

Cottonwood Creek Church

GRACE-BASED MARRIAGE • GOD OF GRACE • ROMANS 3:19-26; 6:14-15 • NO DATE

MAIN POINT

Our relationship with God is based on grace; therefore, we are motivated not by law or fear, but by confidence in a loving covenant.

INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

Think about the various relationships in your life. What makes them good? What makes others bad?

Do you find yourself having to show grace in these relationships? Why or why not?

How would you describe a relationship built on law versus one built on grace? What are the characteristics of both types of relationships?

All relationships are built on one of two foundations: law or grace. Our level of trust, thoughts, words, and actions are all affected by the foundation of that relationship. Today we'll look at our relationship with God, which is based on grace, and discover how it sets the stage for a healthy marriage relationship.

UNDERSTANDING

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

| HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ ROMANS 3:19-26.

What does verse 21 tell us God has provided for all people? What makes this provision so crucial?

Which testimonies of the biblical prophets stand out to you the most? Why?

Paul stated what the Old Testament attests: God's righteousness can be received only through faith in Jesus Christ. The apostle was speaking of a righteousness from God that He granted to people, not one earned by works. Nevertheless, justification is conditioned on placing one's faith in Christ. Such righteousness is available to all who believe without distinction. By saying all who believe, Paul included Jews and Gentiles.

What do you think it means to fall short of God's glory? How can we glorify God even in our failures?

What motivated God to reveal His righteousness? How did He do so?

"Justify" is a legal term meaning God declares the sinner not guilty. How does being declared not guilty impact your future? How does it impact you today?

No one is without sin; we all have sinned. Furthermore, as sinners, we always and continually fall short of God's standard for us. Essentially, this verse declares why people can be justified only through faith in Christ. Human sin was catastrophic in its consequences. Our only hope was for God to graciously offer us a way of salvation in Jesus Christ, His Son. God never offered to sell salvation to people for a price. On the other hand, no human being could even begin to pay the equivalent value of eternal salvation. Thus Paul declared that God acted to justify people freely by His grace. Not only can we never purchase salvation on our own, we are enslaved to sin and therefore we actually need to be purchased. God's grace made it possible.

| HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ ROMANS 6:14-15.

In Romans 6, Paul described how our struggle with sin is impacted by Jesus' work on the cross. First, the believer in Christ is united with Christ in His death so that the sin nature might be done away with. Furthermore, the believer in Christ is united with Christ in His resurrection so that he might live for God. Because sin and death have no mastery over Christ, the believer can be free from the mastery of sin by faith.

What does it mean for something to be our master? What's the relationship Paul describes between sin and the law?

Is the blessing offered by the law conditional? Why? How does this affect us in the short run and the long run?

The law offers love and blessing based on the person's ability to earn it or deserve it. It uses rewards and punishments to motivate. Also, the law leaves us with fear that the love we receive might be gone if we do not continue to earn it. This fear can bring out the worst in people, including highlighting low self-esteem and accentuating relational defenses.

How does the knowledge of your death to sin because of Christ affect your struggle with sin, or how can it? How can it affect your prayer life?

Are there times we live as if we were slaves to sin? Why does this happen?

What two choices do we have for a master? How do each of these masters affect your marriage?

Is it possible to be free from sin but still live like we're enslaved to it? Explain.

As Paul described, not giving in to sin is a constant battle. As we face temptation, we have to choose to grow closer to God by living either as the righteous people He considers us to be or as the selfish people we once were. In this passage Paul emphasized that Christians serve a new Master who liberated them from bondage to sin and empowered them to grow in faith.

APPLICATION

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

What do we learn about God's character from this passage? In contrast, what do we learn about our own character?

Is there a sin in your life that causes you to question if your relationship with God is based on His grace? How can you incorporate the truth of this lesson into your life to help combat those feelings this week?

Is there anything you might be doing subconsciously to hold your spouse or others to a standard of law rather than grace? What do you need to do differently to approach those areas of your life appropriately?

What actions can you take this week to have grace-based relationships with others?

How can our group pray for you?

PRAYER

As a closing prayer time, divide up into couples or small groups and share how you are dealing with the struggles of your life. As you pray for each person in your group, pray specifically that we would live in a state of trusting our grace relationship with God. Pray that we would live out the truth that we are free from the law!

COMMENTARY

| ROMANS 3:19-26

3:19. Someone may argue that the seven passages cited above are addressed not to Jews but to pagan nations. But everything in the Hebrew Bible is first addressed to the Jews for their

instruction so they can learn about sin's power. All people from every nation and ethnicity are sinners, and God will judge the whole world. In God's court, everyone is speechless.

3:20. No one can earn justification by obedience to the law's requirements. The law was never intended to be a means of salvation. A primary purpose of the law was to reveal sin in its full scope, thus pointing to man's need for the gift of righteousness.

3:21. Paul had established that all people have sinned and that the law is inadequate for salvation. Apart from the law, God revealed His righteousness. The law diagnoses the spiritual disease of sin and testifies to God's means of salvation.

