

Part I: Living as a Disciple Maker

Lesson 1: What is a Disciple?

Two thousand years ago, Jesus walked up to a handful of men and said, “Follow me.”

Imagine being one of those original disciples. They were ordinary people like you and me. They had jobs, families, hobbies, and social lives. As they went about their business on the day Jesus called them, none of them would have expected his life to change so quickly and completely.

The disciples could not have fully understood what they were getting into when they responded to Jesus’s call. Whatever expectations or doubts, whatever curiosity, excitement, or uncertainty they felt, nothing could have prepared them for what lay ahead. Everything about Jesus—His teaching, compassion, and wisdom; His life, death, and resurrection; His power, authority, and calling—would shape every aspect of the rest of their lives.

In only a few years, these simple men were standing before some of the most powerful rulers on earth and being accused of “turn[ing] the world upside down” (Acts 17:6). What began as simple obedience to the call of Jesus ended up changing their lives, and ultimately, the world.

What Is a Disciple?

What does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus Christ? As you will discover, the answer is fairly simple, but it changes your life completely.

The word *disciple* refers to a student or apprentice. Disciples in Jesus’s day would follow their rabbi (which means teacher) wherever he went, learning from the rabbi’s teaching and being trained to do as the rabbi did. Basically, a disciple is a follower, but only if we take the term *follower* literally. Becoming a disciple of Jesus is as simple as obeying His call to follow.

When Jesus called His first disciples, they may not have understood where Jesus would take them or the impact it would have on their lives, but they knew what it meant to follow. They took Jesus’s call literally and began going everywhere He went and doing everything He did.

It's impossible to be a disciple or a follower of someone and not end up like that person. Jesus said, "A disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone when he is fully trained will be like his teacher" (Luke 6:40). That's the whole point of being a disciple of Jesus: we imitate Him, carry on His ministry, and become like Him in the process.

Yet somehow many have come to believe that a person can be a "Christian" without being like Christ. A "follower" who doesn't follow. How does that make any sense? Many people in the church have decided to take on the *name* of Christ and nothing else. This would be like Jesus walking up to those first disciples and saying, "Hey, would you guys mind identifying yourselves with Me in some way? Don't worry, I don't actually care if you do anything I do or change your lifestyle at all. I'm just looking for people who are willing to say they believe in Me and call themselves Christians." Seriously?

No one can really believe that this is all it means to be a Christian. But then why do so many people live this way? It appears that we've lost sight of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. The concept of being a disciple isn't difficult to understand, but it affects everything.

Q1 *Up to this point in your life, would you call yourself a follower of Jesus Christ? Why do you say that? Do you see evidence of your faith as described in Luke 6:40?*

How Do I Become a Disciple?

To understand how to become a disciple of Jesus Christ, it makes most sense to start where Jesus started. While it is true that He said to the disciples, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men" (Matt. 4:19), the Bible records one message He proclaimed before that. In Matthew 4:17, Jesus said, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

Try taking this phrase literally. If someone warned you to be prepared because a king and his army were coming, what would you do? You would make sure you were ready to face him. If you weren't prepared to fight this king, then you would do whatever it took to make peace with him.

The word *repent* means “to turn.” It has the idea of changing directions and heading the opposite way. It involves action. In this context, Jesus was telling people to prepare themselves—to change whatever needed to be changed—because God’s kingdom (the kingdom of heaven) was approaching.

So how do we prepare to face this heavenly kingdom? How do we make sure we are at peace with this coming King?

Jesus says we need to repent. This implies that we all need to turn from the way we are currently thinking and living. Romans 3:23 explains that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Every person reading this sentence has done things that are evil and offensive to this King. Romans later explains that “the wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23). Because of our sin, which is an offense to God, we should expect death. But then comes an amazing truth.

“But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8). The death penalty we should have faced from this King was actually paid for by someone else. The King’s Son, Jesus Christ!¹

The Scriptures then say, “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Rom. 10:9). We are saved by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ. It is all about who Jesus is and what He has done. Part of our repentance is to turn from believing that there’s anything we can do to save ourselves—for everything was accomplished by Jesus Christ.

The thought that someone else has paid for our crimes is strange to most of us because it defies our natural way of thinking. And the idea that we need to trust in another person’s sacrifice on our behalf is even more foreign. But understand that while it is strange to us, it is consistent with God’s actions throughout the Scriptures.

We get a picture of this when we read the book of Exodus. In this story, Moses warned Pharaoh repeatedly about what God would do if he did not repent. It climaxed when God said He would bring death to the firstborn of every household if they did not repent. Meanwhile, He told His people that if they put the blood of a lamb over their doorposts, His angel would pass over their homes and not kill the firstborn of that house. So even in the story of the exodus, we see that

people had to trust in the blood of a lamb to save them— and this was the only way they could be saved.

Q2 *Read Ephesians 2 carefully and take some time to consider the truths it presents. Do you trust in the death of Christ for your salvation? Do you ever struggle with believing you need to do something to save yourself?*

The Lord of Grace

Salvation is all about the grace of God. There is absolutely nothing that you can do to save yourself or earn God's favor. Paul said, "By grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Eph. 2:8–9). No one can brag about his or her good deeds because our works cannot save us. Salvation comes through the grace of God as we place our faith in Jesus Christ. All salvation requires is faith: Do you believe that Jesus is who He says He is?

But keep in mind that while this is simple, it's not easy. Faith in Jesus Christ means believing that He is Lord (according to Rom. 10:9). Have you ever thought about what that word *Lord* means? We sometimes think of it as another name for God, but it's actually a title. It refers to a master, owner, or a person who is in a position of authority. So take a minute to think this through: Do you really believe that Jesus is your master? Do you believe that He is your owner—that you actually belong to Him?

Paul is so bold as to tell us: "You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body" (1 Cor. 6:19–20). The same Lord who by His grace set us free from sin and death now owns us. We belong to Him, and He calls us to live in obedience to His rule.

The problem is, many in the church want to "confess that Jesus is Lord," yet they don't believe that He is their master. Do you see the obvious contradiction in this? The call to be a disciple of Jesus Christ is open to everyone, but we don't get to write our own job description. If Jesus is Lord, then He sets the agenda. If Jesus Christ is Lord, then your life belongs to Him. He has a plan, agenda, and calling for you. You don't get to tell Him what you'll be doing today or for the rest of your life.

Q3 Evaluate your approach to following Jesus. Would you say that you view Jesus as your Lord, Master, and Owner? Why or why not?

It All Comes Down to Love

But don't get the impression that following Jesus is all about joyless sacrifice. More than anything else, following Jesus boils down to two commands, which He said were the most important commandments in the Old Testament Law:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets. (Matt. 22:37–40)

It all comes down to love. Peter expressed it well for people like us, who didn't see Jesus on earth but follow Him nonetheless: "Though you have not seen him, *you love him*. Though you do not now see him, *you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory*" (1 Pet. 1:8).

Following Jesus is not about diligently keeping a set of rules or conjuring up the moral fortitude to lead good lives. It's about loving God and enjoying Him.

But lest we think that we can love God and live any way we want to, Jesus told us very clearly, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15). The love for God in the first commandment is made practical in the love for our neighbors in the second commandment. John actually told us that if we don't love the people that we can see around us, then we don't love God, whom we can't see (1 John 4:20).

True love is all about sacrifice for the sake of the ones you love: "By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers" (1 John 3:16). When we understand love in this light, it's not difficult to understand that love for God and obedience to Jesus Christ cannot be separated. God's love changes us from the inside out and redefines every aspect of our lives.

Q4 *As you look at your life, how would you say that your love for God is shown in your actions? (If you're having trouble coming up with an answer, take some time to think through some changes you may need to make in your lifestyle.)*

Count the Cost

As you work your way through this material, you will be challenged to consider what it means to be a follower of Jesus. You will think through what the Bible teaches and its implications for the way you live your life today. Everything you study will be for the purpose of applying it to your life and teaching other people to do the same. But before you set out to teach other people to be disciples of Jesus, you need to examine your heart and make sure you are a disciple.

Read the following words from Jesus slowly and carefully. Understand that Jesus is speaking these words to you. Think about what Jesus is saying and how it should affect the way you approach this material and your relationship with Him. After you have read this section, use the questions below to help you count the cost of following Jesus.

Now great crowds accompanied him, and he turned and said to them, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish.' Or what king, going out to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and deliberate whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? And if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace. So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple." (Luke 14:25–33)

Q5 *If you choose to obey Jesus's call to follow, what might it cost you? (Avoid being vague. If following Jesus would cost you specific possessions, comforts, or relationships, list them below.)*

Q6 *What might hold you back from following Jesus at this point? Are you willing to let go of these things if necessary?*

Q7 *Before you end this session, spend some time in prayer. Ask God to work in your heart and prepare you for what is ahead. You don't need to have all the answers or know specifically how God will use you. He simply calls you to follow wherever He might lead. As you pray, be honest about your doubts, hesitations, and fears. Ask Him to give you the strength to proceed and follow Him no matter what the cost. In other words, place your faith in Him.*

Part I: Living as a Disciple Maker

Lesson 2: The Command to Make Disciples

Imagine your reaction if someone came back from the dead to speak to you. Seriously, try to imagine that right now. What would you feel? How intensely would you listen? How seriously would you take his or her words?

Think about what this must have been like for the disciples. They were working their everyday jobs when a mysterious teacher asked them to follow Him. As they followed, they saw Him challenge religious leaders, embrace sinners, heal the sick, and even raise the dead. They knew that He was not an ordinary man. At various times and to varying degrees, people saw Him as the Messiah who would bring salvation for God's people. But He never quite fit anyone's expectations of what the Messiah would do or say.

The disciples walked beside Jesus through all of this. They watched as the blind were given sight. They heard Jesus forgive the hopelessly unrighteous and restore the lives of the broken. They helped pass out bread and fish as Jesus miraculously fed huge crowds. The disciples seem to have been more aware of Jesus's true identity at some points than at others, but they followed Him until the end, believing that He was the one who would restore the fortunes of God's people.

And then He died. Just like that. It was over. It seemed that Jesus could do absolutely anything, that He had power over sickness, death, every person, and every thing. By this power, Jesus was bringing the healing and redemption that the world so desperately needed. But the disciples' hopes of a better world died as Jesus was nailed to a Roman cross.

And so the disciples spent three days in confusion and disillusionment. Everything they had hoped for was gone. Perhaps they had wasted their time following this mysterious person for three years.

Then it happened. He came back from the dead! When Jesus reappeared on the third day, all of their hope came rushing back! Now there could be no doubt! Now that Jesus had conquered

even sin and death, He would certainly fix this broken world. Jesus would accomplish what everyone was longing to see. There could be no stopping Him.

Once again, He surprised everyone. Instead of telling them that He would immediately transform the earth, Jesus gave His disciples one final command and ascended into heaven. Just like that, out of nowhere. What was the command? Essentially, He told them it was their job to finish what He started. They were to take the message that Jesus declared and exemplified in and around Jerusalem and spread that message to the very ends of the earth:

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. (Matt. 28:18–20)

Q1 *Stop for a minute and read Matthew 28. Try to place yourself in the disciples' shoes as they witnessed these things and heard these words from Jesus. How do you think you would have reacted?*

The Great Commission and the Church

So what comes to your mind when you think about Jesus's command to make disciples of all nations? Many read these words as if they were meant to inspire pastors or missionaries on their way out to the mission field. But have you ever considered that maybe Jesus's command is meant for *you*?

As we read the rest of the New Testament, we see God's people working together in obedience to Jesus's command. They reached out to the people around them, calling them to obediently follow Jesus. The disciples went about making disciples, teaching them to obey everything that Jesus had commanded and baptizing them. Some of them even moved to different areas or traveled around so that they could tell more people. They took Jesus's words seriously—and literally.

Reading through the New Testament, it's not surprising to read that Jesus's followers were focused on making disciples—it makes sense in light of Jesus's ministry and the Great

Commission. The surprise comes when we look at our churches today in light of Jesus's command to make disciples.

Why is it that we see so little disciple making taking place in the church today? Do we really believe that Jesus told His early followers to make disciples but wants the twenty-first-century church to do something different? None of us would claim to believe this, but somehow we have created a church culture where the paid ministers do the "ministry," and the rest of us show up, put some money in the plate, and leave feeling inspired or "fed." We have moved so far away from Jesus's command that many Christians don't have a frame of reference for what disciple making looks like.

Q2 *Assess your church experience in light of Jesus's command to make disciples. Would you say that your church is characterized by disciple making? Why or why not?*

More Than a Program

So what does disciple making look like? We have to be careful about how we answer this question. For some of us, our church experience has been so focused on programs that we immediately think about Jesus's command to make disciples in programmatic terms. We expect our church leaders to create some sort of disciple-maker campaign where we sign up, commit to participating for a few months, and then get to cross the Great Commission off our list. But making disciples is far more than a program. It is the mission of our lives. It defines us. A disciple is a disciple maker.

