The Session 5 Home Study is a project. Read the introduction of the Home Study in advance to help you prepare to lead your group through this project.]

[Pray for your group.]

Notes for Leaders

[Your Notes]

¹ D. A. Carson, *Love In Hard Places* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2002), 61.

² The exact quote is: "Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal." C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York:

Harcourt, Brace, 1960), 121

3 Read the whole article for biblical support and explanation of these guidelines.
John Piper, “Six Biblical Guidelines for Loving Each Other Amid Differences.”
Desiring God: www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary (August 4, 2009)

Session 5 Witness: An Alternate City



[*Complete the Session 5 Home Study.*]

Bible Study Notes For Leaders

[Read Acts 2:42–47 which describes the early church, and then work through the questions and notes below ahead of time to help you prepare to lead your group. The notes beneath the questions are not intended as answers to be read aloud. They are notes to help you facilitate the discussion.]

1. What do we discover about how the early church learned together? What do we discover about fellowship and service? What can we learn from this?

The church trained and educated its members in community. “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching” (v. 42).

- “Devoted themselves” indicates a high commitment to learning.
- It was centered on the apostolic teaching. It was not learning in general, but rather the study of God’s revelation as it came through the apostles. (Today, of course, the apostles’ teaching is in the Bible.)
- Deeds of power accompanied and verified the truth of the apostles’ preaching, as “many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles” (v. 43). People were not simply taught what to believe, but given evidence for their belief. This point is missed unless we realize that verse 43 is not an isolated statement—it follows verse 42. The apostles’ teaching (v. 42) was validated and verified by their miracles and wonders (v. 43). Hebrews 2:3–4 tells us that the purpose of miracles in the early church was to show listeners the truth of the gospel message brought by the apostles. A survey of the Bible reveals that miracles are not distributed randomly and evenly throughout history, but they generally come in clusters, for example when God sends a new set of messengers into the world. (Biblical revelation describes three general clusters of miracles—Moses and the Exodus; Elijah and the prophets before the exile; and Jesus and the apostles.) What’s important to understand in verse 43 is that people were shown evidence of the truth of apostolic teaching, so they would devote themselves to it.

“They devoted themselves ... to the fellowship” (v. 42). Fellowship and service didn’t just happen; they worked at it.

- It was daily. “Every day” (v. 46), they were involved in each other’s daily lives. They did not see each other only on Sundays, but the church brought its members together constantly.

- It was economic as well as “spiritual,” for they “had everything in common” (v. 44). They recognized not only that other brothers and sisters had a claim on their time and their hearts, but also on their resources. People received practical, financial, and material help for their needs: “Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need” (v. 45).

2. The early church were so involved with each other that they had fellowship “every day.” Do you have fellowship with another Christian every day? Is this possible? Why or why not?

Discuss with your group.

3. What do we discover about how the early church worshiped and how they witnessed to others? What can we learn from this?

Worship had both an informal and formal aspect. It happened both in homes and in the temple courts. The church held both small group meetings (“they broke bread in their homes” in verse 46) and large group meetings (“continued to meet together in the temple courts” in verse 46).

- The church practiced the Lord’s Supper, the “breaking of bread” (v. 42).
- There was a general spirit of joy (“glad and sincere hearts” in verse 46 and “praising God” in verse 47) which permeated their meetings.
- It was reverent as well as joyful. Notice that in the small group worship, the emphasis is on joy and gladness (v. 46), but in the large group, there is an emphasis on awe (v. 43).
- The church spent time in prayer, they “devoted themselves ... to prayer” (v. 42).

Their witness to others was dynamic. The church was evangelistically effective with new conversions every day. “The Lord added ... daily those who were being saved” (v. 47).

- It was based on a community life that was attractive to non-Christians. “Enjoying the favor of all the people” (v. 47) cannot mean that every non-Christian loved the early church, since there was plenty of persecution, but overall, the early church demonstrated the gospel in its community in a way that was irresistible to outside observers.
- It was church-centered. The person was “added to their number” (v. 47) and

incorporated into the church.

4. British theologian Lesslie Newbigin observes:

The gospel does not become public truth for a society by being propagated as a theory or as a worldview and certainly not as a religion. It can become public truth only insofar as it is embodied in a society (the church) which is both “abiding in” Christ and engaged in the life of the world.¹

Do you agree with his assessment? Why or why not? Share examples.

Newbigin writes in *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society*, “Those who call for a Christian assault on the worlds of politics and economics often make it clear ... that the aim of the attack is to seize the levers of power and take control. We have seen many such successful revolutions, and we know that in most cases what has happened is simply that the oppressor and the oppressed have exchanged roles ... The throne is unshaken, only there is a different person occupying it. How is the throne itself to be shaken? ... Only by the power of the gospel itself, announced in word and embodied in deed ... The victory of the Church over the demonic power which was embodied in the Roman imperial system was not won by seizing the levers of power: it was won when the victims knelt down in the Colosseum and prayed in the name of Jesus for the Emperor.”²

[Watch the video for Session 5 to help you prepare to lead your group through the discussion that follows.]

Discussion Questions Notes For Leaders

[After watching the video with your group, use these questions to encourage discussion. The notes beneath the questions are not intended as answers to be read aloud. They are notes to help you facilitate the discussion.]

[You do not need to complete all the questions. Depending on the dynamic of the group and your time limit, you may find it helpful to choose in advance the questions that will be of most value to your group and start with those.]

1. Was there anything from the video that was new to you, or had an effect on you? Did you hear anything that raised more questions in your mind?

Discuss with your group.

2. “An alternate city is gospel-speaking.” What intimidates us about telling other people about Jesus? Are some people more intimidating than others? Why? What motivates us to tell people about Jesus?