3:22. The phrase in verse 21 "attested by the Law and the Prophets" is parenthetical, and Paul returned to his point in this verse with the words that is. He clarified that God's righteousness is through faith in Jesus Christ. Righteousness is first and foremost an attribute of God, but it is also an activity of God. He is in the business of making us righteous. God desires fellowship with us, and in order to enjoy that fellowship He makes believers right. How is this righteousness imparted? Faith is the answer to the question and is the key to salvation. The offer of salvation is available by faith. Faith involves intellectual assent as well as a thorough commitment of a believer's life.

3:23. Paul repeated the need for salvation. People of every race and gender need to be saved because all have sinned. Our sin renders us completely incapable of reaching God. The task of righteousness, of accessing the glory of God, is completely beyond our ability. Glory is a difficult word to pin down but essentially means "the full weight" of God's attributes. Through Jesus Christ, God is restoring His glory in His people.

3:24. This verse clarifies the result that "all who believe" (v. 22) enjoy. Justified means "to be declared right with God." Freely translates a Greek word meaning "gift" and underscores the difference between the attempt at salvation by works and the free offer of God. This offer of salvation is the pinnacle of His grace. Being declared right with God comes only through His grace. The means by which God grants justification is through the redemption that is in Jesus Christ. Redemption has a twin focus of deliverance or emancipation on the one hand and payment of a ransom to secure that freedom on the other. The word clearly emphasizes the freedom from sin that believers enjoy.

3:25. The supreme offer of salvation through Jesus Christ is the focus of this section. All the rich gifts are made possible by His work. That God presented Him literally means God "set Him forth publicly." "To propitiate" means "to appease or to allay anger." Once sin is removed, the object of God's wrath is removed. Thus propitiation refers to turning aside God's wrath and to making

peace with God. Through Jesus Christ we are delivered from God's wrath, we have our sins removed, and we receive mercy.

3:26. Righteousness clearly is God's focus. God both possesses it and presents it to humanity as His gift. He will declare righteous anyone who accepts Jesus.

| ROMANS 6:14-15

6:14-15. Sin personified has been in view since Romans 5:20-21. Sin is no longer the believer's ruler. Sin gained its power by using the law, but the Christian is under the rule of grace rather than law. Paul addressed the question: Should we sin because we are not under law but under grace? He responded with a strong "no" because the question assumed that grace is a license to live in sin. The exact opposite is true: God's grace frees believers to reject the way of sin and to live instead in ways that reflect the character of Holy God.

Cottonwood Creek Church

GRACE-BASED MARRIAGE • SUBMISSIVE GRACE • EPHESIANS 5:21-25 • NO DATE

MAIN POINT

God's plan for marriage involves a complete physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional relationship between a husband and wife.

INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

What do you think are the most significant differences between men and women?

How do you think sin has corrupted these differences?

Why do you think God created us with prescribed roles in marriages?

Which natural tendency of your gender do you have the most difficulty handling in a godly way within the context of your home? Why? What affect does this have on your marriage?

God's plan is that we submit to one another by putting our spouses before ourselves. This selfless submission reflects the love Christ has for His church, and therefore, through grace-based marriages, we reflect the gospel to the world.

UNDERSTANDING

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

| HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ EPHESIANS 5:21-25.

How would you define submission? Why does the word tend to stir up controversy?

What does true submission look like? What does it not look like?

How does the church submit to Christ? Wives, how might this help you submit to your husbands?

Submission doesn't imply losing your sense of worth or self. It is a voluntary and loving choice to follow in a way that displays how Christians follow Jesus. Christians don't submit because someone forces them to do so; they submit voluntarily. Wives aren't forced to think of

themselves as their husbands' property. They are partners who are to receive love from their husbands.

Who receives more instruction in Ephesians 5, wives or husbands? Why might this be?

What does the love husbands are called to model look like?

How might a wife respond to a husband who loves her like Jesus? How does this type of love benefit her spiritually?

How does a relationship centered on sacrificial love and submission reflect the gospel? How can you and your spouse keep these ideas as a common part of your marriage?

How can embracing roles in marriage as God designed them help create a strong and healthy friendship?

Though Ephesians 5 is often quoted to remind women of their struggle of submission, it is the husband who actually receives the greater challenge from God. She must submit. He must love with the love of Jesus. It is clear though that each action serves the other. The wife, in submitting, encourages her husband to Christ-likeness and the husband, in loving like Jesus, makes it easier for the wife to submit. We learn more about this kind of grace-filled love from Paul in 1 Corinthians 13.

| HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ 1 CORINTHIANS 13:4-7.

How do you see a lack of submission in each of the negative characteristics Paul lists?

How do you feel when you are treated in a "love is not" type of way? What does it communicate to you about the other person? What is your typical reaction?

Think about a time when your arrogance and rudeness have gotten in the way of your ability to love another person. In that scenario, what might have been different if you had a submissive heart?

What are the opposites of arrogance and rudeness? What makes these positive characteristics often difficult to display?

A man's and woman's commitment to God and to each other forms the basis for a godly marriage. In marriage, we accept a spouse just as God accepts us, for who he or she is. We also

seek to help our spouse mature as a Christian so our marriage can deepen, reflecting God's love and grace. As we do, the bond of friendship and love continues to strengthen through the years.