So what does this look like? The Great Commission uses three phrases to describe what disciple making entails: go, baptize people, and teach them to obey everything Jesus commanded. Simple, right? It's incredibly simple in the sense that it doesn't require a degree, an ordination process, or some sort of hierarchical status. It's as simple as going to people, encouraging them to follow Jesus (this is what baptism is all about), and then teaching them to obey Jesus's commands (which we find in the Bible). The concept itself is not very difficult.

But the simplest things to understand are often the most difficult to put into practice. Let's start with baptism. In your church setting, baptism may not seem like that big of a deal. Maybe that's why so many Christians today have never been baptized. But in the early days of the church, baptism was huge. Baptism was an unmistakable act that marked a person as a follower of Jesus Christ. As Jesus died and was buried in the earth, so a Christian is plunged beneath the surface of the water. As Jesus emerged from the tomb in a resurrected body, so a Christian comes out of the waters of baptism as a new creation.

When first-century Christians took this step of identifying themselves with the death and resurrection of Jesus, they were publicly declaring their allegiance to Christ. This immediately marked them for martyrdom—all of the hostility that the world felt toward Jesus would now be directed at them. Baptism was a declaration that a person's life, identity, and priorities were centered on Jesus and His mission. Depending on where you live in the world, you may not see the same reaction to your choice to be baptized, but that act of identifying with Christ is essential, no matter where you live.

Q3 *Have you identified yourself with Jesus through being baptized? If so, why do you think this was an important step for you to take? If not, what is holding you back from being baptized?*

Just as baptism is more significant than we might have thought, so teaching people to obey Jesus's commands is an enormous task. Realistically, this will require a lifetime of devotion to studying the Scriptures and investing in the people around us. Neither of these things is easy, nor can they be checked off of a list. We are never really "done." We continually devote ourselves to studying the Scriptures so that we can learn with ever-greater depth and clarity what God wants us to know, practice, and pass on. We continually invest in the people around us, teaching them and walking with them through life's joys and trials.

We never "finish" the discipleship process. It's much like raising a child: though there comes a day when she is ready to be on her own, the relationship doesn't end. The friendship continues, and there will always be times when guidance and encouragement are still needed. In addition to that, God continually brings new people into our path, giving us fresh opportunities to start the discipleship process all over again.

Following Jesus by making disciples isn't difficult to understand, but it can be very costly. Jesus's teachings are often difficult to stomach. By sharing His teachings, we are often rejected along with His message. Jesus said:

If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: "A servant is not greater than his master." If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours. (John 15:18–20)

It's easy enough to understand, but it can be extremely costly.

Q4 *Would you say that you're ready to commit yourself to studying the Scriptures and investing in the people around you? Why or why not?*

Equipped to Do the Work of Ministry

Unfortunately, disciple making has become the exclusive domain of pastors (and missionaries). Salesmen sell, insurance agents insure, and ministers minister. At least, that's the way it works in most of our churches.

While it's true that the pastors, elders, and apostles in the New Testament made disciples, we can't overlook the fact that discipleship was everyone's job. The members of the early church took their responsibility to make disciples very seriously. To them, the church wasn't a corporation run by a CEO. Rather, they compared the church to a body that functions properly only when every member is doing its part.

Paul explained the function of the church in Ephesians 4:11–16:

He gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ ... 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.

Paul saw the church as a community of redeemed people in which each person is actively involved in doing the work of ministry. The pastor is not the minister—at least not in the way we typically think of a minister. The pastor is the equipper, and every member of the church is a minister.

The implications are huge. Don't think of this as merely a theological issue. See yourself in this passage. Paul said that your job is to do the work of ministry! Jesus commanded you to make disciples!

Most Christians can give a number of reasons why they cannot or should not disciple other people: "I don't feel called to minister." "I just have too much on my plate right now; I don't have time to invest in other people." "I don't know enough." "I have too many issues of my own. I'll start once I get my life in order."

As convincing as these excuses may seem to us, Jesus's commands don't come with exception clauses. He doesn't tell us to follow *unless* we're busy. He doesn't call us to love our neighbors unless we don't feel prepared. In fact, if you read Luke 9:57–62, you'll see several individuals who gave excuses for why they couldn't follow Jesus at the time. Read the passage and take note of how Jesus responded to them. It may surprise you.

God made you the way you are; He has provided and will continue to provide you with everything you need to accomplish the task. Jesus commands you to look at the people around you and start making them into disciples. Obviously, only God can change people's hearts and make them want to become followers. We just have to be obedient in making the effort to teach them, even though we still have plenty to learn ourselves.

Q5 *What excuses tend to keep you from following Jesus's command to make disciples? What do you need to do in order to move past these excuses?*

Taking the First Step

Being a disciple maker means that you will begin to look at the people in your life differently. Every person in your life is created in the image of God, and Jesus commands every one of them to follow Him. God has placed these people in your life so that you will do everything you can to influence them. Following Jesus means that you will be teaching other people to follow Jesus.

Take some time to consider your first step toward disciple making. Whom has God placed in your life that you can teach to follow Jesus? Maybe God is laying someone on your heart you don't know very well. Your first step could be building a relationship with that person. Maybe it's someone you've known for years, and God is calling you to take that relationship to another level. God has placed you where you are, and the people around you are not there by accident. Keep in mind that the Great Commission calls us to every type of person, to those inside of the church as well as to those outside, to those who are like us and those who are very different. Everyone needs to understand who Jesus is and what it means to follow Him.

Q6 *Whom has God placed in your life right now that you can begin making into a disciple of Jesus Christ?*

Working Together to Make Disciples

God wants you to view the other Christians in your life as partners in ministry. God has not called you to make disciples in isolation; He has placed you in the context of a church body so that you can be encouraged and challenged by the people around you. And you are called to encourage and challenge them in return.

As you begin this study, think about how you will proceed. Are there Christians in your life you can study this material with? Are there mature believers you can approach with the questions that will inevitably arise? The goal is for you to think through this material and let these truths saturate your mind, heart, and lifestyle. But you'll get a lot more out of this if you have other people to talk with, be challenged by, and work together with. Human beings are simply not designed to function in isolation.

Q7 *Whom has God placed in your life for you to partner with in making disciples?*

Q8 *Spend some time praying that God will make you into a committed and effective disciple maker. Confess any feelings of unpreparedness and insecurity. Ask Him to empower you for the ministry He is calling you to. Ask Him to lead you to the right people to partner with and the right people to begin discipling.*

Part I: Living as a Disciple Maker

Lesson 3: The Heart of a Disciple Maker

Why do you want to make disciples?

Have you ever asked yourself that question? The answer is incredibly important.

As followers of Jesus Christ, we should be focused on making disciples. But if we don't do it with the right motives, we are wasting our time. Worse yet, we could be doing more harm than good. Ministering to other people has been a deadly trap for seemingly godly people throughout the ages. If God cared only about outward appearances and religious activities, then any effort toward ministry would please Him. But God tells us repeatedly that He cares more about the heart than the externals.

If God cared only about religious activities, then the Pharisees would have been heroes of the faith. They were continuously engaged in ministry: they vigorously pursued outward demonstrations of godliness; they made sure the people around them kept themselves holy, and they diligently taught the law of God. And yet the Gospels present the Pharisees as villains. Jesus's harshest words were reserved for these religious overachievers:

This people honors me with their lips,
but their heart is far from me;
in vain do they worship me,
teaching as doctrines the commandments of men. (Matt. 15:8–9)

The Pharisees devoted their whole lives to religious activity. They must have seemed so impressive to the people around them. Yet Jesus came along and declared that it was all in vain! An important theme that runs throughout Scripture is this: "The LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart" (1 Sam. 16:7). Clearly, God wants us to pursue certain actions, but as we put God's commands into action, our motivation makes all the difference.

Q1 *Take a moment to examine your heart. In all honesty, why do you want to make disciples? Do you struggle with wanting your actions to be noticed by others?*

Teaching Is Dangerous

Ask yourself again: Why do you want to make disciples?

Maybe your decision to be a disciple maker has been reluctant. Perhaps the only reason you are still working through this material is because Jesus commands you to make disciples, and you don't want to be disobedient. You're not sure if you have much to offer, but you know you should let God use you however He desires.

Or maybe you've always seen yourself as a leader. You have a message that the church needs to hear, and you're ready to teach anyone who will listen. You don't need motivation; you just want to be better equipped.

For those of you who are reluctant, remember that God wants you to minister out of joy, not mere obligation. God wants us to enjoy the privilege and pleasure of ministering to others. He wants us to be cheerful when we give (2 Cor. 9:7), and He wants us to lead others willingly and eagerly:

Shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly. (1 Pet. 5:2)

For those who are eager to lead, remember that God wants us to be cautious as we lead. Remember that you will be teaching people about the Bible and guiding them into godly living. The Bible takes the role of a teacher very seriously, and so should we.

James gave us a terrifying warning about the power of the tongue. While we can speak truth and bring life to people, he warned that our words can also cause incredible damage. The tongue is untamable, James said, capable of diverting the direction of our lives, producing deadly poison, and "setting on fire the entire course of life" (James 3:6). Indeed, James even accused the tongue of being set on fire by hell!

If you look at your heart and find even a trace of desire for the glory and prestige that come through teaching and leading other people, take some time to let James's warning sink in. Think about what your tongue is capable of. As a disciple maker, you could make a huge impact for the kingdom of God. Or you could lead people horribly astray.

Q2 Read James 3:1–12 and meditate on James's warning. How do these powerful words affect you? How might you need to adjust your approach to making disciples?

Love Comes First

Paul added a challenge from a different angle. In the most beautiful terms, he said that gaining knowledge and power—even sacrificing our own bodies—is completely worthless apart from love:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. (1 Cor. 13:1–3)

The result of loveless ministry is serious: *"I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal ... I am nothing ... I gain nothing."* In other words, even the most impressive and sacrificial actions are worthless if they are not empowered by love.

Are you the type of person who would teach someone without loving them? Don't be quick to answer. Many good pastors have confessed that they got so caught up in the busyness of ministry that they went through the motions without loving their people. Most of us have to work hard to keep love at the forefront.

What do you think and feel when you are in a group of people? Are you overly aware of the ones who are wealthy, attractive, or have something they can offer you? Do you worry about what people think of you? Or do you look for ways to love and opportunities to give? A sure sign of a loveless heart is seeing people as a means to your own ends—they listen to you, give you

affirmation when you want it, stay out of your way when you don't, etc. Teaching other people with this type of mentality is bound to be sterile and unfruitful. According to Paul, every time we try to teach someone with this mentality, we can be sure that we have become nothing more than a clanging gong or resounding cymbal; we have made ourselves both annoying and irrelevant.

Fulfilling Jesus's command to make disciples is about more than having the right theology or well-developed teaching points. Remember that if you "understand all mysteries and all knowledge" yet don't have love, you are nothing. Earlier in the same letter, Paul said, "If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. But if anyone loves God, he is known by God" (1 Cor. 8:2–3). It's not about what you know—or what you *think* you know—it's about love.

If you're not willing to make loving God and loving people your highest priority, then stop. Seriously, walk away until you've settled this one essential point. Lack of love is the unmistakable mark of death: "We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death" (1 John 3:14).

Making disciples isn't about gathering pupils to listen to your teaching. The real focus is not on teaching people at all—the focus is on loving them. Jesus's call to make disciples includes teaching people to be obedient followers of Jesus, but the teaching isn't the end goal. Ultimately, it's all about being faithful to God's call to love the people around you. It's about loving those people enough to help them see their need to love and obey God. It's about bringing them to the Savior and allowing Him to set them free from the power of sin and death and transform them into loving followers of Jesus Christ. It's about glorifying God by obediently making disciples who will teach others to love and obey God.

So the question is, how much do you care about the people around you? When you stand in a crowd, interact with your family, or talk to people in your church, do you love them and long to see them glorify God in every aspect of their lives? Honestly assessing your heart and asking God to purify your motives need to become habits in your life.

Q3 *Up to this point, would you say that your desire to make disciples has been motivated by love? Why or why not?*

Take some time to consider your existing relationships—family, friends, coworkers, neighbors, etc. The way you think about and interact with the people that God has placed in your life can tell you a lot about your heart. Think about your relationships and ask yourself how well you love those around you. By assessing your current relationships, you should be able to identify areas you need to work on.

Q4 *Describe your love for the people God has placed in your life. What evidence can you point to that shows that you love the people around you?*

Q5 *In addition to praying fervently, what practical steps can you take to increase your love for people?*

Teaching by Example

One of the worst things you can do is teach truths that you are not applying. We call this hypocrisy, and it's the most common criticism of Christians in America. You could argue that it may be better not to teach at all than to teach truth without applying it to your own life. Jesus gave some harsh warnings toward the religious leaders who were doing that very thing. He said:

Do and observe whatever they [the scribes and Pharisees] tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger. They do all their deeds to be seen by others. (Matt. 23:3–5)

Hypocrisy has damaged many, so let's run far from it.

