

THIS IS US

Week Six | September 17, 2017 | The Value of Small Groups

PREPARATION

MONDAY THROUGH WEDNESDAY

Spend some time alone with God's Word reading through Ephesians 4:15-16, John 13:34-35, Hebrews 10:24-25, Matthew 22:34-40, and Luke 10:25-37. Pray that God, through His Spirit, would bring to life the truths of this text and allow you to teach it well to those in your care.

THURSDAY THROUGH SATURDAY

Read through the questions included in the guide this week. Many questions have been included in this week's guide. Read through this lesson to determine which questions will work best to encourage, push, and grow your group.

DAILY

As you prepare, pray for the preaching of God's Word this coming week at the corporate church gathering. Pray also for your time together as a group, that the Spirit would make effective your teaching and bring gospel clarity, gospel change, and a heart for gospel mission to those that are present.

THIS WEEK

KEY BIBLICAL REALITY

Committing to and consistently participating in a small group is a vital discipline for every believer.

THEOLOGY APPLIED

When we commit to meeting together often through a small group, we grow in Christ, connect in fellowship, serve the needs of others, and fulfill Scripture's call for biblical community.

MEDITATE

"And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near." (Hebrews 10:24-25)

GETTING STARTED

+ Use this section to prepare your heart and mind for the truths of this week. This section will help to introduce the focus of this week's lesson.

- ❓ *Can a football team function with only one player? Can your body operate with just one organ? Can a city hospital run with only one doctor? Why or why not?*
- ❓ *Share about a time in your life when participating in a small group impacted your walk with Christ.*
- ❓ *What does consistent isolation do to a person? How does this impact those who love the isolated person?*
- ❓ *Is gathering together in a smaller group only a Christian thing? What are some ways our culture breaks into sub-communities? What types of interests and activities tend to bring groups of people together?*

Most things in life can't function without multiple parts or members intentionally working together. For example, you can't play a football game with just the quarterback on the field. In order to play the game, all positions must be filled and working together. The same goes for the human body. You need all organs functioning properly and doing their job to stay healthy and alive. In the same way, a city hospital can't run with just one doctor. In order to help the sick and hurting, hospitals must bring together various departments and individuals to succeed. Everything from administrators, to technicians, to doctors, to nurses, to office managers, to cafeteria workers are all necessary to care for patients.

For any system to function well, all parts must be contributing and working properly. The same goes for a believer's relationship to the Church. Instead of viewing the Christian life as an isolated experience, the Bible tells us that we are part of a larger body. We are a team, and without each team member actively involved and contributing, the Church can't function properly. One way a believer can contribute to this team is through small group, an incredibly valuable gift and resource God has given our church. Gathering as a group of believers consistently is non-negotiable—it's the only way our Christian lives will run well and lead to growth! More than small group being something we "do," it's a part of our very identity. Being a group of committed believers who gather together often is part of who we are.

- Q: *Why do you think a Christian grows more in the context of small group than he or she would in isolation?*
- Q: *In what ways is a Christian small group different than other sub-communities of our culture?*

■ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

In this series thus far, we've learned various aspects of who we are as believers: a people defined by the gospel, a people of the Scriptures, a people committed to church planting, a people offered hope in brokenness, and a people committed to the vulnerable. Moving forward this week, we will learn another part of our identity: a people committed to small groups. Given that Scripture calls us to band together as a group instead of remaining isolated, we use small groups as a means to meet together often and obey God's design for our Christian maturity. Over time, as we commit ourselves to other believers in our church, we will see that God uses our small group involvement to help us:

1. GROW IN CHRIST
2. CONNECT IN FELLOWSHIP
3. SERVE THE NEEDS THE OTHERS

GOING DEEPER

+ *This next section will help show what God's Word says about this week's particular focus. Read through the Scripture passages and connect the text to this week's biblical truth.*

GROW IN CHRIST

■ EPHESIANS 4:15-16

- Q: *What analogy does Paul use for the church's experience of being connected to and becoming like Christ?*

Q: *Does a physical body come out of the womb fully developed? What must a baby's body do over time to become a mature adult? Why do you think Paul uses this idea of "growth" in his teaching?*

In Ephesians 4, as he does in other places in the New Testament, Paul uses the analogy of the physical body to help believers understand their place and purpose within the Church. Paul wants us to understand that we are not called to be isolated Christians, walking out our faith alone. But instead, we should be as intricately connected to other believers as each part of the body is to one another. An arm or leg can't survive on its own, disconnected from the rest of the body! The same goes for us. While most of us know that our goal as believers is to grow in our walk with Christ, we often forget that Paul doesn't say "you" or "I" are supposed to grow, but "we" (Eph. 4:15). He's speaking to a community of believers, not separated, isolated individuals. While each of us is certainly an individual part of the community, the growth Paul has in mind for us is something we experience together. And we can't experience this growth as a group unless we are regularly involved in a small group with other believers. There's no such thing as "growing up" in Christ without also "reaching out" to other believers around us. Paul says that growing in Christ is a "we" thing, not a "me" thing!