The gospel produces a constellation of traits in us:

- First, we are compelled to share the gospel out of love.
- Second, we are freed from the fear of being ridiculed or hurt by others, since we already have the favor of God by grace.
- Third, there is a humility in our dealings with others, because we know we are saved only by grace, not because of our superior insight or character.
- Fourth, we are hopeful about anyone, even the “hard cases,” because we were saved only because of grace ourselves.
- Fifth, we are courteous and careful with people. We don’t have to push or coerce them, for it is God’s grace that opens hearts, not our eloquence or persistence or even their openness.

If we are not effective in reaching others for Christ, it could be because of a lack of joy, a lack of humility and gentleness, or a lack of boldness.

- The joyful effects of the gospel in our own lives must give us an enormous energy for witness. How can we keep quiet about such a great wonder? If that energy is not there, we must repent and seek God until it flows.
- The humbling nature of the gospel must lead us to approach others without superiority. Since we are saved only by God’s grace and not by our

goodness, we expect to often find wisdom and compassion in others, which at many points may exceed our own. Are humility and respect present in us? If not, we will be ineffective.

- The love that we experience because of the gospel must remove from us the fear of others' disapproval. Is our boldness increasing? If not, we must repent and reflect on the gospel and God's acceptance of us until fear diminishes.

3. "There is a credibility that comes if you are consistent in your behavior, there is a credibility that comes if people see the gospel transforming you." Do people notice your lifestyle and that of your community? Do they appreciate it, even if they don't understand it? Share examples.

Discuss with your group.

4. Frank Retief, a pastor and church planter in South Africa, writes, "people without Christ go to hell—if you really believe that you've got to take risks, take a chance and be prepared to fail."³ What do you think of his statement?

Discuss with your group. This question is intended to provoke discussion.

5. A leading missiologist, C. Peter Wagner, writes, "Planting new churches is the most effective evangelistic methodology known under heaven."⁴ Think of some reasons why starting new churches is a good way to reach people.

Often in new churches the sense of mission is strongest; more Christians have freedom to lead; and creative means of preaching the gospel are used. New churches, therefore, can best reach new generations, new residents, and new people groups.

Studies confirm that the average new congregation brings new people into the life of the body of Christ at many times the rate of an older congregation of the same size. In *Why Start New Churches?* Lyle Schaller reports, "The most important single argument for making new church development a high priority is this is the most effective means for reaching unchurched persons. Numerous studies have shown that 60 to 80 percent of the new adult members of new congregations are persons who were not actively involved in the life of any worshiping congregation immediately prior to joining that new mission. By contrast, most long established churches draw the majority of their new adult members from persons who transfer

in from other congregations.”⁵

Notice that many of the evangelistic challenges of the New Testament are calls to plant churches. The Great Commission (Matt. 28:18–20), for example, is a call not just to “make disciples” but to baptize. In Acts and elsewhere, it is clear that baptism means incorporation into a worshiping community with accountability and boundaries (see Acts 2:41–47).

Paul, the greatest missionary in history, had a rather simple twofold strategy. First, he went into the largest city of a region (see Acts 16:9, 12), and second, he planted churches in each town (Titus 1:5—“appoint elders in every town”). Once Paul had done that, he could say that he had “fully preached” the gospel in a region and that he had “no more place ... to work in these regions” (Rom. 15:19, 23). This means Paul had two controlling assumptions: (a) that one of the best ways to influence a region was through its chief cities, and (b) that one of the best ways to influence a city was to plant churches in it. Once he had accomplished this, he moved on. He knew that the rest that needed to happen would follow.

6. “When Christ returns to earth, the present age will end completely and the age to come will come fully. Meanwhile, we actually live between the two ages—in what’s been called the overlap of the ages.” What mistaken thoughts, distorted emotions, or wrong practices result when we don’t focus enough on the age to come? What about when we don’t focus enough on the present age?

John Stott in *The Contemporary Christian* suggests some applications:⁶

Personal change and growth

- The Holy Spirit has come into us already in the present age, subduing our fallen nature, our selfishness. So we have confidence that anyone can be changed, that any enslaving habit can be overcome.
- On the other hand, our fallen nature remains in us and will never be eliminated until the age to come. We must avoid pat answers, and we must not expect “quick fixes.” We must be patient and understanding with growing persons and not condescending or impatient toward lapses and failures.

Church change and growth

- The church is now the community of kingdom power. Since Christ is ruling over the present age we can be confident that God can bring church revival and transformation.
- On the other hand, error and evil will never be completely eradicated from the church until the age to come. We must not be harshly critical of imperfect congregations, nor jump impatiently from church to church over perceived blemishes.

Social change

- Since Christ is ruling over the present age we can expect to use God's power to change social conditions and communities.
- On the other hand, until the age to come there will be "wars and rumors of wars." Selfishness, cruelty, terrorism, and oppression will continue. Christians harbor no illusions about politics nor expect utopian conditions. The age to come means that Christians will not trust any political or social agenda to bring about righteousness here on earth.

A few more examples follow:

When we don't focus on the age to come, we may give preeminence to other objects

Other things—perhaps very good things—become too important to us. We can easily make family or work or even our moral record more important than God in our life. When we look to them for more joy and hope than we do to God, they become central to our life and we get distortions.

When we don't focus on the present age, we may forget the importance of unity

In John 17, Jesus directly links Christian oneness to the manifestation of God to the world. The implication is that visible unity is an important way to show the world the glory of God.

When we don't focus on the present age, we may forget the importance of social justice

If the purpose of the kingdom of God is to heal all the results of sin—spiritual, psychological, social and physical—then we must also intentionally use our gifts and resources to fight disintegration in every area.

When we don't focus on the present age, we may forget the importance of witness

2 Corinthians 5:19–20 says, “God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us.” It is an amazing description of our purpose in this present age—we are Christ’s ambassadors.

