

the
GOSPEL-CENTERED
community

STUDY GUIDE WITH LEADER'S NOTES | SERGE

ROBERT H. THUNE + WILL WALKER

“This wise and biblically solid guide cuts beneath platitudes to address how the gospel seizes the heart and transforms our desire to do more than merely exist in community, and instead allows us to participate together in God’s merciful kindness.”

Dan B. Allender, Professor of Counseling Psychology and Founding President, The Seattle School of Theology and Psychology; author

“Using this resource is a no-brainer. It’s a practical, biblical, gospel-saturated study that connect the dots between community and the rich Christian life, without losing anyone’s attention! Pastors, your people will thank you for using this small group study—and you will thank God for the fruit!”

Dave Harvey, Pastor; author of *Am I Called?* and *When Sinners Say I Do*

“The word ‘community’ has become such a buzzword in Christian circles that it has almost lost its meaning. Bob and Will bring us out of the land of the buzzword and into the biblical definition and application of what it means to share our lives in the church through the gospel. I highly recommend this book.”

Dr. Darrin Patrick, Founder of The Journey, St. Louis, MO; author of *Church Planter: The Man, The Message, The Mission*

“Will Walker and Bob Thune offer probing questions to confront your small group head-on with the transforming power of the gospel as it works through a community. If you are looking for a resource that could bring real change to the small group environment of your church, this is it.”

Matt Carter, Pastor of Preaching and Vision at the Austin Stone Community Church and coauthor of *The Real Win: A Man’s Quest for Authentic Success*

“I’m a cynical old preacher who knows that real community in the church is hard to come by. But Thune and Walker’s gift to us of this wonderful and practical small group resource gives this old preacher hope. It should be read and underlined by every leader in the church. Use this small group resource and then you, with me, will ‘rise up and call them blessed.’”

Steve Brown, Key Life radio program Bible teacher; author of *Three Free Sins*

“Everyone longs for community. And pastors long to shepherd churches that are deeply, authentically communal. In *The Gospel-Centered Community*, Robert Thune and Will Walker provide church planters, pastors, small group leaders, and all Christians a clear, accessible tool for working through the messy challenges of living in community, and for growing together as the body of Christ.”

Daniel Montgomery, Lead Pastor, Sojourn Community Church, Louisville, KY

“This is an incredibly helpful resource for fostering gospel-centered community in your church. Whether you are planting a new church, or aiming to strengthen an existing community, you will find this resource profoundly valuable. The Christian life is not meant to be lived in isolation. This book will help you develop a healthy, biblical view of Christian community.”

Ben Peays, Executive Director, The Gospel Coalition

“*The Gospel-Centered Community* is an incredible introduction and practical guide for helping us live out the radical implications of God’s grace and love together. The gospel is personal, but it’s definitely not private. Why do we need each other? How does grace reframe and refocus our relationships? What’s the difference between an ingrown ‘clubbish’ church, and a community of believers who are learning to live and love missionally? That’s what this little gem is all about!”

Scotty Smith, Founding Pastor of Christ Community Church; Teacher in Residence at West End Community Church; author of *Everyday Prayers: 365 Days to a Gospel-Centered Faith*

“Thune and Walker’s first small group study, *The Gospel-Centered Life*, had a profound and life-changing impact on our church. Our small groups worked through the book, and everyone responded with great enthusiasm. With the publication of *The Gospel-Centered Community*, it appears they’ve done it again. I’m certain this short volume will take us even deeper into what it means to live in a community fashioned by the gospel of grace. Every church that longs to experience the development of healthy, Christ-centered and gospel-shaped community should avail themselves of this excellent resource.”

Sam Storms, Lead Pastor, Bridgeway Church, Oklahoma City, OK

“Thune and Walker deftly diagnose our tendencies to hide and isolate, and then show how gospel practices enable us to live in rich, real community. Loneliness is lethal and the faint hope we’ve harbored for more finds fulfillment in gospel-centered community.

