

SMALL GROUP RESOURCE

G O S P E L

love

GRACE,
RELATIONSHIPS,
AND EVERYTHING
THAT GETS IN
THE WAY

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

“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,’ reopened 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 Love* 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?). WH’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

GOSPEL LOVE

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GRACE, RELATIONSHIPS,
AND EVERYTHING THAT
GETS IN THE WAY

Book Three in the
Gospel Transformation Series

Serge



www.newgrowthpress.com

Gospel Love: Grace, Relationships, and Everything that Gets in the Way

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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to *Gospel Love: Grace, Relationships, and Everything that Gets in the Way*! This study is designed to help you discover how your identity and growth in Jesus is inextricably tied to your relationships—both inside and outside the church.

In *Gospel Love*, the third and final study in the “Gospel Transformation” series, you’ll learn how the gospel of Jesus Christ frees you to actively love and accept everyone God puts in your path—because those people *are* your path. You’ll learn that you’re part of a new family—the body of Christ. You’ll discover what living incarnationally looks like, exploring the importance of love in community; loving and forgiving those who are difficult to love; extending grace in our relationships; loving honestly, even in conflict; learning about the role of the Spirit in growing the body of Christ; and finally, exploring opportunities to extend your new family by bringing the gospel to others.

As you work through *Gospel Love*, as well as the other two books in the “Gospel Transformation” series—*Gospel Identity: Discovering Who You Really Are* and *Gospel Growth: Becoming a Faith-Filled Person*—you’ll be encouraged to lead a life of greater faith, repentance, and love. If you haven’t yet completed the first two books, we encourage you to do so before beginning *Gospel Love*. *Gospel Identity* and *Gospel Growth* lay a foundation for *Gospel Love*, as they address how finding our identity in Jesus Christ and living in dependence on him equip us with what we need to love others.

So, 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 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, visibly expressing 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—pretending that we don't struggle with a multitude of sins, such as self-righteous attitudes, foul tempers, nagging anxieties, lustful looks, controlling and critical hearts, and a general belief 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 change 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 our next 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, you 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 are 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 that day’s lesson—and to 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 is 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 as 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!

WE'RE IN THIS TOGETHER

OVERVIEW

In this session we'll grow in awareness that we're part of a new community—one comprised of all who are in Christ.

Our redemption in Christ brings us into a new community of believers. As we are united to Christ, so we become united to one another. This community is as important to us as a pile of fiery coals are to an individual piece of coal. Separating ourselves from the community of believers only invites coldness. Life in the new community is the opposite of selfishness.

The manifestations of our new life in Christ—the fruit of the Spirit, the increased imitation of Christ—only have meaning and value as they are lived out in the context of this new community. It is *in* this community that we express these things outwardly to one another, and it is *through* this community that we express these things outwardly to the world.

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MINUTES

OPENING THE DISCUSSION

Leader: How you start today's session depends on how well you already know one another as a group:

- **If this is your first time together as a group** take some time to get comfortable. Don't "jump right into the session" (even though that is what you will actually be doing). Give everyone the opportunity to relax first. Engage in a bit of small talk. After about five minutes, ask everyone to introduce themselves, and take a few moments to share what you're each hoping to get out of this study.
- **If you're an existing group, and have a social time before starting** tell everyone you'll be starting the session promptly today—then just go on with your normal social time. You might get some quizzical looks, but you're also setting up this session's message perfectly.

Once your "social time" is done, discuss the following questions:

1. How does spending time together help people loosen up and become comfortable with one another? What else do we do to help lower our guards with each other?

2. What keeps us from relaxing and “being real” around other Christians? Why?

Leader: 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.

*The Bible tells us that we’re all fallen people. We’re going to let each other down. It’s inevitable. We’re **all** lost causes without Jesus. Nonetheless—or maybe, therefore—Jesus has called **all** of us as Christians to love one another.*

*Furthermore, we’re not simply to pursue relationships **with** other Christians, but to pursue Jesus—and the world he sends us out to—together **as** Christians. When Christ is our focus, the little things that can get in the way in our relationships don’t seem so important. When we pursue Jesus together, our relationships naturally become closer, deeper, and more loving, because Jesus now sets the tone. And Jesus is never going to steer us the wrong way. Let’s begin exploring how this can become more of a reality in our lives.*

*“All the blessings we enjoy are Divine deposits,
committed to our trust on this condition,
that they should be dispensed
for the benefit of our neighbors.”*

— John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*

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MINUTES

OPENING THE WORD

Have volunteers read Romans 12:3–16; Ephesians 4:1–6, 11–16. Then discuss the following questions:

3. Based on what you've just read, why is it important to remember we're the *body* of Christ?

4. What makes us a body? In other words, what provides the foundation for our union with other believers in Christ (see especially Ephesians 4:4–5)?

5. Given this foundation, how are we to live? Give examples, from these passages.

Let's explore that last question further.

6. Take turns reading aloud through the list of Scripture passages below. After reading each passage, identify one activity of the body of Christ presented there, and then come up with at least one practical example of how this activity could be done in community.