James also gave a strong warning against this type of thinking. He said that if we hear the Word of God, but don't do what it says, we are merely deceiving ourselves (James 1:22–25). He went on to say that religion without practical action is worthless (vv. 26–27). Let's be realistic: a

self-deceived teacher who practices worthless religion is probably not the best candidate for a disciple maker.

Maybe the clearest explanation of teaching by example can be found in the book of Hebrews: “Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith” (Heb. 13:7). The author of Hebrews actually called us to consider—literally, “to examine carefully”—the outcome of a teacher’s lifestyle. We can get so caught up in examining a person’s doctrinal positions that we overlook his or her pattern of life. But this is essential because Hebrews calls us to imitate the faith of these people. If you are going to make disciples, you need to be putting your faith into practice so that the people around you can imitate your faith.

Because of this, being a disciple maker demands your entire life. The job description of a disciple maker is the same as that of a disciple of Jesus Christ. It requires everything. It means following Jesus in every aspect of your life, pursuing Him with a wholehearted devotion. If you’re not ready to lay down your life for Christ’s sake, then you’re not ready to make disciples. It’s that simple.

This doesn’t mean that you need to be perfect before you start. Perfection is a lifelong process that won’t end until eternity (see Phil. 1:6 and 3:12–14). But it does mean that you need to “count the cost” (see Luke 14:25–33) and allow God’s truth to change your life. Making disciples is all about seeing people transformed by the power of God’s Word. If you want to see that happen in others, you need to be experiencing such transformation yourself.

Q6 *Would you say that your life is being transformed by the truth of God’s Word? Why or why not?*

Q7 *What changes do you need to make in order to live the truths that you will be teaching other people?*

Q8 *The things you’ve been thinking through in this session are not easy to address—there are no “quick fixes” here. End your time with this session by praying*

that God will give you the proper motivation to make disciples, increase your love for Him and the people around you, and empower you to live out the truths that He has called you to teach to others.

Part II: Living as the Church

Lesson 4: Life in the Church

Not every culture is individualistic. But in the Western world, we tend to look up to Lone Rangers. Our heroes are strong and self-sufficient, and they tend to walk alone. Very often, the Western church tends toward this type of individualism. We hear Jesus's call to take up our cross and follow Him, and we decide to follow no matter what any one else says or does. Of course, this is the right response, but we need to be careful here. While *every individual* needs to obey Jesus's call to follow, we cannot follow Jesus *as individuals*. The proper context for every disciple maker is the church. It is impossible to make disciples aside from the church of Jesus Christ. Look at it from this perspective: the New Testament is full of commands to do this or that for "one another." Love one another, pray for one another, encourage one another, etc. So how can we teach people to "observe all that I have commanded" if they have no one to love, pray for, or encourage? It's impossible to "one another" yourself. It's impossible to follow Jesus alone. We can't claim to follow Jesus if we neglect the church He created, the church He died for, the church He entrusted His mission to.

In this session and the two following sessions, we will place disciple making squarely within the context of the church. This session will examine the way in which we are called to live together as the church. Teaching people to obey what Jesus commanded is a never-ending process that requires us to intertwine our lives with the Christians around us. As disciple makers, we will join together with other believers, help them overcome the sin that holds them back, and challenge them to grow into more effective disciple makers.

The next two sessions will focus on the call to reach out to the people in our local setting and to the rest of the world. In each case, our call is to make disciples, and we must learn to fulfill that calling through the God-ordained vehicle of the church.

Committing Your Life to the Church

First, let's make sure that we are not guilty of belittling God's church in any way. It's not a social club; it's not a building, and it's not an option. The church is life and death. The church is God's

strategy for reaching our world. What we do inside the church matters. We tend to equate church life with events and programs. But these are not what make a church. Programs are helpful to the extent that they facilitate the life and mission of the church, but we can't equate well-attended events with the health of the church.

God cares about the way we love each other and the way we pursue His mission. The church is a group of redeemed people that live and serve together in such a way that their lives and communities are transformed. What matters is your interaction with the people God has placed in your life. If you are not connected with other Christians, serving and being served, challenging and being challenged, then you are not living as He desires, and the church is not functioning as He intended.

Throughout the Bible, we see pictures of the global church (which includes all followers of Jesus in all locations) and the local church (which includes particular followers of Jesus in a particular location). Out of 114 times that the "church" is mentioned in the New Testament, at least ninety of them refer to specific local gatherings of believers who have banded together for fellowship and mission. God intends for every follower of Jesus to be a part of such a gathering under the servant leadership of pastors who shepherd the church for the glory of God.

Despite the clear priority that the Bible puts on believers being part of a local church, many followers of Christ try to live the Christian life apart from serious, personal commitment to a local church. The reasons are many. We are self-reliant and self-sufficient, and the kind of mutual interdependence and even submission and accountability to others that the Bible talks about frightens us. We are often indecisive, hopping from one church to another looking for the "perfect place" and the "perfect people." Many of us have been hurt in the past by things that have happened to or around us in the church, and others of us simply don't see the importance of being specifically connected to a local church.

But the Bible says the local church is important. God has entrusted local churches with godly leaders who teach us His Word and care for our souls (Heb. 13:17; 1 Pet. 5:1–8; 1 Tim. 3:1–13; 5:17; Titus 1:5–9). God has united us together in local churches to keep one another from sinning and straying from Christ (Gal. 6:1–5; Matt. 18:15–20). God has commanded us to gather together in local assemblies where we preach God's Word, celebrate the Lord's Supper, baptize new believers, and pray for and encourage one another (Acts 2:42; Heb. 10:24–25). Then we

scatter to care for believers and to share the gospel with unbelievers (Acts 2:43–47). Clearly, being a disciple and making disciples involves committing your life to a local church where you are joined together with other believers under biblical leadership to grow in the likeness of Christ and to express the love of Christ to the world around you.

Q1 *Why do you think the New Testament places such a priority on Christians being committed members (or parts) of local churches? How can this priority best be reflected in your life?*

Q2 *Read Ephesians 4:1–16. How should this passage affect the way you view your responsibility to other Christians in the church?*

Bearing One Another's Burdens

In Part I, we said that every Christian is a minister. Paul said that God gave pastors, teachers, and elders to the church so that they could teach the rest of us to minister. A pastor's job is not to do all of the ministry in a church, but to “equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ” (Eph. 4:12).

So the question becomes: Whom should you be ministering to and how? Don't be overwhelmed by the task of ministering to others. It is just about faithfully serving the people God has placed in your life. Paul explained:

Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. (Gal. 6:1–2)

Ministry sounds intimidating until you develop a realistic view of what ministry is really about. Maybe you're not gifted to preach sermons, start a rehabilitation clinic, or lead a marriage retreat. But do you know people who struggle with sin?

Do you know people who are carrying burdens? If so, then your first steps toward ministry are easy: help them.

We don't like getting involved in other people's problems. Our own problems are messy enough—why complicate things by taking on other people's junk? But the reason is simple: God calls us to help other people. He created us to function this way. Your problems are not just your problems—ultimately, they belong to the church body that God has placed you in. You are called to encourage, challenge, and help the other Christians in your life, and they are called to do the same for you. If you wait until all of your own issues are gone before helping others, it will never happen. This is a trap that millions have fallen into, not realizing that our own sanctification happens as we minister to others.

Q3 *Think about your unique setting and identify a few opportunities that God has given you to minister to the people around you. Have you taken advantage of these opportunities?*

Q4 *Take a few minutes to meditate on Galatians 6:1–2. What would it look like to help bear someone else's burden? Is there anyone in your life right now whom you should be helping in this way?*

Getting beneath the Surface

We have to be clear about what it means to help the people God has placed in our lives. We gravitate toward solutions that are quick and easy. When it comes to helping people, we often address the surface level of the problem but never get down to the heart of the matter. When someone is grieving, we might hand him a book that helped us in a difficult moment. But how many of us would take the time to really invest in his life? Would we listen on a consistent basis and offer help whenever we find a need that we are able to meet?

Or when we learn that a friend is struggling with sin, we are quick to explain why that sin is harmful and tell her we will pray for her (whether we follow through or not). But how many of us would take her struggle with sin so seriously that we would walk with her as she works through the issues involved?

It's not that Christians are uncaring. Very often, we really do want to help the people around us however we can, but we get so focused on finding a quick solution to the external behavior that

we overlook the real problem. Here's an example. If a friend struggles with anger, we find out what makes him angry, and then keep him away from the things that provoke his anger (e.g., don't drive during rush hour, interact with your boss as little as possible, avoid talking politics). But changing the external situation doesn't change his heart. In reality, his anger is rooted in his heart, and that anger will find a way to express itself even if his circumstances change.

When Jesus's disciples started eating without going through the necessary cleansing rituals, the Pharisees accused them of defiling themselves. But Jesus's response calls us to look beyond the external to what is going on in the heart:

"Whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?" (Thus he declared all foods clean.) And he said, "What comes out of a person is what defiles him. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person. (Mark 7:18–23)

Every struggle with sin that we could possibly encounter in our own lives or in the lives of the people around us are represented in the list Jesus offered here: evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, and foolishness. Jesus said that these things come from within. In other words, if we are trying to address these problems by regulating a person's circumstances or behavior, then we are wasting our time. These things come "out of the heart of man." Whatever help we can offer people who are struggling with sin has to be aimed at transforming hearts, not behavior.

Q5 *Why do you think we tend to focus on the external circumstances and behavior when we try to help people change?*

Q6 *Using your own words, try to explain why it is essential to get to the heart of the problem rather than merely addressing the circumstances and behavior.*

Transformed by the Gospel

So how do we change a person's heart? It's impossible. We might be able to restrain a person's angry outbursts by tying him up and gagging him, but we are powerless to change a person's heart.

This is where God's plan of redemption comes into play. The gospel is not merely about "getting us saved," as if we simply pray a prayer and are immediately transported into heaven. God describes "salvation" and the transformation of the Christian life like this:

I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. (Ezek. 36:26–27)

This is a cataclysmic event. "Getting saved" is not about praying a prayer and then continuing to live our lives as though nothing happened. No, when God enters our lives, we are changed from the inside out.

The good news is that God has acted in the person of Jesus Christ. Through His life, death, and resurrection we are transformed, made new. Our problem lies at the core of our being, but God transforms our hearts. God literally places His Spirit within us and changes us from the inside out.

So as we come alongside the broken, hurting people God has placed in our lives, let's remember where our power comes from. These are not mere physical issues that we can correct through hard work. These are spiritual issues that run deeper than we can imagine. Yet God has supplied us with everything we need in order to fulfill His calling. The power to transform hearts and change lives comes from the Holy Spirit (John 6:63), through the Word of God (2 Tim. 3:16–17), and through prayer (James 5:16–20). As we use the Scriptures to give counsel to others, there is power (Heb. 4:12). As we pray passionately for their hearts to change, there is power. We cannot remove the lust from another's person's heart by our own efforts, but we have the Spirit of God working through us. Through the gospel, people can be set free from the enslaving power of sin (Rom. 6). Through the gospel, we are actually empowered

to uproot the sin in our hearts and live in a way that pleases God (Gal. 5 and Rom. 8). Paul promised: “If *by the Spirit* you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live” (Rom. 8:13).

Q7 *How should the truth of the gospel and the power of the Holy Spirit affect the way we approach helping people change?*

Bearing one another’s burdens is not easy, but it is also not optional. We have to face this challenge head on: a church full of isolated individuals feeling defeated by their sin and stripped of their joy was never God’s plan for the church. Jesus intended for His church to advance powerfully through the centuries, full of love and joy. Jesus was clear: “I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matt. 16:18).

Paul reminded us that the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus Christ from the dead is working through us (Eph. 1:15–23; Rom. 8:11). God intends for His church to be a united body, not a cluster of isolated individuals. He has empowered us to bring truth and transformation into the lives of the people around us, not to be satisfied with handing out books and warm wishes. If the church is going to fulfill its God-given mission in our modern world, we are going to have to take our responsibility to one another seriously. We will have to accept His call to bear one another’s burdens—even when it’s messy, even when we find ourselves in over our heads.

So when a sister in Christ is speaking harmful words about another member of the church body, we will take the time to help her see the pride and lack of love in her heart and walk with her as she asks the Spirit to transform her heart on this issue. When we find a brother in Christ who is enslaved to his lustful desires, we will help him to understand the fear of the Lord and call out to God to transform his selfish desires into genuine love. Though you may not have a degree in psychology, you are still called to stand with the Christians in your life as they pursue the healing and transformation that only come through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Q8 *Would you say that your church body is characterized more by defeat and isolation or the power and transformation of the Holy Spirit? Why do you say that?*

Q9 *What steps can you take right away to help your church function more like God intended?*

Every Member Doing Its Part

The mission of your church is too important to leave to everyone else. The moment you begin to believe that your church can be healthy while you sit on the sidelines, you have given up on God's plan of redemption. God placed you in your unique situation because He wants you to minister to and with the other Christians He has placed around you. Paul's vision for the church included every Christian:

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. (Eph. 4:15–16)

The goal of the church is to grow up in every way into the likeness of Christ. But the church will never reach this goal unless “each part is working properly.” This doesn't mean that we will all function in exactly the same way, but it does mean that we all have a responsibility. It also means that if you are not active in the church, you are hurting your brothers and sisters. One paralyzed leg forces the rest of the body to work twice as hard to make up for that leg's inactivity. God made you to be exactly who you are, and His Spirit has empowered you with unique spiritual abilities, or “gifts.” Together, we function as one body. Until you and every person in your church are actively ministering to the people around you, your area will not have an accurate picture of what the church was created to be.

When we step outside of ourselves and begin bearing the burdens of the people around us, it is time-consuming, messy, and often confusing. But it is necessary. Helping people change is what discipleship is all about. As we help other Christians follow Jesus, we are going to run into the temptations, lies, and idols that hold them back. It will be difficult, but we know what Jesus has accomplished, and we know how this story will end. We have a part to play in God's plan of redemption. It won't always be fun, but we must be faithful to God's calling.

Q10 *Would you say that you have been playing your part in the body of Christ? If so, how might you still need to grow in this? If not, are you ready to get involved? What steps might you need to take?*

Q11 *Spend some time in prayer. Ask God to give you confidence in the Spirit's power to use you in ministering to other people. Ask Him for the wisdom to know what to do and the discernment to recognize people who need help. Pray that God would use you and your church to continue His plan of redemption in your unique setting.*

Part II: Living as the Church

Lesson 5: The Local Church

You are on this earth to continue the mission that Jesus left for you: “Go and make disciples of all nations.” But you can’t do that on your own, nor are you expected to. God tells us to work together with the Christians He has placed in our lives to bring His healing and transformation into the life of the world. His plan of redemption involves the church working in unity to reach the people around.

Inside the church, this means that we devote ourselves to the members of our church body. We have a responsibility to challenge one another, to love one another, and to serve one another in a variety of ways. When every member takes this seriously, it makes for a healthy church (Eph. 4:16). And when the church functions as God intended, the results are nothing short of miraculous. The church becomes a place of healing, a picture of how God wants humanity to live.

But this vision goes beyond the people within a church body. We don’t love and serve the Christians around us solely to maintain healthy churches. God’s plan is bigger than that. It involves reaching out to the whole world. His plan of redemption will not be completed if we are satisfied with those who are already on the inside. An inwardly focused church is an unhealthy church. It is a dying church. Biblically, a church that fails to look at the world around it is no church at all.

Jesus was clear about His purpose on earth: “The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10). Similarly, our calling is focused on reaching those who don’t know God:

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. (Matt. 5:14–16)

Our focus is not inward. We live in the midst of a threatening environment, but we are more like a lighthouse than a bomb shelter. We are not called to hide from trouble but to guide others through it. We cannot fulfill our mission unless we serve one another in love, but living together in a tight-knit circle is not our ultimate goal. God has placed your church in the midst of a broader community so that He can spread His love, hope, and healing into the lives of the people around you.

Q1 *Would you say that your church is more inwardly focused or outwardly focused? Why do you say that?*

Known by Our Love

We know that we're supposed to love one another. The two greatest commandments are to love God and love people (Mark 12:28–31). Love is basic to what it means to be a follower of Jesus, and it should be what motivates us to reach out to the world around us. The only reason that we can love anyone else is because God loved us first (1 John 4:19). We are transformed by love because “God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (Rom. 5:5).

But what is the purpose of this love? Love should characterize the way we interact with one another. But why?

Because this is how the world will recognize 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)

Let’s say you spent three years following Jesus closely and studying at His feet. That should make a difference in your life, right? Other people should be able to look at your life and notice a change. Something about you should signal your connection to Jesus. But the difference should not just be in our teaching or even in our pursuit of holiness. They should notice a love like they have never seen.

Jesus told His disciples that they should look different because of their love. Something about the way we love the people around us should signal to the world that we belong to Jesus. Our mission will include preaching, encouraging, rebuking, serving, studying, suffering, and many other things. But if all of these activities are not manifestations of love, then we have missed the point.

Q2 *Read 1 Corinthians 13. Would you say that the life of your church is characterized by love? Why or why not?*

Q3 *What steps can you take to be an example of love in your church? Whether you are an official leader in your church or not, how can you lead others in being more loving?*

A Compelling Community

On the night He was betrayed, Jesus prayed for His disciples. This was a pivotal moment for them, and Jesus prayed that they would be strengthened, focused, and protected. Interestingly, Jesus did not pray only for His disciples, but for “those who will believe in me through their word.” In other words, *Jesus prayed for us*. Pay careful attention to what Jesus prayed on our behalf:

I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me. (John 17:20–23)

Jesus prayed that we would be united. Why? So that the world would believe that Jesus was sent by God, and so that the world would know that God loves us. Isn't it amazing that Jesus believed that the unity of His church would communicate all of this to the world? So often we assume that having right and logical arguments will be enough, but Jesus said the world will be

convinced by our unity. And when you think about it, haven't we all heard the objections from unbelievers who point to divisions in the church as a cause for their disbelief?

Notice that Jesus's prayer assumes that our life together as Christians won't be hidden from view. Our unity is something that the world will be able to see. Nowadays, church life can become so introverted and privatized that the world never sees the way we interact with one another. If all we ever do is gather in a private building on Sundays and perhaps meet in someone's home for a midweek Bible study, the world will never know whether we are united or not. If Jesus's desire for us is to be realized, we are going to have to stop hiding from the eyes of the unbelieving world. Jesus prayed for our unity, which means that we have to focus on loving and serving each other. But we need to be doing this in such a way that the world can see what we are doing and recognize it as a picture of unity.

Q4 *Read John 17. Pay careful attention to Jesus's desire for His followers. Would you say that your church could be characterized by this kind of unity? Why or why not?*

Q5 *Take some time to think about your church and your unique cultural setting. What would it take for your church to be united, and for that unity to be displayed to the unbelieving world?*

When was the last time someone *asked you* about your faith? Most of us would have to answer "never." Why do you think that is? The New Testament assumes that people will be able to look at the church, and that they will be struck by what they see. Listen to Peter's exhortation:

Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. (1 Pet. 3:13–16)

Peter was speaking about suffering when we haven't done anything to deserve it. What should happen when we suffer for doing good? We should honor Christ in our hearts, and we should be ready to explain our hope. Peter assumed that we are going to suffer unjustly, and that when we do, we are going to respond with so much hope and joy that people will ask us what is going on. And when that happens, we should be ready to proclaim the gospel.

But it doesn't happen like that for most churches. There isn't anything compelling about the way we live together. Our love isn't very noticeable. Our unity is either nonexistent or hidden behind the doors of the fellowship hall. When we suffer, it's usually because we've done something wrong. In the rare event that we experience suffering that we didn't earn, we respond by complaining.

In other words, we don't give anyone a reason to ask about what makes us unique, so nobody asks. Yet we still feel the need to evangelize. So we end up coming across like salespeople peddling a product that didn't really work for us. We should all pray for the courage to tell others about Jesus, but we also should be working toward the love and unity that makes the church attractive. Let's not place our hope in clever sales tactics. Let's not give up on Jesus's strategy of reaching people simply because it feels impossible at times. Jesus's strategy was the life of the church. We must stick with His plan and pray that supernatural love begins to characterize our churches.

Jesus said that the world would recognize us by our love and unity. Peter said that people would be compelled by our hope. But are *love*, *unity*, and *hope* the words that unbelievers use when describing your church?

Q6 *Do you ever feel like a salesperson when sharing your faith? What steps can you take to change this?*

Q7 *What would it mean for your church to live as a compelling community—a group of people who demonstrate love, unity, and hope in such a way that the unbelieving world is compelled to find out what is going on?*

A Kingdom of Priests

As you will see in the sessions on the Old Testament, God made a covenant with Moses and Israel. As God spoke with Moses on Mount Sinai, He explained how Israel would relate to Him and what it would mean for Him to live in their midst. Israel's calling and identity were clear: "You shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex. 19:5–6). Though all the earth belongs to God, Israel belonged to God in a special way—they were His people. They were a holy nation, a group of people set apart for God's purposes. And they were a kingdom of priests. A priest represented the people to God—interceding on their behalf—and represented God to the people—mediating His truth, commands, and grace into their lives. Israel stood collectively as a kingdom made up of priests. They stood amid all the nations of the earth in a priestly role, ready to represent the nations to God and God to the nations.

When you study the New Testament, you will see that the church is given this same vocation. "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Pet. 2:9). In God's plan of redemption, the church is called to be and to do what Israel failed to be and to do. The purpose of the church is to work together to reach out to the world around us. We have been called out of darkness into His marvelous light so *that* we can proclaim God's excellencies to a watching world.

Q8 *Read 1 Peter 2:4–12. How should Peter's description of our calling as the church affect the way we think about and interact with our surrounding community?*

Your Church Matters

We are called to make disciples, and strengthening the other members of the church body is an important part of this. But if we are not working together to help the unbelieving world around us become followers of Jesus, then we are missing the point of our salvation. God blessed Abraham so that He could bless the world through him (see Gen. 12). If your church is not actively blessing the surrounding community, then you are ignoring God's mission. We can

never forget that we have a role to play in God's plan of redemption. You should feel honored to know that God has a plan for your church in particular.

Though God's church is meant to cover the globe, there is no church aside from the local church. God has placed you in your unique setting, alongside a unique group of Christians, for the purpose of proclaiming Him to the unbelieving world around you. The way you interact with these people matters. It doesn't matter whether your church is thousands strong or if you meet with two other Christians in a living room. It doesn't matter if your church was formed yesterday or one hundred years ago. But the way your church functions does matter. Your church is essential to God's ongoing plan of redemption. Remember that God left His church to fulfill His mission, and He didn't leave a backup plan. If your church does not pursue God's mission, then your community misses out on being exposed to the hope that God offers them in the gospel. Too many churches miss out on the vibrant life Jesus wants us to experience as we pursue His mission together.

The life of your church is a matter of life and death. God tells us how the story will end, but you have an essential role to play nonetheless. Will you help your church step up, look at the community around you with the compassion of Jesus, and call them into the plan of redemption that has transformed your church body? There's a reason God has you in this church at this point in history. You can help your church become an attractive community that exhibits Christ's love, unity, and hope.

Q9 *Spend some time in prayer. God's calling for your church is too important to neglect, and it's too important to take on without the power of the Spirit. Ask God to so fill the life of your church with His Spirit that your community notices a difference. Ask Him to equip you for the role He has called you to play in His plan of redemption.*

Part II: Living as the Church

Lesson 6: The Global Church

As important as the local church is, God's plan extends way beyond your town. As much as God wants you to reach the people in your community, He has no intention of stopping there. God's plan of redemption reaches into your neighborhood—and to every other city, village, and jungle around the globe!

If your church bands together and reaches out to every individual in your community, you are still not done with God's mission. No matter how big of a revival you experience, your area is still only a small part of the world that God has sent us to transform through His gospel. Until our vision of the church encompasses the entire globe, we do not have an accurate view of God's church or His plan of redemption.

All the Families of the Earth

Let's go back to the very beginning. As soon as God's good world became corrupted by the sin of Adam and Eve, God made a promise to restore it. God told the serpent:

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. (Gen. 3:15)

The devastating influence of sin would affect all of mankind, and the struggle for redemption would be between the offspring of the woman and the offspring of the serpent. Ultimately, this promise became a reality in the person of Jesus Christ, who crushed Satan's head by dying on the cross and rising from the grave. But it is also important to see that this promise belongs to the human race. It is not confined to any ethnic group or geographical location. The promise of redemption is as broad as humanity.

God reiterated this promise to Abraham:

I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. (Gen. 12:2–3)

The blessing that God promised here worked itself out through Abraham’s descendants: the people of Israel. Ultimately, the blessing centered upon one Israelite in particular, Jesus of Nazareth. But we have to remember that although the promise came *through* one nation, the blessing has always been intended for all nations.

God has called your church to play a role in His plan of redemption. And since His plan is a global plan, your church needs to think beyond your city limits. You can’t be everywhere at once, and your resources and manpower are limited. But in order to be a part of God’s mission on earth, you need to think in global terms.

Q1 *In your own words, why is it important to think about God’s plan of redemption in global terms?*

Q2 *When you think about the mission of your church, does the rest of the globe factor in at all? How so?*

Where Christ Has Not Been Named

When you study the New Testament, you will look at Paul’s missionary career. Though we may think of Paul as a theologian or a pastor, he was a missionary in every sense of the word. Much of the book of Acts follows Paul as he travelled—often amid great danger, difficulty, and persecution—from place to place, proclaiming the gospel and forming churches among those who responded by following Jesus.

It wasn’t an accident that Paul spent so much of his life spreading the gospel to new areas. In Romans 15:20–21, Paul explained that this was his passion:

I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else's foundation, but as it is written,

“Those who have never been told of him will see,
and those who have never heard will understand.”

When Paul said “as it is written,” he was quoting Isaiah 52, which describes Jesus as the servant of the Lord who would suffer in order to bring healing to His people. Earlier in the chapter, God clearly explained that although He was speaking directly to Israel, His salvation is for all of the nations, and He would specifically send ministers to spread this good news:

How beautiful upon the mountains
are the feet of him who brings good news,
who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness,
who publishes salvation,
who says to Zion, “Your God reigns.”
... The LORD has bared his holy arm
before the eyes of all the nations,
and all the ends of the earth shall see
the salvation of our God. (Isa. 52:7, 10)

Interestingly, Paul cited the beginning of this passage earlier in the book of Romans. Paul made clear not only that salvation is offered to all mankind but also that we are called to take an active role in spreading the gospel:

There is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!” (Rom. 10:12–15)

So what does this all mean? God's plan of redemption belongs to all of humanity, yet only those who have heard the message are able to respond to it. Paul's ambition in life was to take this message of redemption and bring it to those who had never heard.

Keep in mind that Paul's passion to spread the gospel more broadly was not a personal preference. It was an essential part of the mission that Jesus gave to the church. Remember that Christ commanded us to make disciples among all nations. We misunderstand God's plan of redemption unless we see it reaching to all humanity.

Q3 *Take some time to think about the passages above (Romans 15:20–21, Isaiah 52:7–10, Romans 10:12–15). How should these truths affect the way we think about our calling?*

Before the End Will Come

This world will not end until God's plan is accomplished. God sends His people out into the world to embody and to proclaim His healing, and He will not wrap up human history until this has been accomplished. If His plan has always been about redeeming people from every nation on earth, then He is not content with happy, healthy churches in our communities alone—and we shouldn't be either. Though we should long to see Christ glorified in our immediate context, we should share Paul's passion to see Him glorified in every corner of the globe.

Though the details surrounding the end of the earth and the timeframe of many of the prophecies in the Bible are the subject of frequent debate, Jesus made clear that the message of the gospel should not be isolated to one part of the globe: "This gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come" (Matt. 24:14).

Many Christians are surprised to hear that there are still many groups of people around the world that have never heard the name of Jesus. We take it for granted that the people around us have access to the gospel if they ever develop an interest. Even if there's not a church or a Christian in close proximity (though this is difficult to imagine), at the very least everyone has

access to gospel messages on the television, radio, or Internet. But that is simply not the case worldwide. There are people around the world who desperately need hope, healing, and salvation, but who don't have access to the message of redemption.

Paul's questions are as relevant today as they were two thousand years ago: How will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in Him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent?

These questions should burn in our minds and in our hearts. We are not following Jesus fully if we are not concerned about proclaiming the "gospel of the kingdom ... throughout the whole world" (Matt. 24:14). This is what Jesus did while He was on earth. And now, through the power of His death and resurrection, Jesus calls us to do the same.

Q4 *Have you given much thought to the unreached people groups around the world? If so, how does this affect your thinking and lifestyle? If not, why do you think you have never thought about it?*

Working Together for the Gospel

Once we start developing a passion for Christ's glory to be seen around the world, we need to figure out what role we are called to play. Make no mistake, every Christian is called to be involved in spreading the gospel around the world! No one is off the hook. No one is called to a life that is separate from global missions. But this doesn't mean that we all need to immediately start packing for the jungle.

God may well want you to take His gospel overseas. Too many Christians discount that possibility too quickly. Some people are too comfortable with their current lifestyle and would never dream of sacrificing their comfort for God's glory. Others quickly assume that they are called to something else, something more normal. We shouldn't make these assumptions. Have you ever genuinely told God that you would submit yourself to His will in this area? Right now, you should ask God if He wants you to pursue living in a different location for the sake of the

gospel. It may be a terrifying thought, but we have to trust God more than we trust ourselves. We are here on this earth for His glory. God has blessed you so that you will use whatever He has given you for His glory, not yours. Ultimately, we should expect God's plan to lead us places that we wouldn't naturally go.

Q5 *Take a minute to pause and ask God what He wants for your life. Ask Him to break through any excuses you may be hiding behind and idols you might be clinging to. Ask Him to make you willing to follow Him in whichever direction He might lead. If you have any thoughts based on this time of prayer, make a few notes below.*

We all need to consider whether God is calling us to follow Him onto the mission field, but we have to remember that this is not the only way of working to fulfill God's plan to reach every nation. If we decide that God wants us to remain in the area in which He has placed us for the time being, then we need to be using our resources to further the mission around the world. Even if we find our primary ministry in the people directly surrounding us, we need to be praying for our fellow workers in other parts of the earth. The church is spread across the world, and we need to be doing everything in our power to reach people in every corner of the globe.

John wrote a letter to a Christian man named Gaius who had been helping missionaries as they travelled to spread the gospel more broadly. His words put our role in supporting missionaries around the world in perspective:

It is a faithful thing you do in all your efforts for these brothers, strangers as they are, who testified to your love before the church. You will do well to send them on their journey in a manner worthy of God. For they have gone out for the sake of the name, accepting nothing from the Gentiles. Therefore we ought to support people like these, that we may be fellow workers for the truth. (3 John v. 5–8)

John said that “we ought to support people like these” (i.e., missionaries), and that in supporting them we are actually “fellow workers for the truth.” None of us is beyond the task of missions. We are all in this together. We all have a part to play. We may never set foot in a remote jungle,

but our lives should be devoted to seeing God's will be done in our neighborhoods and in Africa and Papua New Guinea. When we take up the call to follow Jesus, we are committing to making disciples in our hometowns and in the Middle East. The question is not whether or not we will be working to spread the gospel around the world, but what role we will play in this. A church that is not devoted to the cause of Christ around the world is not a church in the biblical sense.

Q6 *How would you describe your role in furthering the gospel around the world? If nothing comes to mind, write down a few things that you can begin to pursue in order to make missions a part of your life.*

A Vision of the End

God tells us that history is moving toward a specific and glorious end. God promised Abraham that through him all the nations of the earth would be blessed. This is what God's plan of redemption has been about from the very beginning. And when we look ahead to the end of the story, we see that God's promise to Abraham will be fulfilled. There is no doubt about whether or not the church will fulfill its mission; we know for certain that this is how the world will end.

John was actually allowed to see the fulfillment of this promise that God made to Abraham:

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" (Rev. 7:9–10)

This is where we are headed. As distant and unfamiliar as the churches in India, Africa, China, and Papua New Guinea may seem, our future is inextricably tied to theirs. When Jesus returns to reclaim this world as its rightful King, we will find ourselves praising God alongside Christians from every age and from every nation on earth.

God's plan for our future ought to affect the way we live and think today. Does the church in China matter to you? When you hear about the persecution that Christians are enduring in other parts of the world, do you feel any compassion for them? When you hear about a mission

setting off for Iraq or Thailand, do you make plans to pray for them or support them financially? These are our brothers and sisters. Their mission is the same as ours. They are working together with us toward the same goal. We cannot fulfill the mission that God has given us without them.

Jesus called His followers to be His witnesses “in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8). We have not yet reached the end of the earth, but through the power of God’s Spirit, we will. As followers of Jesus Christ, our calling is to faithfully make disciples. These disciples are also called to make disciples. Jesus promises that He will be with us as we do this, right down to the very end (Matt. 28:20). We don’t know when that end will come, but we want to be faithful in making disciples until that time comes. We are God’s creations, living in God’s earth, placed within God’s plan of redemption. May our lives be devoted to His kingdom and His glory.

Q7 *In order to faithfully follow Jesus and play your part in God’s plan of redemption, what should your life look like right now? (This is a huge question, but try to write down a few things to guide you as you seek to put the things you’ve learned into practice.)*

Q8 *Spend some time in prayer. Ask God to help you submit to Him entirely. Ask Him to guide you and empower you in anything He calls you to do. Pray that God would use you in your neighborhood and around the world in any capacity that He sees fit.*

Part III - How to Study the Bible

Lesson 7: Why Study the Bible?

As we have said, an important part of making disciples is teaching people to obey everything Jesus commanded (Matt. 28:20). This means that we need to know Jesus's teaching and commands. It may seem that the first disciples had an advantage on us here. How can we teach people to follow Jesus if we haven't observed His ministry and listened to His teaching? But we are not at a disadvantage at all because God has recorded His words and the testimony of Jesus's followers in a book—the Bible.

For a Christian, nothing should seem more natural than reading the Bible. Peter, one of Jesus's first disciples, compared it to a baby's natural craving for milk: "Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation—if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good" (1 Pet. 2:2–3).

As a newborn depends on milk to survive and to grow, we should equally depend on the words of Scripture for our spiritual survival and growth. The words of the Bible have impacted millions of lives over thousands of years, and God wants it to change our lives as well. If you don't already love the Bible, pray that you would.

No matter what your experience with the Bible has been, it's helpful for all of us to step back and think about what the Bible actually is. When we talk about the Bible, we sometimes use profound language without considering what we're really saying. Perhaps the strongest thing we can say about the Bible is that it is the "Word of God." But have you ever thought about what that means? That concept should blow our minds. When we talk about the Bible, we're actually talking about something that the all-powerful, all-knowing, transcendent God decided to write to us! What could be more important?

Think of how you would respond to hearing a voice from heaven speaking directly to you. We should approach the Bible with the same reverence.

If we really believe that the Bible is the Word of God, then it should be much more than a book that we are familiar with. It ought to shape every aspect of our existence. It should guide the decisions we make in life. If God is the designer and creator of this world, if He made us and placed us on this earth, and if He has taken the time to tell us who He is, who we are, and how this world operates, then what could be more important to us than the Bible?

But even after we decide that the Bible is important, we still need to learn to approach it in the right way and with the right motives. Many Christians misuse the Bible because they never ask themselves *why* they are studying it in the first place. The purpose of this session is to help you think through the nature of the Bible, why it is important to study, and how it should transform our lives.

Studying the Right Book for the Wrong Reasons

Before you go any further, ask yourself why you study the Bible. Don't be overly optimistic with this; try to assess your heart. When you pick up the Bible and begin to read it, what is motivating you? Are you driven by guilt? Do you have a desire to know God more fully? Are you looking for arguments against other perspectives? Are you looking for material for a Bible study or sermon?

Q1 *Take a few minutes to examine your motivations and write down a few thoughts below.*

The fact of the matter is that most Christians study the Bible for the wrong reasons. Here we will explore three motivations for studying the Bible that we need to move beyond: guilt, status, and teaching material.

Guilt

Many people are motivated by guilt. We all know that we should be reading our Bibles—it's just one of those things that Christians are told they are supposed to do. It is often added to a list with things like church attendance, tithing, and not swearing. Nobody wants to admit that they read the Bible out of guilt, but guilt is a powerful motivator.

Very often this guilt is connected with legalism. We create our own standard (“I must read x chapters per day”) and then hold ourselves to it, never stopping to consider that God has not placed this standard on us, we have placed it on ourselves. It doesn’t take long before we begin holding other people to that standard as well. And thus a culture of guilt is formed, a culture where “good Christians” read their Bibles because they’re afraid not to, and “bad Christians” feel guilty about not meeting their Bible-reading quota.

Status

There is a certain status or air of respect reserved for those who know their Bibles well. And rightly so. We should all aspire to know God’s Word inside and out. It should be on the tip of our tongues and deeply ingrained on our hearts and minds.

But take a minute to ask yourself why you want to know the Bible well. God is pleased when we treasure His Word, but do you really think He is pleased with your desire to appear intelligent? Does your desire to be the “go-to guy” who is never stumped really bring Him glory? What about your desire to be recognized as the best or the most spiritual person in the room?

It’s not about studying the Bible too much (as if that were possible); it’s about your motivation. Too often Christians are motivated by status when we should be motivated by a desire to know God, to be changed by His Word, and to love and serve the people around us.

Chances are, you know someone who knows the Bible inside and out. Maybe you’ve noticed how that person gets treated, and you want what he or she has. Competition is a great motivator, but it’s the wrong reason to study the Bible. God cares more about your character than your productivity, and let’s face it, studying the Bible in order to be better than someone else is ridiculous.

Teaching Material

Sometimes our motivations get skewed when we have to study the Bible in order to lead a Bible study, preach a sermon, or just have some sort of scriptural gem to share with someone. This tends to be a much more subtle misuse of the Bible. It’s not wrong to use the Bible in preparation for teaching other people. In fact, it’s necessary. The problem arises when we begin to approach the Bible *only* as a source for teaching material. If you are in a role where you

preach or teach to others, do you find yourself simply scanning the Bible for nuggets to share? Or do you soak in the Scriptures because of what they have to say to *you*, listening to what God wants to teach *you*, allowing the Bible to transform *you* in unexpected ways?

Q2 *Take a minute to think about your past experience with studying the Bible. Which of the wrong motivations listed above are you guilty of? Can you think of any others?*

Why Did God Give Us the Bible?

