

SMALL GROUP RESOURCE

G O S P E L

identity

DISCOVERING
WHO YOU
REALLY ARE

SERGE

“Many Christian resources focus either on biblical study to the neglect of deep personal life transformation or on life application based on a very flattened understanding of the gospel. World Harvest has drawn upon their history of rich gospel-based training to produce a series that targets real-life transformation grounded in a robust, grace-based theology. Only a resource saturated in the gospel can lead to the kind of meaningful life change promised to us in the Bible, and I am thrilled to see such a resource now available.”

Rev. David H. Kim, Director of the Gotham Initiative, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, NYC

“I love the series of small group resources, *Gospel Identity*, *Gospel Growth*, and *Gospel Love*. They are theologically rich, but not stuffy; practical, but not pragmatic. They are life-transforming resources that will be used to transform communities on a mission with the gospel.”

Scott Thomas, Pastor of Pastoral Development, The Journey Church

“*Gospel Identity* is a rich, interactive analysis of our deepest self in relation to the gospel. The lessons are weighty and deep because the writers have a panoramic and majestic view of the gospel. Complex gospel content is brought into focus through several helpful charts and diagrams, which are obviously the fruit of years of gospel discipleship. This is not just gospel information; this is deep gospel application that is practical and specific, so that gospel encouragement translates into a lifestyle of witness and love. The participant is constantly encouraged toward gospel relationship with others and each section leads into individual and group prayer. The issue is identity, but the study doesn’t stop at introspection. Gospel renewal leads to sharing the radical news of our union with Christ by faith and caring for those around us.”

John Smed, Director, Prayer Current Ministries

“This study brings a powerful experience of gospel truth and a personal relationship with Jesus and all those that he has placed in your life. Using biblical truths, written to open the eyes of all hearts to sins, and full of challenges by the Holy Spirit to change and grow, this is the study you need. User-friendly, even for a first time leader, it is progressive, time-sensitive, and will invite the most timid participant into heart application. I highly recommend this to all who are committed to growing closer to God and being a gospel tool to help others.”

Nancy Puryear, Women’s ministry director (more than eleven years), Christ Community Church; cross-cultural counselor

“God used Jack Miller to help Christians, and pastors especially, to recover the gospel of Jesus Christ as the functional core of the Christian faith. Jack’s

famous line, ‘Cheer up, you’re worse off than you think,’ re-opened the door to many of us with an invitation to drop the pretense of a good life and to admit and delight in our continuing, desperate need for Jesus. As a church planter and trainer of church planters, I have often wished for a concise series of Bible studies that would help churches to not only know this gospel of grace, but to experience it as well. That’s precisely what this series of gospel studies offers. It is a great way to biblically and relationally ground Christians in the gospel of Jesus Christ, and I heartily recommend it.”

John F. Thomas, PhD, Director of Global Training, Redeemer City to City

“I’m probably the most ‘religious’ person you know. I make my living teaching religious students (in seminary) to be more religious, doing religious broadcasts, writing religious books, and preaching religious sermons. It’s very easy to lose the ‘main thing’ about the Christian faith in a religious morass. These studies remind me that it’s all about Jesus, and Jesus is all about the Good News (the gospel). They are refreshing, informative, and life changing. In fact, these studies are like a refreshing drink of cold, pure water to a thirsty man. Read and use these books from World Harvest Mission and get out of the way as you listen to the laughter and relief of the redeemed.”

Steve Brown, Key Life radio broadcaster; author of *Three Free Sins: God Isn’t Mad at You*

“*Gospel Identity* is unique in that it works at the very heart of our faith. It is a marriage course, a discipleship course, and a Bible study, but it is so much more. It is all about getting the central passion of Christianity—the cross of Jesus Christ—at the center of your life. And not just your thinking life, but your doing and experiencing life. So it is good theology and good practice combined. If you get the cross right, then everything else works.”

Paul Miller, Director of SeeJesus (www.seeJesus.net); author of *A Praying Life*

“I’ve dated a lot of different curriculum in the past, but there’s very little worth taking home to meet Mom. Too often, the writing is too high (too theoretical—have you actually met a sinner before?), too emotive (talk to my head and my heart!), or too clunky (really? can I accomplish this in a week—much less an evening?). WHM’s new Gospel Series small group materials are rifle-ready for the foot soldier in the church to use without a lot of training, and they seem to have been written by real sinners/strugglers for fellow sinners/strugglers. Thanks, WHM, for something I can actually use!”

Geoff Bradford, Pastor, Christ the King Presbyterian Church, Raleigh, NC

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World Harvest Mission



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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
ABOUT THE SESSIONS	5
SESSION 1: FIRST, THE BAD NEWS	9
SESSION 2: ... AND NOW, THE GOOD NEWS	19
SESSION 3: GOD MAKES IT RIGHT	25
SESSION 4: JOIN THE FAMILY	33
SESSION 5: A NEW LIFE IN CHRIST	41
SESSION 6: SINNERS IN THE HANDS OF A LOVING GOD ..	51
SESSION 7: YOU ARE WHAT YOU WORSHIP	61
SESSION 8: IT'S ALL (NO LONGER) ABOUT ME	73
SESSION 9: AM I <i>REALLY</i> A NEW CREATION?	83
SESSION 10: GROW FORWARD—AND OUTWARD	93
LEADER'S GUIDE	103

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to *Gospel Identity: Discovering Who You Really Are!* This study is designed to help you discover who you already are in Jesus and how to live your new identity in your life, relationships, and ministry.

Gospel Identity, the first book in the “Gospel Transformation” series, focuses on the transformation of Christians by the power of the gospel. Before we get to that good news, we introduce this study by looking at the bad news that we are a fallen people who continue to justify ourselves apart from Jesus—which only serves to illustrate how thoroughly we *do* need Jesus. From there we’ll examine the blessings we’ve been given through our new identity and new life in Jesus—justification, adoption, unity with Christ—how that helps us overcome our self-centeredness and idolatry, and how it pushes us outward so others can see and experience that new life in Jesus.

As you work through *Gospel Identity* as well as the other two books in the “Gospel Transformation” series—*Gospel Growth: Becoming a Faith-Filled Person* and *Gospel Love: Grace, Relationships, and Everything That Gets in the Way*—you’ll be encouraged to lead a life of greater faith, repentance, and love.

How does “gospel transformation” occur? How does it relate to life? What *are* the essentials of the Christian life, and how do they change us? That’s what this series is all about. Let’s summarize it in four foundational points that we’ll return to again and again.

1. Cheer up! The gospel is far greater than you can imagine! The gospel of Jesus Christ—and his power to transform our lives and relationships, communities, and ultimately, the nations—is the best news we will ever hear. It gives us a new identity not based on race, social class, gender, theology, or a system of rules and regulations, but on faith in Jesus—and it’s an identity that defines every aspect of our lives. Because of this, we no

longer have to hide from our sin and pretend that we have it all together. We now have a new way to live and relate to God and others every day. The good news is not only relevant to us when we first believe, but it continues to work in us and through us as we continue to believe and visibly expresses itself in love (Galatians 5:6).

2. Cheer up! You are worse than you think! One of the great hindrances to Christian growth, healthy relationships, and strong communities is a life of pretense. We pretend that we don't struggle with self-righteous attitudes, foul tempers, nagging anxieties, lustful looks, controlling and critical hearts, or a multitude of sins. We generally believe that we are better than other people. Part of the good news is that God knows all this—knows *us*—already, and he wants to be the one who changes us. Because our sin blocks our intimacy with God and others, we need God's Spirit to show us our many fears and offensive ways, and we need the insights of others to encourage us and speak into our lives.

Our first two points work together in a cyclical fashion. On the one hand, none of us wants to look at our sin without knowing the good news of forgiveness and deliverance from it. On the other hand, our view of the gospel is severely limited if we do not continually see the depths of our sin. The gospel cannot soak deeply into us unless it addresses our ongoing need for it. And that brings us to the third point.

3. Cheer up! God's Spirit works in your weakness! We not only have a new identity, but we have been given the Spirit who is more than sufficient to lead, guide, and empower us in our new life. The power that raised Jesus from the dead is at work in our new lives as well (Ephesians 1:19–20). Nevertheless, the power of the Spirit does not work automatically, but through repentant, obedient faith. Furthermore, this power is made evident through our weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9; 13:4). Along with Paul, we can delight in our weakness, for then we are strong, and God is glorified. The result is a wonderful freedom to forget about ourselves and stop wondering whether we have enough ability—we don't. But we can rejoice in the knowledge that God uses and empowers the weak. Therefore we have the hope discussed in point four.

4. Cheer up! God's kingdom is more wonderful than you can imagine!

The kingdom of God is the new and final age that began with Jesus' coming. It is the age of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit (Romans 14:17). The kingdom of God is about the renewing of all things, and God has made us a part of this great story of salvation. This kingdom is about the reconciliation of relationships, about the restoration of justice and equality, about freedom from every lord except Jesus, about forgiveness, and about the defeat of Satan. It is about compassion for the poor and powerless, about helping those who are marginalized and rejected by society, and about using our gifts and resources for the advancement of others. It is about new communities and the transformation of society and culture. For Paul, to preach the gospel is to preach the kingdom, and therefore to preach the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:24–27).

The goal of each study, therefore, is not simply to master the content, but to allow the gospel to master you and your group more fully. Knowledge is like bread—unless it is digested, it will go stale. The content of this course needs to be chewed, digested, and assimilated, so that true *spiritual* growth can occur. It's easy to slip into the routine of just completing the lesson, but don't. Our ultimate goal here is love—love rooted in a growing faith in Jesus, which leads to more love (Galatians 5:6).

Our prayer is that through your time together your love for Jesus—and the people God brings into your life—will grow deeper daily. May God bless and encourage your group as you work together through this study!

ABOUT THE SESSIONS

The sessions in this study are built to take 75 minutes apiece. They've been built so there's plenty of good content, but also plenty of room for discussion. There are suggested times for each section, but again do what you need to as a group—the goal isn't to master the content, but to allow the gospel to master you and your group.

Sessions follow a logical order, so be sure to cover them in the sequence given. Often, one session builds on what has been previously covered in the session or sessions before it. Furthermore, each session follows its own sequence so that your group can get the most impact from it. Each time you get together, you can expect to see the following:

Overview—This introduction of the session includes the one point to take away from the session. Reading it as part of your group time is optional, but by stating the focus up front everyone knows what's coming.

Opening the Discussion—In this brief opening section, take time to unwind and transition from your previous environment (home, work, or some other place) and into the theme of the session. The questions here are intended to help the entire group interact. They also help set up what comes later in the session. And maybe, because you were so busy having a good time discussing a “light” question, you won't even realize you've *already* gotten down to business.

Opening the Word—This is the heart of each session, and typically the longest section. You'll spend some serious time digging into God's Word and discovering its meaning in ways you hadn't before. More importantly, you'll discover how the information you're studying applies to your life right now, and what God wants to do with it.

Opening Your Life—In this closing section you’ll move from *understanding how* the Bible applies to your life to actually *applying* it. At the end of each session you will break into smaller groups or pairs to share how you will apply today’s lesson and commit to following up with each other during the week. This way everyone’s involved, engaged, and committed to one another. The lesson will usually give some suggestions for its application, but if God’s telling you to do something else, *go for it!*

In short, in each session you’ll be challenged to share, to think, and to act. And as you do, gospel transformation will be more than just the title of a Bible study series. It will be a reality you live every day.

FOR LEADERS

We strongly suggest working through each session on your own first, prior to your group time. Your prep time shouldn’t require more than one-half hour, but take as much time as you need. Your goal is the same your group’s—to grow in faith, repentance, and obedience. As you review the material, honestly answer each question. Ask the Spirit to reveal your own heart, and be prepared to share what the Spirit reveals with the group, as long as it’s appropriate. Your own transparency and vulnerability will open the door for others.

You’ll notice that there are times during the session (especially during “Opening Your Life”) when we suggest getting into pairs or smaller groups. Feel free to do this at other times during the session when we haven’t explicitly told you to do so. It’s a great way to make sure everyone remains engaged with the material and with each other, and it frees people to share about matters they may not want to discuss with the entire group.

Also, in the back of the book are suggested answers and reflections relating to each session’s questions. Don’t use this section as a crutch or a shortcut. Wrestle with each question and passage on your own and as a

group. Figure out its meaning for yourselves. Then, if you like, look in back to add further insight to your discussion time.

Finally, here are some expectations we encourage you to have for your group members, and to share openly with them:

1. **Expect to be challenged.** The answers will not come quickly or easily. If they do, we haven't done our job properly. As you work through each question, expect that it will take some time, thought, and soul-searching to complete each session.
2. **Expect the Holy Spirit** to be the one ultimately responsible for the growth of your group, and for the change in each person's life—including your own. Relax and trust him.
3. **Expect your group time together** to include an open, give-and-take discussion of each session's content and questions. Also expect times of prayer at each meeting. In fact, plan for them.
4. **Expect struggle.** Don't be surprised to find in your group a mixture of enthusiasm, hope, and honesty along with indifference, anxiety, skepticism, and covering up. We are all people who need Jesus every day, so expect your group to be made up of people who wrestle with sin and have problems—just like you!
5. **Expect to be a leader** who desires to serve, but who needs Jesus as much as the rest of the group. No leader should be put on a pedestal or be expected to have the right answers. Give yourself the freedom to share openly about your own weaknesses, struggles, and sins. Covet your group's prayers.
6. **Expect confidentiality,** and be prepared to ask the group to make that commitment with you. Anything personal must be kept in confidence and never shared with others outside the group. Gossip will quickly destroy a group.

You are ready to begin. May God bless your group's journey together!

FIRST, THE BAD NEWS . . .

OVERVIEW

In this session we'll explore how sin has broken us and the world we live in. Our struggles with identity start with our struggles with sin.

In this broken world, we will not—*cannot*—embrace the beauty and glory of the good news of Jesus Christ until we understand our own deep need and our sin. We are much like the rich young ruler (Matthew 19:16–22); we try to justify ourselves to Jesus and make our identity about what we *do*—until Jesus confronts us with that one area that clearly exposes us for what we *are*.

Therefore, we'll also look closely at our well-developed capacity for self-justification. We may not struggle with drugs or cheating the IRS, but we all justify ourselves as easily and automatically as we breathe. And until we face our sin rather than evade it, we will not give Jesus the room he needs to work in our lives. We cannot fully accept our new identity in Christ until we realize how deep our old identity goes.

Even as Christians, when we forget that we are sinners, we forget the gospel, and thus we short-circuit our ability to share it with the world around us that so desperately needs it. So as we confront the sin that pervades this world, let the battle begin within us.

10
MINUTES

OPENING THE DISCUSSION

Get into groups of three or four. Encourage people to get with others they'd like to know better, rather than those they already know well. Then, give groups five minutes to do the following:

1. Take a minute each to introduce yourselves to your group. There's one catch: you can't talk about what you *do*. No mention of jobs, hobbies, volunteer work—any kind of accomplishment or activity. So good luck—and go!

Allow up to five minutes, and then gather everyone back together. If this is your first time together as a group, ask *everyone* to introduce themselves and to take a few moments to share what they're hoping to get out of this study. Then discuss the following question:

2. Think about our opening activity. How does telling people what you do help them understand who you really are? How doesn't it help?

Leaders: The sections in *italics* are for you, to help you and your group transition from one part of the session to the next. Read them verbatim, put what's here in your own words, or just move on to the next section—whatever works best for you and your group.

*When did our identity become so wrapped up in **our** accomplishments, **our** actions, **our** words? When did what we do and what we say become more important to us, and to others, than who we are in Christ? The answer extends much further back in time than you might think.*

*Since the Garden of Eden, history has been marked by all people insisting on their way over God's—by justifying themselves apart from God. And our lives are lived out in the results of that rebellion every day. We all are broken people living in a broken world. Not **above** it—living **in** it. We need a savior and a new identity in Christ as desperately as the people around us. So let's start our time together by first exploring our broken world.*

50
MINUTES

OPENING THE WORD

Read Romans 8:18–22, then discuss these questions:

3. What evidence of “suffering” and “frustration” do you see around you? Come up with personal examples as well as “global” ones.

4. How do you normally respond to suffering or frustration? Confront, ignore, run the other way, complain but do nothing, something else? Explain.

Life's suffering and pressures can come from any direction, good or bad—family, friends, work, possessions, our health, our flesh, from Satan and the world—and can come at any time.

Have volunteers read 1 Kings 10:23–27; 11:1–4. Then discuss the following:

5. How do Solomon's blessings open the door for his sin?

6. What do you think your life would be like if you could go anywhere, or do or buy anything? Do you think you could handle both the blessings and the responsibility that comes with them? Explain.

Sometimes even the good things in our lives lead to suffering. When they do, it reveals something we don't like to hear—that the problem isn't only because of outside sin or influences, however much we're truly damaged by them. The problem is also us. And sometimes we'll do and say just about anything to avoid that truth.

Read Luke 10:25–29 and Revelation 3:1–3, and then discuss the following questions:

7. What does it mean to justify yourself, based on these passages and your own experience? Why do we do it?

8. What are the consequences of justifying ourselves rather than leaving it to God—for ourselves and others around us?

9. Look at the list in the table titled, “Excuses: How to be right and look good.” Which of these excuses do you find yourself using to justify your actions? What are you really saying about yourself, and others, when you make these excuses?

Figure 1.1

*Excuses: how to be right
and look good*

- ▶ "I'm just weak."
(It's not really my fault.)
- ▶ "I was just being honest."
(Can't you handle the truth?)
- ▶ "I didn't mean to do it."
(I didn't mean to get caught.)
- ▶ "It made me so angry."
(I've been treated unfairly.)
- ▶ "I misunderstood you."
(You're not as crazy as I thought!)
- ▶ "I'm just saying what I feel."
(There's nothing wrong with my feelings.)
- ▶ "My family was like that."
(You think I'm bad, you should meet my)
- ▶ "I'm having a bad day/week."
(I deserve better.)
- ▶ "I'm tired . . . it's hot today!"
(I deserve a break.)
- ▶ "I'm sorry, but you"
(It's really your fault.)
- ▶ "I make mistakes."
(Don't we all?)
- ▶ "I was only kidding."
(Didn't you get the joke?)
- ▶ "You misunderstood me."
(I'm not as bad as that.)
- ▶ "Nobody is perfect."
(including you.)
- ▶ "That's just who I am."
(I'm a sinner, you'll just have to live with that fact.)
- ▶ "I'm sorry, please forgive me."
(Let's get this over with as quickly as possible.)
- ▶ "I'm just upset."
(Can't you see that? The problem is that you're not compassionate.)
- ▶ "We have a personality problem."
(You're half the problem.)
- ▶ "We have a communication problem."
(You're half the problem.)
- ▶ "You're just too sensitive."
(It's not my fault.)

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Ask for volunteers to read Luke 6:37–45 and 1 John 1:8–10, and then discuss the following question:

10. What are we really saying when we claim we're not sinners or that someone else's sin is worse than ours?

*“When Christ calls a man,
he bids him come and die.”*
—Dietrich Bonhoeffer

15
MINUTES

OPENING YOUR LIFE

Take turns reading together Psalm 73:1–28. Then discuss the following questions:

11. What is Asaph struggling with at the beginning of this psalm—both in terms of the world around him and within himself? What changes his perspective?

12. What area in your life do you most need to stop justifying yourself and your old identity—whether through words or actions—and replace your perspective with God’s?

Get into smaller groups of three or four.

Think again about your answer to question 12. We don’t want to just identify the places we need to let God work in our lives; we also need to give God the opportunity to work.

*That’s why, each week, you’ll get the opportunity to respond to what God wants to do in your life. Below you’ll find a few options, to help you think through how to put what you’ve learned in today’s session into practice. Use any one of them—or if God has prompted you to do something else through this session, by all means do **that!***

*In the space below, write down the one thing you’ll do this week to apply today’s lesson to your own life. Take ten minutes to share your choices with your group, and then make plans to check in with each other before the next session and encourage one another. Your touch-base time can be face-to-face, by phone, or online, but make a commitment you can keep—and then **keep** it.*

- Begin making a practice of holding your tongue when you want to defend yourself. Watch what happens when God defends you instead.
- Spend a few minutes at the end of each day reviewing your speech. When did you justify yourself instead of allowing God to? Confess this to God and ask his help in catching yourself before that next string of self-justification comes out.

- Who's dealing with bad news this week that you can lift up with your words? Make time for that person this week. The more time you spend lifting up others (and God), the less time you'll have for yourself. And you'll feel better, too.

This week I'll take on God's perspective by: _____

After ten minutes close the session in prayer. Thank God for the relationships that are already beginning and growing in your group. Ask the Spirit to begin revealing areas of your lives that you're hiding from each other—and trying to hide from God. Ask for God's help in addressing those areas, as well as in those areas where the bad news of life is especially difficult for some group members right now.