Glenn Lucke, President, Docent Research Group; coauthor *Common Grounds: Conversations about the Things That Matter Most*

“We desperately need to apply the gospel to our life together so we can live out our calling to be ‘the light of the world’ and a ‘city on the hill.’ Thune and Walker give us an insightful, clear, easy-to-follow road map for applying the humility, kindness, and grace of our Lord Jesus Christ to our relationships at church and in our community.”

Angelo Juliani, Church planter, Bridge Community Church (PCA), Philadelphia, PA

**THE
GOSPEL-CENTERED
COMMUNITY**

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Robert H. Thune and Will Walker

Study Guide with Leader's Notes



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CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	ix
Introduction.....	1
Gospel Overview	9

Section 1: The Foundation of Gospel-Centered Community

LESSON 1 - Created for Community	14
<i>Article:</i> Created for Community	
<i>Exercise:</i> Five Indicators of Individualism	
LESSON 2 - How Community Shapes Us in the Gospel	23
<i>Article:</i> How Community Shapes Us in the Gospel	
<i>Exercise:</i> Redemption in Community	
LESSON 3 - How the Gospel Shapes Community	32
<i>Article:</i> Community Barriers and Gospel Freedom	
<i>Exercise:</i> Communal Prayer and Worship	
LESSON 4 - Faith Working Through Love	40
<i>Article:</i> Making It Count	
<i>Exercise:</i> Faith Working Through Love	

Section 2: The Fruit of Gospel-Centered Community

LESSON 5 - A Joyful Community.	52
<i>Article:</i> A Joyful Community	
<i>Exercise:</i> Growing in Joy	
LESSON 6 - A Humble Community	62
<i>Article:</i> A Humble Community	
<i>Exercise:</i> Pride and Prejudice	
LESSON 7 - An Honest Community.	69
<i>Article:</i> An Honest Community	
<i>Exercise:</i> Speaking the Truth in Love	
LESSON 8 - A Grace-Filled Community	78
<i>Article:</i> A Grace-Filled Community	
<i>Exercise:</i> Growing in Grace	

LESSON 9 - **A Missional Community**86
 Article: A Missional Community
 Exercise: Living on Mission

LEADER'S GUIDE95

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We want to express our deep gratitude:

to the people of Coram Deo Church and Providence Church, who have labored with us in the work of the gospel, encouraged us in the truth of the gospel, and loved us with the love of the gospel;

to our friends at Serge—wise and seasoned mentors—whose rich “oral tradition” of gospel centrality permeates this work;

and to our fellow pastors in the Acts 29 Network, who are giving their lives to see this vision of gospel-centered community realized in the planting and renewal of churches across the globe.

To God alone be the glory.

INTRODUCTION

ABOUT SERGE

Serge never set out to write and publish curriculum. We are an international mission-sending organization that has always believed that the power and motive for mission is the gospel of grace at work in the life of a believer. However, along the way, we've also discovered that it's a lot harder to do cross-cultural, team-oriented ministry than we thought. Eventually, we started writing material to keep the gospel front and center in our own lives and relationships. Before long we had pastors and ministry leaders requesting gospel-centered materials for use in their churches and ministries.

Over the years, it's been our privilege to partner with friends who share our passion for the way the gospel transforms both believers and unbelievers alike. This study is the result of one such partnership. Like *The Gospel-Centered Life*, the study that precedes it, Bob Thune and Will Walker wrote *The Gospel-Centered Community* to help their churches grow in the gospel. We're partnering with them to publish it because we think it may do the same for you.

As a cross-denominational, reformed, sending agency with over 200 missionaries in 15 countries, Serge is always looking for people who are ready to take the next step in a missional lifestyle. If you'd like to learn more about our teaching, healing, and equipping ministries around the world and what might be right for you, please visit us at <http://www.serge.org/mission>. If you'd like to learn more about our gospel mentoring programs and the discipleship training that we offer here in the United States, you can find those details at <http://www.serge.org/mentoring>.

FROM THE AUTHORS

For over a decade now, we have been involved in forming and leading missional communities. We started out in campus ministry, helping young fraternity men become disciples of Jesus. Then we applied our experience to the realm of church planting, striving to build gospel-centered churches that would form people in the gospel and send them out on mission for the glory of God.