The best place to begin in refining our motivation for studying the Bible is to ask a simple question. Why did God give us the Bible? We're used to the thought that the Bible is God's Word. But why did He give it us? If the Bible is God's Word, why did God decide to speak to us in the first place? Until we understand what the purpose of the Bible is, we are bound to keep approaching it in ways that miss God's intention.

To Teach Us about Himself

So why did God give us the Bible? One reason that seems obvious is that He wanted to describe Himself to us. From beginning to end, God is the subject of the Scriptures. Everything in this book is God centered. Genesis begins with a God who existed alone and then spoke all things into existence. Revelation ends with this same God reigning eternally over all that He created. Every book in between reveals His character and attributes by narrating His sovereign actions throughout history.

God in heaven wants us to know certain things about Himself, and He uses the Scriptures to reveal these things. People naturally want to believe in a human-centered world, so God gave us the Bible, which shows that everything revolves around God. He is the First and the Last, the King of kings, and Lord of lords. He is described as "holy," which speaks to the massive disparity between God and people. It is important to God that we understand this.

It is through the Bible that we learn about God's power, justice, mercy, wrath, love, kindness, anger, faithfulness, jealousy, holiness, compassion, etc. Because God is already described in the Bible, we are left with no room to formulate our own opinions. We should all study in order to

understand God better. We search diligently to know the truth about God and to rid ourselves of any misconceptions we hold about Him.

To Teach Us about Ourselves & the World We Live In

God also gave us the Bible so that we can understand the world we live in. It is a grand narrative that explains where we came from, why the world is the way it is, and where everything is headed. It explains who we are as human beings and how we should think about our existence.

Many Christians think that the Bible is helpful for answering religious questions and teaching us how to live godly lives, but it doesn't have answers for the tough questions that we face in philosophy, science, or sociology. This is not true! The Bible gives us answers to all of life's most important questions. The Bible gives us much more than "religious truths"; it accurately explains the world we live in. The God who wrote the Bible is the God who designed this world. Since this is His world, it only makes sense to view the world from His perspective and live according to His principles.

All of this means that as we study the Bible, we should be seeking to understand our God, our world, and ourselves. Rather than pursuing an emotional experience or trying to accumulate religious knowledge, we should be learning to live in the world that God made.

To Enable Us to Live Godly Lives

Another reason that God gave us the Bible is to enable us to live godly lives. Peter said that God's "divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence" (2 Pet. 1:3). Simply put, through the knowledge of God we gain everything we need for living godly lives. Whatever motivations we may have for studying the Bible, godly living needs to be near the top of that list. We study because we want to be godly.

Paul said that "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, *that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work*" (2 Tim. 3:16–17). First, Paul said that Scripture is literally "breathed out" by God. Though He used human authors to write each book of the Bible, God Himself is the

ultimate source of these words. But notice the purpose statement that Paul included: “that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.” So why did God give us the Bible? He gave it to us *so that* we would be complete, mature people who are equipped and ready to do anything God asks us to do.

This means that as we study the Bible, we should be looking to change. Hebrews 4:12 warns us that “the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” Though we primarily think of the Bible as something we read in order to gain knowledge, we actually have it backward. The Bible reads us—it penetrates to our core and exposes who we really are. If you ever find yourself reading your Bible and not changing, then you can be sure that you’re approaching the Bible in the wrong way. It’s not about finding support for our lifestyle or way of thinking; it’s about approaching the mind of God and letting Him change and redefine who we are.

To Facilitate a Relationship with God

God wants you to know Him, and He gave you the Scriptures so that you can. Every relationship requires communication—the loving expression of each person’s thoughts, emotions, concerns, and dreams that strengthens the relationship and deepens intimacy. This is how our relationships with one another function, so why would it be any different with God? The Bible is His means of sharing His thoughts and desires with us! We are relational beings because He created us that way. He Himself exhibits pure relationship in the perfect union and love between the members of the Trinity. From the day He placed Adam in the garden, God has maintained a relationship with mankind, and communication has always been central to that relationship.

When we open the Bible, therefore, we are engaging with God’s communication to us. He chose specific words to say to specific people at specific times. He chose sixty-six books to preserve for us so that we could know Him better. Though different parts of the Bible are addressed to different people, everything in the Bible is ultimately written for our benefit. If the Bible is indeed “breathed out by God”—words delivered from the mouth of God Himself—then reading the Bible is listening to the voice of God.

Every time we read the Bible we are strengthening our relationship with God—unless we approach the Bible for the wrong reasons. If we approach the Bible with humility, eagerly listening for God to speak to us, waiting to hear what God has to say rather than what we want to hear, then we are drawing closer to the one we were made to be in relationship with. True Bible study must always have intimacy with God as a primary goal.

To Exalt Jesus

God uses the Scriptures to explain how and why He has exalted Jesus to the highest place. All of the events in biblical history point to His Son. The law was given to show us our sinfulness and our need for Jesus. Old Testament priests and sacrifices point to our need for the greater high priest and ultimate sacrifice. The Gospels record the loving words and actions of the Son of God. The epistles explain how it is only through His work on the cross that we can be saved from sin and filled with the Spirit. Revelation shows how He will one day return to judge and restore the earth, and reign with His followers forever. All of this is written to exalt Jesus to the glory of God the Father. These words should move us to exalt Jesus in our everyday lives.

To Prepare Us for Our God-Given Mission

From the very beginning, God has had a mission for humanity. After God finished creating the world and everything in it, He created the first man and placed him in the garden “to work it and keep it” (Gen. 2:15). God also gave humanity dominion over the creation. Whatever it means for people to have “dominion” over the creation, it does not mean that we have the right to destroy the creation in any way that serves our purpose. Instead, if humanity’s dominion is to look anything like God’s dominion, then our responsibility is to lovingly care for the world that God made. From the moment Adam was created by God, people have had a mission on this earth.

God chose Abraham to be the father of the nation of Israel. God blessed Abraham, promised to make him into a great nation, and said, “in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen. 12:3). When we think about the nation of Israel, we often think that God chose them so that they could be separated from the rest of the world, enjoying God’s blessings and living their lives as God’s “favorites.” But from the moment He chose Abraham, God made it clear that Abraham was to look outward with the blessings he had been given. Abraham was blessed so

that he could be a blessing to all of the nations of the earth. Israel's mission was to show the world who their God was.

In the New Testament, the mission of God's people becomes even clearer. We are not on this earth merely to enjoy our own personal relationships with God. We are here to be God's servants, His ambassadors: "Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God" (2 Cor. 5:20).

Though much of Christian thought tells us that we are the center of it all—that it's all about you and God and nothing else really matters—the reality is that God is the center, and He has saved us so that we can work with Him in His mission to redeem humanity and restore creation to what He originally intended it to be.

This means that when we read the Bible, we need to view it as our marching orders. Rather than coming to the Bible with our own agenda and trying to find verses that support what we'd like to do, we need to allow the Bible to shape our hopes and dreams. Every time we read the Bible, we should understand our mission a little better. Why are we on this earth in the first place? How can we take part in what God is doing in this world? These are all questions that the Bible answers—as long as we are ready to listen.

Q3 *Take a minute to think through why God gave us the Bible. How should these things affect the way you think about studying the Bible?*

Approaching the Mind of God

Ultimately, when we read the Bible, we are approaching the mind of God. Every time you open the Bible, you ought to prepare yourself for an encounter with the Creator of the universe. So how do you prepare yourself for this type of encounter?

It should go without saying that we ought to approach God with humility. We know that we ought to be humble with other people and with God, but we don't usually think of being humble with the Bible. We make this mistake because we don't think about what it is that we're doing when we read our Bibles. Reading your Bible with humility means that you're assuming the role of a

student. Too often we search the Bible to find agreement with the views we already hold. This is backward. Instead, we need to recognize that we know nothing.

We don't have the answers—that's why we're reading the Bible.

Approaching the Bible with humility means that we're laying aside our agendas and looking for what God will teach us. Every time you find yourself struggling to accept something the Bible says, you've found an area of your life that needs to be brought into submission to Christ. Unfortunately, we often waste these opportunities by finding ways to explain away what the Bible is saying to us.

And that's the real test—when you find that your beliefs or lifestyle don't match the Bible, do you assume that the Bible is wrong? Every time we find ourselves disagreeing with God, we can be certain that we are the ones who need to change. God didn't give us the Bible to help us feel better about the way we do things; He wrote the Bible to tell us what He wants us to be and do. Until we begin reading the Bible in order to draw close to God and do what He says, we are completely missing the point.

Q4 *How do you tend to respond to the Bible's teaching? Would you say that you approach it humbly with a desire to change? How do you need to adjust your approach to studying the Bible?*

Right Motivation Makes All the Difference

In 1 Corinthians 8, Paul talked about food offered to idols. The pagan religions at that time would offer meat to their idols. After the ceremony, they would take the meat (obviously the idols didn't eat it) and sell it in the marketplace at a reduced price. Understandably, some Christians who had converted from paganism had a problem with eating this meat because they felt as if they were participating in idolatry by doing so. Other Christians rightly understood that these idols were nothing, and they could eat that meat with a clear conscience.

The problem came, however, when these Christians began to use their knowledge to push their brothers and sisters to act against their consciences. In addressing that issue, Paul said these

profound words: “Now concerning food offered to idols: we know that ‘all of us possess knowledge.’ This ‘knowledge’ puffs up, but love builds up” (1 Cor. 8:1).

Paul’s warning serves as a great case in point for what happens when we study the Bible with the wrong motives. When we study the Bible in order to gain more knowledge, to look more intelligent, to prove a point to someone else, or to convince other people that they should think and act just as we do, then we are studying the Bible with wrong motives. And what is the fruit of this type of study? We become “puffed up.” Ironically—tragically—the act of studying the Bible has produced some of the most arrogant people this world has ever seen. Chances are, you know one or two of these people.

Q5 *Rather than thinking about all of the arrogant people you know, take a minute to consider whether or not your efforts in studying the Bible have simply puffed you up. How has studying the Bible changed you? Are you more arrogant, argumentative, or judgmental? Write down a few thoughts below:*

Clearly, this is not the way God wants us to study the Bible. Instead, reading God’s Word should lead us to become more like God. As Paul said, knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. When we come to the Bible without an agenda, looking for the ways in which God wants to teach us and change us, then we will walk away more like the people that God desires us to be.

Remember Peter’s exhortation: “So put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander. Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation” (1 Pet. 2:1–2). We should set aside every ungodly desire and inclination and simply long to be fed and nourished by the Word of God. It’s a very simple concept that brings life-changing results. Imagine how different you would be if you aligned your thinking and lifestyle with the Bible. Rather than becoming arrogant, you would love God more; you would be in tune with your God-given mission; you would see people not as means to your own ends but as valuable creations of God, and you would find ways to love and serve the people around you.

Q6 *Take a minute to meditate on 1 Peter 2:1–2. What would your life look like if you desired the Word as Peter described?*

Before You Move On

To sum it all up, the right way to approach the Bible is to first let go of everything that we want and expect, and to let God tell us exactly what to think and what to do. Of course, this is contrary to our natural tendencies, so we need God to work in our hearts to remove our poor motivations and give us a pure longing for His Word. In the next sessions, we will talk about methods for studying the Bible carefully. But before you develop skills in studying the Bible, it's absolutely essential that you work through your motivation for studying in the first place. Unless your heart is right, you will misuse the Bible, no matter how skilled you are at studying it carefully.

Q7 *Close this session by praying. Ask God to purify your heart with regard to Scripture. Ask Him to produce in you a longing for the pure milk of the Word.*

Part III - How to Study the Bible

Lesson 8: Studying the Bible Prayerfully and Obediently

Is there a “right” way to study the Bible?

We will probably all agree that studying the Bible is critical, but we may not agree on the best method of study. There is no universally accepted pattern for how Christians should interact with this book. Some approach the Bible as a textbook or rulebook that gives them direction for how to live their lives. Others gravitate toward the stories and characters in the Bible as an inspiration or model for living a godly life. Still others take a more mystical approach: let it fall open to any page and you will find some spiritual encouragement or guidance to help you through the day. And then there’s the academic approach, which carefully examines each passage of Scripture to determine precisely what the original authors intended to say.

Most of us cycle through each of these approaches and several others in our attempt to get the most out of the Bible. We know that we need the Bible, but we sometimes struggle in our quest to get the most out of our reading.

Q1 *Describe your experience with studying the Bible. What approaches have you tried? What has been effective? What has been ineffective? What have you learned in the process?*

Studying the Bible Devotionally

Before we decide on the best approach to studying the Bible, let’s not forget what the Bible is: God’s Word. It is His words to us, so we should be mindful of His authority as He conveys His purpose and will to us. When we read the Bible we are hearing the voice of God.