[*Pray for your group.*]

Notes for Leaders

[Your Notes]

1 Lesslie Newbigin, *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt and Certainty in Christian Discipleship* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1995), 39.

2 Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1989), 209–210.

3 Bishop Frank Retief quoted in *Multiplying Churches*, edited by Stephen Timmis (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2000), 97.

4 C. Peter Wagner, *Strategies for Church Growth* (Ventura, Calif.: Regal, 1987), 168–169.

5 Lyle Schaller, “Why Start New Churches?” in *The Circuit Rider*, May 1979, 3. Quoted in Donald Anderson McGavran and George G. Hunter Ill, *Church Growth: Strategies That Work* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980), 100.

6 Adapted from the chapter “The Now and the Not Yet,” John Stott, *The Contemporary Christian* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 1992).

Session 6 Work: Cultivating The Garden



[*Complete the Session 6 Home Study.*]

Bible Study Notes For Leaders

[Read Matthew 6:19–21 and then work through the questions and notes below ahead of time to help you prepare to lead your group. The notes beneath the questions are not intended as answers to be read aloud. They are notes to help you facilitate the discussion.]

1. Why does Jesus tell us to store up “treasures in heaven” (v. 20) rather than “treasures on earth” (v. 19)? What does Jesus mean when he says, “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also”?

Literally Jesus is saying not to treasure earthly treasures, but to treasure heavenly treasure. Everybody, at the center of his or her soul, treasures something. To treasure something means to look at it and fill your heart with the beauty and the value of it.

Whatever that treasure is—if it is not God—it will enslave you. You will pay any price for it. You will do anything to get it. An inordinate dependence on money or material things, for example, has the peculiar effect of blinding you spiritually. Moreover, earthly treasures don't actually give you the security and significance they seem to promise. They can't possibly stop all the things—death, tragedy, broken relationships—that come along.

You give to what you treasure. You always give most effortlessly to whatever is your real salvation, your hope, your meaning in life. If your real hope is in your appearance, career, status, or comfort, your giving will flow more easily into those items and symbols. If Jesus is your real hope, your giving flows out easily into his work and the lives of people.

Jesus is asking, “Are you willing to lose it all for me? Are you willing to let me have complete control of your life? Are you willing to make me the new source of your meaning and your identity and your security? Am I your treasure?”

2. How do most people you know tend to spend their time, energy, and money? What do you spend money on most effortlessly and joyfully?

Money is one of the best ways to identify the idols of our heart. Even if money is not an idol, money will often show us where our idols are. We can find out what our heart most loves and adores and worships and rests in for salvation—often it is where we most effortlessly and easily and joyfully spend money.

It may be useful to give this exercise to your group if the members have never done anything similar.

- Estimate what percentage of your money is currently going to the following.
 1. Christian ministry—church, Christian workers, other ministries.
 2. People outside your family with economic needs.
- Think about what this percentage says about your heart and treasure.
- Decide what percentage of your income you will give this year. Make it a sacrificial level. Identify in your own mind the sacrifices that you will have to make.
- Prayerfully determine how to distribute your giving among causes you feel will honor God.
- Decide at what intervals you will give, and plan a way to keep a record of how well you follow your plan.

3. How might you and your group go about storing up “treasures in heaven”?

Examples include:

- Giving money and possessions away in sacrificial proportions with joy.
- Giving that entails sacrifices in our daily lifestyle—how much we spend on clothes, travel, home, and so on.
- Giving radically to others rather than accruing surplus wealth to guarantee a financially secure future.
- Always looking for opportunities to help among our friends, our neighbors, the poor, in our church, in our city.
- Remembering that God is the owner of all things, and we are just the stewards of his wealth.
- Using our resources not for personal ends but for the protection of those with less.
- Taking genuine care of the widows, the poor, and the immigrants—the powerless.
- Modeling to the world a redeemed society in which wealth and possessions are used to build up community and not for personal fulfillment.
- Choosing, thinking about, and working at our jobs in a way that honors God,

not as a way of accruing personal wealth, status, comfort, and so on.

4. One way to ensure that we store up treasures in heaven is to celebrate, reflect on, and give thanks for our treasures on earth. This is part of what we do on the Sabbath. In an article called “Bring Back the Sabbath” in *The New York Times Magazine* we read,

There is ample evidence that our relationship to work is out of whack. Let me argue on behalf of an institution that has kept workaholism in reasonable check for thousands of years. Most people mistakenly believe that all you have to do to stop working is not work. The inventors of the Sabbath understood that it was a much more complicated undertaking. You cannot downshift casually and easily. This is why the Puritan and Jewish Sabbaths were so exactly intentional. The rules did not exist to torture the faithful. Interrupting the ceaseless round of striving requires a surprisingly strenuous act of will, one that has to be bolstered by habit as well as by social sanction.¹

This quote explains that scheduled rest will not work without a great deal of intentionality and discipline. Brainstorm the kind of practical habits and useful practices that can help us observe Sabbath.

Determine what to do with the time

- Take time for contemplative rest.

Prayer and worship is a critical part of Sabbath, from any perspective. It is the basis for “inner rest,” and provides respite from the more exhausting exertions of life.

- Take time for recreational rest.

The Puritans and others were skeptical of recreations that required a great deal of money and time and exertion. Be careful to ensure that recreation really refreshes.

- Take time for aesthetic rest.

We need to expose ourselves to works of God’s creation that refresh and energize us and that we find beautiful. This may mean outdoor experiences. This may also mean the arts—music, drama, visual art, and so on.

- Take some sheer inactivity time.

Almost all of us need some time every week that is unplanned and unstructured, so we can do whatever we spontaneously feel like doing. If our Sabbath time is simply a very busy time filled with scheduled activities of recreation and ministry, it will not suffice. There must be some “cessation” from exertion.