Q: *In these verses, what "makes the body grow"?*

Q: *Paul says that growth means building each other up in what? Explain how "speaking the truth in love" and "building one another up in love" have the same goal.*

Knowing that Christian growth is a joint-project we pursue alongside others, when we do come together, we may ask how we will know if our group is growing. Paul tells us in verse 16: "when each part is working properly." It's one thing to simply come to small group as a spectator or consumer. While this may still technically qualify as being "part" of the whole, it's an inoperative part! It's another thing entirely to come offering the specific gifts, callings, passions, and burdens God has placed in your life. Being an active participant in the group, who not only consumes, but serves, too, is being a fully functional, "working" part of the body. As each member of a small group comes together, all other members are served and taken care of, and the body grows over time! When we approach small group this way, we all grow together in our obedience and likeness to Christ.

Q: *Are there any obstacles currently holding you back from being a contributing, “working” part of the small group?*

CONNECT IN FELLOWSHIP

■ JOHN 13:34-35 AND HEBREWS 10:24-25

Q: *Why do you think Jesus calls this commandment “new”?*

Q: *What is the primary way the world can tell that we are the people of Christ? What about this surprises or encourages you? What about this challenges you?*

Since we know we are supposed to grow by participating in a small group “body” whose parts are working properly, we are left with a question. What makes the parts work properly? The answer is twofold: being connected to one another in both love and consistency. First, in John 13, we see that all our interactions with one another should be based in love. And this isn’t just any love. This is the kind of love that Jesus himself shows us. Jesus’ ultimate goal for his disciples isn’t just for them to be loved by him, but for them to love each other in the very same way he has loved them. Small groups give us a place where we can love others this way, connecting to one another in true loving fellowship as Jesus desires. To model our love after Jesus’ with those in our small group, we must ponder how exactly he loves us.

It is here where the famous “one another” passages throughout the New Testament help us. In these passages, God instructs us to engage with “one another” based on the way Christ practically loves us. We are to do a number of things: embody peace to one another, welcome each other, honor each other more than ourselves, pursue harmony with each other, instruct one another, show concern for each other, practically serve each other’s needs, carry each other’s burdens, bear one another’s shortcomings, show kindness to each other, forgive one another, consider one another’s interests, teach and admonish each other, encourage one another, pray for each other, use our resources and spiritual giftedness to build each other up, and show hospitality to one another, all like Christ did for us (Mk. 9:50, Jn. 13:34, Rom. 15:7, Eph. 4:32, Rom. 12:10, 16, 15:14, 1 Cor. 12:25, Gal. 5:13, 6:2, Eph. 4:2, 32, Phil. 2:3, Col. 3:16, 1 Thes. 4:18, 5:11, Heb. 3:13, James 5:16, 1 Pet. 4:9-10). These “one another” passages give us clear pictures of what it means on a practical level to love like Christ.

Q: *According to Hebrews 10:24-25, there are some who neglect something very important. What is it?*

Q: *What should we be doing when we “meet together”?*

When it comes to obeying the verses in John to “love one another” and all the “one another” passages throughout Scripture, there’s clearly no way to love others the way Jesus loves us if we aren’t relationally connected to other believers outside of big church events. We can’t possibly live out these “one another” commands if we don’t have others around us on a regular basis! Simply attending worship services and then leaving does not provide ample opportunity for us to do all these things.

This moves us to our second point: we must connect regularly with other believers, outside of “church time.” Consistency in our small group interaction is key if we have any hope of living out all these “one another” commands. This is why Hebrews tells us very clearly not to neglect meeting together often. Instead of making small group an optional part of the week, “as is the habit of some,” Hebrews 10 pushes us to interact with biblical community on a consistent basis. Also in these verses, the basis of love is reiterated. The interplay between love and consistency in our small group experience is vital for every believer. Though we may have all the love in the world, if we forgo consistency, no one will actually receive that love, and we will be guilty of disobeying Hebrews 10. Alternatively, we can also be as consistent as possible in small group participation, but if we are void of true love for each other, then our efforts are worth nothing (1 Cor. 13:1-3). For the members of our small group body to function well and enjoy true connection in fellowship, a balance of consistency and love is required.