So how should we read a book that carries the same weight as the audible voice of God coming down from heaven? Obviously, we should read the Bible carefully, paying close attention to what exactly God is saying—a concept we will explore in the next session. In this session, we will focus on another important point: we should read these words devotionally. In other words, we

should be “devoted” to them. When God speaks to us, we should be quick to listen, eager to absorb everything He tells us. And we should enjoy the process.

Have you ever thought to simply *enjoy reading the Bible*? We often get so caught up in the busyness of our lives or the details of the biblical text that we forget that we should be thrilled. We are hearing God’s words to us!

If you want to get a feel for what it means to enjoy the Bible, then read Psalm 119. It’s basically a love letter written to God’s Word. Two things are particularly striking about this psalm: (1) The psalmist had a lot to say about God’s Word (it’s 176 verses long!), and (2) he really, really liked it. The repeated refrain is that he *delights* in God’s law, statutes, precepts, commandments, etc. At one point (vs. 131) he even said, “I open my mouth and pant, because I long for your commandments.” That’s a serious desire!

Recall once again Peter’s exhortation to long for the Word of God as a baby longs for its mother’s milk (1 Pet. 2:2–3). If these statements reflect the attitude a Christian should have toward the Bible, then it’s safe to say that all of us are falling very short.

We should approach the Bible with the same intensity, aware of the fact that we are reading God’s words, and that His words are directed to us. God has given us the Bible to use in discipling, counseling, teaching, and encouraging the people around us (see 2 Tim. 3:16–17). But whatever else we do with the Bible, we cannot fail to read the Bible devotionally. As we study the Bible to teach, correct, or encourage other people, we need to let God’s truths saturate every aspect of our minds, hearts, and lifestyles.

Q2 *What does it look like to take joy in reading the Bible? Have you ever experienced this? If so, what is it like? If not, why do you think you’ve never enjoyed the Bible?*

Q3 *Read through Psalm 119. What do you find striking, challenging, or encouraging?*

Prayer and Understanding

Christians often talk about praying *and* reading their Bibles, but we don't hear much about praying *while* reading the Bible. While many Christians will acknowledge that prayer is an important part of understanding Scripture, not many of us have done a good job of actually putting this into practice.

Some believe that if we examine the biblical text closely enough—possibly even learning Hebrew and Greek—if we consult enough commentaries, and if we diagram every passage perfectly, then we can arrive at the true meaning of any biblical text. Each of these elements is important, but this mentality leaves no room for prayer, which means that there is no dependence on the Holy Spirit. It is a mentality of complete self-reliance.

Paul's description of the difference between human wisdom and the wisdom of God is worth quoting at length:

As it is written,

“What no eye has seen, nor ear heard,

nor the heart of man imagined,

what God has prepared for those who love him”—

these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual.

The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. (1 Cor. 2:9–14)

Make sure you understand the point of that passage: you *cannot* understand the Bible without the Holy Spirit's help.

Dependence on God in our thinking is a fundamental aspect of being human—and was even before the fall. When Adam and Eve were in the garden of Eden, they needed God to tell them what to do. This is huge! Even before sin entered the world, people needed revelation from God in order to understand the world they were living in. Part of what it means to be human is that we depend on revelation from God in order to understand our existence. And this dependency only intensified after the fall.

As a result of the fall, people are corrupt not only in their actions, but also in their minds (Rom. 1:21). That means we naturally stray from God morally (a concept we're all pretty familiar with), but in addition to that, our minds are tainted by sin. We no longer think the way we ought to think. This intensifies our dependence on the Spirit of God to help us see God's truth as it really is, not as we'd like it to be.

And this is exactly Paul's point: we simply cannot understand spiritual truths apart from the Spirit of God. Without the Spirit, we will look at God's revelation in nature and in the Bible and misinterpret it.

This is why prayer is absolutely essential to Bible study. It's not a symbolic gesture; it's not a formality: it is foundational to understanding the mind of God. If the Bible is God's Word, then understanding the Bible means understanding the mind of God (not fully, of course, but insofar as He has revealed His mind to us). And Paul said explicitly that the only way we can understand the mind of God is through the Spirit of God.

If our Bible study is not saturated in prayer, then we are not studying the Bible the way God intends. The Scriptures are full of the wisdom of God, and we are absolutely dependent on the Spirit to reveal that wisdom to us and establish it in our lives.

Q4 *In practical terms, what does it mean to study the Bible prayerfully? What can you do to build prayer and dependence on God into your study of the Bible?*

Studying the Bible Obediently

Perhaps the strongest reason for saturating our Bible study in prayer is that we desperately need the Spirit to make our lives align with the truths we are studying. We don't need statistics to convince us that churchgoers tend toward hypocrisy. We all know people who are passionate about the truth but don't seem to understand the concept of practicing what they preach. What we need is the Spirit to keep us from becoming one of them.

What is the value of truth if it doesn't change us? Paul said it this way:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. (1 Cor. 13:1–2)

If you could amaze people with your ability to speak, if you understood everything and had more faith than anyone on earth, but you didn't love your neighbor as yourself, then what would be the point? This is why prayer is critical. We need Him to make us loving—to make our knowledge translate into loving action.

Too many Christians study the Word of God as if gaining knowledge is the sum total of our mission on this earth. But according to Paul, knowledge can be completely worthless and even harmful: knowledge puffs up, but love builds up (1 Cor. 8:1).

If we believe that statement, then why do we have so much admiration for people who know lots of facts? Have we forgotten that knowledge is a means to a greater end? Knowledge enables us to love God and love our neighbors more fully.

If we're not putting what we know to work in our lives, then our knowledge will simply make us more arrogant. There's a terrifying irony here: *your study of the Bible could actually lead you further away from the Lord.*

The problem definitely isn't solved by studying less. Instead, we should be learning everything we can and immediately applying it. We should be begging God to give us a deeper love for Him and others so we can take the truths He reveals and put them into practice. Very often, the

truths we learn will actually lead us to search for situations in which to apply them (such as caring for the poor or considering other people better than ourselves).

We can't afford to overlook this point. If you find yourself studying the Bible without applying what you're learning, then you're misusing the Bible. It's that simple—and that serious.

You may not consider yourself a biblical scholar, but think about all the things you do know about the Bible. The Bible is filled with God's commands, and you probably already know some of the things that He clearly wants you to do. Start there. Pray, obey, and begin enjoying the peace that comes from studying the Bible obediently.

Q5 *Take a minute to think through the commands that you know God wants us all to be doing (for example, loving the people around you, forgiving others, praying, etc.). Write down a handful of these things below.*

Now evaluate your life in light of these commands. If you find that the things you listed above aren't an active part of your life, then it's pretty evident that you need to change the way you study the Bible. If these things are not manifested in the way you live, then you're misusing the Bible. Putting our knowledge into practice will be a lifelong pursuit for all of us, and we rarely see dramatic, immediate results. But if you're not seeing the things you learn translating into the things you do, then something foundational is out of place.

Q6 *Take a minute to examine your life in light of what you already know about the Bible. If you find that you haven't been applying biblical truth to your life, then what changes do you need to make to the way you study the Bible?*

Studying the Bible with Faith

Something that is often overlooked when studying the Bible is the importance of faith. Once again, this goes back to the very nature of the Bible. If the Bible is indeed the very words of God, then those words carry the same authority and power as God Himself. Every promise is backed by a person—the promise is as trustworthy as the person who makes that promise.

When the Bible gives us a command, that command carries all the authority of God. Likewise, when the Bible makes a promise, that promise is as trustworthy as God.

One of the church's greatest handicaps is that Christians don't study the Bible with faith. We read the Bible, but we don't act as if we believe what it says. We read about judgment for those who deny Jesus, but it doesn't change the way we reach out to the people around us. This raises the question: Do we really believe (i.e., have faith) in what God has said? Another example is when we read of God's grace. The Bible is clear that God forgives (Eph. 2:1–9, 1 John 1:9), yet many of us walk around with doubts and insecurities based upon past actions. If we studied with faith, wouldn't we live with visible peace and joy?

If we are going to study the Bible as the very words of God, then we need to believe what it says. We need to study the Bible with absolute faith. When we read that God works all things according to the counsel of His will (Eph. 1:11), then we need to believe it and live as though it were true. When we read that the Holy Spirit empowers us to put to death the deeds of the body (Rom. 8:13), then we need to put our complete confidence in that truth and live as people who are empowered by the very Spirit of God.

Q7 *In your own words, explain what it means to study the Bible with faith. Do you see this playing out in your life? How so?*

The Bible and Transformation

Often people come out of study groups saying, "That was a good Bible study." But what do they actually mean by that? Does it mean that they learned something or felt convicted at points? Or do they say this because their lives actually changed? Good Bible study leads to transformation. It may not happen all at once, but we should be noticeably different because of our time with Scripture.

We've already looked briefly at Hebrews 4:12: "The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart." The Bible isn't merely an inanimate object that we study and pull information from. It has a life of its own. It acts. *It reads us*; it

pierces to the deepest parts of our being and discerns our motivations. Since our God is a living God, His Word is alive, and He works through His Word to actively transform every part of our being.

James used striking imagery to highlight our need to be transformed by the Bible:

But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing. (1:22–25)

James compared the process of studying the Bible to a man looking into a mirror. Just like a mirror, the Bible has the ability to reveal to you the truth about your condition. First, he described a man who looks into the mirror, clearly sees the reflection, and then walks away without doing anything. This person is clearly foolish, but he also perfectly represents the way most Christians study the Bible. They read their Bibles, see the truth that demands transformation, then walk away as if nothing ever happened.

James contrasted this fool with the person who looks into the mirror and does something about what he sees. This person reads the Word of God, takes what he sees at face value, and then acts on it. James is clear that this person is the one who will be blessed in what he does. There is no reward for merely hearing the truth. Bible study is incomplete and illegitimate until it turns into obedience and transforms us.

So again we have to ask the question: Why do you study the Bible? Is it because you want to be changed, or are you studying to gain knowledge?

James followed his powerful metaphor with these startling words:

If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world. (James 1:26–27)

Once again, he pointed out that there are going to be those who “deceive themselves.” Don’t be one of them. If you think you are a religious person, but don’t act on God’s truth, Scripture says your “religion” is worthless. Don’t kid yourself—true religion is not about what you know, it’s about putting what you know about God and His Word into practice.

God has been so gracious to speak to us. His words lead to life. They set us free! So much of God’s blessing comes to us as we listen to His voice and put His Word into practice. It would be a shame if we merely studied and didn’t allow these words to bless us as He intended.

Q8 *Take a minute to consider everything you’ve thought through in this session. What changes do you need to make in the way you study the Bible?*

Q9 *Spend some time in prayer. Ask God to give you a heart for His Word. Ask Him to help you approach His Word devotionally and obediently.*

Part III - How to Study the Bible

Lesson 9: Studying Logically

As we said in the previous session, an academic study of Scripture does not ensure a proper interpretation. If studying the Bible were all about academics, then our best bet would be to find the most intelligent person we know, and have him or her interpret it for us.

But while it's true that rigorous study does not guarantee right results, it does not mean that hard work and a logical approach to Scripture is insignificant. Not only is it helpful, it is necessary and commanded:

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth. (2 Tim. 2:15)

God calls you to “do your best.” Laziness is inexcusable. We are studying the very words that God chose to communicate to us, so in addition to studying prayerfully and obediently, we must study diligently. God calls us to love Him with our minds (Matt. 22:37), so it is an act of worship to use our minds to understand His thoughts, which in turn will lead us to love Him even more.

We tend to listen carefully when there are consequences for not listening. It's like misunderstanding driving directions and ending up lost and frustrated. How much more important is it to truly understand what God is telling you? As Christians, we claim to base our lives upon the teaching of the Bible. But what if we misunderstand that teaching?

The fact of the matter is that we all misunderstand certain passages of Scripture. If we all understood the Bible perfectly, we would all agree on every point of doctrine. Clearly this is not the case. There are many factors that lead us to misunderstand what the Bible is saying: our own assumptions, blindly following the views of people who have been influential in our lives, our sinful desire to do our own thing, etc. All of these factors are only intensified when we don't pay close attention to what the Bible is actually saying, rather than what we think it must be saying.

It is good for us to keep in mind some general principles for interpreting Scripture.

Consider the Context

Every text belongs to a context. Every chapter, paragraph, sentence, and word derives meaning from its relationship to the words, sentences, paragraphs, and chapters around it. This is true in reading ordinary books, and it is certainly true in reading the Bible.

Consider the simple word *ship*. We all know what the word means (and even if we didn't, we could easily find its definition in a dictionary). But *ship* means different things in different contexts. How do you decide whether *ship* is referring to a large boat or to the process of sending something? You look at the context. This isn't a complicated process, but it is absolutely essential in determining the meaning of the word.

We don't usually think about this because reading words in their context is second nature to us—it probably hasn't even occurred to you that you're thinking in terms of context right now, as you read these sentences. As you read, you are deciding what these words mean based on the words around them. When you run into an ambiguous word (like the word “read” in the last two sentences, which could be taken as past or present tense, depending on the context), you automatically choose the appropriate definition or tense based on the context.