- Matthew 28:18–20
- Romans 15:26
- 2 Corinthians 1:3–5
- Ephesians 5:19
- Philippians 4:6
- Hebrews 3:13
- James 1:27
- 1 John 1:7

7. Several of these activities can be done on one's own. How does doing them in community change how they're done? How does it affect their potential impact?

8. In what ways do you isolate yourself from your faith community rather than engage with it? Why?

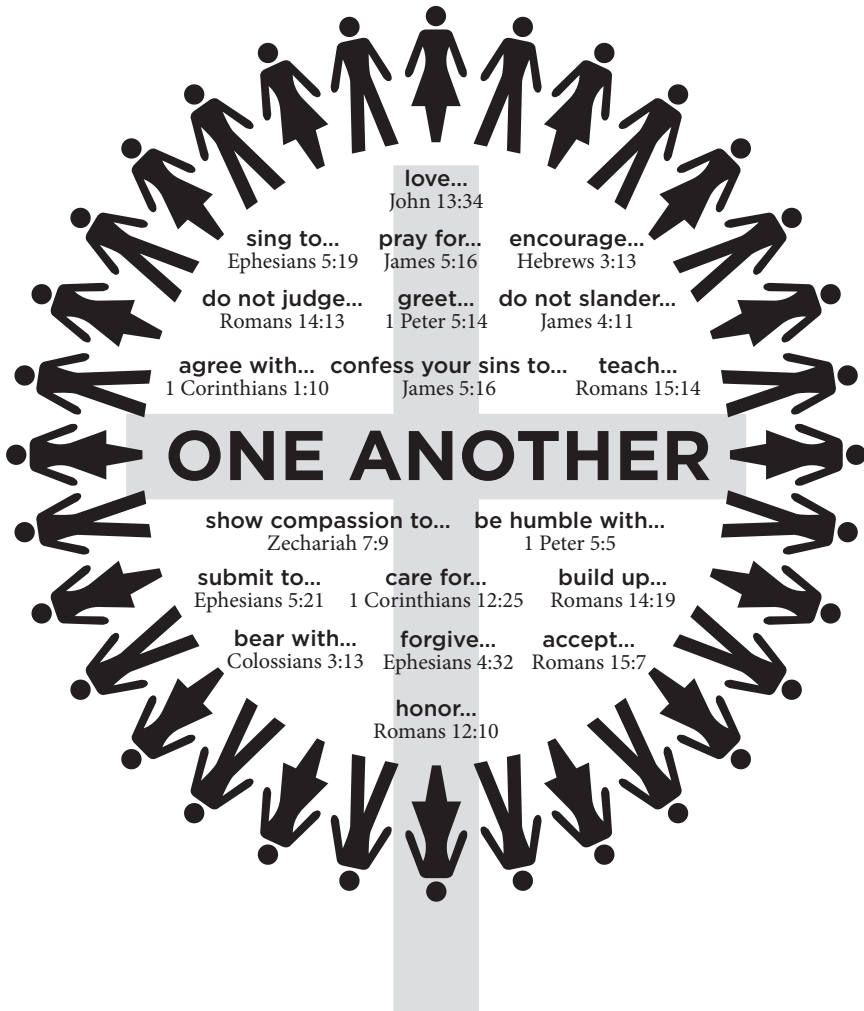
OPENING YOUR LIFE

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MINUTES

Take a minute or two to read through “The New Community in Christ” illustration, which gives a sampling from what’s known as the “one another-ing” passages of the Bible. Afterward, we’ll discuss.

Figure 1.1

The New Community in Christ



9. Which of these “one anothers” stood out to you? Why do you think that is?

10. What do you need to receive from Christ in order to build the type of community described in the “one another” passages?

After considering everything we’ve looked at today, how do you think you need to become reengaged, or more deeply engaged, with the faith communities you’re connected with—your church, ministries, this group? How do you think your participation in your faith community helps you respond differently to the other relationships in your life?

Subdivide into groups of three or four.

*Let's think more about our answers to that last question and about the next steps each of us can take to make that real in our lives. 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 today into practice. Choose one of these ways to step out in faith, so that you really have to rely on Christ—or if God has prompted you to do something else through this session, by all means do **that!***

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

- Look at the “one-anothering” diagram again. This week do a little exercise: *Outside* the circle, write down the opposite (or “evil twin”) of each characteristic. For example, write “lord it over someone” instead of “submit to.” You'll end up with a word-picture of the characteristics that destroy community. Then take time to pray about the word picture you've created, which evil twins you're susceptible to, and what God wants to change in you and how.
- Become involved in some aspect of your faith community, preferably one that has not been a regular part of your life, or perhaps one that would be a challenge for you. Contact someone who can help you get connected.
- Come up with a service project your entire group can do *outside* of church. Go on a lawn-mowing, leaf-raking, or snowplowing expedition, or team up with an organization that builds houses for the needy—whatever works for your group. Afterward, discuss how your time together both helped others and drew you closer together as group. Consider ways you might make this a

regular occurrence.

This week I'll help build the community I'm in by: _____

After ten minutes get back together and close in prayer. Pray something like this:

Dear God, Thank you for the relationships that already exist within our group. We ask for wisdom on how to both grow these relationships and extend them past the boundaries of our group, to love the world you send each one of us into. In Jesus' name, amen.

ADDITIONAL NOTES: