



Grassroots Kingdom: God's Plan to Change the World

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INTRODUCTION

First off, a little bit of background for the book you are holding: it is written as curriculum for our LifeGroups to go through during a series called *Grassroots Kingdom*. This book dives headfirst into exploring God's plan to change the world and how we join Him in what He's doing.

If you've been around Midtown for any amount of time, you know that we highly value people getting involved in LifeGroups, no matter where they are spiritually. We believe that Christian community is the best place to both explore the gospel of Jesus as well as grow in the gospel. So if you are not in a LifeGroup and you are in the Columbia area, you should sign up for one at midtowncolumbia.com. We would love to get you plugged into a community as soon as possible. If you are reading this and you're not in the Columbia area, do everything you can to read it with a small group or group of friends. It just won't be the same without that communal element.

Our LifeGroups will be going through this curriculum together and, at the end, each group will write a LifeGroup Covenant explaining how as a community they are called to join God's plan to redeem the world. We hope for it to be a re-centering, unifying process for our entire church family to go through as we continue to grow up into maturity together and live out the mission that God has given us.

No matter the situation that led you to hold this book in your hands, we are really glad that it found you. We pray that through reading the following pages God will speak to you, encourage you, strengthen you and challenge you.

If you have any questions, feel free to drop us an email at hello@midtowncolumbia.com.

—Brandon Clements and the pastoral staff of Midtown Fellowship

IMPORTANT DISCLAIMERS

IF YOU ARE NOT A CHRISTIAN BUT ARE IN A LIFEGROUP...

We want people who have not submitted their lives to Jesus yet to be a part of our LifeGroups so that they can explore His claims about life. So if that's where you are, we are extremely glad you are here!

We will not hide the fact that we believe Jesus is the best thing in the world for you and we pray that you come to know Him, but we have no desire to force anything on you. Simply put, we believe that if you are investigating Jesus, the best way to do so is to experience the gospel lived out in a community of believers, and you are welcome to do that as long as you wish.

So, to be clear, you are more than welcome in our church, at your LifeGroup and in this study. We hope it will be helpful for you to study how the gospel of Jesus is good news for all of life and how it is lived out in community. However, that means parts of this study may not apply to you, and that's okay.

For example, at the end of the study your group will be writing a covenant together, outlining how the group is committing to live out the gospel with one another. So, of course, you would not have to agree to this covenant if you are not on board with being a follower of Jesus at that point, and you can still stay in the group as a participant for as long as you want. We would rejoice if you came to know Jesus during this study, or a year from now, or twenty years from now...but the important thing we want you to know is that we want you around, even if you never enter into a relationship with Jesus.

So please, do not feel uncomfortable. Feel free to participate however you'd like, but feel no pressure. You are not a project, you are a person that we love and that Jesus loves. Take off your jacket and stay a while!

IF YOU ARE A CHRISTIAN...

If you are a Christian, and especially if you've been a part of Christian culture for a while, there's a good chance you will be pushed and prodded in this study. You may find yourself thinking, "This is a lot..." or "Is this really practical in the 21st century?"

In the pages that follow, we have tried to portray what it looks like biblically to actually be the church together. And yes, it is a lot more involved than the popular cultural expectation of church involvement as an hour on Sunday. In our culture, church tends to get compartmentalized to a service that you simply attend, a thing that you watch from a distance that may affect your life in some small way, but anything beyond that begins to feel a little too much. Like a fish in water, we are not always aware that the water we are swimming in is full of influences trying to keep faith a small and segregated part of our lives.

We believe that is a tragic perspective, because it is so far from what we see in the Scriptures. In the New Testament, church is not an event—it's a family on mission together. In light of that, we do not "go to church;" we *are* the church.

If we *are* the church, that means everything counts. Every single aspect of our lives is affected by the good news of Jesus. Our purpose. Our mission. Our time, budgets, jobs, hobbies, relationships. Everything.

That can feel a little more daunting than going to an event once a week where no one really knows you. It can be a little more scary than compartmentalizing your life into "faith" and "real life." But, please hear this—it is so much better. If Jesus has not come to bear on every part of your life, you are missing out on so much. If His mission has not reoriented your entire life, you have no idea what you are losing.

So we challenge you not to take the easy way out. Don't follow your natural pushback just because it's easy to do so. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you and to correct any false understanding you may have. At least consider the fact that there is something more beautiful, compelling and worthwhile than what you've come to see as normative.

Dream with us. Try it out. Taste and see that the Lord is good, that His design for life actually is best for us, even though we often resist it (Psalm 34:8). If you do, we don't think you'll ever go back.

IF YOU ARE A MISSIONARY MEMBER AT MIDTOWN...

If you've been around us for any length of time, you've heard us talk about our desire to be "A Jesus-centered family on mission with Him." That is no secret—we've pressed that vision from day one when our church started seven years ago.

However, there is still a chance that you will be pushed and prodded in this study, because we are pushing further into the vision than we ever have. Particularly in the area of LifeGroups being on mission together, you may feel some tension, and the reason you feel that tension is a good thing (though blindly following it would be a bad thing).

You see, God has been really gracious to us. The term "family" has meant a lot to us, and it's been incredible to see how God has truly grown us to be family with one another. Some would say it is one of the most defining characteristics of our church—the thing that we've, by God's grace, seen the most growth in over the years. The stories of how God has melded us into family with one another over the years are quite breathtaking.

So, back to that tension you may feel—the reason you feel it is because you know how good family is. You know how good it is to belong to a group of people—to know, care for and love one another deeply—and you wonder how that will be the same when new people show up to your group.

The short answer is, it won't be the same. It will be better. Because you'll have a new family member. You don't stop being family with one another when you pull up a new chair at the dinner table—you keep doing the same things you've been doing and invite the newcomer into your existing community. Inward care and outward mission are not opposed to one another—they work together perfectly. At the edges of our family, we welcome and heal. On the inside, we disciple and build up.

We will study this much more in depth, but we just wanted to mention it before we get started. This push for groups to be on mission together is not to say "Hey guys, you are doing it wrong...get your act together!" As your leaders we have led the charge to take inward care and concern for one another very seriously, and our family has followed well over the years, to the extent that we are glowingly proud of the way you guys love each other.

This push for mission together is simply to say, “Okay guys, here’s the next step...let’s all grow in this together for the glory of Jesus and the good of our city.” We are certain that growing in being on mission with one another will be energizing and fun for our church family as we go forward, and we are really excited about it. We pray that this study will be used by God to grow our family—that lots and lots of new chairs will be pulled up to our table.

CHAPTER ONE:

A BROKEN WORLD & A GRASSROOTS KINGDOM

A TRAIN WRECK OF COSMIC PROPORTIONS

Long, long ago God breathed into dust and clay and, by His immeasurable power, made human life. Our first parents awoke to a world of beauty and grandeur beyond our comprehension. The human being was the crown of all God's creation, made in the actual image of God to reflect Him in all His glory (Genesis 1:26-30). We were created with the miracle of human consciousness, the capacity for love and relationship, with eternity embedded into our souls.

The continual refrain during the creation narrative of Genesis is "And God saw that it was good" (Genesis 1:4, 1:10, 1:12, 1:18, 1:21, 1:25). After creating the first humans God adds a qualifier to the refrain and, as He looks at everything He had made, says it was "very good" (Genesis 1:31).

The Hebrew word *shalom* refers to the peace, completeness and wholeness of all aspects of creation. Adam and Eve had a perfect relationship with God and an untainted relationship with one another. They did not have marriage problems, because they loved each other the way God designed them to. They did not fear for their safety, they did not wonder if they could trust one another, and they had nothing to hide.

Everything was as it should be. *Shalom*.

The peace did not last long, however. Just three chapters into Genesis, things go horribly wrong. In the desire to usurp God, the first humans chose pride over dependence, self over God, discord over relationship. They chose to be their own gods, determining right from wrong, instead of living in humble submission to the one true God. The theological word for this is *sin*, which 1 John 3:4 describes as “lawlessness.” Sin is the rejection of God as God, the rightful king and authority for life.

And in this act of rebellion, the train of creation goes off the tracks. The consequences are devastating.

Distrust and fear entered the human heart, along with the nature and propensity to rebel—to turn toward sin and self instead of God. Sin brought with it a curse, on the man, the woman, their descendants and even the land we live in. This curse of sin was all-encompassing and tragically painful. (If you are not familiar with the narrative, please turn to Genesis and read chapters 1-3.)

The immediate effects we see in the narrative are shocking:

- The entire focus of Adam and Eve instantly switches from being consumed with God to being consumed with self (Genesis 3:7).
- Fear (Genesis 3:7).
- Insecurity (Genesis 3:7).
- Shame—hiding from God instead of turning to Him (Genesis 3:8).
- Broken relationship between Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:12).
- Blame shifting (Genesis 3:12-13).
- Separation from God (Genesis 3:22-24).

And that’s only some of the effects from chapter 3. The wreckage continues to pile up in chapter 4, when we see the jealousy and rage of Cain against his brother Abel as he rises up and murders him in cold blood.

His own *brother*.

We went from perfect shalom and peace to murderous chaos, quite literally, in the flip of a page. One might think things would have to improve after that, but the exact opposite is true. The rebellion of humanity gets even worse in the following generations, to the extent that God decides to flood the earth and wipe out everything except a few people.

The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the Lord was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart.

—Genesis 6:5-6

What a tragic and seismic shift from the blinding glory expressed in the creation narratives just a few chapters earlier.

PERSONAL REFLECTION:

We know the effects of sin portrayed in Genesis all too well, because we notice them in our own lives. Where do you see evidence of these sins or effects from sin in your life?

- Self-absorption (Genesis 3:7)

- Fear (Genesis 3:7)

- Insecurity (Genesis 3:7)

- Shame/hiding from God (Genesis 3:8)

- Broken relationship with others (Genesis 3:12)

- Blame shifting onto others (Genesis 3:12-13)

- Separation from God (Genesis 3:22-24)

- Jealousy (Genesis 4:5)

- Anger (Genesis 4:5)

- Hatred (Genesis 4:8)

If we're honest with ourselves, this train wreck is a very personal one, because it's our train wreck. It is what has happened to us.

People all over the planet are riddled with the curse that is separation from God. The weight of it hangs over them—the guilt and the shame that they have no solution for.

And even those of us who are believers are still plagued with the effects of sin. We have had our separation from God dealt with by Jesus, but we are still self-absorbed and petty. Our relationships with others are broken. We are fearful and insecure, even around those who love us the most. We run away from God, and we point fingers. We are jealous of those who get or have what we want. We're angry and resentful.

The truth is that sin harms us and everyone around us.

PERSONAL REFLECTION:

Think about how sin has harmed those around you. Who do you know that has been devastated by the effects of this cosmic train wreck? Who has been decimated by abandonment or abuse, crushed by divorce or unfaithfulness, scarred by hateful words and self-interest?

Think about how other people's sin has hurt you personally. What are some of the most painful effects that the actions and words of others have had on you? What things do you struggle to overcome?

BAD NEWS ABOUNDS

If you turn on the news at any point, you're going to see the bad news that the world is no longer anything resembling the peaceful paradise it was intended to be.

There was a news story a while back about a little 5 year-old girl in Oklahoma whom the authorities found locked in a closet in her home, on the verge of death from starvation with bones peeking through her skin. Her name is Georgia, and although she was 5, she could not talk yet—she could only mumble animal-like utterings. Her entire body was covered in hair to regulate her body temperature.

Her mother had locked her in a dark closet for years, with very little food and water, because “she looked like her father.”¹

When you hear stories like this one...when you think about the devastating effects of sin in your own life and in the lives of those around you...it can feel overwhelming.

Shalom is nowhere to be found.

In our world, there is bad news everywhere. It's on the news, and it's inside of us. The term “tragically broken” doesn't even begin to describe the depth and weight of what's gone wrong.

We are a mess. The world we inhabit is a mess. Some professions (such as doctors, counselors and social workers) see this more often than the average person, who may not feel it until they turn on the news. But regardless, we all feel the continuous, monotonous gnawing of the fact that life isn't as it was designed to be.

Instead of being united in relationship to God, reflecting and glorifying Him, we are separated from Him, “alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds” (Colossians 1:21). We suffer from a vertical brokenness—a relationship that was designed to give us life and vitality is severed, and we are reeling from the effects of that break.

It is a self-chosen separation, a willful rebellion, well-deserving of the wrath of God and the loss of all blessings that flow from relationship with Him.

¹ Georgia was adopted by a loving, Christian family and is now thriving. You can find a link to her story at midtowncolumbia.com/grassroots.

Derived from this broken relationship with God, we suffer from a crippling horizontal brokenness, a dysfunction of the relationships with those around us.

Instead of loving one another, we harm one another.

Instead of serving one another, we serve ourselves and use others.

Instead of encouraging one another, we tear one another down.

We steal from one another, lie to one another and hate one another.

Instead of peace and joy we have insecurity and a profound sense of shame, with no clue how to fix it.

This is *not* the way things were supposed to be.

So, what is the solution to all this bad news?

Scores of people around the globe are asking that same question and coming up with a myriad of answers. Some think the answer is science, while others turn to philosophy. Some say that there is no answer and we should just enjoy ourselves. Some think the solution is education, and others think better law enforcement will fix it. The problem is, however, that none of these things get to the core of what's gone wrong in the human heart.

The root of our problem is our broken relationship with God, and our relational brokenness is only an outworking of that spiritual issue. Because that is true, God is the only one who can actually fix the problem.

Oprah can't fix it. Dr. Phil can't fix it. You and I can't fix it. Even Mother Theresa wouldn't be able to fix it.

God is the only possible being in the universe who can deal with both our vertical brokenness and our horizontal brokenness. We are in such a predicament that only His arms are strong enough to save and restore.

Here's what we would need:

- We would need God to commit, with all of heaven's ferocity, to be the solution to all of the issues we have no hope of fixing.
- We would need God to do something about our separation from Him.
- We'd need Him to cross the insurmountable gulf that our sin has caused, to make a way, by His grace, for us to be reconciled to Him.

- If something that good ever were to come true, we would then need God to do something about our horizontal brokenness.
- We'd need him to heal our relationships, enabling us to forgive and love instead of getting revenge.
- We'd need Him to help us be faithful to one another in light of the fact that He is so faithful to us.
- We'd need Him to restore relationship among these people to the point that they actually put God's design for life on display for those around them.
- We'd need God to use the community of people He's reconciling to Himself to be messengers of the good news that is found through Him—that He can actually deal with our brokenness and insurmountable problems.
- We'd need this movement to spread in the most simple and organic way possible— crossing cultures, borders and oceans.

In short, we'd need God to enact a history-sweeping, no-holds-barred, come-hell-or-high-water plan to change the world. Huge problems require giant solutions.

Even though we are more wicked and hopeless than we could ever imagine, we'd need Him to have such a ferocious and white-hot love for us that He would be glad to move heaven and earth to chase us down.

We'd need the biggest miracle the world has ever seen. Something that would silence all of heaven with anticipation.

We would need exactly what He has done for us.

GOD'S PLAN TO CHANGE THE WORLD: A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

We discussed how the first chapters of Genesis go quickly awry in the worst way imaginable. However, tucked into the very delivery of the bad news about the curse of sin, God introduces hope—a plan to fix everything that would go wrong and reverse the curse. Theologians have called this preview of the gospel the “*protoevangelium*,” meaning “the first gospel” in Latin. It is a simple statement in Genesis 3:15 directed toward the serpent in the story (Satan):

I will put enmity between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and her offspring;
he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.

—Genesis 3:15

God promises that someone from Eve’s offspring would rise up and crush the enemy, thereby restoring all that was broken and cursed. He would bring victory and redemption as far as the curse is found, crushing the enemy and all of sin’s effects.

A few chapters later in Genesis 12, God approached a childless, 75-year-old man named Abram and told him that He would make a great nation out of him and his offspring. God says that through Abram’s family He will bless all the nations of the earth (Genesis 12:1-3).

Abram and Sarai had tried for decades to bear a child, to no avail. In Genesis 15, God asks Abram to trust that God would provide them an heir—to fix the problem they had no power to fix. Abram “believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness” (Genesis 15:6).

God later changes Abram’s name to Abraham (and Sarai’s to Sarah), a symbol of the new relationship and people God was forming for Himself. Ten years after God first came to him, Abraham and Sarah had a child named Isaac, and the nation of Israel was born.

Throughout the Old Testament, the people of Israel would represent God to the world. They were a “nation of priests” who put God on display to the world around them (Exodus 19:6). God instituted the law, temples, priests and sacrifices—all earthly shadows pointing to the sin that has separated us from God and to the great lengths necessary to make things right again. Knowing God’s promises of redemption through His people, Israel awaited the king that would rise to power and fix all that was wrong with the world.

In the most epic plot twist ever, that King was born into a manger in Bethlehem. It was a different, but much better, solution than the people of Israel could ever have imagined. Jesus, the eternally existent Son of God, put on human flesh and made a way for us to be reconciled to God. He lived a perfect life in submission to the Father, succeeding in every way we failed, then died on a cross to pay the price for our sins and rose from the grave to defeat sin and death forever.

Jesus is our great solution to the humanly unsolvable problem—the very climax of history. He meets our most desperate needs and fills our deepest desires.

He is curing the curse.

God’s heart has always been to reconcile the ends of the earth to Himself through Jesus (2 Corinthians 5:19). His salvation and redemption was not intended to stop at one group of people, and He set His plan in motion from the first words out of His mouth after the fall.

The story doesn’t end with Jesus’ resurrection, however. To the men He had been pouring His life into for the previous years, He gave what is called the Great Commission:

And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

—Matthew 28:18-20

All throughout history, God has been forming a people for Himself—a people to put His love and glory on display for those around them. This culminated in Jesus instituting the church, God’s grassroots kingdom—a beautiful and unexpected plan for transforming the world.

His plan is, boiled down to the simplest extreme, “You guys do this together now. Make disciples and represent Me to the ends of the earth.” His grace creates a community on mission. Groups of broken humans, indwelt by the Holy Spirit and wrecked by the hope of Jesus, are the means through which the kingdom spreads all over the world. Jesus said that He would build His church, and the gates of hell would not overcome it (Matt 16:18).

The promise that God made to Abraham in Genesis 12:3 that “in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” is coming to fruition before our very eyes.

In our current age and culture, the term “church” can carry some baggage with it. It can make people think more about a religious country club, a politi-

cal agenda or hypocrisy than it does about the beautiful and attractive family of God.

Despite the sins and failures of those aligned with Jesus throughout the ages (and there have been many), the church remains *the* plan to bring the hope of Jesus to the world. It is the solution. The church is plan A and there is no plan B.

And that plan A has worked.

What started with a few dozen disciples has spawned into millions upon millions of people all over the world. There are unknown scores of people around the planet whose lives have been turned upside down by Jesus in the best way possible and who now live in a community of believers to put Him on display.

This grassroots kingdom is happening in Israel where it all started. It's happening in China, in the Philippines, in Brazil, in Russia and here in the United States of America.

By the power of the Holy Spirit, those first disciples started baptizing and making disciples and it hasn't stopped yet. As we join God in this, we are literally joining His rescue mission for planet earth. We are joining Him in the solution, in the making right of wrongs.

As you apply the good news of Jesus to all areas of life, you are joining God in redeeming the earth.

As you help create communities who are family because of the gospel, you are joining God in changing the world.

As you live intentionally on mission with those in your community, you are joining God in saving the planet.

Jesus is building His church. He's advancing His kingdom, and although He doesn't need us, by His grace we are invited right into the thick of it.

CONVERSATION STARTERS:

- Discuss any insights or thoughts from this chapter.
- What are some of the effects of sin in your life? Do you see any commonalities with the ones shown in Genesis 3 and 4? What deep-seated problems do you need God to do something about?
- Do you think about the group you are sitting in as God's plan to change the world? If not, how do you view it?
- Think about the innumerable things that had to happen for the gospel to reach you from a small band of believers in the Middle East. How did the gospel reach you? (Your family, a friend, etc.) What was that last connection that brought the good news of Jesus to bear on your life?

NOTES:

CHAPTER TWO:

COMMUNITIES THAT CHANGE THE WORLD

All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

—2 Corinthians 5:18-20

PERSONAL REFLECTION:

Write down any insights or thoughts from the passage above.

Our vision as a church family has always been “To be a Jesus-centered family on mission with Him.”

But as we discussed last chapter, as we become a Jesus-centered family on mission with Him, we are actually joining something infinitely bigger than Midtown or Columbia—we are joining in God’s plan to save the planet. A plan that started thousands of years before we were born, which will continue for long after we are gone.

This is staggering. By God’s grace, we are a part of the greatest story ever told. The greatest mission that’s ever existed. We are part of the largest kingdom that has ever walked the face of the earth. Every cause, mission and charge pales in comparison to the history-sweeping work of God reconciling humans to Himself.

Like an unstoppable train rolling through history, God’s rescue plan has been picking up speed, moving faster and faster with each day. His grassroots kingdom continues to spread. Disciples make other disciples, and spiritual prodigals become family with God again. His good news spreads from one community to the next, starting new churches and communities, beacons of light spanning the spiritual darkness covering the globe.

HOW A KINGDOM SPREADS

He put another parable before them, saying, “The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field. It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”

—Matthew 13:31-32

When you think about a kingdom spreading, you likely picture marches and might, pomp and circumstance and maybe some fireworks. But the grand pageantry of border expansion or military muscle is not quite what God had in mind.

Jesus says it’s like a seed that’s planted in a field. It’s not just any seed, but the smallest of all seeds. And what happens over time, while no one is watching? That seed pokes its sprout out of the dirt. It starts as a seedling and, before long, standing before your eyes is a giant, sprawling tree with birds resting in its branches. It is a slow, but very steady, organic growth.

Like the tree, His kingdom grows through the smallest and simplest of things.

People. Relationships. Conversations. Groups of people who've been given the ministry of reconciliation. Those entrusted with His good news, to whom God has said, "Go and make disciples."

Think about this—all around the world there are groups just like the one you are in. These are little communities who've been reconciled to Jesus, who now implore others to be reconciled to God. Through the work of the Holy Spirit in the midst of these communities spanning the globe, people will come to know Jesus this week—they will pass from spiritual death to life. Someone from their community will shed tears while baptizing them.

Marriages will be reconciled through God's work in these communities this week. Husbands will learn in some small way what it means for them to love their wives as Christ loves the church.

Relational sin will be squashed. Brokenness passed down for generations will be mended. People will trade their idols for the true and living God. Prodigal sons and daughters will be reconciled to their Father and their new family, where all of their needs are met. People will feel the weight of hiding and pretending lift off of them, and for the first time in life they will feel like they belong.

If you could see a spiritual map of the world, you'd see little blips of grace, like the scenarios mentioned earlier, lighting it up like a Lite Brite. The majority of them are not happening at crusades or events—they are happening in the context of everyday, ordinary life. These little miracles are taking place in kitchens, living rooms, coffee shops and parks. Remarkable, breathtaking things are taking place among the most ordinary of circumstances.

This is happening all over the planet, while you sleep, eat and go to work. The kingdom is growing in the most grassroots, underground way possible. It is simple, subversive and spreading like a wildfire. There is no functional difference between the communities in Cambodia and the community you find yourself a part of in Columbia—all are meant for nothing less than changing the world. Seeds are designed to grow into trees.

EVERYDAY WORLD CHANGING

You may not feel like much of a world changer. Maybe you had dreams about being a part of something huge and important, but...life, right? It's Thursday and you have to get to work and then you have to go to the grocery store. If

you're lucky you may have enough energy to watch some Netflix when you get home.

You may think you'll have to leave the world changing to those who have time for that sort of thing. Those moving overseas to be missionaries, those helping the homeless and caring for the orphans and doing radical things. In comparison, your life feels rather...insignificant.

PERSONAL REFLECTION:

Have you ever felt that your life and ministry are somehow second-rate or insignificant compared to other people's? How so?

If that is where you are coming from, we have good news for you—you are a part of changing the world after all. In fact, you are sitting in the midst of a community that, as a representation of Jesus, is the only truly world-changing force in the universe.

If you grew up around Christianity you may be cynical about that claim, but your familiarity does not negate the truth. It may sound like white noise to you because you have heard it so often, but the reality is that groups of people living out what is described in this book is the only thing in existence that will change eternity. There is nothing more beautiful, compelling or attractive in the universe.

World changing is actually for all of us who know Jesus, due to the simple fact that we know the only person who's ever truly changed history.

Read this passage in Acts:

The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of

the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, for 'In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we are indeed his offspring.'

—Acts 17:24-28

PERSONAL REFLECTION:

How should this passage shape the way you view yourself and your purpose in life?

There is a powerful truth in this passage; God is sovereignly orchestrating both where and when we live so that those around us may come to know Him. So for you personally, that means one of the reasons why you are where you are in life (your city, your job, your house) is because God loves the people around you. He wants to use you to speak His good news to them, and that is the farthest thing from insignificant.

God will certainly call many of us to leave Columbia, to help plant a church in North Carolina or in North Korea, to start an orphanage overseas, to work with Project Rescue in India, to teach women how to sew and make a living in Zambia, to be a missionary to an unreached people group, etc.

However, those kinds of callings are not the only ones that are significant and worthwhile. He will call many of us to “live and move and have our being” right here in Columbia, SC. He will call us to work jobs and faithfully proclaim the gospel to those around us. You may live in the same house for decades because God cares about the eternity of your neighbors. He may call you to stay at the same frustrating job for much longer than you want because He loves your coworkers.

In short, you are where you are for a reason...it is not an accident. So while you are there, open your eyes and embrace God’s calling on your life.

To understand this matters immensely, because God’s method of changing the world is not “Go therefore and do something awesome.” It is “Go therefore and make disciples” (Matthew 28:19). It is to be an ambassador of His grace to those around you (2 Corinthians 5:20).

God’s plan to change the world is by entrusting communities of His grace around the world with His message of reconciliation—the best news in history that we can be made right with Him through Jesus. His plan is to make His appeal through these communities who are His representatives on earth.

What could be more significant than that?

God is changing the world, and He’s doing it through communities of people like the one you are sitting in right now. Communities who, like little hospitals, hold out the cure for the curse on all of creation free of charge. Communities who shout, “Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat!” (Isaiah 55:1). He’s changing Columbia through groups of people like the one you are sitting in right now, and He’s been gracious enough to even do so through our church family.

You want proof of this?

- Seven years ago before our church family started, there were hundreds of people who were still lost, “having no hope and without God in the world” (Ephesians 2:12).
- Seven years ago there were not close to 100 LifeGroups on mission all over our city.
- Seven years ago some who are now LifeGroup leaders, coaches, pastors and missionaries did not yet know Jesus.
- Seven years ago hundreds of people were still trapped in relentless cycles of bondage to sin.

God is changing the world through communities of His grace all over the globe, including our little family here in Columbia. He’s doing so through groups of normal people being intentional in everyday life with those around them. Again, God’s plan is not to have lone ranger missionaries, but a family of missionaries doing this together. A communal witness is much more effective than an individual witness, because it’s not just individuals who’ve been restored and redeemed—it’s our relationships.

The crazy thing is, the method through which God is changing the world is so simple. His strategy pretty much boils down to this:

Step 1: Get people who don't know Me around communities of people who do.

Step 2: Let the Holy Spirit work.

And it is working marvelously.

Imagine how different our city would be if a Jesus-loving community of people lived on every street? What if they gathered in homes, shared meals and burdens, met needs in their community, sought out neighbors and coworkers, invited them into community and introduced them to the hope of Jesus? What if there were families of missionaries on every corner, modeling a different way of living?

That would change our city.

- People who were once hopeless would be spreading the good news of Jesus.
- Single mothers would be enfolded into community.
- Their kids would be mentored by godly men.
- Marriages would stay together instead of ending in bitterness and anger.
- Orphans would have a family—no more kids would wait for a place to call home.
- The cycle of sin being passed from generation to generation would be broken.
- Generational poverty would end.
- The homeless would be cared for.
- The addict would be set free.
- The lonely would be enfolded into family.
- Missionaries would be sent out.

That, my friends, would change the world. Columbia would be a beacon of light for the gospel in God's grand mission throughout history, sending more and more missionaries farther and farther out.

PERSONAL REFLECTION:

What do you think about the idea of changing the world through being on mission with your LifeGroup? Is that a new idea to you? Why do you struggle to believe it could really be that simple?

MAKE DISCIPLES: THE SIMPLEST OF STRATEGIES

This may all sound just fine to you, but how do we actually go about becoming communities that change the world? How would these communities need to live?

We're going to spend the rest of the book answering these questions. As we study what God's grassroots kingdom looks like in the following chapters, it's important to keep in mind that all of these things are fleshing out what it looks like for us to do exactly what Jesus commanded us to do in Matthew 28—make disciples.

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

—Matthew 28:18-20

This is one of the primary passages where God's plan to save the world is revealed. As mentioned earlier, it is not terribly complicated. Jesus was speaking to the people He had poured His life into—the people He had been training for years. And at this point His instruction to them was to "go therefore and make disciples". In other words, "Go do for others what I have done for you. Pass along what I've taught and lived in front of you."

Making disciples in this passage involves both *baptizing them* and *teaching them*. *Baptizing them* implies introducing non-believers to Jesus. *Teaching them* implies growing them up into maturity.

Being disciples who make disciples is what we are called to. It's what being the church together looks like—what the Holy Spirit produces as we follow and submit everything to Jesus.

But what does it mean to make disciples? Many people upon hearing that terminology may think of a classroom setting, or of sitting down once a week at Starbucks with someone who is at least 20 years older than them. Those are certainly valid avenues through which discipleship can occur, but to get closest to what the Bible describes as discipleship we must look to the Gospels, to the actual context in which Jesus made disciples of those who followed Him.

First, for Jesus, discipleship was relational. It was mired in everyday life, and it happened primarily in the context of a group, not one on one. Jesus did not meet with His disciples for an hour a month—He shared His very life with them. They ate together, traveled together, laughed together and ministered together.

Discipleship was not sectioned off from real life—it was real life. Jesus saw them in everyday situations, in everyday tensions and in real-time struggles with sin. He would hear them arguing as they walked down a road together, and He was able to speak directly into these things and apply His truth to their lives (Mark 9:33-35).

Second, discipleship was comprehensive. It started when He went to the future disciple and extended an invitation, and it was still going on as He was commissioning them to be sent out in Matthew 28.

In other words discipleship can most simply be described as this:

Helping people take the next step toward Jesus, no matter where they are.

So the command to “make disciples” is all-encompassing. It includes both being on mission with those who do not yet know Jesus and pushing those who already know Jesus even closer to Him. It is our “one size fits all” strategy. We seek to make disciples of the people we do life with in LifeGroup and also of those we are intentionally building relationship with.

This is all the same process because of this reason: no matter who the person is, the question is always, “What is their next step toward Jesus and how can we help them move in that direction?”

This helps to simplify what can seem like a confusing process. We always ask the same question, because helping others take next steps toward Jesus, no matter where they are, is how we help change the world.

The remainder of our study will address these in more detail, but in order to join God in His mission of making disciples, here are the types of communities we will need to become:

- Communities that believe the good news of Jesus.
- Communities that tell a better story than the story of our culture.
- Communities that love Jesus and forsake our idols.
- Communities that look like a family because of Jesus.
- Communities that live on mission together.
- Communities that fight for one another.
- Communities that refuse to quit when things are hard.
- Communities that multiply.

THE NEXT SEVEN YEARS

Earlier, we mentioned some of the incredible things that God has done through our church family in the first seven years of our existence. It's so encouraging to reflect on what He has done, the people He's reached that were far from Him and the health and maturity that He's grown in us.

But we are just getting started.

Dream with us for a moment. What could God do through our meager little family in the next seven years? How many new LifeGroups could we launch to be beacons of light in our city? Could we have one in every neighborhood? How many church plants and missionaries could we send out?

How many people in our city, who are currently far from God, could pass through the baptism pool, proclaiming that Jesus is Lord among the shouts of our family?

How many people who God has placed you around (your neighbors, coworkers, friends) may come to know Jesus and be a part of your LifeGroup? How many new groups could your group alone plant in seven years?

PERSONAL REFLECTION:

Pray and ask the Holy Spirit to help you dream about these things. Ask Him to guide you and give you a compelling vision for the future.

What would you love to see God do through our church family as a whole, both in our city and beyond?

What would you love to see God do specifically through your LifeGroup? How many new groups could be started? Who are people you already know who you could pray for to come to know Jesus and find community in your group? (Give specific names.)

We know you want this as much as we do. Please be praying and dreaming with us about how God can use us to change our city and our world.

CONVERSATION STARTERS:

- Discuss any insights or thoughts from this chapter.
- Share some of your individual answers to the last two questions in this section.
 - What were some of the dreams that you came up with for how God could use our church family in His work of reconciling the world to Himself?
 - Were there any specific goals that you came up with particularly for our LifeGroup?
 - Are there any people that you are already building relationship with and praying for? How can we as a group help you reach them? How can we pray for them?
- How does our perspective toward LifeGroup need to grow and change? Do we really believe that God can use our community to change the world?

NOTES:

CHAPTER THREE:

COMMUNITIES THAT BELIEVE GOOD NEWS

Katherine is a fellow student in your sociology class. You've never met her, but you'd recognize her as the really outspoken girl. Really outspoken, especially when religion comes up in class. Katherine is very cynical and, it seems, almost anti-religion in general. She seems to believe that Christianity is the same as any other performance-based religious system—do good and God will bless you; do bad and He will curse you. And she wants nothing to do with it. She thinks she's heard all about Jesus, but in reality she has only heard about religion. She is far from understanding the actual good news about Jesus.

A TALE OF TWO MEN

In Luke chapter 18, Jesus tells a very insightful parable that has drastic implications for our lives:

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.' But

the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”

—Luke 18:9-14

This story is alarming. Jesus is describing exactly what does and does not make a person right with God. Throughout history, people have felt the weight of sin and our separation from God, the pressing nature of both our vertical and horizontal brokenness. They have come up with innumerable answers for how this brokenness can be fixed, and, in this story, Jesus is saying all of those answers come down to one of two options:

OPTION 1: TRUST IN SELF

It is interesting that the audience for this parable is clearly stated: those “who *trusted in themselves* that they were righteous” (Luke 18:9, emphasis added). Jesus wanted us to know exactly who He was talking to because it was a slap in the face to the religious elite of His day, those who sought to earn their own standing with God.

This option is characterized by pride, performance and pomp, but it’s important to realize that it does not just apply to religious zealots. In what may be the most popular parable in the New Testament, the story of the prodigal son in Luke 15, Jesus makes that much clear. (Please read Luke 15:11-32 if you are unfamiliar with this parable.)

The younger brother (frequently referred to as the “prodigal son”) runs away from his father and squanders his inheritance. After losing everything and being reduced to eating pig slop, the younger brother realizes that maybe his father would at least let him come back as a slave. But when he returns, he finds a much different reception—his dad tears up the gravel running to him and hugs his neck. He welcomes the younger brother back into the family and throws an epic party of steak dinners and dancing.

He had trusted in himself—that he knew what was best...how to live life... what would make him happy. He had come up miserably short but, by the father’s grace, he was invited back into the family.

The older brother (who is sometimes ignored in the parable) had never left his father's house. He'd always worked hard and tried to be a model son. He gets offended at the lavish grace shown to his younger brother, and he storms out pouting. Where's the party for him? He's never seen a steak dinner and dancing, and doesn't he deserve that much more so than his younger brother? After all, his performance was flawless. He had obeyed with the best of them. In short, he had trusted in himself and his ability to earn his father's love and blessings.

But the father pursues the older brother as well. He goes outside to him and invites him back in. It's important to note exactly what it is that the father is inviting him back into. It's not just a party; it's a relationship. The older brother is invited back into a relationship that is based on grace and love, not on his performance.

Both brothers trusted in themselves, and that prideful self-trust led both outside of their father's house.

PERSONAL REFLECTION:

Which character do you identify more with: the rebellious younger brother or the religious older brother? Why? Have there been different times in your life when you have identified with both?

In the parable of the tax collector and the Pharisee, this idea is highlighted and summarized. The Pharisee symbolizes any form of trust in self, whether it be religious or rebellious. And Jesus' point is simply that the Pharisee does not get it—he is not “justified,” meaning he is not made right with God. Though he thinks himself righteous, he is actually still under God's just condemnation.

This pride is the root of all that is broken about the world. It's our first parents saying “I know better” in the garden of Eden. It's the reason for our broken relationship with God, as well as our severed relationships with others. The

self-absorption of trying to be our own god, fix our own problems and find our own way no matter the cost lies at the core of the world's agony.

OPTION 2: TRUST IN JESUS

And what about the tax collector in the parable? He was probably the most despised person in his city during that day. He symbolized the scum of the earth, a traitor and a thief—the last person you would think to be made right with God. An unlikely candidate for salvation, to be sure.

But he beat his chest in humble contrition for his sin that he knew separated him from God. He would not even raise his eyes while crying out for God to have mercy on him. Grace was his only shot.

In short, he trusted fully and completely in Jesus. He pushed all of his chips in and said, “God, your grace is my only hope.” And Jesus says that guy gets it. He understands the good news that Jesus has made a way for us to be made right with God. And it's the *only* way.

Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

—John 14:6

The best news in history is that though we had no way of making ourselves right with God, Jesus came and made things right for us. He:

- Came to earth, pursuing us to the point of taking on human flesh.
- Lived a perfect life that fully satisfied the Father.
- Died on the cross to pay the full penalty for our sins, saving us from an eternity in hell separated from God.
- Rose from the grave to defeat sin and death.

By grace through faith, we repent and trust in Jesus alone for salvation (Ephesians 2:8). We are credited for His righteousness and achieve His perfect record by no effort of our own.

For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

—2 Corinthians 5:21

The tax collector is a picture of what salvation by grace through faith looks like. We are 100% saved by grace. Not one ounce of our works, efforts or performance contribute to making us right with God. It is not Jesus + anything; it is ONLY Jesus.

Ultimately, it is this great exchange that restores our relationship with God, and then it works outward to deal with our horizontal brokenness as well.

PERSONAL REFLECTION:

In what ways do you tend to believe that you contributed something to your salvation, even a little bit? Is there any performance or works-based mentality in the way you approach God?

HOW THIS PLAYS OUT IN LIFEGROUPS

WHAT ARE YOU TRUSTING IN?

Because we are sinful people, even after coming to know Jesus we still struggle with reverting back to a self-trusting, performance-based mentality. This is a very sneaky thing, because it comes so naturally to us.

Though a culture of self-trust can look a number of different ways, in a spiritual community like a LifeGroup the most common form it will take is religious self-trust (the older brother from the parable). Well-meaning people will encourage others to “grow spiritually” in all the wrong ways by essentially encouraging them to depend on their performance, try harder, do better, white knuckle it, etc.

This often carries the tone of, “Sure we’re saved by grace, but we are now commanded to keep God happy by doing this or that.” People begin to believe that the way God feels about them rises and falls on their spiritual performance, and that changes almost by the minute. This leads to a very anxious, nerve-racking existence where you feel like you’re walking on eggshells around God. You feel like you’re at bat and you have to hit the ball right,

but for some reason you just can't do it. You keep striking out, and often you just want to give up entirely.

Our huffing and puffing to impress God, our scrambling for brownie points, our thrashing about trying to fix ourselves while hiding our pettiness and wallowing in guilt are nauseating to God and are a flat out denial of the gospel of grace.

—Brennan Manning, *The Ragamuffin Gospel*

A culture based on self-trust may be characterized by the following:

- People will either be proud or depressed (depending on how they feel they are performing spiritually at the time).
- Since relationship with God is performance-based, people will look down on those who can't seem to get their act together.
- There will be very little to no genuine confession of sin because people fear the same judgment they dish out on others. (After all, the only thing worse than God knowing you're a sinner is other people knowing!)
- Some version of "You just need to stop that...do better...try harder..." will be a continual refrain of the group's interaction and advice.²

This culture will never be a welcome relief to a world in need of good news, because it does not highlight the good news. Communities like these will not change the world—they will, at best, bore the world and, at worst, further enslave it.

On the other hand, a culture of grace that's based on trust in Jesus will look drastically different. Because the gospel is known and applied to life, people will become more and more free from their self-trust and performance-based mentalities.

² For a humorous take on what this type of community feels like, check out the spoof of Jesus talking to His disciples. Find the link at midtowncolumbia.com/grassroots.

PERSONAL REFLECTION:

On the scale below, circle the number that is appropriate to answer the question:

HOW DOES GOD FEEL ABOUT YOU RIGHT NOW?

1 = God is very disappointed in you.

10 = God is delighted in you.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Why did you circle the number that you did?

Let's say all of the guys in Jeff's LifeGroup are Christians (a situation that we hope is less and less common as we join God in His mission). One week Jeff wants to press into the issue of how much they are trusting in Jesus, so at the beginning of their meeting time he asks them to get out a piece of paper and asks them the same question you just answered. He says: "On a scale from 1 to 10—1 being God is completely and utterly disappointed in you, and 10 being that God is completely delighting in you, how does God feel about you right now in this moment?"

The first person to share clears his throat and humbly says that he feels like a 4 right now, because he looked at porn last night and he needs to get that off his chest. Another guy says he feels like a 9.5 because he's read his Bible every day for the past two weeks, and that has never happened before in his life. The third guy shares that he drank a little too much on Saturday night, but he got up and made it to church on Sunday and the sermon was about forgiveness, which reminded him of the gospel. But he still feels like a 7 because he was still hungover while hearing about God's grace.

Jeff sees red flags everywhere. He had considered it before, but now more than ever he sees that his guys are heavily operating from a works-based mindset and are trusting in themselves. So he turns to Matthew 3 and reads the story of Jesus' baptism.

And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”

—Matthew 3:16-17

Jeff tells them that they have too small a view of Jesus and what He has accomplished for them. He tells them, “If you are in Christ, then when God looks at you He sees Jesus. After you look at porn or get drunk—He still sees Jesus. Whether you read your Bible everyday or whether you haven’t touched it in a month—He still sees Jesus. Because of Jesus, ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased’ can be said over you at every moment of your lives. You are always a 10 in Jesus, and that will never change. Nothing you do could make God love you any more or any less, and your greatest feats would not make him more pleased with you than He is right now.”

That, friends, is freedom. That is good news if there has ever been such a thing.

God is not keeping score, granting or withholding blessings on the basis of our performance.

—Jerry Bridges

The best of earthly fathers are an example of this unconditional love. A loving father does not delight in his children because they perform well—He delights in them because they are His children! A godly father does not celebrate his son if he hits a homerun and shun him if he strikes out. In the same way, God does not turn His back on us in shame when we do not hit the proverbial ball right.

Understanding what Jesus has accomplished for us changes everything. It frees us from trusting in ourselves in any way. It releases us from the bondage of “perform or be punished.”

The gospel shuts down the bookkeeping department in our hearts.

—Scotty Ward Smith

PERSONAL REFLECTION:

Do you tend to believe that God is disappointed in you when you don't hit the proverbial ball right? How so? Is there still a "bookkeeping department" alive and well in your heart?

Do you find it hard to believe that if you are in Jesus, you are always a 10 on the scale of how much God is delighting in you? Why or why not?

Read Hebrews 4:14-16. When you experience temptation or fall into sin, do you immediately "with confidence draw near to the throne of grace," or do you run from God in shame? What does your answer to that question say about your functional understanding of the gospel?

A grace-based culture of trusting in Jesus will look very different from a culture of self-trust. It will be marked by:

- **Honesty and authenticity.** God knows our sin and has taken care of it, so there is no reason to hide.
- **Genuine confession and repentance.** Grace has produced a genuine love for Jesus, so by the Holy Spirit's conviction we actually want

to turn away from sin. We are free to confess things that we never thought we'd say out loud, and there is immeasurable freedom in that.

- **Atmosphere of grace.** People will notice grace instead of judgment and condemnation.
- **God-centered encouragement.** Because standing with God is not a competition or based on performance, people are freed up to genuinely encourage others about how Jesus is working in their lives.
- **Gospel application to life.** When people share their sins and issues, the response is how the finished work of Jesus applies and frees them, not only surface-level advice.

What would happen if Jeff's LifeGroup embodied this grace-based culture? If their community was based on the bedrock truth that Jesus has fully accomplished, once and for all, their standing with God?

For one, it would be incredible for the guys in the group. They would constantly be encouraged by others and reminded of the fact that their righteousness is in Jesus. They would not feel judged or used by others in order to prop themselves up spiritually.

And what about when unbelieving friends or coworkers were invited into the group...what would they notice? A tangible picture of the good news of Jesus would be set before them. They would see people repenting and trusting Jesus alone. They would find a culture of transparency and authenticity that might even shock them.

If we are ever to be a meaningful part of God's kingdom, we must become communities of grace that are completely transformed by the good news of Jesus.

Only the gospel tells us to be free by acknowledging our failure. Christianity is the unreligion because it is the one faith whose founder tells us to bring not our doing, but our need.

—Dane Ortlund

GOOD NEWS, THEN ADVICE

Like cold water to a thirsty soul, so is good news from a far country.

—Proverbs 25:25

The Greek word for gospel is *euangelion*, literally meaning “good news” or “news that brings joy”. But this is no everyday good news that you hear on Facebook with people exclaiming what good fortunes have recently arrived in their life.

This is life-changing, earth-shattering good news. It is news—not advice. Here is what Martyn Lloyd Jones says is the difference:

Advice is counsel about something that hasn’t happened yet, but you can do something about it. News is a report about something that has happened which you can’t do anything about because it has been done for you and all you can do is to respond to it.

In context, the word was associated with a military victory. If an army lost a battle, a messenger would run back to the city screaming “The enemy is coming to kill us all! Marksmen over here, horses over here...fight for your lives!”

However, if the army won, the messenger would run back to the city yelling “Good news! Good news! We won, we are safe!” Something was accomplished *for* the people and they could breathe a massive sigh of relief. Both messengers produce a tremendous response—one produces fear while the other produces joy.

There is a drastic difference between good advice and good news.

To use a modern-day analogy, let’s say a young husband has been deployed into the heat of war overseas. His wife hasn’t seen him in over a year, and she misses him so much it feels like her bones ache.

Suppose someone were to go to her and say, “I know how you can get through this. You need to get a hobby. Keep yourself busy. Try to fill up every minute of your day to make the time pass faster. Be strong—you can make it through this.”

She would likely take that as good advice, but it does not in any way bring relief to her true distress.

However, suppose a friend were to run to her house and beat on her front door. Upon her opening the door, the friend starts to scream, “The war is over! The war is over! Your husband is coming home!”

That would be good news. That would be *euangelion*.

This is the gospel of Jesus. It is good news that changes everything, not advice that we follow. This grace has happened to us and we rejoice in what has been accomplished on our behalf. Like the young wife, we simply celebrate what is now true about us and our future.

Believers in Jesus have had the ultimate good news spoken over us:

- Our sin and separation from God have been conquered (Romans 8:1-2).
- Our justly deserved wrath, an eternity in hell, has been taken away by God (Ephesians 2:1-8).
- We have been restored to relationship with God and even adopted into His family (Galatians 4:1-7).

The gospel of Jesus properly understood produces relief and joy, not fear and anxiety. Like the military messengers sent to proclaim freedom and victory, we have been given the world's greatest news to proclaim to those in our LifeGroup and those who don't know Jesus yet. This is a vital part of what it means to make disciples, because as we point people to the good news of Jesus, we help them take next steps toward Him.

Everyone around you who doesn't know Jesus is believing a false good news. Their good news will not work—it will not deliver them. So as we point others to trust in the fact that Jesus can deal with all of our brokenness, we are joining God on His mission to save the planet. We have good news to offer everyone, and applying it to all of life is an integral part of our mission.

Of course, there is nothing wrong with giving helpful and practical advice to people, and many times that is a loving thing to do. We simply want to give good news first, and then any practical advice can follow. This follows the pattern we see in the New Testament, where in many letters (such as Ephesians and Colossians) the general structure is:

- Here are all the things that are true about you in Christ.
- In light of that, here's how you should live.

The gospel addresses our spiritual needs as the root of our practical needs, so we want to do the same.

HOW DO I GIVE GOOD NEWS BEFORE ADVICE?

I have heard your exhortations and they will not help me. Do you have good news for me?

—J. Gresham Machen

If this is a newer concept to you, you may be hesitant to speak truth to someone because you don't want to just give them advice without the gospel. First, don't be petrified of saying something wrong. We are all learning this concept, and the Holy Spirit is with us to teach and guide us. But it is good to think about our language and what it implies, so here are a few markers to help you know when you are giving advice only vs. when you are giving good news.

ADVICE	GOOD NEWS
Typically starts with some version of "You just need to..."	Typically starts with some version of "In Christ you are..." (Righteous, justified, made new, clean, loved, adopted, etc.)
Primarily focuses on behavior modification and accountability.	Does not neglect accountability, but does not stop there—it digs deeper and focuses on the heart change that will lead to behavior change.
About what you should do.	About what Jesus has done on your behalf.
Makes people feel increased pressure.	Makes people feel relieved from pressure.

A good summary of this is that advice gives people more work to do, while good news gives them freedom. Advice assumes that your behavior will change your identity, while good news attests that knowing your identity will change your behavior.

The story from Jeff's LifeGroup is a great example of good news vs. advice. He could simply have told them things they could do to improve their partic-

ular issues (practice spiritual disciplines, improve accountability for pornography, etc.). Instead, he spoke the good news about what is true about them in Jesus. He pointed them to what Jesus has already accomplished on their behalf and showed them how there is no pressure to perform because in Christ believers have been credited with a perfect righteousness that can never fade.

For anyone in Christ, the pressure truly is off, and that grace is the best thing imaginable to produce behavior change. After speaking this good news, Jeff could go on to give helpful advice for their specific struggles based on his experience with similar struggles, insight on accountability, etc.

Important note: When encouraging people not to revert to a “do better...try harder” religious mentality, the question inevitably arises: “Wait...aren’t we supposed to try harder?” The answer is yes...and no. Dallas Willard puts it this way: “Grace is not opposed to effort—it’s opposed to earning.” In other words, a proper understanding of the gospel will not produce a lackadaisical apathy; it will produce a grace-driven effort—a desire to grow spiritually, repent of our sin, etc. We will want to grow and trust Jesus, putting forth effort that naturally flows from gratitude for what He’s accomplished for us. This grace-driven effort, however, is a far cry from performance-driven righteousness where we believe our effort (or lack thereof) is what determines our standing with God.

We pray that our LifeGroups would be firmly rooted in this good news about Jesus, creating attractive cultures of grace and transparency. In our own lives and in our conversations both with those inside and outside of our groups, it’s important to ask:

- Am I believing the gospel for myself?
- Am I trusting in Jesus’ righteousness alone for my standing with God on a daily basis?
- Am I pointing people to trust in themselves (no matter what form that takes), or am I pointing them to trust in Jesus?
- Am I reminding those in Christ that God delights in them fully and completely through Jesus?
- Am I giving believers advice only, or am I first giving them the good news about Christ’s love, affection and faithfulness to them?

Important note: One helpful question to ask yourself when thinking through what you are about to say to someone is, “Could I start this by saying, ‘*I have good news for you?*’” For example, saying, “*I have good news for you...you need to do better*” doesn’t work. A bell would go off in your brain...nope, that’s not good news. However, take the test with this sentence: “*I have good news for you...Jesus forgives you and His grace also empowers you to change. He promises to be faithful in changing you as you repent and trust Him.*” Would that be good news? Yep. You have a winner.

The world has plenty of advice (the self-help shelves are full of it). In order to be a part of God’s plan to change the world, we need to be a people who believe good news.

A people who point to the surpassing grace of Jesus that can save tax collectors and Pharisees alike.

A people who proclaim the Father’s pursuit of both the religious and the rebellious.

A people so wrecked by the unconditional love of God that it shapes our interactions with everyone around us.

The grace of Jesus covers us and the Father ran after us. There is no better news under the sun than that. There are scores of people around you who think that Christianity is nothing but advice—a list of “dos and don’ts.” They couldn’t be more wrong, but they don’t know it. They desperately need to hear and see the good news that changes everything lived out in a community like yours.

CONVERSATION STARTERS:

- Discuss any insights or thoughts from this chapter.
- Before knowing the truth that your righteousness is perfected in Jesus, how would you have rated yourself on a scale of 1-10 determining how pleased God is with you this week? How does knowing the truth that you are always a 10 in Christ make you feel?

- What makes it difficult for you to receive or accept God's grace? What does your difficulty in receiving grace reveal that you believe about God and yourself?
- Are there areas of our conversation and interaction with each other where we point one another to trust in self rather than trust in Jesus? Where do we give good advice without good news? How can we grow in pointing each other to Jesus and the good news of what He has accomplished for us?
- In light of the good news that Jesus' righteousness covers our sin, is there anything you need to confess to the group? Is there anything you need to share that you never thought you'd be able to say out loud?

NOTES:

CHAPTER FOUR:

COMMUNITIES THAT TELL A BETTER STORY

The same impulse that makes us want our books to have a plot makes us want our lives to have a plot. We need to feel that we are getting somewhere, making progress...It doesn't do justice to our conviction that we are on some kind of journey or quest, that there must be some deeper meaning to our lives than whether we feel good about ourselves. Only people who have lost their sense of adventure, mystery, and romance worry about their self-esteem. And at that point what they need is not a good therapist, but a good story...the central question for us should not be, "What personality dynamics explain my behavior?" but rather "What sort of story am I in?"

—William Kilpatrick

If we are to be grassroots communities that God uses to reach the world, we will need to understand what it means to live in His story—to be a part of His kingdom.

THE STORY OF GOD

The story of God is the greatest story ever told. It's a gospel story, because again, it is life-changing good news. It goes something like this:

Act 1: Creation. God is the infinite Creator—the "Unmade Maker" of all things. We were created to reflect His image, enjoy relation-

ship with Him forever and rule over creation in submission to Him. Bearing the image of God, we hold a dignity that no other created being has.

Act 2: Fall. Rather than live as a part of God's grand story, we chose to tell our own story. We wanted to be the hero, and this had devastating consequences. Relationship with God was severed, and, along with it, the blessings of joy, comfort, and security that come only from Him. We were left to our own devices, bent over fatal wounds. Both vertical and horizontal brokenness came to define our lives.

Act 3: Redemption. In His grace, God did not leave us to our own devices. He came to rescue us in the form of Jesus. He reconciled us to Himself, and part of His work is making all things new. We have a renewed and redeemed purpose for life because of Him, and we spread to others the hope we've received by joining God in His plan to change the world.

Act 4: Restoration. What God has started in us, He will finish. As God concludes His history-redeeming work, He puts everything broken back together. All who are in Christ will be completely made new, our sin natures destroyed forever, in a paradise of relationship with our Father, where there is no more death, sin or pain.

This is the sweeping, grand narrative of the universe. It is the story that God, the only true storyteller, has woven throughout history. He is the author of this story, the sole arbiter of truth. Since this is God's worldview, it is the one correct worldview. He, being the king, determines what it looks like to live life in His kingdom. The problem is, because of our rebellion (the Fall from Act 2), we have chosen to tell our own stories, thus creating our own broken worldviews.

FALSE STORIES, FALSE KINGDOMS

Everyone has a story (or worldview). Your story is your context for life—what gives you meaning, purpose and hope. It is of drastic importance, because it literally shapes your life, determining the decisions you make, what you find important and how you spend your time. Your story answers burning questions such as:

- **Creation.** Why am I here? What is my purpose in life?
- **Fall.** What has gone wrong with the world? What has gone wrong with me?
- **Redemption.** What will fix the problem?
- **Restoration.** What will things be like when the problem is fixed?

There is only one story big enough to adequately answer all of our questions. One story that can explain both the beauty and the immense brokenness we find scattered throughout ourselves and throughout the world. One story that can make sense of our desires, dreams and disappointments. That is the story of God's purpose for creation, His unceasing love for mankind and His pull-out-all-the-stops plan to fix what's gone wrong. It is not only a story big enough for all of us, it is the only story big enough for us.

Writing novels, I got into the habit of looking for plots. After awhile, I began to suspect that my own life had a plot. And after awhile more, I began to suspect that life itself has a plot.

—Frederick Buechner

We get off track from God's metanarrative, and things go bad quickly. As we discussed in the previous chapter, our sin nature causes us to be self-consumed, so our stories revolve around us. We think we can fix the problem. We become the storyteller, taking the reins out of God's hands, and we believe we can find the solution to our problems and become our own hero. We'd rather build our own kingdom than submit to God's.

Our false stories and personal kingdoms can be built on anything. Your false story could be success—as long as you look successful compared to others around you, you think your life will have meaning. It could be leisure—the thought that pursuing comfort and ease at all costs will give you the good life. Your personal kingdom could be being a perfect parent—you find your identity in your role as a parent and making a mistake would crush you. It could be about where you're from, who you know or what you do. Your story could even be the college football team that you pull for—you (falsely) believe that a group of 18-21 year-olds can justify your existence.

All of these (and many more) are examples of us living in the wrong story—the one with you at the center, where you have to shore up your identity, solve your issues all by yourself and find your own way to make sense of your life.

Your neighbors, family, coworkers and even your local bookstore and the billboards you drive by on the way to it all offer you a story. They all point you in a direction to find meaning and purpose, to fix what's gone wrong, whether they know it or not.

Some of us draw our stories from family legacy while others try to escape the story of their family. Some live the stories of pursuing success, fame, or wealth...Some of us fit our lives into a story taught by a religion or a philosopher or thinker we admire. Some of us attach ourselves to the dominant storyline of the city we live in, chasing pleasure in Las Vegas or power in Washington, D.C. We may not even be aware of it or ever have thought of it in those terms, but it is true. We can't live without a sense of story.

—Justin Buzzard, *The Big Story*

Ultimately, our little kingdoms crumble. Our false stories do not provide the solutions to our problems that we hoped they would. The idols we turned to in order to fix us only end up enslaving us. Our stories are revealed to be small, insignificant and defective.

Repentance is vital here, because it is what gets us out of our false stories and into God's story. Repentance is not just turning from doing wrong things; it's turning from thinking wrong things—trading your false worldview for God's worldview. It is owning the fact that you have chosen to write your own story and be your own king, leading to the unmanageable chaos that follows.

The gospel is good news for us because God invites us back into His story. Repentance is forsaking our false stories and kingdoms, trading them for the Lordship of Jesus. Repentance is a kingdom transfer (Colossians 1:13). God offers us actual redemption and restoration in His story—not a fake and fleeting version. He gives us a purpose and hope beyond comparison. God's story is much bigger, better and more compelling than the small stories we turn to in order to make sense of our lives.

He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

—Colossians 1:13-14

PERSONAL REFLECTION:

What false stories or kingdoms do you tend to turn to in order to make sense of your life? (A helpful way to think about this: when you meet someone new, what do you naturally want them to know about you early in the conversation?)

How have you tried to solve your problems independent of God?

What false stories do you see in those around you?

THE STORY OF OUR CULTURE

Like a pair of glasses, we don't often realize or think about the lens changing how we see the world. We simply look through it. In light of this, it's important to think about the story our culture is telling us.

Make no mistake: we do not live in a vacuum. In many ways our culture has already shaped us in profound ways that we don't even recognize. Like the water surrounding a fish, it's what we swim in every day, yet we hardly even know it's there.

As mentioned in the quote from Justin Buzzard, different cities and even different sub-cultures and areas within a city can have different prevailing stories, and that's before you get to countless individual differences. There is no shortage of differences in how we go about finding meaning for our lives. However, for our purpose here let's zoom out to the widest scope of culture in America. What is the dominant story of our culture? If an alien from Pluto came to observe our nation, what would he notice that would stand out from much of the rest of the world?

One remarkably prevalent story in our culture is what we call "The American Dream." Wikipedia defines it as "*a national ethos of the United States, a set of ideals in which freedom includes the opportunity for prosperity and success, and an upward social mobility achieved through hard work.*" The American Dream is a huge part of our collective story as a nation, even our founding, as it is built upon this statement from the Declaration of Independence: "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

The ideas and implications found within the American Dream framework are not all bad. We are all practical beneficiaries of this philosophy in some way, and it is God's grace that we are allowed to live in our country and possess the freedoms that we sometimes take for granted. Our nation is a melting pot of stories, and so many of those founding stories were people coming from hard places and finding a better life here.

However, the Wikipedia definition hints at where we can go wrong, and it does so in the two words "freedom includes." Is it actually true that we will find freedom in prosperity, success, upward social mobility and hard work? Nope.

That is the point at which the American Dream goes from beneficial to society to enslaving for society. Hordes and hordes of people, including us if we are honest, have turned "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" into our life's biggest idol—we've taken it on as our story. Because of this, life has turned into one giant rat race. When the comforts of success and upward mobility become the kingdoms we seek after at all costs, our lives become a self-destructive cycle that goes something like this:

- Work hard to get what you want. →
- Begin to consume the things you believe will make you happy. →
- Get a better car, a better house. →

- Entertain yourself. →
- Enter a slight gnawing at your soul: “Is this all there is?” →
- Move to a better neighborhood. →
- Climb the ladder at work. →
- Consume more entertainment. →
- Only do what you think will make you happy. →
- Buy more things. →
- Medicate your discontentment with an addiction. →
- Neglect family and community to pursue more success. →
- Go to marriage/family counseling. →
- The gnawing gets worse. →

You start to wonder along the way if you are headed in the right direction, but everyone around you is doing the same things so you think you must be on the right track, right? Or if you just become exhausted from the pressure and the unanswered questions in your soul, maybe you just unplug. You disengage from life and become a shell of a human. If someone wants to talk to you it better be about the TV show you’re watching.

The American Dream makes for a horrible life story. It’s not big enough to make sense of our existence. It’s too small and insignificant of a kingdom to devote your life to. And this warning—it’s not a small caution like “Hey, watch out for that stick, you might trip on it.” It’s “Hey, you’re a fish and this is the stream you are swimming in. Here’s where it is headed, so by the grace of God swim for your life or else it will swallow you up in it.”

Please hear this—the American Dream is the default story of our culture. If you think you’re doing nothing, you are actually doing this. It’s where you’re headed. It’s how the culture around you is teaching you to live life. And not only that—unless your communities are absolutely transformed by the gospel of Jesus, this will be the story your community preaches as well. You may come around a noble common goal to be a spiritual community, but there is a distinct possibility that your lives together will preach nothing but the gospel of The American Dream. It is not what you say that will determine the kingdom that your community is a witness to; it is how you live your lives together.

DIFFERENT KINGDOMS, DIFFERENT VALUES

Neither revolution nor reformation can ultimately change a society, rather you must tell a new powerful tale, one so persuasive that it

sweeps away the old myths and becomes the preferred story, one so inclusive that it gathers all the bits of our past and our present into a coherent whole, one that even shines some light into our future so we can take the next step...If you want to change a society, then you have to tell an alternative story.

—Ivan Illich

When taken on as a defining life narrative, The American Dream kingdom will produce very different values in people than Jesus' kingdom. It's a totally different way of life that Jesus invites us into, so in order to live differently we have to see what our culture teaches us about the art of living. Then we can look at how Jesus is calling us to live uniquely and differently, in light of the cross.

AMERICAN DREAM KINGDOM	JESUS' KINGDOM
Jesus as Add-On	Jesus as King
Consuming	Serving
Options	Commitment
Privacy	Transparency
Independence	Interdependence
Demanding	Forgiving
Comfort	Self-denial

JESUS AS ADD-ON VS. JESUS AS KING

Spirituality can be looked at in a positive light in the American Dream kingdom, but only if you don't get too crazy with it. Be nice, go to church...that's all well and good. But actually give Jesus the reins to your life? Give Him decision-making power and take what He says seriously? Whoa there...that's just crazy. Fanatical even. In Jesus' kingdom, however, He reigns supreme and will not settle for being an accessory or add-on—a peaceful addition to a nice life (Mark 1:14-15). Because He is good, we trust that He is the best person to be in control of our lives.

If your God can't disturb your life, then you don't have a real God.

—Justin Buzzard, *The Big Story*

CONSUMING VS. SERVING

When we live in the American Dream kingdom, we focus on consuming. We believe everything is designed primarily to be used either for our purpose and pleasure, or to further our advancement. Everything around us becomes a product, a means to an end—even people. Church even becomes a place where you consume religious goods and services—it’s just a spiritualized Home Depot. We fall into the roles of consumer, spectator and critic. However, Jesus’ kingdom produces a heart of serving others. We don’t need to consume for satisfaction, because He is our satisfaction. Therefore we become more concerned with loving our communities and our neighbors than we are with buying things or consuming entertainment. Rather than being a spectator, we engage with life and get our hands dirty. Church becomes a family that we belong to and serve (Mark 10:45).

OPTIONS VS. COMMITMENT

Options are essential in the American Dream kingdom, and you should keep them open. This infatuation with options can be as small as the return policy at your favorite department store (your savior should you decide you don’t like those shoes after all), and as big as prenuptial agreements and divorce, just in case someone else comes along who strikes your fancy. “Maybe” is the theme song of this culture...after all, what if a better party/person/church/opportunity comes along? In Jesus’ kingdom it’s the opposite, because He makes us a people who are committed to one another. Our reconciled relationship with Him is forever accomplished and permanent, and that shapes how we see the world. He has been immeasurably faithful to us, so we can be faithful to one another. He has made us a family, so family we will be (Romans 12:10).

PRIVACY VS. TRANSPARENCY

When we live in the American Dream kingdom, privacy is inappropriately valued. Because it is a self-centered ethos, we believe that no one has the right to be “in my business” or tell me that I am wrong. However, in Jesus’ kingdom, we understand that He has made us into a community for our benefit. He gives us the ability and desire to be transparent with one another because we have nothing to hide, and we know we need help, grace and encouragement. Even when people point out blind spots or areas of concern in our lives, we are humbly grateful and not furious (1 John 1:5-10).

INDEPENDENCE VS. INTERDEPENDENCE

Our culture encourages independence to the extreme. The “achieved through hard work” part of Wikipedia’s definition of the American Dream fuels this. You can do it—anything you set your mind to—and you don’t need anyone else. Our over-valuing of independence essentially leads us to higher levels of self-trust, believing “I alone know what’s best for me.” The gospel creates a different kingdom, one of interdependence where we know we need Jesus and others. This humility is birthed from the realization that no one has lied to or deceived you more than you have, and that Jesus is utterly trustworthy. His design is for life to be lived in community where we play different roles and carry each other’s burdens (Galatians 6:2).

DEMANDING VS. FORGIVING

When the American Dream kingdom is taken on as our life story, it creates demanding people. There is not much grace to be had for anything or anyone who proves to be an obstacle or hindrance to our goals of upward mobility. However, God’s story creates a culture of forgiveness, because in the gospel we’ve been forgiven for more than we’ll ever have to forgive. People are not nuisances in the way of getting what we want—they are fellow image bearers of God. In Jesus’ kingdom we become gracious people who love and bear with one another (Colossians 3:13).

COMFORT VS. SELF-DENIAL

In the American Dream kingdom, comfort is king. The ability to get and stay comfortable is the driving force behind most every decision, from what you will do with your time tonight to what kind of house you buy. Because we are so immune to this (again, it is the water we are swimming in), many American Christians don’t even know that this comfort-seeking is the value our lives point toward. What we do with our time and our resources clearly reveals our hearts. Jesus, however, creates an ethos of self-denial in His kingdom. He forms a people who follow in his footsteps of sacrificing self for the good of others. In His kingdom we become a people who put ourselves last in our marriages, our communities and our workplaces (Luke 9:23).

Jesus teaches us a different and better way of doing life in His Kingdom. In light of God’s grand metanarrative, He gives us a better story to tell. When we allow Him to shape our communities where we exhibit these counter-cultural values of service, transparency, interdependence, forgiveness, and self-denial,

we are putting His kingdom on display. We are telling His story, joining Him in changing the world. There are communities galore practicing American Dream kingdom values...let's be people who tell a better story.

If the world is sane, then Jesus is mad as a hatter and the Last Supper is the Mad Tea Party. The world says, "Mind your own business," and Jesus says, "There is no such thing as your own business." The world says, "Follow the wisest course and be a success," and Jesus says, "Follow me and be crucified"...The world says, "Law and order," and Jesus says, "Love." The world says, "Get" and Jesus says, "Give." In terms of the world's sanity, Jesus is crazy as a coot, and anybody who thinks he can follow Him without being a little crazy too is laboring less under a cross than under a delusion.

-Frederick Buechner, *The Faces of Jesus*

PERSONAL REFLECTION:

Where do you see the cultural values of the American Dream in your life?

Where do you see, by God's grace, the values of Jesus' kingdom taking root in your life?

TELL A BETTER STORY

The gospel is not just a series of facts to which we yield our assent but a dramatic narrative that re-plots our identity.

—Michael Horton

The good news is that the grand story of God offers us meaning, purpose, value and identity that we will never achieve on our own. It provides answers for our unanswered questions like “Who am I?”...“Why am I here?”...and “Why does it matter?” The gospel offers us true freedom that prosperity, success, upward social mobility and hard work never can or will. We truly have a better story to tell than our culture or anyone else—a gospel story that will shape us into the kinds of communities God uses to transform the world.

The task of our communities is to tell this story—both to those around us who don’t know Jesus and to those who do—and live out the implications of what Christ has accomplished for us together as a family. As we live out the values of Jesus’ kingdom, we will naturally put Him on display—but we do not only preach the gospel through our actions; we preach it through our words.

GOSPEL FLUENCY

If you have been around Midtown for a while, this is nothing new. We have always taught how Jesus is good news for real life, how the gospel applies to our sins, struggles and issues. However, we would like to introduce a new term for an old concept: gospel fluency. Gospel fluency is simply applying the gospel to every area of life.

Practicing gospel fluency is asking, “How is Jesus good news for _____?” and then answering the question pointing to Christ. It is embodied in three parts:

1. **Know** (Knowing the gospel)
2. **Apply** (Applying the gospel to life)
3. **Speak** (Speaking the gospel to self and others)

When we talk with unbelievers, we share not just the bullet points of the gospel but the story of the gospel. Many people in our culture have been functionally inoculated to the gospel. Do you know how inoculations work? You get just enough of the real thing to make you immune to it. In the same

way, many in our culture have heard *about* the gospel but have never actually *heard* the gospel. They have heard a 30-second sales pitch about Jesus and how to get saved, totally divorced from their worldview, and when it's over they are a) disinterested and b) confused about why they need saving in the first place. They heard just enough of the real thing to make them uninterested.

That same person, however, may read *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* and tear up when Aslan dies for his friends (or other stories with Christ characters). They may wonder why it seems they have desires that nothing on earth can fully satisfy. They may feel a strange attraction to Jesus' teaching, even though they haven't the foggiest idea why it matters.

Stories are how we remember; we tend to forget lists and bullet points.

—Robert McKee

There are no doubt numerous spiritual things at play with such a person, but one of them very well may be that they simply haven't heard the gospel in their language yet. They haven't seen how Jesus really is good news, for all of life. They haven't connected their story to God's story, so we share His story and how it is good news for them. This of course happens in part by inviting them into our communities to experience it, while we pray and let the Holy Spirit work.

The disconnect between “gospel for salvation” and “gospel for life” can certainly be true for Christians as well. Many Christians think the gospel is just the diving board, when in reality it is also the deep end of the pool. Some have been believers for decades without understanding how Jesus is good news for the specific sin issues, wounds and struggles that they face. In light of this, we tell a better story by connecting the gospel story to the issues we face.

For example, if your spouse has made you angry recently, how can you forgive them? Do you just try to muster up enough grace to do so? This is what many try to do, but our forgiveness reserves run dry rather quickly. The gospel gives us a better answer. Colossians 3:13 says: “As the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.” It grounds us in the gospel story and teaches us

that, in Christ, we've been forgiven for more than we'll ever have to forgive another. If we soak in that truth, we will have a limitless supply of grace to forgive, even for significant wrongs done against us.

So if someone in your LifeGroup is having trouble forgiving someone they are angry with, what should you tell them? You could say, "Well, you are supposed to forgive them," but that would not be the most helpful response. That's a self-effort driven story that does not produce hope. Instead, you could encourage them with the gospel. Remind them how much grace Jesus has lavished upon them—that grace applied produces grace for others.

If a friend struggles with greed and selfishness when it comes to money, you could tell them that greed is wrong, that the right thing to do is to give generously. Or...you could, like Paul, tell them this: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich" (2 Corinthians 8:9).

Jesus sacrificed His riches for you. Doesn't that make you want to do the same for others? Understanding that produces heart-level generosity, not guilt-driven giving.

If someone in your LifeGroup is having trouble being hospitable to others, instead of heaping shame on them to try and produce surface-level behavior modification, you could tell them to "welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God" (Romans 15:7). Jesus gave up the comfort of heaven to take our pain and sin onto Himself, so that we could be welcomed into the family of God.

We want to always think in light of the gospel story—to decipher life in light of what Jesus has done for us. This is what it means to be gospel fluent. But, if you've ever tried to learn another language, you know this takes time. Even as you learn the vocabulary and accent, you have to really practice it with others to fully get it. This is why Christian community is vital to our growth in Jesus, as we continue to disciple one another and encourage one another with the truth of Jesus.

The whole story of the world—and how we fit into it—is most clearly understood through a careful, direct look at the story of Jesus...how beautifully His life makes sense of ours.

—Tim Keller

We desire to constantly ask the question “How is the gospel story good news for _____?”

HOW IS THE GOSPEL STORY GOOD NEWS FOR SOMEONE THINKING ABOUT GIVING UP ON THEIR MARRIAGE?

God said He will never leave or forsake you, and His faithfulness to you can produce faithfulness toward others. (Hebrews 13:5)

HOW IS THE GOSPEL STORY GOOD NEWS FOR SOMEONE STRUGGLING WITH SELF-INJURY?

Jesus has taken all of the punishment and pain we deserve, so we don't have to punish ourselves. He loved us so much that He was glad to do this! (John 3:16-17)

HOW IS THE GOSPEL STORY GOOD NEWS TO SOMEONE WHO IS WRECKED WITH SHAME OVER THEIR SIN?

Jesus was naked and ashamed, so you do not have to be. He took your shame and set His approval on you...He has clothed you with His righteousness! (Mark 15:16-32; Isaiah 61:10)

HOW IS THE GOSPEL STORY GOOD NEWS FOR A FRIEND WHO FEELS REJECTED AND WHO HIDES THEIR TRUE SELF FROM GOD AND OTHERS?

He experienced rejection so that you wouldn't have to—so you could draw near to the throne of grace with confidence. (Hebrews 4:16)

HOW IS THE GOSPEL STORY GOOD NEWS FOR SOMEONE WHO HAS BEEN HURT DEEPLY BY ANOTHER'S SIN IN SOME FORM OF ABUSE?

He is the great physician who was wounded so you might be healed in the midst of a relationship with Him. (Isaiah 53:5)

Important note: This is not just a “Bam, here’s a verse!” Sunday School answer. We have said in the past that “Jesus is always the solution,” and that is true but it can be misapplied. It can be applied in a dismissive, quick way that doesn’t really engage or help the heart. The goal of connecting to the gospel story is not a quick fix formula, but it encourages us to take the time to ask questions, find out what the real issue or need is, and show how Jesus is genuinely good news for that issue. On the flipside, those who have been around Christianity for a while at times grow cynical and cold to gospel application, mostly because they’ve heard it before. When we struggle, it’s easy to grow resistant to simple truths we already know. It’s important for people in that situation to realize that familiarity and coldness of heart do not negate the truth.

The gospel is always good news, and one of the most worthwhile things we can do in the universe is to ask the Holy Spirit to reveal to us how the gospel story is good news for us and others around us. Many times the application of the gospel story will simply be that God loves them, forgives them, is faithful to them and will never leave or forsake them. The point of applying these truths is not the acquisition of facts about Jesus; it is ushering people into relationship with Him where they will experience His love, mercy and faithfulness.

PERSONAL REFLECTION:

How is the gospel story good news for the specific sins or issues that you face?

Think about someone in your LifeGroup who is struggling with a particular issue, and pray for them. Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal to you how the gospel story is good news for them. Write what He reveals to you.

DIGGING DEEPER: REPENT & BELIEVE

God’s narrative for life may sound great on paper, but how do we actually live in it? How do we submit our wayward wills and desires to Him and fall in our appropriate place as a member of His kingdom? How do we live in His story?

Jesus gives us direction on this in the first recorded words of His ministry in the book of Mark:

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”

—Mark 1:14-15

The simplest answer to this question, again, is ongoing repentance. Through the help of the Holy Spirit and His conviction in our lives, we continually reorient our hearts to Jesus and repent and believe the gospel. We confess both to God and our communities, and pray for the Holy Spirit’s help. As Mark Driscoll says, “Fish swim, birds fly, and Christians repent.” This is the core of what it means to live in Christ’s kingdom, to daily deny our self-consumed desires and choose to live in His kingdom (Luke 9:23). In order to be communities that change the world, we will have to model what it looks like to repent of our false stories and trust Jesus, submitting our kingdoms to His.

The following chart is a practical tool to help us dig deeper into what it looks like to repent and believe the gospel and apply the story of God to our lives. It will be helpful for you, and also for others, as you seek to help them through the issues that they are facing. The way it works is by asking a series of ques-

tions, then following the questions back up the chart on the right side.






Try it out with one of your biggest sin issues, and be prepared to discuss further at your next LifeGroup meeting. (Hint: to help remember this tool when you don't have the chart handy, simply remember the following three things and that you will work your way back up at the end.)

- 1. ACTION/FEELING**
- 2. BELIEF ABOUT SELF**
- 3. BELIEF ABOUT GOD**

CONVERSATION STARTERS:

- Discuss any insights or thoughts from this chapter.
- Are there any false stories that we have been trusting in? How does Jesus offer us a better story that makes sense of our lives?
- Does anyone have sin you need to confess to the group in light of the truth that you have nothing to prove in Christ? Is there anything you need to share with the group that you've been resisting?
- Which area of gospel fluency does our group need to grow in the most: knowing the gospel story, applying it to everyday life or speaking it to each other?
- Get in small groups of two to three and ask each other the questions from the Digging Deeper Chart.

DIGGING DEEPER CHART

ACTION/FEELING	NEW ACTION/FEELING
What sin issue or feeling are you dealing with? 	If that is true, how should it change your actions and feelings? 
BELIEF ABOUT SELF What does that reveal that you believe about yourself? 	TRUTH ABOUT SELF In light of what is true about God, what is true about you? 
BELIEF ABOUT GOD What does that reveal that you believe about God? 	TRUTH ABOUT GOD How does the gospel story display the truth about God?

NOTES:

CHAPTER FIVE:

COMMUNITIES THAT LOVE JESUS MOST

There is a woman who lives in your neighborhood—we'll call her Suzanne. You don't know her yet, but you've seen her a few times walking her dog and you have politely waved at her. There is a reason that she walks her dog so much. You see, Suzanne has been married to three different men, none of whom were fit to be a husband, and she just recently finalized her third heart-breaking divorce after the low-life she married ran up her credit card and then moved to Florida. The judge knew her name without looking at the paperwork this last time, adding one more reason to the list of why she cried herself to sleep that night.

Ever since middle school, Suzanne has turned to guys in unhealthy ways, looking for them to provide her with worth, value and satisfaction. One after the other used and abused her, and she is starting to wonder if she'll ever find what she is looking for. Currently, she's becoming more bitter, confused and cynical by the day, and her monthly wine budget is steadily increasing.

Suzanne does not understand that in all the faces of all those men over the years, she was really looking for what only Jesus can offer her. She has never been around people who, no matter where they are in life, seem to have their deepest needs met. She's never seen

a community that points one another to the satisfaction that is only found in a relationship with our Creator, but that's exactly what she needs to see.

.....

Everybody's got a hungry heart.

—Bruce Springsteen

THE SLAVERY OF FALSE GODS

They exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

—Romans 1:25

Another important way the Bible frames the gospel as good news for life is in the context of false gods, or idolatry. We have taught idolatry a lot at Midtown, and that's a good thing because the Bible talks about it a lot. It is one of the easiest ways to see how the gospel of Jesus applies to our sin struggles.

Because of our sin nature, we have all turned aside from worshiping God to, instead, worshiping and serving created things. As we discussed in chapter 1, this is the bad news, and our sin of worshiping false gods has contributed to every inch of brokenness on the planet. All of the heartache, relational sin, addictions and abuse that the world has ever seen have been a direct result of people turning elsewhere when they were designed to get their needs met by God.

An idol is something we look to, rather than God, to find ultimate meaning and satisfaction. We devote ourselves to things that cannot fulfill our needs and desires like God alone can. Like Suzanne in the previous story, we turn to idols in order to meet those desires, but they only end up disappointing us. When we try to meet legitimate desires in illegitimate ways things go bad quickly.

The theme of idolatry runs throughout the Scriptures. In Isaiah chapter 44, people are borderline mocked by God because they cut down a tree and use half of it to make a fire, while fashioning the other half into an idol and praying

to it, “Deliver me, for you are my god!” (Isaiah 44:17). The passage goes on to say, “He feeds on ashes; a deluded heart has led him astray, and he cannot deliver himself or say, ‘Is there not a lie in my right hand?’” (Isaiah 44:20).

The human heart is an idol factory...Every one of us from our mother’s womb is an expert in inventing idols.

—John Calvin

In our culture we generally do not create wooden statues to worship as mentioned in Isaiah 44, but the point of idolatry is that our hearts create idols, not our hands. Anything can be turned into an idol. In your LifeGroup, there may be people who, at one point in their lives, have idolized money, sex, sports, food, relationships...the list could go on and on. Anything can become what our hearts turn to for satisfaction—even when we take good things like ministry, children or success and turn them into ultimate things.

When we idolize something we think it will save us, but it only ends up enslaving us. In this way, addictions are a perfect example of idolatry. When an addict starts out with an addictive behavior, it seems innocent enough—and before long the grip of that compulsive behavior feels inescapable.

Sin deceives. It whispers lies: “The idol takes care of you; God doesn’t. The idol gives you what you want, what you crave; it relieves your pain; it liberates you. Fight for your idol. Serve and defend it.”

—Mike Wilkerson, *Redemption*

The heart of idolatry goes back to what we discussed in chapter 2—self-trust. When we idolize something, we are essentially choosing to be our own authority, our own god, deciding for ourselves what will deliver us. In this sense, all idolatry really comes down to worship of self.

PERSONAL REFLECTION:

What are things in your life you thought would save you, but that ended up enslaving you? In what ways have idols contributed to the brokenness of your life?

SURFACE IDOLS & DEEP IDOLS

Human history is the long terrible story of man trying to find something other than God which will make him happy.

—C.S. Lewis

In thinking about idolatry, it's helpful to think about the difference between a surface idol and a deep idol. Those may be new terms, but the idea is really simple. Surface idols are the surface-level things our hearts latch onto, and they are easier to notice because they are visible and our behavior points to them. You can look at your bank account, your schedule and your actions and fairly easily point out things that you look to for meaning and satisfaction. A surface idol can be anything—alcohol, a particular person or even a job.

However, the reason we turn to those surface idols is because we think they give us something else. We think they will meet some deeper need and desire. So to really get to our hearts, we have to dig down beneath the surface to what our deep idols are.

Tim Keller, a pastor in New York City, names what he believes are four common deep idols: *comfort*, *control*, *approval* and *power*. He says that most of the time when we idolize something, it's because we believe it is providing one of those four things for us, thus whatever that is becomes our true deep idol. This is a fascinating idea, because it means that the same surface-level issue can actually have very different roots, and the good news of the gospel will come when we learn how Jesus offers us the true and better version of what we are looking for (whether comfort, control, approval, power or something else).

A VERY EXPENSIVE NIGHT

For example, there was a guy—we'll call him Steve—who came to Recovery a few years back. He told the group that alcohol had begun to control his life and that he had decided to come to Recovery because the weekend before was a wake up call for him. He had taken some friends out to a strip club, and when he woke the next morning realized that he had somehow spent \$6000 the night before.

This is a perfect example of how idolatry gets out of hand, is it not? Steve did not sit down that night and calmly decide, "You know what, I've got enough money to buy a car saved up, but instead I'm going to go blow it at a strip club tonight." But why did he make the decision to spend that much money, essentially, on booze and lust?

The short answer is, he did not spend that much money on alcohol and lap dances. He spent it to get something else—something deeper. As we asked Steve questions and he explained more of his story, he had some remarkable, Holy Spirit-led insight into his heart. He said, "You know what, it's not really even about alcohol or lust I don't think. I think the real issue is that when I take my friends out like that, when I say 'Whatever you want—it's on me!' I feel so powerful and so liked. My friends like me better when I'm drunk, and I think that, more than anything, is why I do it."

Most people do not know why it is that they chase the things they do, but by God's grace Steve had a clear view into his heart. The deep idol that he was chasing could have been any number of things. It could have been comfort, where he just couldn't deal with the pain of his life and wanted to be numb to it. It could have been control, where he felt his life was chaos, but he felt a sense of order over at least being in control of the bottles passing through his hands and the effect they have on his body. But for Steve, the root issue was that he was looking for approval and power in the form of friends and alcohol.

Humans are deeply intricate beings with complicated motivations. But when it comes down to it, we are generally looking to have the same basic desires met, albeit we go about doing so in a million different ways.

To love someone like Steve well, you could pray for the Holy Spirit to give you insight into his life, and ask him good questions like:

- “Why do you drink so much?”
- “What do you think alcohol is providing for you?”
- “What are you looking for it to give you?”

We love people well and join God in fixing what’s wrong with the world when we apply the good news of the gospel to the deep idols that we turn to. We connect the gospel story with the deep needs and desires we have by giving them good news about what a relationship with Jesus provides for them.

- We tell them that Jesus offers us true comfort—that relationship with Him provides never-ending security and peace.
- We teach them that they will never be in control of life, but that God created the universe. He’s the only one truly in control and we can trust Him.
- We tell them that the gospel provides all the approval they’ll ever need, because for anyone in Christ, God sees Jesus when He looks at them.
- We show them that relationship with a God who has unqualified, limitless power makes us not need to seek it out anymore. He has all the power we’ll ever need.

In short, we try to connect the dots and show that, in Christ, every spiritual blessing is offered to us. Every need and desire is fully met through Christ, and there is no need to look elsewhere. Jesus doesn’t just save us to punch our ticket to heaven—He redeems and restores every broken crevice of our souls. Every insecurity can be overcome by His approval, every dissatisfaction quenched by His joy and every worry secured by His strength. Jesus offers us the true and better version of whatever we look for in our idols, and that is the only path to true heart change.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.

—Ephesians 1:3

SOME PRACTICAL HELP

The following questions and chart are designed to help you diagnose any idols in your life. Take a few minutes to work through them and pray for the Holy Spirit to give you insight.

SOME QUESTIONS THAT MAY HELP REVEAL IDOLS IN YOUR LIFE:

- What does my mind consistently wander to when I'm alone?
- What am I most afraid of losing?
- What would be "hell on earth" for me? What would solve or fix that?
- Where do I run for comfort?
- What angers me most?
- What do I want to have more than anything else?
- What do I sacrifice the most for in my life?
- What does my heart leap at?

PERSONAL REFLECTION:

Write down any thoughts from the questions above.

DEEP IDOLS CHART

DEEP IDOL	MY LIFE ONLY HAS MEANING OR PURPOSE IF I...	MY WORST NIGHTMARE IS...	PEOPLE AROUND ME MAY FEEL...	MY PROBLEM EMOTION IS...
POWER	Have success, influence or win.	Humiliation	Used	Anger
APPROVAL	Have affirmation, relationships or feel loved.	Rejection	Smothered	Cowardice
COMFORT	Have freedom, privacy and no stress.	Stress, Demands	Neglected	Apathy
CONTROL	Have self-discipline, certainty and standards.	Uncertainty	Unloved	Worry

PERSONAL REFLECTION:

What surface idols have you worshiped in your life? What need (or deep idol) did you think the surface idol provided for you?

Are there any idols in your life currently that you need to repent of? How does Jesus offer you the true and better version of what you are looking for?

DRINKING FROM MUD PUDDLES

All men seek happiness without exception.

—Blaise Pascal

Why do we idolize things and people? Because we believe, deep down, that they will make us happy. We build our lives on what we think works, and we pursue what we believe will give us the most satisfaction. This is how we make our decisions. Even self-denial is ultimately practiced because we believe we will derive more pleasure from denying ourselves than indulging other desires.

Generally, it's easier to see this with other people. You are removed from them and can see what the driving motivations are in their lives. When you see someone pursuing something that seems really foreign to you, it's easy to stand at a distance and be baffled, wondering "Why would they ever think that will be fulfilling?" (For an extreme example of this, watch the TV show *Hoarders*.) However, when we take a look at our own hearts, the same tendencies are there, even if they are less noticeable because of their familiarity.

PERSONAL REFLECTION:

Have you ever been shocked or confused at something someone seemed to be chasing for satisfaction? How is your heart ultimately the same in pursuing things you believe will satisfy you?

Of course it is not wrong to pursue passions, interests, relationships, careers or education (etc.) in a healthy way, as they are a part of life and the way God has designed us. The problem comes when we make any created thing ultimate in our lives. When our hearts latch onto something that is not God to give us what only God can, we end up destroying our idol and devastating our hearts, because nothing can bear the weight of God.

Has a nation changed its gods, even though they are no gods? But my people have changed their glory for that which does not profit. Be appalled, O heavens, at this; be shocked, be utterly desolate, declares the Lord, for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water.

—Jeremiah 2:11-13

In this passage, God describes the utter insanity that is idolatry. He tells the heavens to be shocked and appalled, so that should clue us in to the weight of what He is saying here.

Because of cultural differences, however, that weight may not quite hit us like it should. Back in the day, people did not have clear, delicious water magically flowing out of pipes into their homes. Like in parts of the developing world today, they had to work really hard to get water. The best option was to live near a stream—a “fountain of living water.” The next best option was to build a well, but that was really expensive and only the rich could afford to do so. The last option was something called a cistern, and it was basically a big pot to catch rainwater.

However, if you've ever noticed what happens to standing water outside, you know that it gets nasty pretty quickly. It gets stagnant and gross and bugs get all up in it. Basically a cistern is a glorified mud puddle, and if you want to see for yourself, stick a pot outside for a week and then see if you'd want to drink what's in it.

But God doesn't even stop there—He says the cistern we've traded Him for is broken. It can't do its one and only job, so we're left with a broken pot and a tongue scorched with thirst. We keep turning it up to our parched mouths, but there's not a drop of water in there. This is God's image for idolatry, and it is a striking one. It rings true with people from all times and all places. It plagues all of us sons and daughters of Adam and Eve, the first idolaters.

RIVERS IN THE DESERT

But once again, there is good news for us. God has a plan to fix the gashing pain and separation from Him that our idols bring upon us. He has sent His Son Jesus to rescue us from our self-chosen slavery to idols and the destruction that they bring. We wander thirsty and cotton-mouthed through the desert that we've made for ourselves, but He gives "water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself that they might declare my praise" (Isaiah 43:20-21).

He is forming a people, a gospel people full of good news for those who have built their lives on false gods. This people will bring hope to those around them by declaring His praise and superiority to idols. They will put Him on display.

And how will we become this people who declare His praise? By repenting of our idols, trading worship of false gods for worship of the one true God. We worshiped our way into idolatry, and we will worship our way out. Isaiah 55:1-3 puts it this way:

Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; hear, that your soul may live.

These verses are crushing and convicting, calling out the core issues of our souls and inviting us to something better. We are not told to stop chasing after

satisfaction, we are told to chase after it in the right place. We are called, once again, to repent by turning our hearts away from idols and toward God...to trade our mud puddles for living water. We are invited to turn our ears toward Him, to listen and believe that what He says is true, and to simply “Come.” What a beautiful invitation for our weary and tired hearts.

People often think about sin as the “fun” stuff and God as a cosmic killjoy, but nothing could be further from the truth. There is nothing more thrilling in the universe than God. He created every pleasure under the sun, and even the ability for us to feel joy and peace, to shed tears at the sight of something that moves us.

We do not conquer idols by white-knuckling our behavior, instructing ourselves and others to “Get your act together!” We conquer idols by pointing our hearts to something far better, by introducing people to a far greater thrill. Repentance is not a slap on the wrist—it’s not “do better!” or “stop that!” It’s that Jesus is better. He is more desirable. This is the culture of repentance that we want to create in our groups.

God invites us to get serious about pleasure-seeking by seeking Him, the ultimate pleasure of our souls. We are invited to ditch the cheap pleasures that never satisfied and experience the true joy we were made for. He is a joyous, satisfied and satisfying, party-throwing God.

Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him!

—Psalm 34:8

THE RUNNING, EMBRACING, PARTY-THROWING GOD

We tend to think of repentance, turning from idols to serve and worship God, as a somber act. And to be sure, in a way it is. But in Scripture it is also a joyous act. In Luke 15:7 Jesus says that “there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.” Later in the chapter Jesus tells the parable about the two lost sons (often referred to as the prodigal son story) that we mentioned in chapter 3. There are mountains of depth in that parable, but one strong theme is the Father’s joy over the repentance of his son.

What the younger brother did by asking for his share of the inheritance was the equivalent of saying, “I want your money, and I want you dead.” Culturally, the father would have had every right to publicly disown the son. His actions brought shame upon his entire family. But instead he divides his inheritance and, with an implied broken heart, sends off his son.

Jesus tells the story of the younger brother with purpose, as it is the epitome of idolatry. He runs from home, a place of security and love, to a land where he can indulge in whatever his heart leaps at. He turns from his father to the false gods of pleasure and independence and goes on a Vegas-style bender. When he comes to his senses while eating out of a pig’s trough, he decides to return to his father’s house and see if he could possibly be hired as a servant so he would have food to eat.

And his return—can you imagine the shame of it? Can you imagine him walking through the streets of the town he grew up in, once a well-respected man in a privileged family, now a fool covered in grime and pig slop, despised by everyone who saw him for what he had done to his family. Culturally they very well could have ridiculed or even beaten him, spitting on him as he walked, covered in the smelly filth and despair of his idols, bearing the shame of their failure to deliver him. His father would have been expected to stay in the house, not to turn his ear toward the townspeople taking out their disgust on him verbally or even physically.

But what does Jesus say about the father? First, and this is a significant fact—that the father notices the son’s return. Which means he was looking for him. Most fathers in that culture would have never spoken to the son again, but this father was looking for him. Then what does he do? “But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him” (Luke 15:20, emphasis added). Of all the verbs that the father could have acted out in response to his son, these are the ones that he chooses? Instead of shaming and rejecting him, he chooses to feel compassion, run to him, embrace him and kiss him. What better news could there be for a runaway?

There’s something about his running to the son that we miss because of the cultural disconnect. For a Middle Eastern man of this time, running was considered shameful and boyish—something that no self-respecting man would ever do. Children and animals ran, but men did not. More so, during the act of running, the man’s robes would likely rise up, showing his legs, which would

be humiliating and laugh-inspiring for anyone who saw it happen. Do you catch what's happening here? In the act of running to him, the father is taking the shame of his son onto himself by directing the attention of onlookers from a slop-covered boy to a childish old man. He's taking the effects of his sin onto himself. And then he hugs and even kisses his disgusting, stench-ridden son.

The father then walks his son back home where he belongs, and reinstates him, not as a servant, but as a son. He throws a massive party to celebrate his son's return home and invites the entire village. He invites the people who would have been scornfully watching his son trudge through the streets to drop their shaming at the door and come celebrate that his son "was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found" (Luke 15:24). Can you imagine the change that took place in the townspeople that day, going from scornful disgust, to likely shedding tears over the scene they've witnessed, to raising their wine glasses in celebration of the miracle that's just happened? Can you imagine the demeanor of the son who was brought from death to life, the overwhelming emotions that must have been stirring in his gut?

What an interesting party this is. Writers have been using this storyline for centuries, because there's something about it that wrestles our hearts to the ground. Could it be true that God feels this way about us? Could it be true that after our spiteful rebellion and worship of false gods, He invites us back into the soul-stirring pleasure of relationship with Him?

Again, the gospel is the best news on the planet because yes, it could be and is indeed true. The desperation of our idols is no match for the grace and joy of our Father. Broken cisterns don't hold a candle to streams of pure water. Traitors are invited to come home, and there's a party every time it happens.

The gospel is true, so repentance should end with rejoicing. When people repent from their idols we should join heaven in going nuts. Even in the daily, ongoing repentance that happens in our LifeGroups, we do not bemoan the fact that our sin natures are still present; we rejoice in the unceasing goodness and pursuit of our God. Although those of us in Christ are sealed forever as children of God, the fact is that on this earth our prodigal hearts will have to return home time and time again (Ephesians 1:13-14).

PERSONAL REFLECTION:

What is my reaction when I see someone repent? Do I adequately celebrate and encourage what is happening before me?

WE BRING THE PARTY

Periodically our church gathers to witness people being baptized—symbolically passing from death to life—and we go nuts. We clap and cheer and yell, celebrating other prodigals who have been reconciled to the Father. We celebrate person after person whom God has rescued from slavery to false gods. In a way we are continuing that party that the father threw for his lost son, but the party hasn't stopped yet and never will.

There is not only joy for the big celebrations, however. There is joy for every hour. I don't mean a fleeting, surface-level giddiness, but a deep, profound and uncommon joy that is not shaken by the winds of life. David in Psalm 16 attests "The sorrows of those who run after another god shall multiply...You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore" (Psalm 16:4,11).

As we walk with God, we will walk in His satisfaction. As we experience Him, the allure of idols will grow more and more dim. What we once turned to with a reckless abandon will begin to look unappealing. If you know what you already have, you won't be tempted to buy what you already possess.

We get to enjoy God, together, and that is a matchless gift for those around us. They get to experience a miraculously changed life—the glory of a human fully alive and being put back together by a God who makes the crooked places in our souls straight. This is a gift for people in your LifeGroup, and also people like Suzanne who you will meet as you are on mission together. Like the prodigal son, people are cynical and disillusioned, increasingly weary of any claims that our needs can actually be met, our desires actually filled. At least their idols are familiar, and leaving them is not easy. As Mike Wilkerson says, "Walking away from the only life you've ever known can feel like death."

We get to enjoy God in front of others, and that is a blessing to the world.

But that begs the question: “What about when we don’t enjoy God? What about when our hearts turn back to idols?” Because we know the waywardness of our hearts, this opportunity may feel more like pressure. We don’t want to fail or seemingly make God look less glorious than He is. The good news is, repentance is just as much a gift to those around us. The prodigal’s repentance put the father’s glory on display as much as anything else.

We are, all of us, prodigals. We all carry restless and wayward hearts that need to constantly be turned back to Jesus. Ongoing, continual repentance gives people great hope, because that is exactly what their experience will look like. Seeing this daily walk of repentance and reorienting our hearts is good news for the people around us.

So, in summary, we are a blessing to those surrounding us by practicing a simple two-step process:

Step One: Enjoy God, together.

Step Two: Openly repent when we don’t.

People think God is just another false advertisement, so they need to see this lived out. They need to see people repent of idols and trust Jesus. They need to witness the uncommon joy that accompanies a life lived under Christ’s reign. They need to have relationships with believers in Jesus who can at the right time humbly and graciously speak into the idols of their lives.

When we tell the truth about the destruction of idols, we are a part of God’s solution to fix what’s gone wrong with the world. When we walk in the deep joy that the Father alone brings, we are a blessing to the world. When we continually return home to our Father from the slop of our false gods, we model repentance for them. We’ve seen this time and time again at our Baptism Gatherings, where people will say some version of, “I had never seen real, normal people who loved Jesus, and being a part of my LifeGroup helped me understand that my life was built on idols.”

Maybe you never thought that by doing something so simple and fundamental—something that we’ve taught for years—could play a huge part in how God is changing the world. But it can and it does, and we are invited to be a part of it. Our love for Jesus is the best thing we can offer people, so let’s re-

pent of idols in front of them. Let's encourage others by graciously identifying and pointing out idols in their lives. Let's walk in the joy that Christ gives us as a community and by God's grace become a river in the desert of our culture.

Let's bring the party.

“Let us eat, and be merry: for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.” Indeed, grace is the celebration of life, relentlessly hounding all the non-celebrants in the world. It is a floating, cosmic bash shouting its way through the streets of the universe, flinging the sweetness...to every window, pounding at every door in a hilarity beyond all liking and happening, until the prodigals come out at last and dance, and the elder brothers finally take their fingers out of their ears.

—Robert Farrar Capon

TWO IMPORTANT REMINDERS

In the previous few chapters we've been discussing what it looks like for us to be fluent in the gospel so that we'll have good news for everyone. This is a large part of how God shapes us into communities that change the world. However, here are a few important reminders:

1. GOSPEL FLUENCY STARTS WITH APPLYING THE GOSPEL TO OURSELVES.

We want to know, apply and speak the gospel to others, but we can't forget about applying and speaking it to our own lives first. Because we understand the gospel, we are suspicious of ourselves (1 Timothy 1:15). We know that our hearts are wayward and constantly in need of grace. So we ask the Holy Spirit to convict us of our sin, and we repent, trust Jesus and confess to our LifeGroups.

Through the insight and conviction of the Holy Spirit, we hope that much of the time we will see the areas of unbelief in sin in our own lives before those in our community do, and that we will be self-revealing with an honesty that comes from knowing we have nothing to prove.

Of course, we will still have blind spots and need others to point us to the gospel. But we want our culture to be marked by a rugged honesty and authenticity about our deepest flaws. Jesus has performed for us, so we are free

from the pressure to do so. We can be honest about ourselves and confess freely and openly.

As we confess and repent of sin in front of others, we are giving them an incredible gift—the gift of going second. Often people will follow your lead when you walk out into the light and let them go second because you’ve modeled repentance and confession for them.

2. GOSPEL FLUENCY IS BASED ON A PERSON, NOT A FORMULA.

When diving into how the good news of Jesus applies to every area of life, it can begin to almost feel like a mathematical formula. Like, “Apply X about Jesus to issue Y in my life and bam!...I’m fixed.”

It is tempting to think of it this way, but there is absolutely zero power in a formula.

The power is in the person of Jesus that comes through a real, vibrant relationship with Him. You will not experience the comfort of Jesus through head knowledge—you will experience it through walking with Him in relationship over time. You will not be filled with the approval of God through hearing a nugget of truth—you will be filled with His approval by walking in an intimate relationship with the Father, by the Holy Spirit reminding you that you are God’s adopted child, that you have every benefit of sonship, that God delights in you every second of every day because of Christ.

Freedom is not a formula, it is a person, and His name is Jesus. We pray to the Father, we read the Scriptures, we aggressively participate in Christian community...and as we do these things we walk in relationship with Jesus and grow in His freedom. The Holy Spirit takes the truth that we know in our heads and lights it on fire in our hearts. These things become real to us—they uproot every false story and false god that we’ve ever trusted in.

We simply focus on staying connected to Jesus and walking in relationship with Him (John 15:1-11). As we do this, the Holy Spirit will guide us into all truth—He will light these things on fire in our souls (John 16:13). It will be the best thing for us, for our LifeGroups, for our city and for our world. Because Jesus is always good news.

I HAVE GOOD NEWS FOR YOU

Equipped with the fact that the gospel is always good news, you will begin to have good news for everyone you meet. You will be able to share these staggering realities, among many more:

- Jesus offers you a much bigger and more compelling story than the small, self-centered stories you get caught up in.
- Jesus frees you from the slavery of false gods and fully meets every need and desire you have.
- You have nothing to prove because your righteousness has been accomplished in Christ. The pressure is off!
- Jesus took your shame on the cross, so you don't have to hide and be conquered by shame. You can approach the throne of grace with confidence!
- Jesus achieved perfection on your behalf, so you don't have to be perfect.
- You don't have to earn God's approval because you already have it fully in Jesus. There is nothing you could ever do to add to or take away from the Jesus' righteousness.

These are life-changing truths that everyone around you needs to hear, either for the first time or the millionth time. God is on a mission to reconcile the world to Himself, and He's doing it through a gospel people entrusted with the good news that changes everything (2 Corinthians 5:18-20).

PERSONAL REFLECTION:

How is the gospel good news for you today?

Think about someone from your LifeGroup. How is the gospel good news for them? What idols might they have, and how can you gracefully engage them out of love?

CONVERSATION STARTERS:

- Discuss any insights or thoughts from this chapter.
- Are there any false gods that we have been trusting in? How does Jesus offer us the true and better version of what we were looking for in them?
- What idols have you turned to in the past? (It's helpful to pre-confess our issues so that we can know about sin patterns in one another's lives, how to support and pray for one another, etc.)
- Have those who are willing share one of the following:
 - How they need to be freed from a false story.
 - How they need to be freed from worshiping a false god.
 - How they need Jesus to be perfect on their behalf.
 - How they need the gospel to be true.
 - How they need to be freed from a performance-based mentality with God.
 - How they need grace to cover their sins.

Then have someone else in the group (whoever is comfortable doing so) speak the good news about Jesus to them, applied to their specific needs.

NOTES:

CHAPTER SIX:

COMMUNITIES THAT LOOK LIKE FAMILY

WE WILL BE YOUR FAMILY

In 2008, a man named Willie Smith Jr. walked into our family. Willie was a fifty-something African-American man who had struggled with drug addiction most of his life. He had been on and off the streets in several different cities before coming to Columbia, where one of our college students met him in Five Points one day and invited him to a Gathering.

Willie got involved with a LifeGroup and then came to know Jesus. Everyone went nuts as he was baptized in a parking garage, symbolically raised to new life in Jesus.

His LifeGroup helped him grow spiritually, and he got involved in our Recovery ministry. Through this, he was able to learn that Jesus is better than drugs, and he even got some extended clean time off of the drugs that had haunted most of his life. He became a treasured part of our family, and many would be greeted and hugged by him at the front door of our Gatherings.

Unfortunately Willie's life came to a tragic end in 2010 when, during a relapse, his life was taken during an altercation. This devastated those who knew him well, and dozens of people from our family gathered to have a memorial service for him.

The group of people that gathered to celebrate and remember Willie was in itself a sermon. There were old and young, rich and poor, black, white, Asian

and Latino. The most diverse group of people sat together in that room, hugging one another and shedding tears together because we were family and we had just lost a brother.

We told stories of how Willie had impacted our lives, and it became clear to everyone in the room that we were witnessing a holy moment. God had taken the most random group of people, people who had no cultural reason to be close to one another, and He had made us family through the cross of Jesus. Our spiritual family had transcended all barriers, to the extent that someone like Willie who might be avoided in society was as much a part of the family as anyone.

And not only that—there were people in the room who at one point were not part of the family, but through seeing family lived out had become a part of the family.

A girl named Vicki was one of the last to speak up at the memorial service. She said that she'd had a tough life, and that after attending the membership class she wasn't sure if she could really do this—if she could be known and make herself vulnerable.

She said that Willie walked up to her car while she was in the parking lot and asked if he could get in and sit with her. Reluctantly, she said yes and he got in.

He could see that she was upset so he asked her, "You've had a hard life, haven't you?"

"Yes, I guess I have," Vicki said, after a long pause.

"I've had a hard life too," Willie responded, and then proceeded to fill her in on some of the pain he'd walked through. "So don't you worry," he said, flashing his trademark smile. "If these people took me in, they will definitely take you... we will be your family."³

CHURCH AS FAMILY

And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and

3 You find the link to Vicki's story at midtowncolumbia.com/grassroots.

aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

—Ephesians 2:17-22

Back in chapter 1 we discussed how the sin of humanity resulted in God kicking Adam and Eve out of the garden of Eden (Genesis 3:23-24). Shalom was broken. Peace was replaced with hostility. It was not the characteristics of the garden of Eden that made it paradise—relationship with God made it paradise. It felt like home, because it was our home. But we severed relationship with God, and that separation would be costly in innumerable ways. Our sin caused us to be spiritual strangers to God, aliens foreign to His presence who would wander through the world in spiritual darkness, hopeless and lost.

I'd be homesick if I knew where home was.

—J.J. Connolly

But as the parable of the two lost sons in Luke 15 attests, home would not be lost forever. God would initiate His plan to save the world through Jesus, such that those of us in Christ would no longer be “strangers and aliens” to God, but “members of the household of God” (Ephesians 2:19). God takes all who are in Christ and grafts them into His very family. He makes us His adopted sons and daughters (Galatians 4:5).

However, the good news doesn't stop there. Paul goes on to say this about us in Ephesians 2:22: “In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.” That is a shell-shocking statement...but what exactly does it mean?

God is creating a spiritual community where He actually dwells among us (Matthew 18:20, John 16:7). In this way the church is a reversal of the curse of Eden—the relationship that was severed by the fall of man has been restored through the cross. Our only hope was for God to come to us and fix the problem we had created, and that's exactly what He did through Jesus. God's presence is now invading our cursed and dark world through His adopted

family, the church. Those “having no hope and without God in the world” are, in their spiritual darkness, looking for home in all the wrong places, and we get to live out what it looks like to be restored to God in front of them (Ephesians 2:12, 2 Corinthians 5:18-20).

God, you made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.

—St. Augustine

We want our LifeGroups, not just in theory, but practically, to become little communities that love each other like family. Ever since our young church began we’ve desired to embody “family” as one of our highest values, because, if we’ve really been made family through Jesus, we should live like it. We will be there for one another when life hits the fan. We will rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep (Romans 12:15).

By God’s grace we’ve seen a lot of this happen. We’ve seen groups of people who had no other reason for being together than Jesus become family with one another.

- We’ve seen people take off work and rally around someone struggling with drug addiction, monitoring them 24/7 until they were able to get them into a treatment facility.
- We’ve seen people buy groceries and pay bills for one another.
- We’ve seen people take others to the hospital and stay all night with them.
- We’ve seen people go to counseling with one another.
- We’ve seen people plan weddings, funerals and baby showers for one another.
- We’ve seen people sell possessions to buy another member a car.
- We’ve seen people celebrate holidays together.
- We’ve seen almost every kind of need met that you can imagine—material, physical, emotional and spiritual.

Read the following passage from Acts 2.

And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done

through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

—Acts 2:42-47

PERSONAL REFLECTION:

What do you notice about this community? What habits and values stand out?

Truly thinking about church as family can be hard for 21st century Christians. Even when you read a passage like this one in Acts 2, maybe you think something along the lines of “Oh that’s nice, but that was a long time ago.”

You may associate church far more with terms like program, event or country club than family. Maybe you’ve never really seen people in the church love each other like that.

PERSONAL REFLECTION:

What do you most naturally think about when you hear the word church? How has your perception of the church changed over your lifetime?

We mourn the loss of church as family in many of our modern churches. God designed His grassroots kingdom to spread through relationships. This family dynamic is the kind of community His grace creates, and it is the best context in which disciples are made. Unfortunately, many churches have been tricked into keeping people busy with endless services and programs rather than focusing on community, the most conducive environment for spiritual growth and mission. Discipleship can happen in a pew or a classroom, but it happens best in everyday, life-on-life contexts—in living rooms, kitchens, backyards and coffee shops. As we do life together as the family of God, we are joining His work of redeeming all that's under the sun.

From day one of our church's existence, we've desperately wanted to fight to be family with each other. We knew that it would not be easy, but that it was worth fighting for. The goal for your LifeGroup is to become family with one another. To love each other with an uncommon love. To have a concern for each other that is remarkable. To sacrifice for one another, to pray for one another, to fight for one another.

This is not easy for a number of reasons. One is that it is so counter-cultural to what most people expect out of church. It takes some reorienting to be able to see church as it is described in Scripture and not as whatever your experience has taught you. Another reason is that your LifeGroup probably has very different people in it, and some of those may be people that you wouldn't naturally seek out friendships with. This has been one of the issues that we've heard most frequently from people in LifeGroups over the years.

But there is good news for this challenge, and it is this: our preferences have not made us family, God has made us family. In His sovereignty He has saved us and put us around specific people in order to help us all grow. Just like you didn't get to choose your biological family, you don't get to choose your spiritual family. You know your annoying uncle Jim that always pinches your cheek even now that you're a grown human being? Guess what? He is still family. You know the person in your LifeGroup that gets on your nerves? Guess what? You are still family with them, and God has sovereignly put them in your life to help you grow.

That may not feel like good news at first, but it is good news. The spiritual family that God creates is for our good and the good of those around us. To believe is to belong in God's family, and there is no separating those two things. The gospel gives us a deeper commonality than our surface-level

similarities. Peter Mathias, one of our LifeGroup leaders, tells about this experience with his LifeGroup:

I remember meeting my Lifegroup for the first time. I already knew three of the members but we were given ten other guys who had signed up at the Gathering. I decided we would have dinner together to kick things off, and upon meeting everyone my immediate thought was, albeit sinful, "Where's the door? This will never work." In front of me sat two former college athletes, a cadet in the Army, a pizza man, an older divorced man, a deer hunter, a nerdy engineer, a gelled up Abercrombie model looking guy, a law student, an architect, and a loner. We were just too different, and I thought it would never work.

Little did I know that over the upcoming year we would walk through addictions, shame from sexual sin, deep depression, confusion from a father's abuse, freedom from religion, and even the death of one of our members from cancer. Truly I don't think we would have been able to walk through all of this if it wasn't for our differences. We all brought unique perspectives that God used to help us look at things differently than we ever had. I praise the Lord that I didn't run out that door the first day we met. Through this crazy mix of guys God truly showed up.

The gospel can overcome the most drastic differences because we have the most important reality in common: being rescued by Jesus. Our differences provide the perfect context for us to grow spiritually, so if you are running from people who are different from you, you are running from growth.

Again, this is different and counter-cultural, but it is beautiful. Anyone who attended Willie's memorial service can attest to that. The world says, "Seek out only those who are just like you and ignore everyone else." The gospel says "Christ has made you family, so love one another." The world says, "Get around people you are interested in," and the gospel says, "Be interested in the people you are around." When people who are very different by the world's standard come together as a family, it is head-turning. It blows up the world's categories and causes people to ask questions.

In Revelation 5, John witnesses heaven worshiping Jesus and records the following chorus:

Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals,
for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God
from every tribe and language and people and nation,
and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God,
and they shall reign on the earth.

—Revelation 5:9-10

How incredible is the truth this song proclaims? He has ransomed people from every tribe, language and nation for His renown. People from different continents and languages, different backgrounds and sub-cultures, will all worship Jesus in heaven. Urbanites and suburbanites will fall at His feet together. People who love country music will lift up His name alongside people who make fun of country music. Rich and poor, married and single, black and white will all stand together before Him not only as a kingdom, but as His kingdom. How will we ever display the gospel among the endless diversity of the world if we don't love those who are not the same as us?

What a privilege it is that we get to put heaven in front of people here on earth as we walk together through life as a family.

Without the Church we are factions of individuals broken by the things that set us apart. With the Church we are reminded it is our brokenness that binds us together, planting us deep on the level ground before the cross.

—Lore Ferguson

PERSONAL REFLECTION:

Have you ever had thoughts similar to Peter's about your LifeGroup? How has your perspective toward others in your group changed over time?

Read Galatians 3:28 and Ephesians 2:14-16. What strikes you about these verses?

Church as family is vital on many levels, but let's quickly examine two specific reasons:

1. CHURCH AS FAMILY IS A RESULT OF THE GOSPEL.

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.

—Galatians 4:4-7

This passage shares the glorious truth that Jesus has accomplished for those who are in Him. The gospel is the good news that we, who were once slaves, are now grafted into the very family of God! We get a new Father and new siblings as well.

We've been made into a spiritual family through Jesus, and that family is eternal. It's thicker and stronger than flesh and blood family. We are brothers and sisters, and we will be forever and ever. This family is growing and spreading in a subversive, grassroots way all over the planet as God rescues more and more people from spiritual darkness. Our family gets bigger by the day.

The fact that we are family is true whether we act like it or not, but that is not license not to care about your spiritual brothers and sisters. In fact, it's all the more reason for us to do life together as family. We get the privilege of physically putting on display what is already true about us spiritually. Which leads into the second reason that church as family is vital:

2. CHURCH AS FAMILY PUTS THE GOSPEL ON DISPLAY.

When we do life together as family, we literally put the gospel on display for those around us. We become a walking billboard, acting out the truth of what Jesus has accomplished for us.

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

—John 13:34-35

There is something incomparably attractive about church family loving one another through Jesus. We've had multiple non-believers come around our church in some capacity who have said something to the effect of "I don't believe in God, but I see Him in you people." Isn't that crazy? It's remarkable because that is the exact opposite of the sentiment shared by many in our culture, who would say that they are open to Jesus but want nothing to do with the church.

Through an illogical statement those people have pointed out the obvious fact that they could see something special in church family, something they didn't even have a category for, something that must be divine if anything on earth is divine.

There was a 12 year-old boy named Ben who had grown up in a very unhealthy family environment. His parents were hardly ever there, and when they were their love and relationship with him was very performance-based. He never felt loved or wanted.

Then, one Friday night Ben was invited over to a friend's house for dinner. He immediately noticed that there was something drastically different about their family. For one, they seemed to really like each other, to want to be around one another. His friend's parents asked him questions, and they listened while he answered. They laughed, told stories and no one was in a rush.

Ben walked away from that experience not quite knowing what he'd just witnessed, but sure that he'd love to be a part of a family like that.

When we as the church operate as a family, that is the kind of love we are putting on display—our Father's love for us. We get to be family in front of those

who need it most. As we receive unconditional love, grace and mercy from relationship with Him, we bend it outward to those around us. When people who don't know Jesus see that it often screams Jesus at them, because we are playing a part in making an invisible God visible to them.

Sin is ultimately what has fractured every relationship that has ever been damaged. Every relational scar and each harmful word have resulted from our rebellion against God. Now as God knits us together as a family, we get to be a picture of how He heals and restores to those around us. We get to show how He gives people who have hurt each other strength to forgive one another, how He gives people who have no worldly reason to like each other a reason to be family.

In acting out the truth that He has made us a family, we are joining God in His great solution to mend the brokenness of our world. We are joining Him as He reverses the relational curse of sin, testifying to the truth that He can put back together the most fractured of relationships. After all, if He can repair the vertical brokenness of our severed relationship with Him, He can restore and redeem any of our disintegrated horizontal relationships with people.

CITY ON A HILL

Read the following passage from Matthew 5.

“You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”

—Matthew 5:14-16

PERSONAL REFLECTION:

What do you think it means for us as the church to be a city on a hill?

The metaphors of the church being the light of the world and a city on a hill point to the fact that the relationships we have with one another are the best tool for mission we have. Just like the family at the dinner table in the story, the love we have for one another is what shows the love of Jesus to others.

The word pictures Jesus uses in Matthew 5 are striking in their scope and in their intensity. The light of the whole world? Us? A city on a hill? Could that really be true of us?

Yes, it can be, and it is true. Not of you or I as individuals, but of us as a family—the family of God that spans both history and the globe. God is on a mission to save the planet, and He’s doing it through the church.

Here is where a typical pushback comes in: “But if we are so busy being light for those on the outside, how are we ever going to actually love and care for one another?” People tend to think that being family and being on mission are two things that compete with one another.

And here’s what we want to remind you of, emphatically: mission and family do not compete with each other! You don’t stop caring for your LifeGroup in order to be on mission—you do the same things you’ve been doing while inviting others in to be a part of it. You don’t stop caring...you let others see how much you care. You invite them in to see a Jesus-loving community on display. In short, mission is simply family with open arms.

If you invite a new person to a dinner with friends, you don’t totally neglect your friends—you invite that person into the relationships that you already have. You continue to be friends in front of them, and invite them in. In the same way, you don’t stop loving and caring for your LifeGroup to be on mission—you simply allow those you invite in to watch you being Christians together and loving one another.

People get caught doing things all the time. We want to get caught being family all over our city. We want heads to turn when people see the love of Jesus displayed through our relationships. We want people to see us and think, “There’s something different about that...and I might want to learn more about it.”

PERSONAL REFLECTION:

Let’s say a group of non-believers witnessed your LifeGroup hanging out with one another at a local park. What do you think they would say about your re-

relationships? Would they see the love of Jesus among you in the way you treat one another? If not, how can you personally take ownership to further the love you have for one another?

GETTING PRACTICAL: HOW DO WE BECOME FAMILY?

FAMILY SPENDS TIME WITH ONE ANOTHER

Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well.

—1 Thessalonians 2:8 (NIV)

You do not become close with people overnight. It takes time and effort to really be family with one another. The way you become close to the people in your LifeGroup is the same way you become close with anyone else—you choose to and you spend time with them.

A LifeGroup will not become family with one another by only seeing each other at Gatherings on Sunday, and it is hard to do so even seeing each other once a week at the group meeting time.

Spending time together is good for growing love for one another, and it's also effective for discipleship, because discipleship happens in sharing real life with one another. We want more than transfer of knowledge in our LifeGroups—we want application and transformation—people living out the gospel in all areas of life. We want more examples of how Jesus impacts every area of life: work, marriage, parenting, etc. We need more models of Jesus and of how He operates and relates to people.

Observation is the best way to see what someone truly believes, so it makes sense that inviting people into your life is the best way to disciple them. For example, if a college girl in a LifeGroup says that she believes Jesus is the

only thing that satisfies, but she continues to chase unhealthy relationship after unhealthy relationship, the group will see that her practical action does not line up with her confessional belief. Because of their knowledge of her and her relationships, they will be able to speak good news into her life and point out her blind spot.

There was a guy in a LifeGroup—we'll call him Blake—who told the other men in the group that everything at home with the wife and kids was fine. He'd been coming to group time for months, and no one had ever heard him say anything that he struggles with as a father or husband. However, their family came to a LifeGroup day at the park, and it became evident that Blake is harsh with his kids, that he gets angry with his wife very quickly and makes everyone in their family walk on eggshells.

Because the group spent time outside of a group meeting, they've just seen something that they can engage Blake on that he may never have told them on his own. Anyone can hide things in a two-hour group meeting, after all. You get to know what people believe not only by what they confess at a group, but because you see their beliefs played out in their marriage, parenting, work, etc.

Because family is light for outsiders, and because family is good for discipleship, we want our LifeGroups to figure out ways to spend time with each other outside of the normal group meeting time. The term we use for this is LifeGroup rhythms.

WHAT ARE LIFEGROUP RHYTHMS?

Rhythms are intentional ways to do life with your group in a given week or month. It is intentionally doing things together with regularity and gospel intentionality. Rhythms are the practical ways we are going to be involved in one another's lives. We encourage both intentional rhythms (planned and established) and impromptu rhythms (unplanned, spontaneous ways to do things together). For example, let's look at what a LifeGroup schedule for a married co-ed LifeGroup might look like:

- On Sunday, they try to attend the same Gathering and while they are there, they might serve together or sit together. Sometimes they may even eat together afterward.
- On Tuesday, the men in the group eat lunch together, and the women get together for happy hour after work.

- On Thursday night they have their group meeting time where they eat, catch up on life, confess sin, pray, discuss the sermon and study the Bible.

These would be their intentional rhythms—the ways that they intentionally cross paths during a week. Then, they would occasionally have impromptu rhythms, where a LifeGroup member might say, “Hey, I’m going to this concert on Saturday night with some coworkers...does anyone want to join?”

The purpose for this, again, is twofold: 1) crossing paths is good for discipleship and being family together, because we know each other and our struggles better, and 2) to have non-threatening environments to invite those you are building with into your community. For example, if you are building with a coworker who cares nothing about religion but is interested in relationship, it would probably be wiser to invite her to lunch with your LifeGroup friends than to invite her to your group meeting time.

One potential pushback that you could be thinking is, “Why can’t this just be totally organic?” We also want hanging out with your LifeGroup to come naturally. However, most of the time in life, structure is what facilitates things to happen naturally. If you’re trying to start a new habit, you don’t just say, “I hope that happens.” You create a plan to make it happen.

Structure and intentionality become especially important when you have a big family or group of friends (such as a LifeGroup). Your extended biological family doesn’t just randomly find everyone coming together—that’s not how it works. If everyone comes together, it’s because someone made a plan to have Thanksgiving dinner at their house. Planning helps you spend time together.

As your group tries to implement relational rhythms, don’t be discouraged if it’s harder than you hoped. It takes time to build relationship and figure out what works to help your paths cross during the week. Consistency breeds participation, so be encouraged and keep at it!

We want our LifeGroups to be missionaries together in our city to the extent that they design their rhythms around their target mission (we will discuss this much further in the following chapter). Each group needs to answer the question: “Who are we looking to reach and how can we be intentional with building those relationships?” They can then plan their group rhythms around

their mission, going to people in our city who are without hope and without a family to invite them into our community. Please hear this caveat—the point of rhythms is not only to hang out more, it is a practical way to make disciples. We know people are busy, and, especially in adult life, many are probably thinking, “Hanging out once a week is a lot already!”

Rhythms are not a law; they are simply a tool to help us be on mission together and disciple one another. Think of them like training wheels—they help us learn how to be family on mission together.

The same group could even have multiple rhythms because of differing schedules. Maybe some guys do lunch on Fridays and others do breakfast on Tuesdays because they work in very different parts of the city. The goal is to find things that you are probably already doing (or would like to do), invite others from your LifeGroup, and be intentionally on mission with non-believers while you are doing so.

We know that this can feel overwhelming, and we do not want it to be overwhelming. Again, this is simply a tool for us to leverage our relationships for the gospel, to be family in front of others, and to have non-threatening environments to invite others into. This is not, “Hey, you’re doing it wrong...” it is, “Hey, we think this is an incredible way to be family on mission together...will you dream with us about how your LifeGroup can be a part of reaching our city while growing closer together?”

We encourage LifeGroups to start with three basic intentional rhythms:

1. GATHER TOGETHER:

Attend a Gathering together. Attending a Gathering together gives you a sense of togetherness. Maybe you will sit together, maybe you will serve together once a month, maybe you’ll occasionally go out to eat together afterward and invite friends. The important thing is, you are seeing one another and crossing paths, and it’s an easy opportunity to do so.

2. GROW TOGETHER:

Group time, an intentional time of training once a week. This is what people commonly think of when they think about the term “LifeGroup.” However, this event is not LifeGroup—your community is the LifeGroup, 24/7. Just like “we don’t go to church—we are the church” is true, the same applies to LifeGroup. This is just your primary intentional meeting

time that happens each week. It's where we ask each other "How have you seen Jesus at work in your life?" and "Who are you on mission with, and how can we support you?"

Group time should primarily be focused on these core elements:

- **Catching up on life.** As we move to do life together, the goal is that we will know important things about one another before group time. However, we can still catch up on what is going on with each other and where we've seen Jesus working in our lives recently.
- **Sermon discussion.** American Christians tend to focus more on spiritual knowledge than application. Discussing the sermons allows us to focus on applying what we are learning together on Sundays.
- **Discussing the group's mission and rhythms.** We want to regularly discuss our mission as a group and pray, by name, for the people we are on mission with that God has put us around.
- **Confession & prayer.** This is where we engage the heart, confess any sin, encourage one another and pray for one another.

3. GO TOGETHER:

A social gathering where you can be family in front of others. This is a neutral social setting focused around eating, drinking and/or playing. Sometimes called a "third place" (home and work are the first two places), this can be any environment where people will feel safe if they don't have existing relationships with the group. Many times this will need to be something outside of a home, but in some contexts a social gathering at someone's home would work just fine.

This rhythm is one of the primary answers to the question "Who are we trying to reach and how can we be intentional about building relationship with them?" (The idea of this group rhythm being a tool for mission will be discussed in much further detail in the next chapter.)

The hope is that as we are family in front of others, it will be an attractive light for the gospel, and those we meet in our third rhythm will eventually be in the first two rhythms with us (Gatherings and group time), because they now love Jesus and are family with us.

Here are some ideas for possible social gathering rhythms:

- A meal or restaurant
- A bar
- A frozen yogurt place
- A park
- A sports league
- A hobby
- A poker night
- A TV show
- A farmer's market
- A garden

Again, please hear the purpose behind this: to have an easy environment to build relationship with one another and invite those we are on mission with into our community. Focus on the purpose more than the specific application and decipher how your group can accomplish the purpose.

For example, Toni leads a group of young adult women in our church family. Her group has rapidly grown to 16 people because the girls in it have been excited about inviting their friends into their community. But many of the girls are in grad school and their schedules are hectic. It's an absolute miracle that they can all get together on Wednesday nights for group time, and it is impossible for all 16 people to find another place where their schedules align. Nothing seems to work, and the tendency could be to get frustrated and give up on the idea.

The good news is Toni's group could still easily accomplish the purpose of this rhythm by incorporating a very simple solution: breaking up into smaller, more manageable groups. They could still even have one specific third place and just go at different times. For example, Cool Beans, a coffee shop on campus, may be a perfect third place for them because it is close and many of their friends and classmates already frequent it. This makes it a great place to cross paths with others and be family in front of those they are trying to reach. So one group could go to Cool Beans on Monday afternoon, another on Thursday morning, etc.

As LifeGroups have started to put this idea into practice, we've noticed that one of the biggest frustrations can be that there is no option that is perfect for

everyone. If this is the case in your LifeGroup, we want to kindly remove this frustration from you. It's okay, and you are not failing. Simply figure out how your LifeGroup can best accomplish the purpose, and that may be a combination of a) choosing what works best for most, rolling with that and adjusting as necessary and b) breaking up into smaller groups. If this proves to be difficult for your group, don't wait around for the perfect solution, because it will likely never come. (Much more to come on this idea in the next chapter.)

DO IT TOGETHER, SOMETIMES

Another helpful way to spend time together outside of group time is to look at your personal rhythms, interests and hobbies to see where they line up. There are things that everyone in your group does individually such as grocery shopping, eating, exercising, etc., so why not do those things together sometimes?

Do others in your group enjoy riding bicycles? Ride together sometimes. Do others share a favorite restaurant or social gathering? Go together sometimes. Do others enjoy going to the Soda City Market on Main St. on Saturday mornings? Go together sometimes.

It makes so much sense to look at the things you already do and enjoy in a typical week and try to sync up with any similarities in your group. Use the questions and the calendar below to have a conversation with your group about how your lives may be able to mesh more than you think.

What are your favorite things to do in Columbia? (Interests, hobbies, etc.)

What is your favorite restaurant, bar, coffee shop or hang out spot?

Use the chart on the next page: what does your life look like? What do you already frequently do that you could do together with others sometimes?

PERSONAL RHYTHMS CALENDAR

	SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
BREAKFAST							
MORNING							
LUNCH							
AFTERNOON							
EVENING							
DINNER							
NIGHT							

IF YOU WANT TO BE FAMILY

For those who knew Willie personally, there is an endless amount of what we call “Willie stories.” These range from silly to heart-wrenching, and they get told often by those who knew him. One such story came on a LifeGroup retreat when Willie was put in charge of frying the bacon. The group looked over at him achieving this task and, to their great dismay, saw Willie flipping the bacon with his bare fingers. They ran over to Willie and yelled, “Willie, what are you doing?” and he responded, “What? I washed my hands.” His fingertips had been burnt so often by a crack pipe that he no longer had feeling in them. He genuinely didn’t know why a normal person wouldn’t want to put their fingers in boiling grease.⁴

One of the major reasons so many incredible things happened in Willie’s life while he was with us is that he got involved with a LifeGroup that looked more like a family than a once-a-week meeting. They went on trips together, ate meals together and played disc golf together. Much of Willie’s discipleship happened, not in the formal group time, but in the context of everyday life... driving down the road together, cooking meals, etc.

If you want to get big, you have to lift some weights, and if you want to be family, you have to spend time with one another.

God is on a mission to save the planet, and He’s doing it through little pockets of His family all over the globe. As our LifeGroups become more and more so our primary relationships in life—as we do life together and spend time with one another, we are joining God in His mission. We are putting His glory on display through living out the fact that He has made us a family.

CONVERSATION STARTERS:

- Discuss any insights or thoughts from this chapter.
- How have you seen Jesus work through church as family in your life?
- How can our group grow in spending time with one another outside of group time? (Discuss the questions and personal rhythms calendar from the “Do It Together, Sometimes” section.)

⁴ For more Willie stories, go back and listen to the sermon titled “Loving Our City” from our series called A Green Van & Duct Tape. You can find the link at midtowncolumbia.com/grassroots.

- How can we be family in front of others more often?
- What could our LifeGroup rhythms look like in light of the mission God has given us?
 - What Gathering could we attend together? Is there a way we can serve together or eat together sometimes?
 - What could our third place/social gathering be? (You can go ahead and discuss this and even start something, but keep it adjustable because we will discuss much further in the next chapter.)

NOTES:

CHAPTER SEVEN:

**COMMUNITIES
THAT LIVE ON
MISSION**

You don't know Rick, but you would recognize him if he was pointed out to you. He and his family frequent the park where you often take your kids to play. If Rick were honest with you, both his life and his family are a mess. He covers this well, but he's not sure what's wrong or what to do.

One thing he is sure of, however, is that he won't find the answers in church. He had a bad experience growing up around the church in his hometown and is now convinced that Christians are phonies and that church is nothing but a glorified hobby. His view of spirituality is that of the older brother in Luke 15, that it is a "work your tail off to make God happy" kind of moralism, and he sees no freedom in that. If the good news of Jesus is ever going to come to bear on his life, it won't be because he came to church; it will be because God sent the church to him.

God doesn't need our good works, but our neighbor does.

—Martin Luther

COME AND SEE VS. GO AND BE

For many people, when they think about outreach and evangelism, they think about getting people to a church building. This is what is called a “come and see” ministry philosophy. In order to reach people for Christ, we need to somehow get them to come to our service or crusade or outreach event.

While the gospel can and does spread through events and church services, the fuller biblical picture of how the grassroots kingdom of God spreads is personified in the sentiment of “go and be.” Go and make disciples (Matthew 28:18-20). Go and be the church, not just on Sunday mornings but on Tuesday evenings and Friday during your lunch break. Many people like Rick in the previous story would respond with “No thanks” to an invitation to a church event, while they may be very interested in going to dinner with you.

Jeff Vanderstelt, a pastor in Washington, puts it this way: “You are the church. Now everything counts.”

Everything counts. Every aspect of our lives is brought under the reign of God. This is what it means to be a disciple of Christ, that He gets control over all of us. Our lives are not compartmentalized into “spiritual me” and “real me.” Work, play and rest now become ways in which we live out God’s kingdom here on earth. He uses the everyday, ordinariness of our lives to spread His kingdom. We do not sit around and wait on people to come to church services so that we can preach to them—we go to them and speak good news with our very lives.

In God’s kingdom, we go from nothing in our lives being spiritually intentional to everything in our lives being spiritually intentional. Everything suddenly has a purpose. The quote below emphasizes the role of the everyday and ordinary, especially that of having meals together, as an essential means through which God spreads His kingdom:

Meals bring mission into the ordinary. But that’s where most people are—living in the ordinary. That’s where we need to go to reach them. We too readily think of mission as extraordinary. Perhaps that’s because we find it awkward to talk about Jesus outside a church gathering. Perhaps it’s because we think God moves through the spectacular rather than the witness of people like us. Perhaps it’s because we want to outsource mission to the professionals, so we invite people to guest services where an “expert” can do mission for us. But

most people live in the ordinary, and most people will be reached by ordinary people. Even those who attend a special event will, for the most part, have first been befriended by a Christian.

—Tim Chester, *A Meal with Jesus*

Important note: In the context of joining God in His mission to save the planet, this chapter is where we practically start putting our money where our mouths are. There is a good chance you'll be prodded and challenged in this chapter, and that is a good thing. Stop right now and ask the Holy Spirit to lead and guide you through this chapter. Ask Him to help you resist any temptation to make excuses as to why you are an exception to living on mission as a disciple of Jesus. In Jesus' kingdom, there are no exceptions to His command to "Go therefore and make disciples" (Matthew 28:19).

COMMUNITY MISSION & EVERYDAY MISSION

If you have been around Midtown for a while, you have heard us teach on what we call "community mission," or meeting real, practical needs in our city. In our young church's existence we have rallied our family to tangibly love and serve those in need around us, and God has blessed this in a mighty way. We've seen homeless people come to know Jesus and transition off of the streets—not to mention thousands of people sleep outside in the cold to raise money and awareness for the homeless at the Homeless for the Homeless events we hosted. We've given out water, food and clothes, and we've seen at-risk kids be mentored. We've thrown party after party for disabled people in our city, visited nursing homes to spend time with widows, and remodeled a homeless shelter for families. That's not even getting into the countless personal and LifeGroup projects that our members have taken on.

In light of this, when you hear "communities that live on mission," this may be the primary thing that comes to mind. Communities that serve at soup kitchens together and tutor kids together...meeting real, tangible needs. Is this what it looks like to be on mission together? Of course! This is a practical and legitimate part of being on mission and making disciples in our city. LifeGroups will certainly be led by God to put His love on display for those

around them by meeting physical needs. We as a church will continue to press forward and bless people by meeting physical needs in our city and beyond. As 1 John 3:17 says, how can the love of God be in us if we don't?

But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?

Community mission and the everyday mission of making disciples in ordinary life are not opposed to one another; they are one in the same. They are both about meeting needs, whether physical, spiritual or emotional. The intention behind both is to bless people and help them take next steps toward Jesus by putting His love on display. By pursuing a holistic, everyday mission together we are not getting away from serving our community; we are going deeper into it.

HOW JESUS MADE DISCIPLES

Jesus is, of course, the perfect picture of what it looks like to disciple others by meeting needs. He met people where they were and responded to their various needs. If they needed to be invited into a relationship with Him, He did just that (Matthew 4:18-19). If they needed food, He gave them food (John 6:1-14). If they needed prayer, He prayed for them (Luke 22:32). If they needed physical healing, He healed them (John 9). All of these were what it looked like for Jesus to help people take next steps toward Him.

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

—Matthew 28:18-20

"Go and make disciples" are four words that have changed our entire lives as believers in Jesus.

Again, we want to remind you that for Jesus, discipleship was relational. It happened in the context of everyday, ordinary life. It was also comprehensive, in that it started when he went to the future disciple and extended an invitation to them, and was still ongoing as He sent his disciples out in Matthew 28.

From the example of Jesus, making disciples includes four main parts:

1. Go to
2. Invite in
3. Grow up
4. Send out

Take the life of Peter for example. At one point in his life, Jesus' discipleship looked like this:

1. Jesus *going* to him (Matthew 4:18-19)
2. Jesus *inviting* him into a relationship (Matthew 4:18-19)
3. Jesus *growing* him up in his faith, pointing out sin and pushing toward truth (Matthew 16:21-23)
4. Jesus *sending* him out to make other disciples (Matthew 28:18-20)

In other words, the entire time Jesus was helping Peter take the next step toward Him...toward a relationship with Him, toward maturity in his faith, toward being a missionary to others.

In this chapter we will discuss what it looks like for us to *go to* and *invite in*. Every chapter of this curriculum contributes to what it looks like to grow up as a disciple of Jesus in community together, and in chapter 10 we will discuss what it looks like to send out.

A gospel community is a group of people with a shared life and a shared mission. They have a common identity with a commitment to pastor one another with the gospel and working together to witness to Christ in their context.

—Tim Chester and Steve Timmis, *Everyday Church*

GO TO

We are missionaries in the context of everyday life. That means we live everyday, ordinary life with a gospel-centered intentionality—we are always on the lookout for where Jesus is at work in those around us.

This is the part that trips people up. A typical response is, “How do I have time for this? There is no way I can add a million things to my already busy life.” To be sure, being on mission requires re-prioritizing our schedules to

squeeze out time wasted on insignificant things. If you are watching 25 hours of TV a week, that's probably an issue...

However, many people with this pushback are not watching 25 hours of TV a week. They have a job, they go to school, they have kids to raise and so on. They are legitimately busy. So the thought of adding mission to their schedule feels overwhelming.

And, as usual, there is good news for this. Mission, as it turns out, is not necessarily something that you have to add to your schedule.

INTENTIONAL, NOT ADDITIONAL

We need to move from a mindset of additional to intentional. What if God has actually given us this amazing way of seeing life that would make all of life one big, huge opportunity for discipleship and mission? Like everything we're already doing, what if it's already an opportunity, perfectly for discipleship and mission?

—Caesar Kalinowski

Being on mission as a disciple is not a new program you have to add to your already busy life; it is something that reorients your entire life—the new lens through which you see the world. It becomes the way you see yourself and every area of your life. As Paul David Tripp says, “My mission is my schedule.”

- You no longer work a job—you make disciples at work. You have a ministry with people in a workplace and happen to get your pay-check through a company.
- You no longer just have hobbies—you participate in hobbies with a mission.
- You no longer turn your brain off and try to get through class—you make disciples while you are at school.
- You no longer just raise a family—you raise a family who is on mission together in your neighborhood.

Another way that “Go therefore” from Matthew 28:18 has been described is the sense of “As you are going”. You have already been “going”—going to work, going to school, going to the park, going to coffee shops, etc. Now you simply go with a new perspective. You do the same things you’ve been doing with a new and compelling purpose, because you’re a part of God’s mission to save the planet.

Being a missionary who makes disciples does not mean you have to move somewhere; it means you are intentional as you are doing the things you're already doing with the people God has put you around. You don't add mission to your life—life is one big opportunity for discipleship and mission.

What do I want for my children? Redemption. What do I want for my neighbors? Redemption. What do I want for my husband or wife? Redemption. What do I want for my coworkers? Redemption. What do I want for the shopkeeper that I meet three or four times a week? Redemption. And I want to be a part of that. And by the touch of my hand, by the tone of my voice, by the look on my face I want to represent the One who has sent me.

—Paul David Tripp

PERSONAL REFLECTION:

What would it look like for you to live your everyday life with gospel intentionality? Where and with whom would you be on mission?

FOLLOWING THE HOLY SPIRIT

An important reminder as we study what it looks like to “go to” is that our going is really following. We are not trailblazers charting unseen territory; we are following the Holy Spirit who is already at work in those around us. The Holy Spirit is on mission all over the world, pointing people to Jesus and convicting the world of sin (John 16:8).

We are much like a kid going to work with our dad. This is why prayer and a constant dependence on the Holy Spirit is essential to being on mission—we want to be always aware of our inability to change hearts or produce spiritual fruit without Him. God is the ultimate missionary and evangelist. It is He who does all the work...we simply join Him in what He is already doing in the hearts and lives of those around us.

As we go, we need to be constantly in tune with the Holy Spirit...asking for guidance, listening and being receptive to His prodding. As a part of doing this, here are some good questions to ask:

- Who is the Holy Spirit calling me to build relationship with?
- Who does He keep putting around me?
- Who does He keep putting on my heart while I'm praying?
- Who seems receptive (or at least non-resistant) to spiritual things? (May be an indicator that the Holy Spirit is working in them.)
- Who is asking questions about spiritual things?

This is not saying that if a person doesn't fit one of these categories, you shouldn't be on mission with them. But because God is at work around us, because He has to be at work around us and in us to change hearts, we want to make it a priority to be sensitive to His leading. It is often best to focus first on the people who do fit some of these categories, simply because it's likely that the Holy Spirit is already at work in them.

PERSONAL REFLECTION:

Who in your life fits these categories? How can you commit to praying for and being intentional with them?

GETTING PRACTICAL

How does your LifeGroup practically *go to* together? Who are we to be on mission with?

The short answer to these questions is that we pray and ask for the Holy Spirit's direction. He is our guide, and we want everything we do to be in response to His leading. However, there are a few practical steps to guide us as we pray and seek His direction.

1. WE ARE ON MISSION WITH THOSE GOD PUTS AROUND US.

This will be a large part of the Holy Spirit's answers to our prayers for direction, because God has already put us around the people we find in our lives. Your coworkers, neighbors and friends are not there by accident just like you are not where you are by accident (Acts 17:26-27). You are around them, at least in part, because God loves them and wants to reach out to them.

This is the goal for every Christian and every community of believers. LifeGroups are to be little missional communities working toward the common goal of making disciples of those in our everyday lives. Every group will have friends, neighbors and coworkers as a major part of their intentional mission. We want to empower, equip and support each other in the avenues and spheres that God has placed us in. All of us are on mission with those around us, and we are not doing this alone, but as a group.

2. WE PRAY FOR THOSE THAT GOD PUTS AROUND US AND MAKE A PLAN TO ENGAGE THEM.

Again, in our groups we want to continually ask the question: "Who are you building with and how can we help?" During group time, we will answer this question and pray for the people that are shared by name.

For example, a LifeGroup member named Tom shared that he was building with a guy named James from his job, and his group asked Tom that question. The natural thing would have been to invite James to Pizza Joint (their group's third place rhythm), but James couldn't do Tuesday nights because of his work schedule. So Tom's response was simple: "Well, we are playing tennis this weekend, so you could come play with us." This was a win in so many different ways. Tom was supported in his efforts to build relationship with his coworker. The LifeGroup suddenly was on mission together. James just got several new friends instead of one. Wins everywhere.

The group then proceeded to pray for James by name. They prayed that God would work in his heart, that tennis would be a good introductory experience to their community, and that God would give them wisdom on how to best engage James. Now week after week Tom shares updates about James and their group does the same thing until hopefully James comes to know Jesus and becomes a part of their community. A large part of being on mission together is supporting and empowering one another—to take what might have been an individual effort and make it a group effort.

Another example of this is comes from Jon Ludovina, one of our teaching pastors who also leads a married co-ed LifeGroup with his wife Erica. He describes the following experience:

Our group was starting to get some traction in being family together and understanding that we are on a mission to give the grace we've received from Jesus to others. A couple named Derek and Mandy in our group had become friends with another couple, JR and Kyra, through, of all possible things, going to physical therapy. Mandy was having some health issues and as she frequented the physical therapy office that JR and Kyra ran, they hit it off.

Mandy started having spiritual conversations with them. She kept inviting them to come around Midtown and, in Kyra's words, she "eventually ran out of excuses" and came to a Gathering. After meeting a lot of the people in our LifeGroup, they started coming to some of our rhythms. They would come to a cookout or JR would go to lunch or World of Beer with the guys on Monday nights. Eventually they started coming to our group time.

Kyra says that it was when she joined the LifeGroup that everything clicked for her. She realized that she "couldn't imagine her life without Jesus" anymore and became a Christian. JR was already a believer, but he started growing exponentially, too. He once told us that it was the first time he came to lunch with the guys from LifeGroup that helped him realize that Jesus was supposed to be a part of his entire life. And it wasn't even a particularly good lunch.

Our third places often provide the perfect opportunity to engage people like JR and Kyra, but, again, this is only a tool. Because we are joining God in saving the planet, we will do whatever it takes to pray for, pursue and relationally engage those that our group is building with.

3. WHEN POSSIBLE WE NARROW OUR INTENTIONAL MISSION.

Again, we are all called to be on mission with those around us. Some groups will find that the best intentional mission they can pursue is their collective friends, coworkers and neighbors. However, when possible we encourage groups to get even more specific with their intentional mission. It is not a requirement for every group to select a more specific intentional mission—it is

simply a tool. The reason for this is that we have seen groups become more effective in helping, serving and making disciples when they do select a specific group to pursue together. Doing so focuses the group and gives direction and clarity as to exactly what the group is trying to accomplish together. All of which are good things.

Does this mean groups who have a specific intentional mission won't welcome others who are not a part of that group? Of course not. Having a narrowed intentional mission simply means that a group will channel their collective effort into serving, loving, blessing, getting to know and making disciples with that particular group. While mission certainly can be reactive (beginning with random encounters, people you meet, etc.), Jesus' call to "Go therefore" implies a more proactive mindset—that we are intentional about reaching those God has placed us around.

In thinking about what your group's intentional mission could be, here are some questions to ask:

IS THERE A PARTICULAR GROUP OF PEOPLE WE ARE WELL SUITED TO REACH?

A group who lives in close proximity to one another would be well suited to have their neighborhood as their intentional mission.

With this group, a neighborhood restaurant would make a perfect third place.

A group of college girls would be well suited to reach other college girls around them. Yogurt might be a great third place for this group.

A group of young families would more easily be able to reach other young families. A kid-friendly park would be a good place to hang out and engage other young families.

If several people in a group work at the same company, they are positioned well to make other friends from that company their intentional mission. A bar or restaurant near that company could be a great third place.

The answer to this question could also potentially be more of a response to a community need. For example, Landon Thompson,

one of our LifeGroup coaches at Midtown, found a young boy trying to break into a house while walking through his neighborhood late one night. He walked the young boy home and talked to his mother, who was very upset. She told Landon that her son didn't have a father figure and that many of the neighborhood kids were being a bad influence on him.

So Landon offered to start playing kickball with the boy and any neighborhood kids every week to spend time with them and be a good male influence. The mother gratefully agreed, and, ever since, Landon's LifeGroup has joined in this effort, with the goal of making disciples of the neighborhood kids and their families.

ARE THERE HOBBIES, INTERESTS OR PASSIONS THAT ARE SHARED BY MANY IN OUR GROUP THAT COULD BE A STARTING POINT TO BE ON MISSION WITH OTHERS WITH THE SAME INTERESTS?

Do lots of people in your group enjoy playing disc golf? Guess what could be a good intentional mission? Men in your group enjoy riding bikes, fishing or playing poker? Women in your group enjoy crafting, running or going to the pool? (You get the point... this is not calculus.) One group could have multiple avenues of this going on. Some people could do one thing together, while others do something else.

What do you like to do that could potentially be the basis for an intentional mission in your group?

IS ANYONE IN OUR GROUP ALREADY WELL CONNECTED RELATIONALLY WITH NON-BELIEVERS (A NATURAL CONNECTOR)? IF SO, HOW CAN THE GROUP COME ALONGSIDE THEM TO BE ON MISSION TOGETHER?

The story from Jon's LifeGroup about JR and Kyra gets even better. Jon shares the rest of the story and how it has impacted their group's mission:

As it turned out, JR and Kyra are incredible connectors. They make friends easily and know a lot of people from running a physical therapy clinic together. One of their employees named John actually started coming to World of Beer with us a while back on Monday nights. He was a little hesitant at first, but eventually he started asking about what we do on Wednesday nights (our group time). He told JR: "Whatever kind of community you have—I want in on it." So he started coming on Wednesday nights.

Honestly more than anything else right now, the relationships that JR and Kyra have are our group's intentional mission. Every other Friday night we do a movie night at their house and meet more of their friends. It's incredible.

When God is doing something through a particular person who is gifted at connecting others, it makes perfect sense for us to come alongside them and be the communal support that they need. This is not an excuse for others to neglect being on mission individually; it is a way that we can be on mission together.

In conclusion, the intentional mission of every group will include their collective friends, neighbors and coworkers—those whom God has placed around them. Some groups, after praying through this material, will land on this as their intentional mission. Other groups, however, will be led to an even more specific group of people to focus on. The heart of both of these outcomes is the same—to be on mission with each other in the most effective way possible.

THINK STRATEGICALLY ABOUT MISSION

Regardless of your group's intentional mission, the goal is to organize your LifeGroup's relational time and rhythms around the people you desire to reach. Your social "Go Together" rhythm will ideally be strategically planned in light of who you are trying to reach. Essentially, it's answering this question: "How can we intentionally put our community around the people we are trying to reach?" One way to answer this question is to discern where the people you are trying to reach tend to naturally gather and make that place your third place.

A third place is essentially the front porch of modern America. While back in the good ole' days the front porch might have been the third place where people gathered to be social, that's not true so much today. But people do have those third places where they gather—their own personal front porches.

- For some it's Starbucks—the coffee shop has become a common front porch for Americans.
- For some it's a local restaurant or a bar—being a regular somewhere offers a unique sense of belonging.
- For some it's a poker night at someone's house.
- For some it's a hobby or interest.
- For some it's a location or recurring event—maybe a local park, playground or farmer's market.

Once your group has identified your intentional mission, pick a third place to be regulars at where your lives will intersect with those you are being intentional with. This is a practical way for your group to go to the people you are trying to reach, as it provides a neutral, non-threatening way to meet people on their turf.

Important note: Don't be discouraged if heading in this direction is harder than you hoped. Everyone in the group will not likely be on board at first, and if even a handful of people show up consistently to relational avenues where you can be on mission together, that's a win! Keep it up, and push in that direction.

TWO MISSION CONSIDERATIONS

To be on mission together as disciples who make disciples, there are two very important things to consider: proximity and frequency.

Proximity is important because you need to be around the people you are trying to reach. For example, what if a pastor of a church lived an hour away from the community his church was in. That would be a mission fail, would it not? There is no way he could be effective in reaching people that he lives an hour from. This is why your personal and group mission should primarily include people you are geographically close to.

Secondly, frequency is important because in order to build relationship with those you desire to reach, you have to spend time with them. You have to be around them frequently. After all, you can't reach people that you don't know. This is why, whatever it may look like, the idea of being a regular is very important to being on mission.

Mission takes place not through attractational events, but through attractational communities.

—Tim Chester and Steve Timmis, *Everyday Church*

INVITE IN

As we go to be on mission with those around us, the next step is to invite them into relationship. This can look a number of different ways depending on their openness, but the key is that you are inviting them into relationship with you and others in your group.

The idea of having a third place serves a double purpose in that, in addition to putting you around new people, it also provides a perfect opportunity for you to invite into your community anyone that you are building with.

Having a fun, easy, non-threatening environment to invite others into is a huge asset to being on mission. Think about this—if you are building with a neighbor who is not currently interested in anything spiritual, which invite do you think she is more willing to take you up on?

A) Hey, some friends and I usually go to happy hour on Tuesdays at The Whig, do you want to come with us?

B) Hey, do you want to go to my LifeGroup meeting with me on Thursday night? We talk about the Bible, confess our sins and pray for one another.

You guessed it—option A it is. She may have no clue what happens at a LifeGroup meeting—or worse yet, she may have a totally wrong idea of what

happens. That may be incredibly intimidating or just uninteresting to her. But happy hour...who doesn't like happy hour?

That is not to say that you should never invite someone directly to your LifeGroup meeting time. Follow the Holy Spirit as He leads, for sure. But in general, it is super helpful to have a non-threatening, fun, relational environment to invite people into as the first step. Your community gets to build with them, and they get to see the gospel on display through the way you love and treat one another. Win/win.

PERSONAL REFLECTION:

What do you think about the idea of having a fun, non-threatening environment to invite people you are building with? Who are people in your life that you would want to invite to hang out with your LifeGroup in an environment like that?

Invite in is a stage that can look a thousand different ways, but the goal is always the same—to get people who don't know Jesus around people who do. That's always a good start and something to celebrate.

And don't be discouraged if this doesn't go as well as you hoped it would. Maybe your neighbor comes to happy hour with you occasionally. She's built some friendships with others in your group and you've definitely gotten closer, but she's still very far from being interested in Jesus.

That situation would not be something to mourn, it would be something to rejoice in. Your neighbor knows people who love Jesus! She wants to hang out with them. That is nothing to hang your head about. Instead, rejoice while you continue to pray for and love her.

Even if it is difficult to get a third place rhythm started with your LifeGroup members, don't be discouraged. If a few people are showing up, that's something to celebrate and keep pushing for. We are calling people to a life of everyday mission, and sometimes that takes a while to grasp.

This step is also where gospel fluency becomes a very important part of being on mission. You have two very attractive things to invite people into—community and the good news of Jesus—so they should be hearing how Jesus is good news for them.

Since the gospel should be regularly discussed in our groups, it should be the norm, the language we speak, and the lens through which we see the world. When others are putting their hope in false good news, we get to ask good questions and have loving conversations that point them to Jesus, the ultimate good news. This level of comfort and knowledge of Jesus being good news for everyone enables us to have gospel conversations with people without it being forced or awkward.

Here are three things to keep in mind for gospel conversation to be normal and natural:

1. **Know the good news.** The more you know and are personally reflecting on the good news of Jesus for the various issues in life, the more comfortable you will be with it (it won't feel like a sales presentation—it will be you talking about something that is changing your life).
2. **Listen more often than you speak.** We have to listen to people well in order to understand their stories, their perspectives and their idols. Don't speak too soon.
3. **The gospel is always good news.** We are never shy or awkward in telling people what we believe is genuinely good news for them. How is the gospel good news to the person you are building with?

If you want to understand a person's worldview, don't read a book. Talk to them, hang out with them, eat with them.

—Tim Chester, *A Meal with Jesus*

PRAY & ENGAGE

The chart on the next page is designed to help you be intentional with those God has put around you.

Name column: What people in your life from the categories below are you praying for? Who would you love to see come to know Jesus?

Next Steps column: What practical next steps can you take to engage them with the gospel? (Examples of this could be asking them to eat lunch with you, inviting them to a LifeGroup rhythm, having an intentional conversation with them, etc.) We want to always be asking the Holy Spirit the question “What’s next?” for those He leads us to build with.

Group Effort column: How can your LifeGroup support and encourage you as you engage them? How can you make it a group effort?

PRAY & ENGAGE CHART

	NAME	NEXT STEPS	GROUP EFFORT
FRIENDS			
NEIGHBORS			
COWORKERS			
OTHER			

CONVERSATION STARTERS:

- Discuss any insights or thoughts from this chapter.
- What does it look like for our group to *go to*? What should be our group's intentional mission?
- How can we be strategic about spending quality time with those we are well suited to reach? What could be our third place?
- Are there any specific people that God has laid on your heart to pray for and build relationship with? How can we support and encourage you in reaching them?
- What does it look like for our group to *invite in*? What relational avenues are we inviting people into?

NOTES:

CHAPTER EIGHT:

COMMUNITIES THAT FIGHT FOR ONE ANOTHER

GROWTH AS LIGHT

As we've mentioned often in this book, God is on a mission to redeem the planet, and He's using communities of people who've been reconciled to Him as a major part of His redemptive work. In Matthew 5:14-16, Jesus says the church is the light of the world. As God creates these communities centered on His grace, the transformation that occurs as people grow spiritually is attractive, counter-cultural and compelling. It puts off light into the spiritual darkness around them.

Many may think of spiritual growth as a solitary pursuit—something that you do completely on your own, just you and God, or in some kind of knowledge-learning atmosphere. However, while individual spiritual disciplines such as studying Scripture, prayer, fasting, etc., are certainly important things we can do to grow spiritually, the major emphasis of the New Testament is that growth happens in community. Even the “you” commands in the New Testament are most often not singular—they are plural. In the South they would imply “y'all”—they are communal commands.

Spiritual growth will not happen in a vacuum. Imagine someone going away in complete solitude for six months and then coming back to attest to their newfound patience and love for people. Your response would probably be something along the lines of, “How do you know your patience and love for people has grown if you haven't seen another human being in six months?

Could it just be that you haven't been standing in line at the grocery store?"

Think about the fruit of the Spirit listed in Galatians 5:22-23: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. These are by and large communal qualities. The Holy Spirit grows these in us by surrounding us with real people...people who test your patience, people who are hard to love sometimes, people who push your ability to be gentle and self-controlled.

The primary way that God grows us is through relationships with other believers where He convicts us of sin and pushes us to believe the gospel more deeply and practically. A beautiful addition to this spiritual growth in community is that while it is taking place, our transformation is actively putting God on display for those around us.

The way this communal design for growth plays out in the New Testament is seen in what are called the "one another" commands. The "one another" commands are direction for us as a newly formed spiritual community, teaching us how to live life together as a family. They function both as:

- "Because of the gospel, you will treat one another this way," and
- "Treating one another this way will put the gospel on display."

There are 59 "one another" commands in the New Testament (also including "each other"). Can you believe that? It must be a big deal. Just in case you need proof, here is a list of all of them (some are repeated in the same verse):

1. "...Be at peace with each other." (Mark 9:50)
2. "...Wash one another's feet." (John 13:14)
3. "...Love one another..." (John 13:34)
4. "...Love one another..." (John 13:34)
5. "...If you have love for one another..." (John 13:35)
6. "...Love one another..." (John 15:12)
7. "...Love one another" (John 15:17)
8. "Love one another with a brotherly affection..." (Romans 12:10)
9. "...Outdo one another in showing honor." (Romans 12:10)
10. "Live in harmony with one another..." (Romans 12:16)
11. "...Love each other..." (Romans 13:8)
12. "...Let us not pass judgment on one another." (Romans 14:13)

13. "Welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you..." (Romans 15:7)
14. "...Instruct one another." (Romans 15:14)
15. "Greet one another with a holy kiss..." (Romans 16:16)
16. "...When you come together to eat, wait for one another." (1 Corinthians 11:33)
17. "...Have the same care for one another." (1 Corinthians 12:25)
18. "...Greet one another with a holy kiss." (1 Corinthians 16:20)
19. "Greet one another with a holy kiss." (2 Corinthians 13:12)
20. "...Through love serve one another." (Galatians 5:13)
21. "If you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another." (Galatians 5:15)
22. "Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another." (Galatians 5:26)
23. "Bear one another's burdens..." (Galatians 6:2)
24. "...Bearing with one another in love." (Ephesians 4:2)
25. "Be kind to one another..." (Ephesians 4:32)
26. "...Forgiving one another..." (Ephesians 4:32)
27. "Addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs." (Ephesians 5:19)
28. "Submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ." (Ephesians 5:21)
29. "...In humility count others more significant than yourselves." (Philippians 2:3)
30. "Do not lie to each other..." (Colossians 3:9)
31. "Bearing with each other..." (Colossians 3:13)
32. "...Forgiving each other, as the Lord has forgiven you..." (Colossians 3:13)
33. "Teaching...[one another]" (Colossians 3:16)
34. "...Admonishing one another..." (Colossians 3:16)
35. "...Abound in love for one another and for all..." (1 Thessalonians 3:12)
36. "...Love one another." (1 Thessalonians 4:9)
37. "...Encourage one another..." (1 Thessalonians 4:18)
38. "...Encourage one another..." (1 Thessalonians 5:11)
39. "...Build one another up..." (1 Thessalonians 5:11)
40. "Exhort one another every day..." (Hebrews 3:13)

41. "...Stir up one another toward love and good deeds." (Hebrews 10:24)
42. "...Encouraging one another." (Hebrews 10:25)
43. "...Do not speak evil against one another." (James 4:11)
44. "Do not grumble against one another..." (James 5:9)
45. "Confess your sins to one another..." (James 5:16)
46. "...Pray for one another." (James 5:16)
47. "...Love one another earnestly from a pure heart." (1 Peter 1:22)
48. "...Live in harmony with one another..." (Romans 12:16)
49. "...Loving one another earnestly..." (1 Peter 4:8)
50. "Show hospitality to one another without grumbling." (1 Peter 4:9)
51. "As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another..." (1 Peter 4:10)
52. "...Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another..." (1 Peter 5:5)
53. "Greet one another with the kiss of love." (1 Peter 5:14)
54. "...Love one another." (1 John 3:11)
55. "...Love one another." (1 John 3:23)
56. "...Love one another." (1 John 4:7)
57. "...Love one another." (1 John 4:11)
58. "...Love one another." (1 John 4:12)
59. "...Love one another." (2 John 1:5)

Do you see any refrains in these? A few of the repeated commands are "love" (15 times), "greet" (4 times) and "encourage" (4 times). They describe quite a compelling community, don't they? Can you imagine a group of people who constantly practiced these commands? It would be breathtaking.

DIFFERENT KINGDOMS, DIFFERENT "ONE ANOTHERS"

Why is this so important, other than the fact that following God's commands to walk in this spiritual community facilitates much of our spiritual growth?

Like we discussed at the beginning of our study, our world is busted beyond belief because of our sin. This rebellion against God has wrecked all of creation, most notably humans and our relationships with one another. Colossians 1:13 calls it "the domain of darkness," and dark it certainly is.

The false kingdoms we humans have set up have produced their own set of “one anothers,” and they happen all too often. In these false kingdoms, we:

- Hurt one another.
- Lie to one another.
- Hate one another.
- Envy one another.
- Cheat one another.
- Steal from one another.
- Abuse one another.
- Use one another.
- Hide from one another.
- Tear down one another.
- Fight one another.
- Hold grudges against one another.
- Leave one another.
- Neglect one another.

This is the state of the world we live in. This is life apart from God. People do not have their needs met in relationship with God, so they use and abuse one another in a fleeting attempt to gain status or fill up the lacking places of their souls. Even when we do not actively harm one another, we often neglect one another and simply keep to ourselves, refusing to love and care for others the way we were designed because doing so is too costly. Sin has broken relationship such that we do not naturally practice the “one anothers” of Jesus’ kingdom—we default to those of our false kingdoms. Galatians 5:15 becomes a bitter prophecy because we end up biting and devouring one another.

PERSONAL REFLECTION:

Where have you seen these “one anothers” in your life? How have you committed them against others? How have others committed them against you?

“But God” (Ephesians 2:4). But God. Have there ever been two better words? “But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved” (Ephesians 2:4-5).

God has solved the problem that humanity would never be able to cure—not even if we had an infinite number of resources and education. Not even if we had an eternity of time.

By His grace He has made us, who had spiritual death coursing through our veins and our relationships, alive together with Christ. Not because we earned it, but because of the great love with which He loved us. He has dealt not only with our vertical brokenness but with our horizontal brokenness as well. “He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Colossians 1:13-14).

He transfers us from our tiny, shattered kingdoms back into the kingdom of Jesus, His beloved Son. He takes people who used to practice the destructive “one anothers” of our false kingdoms and creates a community that practice the “one anothers” of Jesus.

Do you understand what this means? It means that although practicing the “one anothers” in community contributes heavily to our growth, the “one anothers” actually have a much bigger purpose than that. Every time we as the church practice the “one anothers,” we are joining God in His solution to fix what’s wrong with creation. We are joining God in the renewal of all things by putting His family, His way of life, on display for the world. We get to show people that He has a better way—a better story for us, as each “one another” has a shadow of the gospel story in it. The “one anothers” of Jesus’ kingdom are the practical instructions for us to fight for one another as a family and put His grace on display.

God’s design for the church to live everyday, ordinary life together is really good for the church and really good for the world. But these can’t happen by just showing up on a Sunday, and they won’t happen by adding in a once-a-week meeting. “One anothers” can only happen in the context of real life, being family together.

Below are some of the major categories the “one anothers” fall into and how we’d love to see them lived out in our church family.

Important note: As you read these, don't think of them as "what others should do for me"...think of them as "what I will do for others." That is the only way these work properly—if everyone is focused on practicing them for one another.

LOVE ONE ANOTHER

- **Romans 12:10** *Love one another with a brotherly affection.*
- **1 Thessalonians 3:12** *And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all.*

The most often repeated of these communal commands in the New Testament is "love one another." Obviously, this must mean that it is of supreme importance. One of the primary ways that we grow in grace is by learning to love one another, and one of the primary ways outsiders see Jesus is in the way we love one another (John 13:35).

But this love described is far from a fleeting love. You do not fall into it and fall out of it like our culture may lead you to believe. It is not all warm fuzzies and butterflies. No, it is a family kind of love. As Romans 12:10 states, the outcome is a "brotherly affection."

The way you love your brother, your sister, your mother, father, wife and children—that's the love we're talking about. They may get on your nerves sometimes, but you love them in the deepest way. You would die for them, you'd do anything you could for them.

This love means that we are concerned for one another. We watch out for one another. We care about the well-being of one another, and we don't want each other to get hurt. It means we sacrifice for one another. You begin to love the things that your family loves, and you become willing to do things with and for your family that you normally wouldn't because they are your family.

We've seen this brotherly affection displayed in our church family often, and it is incredibly compelling. It's beautiful beyond description to see a community of people come together and love each other with a remarkable, gospel-exalting love.

Jesus has loved us with a striking love, and He gives us the ability and desire to do the same for others. As we love one another, we put His love on display and join God in His work of reconciling people to Himself.

PERSONAL REFLECTION:

How have you come to deeply love those in your community? How have you grown concerned for them and even sacrificed for them?

FORGIVE ONE ANOTHER

- **Colossians 3:12-16 (NIV)** *Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts.*

Just as you sometimes fight and hurt one another in your biological family, the same will be true in a spiritual family. If the church is God's gathered, broken people, you have to expect that someone is going to sin against you, just like you should not be surprised that there are sick people when you walk into a hospital. We are sinful people who hurt one another. There will be hurt feelings and relational tension...this is inevitable.

Gratefully we have the good news of the gospel displayed in Colossians 3:13: "Forgive as the Lord forgave you." We get to extend the grace we've received in Jesus, because we realize that we've been forgiven for more than we'll ever have to forgive. Because of the gospel, we have a limitless supply of grace. Bitterness, relational drama and un-forgiveness are not marks of a gospel-centered community of believers, so they have no place in our communities.

This is yet another way that we put Jesus on display to those around us. If you've ever been around a gospel-centered marriage where a couple is quick to forgive, bearing with one another, responding with grace instead of anger—you've seen how beautiful this can be. This is exactly what we want to be true of our LifeGroups—that others would see the tangible grace of Jesus played out in our relationships.

The way we treat one another as family is a unique and beautiful representation of Jesus. As we bear with one another, forgive one another and love one another, we are testifying to the transformational and unifying love of Jesus. As a family, our goal is to be the best picture of Jesus that we can be, and that means we don't do relational bitterness or drama—we quickly deal with those issues in a gospel-centered way. When we forgive and deal with relational sin quickly, we join what God is doing by creating communities who have good news for the world.

PERSONAL REFLECTION:

Is there anyone you are harboring bitterness against that you need to offer forgiveness to?

Is there anyone you have sinned against that you need to approach and apologize to?

BEAR WITH ONE ANOTHER

- **Ephesians 4:1-3** *I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with*

all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Guess what? People can be frustrating and annoying. You might not want to admit it, but you can be frustrating and annoying (just ask your spouse, room-mates or LifeGroup). You will get under each other's skin. In fact, if you're not, that is probably a sign that you aren't as close as you should be. It's very normal to have relational tension and frustration when you are truly family with one another, just as it is in your biological family. Fighting and frustration is like morning sickness during pregnancy—it's not fun, but it's a great sign that things are healthy!

The good news of the gospel is that every believer has been given more grace than we'll ever have to show to another person. We are overflowing with it, so we have plenty to extend. We can even practice forbearance—forgiving others in advance—because we have grace stored up for them already.

Even in frustration, we can be patient and gentle, bearing with one another because of the gospel. After all, hasn't Jesus put up with a lot of crap from you? Hasn't He had to bear with you? I thought so. You can do the same for others!

It might not feel like it, but as we bear with one another we join God in what He's doing to change the world in the most grassroots way possible.

PERSONAL REFLECTION:

How has Jesus had to bear with your difficulty and frustration? How is that a model for you to be gentle and patient, practicing forbearance with others?

CONFESS YOUR SINS TO ONE ANOTHER

- **James 5:16** *Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.*

This is one of those verses that at times you may wish was absent from the Bible. Our sin nature wants to hide our sin and not walk in the light with others. We don't want others to find out who we truly are and how evil our hearts can be.

PERSONAL REFLECTION:

Read **John 3:19-21**. What does the person who “does what is true” do? How does the gospel produce freedom for the person hiding in the darkness?

To our propensity to hide from God and others, the gospel again is good news for us. As John 3 states, we want to hide in the darkness because the light exposes us for who we really are, and we hate that. But our righteousness has been fully accomplished through Jesus! Our “works” have been carried out in Him. He has performed perfectly on our behalf, and his perfect standing with God has been credited to us.

Translation: there's no reason to hide! We can do what is true, acknowledge reality and walk in the light. We don't have to be in denial or hiding anymore.

“But...” you might say, “can't I just be thankful for that and simply confess my sins to Jesus? Why do I have to confess to other people?”

The answer to that question is that we confess our sins to one another (and not just Jesus) because Jesus has told us to explicitly, and we trust that what He tells us to do is for our best. Just like the person in John 3, walking out into the light is the best thing for our souls.

Confession is a practical means of receiving God's grace. When you confess to your LifeGroup, they get to act out Jesus to you. They get to speak His words and assure you that your righteousness in Christ has not changed. If you do not confess, you are forfeiting experiencing God's grace in this way, along with the freedom and healing it brings.

Because confession is putting the grace of Jesus on display, every time we confess to one another we join God in subversively changing the world.

Allowing those around you to see you confess and repent of sin in your life is one of the best gifts you can give them because in confessing to one another, we are acting out the gospel story. It gives others hope that they can receive the same mercy that you are walking in. Many times confession produces a chain reaction—when someone is willing to go first, others will follow.

Confession is not just about the big issues in our lives—we are called to do life with one another and share all areas of sin, whether big or small. Part of walking together is even confessing before you sin (or pre-confession), which is simply turning to Jesus and community for support while you are tempted instead of after you sin.

PERSONAL REFLECTION:

What would pre-confession look like in your struggles with sin? How can you reach out to your LifeGroup for encouragement and accountability when you are tempted?

When is the last time you confessed sin to your LifeGroup? How can you make it a habit to confess your sins regularly?

SPUR & ENCOURAGE ONE ANOTHER

- **Hebrews 10:24-25 (NIV)** *And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.*

These verses teach us that we have a responsibility to each other. We are family and we look out for one another. We encourage one another and spur one another toward love and following Jesus. This is entirely different from our cultural value of “Look out for yourself.”

This means we constantly look for how Jesus is at work in those surrounding us. We ask for the Holy Spirit to show us how they are growing, so we can point that out and encourage them. Maybe a woman in your LifeGroup used to hide her sin for months before she would confess it, and now she does it almost instantly. That is growth! You can point that out to her, encourage her by the progress you see in her walk with Jesus.

Biblically, encouragement is not “I like your shirt,” or “You make good brownies,” it is engaging people on a heart level, pointing out how Jesus is at work in their lives.

This category also includes commands to teach, admonish, and instruct one another. We are called to take responsibility for one another, to disciple one another, and to look out for one another’s blind spots.

We all know that sick feeling when you’re driving down a highway, and you go to change lanes and suddenly hear a loud horn or notice a piece of a hood in your side mirror. It’s a terrible feeling to have something in your blind spot and not know it is there, and it can cause major damage if you are not careful. Just like a blind spot in a car, we all have areas of weakness and sin that are hard for us to see in ourselves, and we need people who know and love us to lovingly point them out and engage us on them.

This is not always easy and comfortable, but if we love one another and want what’s best for each other, we’ll be willing to have difficult conversations. However, the hope is that we are creating such gospel-centered environments in our LifeGroups that people both expect and ask for correction.

The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.

— 1 Timothy 1:15

If I, like Paul, understand my heart and how wicked it can be, that I am the worst sinner I know of, then I will not be defensive when someone engages

me on a sin issue that I might not see. I will suspect myself first and humbly listen to their concerns. Jeremiah 17:9 says that our hearts are deceitful, so we should be suspicious of our judgment. No one has deceived you more than your own heart has, so don't revert to self-trust, finger pointing, and blame shifting when you are confronted. Humbly listen, thank the person for being willing to have a difficult conversation, take some time to pray about it, and then have any follow up conversations that need to take place, including confession.

In fact, as we grow in the gospel, we will not only respond well when someone brings something to our attention, we will ask for their input, correction and spurring. We will regularly invite others to speak into our lives, to be very honest with us about how we can grow spiritually.

When we spur and encourage one another, we join God in creating this beautiful, counter-cultural community that lives out the good news that God takes self-consumed, runaway prodigals and makes them family.

PERSONAL REFLECTION:

When was the last time you approached someone about an area of sin they may not see in their life? Is there anyone you need to approach and have a conversation with now that you are concerned about?

Have you asked your LifeGroup for encouragement and correction recently? How can you communicate that you want them to take responsibility for you and help point out your blind spots?

SHOW HOSPITALITY TO ONE ANOTHER

- **1 Peter 4:8-9** *Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins. Show hospitality to one another without grumbling.*
- **Romans 15:7** *Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.*

Hospitality is another way that we get to grow in grace by serving one another. At its root, hospitality is making people feel welcomed and loved, which is exactly what Jesus has done for us. We get to go out of our way to make others feel welcomed and loved because of the gospel—to invite them in just as we were invited in.

Have you ever been around someone that just made you feel good? Maybe they threw a party, welcomed you into their home, or just asked you questions and it seemed for all the world that they weren't just being polite, but that they really wanted to know you, wanted to listen.

That is the kind of loving, others-focused people we want to be because of the gospel. Jesus has met all of our needs, blessed us with every spiritual blessing, so we can be free to truly care about others without concern for ourselves (Ephesians 1:3). We can bless people, invite them to parties, cook dinner for them, ask them about their lives and really listen.

Are you uncertain of the best way to be on mission with those around you? If so, hospitality is a no-brainer answer for where to start. Cook dinner for your neighbors or coworkers, and invite some people from your LifeGroup as well. Have a cookout or throw a party. It really is that easy. No manual necessary. One of the best things that could happen to your neighborhood is for your house to become known as the house that is open and welcoming—the house that has good food and good conversation. What if, when your neighbors drove by your house, they saw a bright spot on their street? Hospitality is a perfect and easy tool for mission and discipleship.

We want to throw the best parties and host the best dinners in our city. We want people both inside and outside our LifeGroups to be welcomed and overwhelmed by a Jesus-saturated hospitality. We want our relationships with each other and our homes to always be open, always be on the lookout for someone who needs encouragement or community. We want our homes to

not only be a refuge for us, but a weapon for the gospel and a haven for the weary.

PERSONAL REFLECTION:

When was the last time you opened your home to someone who does not know Jesus? How can you make a plan to make this a regular part of your life?

Imagine how good it would be for our city to have thousands of homes displaying the hospitality of Jesus, to have LifeGroups throwing parties and dinners, welcoming all to the table. Our LifeGroups and homes would be beacons of light. A term we like to use is “refrigerator rights.” It simply means that if you walk in my house, you can go to the refrigerator and get whatever you want. I want you to feel that much at home.

Hospitality can be inconvenient, invasive and sacrificial. It will cost you privacy, money, time, and comfort. But as in every area of obedience, it leads to our joy and the good of others. Our practical theology fleshes itself out in the hospitality we show to one another. If we’ve really welcomed Christ into our lives, we will naturally want to welcome others. As we show hospitality to one another, we actively take part in ushering God’s kingdom into our culture.

PERSONAL REFLECTION:

How can you grow in showing gospel-centered hospitality to those around you?

How can your LifeGroup be hospitable to those you are trying to reach with the gospel?