The point of using these simple examples is to highlight an essential aspect of studying the Bible: in order to understand a particular word, verse, chapter, or book, we need to consider it in light of its context. Too often, verses are read and quoted in isolation. While this is not necessarily wrong, it greatly increases the chances of misinterpretation.

Here's a helpful way to get the point across: when studying Scripture, think apple rather than orange. Typically, when you eat an apple, you take a bite out of the whole fruit. When you eat an orange, you break it into isolated pieces and then eat the pieces individually. Whenever we read a verse, we should be mindful that we are taking a thought (a “bite”) from a larger story. Always keep in mind that every verse is connected to a chapter, a book, and the entire Bible.

One of the best things we can do to understand context is to read the Bible in its entirety. Some choose to do this every two years, others on a yearly basis, and others even more frequently. Whatever approach you take to reading the Bible, the more often you read it, the better you will understand the whole story.¹

Q1 *Think about the way you tend to study the Bible. Would you say that you make an effort to seek out what the Bible is actually saying? Do you pay attention to the context? If so, how has this helped you? If not, how do you think this might change the way you read the Bible?*

Know the Difference between Interpretation and Application

Maybe the most common mistake made in Bible interpretation is when people focus too much on “what this verse means *to me*.” It’s not uncommon for Bible study groups to go around the circle as each person shares an individualized interpretation. Often these interpretations are made with little study and are heavily influenced by opinion and desire. Many times, the various interpretations are incompatible with one another. In this type of setting, the focus is not on what God is saying through the Bible. Instead, each person is focused on what he or she thinks the verse means. Whether it’s clearly articulated or not, this approach reveals the assumption that the Bible has a personalized meaning for each Christian. It might mean one thing to me, but another thing to you.

I don’t want to completely disparage this approach. For one thing, many biblical passages have nuances of meaning, and you might notice something that others miss. In that sense, “going around the circle” can be a very helpful exercise. But this is not the same thing as saying that the Bible has a personalized meaning for each of us. Once we head down that road, there is no longer such a thing as “misinterpretation,” and people are free to make the Scripture say anything. It’s important to understand that the Bible means what God intends for it to mean. When we ask our children to wash the dishes, we have a clear message we want to get across, and we expect them to figure out what we mean by that statement. In the same way, God has a message to get across, and we all need to work together in order to examine God’s words and find out what He is really saying to us.

Sometimes when we talk about “what this passage means to me,” we are actually talking about application, rather than interpretation. With *interpretation*, we are asking what the passage is saying and what it means. With *application*, we are applying that meaning to our specific

situation. Ultimately, each passage has one meaning, but it might have many different applications.

For example, in Matthew 22:39, Jesus quoted Leviticus 19:18, which says, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” The meaning is pretty easy to grasp: we need to love the people whom God has placed around us. But how do we apply that truth to our lives? One person might apply it by helping a neighbor with her yard work, and another person might apply it by listening graciously to a coworker as he shares his concerns about his family. They might each apply the same truth to their lives in different ways tomorrow.

Application depends on our specific life situations, so we may all read the same passage and walk away with different applications. *Interpretation*, on the other hand, is all about discovering what God has actually said and what He intended to communicate. We should all read the same passage and walk away with the same meaning.

Q2 *In your own words, why is it important to distinguish between interpretation and application?*

Find the Plain Meaning

Sometimes our personal agendas or assumptions divert us from what God is saying in a biblical passage. For example, in Luke 12:33, Jesus said, “Sell your possessions, and give to the needy.” We will often read a verse like that and say, “Okay, obviously God is not asking me to *literally* sell my possessions and give to the needy. This passage must mean _____.” Really? Because it sure seems that Jesus is saying that these disciples should literally sell their possessions and give to the needy. In fact, looking at the context of Jesus’s teaching and ministry only strengthens the literal meaning of that passage. Based on the rest of the book of Luke, this is exactly the sort of thing that Jesus would call His followers to do.

The fact that Jesus called His disciples to sell some possessions at that moment in history does not necessarily mean that every Christian has to sell every possession at all times, but the point is that our own agendas can keep us from even considering such a thing. If Jesus called His

disciples to sell some of their stuff and use that money to meet the needs of the poor, shouldn't we be open to His calling us to do the same thing today?

We need to learn to take Scripture at face value. While some sections of the Bible are difficult to understand (2 Pet. 3:16), so much of the Bible is easily understood. When we read that "those who are in the flesh cannot please God" (Rom. 8:8), we will have to carefully study the verse and its context to decide what it means to be "in the flesh," but the plain meaning of the verse is clear: God does not want us to be in the flesh.

Other passages are more difficult. What happens when we read one of the many portions of the Old Testament that seem so distant? In Exodus 17, for example, Israel goes to war against Amalek. As Joshua lead the army in battle, Moses sat on top of a hill and kept his hands raised in the air. The Bible says, "Whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed, and whenever he lowered his hand, Amalek prevailed" (Ex. 17:11). This is a fascinating account, but how do we interpret it? We will probably all agree that the verse isn't telling us to go sit on a hilltop and hold our hands in the air. Should we be seeking a spiritual meaning that lies beneath the surface, then? Maybe the verse means that we must keep our hands and our hearts pointed toward heaven if we are going to defeat our spiritual enemies. While that may be true, there is no indication that this is what God is telling us through this passage.

If we are going to take this verse at face value, we will read it as a description of the unusual way in which God used Moses to lead Israel to victory in a historical battle over the Amalekites. Through that story we can gain insight into the power of God and His ability to save His people, but those insights do not change the clear meaning of what God recorded in Exodus 17. It might seem more "spiritual" to try to find some deeper meaning behind the text, but what could be more spiritual than simply taking God at His word?

The Bible is a fascinating book. It is the communication of the Creator of the universe to His people. God wrote the Bible using human language, in words that we understand and use every day. He chose to communicate through a book, and He obviously has the ability to communicate His message clearly.

If we say that we shouldn't take God's words at face value, that we need to discover some sort of hidden meaning beneath the plain meaning of the words of Scripture, then we are saying that

God is using human language in a way that is different from the way human beings use language. But we have absolutely no indication that this is the case. To the contrary, when God spoke to human beings in the Bible, they understood Him and acted according to the plain meaning of His words. When God told Israel to build a tabernacle, they didn't perform some sort of dance as a spiritual interpretation of His words. Instead, they took His words at face value and created a tabernacle in accordance with the plain meaning of God's words. Our approach to Scripture should be the same.

Q3 *In your own words, why is it important to look for the plain meaning of each passage rather than seeking out a deeper meaning?*

Q4 *Would you say that your study of the Bible is focused on finding the plain meaning of each passage? Why or why not?*

Take the Bible Literally

There is an old statement that is worth repeating here: if the literal sense makes sense, seek no other sense. We need to be careful with this, because we are still left to determine when the literal sense actually makes sense. But it makes an important point: we should look for the plain meaning of the words of Scripture. When we examine each word, verse, chapter, and book, we need to allow the context to suggest whether that verse should be taken as a literal statement, a rhetorical question, a figure of speech, etc.

Accepting the Bible as literal truth does not mean that we interpret every passage literally. When we read the Bible, we find many places where the author uses metaphors, parables, poems, prophecies, and other literary devices. For example, when Jesus said, "I am the door" (John 10:9), He was using a metaphor. We understand that He was not claiming to be made of wood and attached to a doorframe. Jesus was conveying literal truth, but using a figure of speech to do so.

But notice that this is not using any sort of strange spiritual or allegorical interpretation. We are following the normal usage of human language, which allows for metaphor, imagery, and other

rhetorical devices. So when we say that we need to take the Bible literally, we need to be careful to understand what we're really saying. What we mean is that we will take the Scriptures at face value, and when the context suggests that the author is using a figure of speech or some sort of poetic or prophetic imagery, then we will follow the normal rules of human language and interpret the passage accordingly.

Don't misunderstand—this isn't always a simple task. As an illustration, consider the fact that whole camps have formed over which portions of the book of Revelation should be read literally and which should be read figuratively. We will often disagree over which specific passages are speaking literally and which ones are using rhetorical devices. This means that we need to be gracious as we discuss the Bible. There is room for discussion and exploration—in fact, it glorifies God when we humbly and patiently examine the Bible together. The point is simply this: take God's words at face value and do what He tells you to do.

Q5 *Do you have a tendency to interpret the Bible allegorically or figuratively? If so, why do you think you tend to do this?*

Study the Grammatical Context

As we have seen, God used human language to write the Bible. He led human authors to use human words and human grammar in order to record His truth. So it only makes sense to pay attention to the grammar of the Bible. This doesn't mean that you need to be a grammatical expert to read the Bible (though God does give these people to the church to guide the rest of us), but we should pay attention to how the words in the Bible are being used.

The biblical authors often pay very close attention to grammar. To give one example, Paul made a significant theological point based on the use of a singular noun (rather than a plural) in Genesis 12:

Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, "And to offsprings," referring to many, but referring to one, "And to your offspring," who is Christ. (Gal. 3:16)

This doesn't mean that we will always find interpretive gems by examining the grammar, but when we come to difficult passages, we will want to ask questions like the following:

Who is doing the action here? (Find the subject)

What action is the actor performing? (Find the verb)

How are the actor and the action described? (Find the adjectives and adverbs)

Who or what is being acted upon? (Find the direct and indirect objects)

Most of the time, we do this sort of analysis automatically, without even thinking about what we're doing. (You just did it with the previous sentence, and now you're doing it again.) But when you encounter a passage that seems difficult, try breaking it down and examining what is really going on with each sentence. God's words are worth evaluating at this level.

Study the Historical Context

The historical setting of a passage will often shed light on what the passage means. Sometimes this will require outside resources, like a study Bible, Bible dictionary, or commentary. But many times the historical insights can be found in the Bible itself. For example, much of the Old Testament consists of detailed historical accounts. And many New Testament books give historical insights—particularly the Gospels and the book of Acts.

Consider just one example of how the historical setting can help us understand the Bible. Walk into any Christian bookstore and you will find decorative knick-knacks bearing Jeremiah 29:11: "For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope." People love it because they interpret it as God saying He will keep us from harm and bless us. But is that really what Jeremiah intended to communicate to us?

If we look at the historical context, we find that Jeremiah was writing to Jewish exiles in Babylon. They had gone into captivity as punishment for their lack of faithfulness to God. Jeremiah told them that they would be in captivity for seventy years, so they should settle in and seek to bless Babylon while they were there. And then comes Jeremiah 29:11. God promised that He did indeed have a plan for His people, and He would restore them to the land of Israel after their days of exile were over.

The historical context reveals that Jeremiah 29:11 is not a blank-check promise from God that nothing bad will ever happen to any of us today. We have much to learn from God's provision for Israel in the midst of their exile and punishment. We can even make observations about God's compassion in this story and trust that this same compassionate God will care for us today. But we would be misusing Scripture if we assumed that those words could be directly applied to every circumstance as a promise of prosperity. The historical context does not always affect the meaning of a passage, but we must always consider who the biblical authors were addressing and why.

Q6 *In your own words, explain why paying attention to the grammatical and historical context is important. How should these concepts shape your study of the Bible?*

Let Go of Your Baggage

As important as it is to pay attention to the context of the passages we read, the greatest danger in biblical interpretation comes from our own "baggage." For example, many Americans assume that Jesus is a white, blond-haired, blue-eyed capitalist who bleeds red, white, and blue. But that is simply not the case. We often assume that God wants us to be happy, healthy, and fulfilled because that's the message we get from everyone around us. But again, that's not the case. Read the Bible carefully and you'll see that God doesn't necessarily want those things for us, at least not in the way our culture defines and pursues them.

Life experiences can also taint the way we read the Bible. Those abandoned or abused by their fathers may struggle more to understand what the Bible says about our loving heavenly Father. Those who were raised with few rules and weak parents may have a hard time seeing the power and sovereignty of God. Our experiences have an impact on our desires, which in turn affect our interpretations.

When we read the Bible, we need to do everything we can to avoid making assumptions about what the Bible is saying. We need to let it speak for itself. We are all tainted by the commitments and assumptions of our culture. We also have been heavily affected by our life experiences, but the more we let go of our baggage and ask God to speak directly to us through His Word, the

more we will find God's truth transforming our minds and actions, and the better we will understand the mind of God.

Q7 *What would it mean for you to read the Bible with an awareness of your own baggage and a willingness to get rid of those assumptions for the sake of understanding God's truth more clearly?*

A Note on Application

Don't forget what you read in the session. Accurately interpreting the Bible is not the final step. The purpose of reading and interpreting the Bible is obedience and fellowship with God. If we interpret Scripture perfectly, yet fail to live in accordance with what we read, we are fooling ourselves (James 1:22). God has given us the precious gift of the Bible so that we will be transformed by its truth, becoming more like Him and growing in our love for Him.

Q8 *In light of what you have thought through in this session, how do you need to change your approach to reading and studying the Bible?*