One thing we've learned in our years of ministry is that the gospel has to be at the center of Christian community. Without the gospel, community groups will always become unhealthy. Some will become ingrown and self-absorbed. Others will become busy and activist. Either way, they will lose their compelling power to display the glory and grace of God. Only with the gospel at the center can a community become a thriving nexus of gospel discipleship, rich fellowship, and Spirit-empowered mission.

It's one thing to see the need for gospel-centered community. It's another thing to know how to cultivate it. How do you take a church, a small group, or even a family and build a vibrant gospel culture within it? That's where we hope this study will help.

This study—The Gospel-Centered Community—is a follow-up to another work we produced a few years ago called The Gospel-Centered Life. That study focused on personal renewal dynamics. The current one seeks to apply those same renewal dynamics to a larger community. Through a combination of Bible study, reflection, discussion, and application, we want to help your community experience the transforming power of the gospel.

ABOUT THIS STUDY

The phrase “gospel-centered” has experienced a surge of popularity in recent years. Though we’re thankful for this renewed interest in the gospel, we’ve encountered two problems with the popularity of this term:

1. Many people use the phrase as a junk drawer. Because all faithful Christians love the gospel, “gospel-centered” becomes a phrase that easily gets people nodding their heads—even if they don’t fully comprehend it.
2. Many people use this term “aspirationally.” They *aspire* to be gospel-centered, but they don’t really know how to *get* there.

The Gospel-Centered Community has been written to help remedy both of these problems. By God’s grace, we trust that this study will (1) deepen your comprehension of the gospel and (2) help you move from *aspiring toward* gospel-centered community to actually *being* a gospel-centered community.

This may be obvious, but *The Gospel-Centered Community* is meant to be studied in community. This is not a personal Bible study to work through on your own. It is communal content that’s meant to be learned, processed, and critiqued within a group. It’s appropriate for missional church-planting contexts, established churches, and parachurch or campus ministries. If your group already has a fairly gospel-centered culture, this study will deepen it. And if your group desperately needs gospel reform and renewal, this study will provide a great starting point. It’s foundational material that will work in almost any context.

HOW THIS STUDY IS ORGANIZED

The Gospel-Centered Community contains nine lessons that are grouped into two major sections.

Section 1: The Foundation of Gospel-Centered Community

LESSON 1: CREATED FOR COMMUNITY

This lesson explores the theme of community through the redemptive storyline of Creation-Fall-Redemption-Consummation. How does

being created in God's image provide the foundation for meaningful community? How does the fall destroy community? How does redemption in Jesus renew our capacity for community? And how does community provide the context for our ongoing transformation? This lesson lays the foundation for a biblical understanding of the gospel and community.

LESSON 2: HOW COMMUNITY SHAPES US IN THE GOSPEL

This lesson focuses on the way community exposes our sin and unbelief, pushing us into a deeper dependence on what Jesus accomplished for us in his death and resurrection. When we begin to see community as a means of spiritual formation, we see every struggle or problem we have in relationships as a “gospel opportunity”—a chance to believe the promises of the gospel more deeply and to rely on the Holy Spirit to change our hearts and lives in the ways God desires.

LESSON 3: HOW THE GOSPEL SHAPES COMMUNITY

In this lesson, we want to explore how the gospel empowers and enables deeper community. By “deeper” community we mean community in which relationships are increasingly shaped by the good things that come from trusting Jesus and the promises of the gospel: things like a growing trust, openness, humility, service, teachability, and accountability that reflect God's character and his intentions for human relationships. We're still working out the same concepts, just coming at them from a different angle. As a result of this lesson, your group should begin to confront some of the barriers to deeper, more life-giving community.

LESSON 4: FAITH WORKING THROUGH LOVE

This lesson is a “hinge point” in the study. It introduces the concept of “faith working through love” (Galatians 5:6). We will never love one another as God intends unless we understand how faith in the work of Christ provides the foundation and the motivation for love. This lesson establishes a core principle that we'll return to in Lessons 5 through 9.

Section 2: The Fruit of Gospel-Centered Community

LESSON 5: A JOYFUL COMMUNITY

In this lesson, we begin to look at some of the characteristic marks of gospel-centered community. The first—and perhaps the most important—is joy. If joy is missing from Christian community, it’s a clear indication that something is amiss in our understanding of the gospel. This lesson will help us understand why the relationship between justification and sanctification is crucial to experiencing joy in Christ.

LESSON 6: A HUMBLE COMMUNITY

Another mark of a gospel-centered community is humility. To grow in humility, we need to identify the ways pride manifests itself in our lives, and we need to put pride to death by looking to Jesus as our example and experiencing his grace personally. This lesson seeks to help us understand biblical humility, become more humble people, and shape a more humble community that is eager to serve.

LESSON 7: AN HONEST COMMUNITY

Authentic community means being known “as we really are.” But most of us are worried that others would not accept us or like us if they really knew us. So instead of letting our true selves be known, we hide behind a false self. The apostle John urges us to turn from this darkness, this denial of truth, and “walk in the light” instead. This lesson explores how the good news of the gospel frees us from slavery to the approval or disapproval of others. When we are confident in our identity in Christ, we are free to be known as we really are and to love others as they really are.

LESSON 8: A GRACE-FILLED COMMUNITY

A gospel-centered community is a grace-filled community. But sin has distorted our understanding and tainted our desires in this area. Sometimes we settle for a flimsy sort of “acceptance” that doesn’t confront unbiblical beliefs or behaviors. In other situations we can make people earn our acceptance through their performance. Our deep dysfunction in this area is only healed when we allow the gospel to transform our hearts and lives. When we understand and believe that God accepts and

forgives us in Christ, we gain a right understanding of what it means to accept and forgive each other.

LESSON 9: A MISSIONAL COMMUNITY

In this last lesson, we consider one final characteristic of a gospel-centered community: mission. A gospel-centered community is a community that is moving toward others as God has moved toward them. All Christians are called to leave their comfortable routines and move toward their neighbors who don't know Christ. The Father sent the Son; the Son sent the Spirit; and the Spirit sends the church. As those changed by the Spirit through the gospel, we are a "going" people, always moving toward others as God has moved toward us.

HOW TO USE THIS STUDY

Each lesson follows a similar format including these elements:

BIBLE CONVERSATION

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

ARTICLE

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

DISCUSSION

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

EXERCISE

Each exercise in this study is designed to help you make practical applications of the concepts being taught or help you understand the content

at a deeper heart level. Be sure to allow enough time for your group to adequately work through and discuss the exercises as directed.

WRAP-UP

The wrap-up gives the leader the chance to answer any last-minute questions, reinforce ideas and, most importantly, spend a few minutes praying as a group.

WHAT TO EXPECT

EXPECT TO BE CHALLENGED . . .

Most of us have reduced the gospel to something much less than it is. As you work through each lesson, expect your thinking about the gospel to be challenged and expanded.

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.

EXPECT YOUR GROUP'S AGENDA TO INCLUDE . . .

an open, give-and-take discussion of the article, the questions, and the exercises. Also expect times of prayer at each meeting.

EXPECT STRUGGLE . . .

and don't be surprised to find that your group is a mixture of enthusiasm, hope, and honesty along with indifference, anxiety, skepticism, guilt, and covering up. We are all people who really need Jesus every day. So expect your group to be made up of people who wrestle with sin and have problems—people just like yourself!

EXPECT A GROUP LEADER . . .

who desires to serve you but who also needs Jesus as much as you do. No leader should be put on a pedestal, so expect that your group leader will have the freedom to share openly about his or her own weaknesses, struggles, and sins.

GOSPEL OVERVIEW

The study you are about to begin aims to help you live a “gospel-centered” life in a gospel-centered community. The obvious question is, What exactly is “the gospel”? That’s a question we should clear up before going any further. Though many people are familiar with the word *gospel*, we’re often fuzzy about its content.

Many popular “gospel presentations” distill the gospel message down to three or four core principles. These simple summaries can be very helpful. But a richer way to understand the gospel is as a *story*—the true Story that speaks to our purest aspirations and deepest longings. This Great Story has four chapters.

CREATION: THE WORLD WE WERE MADE FOR

The Story begins, not with us, but with God. Deep down, we have a sense that this is true. We sense that we are important—that there is something dignified, majestic, and eternal about humanity. But we also know that we are not ultimate. Something (or Someone) greater than us exists.