SERVE ONE ANOTHER

- **Galatians 5:13** *For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.*
- **1 Peter 4:10** *As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace.*

The New Testament gives the metaphor that the church is the body of Christ—we all have different roles and gifts, just like the eyes, ears, and fingers have different roles in the physical body.

This means that we are incomplete without one another. To function like we are designed to, we must serve one another. We must use our spiritual giftedness, our time, our resources, and our energy to build up one another.

LifeGroups are not a one-man show led by a fearless leader—they are a small reflection of the body of Christ. Every person plays an integral part. As we have said before, this means that whenever someone is not present or devoted to serving the group, “We are less without you.” Everyone misses out when we do not serve one another as the body, even those who are on the outside.

Because of the gospel, we also naturally serve those who are not a part of our groups. We look for needs in our city and meet them. What are the problems in your neighborhood? How can you serve others? Do you work with a lot of single moms? If so, how can your LifeGroup serve them? Do you have elderly neighbors who need someone to spend time with them and take care of their yard? How can your LifeGroup serve them?

As we serve one another, we are acting out what Christ has done for us. We are joining God in His mission to save the planet through Jesus.

Important note: Is your LifeGroup lacking in feeling like a family? Don't sit back and critique, thus worsening the problem. Take that as an opportunity to serve them. Start practicing the "one another." Take ownership and be a leader. Be the kind of LifeGroup member you want to see in others.

PERSONAL REFLECTION:

How can you use your giftedness, time, resources and energy to serve those around you? How can your LifeGroup make serving others a group effort?

CARRY ONE ANOTHER'S BURDENS

- **Galatians 6:2-5** *Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. For if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself. But let each one test his own work, and then his reason to boast will be in himself alone and not in his neighbor. For each will have to bear his own load.*

Life is hard, and we each have our own "load" to bear—the everyday weight of life, work, and responsibility. To bear one another's burdens does not mean to do things for others that they should do for themselves. For example, the New Testament says that if a man doesn't work, he doesn't eat (2 Thessalonians 3:10).

However, frequently in life we encounter "burdens," or things that are simply too heavy to carry and deal with alone. God has designed the church such that we would help and support one another with these things in life that are overwhelming.

There is no end to what a burden could be. Maybe it's an overwhelming struggle with sin, the loss of a job, physical sickness, a death, or financial hardship. Simply put, when life gets hard, we rally around one another. We fight for one

another, provide for one another, and support one another. Because we are family, individual problems become group problems.

Because we are family, individual problems become group problems. We will do whatever is needed to fight for one another. Period. We pray that our LifeGroups would be ready to respond to genuine burdens in an instant, shouldering the weight alongside whoever needs it. As we do so, we unite with God in what He's doing to change the world.

PERSONAL REFLECTION:

What are burdens that others have had to help you carry in the past? How have you been able to help shoulder the burdens of others?

A STAGGERING COMMUNITY

Practicing these “one another” commands is what we are called to, what will grow us spiritually, and what will put Jesus on display to those around us. Can you imagine being a part of a community that truly does these things for one another? It would be staggering.

As we grow into this type of community, it is not only us and those around us that are affected. No, generations will be different. Families will be mended and generational issues will be repaired and redeemed instead of passed down the line. God's grassroots kingdom will spread, healing and restoring as it goes. Your very own children and grandchildren will be positively affected by you practicing the “one anothers.”

Please join us as we fight to truly be the church, to be family with one another and show others what it looks like to be a part of Jesus' kingdom. It will not be easy, but it will be so very worth it. Each time we practice the “one anothers” we are joining God in His work of reversing the curse that sin has brought about. What an incredible privilege.

PERSONAL REFLECTION:

Pray and ask the Holy Spirit to reveal to you how you can grow in the “one anothers.” Who do you need to love, serve, encourage, or show hospitality to? Write down any conviction or direction that He brings to you.

CONVERSATION STARTERS:

- Discuss any insights or thoughts from this chapter.
- Which “one anothers” of Jesus’ kingdom does our group already show progress in? How has Jesus been at work to grow us as a family together?
- How can you grow in practicing the “one anothers”? Which category are you the weakest in currently?
- Is there anything that you haven’t been completely honest about with the group that you need to confess?
- Is there anything you’d like to encourage another member of the group with?

NOTES:

CHAPTER NINE:

COMMUNITIES THAT REFUSE TO QUIT

We've spent a lot of time discussing God's grassroots plan to save the world, and what it looks like to be one of the communities that He uses to do so.

But as we move to do life and be on mission with one another, what are the things that will trip us up? In this chapter we will discuss a number of barriers that will arise and be exposed. Some of these are sin issues, some are cultural pressures and most are a mixture of both.

Do not be disheartened when you notice these things—the fact that they are coming up is a good sign! It means you are going somewhere. You are pushing into being family on mission with one another. These things are normal parts of our sin nature and culture that we will work through and apply the gospel to as we grow together as a family.

How good is Jesus that He's given us a way for these things to be exposed and dealt with as He calls us into His beautiful design for life?

BARRIERS TO CHANGING THE WORLD

PITTING FAMILY VS. MISSION

Something really amazing has happened over the last seven years that our church has existed. We dreamed that our church would really become family with one another, that people would do life together and have a remarkable love for one another—and it has happened! We have been astounded at the

way God has grown us into a family, and His love has certainly been displayed by the way our communities have loved one another.

People have taken responsibility for one another, helped bear one another's burdens, and re-oriented their lives to make Christian community a priority. The level of inward care and concern for one another our church has grown to embody has been nothing short of breathtaking, and it certainly puts Jesus on display.

The tension can come when you think about pushing into mission as a LifeGroup, and you wonder how it's possible for things to stay the same if there are new people coming in and out. This is a very natural fear, and it comes from a desire to protect what we have. Because we know community is such a good thing, we want to make sure it stays that way. This fear has led many to functionally divorce inward care from outward mission, leading people to think that the two cannot coexist. In this mentality, family becomes a refuge *from* mission, rather than a tool *for* mission.

But there is good news for us—the divorce of family and mission is a false dichotomy. We do not have to choose between the two! In fact, we cannot choose between the two, because they are one in the same. Family *is* mission. The perceived “costs” of pursuing mission are actually not costs at all—they are opportunities for growth and expanding God's kingdom. LifeGroups are not a refuge from mission—they are where the most important mission takes place! They are the absolute best tool for mission we have.

A year from now, there will be someone in your LifeGroup who is currently not around. Maybe his name is Dave, or her name is Dana. A year from now, you will love Dave. You will know Dana, appreciate her, and want to be around her...you will love to hear her laugh. You might have cheered at Dave's baptism or walked with Dana through a really difficult struggle. You will not want to fathom your LifeGroup *not* having Dave or Dana as an integral part of it because you would miss them terribly.

But right now, Dave's chair is empty. Dana's spot on the couch is covered by a throw pillow. God does not need us to reach them, but He graciously chooses to do so. He gives us the ministry of reconciliation and disciple-making (2 Corinthians 5:18-20, Matthew 28:18-20).

What if, instead of welcoming Dave or Dana in, your group decided that you had enough going on, that you really didn't want to risk things changing or

not being the same anymore...so they never actually became a part of your group?

The goal is not to do all we can to make things stay the same. We are not called to desperately hang onto what we have and refuse to let our communities grow. Living things grow and change—it's just what they do. Babies grow up, people age, relationships mature and families get bigger. There would be something majorly wrong if a 12-year-old was still wearing diapers, right?

Change is a natural and healthy thing. While all believers will be family forever, the people in your LifeGroup will change. Some will move away, and, by God's grace, new people will join. You will raise up new leaders and send out people to plant new LifeGroups to make room for more people to have community. While it may be sad to see less often the people we love, this is something to celebrate! Growth and welcoming new people are energizing. It gives you an opportunity to welcome and strengthen culture and to reiterate why we do what we do.

We quite literally have forever (in heaven) to sit around and enjoy each other's company. For now we have good news to spread and people to welcome into God's family. We have to model what it looks like to love Jesus and be family with one another for those who need to see it. We don't stop being family and caring for one another in order to be on mission—we simply do it in front of others, inviting them in to see it lived out. We let them catch us being Christians together.

We cannot overstate the following enough:

- We are not asking you to stop caring about the people in your LifeGroup—we're asking you to keep caring and let others see how much you care. Keep doing what you are doing and invite others into a community that cares that way.
- We're not asking you to change the depth of relationship and warmth you have with your community—we're asking you to leverage it for mission. The love and warmth you have for each other is radically compelling.
- Family and mission are not either/or—they are both/and. They are not competing with one another—they are two sides of the same coin. You can't truly have one without the other, as both compromise what it means to make disciples.

Remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ...So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.

—Ephesians 2:12-13, 19

THE GOSPEL APPLIED TO PITTING FAMILY AGAINST MISSION:

The gospel calls us to *remember*. Remember that once we were separated from Christ, without hope and without God in the world. He has made us family with Him, full citizens of His kingdom. Just as He has graciously welcomed us, we are called to welcome others.

The gospel calls us to give what we've been given, not to keep what we have. We are not hoarders of the spiritual blessings we've received in Christ—the gospel motivates us to share every blessing that we've been so generously given (Ephesians 1:3). We are blessed to be a blessing, because what we have received in Jesus is much too good to keep for ourselves (Genesis 12:3).

The gospel changes our perspective from “But it might mess up what we have...” to “We get to share what Jesus has given us!” It trades our fear of “But what if I don't feel comfortable sharing anymore?” to a confident excitement that “I get to welcome someone and make them feel comfortable because Jesus did that for me.”

We're already really good at caring for one another. LifeGroups are constantly mending one another's wounds, surrounding, healing and protecting one another. How awesome is it that we get to help others who don't know Jesus the exact same way by welcoming them into our communities?

We are no longer strangers or orphans, but many around us are—and God wants to offer them the same hope that He's given to us. He wants to bring those who are still far from Him near, and He's graciously chosen to use us to do that. The gospel calls our attention outward, because once we were on the outside.

Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.

—Romans 15:17

PERSONAL REFLECTION:

Have you personally viewed inward care and outward mission as competing with one another? How are they really the same?

INDIVIDUALISM

The melding of lives to produce a genuine family atmosphere is not easy, especially in our culture. Many cultures in the world are primarily “group comes first” cultures, where the good of the group is considered most important, but America is certainly by-and-large an “individual comes first” culture. People desperately want community, but we also resist it based off of our highly individualistic values.

Individualism is the air we breathe, so much so that we don’t often realize it. We think we can do things on our own and we don’t want others messing around in our business. The individual is the highest source of authority in our culture, and how dare you if you question an individual’s ability and sovereignty.

We in America have been socialized to believe that our own dreams, goals, and personal fulfillment ought to take precedence over the well-being of any group—our church or family, for example—to which we belong. The immediate needs of the individual are more important than the long-term health of the group. So we leave and withdraw, rather than stay and grow up, when the going gets rough in the church or in the home.

—Joseph Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family*

Individualism is a deep fabric of our culture, and in its worst form it is essentially the idolatry of self. In a speech by the late novelist David Foster Wallace, he described it as such: “The freedom to be lords of our own tiny skull-sized kingdoms, alone at the center of all creation.”

Our culture encourages us to “be true to yourself” and “follow your heart.” That mentality taken to an extreme can be dangerous, because it can encourage following your personal whims or feelings at all costs. As Christians, we need to consider the possibility that following your heart could actually be the worst thing for you, since your heart can be synonymous with your old self, your flesh nature that is opposed to the Spirit of God (Jeremiah 17:9).

Individualism leads us to live out individualistic values instead of communal values, deal with our struggles in isolation and prioritize our personal agendas. Rampant individualism leads to isolation and pride, both of which are barriers to God’s communal design for life and the picture of the church we see in Acts chapter 2. We may even speak of valuing community, but often the decisions we make reveal that we are unwilling to make the sacrifices necessary to walk in deep relationship with others. Genuine community requires commitment and the limitation of personal freedoms for a greater good. Individualism leads us to forsake deep community for the cheap ability to “do as I please.”

THE GOSPEL APPLIED TO INDIVIDUALISM:

Like the tax collector in Luke 18, Jesus has rescued us from self-trust. We have been adopted and given a new Father who only and always wants what is best for us, along with a family to help remind us of that truth constantly. Jesus proved once and for all on the cross that He is good and that He is for our good, so when our desires run contrary to God’s design for life, we humbly submit to Him.

The gospel is good news for individualism because it is designed to be lived out in the context of community, practicing the “one another” commands together. Community is the one and only expression through which our faith is lived out in the Scriptures. The idea of a wholly personalized and privatized faith is a unicorn—it just doesn’t exist. The gospel confronts our rampant individualism and calls us to belong to one another.

We've seen people in LifeGroups make terrible decisions in spite of the warning and pleading of their group, simply because they trusted in themselves above all else. This is very unfortunate, and because we are family we want to guard against rampant individualism that leads us away from being family with one another.

In a spiritual family, we will include each other on major life decisions—not simply inform others. We know that we as individuals can be misled easily, so we actually want input and wisdom from others. We sacrifice our individual sovereignty and respect the love and wisdom God has put around us.

Trust in the Lord with all your heart,
 and do not lean on your own understanding.
 In all your ways acknowledge him,
 and he will make straight your paths.
 Be not wise in your own eyes;
 fear the Lord, and turn away from evil.
 It will be healing to your flesh
 and refreshment to your bones.

—Proverbs 3:5-8

PERSONAL REFLECTION:

Where are you inclined to let individualism be a barrier to community in your life? Do you trust and depend on yourself too much while having a lack of respect for the people in your life who love you?

SELF-FOCUSED CONSUMERISM

Consumerism is another huge cultural value that is hard to separate from as a 21st century American. We are bombarded by thousands of messages a day that we are primarily consumers, trading our resources only for the benefit we receive from whatever product we are buying.

This leads us to see the world through a self-focused, “what’s in it for me?” mentality. This mentality is characterized by:

- Operating from the assumption that Christian community “exists for me.”
- Caring more about my comfort than the mission.
- Focusing on what I can get from the group, instead of what I can contribute.
- Being self-focused in the group, consumed with how others in the group are loving/caring/welcoming me, instead of how I can love/care/welcome them.

Self-focused consumerism leads us to think of LifeGroup primarily as a personal refuge. We participate in LifeGroup as a consumer, and whenever we feel like we are not getting a good enough return (whatever we may define that to be) on our investment, we just leave. We simply decide it’s not worth it and leave.

However, the gospel produces missionaries, not consumers, so the perspective of a missionary is entirely different. While it is true that LifeGroup is a refuge for us, it is not *only* a personal refuge. Primarily, Christian community is a weapon for the gospel, a tool for glorifying God and spreading His kingdom. It is, of course, really good for us, too, but our priorities get out of whack when we think that community exists first to serve our interests.

A missionary perspective:

- Knows that Christian community primarily exists for God’s mission of saving the planet.
- Makes the mission of God priority over personal comfort.
- Focuses on how I can contribute to the group, not on what I can take.
- Is others-focused in the group, focusing on making others feel loved, cared for and welcomed.

There is a Christian businessman in Columbia who works a lot with married couples in their 40s and 50s who are having difficulty with their relationships. This man asked our staff once, “Do you know why these same people after 20 years of loving their children still love them the same, but after 20 years of marriage they’ve grown bitter and resentful of their spouse? It’s because they have a ‘give’ mentality with their kids and a ‘take’ mentality with their spouse.”

The mentality that you approach your LifeGroup with is incredibly important. If your focus is primarily on what you get out of your LifeGroup, you will be frequently frustrated and most likely eventually will quit. You will constantly feel like LifeGroup isn't living up to your expectations, and instead of fighting to improve the health of the group, you will go in search of one that will meet your perceived needs.

However, if, just like a parent who loves and pours into their child, you approach LifeGroup with a "what can I give?" mentality, you will be happier and healthier—and your LifeGroup will be all the better for it.

THE GOSPEL APPLIED TO CONSUMERISM:

Consumerism is a form of greed—gathering or hoarding blessings for selfish use. 2 Corinthians 8:9 is a great encouragement for us who struggle with consumerism: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich."

The gospel compels us not to hoard what we've been given, but to give what we've been given. Jesus turned his attention outward to give us hope and a future, and that truth should make our hearts want to generously give what we've received.

This sacrificial, self-giving heart is exactly what the gospel produces, so if this is something you struggle with, confess it and preach the gospel to yourself. God has blessed you with every spiritual blessing in Christ, so you are freed up to give instead of take.

When we dwell on how much Jesus sacrificed for us, it makes us want to sacrifice for others. When we realize how He has warmly welcomed us, we want to welcome others. When we are filled with His love for us, we don't need to pine for approval or be perfectly loved by others—we are free to focus on loving others with the love that we've received. When we see what great lengths Jesus has gone to for us, we are glad to go great lengths to pursue others.

Look for yourself, and you will find loneliness and despair. But look for Christ and you will find Him and everything else.

—C. S. Lewis

PERSONAL REFLECTION:

How have you struggled with a self-focused consumer mentality when it comes to community? If so, how does the gospel motivate you to turn your focus outward?

APATHY

“You know what? I just don’t care. I’m just going to kick back and veg out.”

Apathy results from pursuing false stories to make sense of our lives and misunderstanding the purpose God has for us. Our false stories do not end up working, so we cynically detach from life in an effort to numb ourselves. Because of this lack of purpose, people have traded the mission of God for entertainment, and they are incredibly bored. Because as good as TV shows, Pinterest and college football are, they all make lousy life stories.

The biggest indicator of apathy is how we spend our time. For example, a Christian guy who spends the vast majority of his free time either playing video games or watching sports does so because he practically believes those are the most worthwhile things he can devote his life to. That is not to pick on video games or sports (or any other hobby), it’s just to point out an obvious truth.

Many Christians today have completely missed the fact that they have an important part to play in God’s cosmic work of redemption in history. They do not see that the mission of God on earth is the most valuable thing they can spend their time doing. So they unplug and kick back in whatever form that happens to suit their fancy at the moment.

THE GOSPEL APPLIED TO APATHY:

The root of apathy is believing a false story, and God offers us the one true story that makes sense of both our lives and all of history. The story of God is the only story big enough to give us lasting

purpose and value. He has made a way through Christ for us to have relationship with Him, the most thrilling being in the universe. When we are grafted into His kingdom by grace, we inherit God's mission of changing history through the church.

You were *made* for this! You were created to give your life to something bigger than yourself. God's mission to reconcile the world to Himself is an infinitely more compelling thing to give your life to than whatever hobby you've become consumed with to pass the time.

If you struggle with apathy, soak in this truth. Preach the gospel to yourself. Confess to your LifeGroup and ask them to remind you what your ultimate purpose in life is. The Holy Spirit will light a fire under you and turn that apathy into passion for God's mission, the most worthwhile cause in history.

PERSONAL REFLECTION:

How have you struggled with apathy or boredom? Have you lacked understanding of your purpose in life?

SURFACE-LEVEL COMMITMENT

Surface-level commitment can be a byproduct of a number of other factors like individualism or consumerism. Essentially, it is the mentality of, "I'll do community, but only when it is easy and convenient for me."

However, becoming family with one another requires sacrifice. In this sacrificial community, we adjust our schedules to prioritize God's mission and time with each other. We take a close look at our priorities, the things that fill up our time, and we adjust to the Holy Spirit's leading.

We are a non-committal culture, and that goes bad quickly, because it always keeps people at arms length. Think about an immature guy who refuses to commit to a dating relationship. Sure, he keeps some flexibility, but what is he missing out on? Keeping community and depth at arms length is bad for you, because you are missing out on so much depth of relationship.

THE GOSPEL APPLIED TO SURFACE-LEVEL COMMITMENT:

Aren't you glad Jesus didn't half-heartedly commit to pursuing and saving you? That He doesn't give up when growing you is difficult? Philippians 1:6 says, "And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ."

God has been immeasurably faithful to you, first and foremost. He has been committed to you when you wanted nothing to do with Him. Don't ground your commitment and faithfulness to Him and others in your whims but in the never-failing, relentless faithfulness that God has shown to you in Christ.

Some while going through this book may no doubt be thinking: "This just feels like too much!" That's understandable, but we have to realize that what feels normal to us as far as church involvement goes may actually be way below the bar of what the Bible describes. We are truly trying to push for what the Bible describes as normative, and so many have already seen how amazing it is to walk in this committed, covenant community together. The issue is our culture, which leads us to believe that faith is a small add-on to your life and not supposed to take up more than an hour on Sundays.

Reorienting your life so that you do everyday, ordinary life with your LifeGroup requires adjustment and sacrifice, but belonging to one another and knowing each other deeply are treasures well worth whatever it costs.

PERSONAL REFLECTION:

How can you grow in prioritizing relationships with your LifeGroup?

SURFACE-LEVEL HONESTY

This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word is not in us.

—1 John 1:5-10

Truly sharing life together—confessing our sins, weaknesses, and scars—can be uncomfortable. The idea of being truly known with all masks off is a scary proposition, but it is essential in creating a community God uses to change the world. After all, your group is not full of mind readers!

Transparency is the best thing for us—for our sanctification and our joy. We are not called to walk in the light as some kind of religious penance, but because it is good for us! Family is marked by genuine knowledge of each other, confession and repentance.

THE GOSPEL APPLIED TO SURFACE-LEVEL HONESTY:

John 3:19-21 teaches us that we hide in the darkness because of our sin, and we hate that the light exposes our failures. However, when we understand that our “works have been carried out in God” (v.19), by grace through faith, we are credited with the full measure of Jesus’ righteousness. When God looks at us, He sees Jesus, and that is a righteousness that will never change or fade. That frees us to be aggressively honest about our sin and weakness, because we have absolutely nothing to prove! Nothing we could ever do could add to or take away from Jesus’ righteousness.

Being aggressively honest in confession facilitates our spiritual growth, and it also serves others. Often, others in the group want to share more deeply but

are afraid of being vulnerable. Many times when one person opens up, others will follow suit. So when you are honest on a deep level with your LifeGroup, you are modeling confession for others and even encouraging them to follow right behind you.

PERSONAL REFLECTION:

Do you need to be more honest with your LifeGroup about sin struggles or issues? If so, write down what you need to confess and do so at the next group meeting.

INSECURITY

The sneaky trick of insecurity is that you cannot really love and serve other people when you are constantly worried about yourself. Insecurity makes us focus on self, and that makes it impossible to be a healthy part of Christian community.

Insecurity causes us to be consumed with questions about our standing in the group, how much we perceive that we are liked, included and valued. The ironic thing is that a lot of people struggle with insecurity, so there are good odds that others in the group are asking the same questions you are!

THE GOSPEL APPLIED TO INSECURITY:

The gospel, again, has good news for insecurity:

- You have been fully welcomed in Christ, so you can focus on welcoming others.
- You have been perfectly cared for in Christ, so you can focus on caring for others.
- You have been warmly included in Christ, so you can focus on including others.
- You've been given matchless worth in Christ, so you don't have to look for worth in what others think of you.

Because God has blessed you with every spiritual blessing, you are secure, full—your cup is running over. You need nothing else, and you’ve already been made family with these people. So you can leave insecurity behind and instead focus on making others feel welcomed, included and valued.

PERSONAL REFLECTION:

Do you struggle with insecurity when it comes to relationships in LifeGroup? How does the gospel set you free from insecurity?

“BUT...”

A few more barriers that we’ve seen through the years are characterized by the following statements:

“BUT WE’RE JUST NOT MESHING.”

We want LifeGroups to “mesh” as much as possible in the sense of making it as easy as possible for lives to cross paths, such as being geographically close and similar in life-stage. However, “meshing” does not always mean that. This sentiment often comes from the expectation that LifeGroups should be just like a best friend group—that we should have chemistry, similar interests and it should be perfectly natural.

Another place that we hear this is when college students are transitioning to adult life, and they remark that relationships are just not the same as they were in college. And we say, “Of course they aren’t!” College is not a reproducible environment, because it’s basically a four-year-long summer camp. Adult friendships will look different, and that’s natural.

Sometimes chemistry will be easy in a LifeGroup, but other times it will not, and that’s okay. The goal of a LifeGroup is not to be a best friend group, it is to be a Jesus-centered family on mission together. Nine times out of ten, the answer to this is for the group to get a mission and choose to mesh. When people go to war together they get close because they have a common bond.

Additionally, we shouldn't be surprised if Jesus asks us to befriend people we wouldn't naturally drift to. Sometimes God teaches us to love by putting hard-to-love people around us. It takes no maturity to love those who are easy to love. Part of the beauty of the gospel is that we get to be united with people we otherwise wouldn't, because our relationships are based on Jesus, not chemistry.

You don't necessarily have to be best friends. Just love the people in your group. Don't focus too much on the end and get frustrated that you're not there yet. It takes time to build relationships. Just focus on loving one another because of Jesus, practice the "one anothers," and trust God with the result.

"BUT WHAT'S THE POINT? OUR GROUP WILL BE DIFFERENT IN A YEAR ANYWAY."

There is no set end date for LifeGroups, but groups should be continually growing and multiplying. This means that a year or two from now, the group of people you are doing life with could be much different than it is now. The goal is that a) your group will have invited new people in to experience community and see the gospel on display, and b) your group will have trained up and launched out a leader and core group to launch a new LifeGroup.

Needless to say, change is a part of growth, and if new people are coming to know Jesus and finding community, the faces you see each week will change. And that is an incredible thing! The gospel calls our attention outward, and the goal for LifeGroup is not to just keep what we have—it's to give what we have to as many people as possible.

That doesn't give you a reason not to pour into the people in your group right now. In fact, it gives you the opposite—an urgency to pour into them right now. Because of the gospel, pour into people and build relationship as much as possible. Be a community that cares deeply for one another. And be open-handed with what the future looks like, because God is always growing His family. There will be new people who need building into, who need to be practically shown what it looks like to be a family together. We get the privilege of pouring into those God has placed us around, and as we add new people and plant new groups, we get the gift of being family with more and more people.

“BUT WHAT IF SOMEONE TELLS OTHER PEOPLE SOMETHING PERSONAL I SHARE WITH MY LIFEGROUP?”

For one, we do not let gossip and drama run rampant in our church family (let’s just call it a church-wide “Drama Free Policy”). We engage it and deal with it whenever it happens. We take our relationships with one another very seriously, and we desire LifeGroups to be safe places to share anything without fear. We will do whatever necessary to protect that.

However, we cannot control the actions of everyone, and gossip is a sin issue that will no doubt happen at times. Of course people are going to say things that they shouldn’t—they are people! This will need to be dealt with in grace just like any other sin issue.

The important thing to remember is that this fear is never a legitimate reason to not share openly with your group. Part of relationship is risk—letting other people into the deepest parts of who you are. The risk of then being hurt by that person is a part of relationship, but a risk well worth taking, because it’s the only way to be truly known by others. After all, the worst thing that could happen is that someone inappropriately finds out that you are a sinner in need of Jesus. The gospel is our foundation in all of life, and we are secure eternally because of Jesus. In light of that we can brave the risk of being truly known in our LifeGroups.

Additionally, when someone shares something about you that they weren’t supposed to, that provides a great opportunity for you to help them grow. You get to address it with grace, talk to them about it, forgive them and, in doing so, model Jesus and spur their spiritual growth. In community everything is an opportunity for us all to grow, even when we sin against one another.

“BUT...NETFLIX.” (OR ANY OTHER LIFE-CONSUMING HOBBY)

See previous section on apathy.

GETTING PERSONAL

Disciples of Jesus are in the process of becoming a clearer and more accessible proclamation of the gospel.

—Caesar Kalinowski

All of these barriers and more can keep us from becoming communities that change the world. Just like with every other issue that we face, the solution is to repent, believe the gospel and trust Jesus to change our hearts. Our natural response is to simply follow whatever our resistance to its natural conclusion, but Jesus graciously calls us to repent.

As we submit all of our lives to God's kingdom, we become a clearer picture of what it looks like to be disciples of Jesus. As we repent of these barriers and become communities that refuse to quit in the face of them, we are putting God's plan to redeem the planet on display.

PERSONAL REFLECTION:

Which barriers do you see evidenced in your life? Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal any of these barriers in your life, and use the space below to write them down.

PERSONAL REFLECTION:

What are practical steps you need to take as you repent of these barriers?

CONVERSATION STARTERS:

- Discuss any insights or thoughts from this chapter.
- Which barriers were you personally convicted of? Are there any that are prevalent in our group as a whole?

- What does it look like to repent and trust Jesus for any of the barriers that you resonated with personally?
- In light of this chapter's study, what are practical ways our group can fight to be family with one another?

NOTES:

CHAPTER TEN:

COMMUNITIES THAT MULTIPLY

Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.”

—John 20:21

As we discussed in chapter 7, when you look at the life of Jesus and how He led His disciples, you notice four major components to His strategy: *go to*, *invite in*, *grow up* and *send out*. After His resurrection in John 20, He tells His disciples that just as the Father had sent Him, He was sending them.

After spending three years with Jesus, you can imagine what kind of community the disciples had with one another. They traveled together, lived together and witnessed the most remarkable events in history together. They knew one another deeply and lived physically with Jesus in everyday life, forming, one could argue, the most enviable small group that has ever existed.

But Jesus’ intention was never to end their journey at “most rock star Christian community in history.” His goal for them was not to be the most comfortable and easy community ever, or to sit around a campfire for the rest of their lives re-telling stories. No—His goal was to grow them up into maturity and send them out to make other disciples and spread his kingdom to the ends of the earth (Matthew 28:18-20). The book of Acts starts to tell the story of how the disciples spread out in every direction to spread the gospel and create new Jesus-centered communities.

Upon reading the book of Acts, you notice that they even had an urgency to do so. The gospel gave them the desire to spread out and take the gift that they had received to others. To be sure, they loved and missed one another, but the glory of Jesus through the expansion of His kingdom was their ultimate motivation. There were tearful goodbyes and letters written, some even with the knowledge that they would likely be martyred and would not see one another again until heaven.