Honor both macro- and micro-rhythms and seasons in your rest

Israel’s Sabbath cycles of rest-and-work included not only Sabbath days but Sabbath years and even a Jubilee, the seventh Sabbath year. This is an important insight for workers in today’s world.

It is possible to voluntarily take on an insufficient-Sabbath-time season of work. For example, if you want to be a doctor, you are going to have to be a resident. Many other jobs demand an initial investment of time with a heavy work week. Also, going into business for yourself or undertaking a major project may require something similar. We can enter a season like this for a time, but we need to be accountable to someone for this or we will get locked into an “under-Sabbathed” lifestyle. During the “under-Sabbathed” time, we must not let rhythms of prayer, Bible study, and worship die.

Inject Sabbath into the rest of the work week

If you develop the “inner rest” of Sabbath, it will lead you to be less frantic and driven in the rest of your work.

Associated with the Sabbath laws were the gleaning laws. According to these laws, the owners of fields were not allowed to harvest out to the edges of their fields. They left a percentage of grain in the field for the poor to come and take. Sabbath, then, is the deliberate limitation of productivity, as a way to trust God and be a good steward of yourself and your resources.

In our case this may mean deliberately setting fewer goals for ourselves in a given day and week, not “harvesting out to the edges.” The purpose of Sabbath is not simply to rejuvenate yourself in order to do more work. Nor is it the pursuit of pleasure. The purpose of Sabbath is to enjoy God, life in general, what you have accomplished in the world through his help, and the freedom you have in the gospel—the freedom from slavery to any material object or human expectation. The

Sabbath is a sign of the whole future salvation that is coming.

[Watch the video for Session 6 to help you prepare to lead your group through the discussion that follows.]

Discussion Questions Notes For Leaders

[After watching the video with your group, use these questions to encourage discussion. The notes beneath the questions are not intended as answers to be read aloud. They are notes to help you facilitate the discussion.]

[You do not need to complete all the questions. Depending on the dynamic of the group and your time limit, you may find it helpful to choose in advance the questions that will be of most value to your group and start with those.]

1. Was there anything from the video that was new to you, or had an effect on you? Did you hear anything that raised more questions in your mind?

Discuss with your group.

2. What are some of the practical implications of the biblical teachings that work is good and has dignity?

The ancient Greeks saw the material world (and therefore manual labor, or work-for-pay) as demeaning and degrading. A work-free, contemplative life was considered the most humanizing, ennobling, and ideal life. Work was seen as an unmixed burden and curse.

Unfortunately, a strong strain of this thinking has come down to us and created a hierarchy for our work, from the “nobler” work of the philosopher down through the helping professions and on down to manual labor. Today, people often find their dignity or identity in doing work that is high-status and high-paying. Many people take jobs that they don’t like and/or aren’t good at, simply because they are higher-status jobs. This thinking has even invaded the church. In many churches it is either implicitly or explicitly stated that full-time ministry is the way to really please God, while all other jobs are just “secular work.”

The biblical view of the dignity of all work puts an end to this type of thinking. Work matters to God.

3. What are some of the practical implications of the biblical teachings that we must not separate God from our work?

Christianity is not simply a set of beliefs to be held in order to save my individual soul. It is also an interpretation of (and a distinct way of understanding) everything in the world. It brings a distinct perspective on human nature, right and wrong,

justice, beauty, and character. If you believe the universe happened by accident—as opposed to being created by a loving, redeeming God—then you will have to have a different view of every one of these fundamental issues. And these issues determine how you live your daily life, and how you do and think about your work.

The fact is that all work must be done out of some worldview. For example, if you believe that this world is all there is, and therefore all moral values are relative and there is no afterlife, this understanding will have an effect on how you do your work.

The problem comes for Christians when they enter a work-world that is operating according to different worldviews. The temptation for Christians is to simply plunge into workplaces dominated by these worldviews and conduct their working lives in accordance with the reigning paradigms, rather than thinking out the implications of the gospel for how they can do their work with Christian distinctiveness.

The Bible tells us that Jesus has to be Lord of every area of life, not just of our private lives. The gospel should shape and affect the motives, manner, and methods with which we carry out every task in life, including our work. God matters to our work.

4. Besides telling coworkers about Christ, what does it mean to “bring the gospel into your work”? Brainstorm some ways that you can work with Christian distinctiveness in your workplace.

To be a Christian in your workplace means much more than just being honest, or not sleeping with your coworkers. It even means more than personal witnessing and holding a Bible study at your place of work. Rather, it means thinking out the implications of the gospel and God’s kingship for your entire work-life.

Below is just one list of possible implications and applications. As Christians we will be:

- Working with more job satisfaction, because our job is not an idol.
- Exhibiting honesty and integrity in our work, and not cutting corners to benefit ourselves at the expense of other employees, customers, or the community.
- Listening, building community, being welcoming, being humble in our workplace.

- Working with a commitment to delayed gratification, and showing self-control and discipline in our work. We will be looking to long-term benefits for all, not just short-term benefits for ourselves.
- Seeking jobs that promote the common good and are congruent with our gifts, not just to make money.
- Displaying attitudes toward economic justice. We will not be assessing persons in pure economic terms or paying people as little as the market will bear. Our desire will be to promote the general welfare of workers, so they flourish not only professionally but personally.
- Being honest in advertising and promotion. This is not only honesty in presenting ourselves, but seeking to cater to the best desires in customers, not the worst.
- Producing products that benefit people and communities. Our desire will be to help the company's broader community and neighborhood flourish.
- Neither overworking nor underworking.

5. In Matthew 11, Jesus promises to “give us rest” (v. 28). How can the deep rest Jesus gives us in the gospel change our relationship to our work?

To get a deeper picture of what happens to our work in Christ, look at Matthew 11:28–30. When Jesus calls all people to himself, he says that he knows we are “weary and burdened,” and that we need “rest” (v. 28). In verse 30 he offers his cure: a “burden” and even a “yoke”! This was, of course, the harness put on a beast of burden, so it was a symbol of slavery, grinding work, and toil. How could a yoke be a solution to the problem of deep weariness?

Jesus says that it is *his* yoke and *his* burden—that these are the only yoke and burden that are “light.” Why? “For I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (v. 29).

Jesus directly claims that he is the only “boss” who will not drive you into the ground. Only when we have an identity, meaning, and significance based in Jesus—something beyond our work—will we find deep rest for our souls, a rest that will abide with us in our work. Why? Only Jesus offers us a finished work to rest in. Remember, a Christian is not just someone who admires Jesus, emulates Jesus, or obeys Jesus. A Christian is someone who rests in Jesus' finished work instead of his or her own.

We must have this deep spiritual rest, or else we will experience a weariness that vacations can't cure. You won't be able to relax, even when you are supposed to be resting. Many people put enormous pressure on work to be satisfying, profitable, and fulfilling. Only if we get the deep rest of the gospel will we be able to live a life happily in the 99 percent of the world's jobs that are neither very fulfilling nor very lucrative.

Learn to see the signs of a deeper weariness that time off and vacation are not healing. Ask yourself these questions:

- Am I making work too important—an idol?
- Am I making money, status, or control (as a means to freedom, leisure/pleasure, or just significance) too important—an idol?
- Am I doing work that I am not gifted/able to do? Why did I take this job?
- Are sins in others (such as greed, pride, bitterness, fear) making this particular work environment crushing and probably not fixable? Do I need a new job?

6. “Do you see your workplace as a place to share the gospel as well as a place to let the gospel shape how you work”? What can you bring into your profession that is uniquely helpful?

Discuss with your group.

[The Session 7 Home Study is a project. Read the introduction of the Home Study in advance to help you prepare to lead your group through this project.]

[Pray for your group.]

Notes for Leaders

[Your Notes]

¹ J. Shulevitz, “Bring Back the Sabbath” *New York Times Magazine* (March 2, 2003).

Session 7 Justice: A People For Others



[*Complete the Session 7 Home Study.*]

Bible Study Notes For Leaders

[Read Luke 10:25–37 and then work through the questions and notes below ahead of time to help you prepare to lead your group. The notes beneath the questions are not intended as answers to be read aloud. They are notes to help you facilitate the discussion.]

1. On the basis of Jesus' teaching, who is our neighbor?

In effect, the law expert was saying to Jesus, “Come on, now. Be reasonable! You don't mean we have to love everyone like this, do you? Who is my neighbor?”

Jesus responded by making a Samaritan and a Jew the two main characters in his parable. They were extreme enemies, yet the Samaritan gave aid in spite of the following facts:

- It was extremely dangerous for the Samaritan to stop on a desolate road infested with robbers.
- It was very expensive for the Samaritan to give the innkeeper a promise to pay whatever it might cost to care for the man until he recovered.

Jesus' answer is clear and devastating; it demolishes any limitations put on our mercy. We are to help people of other races and religions, even from groups we have a historical reason to distrust. We are to help, even when it is risky and costly to us.

In summary, we are to love in word and deed anyone we find in need, anyone we find in the road. They are our neighbors.

2. Shouldn't we help members of our own family and of our own Christian community first?

It is certainly natural that our involvement would be much deeper with family and usually with other Christians in our community (Gal. 6:10), but Jesus forbids us from being exclusive. The parable shows a priest and a Levite trying to get to the other side of the road from the needy man. They avoid walking directly over him physically, but obviously they are guilty of neglect, because he is in their road, even though they try to create the illusion that he is not. In the same way, everyone else where we live is “in our road.” If we don't learn about or get involved in any way with the needs of others, we are like the priest and the Levite in the parable.

3. How does Jesus illustrate what the true motive should be for showing mercy to our neighbor?

Remember, Jesus told this story to a Jewish man, so it was a remarkable twist when he put the Jewish man in the parable.

What if the parable had gone like this? “A Samaritan was beaten up and left half dead in a road. A man came along and saw him and had compassion and ministered to him.” The hearer would have said, “How ridiculous! I would never do such a thing! Samaritans hate us and we hate them. They are enemies.”

Instead, Jesus put the hearer in the road as the victim, so the parable goes like this: “Imagine if *you* were beaten up and left half dead on the road. What if your only hope was to get help from someone who not only did not owe you any help but who actually owed you the opposite. What if your only hope was to get free grace from someone who had every reason to trample you?”

Notice, when Jesus asked who the neighbor was, the law expert admitted it was the “one who had mercy on him” (vv. 36–37). The man realized that, of course, he would want mercy from even an enemy.

Jesus then said to him, “Go and do likewise” (v. 37). Jesus is saying, “If you see that you have been saved by grace, then your attitude toward others will be one of compassion.” If you see that you have been saved graciously by someone who owes you the opposite, then you will show grace to others.

4. The following quotes are cited by Rodney Stark, a historian and sociologist who studied the reasons why Christianity spread in the Roman Empire. The Greco-Roman world was struck by several huge plagues or epidemics. Stark traces how the Christians’ reaction to the plagues differed dramatically from that of those who maintained faith in traditional, polytheistic paganism.

The impious Galileans [Christians] support not only their poor, but ours as well, everyone can see that our people lack aid from us.

Roman Emperor Julian (around 360 AD)¹

[During the great epidemic] most of our brother Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves ... Heedless of danger,

they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ ... Many, in nursing and curing others, transferred their death to themselves and died in their stead ... The [pagans] behaved in the very opposite way. At the first onset of the disease, they pushed the sufferers away and fled even from their dearest, throwing them into the roads before they were dead.

Dionysius, Bishop of Alexandria (around 260 AD)²

Having read these quotes, what is the effect of unselfish service on others? Have you found this to be true in your own experience? Give examples.

In this particular case, because Christians had a strong assurance of salvation and a pattern of self-giving service in Christ's sacrifice on the cross, they did not abandon the sick or flee the cities but cared for the sick, both Christian and pagan. Many of the survivors owed their lives to the Christian church. The esteem of the church in the culture in general increased, and people listened to the gospel message as a result.

The gospel is the good news that we are forgiven by God's grace, and that the whole world will one day be renewed by God's grace. That is why deeds that alleviate suffering are so integral to the declaration of the gospel. In one sense, showing mercy to our neighbor is a result of the gospel, because as converted people we live like the one who saved us. In another sense, showing mercy to our neighbor is itself a gospel proclamation. It preaches the gospel through our actions.

[Watch the video for Session 7 to help you prepare to lead your group through the discussion that follows.]

Discussion Questions Notes For Leaders

[After watching the video with your group, use these questions to encourage discussion. The notes beneath the questions are not intended as answers to be read aloud. They are notes to help you facilitate the discussion.]

[You do not need to complete all the questions. Depending on the dynamic of the group and your time limit, you may find it helpful to choose in advance the questions that will be of most value to your group and start with those.]

1. Was there anything from the video that was new to you, or had an effect on you? Did you hear anything that raised more questions in your mind?

Discuss with your group.

2. “*Shalom* means total flourishing in absolutely every dimension: physically, relationally, socially, and spiritually.” In what practical ways can you and your group “resolve to have shalom felt everywhere ... and begin to reweave the broken fabric of creation”? What can you as a group (or a church) bring into your neighborhood that is uniquely helpful?

The fabric of creation has been eaten away by sin in every aspect. Because of sin, our bodies, our relationships, and our societies are always breaking down and pulling apart rather than cohering in harmony and unity. For example:

Slavery to personal idols

- Anything more important than Christ for happiness (e.g., career or family) becomes our master.
- *Shalom* means allowing Jesus, as Savior and Lord, to liberate us from the power of false masters (e.g., from overwork, excessive anxiety over children, and so on.)

Slavery to cultural idols

- Every field of human endeavor puts forth something other than God—financial profit, individual rights or happiness, human reason, group power—as the ultimate value and goal.
- *Shalom* means doing our work with kingdom values, so it will be distinctive.

Slavery to social idols

- The world attaches high value to power, comfort, success, and recognition.
- God's kingdom is won not through strength and accomplishment, however, but through the cross. It is entered not by the strong, but by those who admit their weakness and need for grace. This completely changes our attitude toward the poor, the powerless, and the marginal. Shalom means working toward peace and social justice.

3. Benjamin Fernando from Sri Lanka writes,

There is no such thing as a separate individual gospel and a separate social gospel. There is only one gospel—a redeemed man in a reformed society ... Social problems assume greater importance in Christianity than in Buddhism or Hinduism. The theory of Karma and rebirth gives a fairly reasonable explanation for social inequalities of this life which on the one hand are consequences of the previous life and on the other hand can be compensated for in the next life. But to a Christian there is only one earthly life and so social problems have to be dealt with now or never.³

Do you agree with his assessment that “social problems have to be dealt with now or never”? Why or why not?

Discuss with your group. This question is intended to provoke discussion.

4. The Bible reveals at least three causal factors for poverty: injustice and oppression; circumstantial calamity; and personal failure. Do you agree? Can you give examples of these from the Bible or from your own experience?

The biblical Wisdom Literature provides a remarkably balanced and nuanced view of the root causes of poverty.

- **Injustice and oppression:** This refers to any unjust social condition or treatment that keeps a person in poverty. Examples include social systems weighted in favor of the powerful (Lev. 19:15), high-interest loans (Ex. 22:25–27).
- **Circumstantial calamity:** This refers to any natural disaster or circumstance that brings or keeps a person in poverty. The Bible is filled with examples, such as the famine in Genesis 47.

- Personal failure: Poverty can also be caused by one's own personal sins and failures, such as indolence (Prov. 6:6–11) and other problems with self-discipline (Prov. 23:21).

These three factors are often intertwined. They do not usually produce separate categories of poverty except in acute situations, such as a hurricane that leaves people homeless and in need of immediate, short-term, material care. Rather, the three factors are usually interactively present.

On the one hand, the Bible strongly endorses hard work and frugality—qualities that virtually always lead to some degree of prosperity. Also, it promotes and recognizes the place of private ownership of property and provides many safeguards against theft.

On the other hand, the Bible strongly promotes relative economic equality in society. Hard work does not necessarily lead to material prosperity. Relative equality is sought partly through individual generosity, but not exclusively. The gleaning laws and the Sabbath and Jubilee years were social structures that limited profit-taking and income production.

The Old Testament is full of prophetic denunciations against social injustice to the poor. Amos 5:11–12 says, “You trample on the poor and force him to give you grain. Therefore, though you have built stone mansions, you will not live in them; though you have planted lush vineyards, you will not drink their wine. For I know how many are your offenses and how great your sins. You oppress the righteous and take bribes and you deprive the poor of justice in the courts.” Ezekiel 22:29 says, “The people of the land practice extortion and commit robbery; they oppress the poor and needy and mistreat the alien, denying them justice.”

Unlike many ancient cultures and some modern philosophies, the Bible does not see being poor as a curse from God; yet poverty and material deprivation are in no way glamorized, seen as an intrinsic good, or considered something to simply be accepted. Unlike many ancient cultures and some modern philosophies, the Bible does not see being wealthy as necessarily a blessing from God. It can be an enormous spiritual trap; yet rich people are in no way demonized or seen as intrinsically oppressive. No one is saved or blessed simply because of being materially poor, nor is anyone condemned simply because of being materially rich.

5. “It’s natural to want to help people who are like you, who like you, and

who you like.” What would it mean for you, specifically, to help people who are not like you, who do not like you, and who you do not like?

God tells Israel, “The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the LORD your God” (Lev. 19:34). The Israelites had been “aliens” and oppressed slaves in Egypt, without the ability to free themselves—God liberated them by his grace and power. Now they are to treat all people who have less power or fewer assets than they do as their neighbors, doing love, justice, and mercy to them. The basis for “doing justice,” then, is salvation by grace. Christians may disagree about the particular political approach to the problems of injustice and poverty, but all Christians must be characterized by their passion for justice, and by their personal commitment to ameliorate injustice through personal giving, sacrifice, and generosity.

6. Jonathan Edwards once was preaching on how important it was to give to the poor. Someone later objected, “I can’t afford to give to the poor.” Edwards responded with an application of Galatians 6:2.

In many cases, we may, by the rules of the gospel, be obliged to give to others, when we cannot do it without suffering ourselves ... If our neighbor’s difficulties and necessities be much greater than our own, and we see that he is not like to be otherwise relieved, we should be willing to suffer with him, and to take part of his burden on ourselves; else how is that rule of bearing one another’s burdens fulfilled? If we are never obliged to relieve others’ burdens, but when we can do it without burdening ourselves, then how do we bear our neighbor’s burdens, when we bear no burden at all?⁴

Do you agree that we are not only to help others with our excess time, money, and emotional resources, but that we are to give until it burdens us? What will this mean for you and your group?

Only when we give until it burdens us are we truly bearing one another’s burdens. Discuss what it means in your context to help not only with your excess time, money, and emotional resources, but until it burdens you. Be practical.

[Pray for your group.]

Notes for Leaders

- 1 Quoted in Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (San Francisco: Harper, 1997), 84.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 82–83.
- 3 Benjamin E. Fernando, “The Evangel and Social Upheaval (part 2)”, in *Christ Seeks Asia*, ed. W.S. Mooneyham (Charlestown, Ind.: Rock House, 1969), 118–119.
- 4 Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1834), Volume 2, 171.

Session 8 Eternity: The World That Is To Come



[*Complete the Session 8 Home Study.*]

Bible Study Notes For Leaders

[Read Isaiah 60:15–22 and then work through the questions and notes below ahead of time to help you prepare to lead your group. The notes beneath the questions are not intended as answers to be read aloud. They are notes to help you facilitate the discussion.]

1. What will heaven be like according to Isaiah’s description in verses 17–21?

How does this compare with the description in Revelation 21:1–4, 22–27?

- v. 17 The city will be made of metal—gold, silver, bronze, and iron—which implies security and stability. In Revelation the city is described as being made of precious gems (Rev. 21:18–21) which also implies permanence.
- vv. 17–18 There will be peace and righteousness. There will be no violence or ruin or destruction. Revelation 21:4 takes up this theme also.
- vv. 19–20 The sun and moon will not be necessary because God’s presence in the city is all the light needed. This is also what is described in Revelation 21:23.

2. How can the knowledge that there will be no violence or destruction in the future kingdom help us, and those we come into contact with, to cope with the violence and destruction we experience around us?

Discuss with your group.

3. God is described in a variety of ways and given a variety of titles in this passage. What do we learn about God and what does it mean for our relationship with him?

- v. 16 “the Lord”
- v. 16 “your Savior”
- v. 16 “your Redeemer”
- v. 16 “the Mighty One of Jacob”
- v. 19 “your everlasting light”
- v. 19 “your God will be your glory”

This is a good time to review some of the things you have learned about God through this course.

In his commentary on this passage of Isaiah, John Oswalt writes: “Throughout

Israel's history, God's purpose was that Israel should know him. This is one of the most moving notes in biblical theology: the transcendent Creator, the only self-existent Being in the universe, wants his creatures to know him. Why? Because only through the knowledge of him is there any hope of our reaching the possibilities for which we were created. Thus in the Exodus God says that it is all in order that they may know him. Thus it was also in the establishment of Israel in the promised land, in the return from exile, in the coming of the Messiah, and now here in the culmination of all things at the end of the age. What is it that God's activity on behalf of his people will teach? That he is the Savior, the Redeemer! All creation shouts of its Creator, of his beauty, his order, his power, and his truth. But what of God when his creatures have corrupted their way and turned his beauty to ugliness, his order to chaos, his power to oppression, and his truth to lies? Will he abandon us to our well-deserved fates? No, he will not. God is not only the Creator—he is the Savior ... God, the Mighty One of Jacob ... reaches out to us and offers us the means in the Servant-Messiah of transcending sin, failure, guilt, and shame.”¹

4. Richard Mouw writes:

My own hunch is that God has provided us with a rich storehouse of diverse images of the afterlife, all of them hints in the direction of something that is beyond our present comprehension, so that we can be free to draw on one or another of them as a particular situation in our life may require.²

**In what situations might we draw on the description of heaven in Isaiah 60?
What other descriptions of eternity have you drawn on in the past and why?**

Discuss with your group.

[Read Isaiah 60:1–14 and watch the video for Session 8 to help you prepare to lead your group through the discussion that follows.]

Discussion Questions Notes For Leaders

[After watching the video with your group, use these questions to encourage discussion. The notes beneath the questions are not intended as answers to be read aloud. They are notes to help you facilitate the discussion.]

[You do not need to complete all the questions. Depending on the dynamic of the group and your time limit, you may find it helpful to choose in advance the questions that will be of most value to your group and start with those.]