The Bible tells us that this Someone is the one infinite, eternal, and unchanging God who created all things out of nothing (Genesis 1:1–31). This one God exists in three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19). Because God is Triune in his being, he wasn’t motivated to create the world because he *needed* something—be it relationship, worship, or glory. Rather, he created out of the overflow of his perfection—his own love, goodness, and glory. God made human beings in

his image (Genesis 1:27), which is what gives us our dignity and value. He also made us *human*, which means we are created beings, dependent on our Creator. We were made to worship, enjoy, love, and serve him, not ourselves.

In God's original creation, everything was good. The world existed in perfect peace, stability, harmony, and wholeness.

FALL: THE CORRUPTION OF EVERYTHING

God created us to worship, enjoy, love, and serve him. But rather than live under God's authority, humanity turned away from God in sinful rebellion (Genesis 3:1–7; Isaiah 53:6). Our defection plunged the whole world into the darkness and chaos of sin. Though vestiges of good remain, the wholeness and harmony of God's original creation is shattered.

As a result, all human beings are sinners by nature and by choice (Ephesians 2:1–3). We often excuse our sin by claiming that we're "not that bad"—after all, we can always find someone worse than we are! But this evasion only reveals our shallow and superficial view of sin. Sin is not primarily an *action*; it's a *disposition*. It's our soul's aversion to God. Sin is manifested in our pride, our selfishness, our independence, and our lack of love for God and others. Sometimes sin is very obvious and external; other times it's hidden and internal. But "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23).

Sin brings two drastic consequences into our lives. First, *sin enslaves us* (Romans 6:17–18). When we turn *from* God, we turn *to* other things to find our life, our identity, our meaning, and our happiness. These things become substitute gods—what the Bible calls idols—and they soon enslave us, demanding our time, our energy, our loyalty, our money—everything we are and have. They begin to rule over our lives and hearts. This is why the Bible describes sin as something that "masters" us (Romans 6:14 NIV). Sin causes us to "serve created things rather than the Creator" (Romans 1:25 NIV).

Second, *sin brings condemnation*. We're not just enslaved by our sin; we're *guilty* because of it. We stand condemned before the Judge of heaven and

earth. “The wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23). We are under a death sentence for our cosmic treason against the holiness and justice of God. His righteous anger toward sin stands over us (Nahum 1:2; John 3:36).

REDEMPTION: JESUS COMES TO SAVE US

Every good story has a hero. And the hero of the Gospel Story is Jesus. Humanity needs a Savior, a Redeemer, a Deliverer to free us from the bondage and condemnation of sin and to restore the world to its original good. This Rescuer must be *truly human* in order to pay the debt we owe to God. But he can't be *merely human* because he must conquer sin. We need a Substitute—one who can live the life of obedience we've failed to live, and who can stand in our place to bear the punishment we deserve for our disobedience and sin.

This is why God sent Jesus into the world to be our substitute (1 John 4:14). The Bible teaches that Jesus was fully God—the second person of the Trinity—and also fully human. He was born to a human mother, lived a real flesh-and-blood existence, and died a brutal death on a Roman cross outside Jerusalem. Jesus lived a life of perfect obedience to God (Hebrews 4:15), making him the only person in history who did not deserve judgment. But on the cross, he took our place, dying for our sin. He received the condemnation and death we deserve so that, when we put our trust in him, we can receive the blessing and life he deserves (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Not only did Jesus die in our place, he rose from death, displaying his victory over sin, death, and hell. His resurrection is a decisive event in history; the Bible calls it the “first fruits”—the initial evidence—of the cosmic renewal God is bringing (1 Corinthians 15:20–28). One of the greatest promises in the Bible is Revelation 21:5: “Behold, I am making all things new.” All that was lost, broken, and corrupted in the fall will ultimately be put right. Redemption doesn't simply mean the salvation of individual souls; it means the restoring of the whole creation back to its original good.

A NEW PEOPLE: THE STORY CONTINUES

So how do we become a part of the story? How do we experience God's salvation personally and become agents of his redemption in the world? By faith or trust (Ephesians 2:8–9). What does that mean? We trust a taxi driver when we count on him to get us to our destination. We trust a doctor when we agree with her diagnosis and entrust ourselves to her care. And we trust in Jesus Christ when we admit our sin, receive his gracious forgiveness, and rest entirely in Jesus for our acceptance before God. Faith is like getting in the taxi. It's like going under the surgeon's knife. It's a restful, whole-hearted commitment of the self to Jesus (Psalm 31:14–15). This is what it means to believe the gospel.

When we trust in Jesus, we are released from sin's condemnation *and* from its bondage. We are free to say “no” to sin and “yes” to God. We are free to die to ourselves and live for Christ and his purposes. We are free to work for justice in the world. We are free to stop living for our own glory and start living for the glory of God (1 Corinthians 10:31). We are free to love God and others in the way we live, which is the particular focus of this study.

God has promised that Jesus will return to finally judge sin and make all things new. Until then, he is gathering to himself a people “from every nation, tribe, people and language” (Revelation 7:9 NIV). As part of that called-and-sent people, we have the privilege of joining him in his mission (Matthew 28:18–20) as individuals and as part of his spiritual family. By grace, we can enjoy God, live life for his glory, serve humanity, and make his gospel known to others through our words and actions.

This is the good news—the True Story—of the gospel.

SECTION 1:
THE FOUNDATION OF
GOSPEL-CENTERED
COMMUNITY

Lesson

1

CREATED FOR COMMUNITY

BIG IDEA

Community is something we all want. Every human being longs for meaningful relationships—a context in which they can know and be known. Theologically, this longing for community is rooted in God himself: God is a relational being (three persons in one as the Trinity), and we are made in his image. This lesson explores the theme of community through the grid of Creation-Fall-Redemption-Consummation. How does being created in God’s image provide the foundation for meaningful community? How does the fall destroy community? How does redemption in Jesus renew our capacity for community? And how does community provide the context for our ongoing transformation? This lesson lays the foundation for a biblical understanding of the gospel and community.

NOTES:



CREATED FOR COMMUNITY

Community is something we all want.

No matter how you're wired—introvert, extrovert, socially adept or socially awkward—something in your soul longs for meaningful relationships with other humans. We long to know others and be known by them. We treasure friendships that allow us to truly “be ourselves.” Though some of us have never found this sort of community and though others have been deeply wounded by relationships, all of us still long for deep, authentic, real community.

How did we get this way? How did this craving, this longing, get hard-wired into us? The Bible answers that question by explaining that we are created in the image of God. **God created us for community.**

CREATED FOR COMMUNITY

One of the oldest and most cherished doctrines of historic Christian theology is the doctrine of the Trinity. The Nicene Creed (c. AD 325) summarizes the Trinity this way:

I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds; God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made, being of one substance with the

Father. . . . And I believe in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of Life; who proceeds from the Father and the Son; who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified.

The Trinity means that God himself is in community. More accurately, God *is* community: one God, three persons. “Before all worlds”—before any sort of human community existed—there was God, dwelling in perfect, loving harmony in his threefold being.

In the biblical account of creation, this Triune God says: “Let us make man in our image” (Genesis 1:26). Human beings are made to *image* God, to reflect his likeness. That’s why our longing for community seems so deep and primal. It’s how we’re made as God’s image bearers.

So if deep community is something we all want, if it’s part of being made in God’s image, then what makes it so hard to attain? What keeps us from achieving the type of meaningful human relationships that God wired us for?

THE FALL: BROKEN COMMUNITY

If you think for a moment about the nature of your relationships, you’ll quickly identify another tendency that’s present—something darker and more sinister than your God-given desire for community. It’s the tendency to use people to meet your own needs first. It’s not hard to see how often we are self-focused, pursuing our own interests and protecting ourselves from people and relationships that will demand too much of us. For example, think of the times you’ve intentionally avoided someone who bothers you. Or the times you’ve said what people wanted to hear in order to avoid offending them. Or the times you’ve stopped pursuing certain friends because they were no longer useful to you. Or the times you’ve clung to bad or unhealthy relationships just to escape the feeling of being alone.

These selfish tendencies reveal that something has gone deeply wrong in our pursuit of community. Though made in God’s image, we have fallen from our original glory. We have devolved into something less than what we were made to be. There’s something selfish and self-absorbed about us that prevents us from imaging God the way we were designed to.

Our inherent selfishness is evidence of what the Bible calls “sin.” When we hear the word *sin*, we tend to think of bad behavior. But sin is deeper than external actions. The Bible often talks about sin in terms of **unbelief**. In other words, rather than believing what is true, we believe lies, which obviously leads to bad behavior and negative emotions. Unbelief was at the root of the first sin. Eve believed the Serpent’s lie about God and his intentions toward them: “You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it [the forbidden fruit] your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God” (Genesis 3:4–5). Unbelief is a failure to see and believe what’s true about God, the world, and ourselves. It’s not taking God at his word, not believing his promises, not trusting in his goodness.

And sin’s impact is not just that we *don’t* believe, it’s that apart from Christ we’re *unable* to believe. Sin has turned us in on ourselves and warped our relationships with others. We need Someone who can deliver us from our unbelief and selfishness and restore our capacity for true, deep, lasting community.

REDEEMED FOR COMMUNITY

This is where the good news of the **gospel** meets us. The word *gospel* literally means “good news”—a message, a proclamation, an announcement. One of the paradoxes of this message is that before it can be good news, it must start with bad news: we are sinful, broken people. We are rebels against God. We are mired in lies and self-worship, and we look to things other than God to give us identity and significance. We can’t free ourselves, make God happy with us, or do enough good works to make up for our sins. But God, rich in mercy, sent Jesus to earth as our substitute. Jesus took our place in his life as he obeyed God fully and worshiped him totally, things we failed to do. He substituted himself for us in his death, as he paid the penalty we owed to God for our sin and unbelief. If we humble ourselves, acknowledge our need, and turn to him, God the Holy Spirit will apply Jesus’ substitutionary work to us by faith. The Bible calls this *redemption*, a word that means “to be delivered, ransomed, or set free.”

What does Jesus redeem us *from*? Sin and all its effects. What does Jesus redeem us *for*? A life that images God and reflects his goodness to the

world. In other words, one of the chief things that Jesus accomplishes when he redeems us is to restore our capacity for community. Not for a community of people who look and act just like us, but a community made up of people from every tribe and tongue and nation on earth (Revelation 7:9). God has created us for community, and Jesus has redeemed us for community. In doing so, he has made us into his very own body (1 Corinthians 12:27) that is able to live, love, and make known his “good news” to our friends and neighbors.

But wait: If Jesus redeems us for community, then why is community still such hard work? Why are relationships still fraught with brokenness, even among Christians? This is the tension we live in. Even though Jesus has delivered us from the penalty and rule of sin, he has not yet eradicated sin from the world. Because of sin’s ongoing presence, we are prone to **unbelief**. We easily forget the good news of the gospel and fall back into lies and self-worship. That’s why the Bible encourages us not just to receive the gospel, but to “stand” in it (1 Corinthians 15:1) and to “continue” in it (Colossians 1:23).

In other words, building and enjoying healthy community is going to require us to believe the gospel, to believe that what Jesus did for us has power and relevance for the way we relate to God and others. This requires an intentional focus on our part. It means identifying the unbelief in our hearts that hinders our ability to love and serve others and to receive love from them in turn. It means receiving the healing, liberating truths of the gospel in ways that allow them to soak deep into the core of our being. And guess where this work of ongoing transformation takes place? In community.

TRANSFORMED IN COMMUNITY

Did you ever notice how patient you are—as long as no one is getting on your nerves? Or how loving you are—as long as you’re surrounded by people who are easy to love? Or how humble you are—as long as you’re respected and admired by others? Every one of us is a saint in isolation! It’s in community that our real weaknesses, flaws, and sins are exposed. That’s why community is essential—not optional—for

transformation. We can't become the people God wants us to become outside of community.