PERSONAL REFLECTION:

Read the story of Paul leaving Ephesus in Acts 20:17-38. What do the emotions shown in this passage reveal about the depth of love and relationship they had with one another?

What does this story reveal about Paul's urgency in spreading the gospel?
What quote from Jesus does Paul end his speech with?

As a result of Jesus sending His disciples out, we now have communities who love Jesus circling the globe. What could have ended with a small group of people being buried and long forgotten has turned into a worldwide phenomenon. Churches have been planted all across the planet. God's grassroots kingdom has not ceased to spread, and it is taking root in the very community that you are a part of. Because of the incredible fact that God is a sending God, you and I now have access to the news about Jesus that changes everything.

The disciples, by the grace of Jesus, understood that in order to join God in His mission to change the world, they would have to form communities that

multiply. Reproduction was a privilege, not a burden. This is a large part of God's plan to advance His kingdom, because if every community reproduces itself it has an exponential effect on the world. In light of the gospel, neither will our communities stay the same year after year. Again, those in Christ will have eternity to enjoy Jesus together, but here on earth we have a compelling mission to fulfill. In order to join God in saving the planet, we will be communities who, by God's grace, *grow up* and *send out*.

GROW UP

We've already covered what it looks like for us to practice the first two components of how Jesus made disciples as a community, but what does it look like for us to grow spiritually and help those around us grow?

The simplest answer is that we take an active role in Jesus-centered communities like the ones described in this book. If we are walking through life in communities that are founded on the good news of Jesus and practicing the habits described here, then spiritual growth will be a natural byproduct because the Holy Spirit is leading us (John 16:13). However, by way of reminder, here are a few things that will encourage spiritual growth in our communities.

Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

—Ephesians 4:15-16

WE PREACH THE GOSPEL TO ONE ANOTHER.

The *grow up* stage is not where you go, "Okay, now it's all about my effort and ability to perform spiritually." No, it is where we press deeper into the gospel. The grace of Jesus is not simply what gets us in the door of His kingdom; it's what grows us up into maturity as well. Grace is the catalyst for our growth and the only means of true heart change.

So we remind one another of the gospel of Jesus. We practice gospel fluency and tell each other what is already true about believers in Jesus. If we truly have a gospel culture of people confessing and repenting of sin and applying the gospel to one another's lives, then growth will certainly be a byproduct.

PERSONAL REFLECTION:

How can you grow in reminding others in your group of the gospel?

WE DO EVERYDAY, ORDINARY LIFE TOGETHER.

Discipleship is ultimately modeling the gospel to one another, not simply transfer of knowledge. This means maturity is not about what you know—it's about what you apply and how you walk in obedience.

Doing everyday, ordinary life together exposes what people really believe functionally, not just what they say they believe. Anyone can hide during a short group meeting, but it's hard to hide when someone sees you in the context of everyday life. Just like in marriage, the more we are known by one another, the more we can grow because more areas of sin and unbelief are exposed. While scary, this is good news for us!

Of course, you are not married to your LifeGroup, so this takes some intentionality. Again, one thing that has been encouraging for our groups is the simple statement, "Do it together sometimes." We all do normal things like eating, grocery shopping, working on our budgets and so on. Why not take things that can become boring and monotonous and make them more fun by doing them together sometimes?

PERSONAL REFLECTION:

How can you grow in doing everyday life together with your group? What are practical things that you can do together with others sometimes?

WE PRACTICE THE “ONE ANOTHERS.”

Looking back to chapter 8, the way we practically walk as family together is also a primary way that we grow up into maturity. As we love, serve, show hospitality, bear with and confess to one another, spiritual growth is sure to take place. The Holy Spirit is actively at work when we are gathered together as a family, and He will spur and grow us exponentially as we walk in His design for our faith to be lived out.

As we walk together, we will see the fruit of the Spirit exhibited in our community. Where there was once anger and irritation, there will be peace and self-control. Where there was once strife, jealousy and envy, there will be peace, gentleness and patience. You will be blown away, fiercely grateful for the work of the Holy Spirit in yourself and in those around you.

PERSONAL REFLECTION:

Read Galatians 5:16-25. What fruit of the Spirit have you noticed growing in yourself recently? What have you noticed growing in others in your LifeGroup?

WE COMMIT TO EACH OTHER’S GROWTH.

A group of people all selfishly preoccupied with their own individual growth does no one any good. A key to spiritual growth is taking your eyes off yourself and being more concerned with others.

Simply put, we look out for one another. We spur and encourage one another, point out idols to each other and look out for blind spots. As Hebrews 3:13 states, we do this so that “none of you will be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness.” We have been made family through Jesus, so we take each other’s growth seriously enough to fight for one another.

PERSONAL REFLECTION:

How is it difficult for you to commit to others' spiritual growth in your group?

WE ALL PITCH IN AND SERVE IN THE WAYS GOD HAS GIFTED US.

Being on mission together as a community means everyone gets to have a role. God has designed us to work as a family, and He's given us different gifts to serve and complement one another. When everyone takes ownership and plays a role in the kingdom, it serves the growth of the community and puts Christ on display.

One of the many benefits of this reality is that it gives everyone a role in reaching others for Jesus, not just the extroverted, people-oriented personalities.

PERSONAL REFLECTION:

Read 1 Corinthians 12:12-31. How does Paul's analogy of one body with different parts translate to your LifeGroup?

Just as Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 12, every believer does not have the same gifting or role. We all have the same mission, but we have different roles to fill in the mission.

In your LifeGroup, here are some potential roles God may have gifted you to fill:

- **Connector** – A connector is great at relational connections and finds it easy to make new friends. They seem to be constantly meeting new

people, and, as we mentioned earlier, sometimes it makes a lot of sense to use the natural relationships that a connector builds as your intentional mission as a group. We have seen groups where a natural connector brings several non-Christian friends around the group and many of them ended up coming to know Jesus.

- **Host** – A host loves inviting others into their home and being hospitable. They exude a warmth that makes people feel welcome and wanted. Having someone especially gifted in hospitality in a group is a wonderful asset, because they help provide an atmosphere that in itself displays the love and concern of Jesus.
- **Servant** – A servant is someone passionate about serving others because of the gospel. They love to get their hands dirty, and they are willing to do things that others may not naturally want to do. They put the humility of Jesus on display as they live daily life. A servant may be a stronger introvert, and they may prefer to cook or clean up to give others more time to engage new people in conversation.
- **Conversationalist** – A conversationalist is great at leading conversations and asking good questions. They often keep the conversation going in a helpful direction, and their desire is to engage people in a helpful way.
- **Encourager** – An encourager is gifted at listening to others and responding in a way that makes them feel heard and understood. They seek to encourage and bless others with their words, and they are skilled at making people feel comfortable in conversation.
- **Teacher** – A teacher is especially gifted in gospel fluency. They speak the truth of Jesus into a person's life in a relevant and applicable way, and they can help explain things from the Bible. All of us are called to grow in applying and speaking the gospel to one another, but the teacher is someone who leads and shows us how to do that in a helpful way.

Understanding that there are various roles for us to play is essential to developing a healthy community. Otherwise, what tends to happen is that a leader tries to fill every possible role, and they end up getting burned out (because they are doing too much and trying to serve in ways they are not gifted in).

It is not a LifeGroup leader’s job to do everything. Instead, the leader’s job is to encourage and equip the members to serve according to their own gifting and capacity.⁵ For a group to be as healthy as possible, all of the members need to take ownership and responsibility.

One of the key benefits of everyday mission is that it enfranchises each and every one of us. Everyday mission requires everyday missionaries rather than superheroes of the faith. We need to recapture the sense that gospel ministry is not something done by pastors with the support of ordinary Christians but something done by ordinary Christians with the support of pastors.

—Tim Chester & Steve Timmis, *Everyday Church*

PERSONAL REFLECTION:

What potential role do you think you might fit best in your group? How can you best serve the mission of Jesus through your group?

What roles do you see others in your group fitting into?

SEND OUT

The last stage of how Jesus made disciples is to *send out*. For many, this is the most foreign part of the process. Many people think the end goal of discipleship is personal growth and maturity, and after all, we like the people in our LifeGroups and want to keep them there!

⁵ For more on this topic, find the link to “The Introverted Evangelist” by Seth McBee at midtowncolumbia.com/grassroots.

However, the gospel informs us that it is not about keeping what we have—it is about spreading what we have. Jesus left heaven and came after us, to make room for us in God’s family. Ephesians 2:12-13 teaches us to “remember”—to reflect on the fact that once we were without God, having no hope. Remembering that truth will make us want to spread out and make room for others.

Remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

—Ephesians 2:12-13

The gospel compels us to be communities that reproduce instead of selfishly holding onto what we have. We are a sent people, which means we all “go” to make disciples in our everyday lives (John 20:21). Part of what that looks like is going to plant new communities, whether we are on the *going* end or the *sending* end. Becoming communities that multiply is the path to join in what God’s doing to reconcile the ends of the earth to Himself.

Because spreading out and forming new communities is the way we will reach our city and our world, we want to make it a priority. The goal is for every LifeGroup to always have at least one leader-in-training going through the training process, and for each group to plant a new LifeGroup every 1-2 years. That second part may sound daunting, but we believe it is very attainable as we continue to grow together.

Starting a new group may seem overwhelming at first, but if we come together and pursue it as a group it is energizing and strengthening. Reproduction is not the LifeGroup leader’s responsibility; it’s the group’s responsibility. We plant new LifeGroups as a group, not as individuals.

We want you to think about group multiplication almost like you are planting little house churches. It is beyond exciting for your group to get to be a part of God changing history.

Our hope is to start the most healthy and effective communities that we can, but in order to spread organically and quickly, we cannot get bogged down

in unrealistic or unbiblical expectations. You do not need a sound system, stage and lights to start new communities that change the world—you need the gospel and a living room. We need to keep our strategy as simple and reproducible as possible.

In light of this, the section below dives into how we encourage LifeGroups to multiply.

LIFEGROUP GUIDE: HOW TO LAUNCH A GROUP

For a healthy LifeGroup to plant another healthy LifeGroup, they should have these three things in place:

1. A LEADER

A new LifeGroup needs a person (or couple) that will lead the charge to be a Jesus-centered family on mission with Him. This new leader must:

- Love Jesus and have the desire, calling and qualification to lead others (meet qualifications for a deacon from 1 Timothy 3:8-13).
- Have been an active participant of a LifeGroup for a year.
- Be a Midtown missionary member.
- Have completed leader training with their current group leader and have been recommended to lead by the group leader.
- Complete Basic Training.

Notice that the leader does not need to have a seminary degree. They do not need to be the perfect leader (since there is no such thing). They do not need to be able to teach like Paul to lead group time effectively. Because we want LifeGroups to be simple and reproducible, we keep group time focused on a few core elements:

- **Catching up on life.** As we move to do life together, the goal is that we will know important things about one another before group time. However, we can still catch up on what is going on with each other and where we've seen Jesus working in our lives recently.
- **Sermon discussion.** Discussing the sermons allows group leaders to take advantage of the many hours our pastors spend in sermon preparation, rather than trying to come up with another thing to teach every week.

- **Discussing the group's mission and rhythms.** We want to regularly discuss our mission and pray, by name, for the people we are on mission with.
- **Confession & prayer.** This is where we engage the heart, confess any sin, encourage one another and pray for one another.

The most important thing is for a leader to love Jesus and follow Him, committing both to being a disciple and making disciples in community with others.

2. A CORE GROUP

Next, we want to launch new LifeGroups with a core group of people that have pre-existing relationships from the current group. The purpose for this is so that new groups are not starting from scratch and so they have a sense of community to invite others into. A new leader should discuss this with the current LifeGroup and gather a small group of people (2-6) to be on the core group for the new LifeGroup. Ideally a core group would be people who share some type of commonality, such as living close to one another, having small children, etc.

These people would be committed to take ownership over the health of the new group and be a healthy start that would welcome others into the group with open arms. Aside from this obvious benefit, doing this also takes pressure off the leader, because the core group is committed to sharing responsibility and cultivating gospel fluency and health within the group. This reinforces the reality that no one is a lone ranger missionary. We make disciples together as a community.

Additionally, serving in a core group for a new LifeGroup would naturally be a good first step before becoming a leader-in-training, so it serves as a great step for leadership development.

3. ESTABLISHED RHYTHMS

Instead of waiting to see what works for everyone that will eventually be added to the group, a new LifeGroup should go ahead and start with some established LifeGroup rhythms so you're able to invite others into what you are already doing.

A LifeGroup should start with three basic rhythms:

- **Gather Together.** Attend a gathering together. Maybe sit, serve or eat together before or after.
- **Grow Together.** Set a night of the week for group time.
- **Go Together.** Pick a third place.

Of course, as you invite new people into your community, be willing to adapt your rhythms.

PRAY & CELEBRATE

As your LifeGroup prepares to plant a new LifeGroup, make it a huge deal! You are actively joining God's plan to redeem the planet by multiplying your community. You are putting the gospel on display by remembering what Christ has done for you and making room for others to experience Jesus through a gospel-fluent community. It is a sad-happy time of sending off friends but rejoicing that disciples are being made.

Throw a party and celebrate the fact that your group has raised up a new leader and core group to go out and start a new LifeGroup. Spend some time praying over them and send them out well. Rejoice that where there was one community God is using to change the world, now there are two. Your group is becoming an extended family, and the groups you plant will continue to multiply. Like a family tree, soon the first group will have branches reaching out everywhere.

People you may never meet will be affected by the faithfulness of your group to be sent in the name of Jesus. People who are far from God will come to know Him through missionary communities generations down the line from yours. If that's not something to celebrate, I don't know what is.

Becoming a part of God's kingdom means that our communities will spread in the most simple, subversive and grassroots way possible for the glory of God and the good of our world.

CONVERSATION STARTERS:

- Discuss any insights or thoughts from this chapter.
- Which fruit of the Spirit from Galatians 5:16-25 have you noticed in your life recently? Which have you noticed in the lives of others in the group?

- What gifts or roles do you see in yourself and each other? Did anyone stand out as one of the potential roles mentioned?
- How can we help push everyone in our group to grow up into maturity? What elements from this book can our group grow in the most?
- What resistance do you have to multiplying our group? How does the gospel apply to your resistance?
- Who from our group could we send out to launch a new LifeGroup in the near future? What can we do to proactively move in that direction?

NOTES:

CHAPTER ELEVEN:

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

In Matthew 13, Jesus tells a parable about the kingdom of heaven.

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

—Matthew 13:44

Then in His next breath, He goes on to say the same thing in a slightly different way, using repetition for effect.

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it.

—Matthew 13:45-46

“Just in case you didn’t hear Me the first time,” it seems He is saying. The truth contained in these tiny, brilliant stories is jarring. Jesus is teaching us that if we were ever to get a good look at Him and His kingdom, we would, without hesitation, forsake anything and everything else. We would, with *joy*, go and sell all that we have to gain possession of His kingdom.

It’s worth noting, again, that the kingdom is counter-cultural, even in the story of the man who sells all he has to buy, of all things, a field. Any onlookers

witnessing this man's blatant disregard for anything else that could have competed for his affection may have thought him crazy, just as those in our culture may deem us crazy for pursuing Jesus' kingdom instead of our own. But that man would not have been bothered by such a fact were it true. No, he simply would have walked through the field and smiled, a deep and confident joy buried beneath his bones.

These stories are fitting to end our study on, because they give us a glimpse of what we will look like when we become fully swept up in God's grassroots kingdom. Our countenance will not be marked by drudgery, self-pity or begrudging obedience. No, our faces will light up with the joy of someone who has treasure buried in a field.

Things that may have once felt like "have tos" will begin to feel like "get tos" as we joyfully forsake all to join God in spreading His kingdom. Things that were once boring and monotonous will take on an entirely new purpose as we begin to see all of life as part of Jesus' rescue mission. We will not mourn the false kingdoms we left behind for the same reason that a man doesn't mourn his rusty pickup when he traded it for a billion dollars.

PERSONAL REFLECTION:

Have you begun to see God and His kingdom as truly and incomparably better than any other alternative that you could devote your life to? If so, rejoice and thank Jesus. If not, pray and ask the Holy Spirit to reveal what is keeping you from this.

GETTING PRACTICAL: LIFEGROUP COVENANT

We've gone through this book together over the past few months, and we've covered a lot. But what do we do now? How do we put these things into practice and submit our entire lives under the rule and reign of God?

The first step, as usual, is repentance. Until we come to truly believe that Jesus (and life as He has designed it to be lived) is better than any other option, change will elude us. We cannot get swept up into God's kingdom when our hands are full of our own. So, as always, we repent and believe the gospel together as a community. The Holy Spirit will continue to convict and lead us in this, as it will be a continual process of realigning our hearts to Jesus.

In order to facilitate our ongoing repentance and realignment with God's kingdom, we want to give you a practical tool to help your group focus and walk in light of what you've learned through this study.

The following template serves as an example to put together everything we've learned by writing a LifeGroup covenant. Basically, this is a way for us to agree that we will commit and fight to be a healthy community and flesh out any practical ways that we will do so. We want each LifeGroup to take the basis of our vision as a church (to be a Jesus-centered family on mission with Him) and flesh out what that means for their group. Many aspects will be the same across groups, but others will be customized to the group. The covenant is not meant to be a law, but a helpful guide for us to stay on track.

The paragraphs in the template describing the elements of our vision will be the same on each group covenant, but the bullet points describing how we will live it out will be different for each group (with a lot of similar elements obviously).

The last section of the template covers LifeGroup rhythms. This helps you solidify your plan to do life and be on mission with one another. The goal is to discuss this as a group and come up with a plan for what works best for the majority of the group. If it is difficult to find one Gathering or third place environment that works for everyone, split up into smaller groups for those rhythms. It can be hard to find an option that works for all, but that cannot cripple us with inaction. Instead, it should lead us to find creative solutions for how we can do life and be on mission together.

As you read through this covenant and the questions, write down ideas for how your group is called to live out this covenant and email them to your leader. Don't focus only on answering the sample questions—those are only there to get you started.

Leaders, you can then compile the ideas from the group and lead a group discussion about finalizing your covenant. You can also find an electronic copy

of the template on the Resources page of the Midtown website (midtowncolumbia.com).

As your group finalizes your covenant, we'd love for you to have a covenant celebration party that includes good food (of course) and taking communion together. Communion is a symbol that we have been rescued, redeemed and made family through the cross—so it makes sense for us to take communion as a group to celebrate what Jesus has accomplished for us. (Obviously if non-Christians are in the group, they do not need to agree to the covenant or take communion...see disclaimers at the beginning of the book.)

A LifeGroup Covenant is simply a tool to help us live intentionally in light of the gospel. The long-term goal is that each group would either recommit to or rewrite their covenant every August, thus serving as a continual reminder to help refocus the group. This also serves as a way to adjust the group's covenant as things change over time.

We pray that this study has been a blessing to you and your LifeGroup as you've read, studied and prayed the last few months. We are not kidding in the least when we say that groups of people living out what has been described here is what God will use to change the world. Jesus is on a mission to save the lost and redeem the planet, putting everything that's broken back together—including the shattered lives and hopes of those around you.

How incredible is it that we get to be a small part of Jesus changing history through His grassroots kingdom? There has never been a better story or kingdom to get completely swept up in.

As we conclude, we want to remind you to be patient and faithful on this journey. As we focus on Jesus and keep confessing and repenting, we will eventually become these beautiful communities that we have discussed, but often these things take time. Just because it isn't perfectly beautiful and magical right now doesn't mean that God is not at work in your group. Give it time and stay faithful. Allow some space for people to grow and change and repent, and trust that Jesus will, by His grace, form us into these types of communities as we walk with Him.

We can't wait to see what God continues to do through our church family, and we're really glad that we get to do this together for the glory of God and the good of our neighbors around the world.

INSTRUCTIONS:

- Read and pray through what your group's covenant could look like.
- Brainstorm ideas and send them to your leader for them to compile.
- Come to the next LifeGroup meeting prepared to discuss what your group's covenant could be.

NOTES:

LIFEGROUP COVENANT TEMPLATE

JESUS-CENTERED

Jesus, the eternally-existent Son of God, put on human flesh. He came to make a way for us to be reconciled to God. He lived a perfect life in submission to the Father, succeeding in every way we failed, then died on a cross to pay the price for our sins and rose from the grave to defeat sin and death forever. The gospel is good news that changes everything. We are now the people of God, saved by grace through faith. Our identities have been transformed, and the gospel is invading every area of our lives. As a LifeGroup saved by grace, this is how we will live:

- We will ... (Who will you trust in and what will you need to continually confess and confront in each other?)
- We will ... (What type of culture will your group have and what does this culture look like?)
- We will ... (What will your conversations with one another be marked by?)
- We will ... (What are the things that your group needs to guard against, and how do you fight them when they are present in your group?)
- Etc.

FAMILY

By His love, God the Father has adopted us into His family through the work of Jesus. God has placed us in a group to do everyday, ordinary life together. We get to put the gospel on display by the way we love one another, and it is

this love for each other that will be the most attractive component in reaching our friends and neighbors. As brothers and sisters in God's family, this is how we will live:

- We will ... (How will you love one another?)
- We will ... (How will you live life together?)
- We will ... (How will you deal with frustrations together?)
- Etc.

ON MISSION WITH HIM

God is on a mission to save the planet through Jesus, and He's using a community of people to do so. Jesus is building His church, and the gates of hell nor any other force on earth stands a chance of stopping it. We who have been adopted into the family of God are now a part of Jesus' rescue mission to reconcile the ends of the earth to God. We walk in step with the Holy Spirit, following His lead on mission together. As a LifeGroup on mission together this is how we will live:

- We will ... (Who is your intentional mission? Is it your collective friends, neighbors and coworkers or a more specific group?)
- We will ... (How will you consistently pray by name for those you are trying to reach?)
- We will ... (How will you go to them? What is the plan?)
- We will ... (What relational avenues does your group have to invite people into?)
- We will ... (What is the primary plan for growth in your group?)
- We will ... (What is your goal and plan for planting a new group?)
- Etc.

LIFEGROUP RHYTHMS

LifeGroup Rhythms are the practical ways that we begin to be family with one another and be on mission together as we learn to see all of life as mission. In light of this purpose, groups can design as many rhythms as they want, but every group is encouraged to start with three basic rhythms.

1. GATHER TOGETHER

What gathering do people attend? Is there one that seems like a natural fit for people's schedule? Can everyone agree to commit to a specific gathering

time? Would people want to eat together before or after the Gathering? Would the group want to try to serve together during one of the Gatherings?

We commit to attending the _____ Gathering. We may serve together or plan to eat together before or after sometimes.

2. GROW TOGETHER

Which evening works best for people to meet for group time? Can everyone be committed to this day and time?

We commit to meet on _____ from _____ to _____ at _____ for group time.

3. GO TOGETHER

What activity or environment would be a good third place, providing an easy way to invite people in and put you around the people you are trying to build with? How can you become a regular there? What day and time works best for the majority of people? Should you have multiple third place environments or times?

We commit to meet at _____ from _____ to _____ on _____ for building relationship with one another and to have a non-threatening environment to invite others into our community.

APPENDIX:

KIDS IN GROUPS

BY ALLEN TIPPING

The goal of LifeGroups is to help people take the next step toward Jesus, making disciples in the context of everyday, ordinary life. If the goal is discipleship in the context of everyday, ordinary life, then my kids have to be part of the plan because they are part of my everyday, ordinary life.

Therefore, my kids are a part of my LifeGroup. In fact, in total we have 14 kids who are a part of our LifeGroup. They have to be. My LifeGroup can't know me if they don't know my family. I want my group to help raise my kids. I want my group to make me a better parent by seeing where I don't apply the gospel to my parenting. Integrating kids into the rhythms of our group is beneficial for the kids and for us adults. My kids develop relationships with other Christians who have a real, active relationship with Jesus...I get support and help in shepherding my kids...and, hopefully, others in my group get a model of how the gospel changes parenting.

Ultimately, I am responsible for raising my kids in the Lord, and a large part of that includes allowing them to learn what Christian community is all about.

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.

—Deuteronomy 6:4-7

Discipleship is not just the transferring of knowledge. Yes, we want to teach our kids about Jesus and the Bible. The most effective discipleship, however, happens through modeling. Kids get to observe and see the impact of Jesus on our lives. They learn how to be missionaries from us. They learn how to talk about Jesus in everyday life.

My kids are going to learn from me how (and if) Jesus impacts my everyday life. They will see if a relationship with Jesus is worth pursuing. My wife Courtney and I are the primary model in their lives for understanding who God is and how we relate to Him. The good news about LifeGroup is that we don't have to be alone in this journey. We have a support system, a team of people to help and encourage us in discipling our kids.

We have a growing number of young parents in our church family, and when kids come along, the question inevitably arises: "Can we still do this with kids? Can we be a part of communities that change the world now that we have the challenging task of keeping these little humans alive?" The answer to that is, of course, yes you can. And not only that, but, for the good of your kids, you must. Just like Christian community is the best way for you to live life, it is also the best way for your kids to live life. The way you approach LifeGroup will reveal to your kids the importance of community, what it means to see all of life as mission and how to develop interdependent relationships. Your decisions are actively teaching your kids what is important about life and what is not significant enough to make the cut. It isn't that you have to pick between your family and doing ministry—you include your family in ministry and mission. Including your kids in ministry is part of being a good parent.

We encourage all LifeGroups to adopt weekly and monthly rhythms to ensure that we are doing life together. Rhythms are intentionally doing things together with regularity and gospel intentionality. Rhythms are practical ways we are going to be involved in one another's lives. We encourage groups to start with three basic intentional rhythms: 1) Gather Together—attend a gathering together, 2) Grow Together—group time for intentional training, and 3) Go Together—a social gathering in a non-threatening environment to invite people into your community. So how do we involve our kids these basic rhythms?

GATHER TOGETHER:

Ideally the group chooses one of the Gatherings to attend together. Of course, kids should attend Kidtown while adults attend the Gathering. We also en-

courage groups to plan to eat or hang out before or after the Gathering. This mealtime is a great time to involve kid-friendly discussion about the sermon and Kidtown materials. In addition to the questions from the Kidtown Home-links, here are some of the questions I ask my three-year-old Zoe:

- How was Kidtown?
- What friends were there? Who were your teachers?
- What did Mr. Bailey talk about today?
- Is there anyone from Kidtown that we can pray for this week?

GROW TOGETHER:

LifeGroups are more than a once-a-week meeting, but we do highly value our group time and every group should commit to a regular weekly meeting for this purpose. Group time is focused on intentional training to push each other toward Jesus. A typical group time will involve four elements: catching up on life, discussing the sermon, reviewing the group's mission and rhythms and engaging the heart through confession and prayer.

Because of the intentionality and focus needed during group time, this is not the best environment to be supervising kids. We encourage every group to talk about childcare for group time and to come up with a group plan. This is a group discussion, not just a families-with-kids discussion, because it is a group issue. Childcare options can vary because each group needs to make a plan that works best for them. Listed below are five examples of how different groups have handled childcare during group time:

GROUP A

- Everyone arranges childcare for their own families, unless it is a baby (babies usually mean under 1, still nursing, and/or not able to walk). Babies are welcome at group time, and any given week there are one to five babies present during our group time.

GROUP B

- Families in a group pitch in to hire a babysitter to keep the kids during group time. Depending on the number of kids and the size of the home the group meets in, this could happen at the same house as group time or at a nearby group member's home.

GROUP C

- Two or three adults from the group rotate pouring into kids while the rest of the group has intentional time. The group could eat a meal together, and then the adults watching the kids could take them upstairs to hang out. This would give everyone time with each other's kids, and also give single people and couples without kids opportunities to disciple kids in a way that they would not have otherwise.

GROUP D

- 1st week: All together—bring your kids and let's party.
- 2nd week: Women take the kids and hang out at someone's house, a restaurant or a park, and the guys prioritize to be there that week for intentional group time (flexible for the women: if they need to miss a week this is the one to miss).
- 3rd week: Reverse roles from the 2nd week.
- 4th week: Get two people from within the group (on a rotating basis) to keep the kids while the group has an intentional time all together (or people can get their own childcare if they so desire).

GROUP E

- The older kids in the group (including a few middle or high school students) view it as their responsibility to watch and take care of the younger kids while the adults meet.

GO TOGETHER:

We want groups to be on mission together and build relationships with people who do not know Jesus. This rhythm (called a third place) is a social gathering in a non-threatening environment where we can be family in front of others. This rhythm should be a welcoming environment to invite people into community.

For my group, we tend to have missional rhythms that involve kids and some that do not. If you are planning ways to involve your kids on mission here are two good questions to ask: "What are my children already doing?" and "How can I involve my community in those activities?" Here are a couple of the missional, social rhythms that our group uses to involve kids:

- Many of the women in our group get together with other moms during the week to hang out and eat a meal. This is a great environment to invite new mothers and kids into.

- We host cookouts at our homes, and we have even done one at the local park. Having a cookout outdoors is a great way for all of us to be in one spot with all the kids and still have room to invite more families.
- We eat three times a day every day, so we try our best to use meals as an opportunity for mission by inviting both members of our LifeGroup and people we are building with to join us for dinner. In fact, this is such a rhythm in my family that I recently had this conversation with my three-year-old Zoe as we are sitting down for family dinner:

Zoe: "Who's eating with us?"

Me: "Oh. No one tonight. It's just us as a family."

Zoe: "But, Dad, I want to see friends."

This is a simple conversation, and I think two quick conclusions can be drawn. One, I have a very social daughter. Two, Zoe is recognizing a pattern. We do life with other people and seek to practice hospitality as Scripture commands us. We eat with people and plan ways to hang out with people. She is seeing the value we as a family put on community and mission and, by God's grace, it will impact her for the rest of her life.

Learning how to do life on mission together with our children and involve them in our communities is essential. Neglecting this will be to the detriment of our families, our church and those around us. So let's disciple our kids together, as a family, and in doing so put the gospel on display for everyone around us.