1. Was there anything from the video that was new to you, or had an effect on you? Did you hear anything that raised more questions in your mind?

Discuss with your group.

2. Isaiah 60 describes a vision of the New Jerusalem as incorporating the cultural achievements of all people and all nations. What aspects of your work do you think might be incorporated into this final kingdom? How does this affect your understanding of your work?

This question will be easier to answer for some industries, for example, health care/medicine, law/justice, education, the arts, and other service-oriented industries. People may find more difficulty answering for fields including finance, advertising, entertainment, etc.

However, when we recognize that the vision of the New Jerusalem includes the full-orbed idea of human flourishing, we can see that economic growth and wealth are part of this vision. Similarly, advertising and entertainment integrate beauty, longing, and joy with what we call “popular culture.” These things will be enjoyed as an appropriate way to honor the work of God’s new creation (and all the human cultural achievements integrated therein).

3. The community described here is one of perfectly restored shalom. What are some tangible ways that the church can be a better foretaste of that community?

Examples include justice and mercy ministries, radical commitment to reconciliation with one another, forgiveness, unity, sharing of wealth and power, fighting disease and hunger and providing help for the sick and physically afflicted, doing our jobs with excellence, with integrity, with love, and with an eye to helping

others around us, etc.

This is a chance to review all that has been learned in the last seven sessions.

4. What are some things that are competing with God as your “glory” and your “everlasting light”? What do you think would change if God were your only glory and everlasting light?

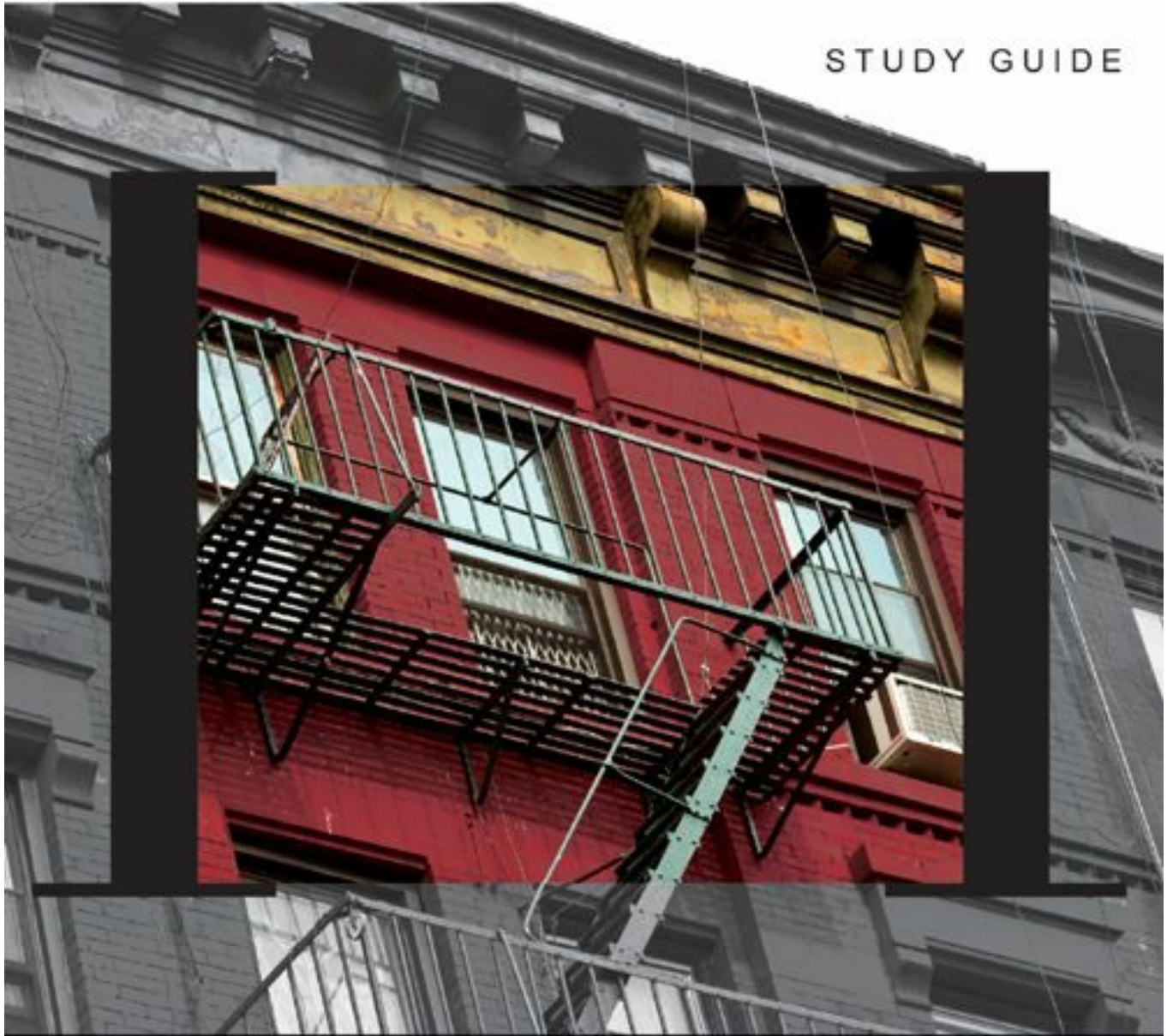
Discuss with your group.

5. Now that you have completed the *Gospel in Life* course, take a few minutes to look back through your notes and then share with the group one thing that changed or affected you, and explain why. Pray about these discoveries and realizations during your time of prayer together.

Write down people’s answers so that you can pray about them. Encourage your group to do the same.

[*Pray for your group.*]

STUDY GUIDE



gospelⁱⁿlife

Grace Changes Everything

EIGHT SESSIONS

TIMOTHY KELLER