Q: *Is the time you spend regularly with your small group characterized by encouragement and “stirring one another toward love and good deeds?” Why or why not?*

SERVE THE NEEDS OF OTHERS

■ **MATTHEW 22:34-40 AND LUKE 10:25-37**

Q: *What is the Christian’s first “great commandment” to be obeyed?*

Q: *With what part of us should we obey this command? Why do you think Jesus mentions all these parts? What's his point?*

In this section of Proverbs, the author is framing his advice using stark contrast. While both parties in this proverb In this passage, Jesus gives one of the most famous statements in all of the Bible. Referring to Deuteronomy 6:5, Jesus tells the lawyer what is known as the “Great Commandment”, a two-fold summary statement of all of the Old Testament law that centers on loving God, and by extension, loving one’s neighbor. The first part of the Great Commandment instructs us to love God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind. In telling us this, Jesus isn’t breaking down the various parts of the human spirit. Instead, he is simply helping us see that loving God involves the whole person. Loving God shouldn’t just happen on a mental level, but an emotional one, too. Our commitment to God shouldn’t only take place on Sundays, but all throughout our week. Our passion for worship should not just flow during seasons when it feels easy, but should be something we try to cultivate with all our effort and strength, even in hard seasons. Our first priority should be to love God with our whole self, holding back nothing. From there, all the other “loves” in our lives will fall into place. One way to cultivate this love for God is to surround ourselves with small group members who also strive to make God the first love in their lives.

Q: *What is the Christian’s second “great commandment” to be obeyed?*

Q: *Why do you think Jesus says that the second is “like” the first? How are they linked?*

The second part of the Great Commandment is to love our neighbor as ourselves (Lev. 19:18). This second command is linked to the first in two ways. First, if we truly love God, we will care about the things He cares about, one of which is meeting the needs of our neighbors. We cannot say we love God, yet care nothing for the people He values. If we are truly growing in Christlikeness, we will always end up loving those God loves. Two, the way we love our neighbor is “like” the way we love God because it should consume all parts of us! Jesus said we should love God with everything we have, which, if we’re honest, is the way we usually love ourselves. We think and care for ourselves with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, don’t we? Mentally, we think about our own situations all day long. Emotionally, we are overwhelmingly aware of how others make us feel throughout our week. Physically, we do whatever is necessary to keep ourselves free of pain, harm, and injury. We love ourselves with everything we’ve got. All of our resources go to this end, whether we are conscious of it or not. And we don’t have to be taught to do this. We naturally self-protect every moment of every day for our own health and safety. It’s simply how humans are.

Jesus knows this about us, and says we should not only love God this way, but also our neighbor! All our resources, mental energy, emotional capacity, and physical strength should go to loving God first. And from that overflow, our energy and focus should go toward those around us! Can you imagine how different life would look if we truly followed this second command as Jesus instructs? What if we spent every drop of the mental, emotional, and physical attention we spend on ourselves and poured it out on our neighbors? What if we served them to the very same measure we serve ourselves all day long? The world would be a much different place!

🗣️: *Explain what “loving your neighbor” means in this passage. Who does Jesus think our neighbor is?*

Since we know that we should show our neighbors the same care and concern we show ourselves, this leaves us wondering more about the category of “neighbor” in the Scripture. Thankfully, someone has gone before us and asked a few of our questions! In Luke 10, a lawyer comes to Jesus with eternal questions. Jesus tells him that examining the Great Commandment is a good place to start. He tells the lawyer to love God and love his neighbor with everything he has.

At this point in the story, the lawyer unknowingly shows his cards with his next question: “Who is my neighbor?” The lawyer is clearly not interested in actually serving the needs of those around him, but checking off a list so he can go to heaven. Instead of answering his question, Jesus answers the question he should have asked—“In what ways can I serve any neighbor who crosses my path?” Jesus’ story of the Good Samaritan answers how we should love our neighbors instead of pinpointing exactly who our neighbors are. In Jesus’ mind, the question is never “who” because your neighbor is anyone who has a need! Instead, he simply restates the Great Commandment in story-form instead of reciting the Law. He tells us how to love our neighbor: with all our heart, mind, and strength.

Emotionally, the Good Samaritan had compassion on the beaten man when the other passersby didn’t. Mentally, the Good Samaritan had to come up with a logistical plan to help this beaten man get to safety. He had to set up travel arrangements, work together with the innkeeper, get a room set up, and so on. And in regards to strength, the Good Samaritan had to spend both his financial and physical resources to meet the needs of this wounded Jew. Financially, between the oil he used for the wounds, the travel expenses to get to the inn, and the room rate to let the wounded man stay for as long as needed, this whole ordeal cost him a lot! Physically, it required the strength to hoist the half-dead man on an animal, take an extra journey with limited supplies, and face the delay of his own plans. This is what loving your neighbor as yourself looks like. Meeting the needs of others isn’t convenient or done in the margins of life, it should reach into every resource you have and take up a lot of your time. After all, we love ourselves with this kind of commitment, don’t we?