You see, redemption is not the end of the story. God is preparing us for “new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells” (2 Peter 3:13). His goal is a renewed creation, where redeemed humans dwell in perfect harmony with each other and with their Creator. God is out to prepare his people for this glorious future by transforming them now, a process the Bible calls *sanctification*. The agent of sanctification is the Holy Spirit. The tool of sanctification is the truth of the gospel. And the context of sanctification is community.

Consider some of the “one another” statements in the Bible: “Love one another with brotherly affection; outdo one another in showing honor” (Romans 12:10). “Comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace” (2 Corinthians 13:11). “Do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another” (Galatians 5:13). “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another” (Ephesians 4:32). Isn't it obvious that none of us can do these things perfectly? These commands aren't given just so that we'll know what we *should* do; they're also given so that we can try, and fail, and grow in our experience of God's grace. Trying to fulfill these “one another” commands helps to reveal our sin, drives us to Jesus in repentance and faith, and causes us to depend on the Holy Spirit for transformation. Community is the laboratory in which we learn to rely on God's grace and experience the gospel's transforming power.

Community is also the primary context for *mission*, our outward focus as believers. God wants to use our communities, messy and broken as they are, to draw others into his story and introduce them to Jesus, the Redeemer! It's not just about us becoming more like Jesus; it's about people who don't know Jesus coming to know him as Savior and Lord.

We sometimes treat community like the safety net under a tightrope walker: it's a good thing to have in case something bad happens. But the Bible talks about community as if it's the tightrope itself: you can't move forward without it. We are created for community. We are redeemed for community. And we are transformed in community.

Lesson

1

EXERCISE

FIVE INDICATORS OF INDIVIDUALISM

In Western culture, individualism is like a windshield or a pair of glasses. We're so used to "seeing through" it that we don't even see it. We need some help to recognize how our self-centeredness actually manifests itself. Below are some indicators of individualism, some ways it may express itself based on who you are and how you're wired. Choose the one or two bullet-point statements below that you see most often in your life. (You may find bullet points that apply to you under multiple headings.)

SELF-RELIANCE

- You are proud of your ability to deal with your own problems and challenges without help from others.
- You enjoy being asked for help but you rarely ask others for help.
- It's difficult for you to be vulnerable about what's really going on in your soul because "those are my issues to deal with."
- You don't honestly think you need people to grow spiritually; personal spiritual disciplines are sufficient (Bible study, prayer, theological reading).
- It's hard for you to receive gifts or help from people without wanting to pay them back somehow.

SELF-SUFFICIENCY

- You may be thought of as a “good Christian” by others, but few people know you as you really are.
- You may be outgoing and extroverted, but your relationships stay on the surface.
- Very few people have full access to your life. You may disclose things to people, but only what you want them to know. You do not want them to dig deeper.
- When relationships get hard, you tend to withdraw rather than deal with the issues.
- You tend to measure spiritual growth by how much you know.

SELF-PROTECTION

- You tend to keep others at arm’s length to guard against being hurt or rejected.
- You measure spiritual growth or maturity by what others say or think.
- You fear at times that if people knew “the real you,” they would keep their distance.
- You avoid conflict. If people offend you or hurt your feelings, you prefer to say nothing rather than risk anger or rejection.
- You might be addicted to approval. Your sense of value rises and falls on what other people say (or do not say) about you.

SELF-IMPORTANCE

- You tend to be addicted to busyness; it’s the way you fill the void of deep relationships in your life.
- You have a higher concern for respect from others (attention) than you have a sense of responsibility for others (sacrifice).
- You are more concerned about what others think of your accomplishments (importance) than what they think of your relational influence in their lives (significance).

- You tend to measure spiritual growth by what you have accomplished.

SELF-WILL

- You regularly choose work and hobbies over people.
- Your schedule and priorities always take precedence; you don't reshuffle your agenda to help or serve others.
- You like having people around, but you don't tend to take their advice or welcome their correction.
- When it comes to church, you tend to ask consumer-oriented questions like, "What do I like/not like? How does this make me feel? What do I get out of this?" Your wants and goals are functionally prioritized over the needs of the community and the mission of the church.

Notice that the headings over all of these bullet points have to do with "self." If your self-centeredness was transformed into a joyful God-centeredness, what would the results be for yourself and for the community around you?