While meeting needs of neighbors to this level seems impossible for just one person, small groups give us a way to

do this as a team. With all our resources combined, we can really make a dent in the needs of our community! This is one of the reasons we value small groups so much here at Oakwood. They aren't just a place to grow and connect for us. They also exist for the sake of serving our neighbors, whether that be our co-workers, community organizations, schools, neighborhoods, or social clubs. Joining a small group means committing not only to God and His people, but also committing to serve those around us.

NEXT STEPS

+ *Connect the truths from God's Word to your daily life. Process how what you've learned this week will impact the way you live beyond today and into the future.*

- 🗣️: *We discussed that growing in Christ is a "we" thing, not a "me" thing. In what ways have you made your growth in Christ too isolated? What areas of your walk with Christ are suffering because your small group is not part of it? List some ways your life needs to change in order to invite others to help you grow.*
- 🗣️: *Review the "one another" Scripture list and look up each Scripture reference. Which of these do you struggle most to practice? How can you practice this specific "one another" passage this week? Share this with your small group so they can hold you accountable to your plan.*
- 🗣️: *We should love God, those in our small group, and our neighbors with everything we have, pulling from our mind, heart, and strength. Of your mental focus, emotional energy, or physical resources, which do you find most inconvenient to give to others in need? Take time this week to spend that particular resource on someone in your small group or community who truly needs it.*
- 🗣️: *Which "neighbor" in your life has God given you a special burden for? How can your small group help you meet the needs of this person or group of people?*

PRAY

+Use these prayer points to connect your time in prayer to this week's focus.

- God, thank you for loving me with everything you have. Help me, as I enjoy this love of yours, to love others to the same measure.
- God, thank you for making Christian growth a “we” project, not a “me” project. Instead of leaving me to myself, you have given me the gift of community through small group. Help me steward this gift well.
- God, use other believers in my small group to speak into my life, encourage me, sharpen me, hold me accountable, teach me, pray for me, and bear my burdens. Use me to do the same in their lives as well.
- God, open my eyes to the neighbors all around me who you want me to pursue through the use of my mental, emotional, and physical energy. Give me the power to love them as I love myself in practical ways.

COMMENTARY

EPH. 4:15-16 Paul also uses the word “joint” in a “body” to describe an individual’s place in the general community of believers. Though “joint” is a different word than “member,” which Paul uses elsewhere, the meaning is the same. Each person in a church or a small group is considered a living limb of the body of believers, which Christ as the “head” directs and guides.

JOHN 13:34-35 Jesus’ “new command” is in line with the commands from Moses to love the Lord with all one has and to love your neighbor as yourself (Lev. 19:18; Deut. 6:5; Mark 12:28–33). However, Jesus’ own love and teaching deepen and transform these commands, as Jesus loved his enemies and even died for others. The command to love one’s neighbor was not new in a certain sense—given that loving God and others was a common theme in Old Testament Law. The “newness” was found in loving one another as Jesus had loved his disciples to the point of self-sacrifice and even death (John 13:1; 15:13).

HEB. 10:24-25 One of the reasons the author is so adamant about all the members of the local church showing up to meet regularly was the situation for Jews and Gentiles at the time. While Gentile believers were getting persecuted for their faith in the culture at that time, society’s laws happened to protect Jews for their differing beliefs. While others got persecuted for their faith, Jews had a loophole. In this particular time and place, it was easy to hide behind one’s Jewishness and simply not say you were a Christian publicly. It was even easier to slide

back into Jewish customs for the time being, and put worshipping Christ on hold until the cultural climate wasn't so dangerous. Some Jewish Christians were maintaining that they were Christians in secret, but did not come to the corporate gathering on Sunday alongside their Gentile brethren for fear of persecution. Others were going back to Judaism altogether, at least until the persecution died down. The author calls the hiding Jewish Christians to stop neglecting to meet with their racially different Gentile brothers and sisters, and stand beside them in the persecution, "not neglecting meeting together." In the author's mind, this was one local church, one body, and they should stand together. There was no going back to Judaism after the Messiah had come, and to leave the Gentile brothers and sisters to suffer for the name of Christ alone while the Jewish believers hid was unacceptable for Christ's followers.

**All exegetical content and commentary resourcing for this lesson was provided by the ESV Study Bible Commentary Notes and the The New American Commentary Series.*