APPLICATION

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

In your own words, how would you explain the main goal of submission in a Christian marriage?

What other elements do you believe are vital to a good, godly marriage? Which of these needs the most attention in your marriage? What is something you can do to focus on it?

How can living out God's call to submission be difficult? In what ways can it be rewarding?

What heart change needs to happen in your life for you to move from "love is not" actions to "love is" actions this week?

What is something you can do this week to show love and respect to your spouse? to someone in your family?

PRAYER

Lead your group in prayer, asking God to strengthen the marriages in your church based on the truths of His Word. Pray that marriages would reflect the submissiveness and sacrificial love God desires spouses to show each other. Consider giving couples an opportunity to pray for one another as they seek to fulfill their roles in a grace-based marriage.

COMMENTARY

| EPHESIANS 5:21-25

5:21. This verse serves as a hinge to connect what is prior with what follows. Grammatically, the participial phrase (lit "submitting yourselves") goes with verses 18-20. The content of verses 22-33, however, depends on the principle of submission in verse 21.

5:22. Wives submit directs wives to be submissive to their own husbands (Col 3:18-4:1). The distinctive feature here is that the relationship between husband and wife is compared with that

between Christ and the church. No verb is in the original language of verse 22. The imperative “submit” is understood from verse 21.

5:22-24. Paul addressed wives first. They were to be voluntarily submissive to their husbands. No external coercion should be involved, nor should submission imply that the wife is a lesser partner in the marital union. The submission is governed by the phrase as to the Lord. Christian wives’ submission to their husbands is one aspect of their obedience to Christ. Submission is a person’s yielding his or her own rights and losing self for another. Submission is patterned after Christ’s example (Phil. 2:5-8) and reflects the essence of the gospel. Submission distinguishes the lifestyle of all Christians.

5:25. Paul turned to the duties of husbands. The society in which Paul wrote recognized the duties of wives to husbands but not necessarily of husbands to wives. As in Col. 3:19, Paul exhorted husbands to love their wives, but Ephesians presents Christ’s self-sacrificing love for the church as the pattern for the husband’s love for his wife.

| 1 CORINTHIANS 13:4-7

13:4. The Greek word for patient literally means “to be long (that is, slow) to anger.” Generally speaking, the term refers to the patience we need to have with people as opposed to endurance in difficult circumstances. The word for kind refers to an active quality in which we look for opportunities to act with helpful intentions toward others. This is the quality of love in which we seek to do good to others. We derive the English word zealous from the Greek term for envy. This word is sometimes used in a positive sense, for we can be appropriately passionate about many good causes. In this case, however, the term refers to a negative desire for gain or jealousy that another person received gain. Such envy usually leads on to rivalry and strife.

To be boastful refers to a tendency to call attention to one’s accomplishments or abilities for selfish reasons. Paul saw this tendency as a particular problem among the Corinthian church members. He included the synonymous phrase conceited. This word literally means “to be puffed up” and serves as an apt illustration of the inflated egos of some of the Corinthians. Paul insisted that Christlike love displays neither of these tendencies.

13:5. The phrase not act improperly can be literally translated as “not behave against the scheme.” The phrase refers to God’s giving His people a certain pattern of behavior to follow. Those who are guided by agape-love strive to avoid acting in ways that are inconsistent with that God-given pattern. The phrase is not selfish literally means “does not seek its own.” Again, Paul’s emphasis was on avoiding any behavior that constantly puts one’s own desires and

preferences above the needs of others. Selfish behavior was at the root of many problems in the Corinthian church. Selfless love was the solution. The Greek word behind the phrase is not provoked came over into English as the basis of the word paroxysm, a violent explosion of anger. Paul taught that love molds a Christian into the kind of person who is a calming influence. The phrase does not keep a record of wrongs includes a concept from the world of accounting. Refusing to keep a record of wrongs means not being “historical” with those who have wronged us.

13:6-7. The Corinthians would have recognized these faults as taking place among them. Contrary to common perception, love is not marked by tolerance for error. Love endures in this age with a sure expectation of better things to come in the next.

Cottonwood Creek Church

GRACE-BASED MARRIAGE • PROACTIVE GRACE • EPHESIANS 5:25-31; 4:29-32 • NO DATE

MAIN POINT

A grace-based marriage means not only responding in the right way, but also taking the initiative to show grace through genuine affection and loving actions.

INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

What do you think are the most significant differences between men and women?

How do you think sin has corrupted these differences?

Why do you think God created us with prescribed roles in marriages? Which natural tendency of your gender do you have the most difficulty handling in a godly way with your family? What affect does this have on your marriage?

A grace-based marriage means not only responding in the right way, but also taking the initiative to show grace through genuine affection and loving actions. God's plan ensures we are submissive to one another, putting our spouse before self. This reflects the same love Christ has for His church. In turn, a healthy, Christ-centered marriage reflects the gospel to the world.

UNDERSTANDING

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

| HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ EPHESIANS 5:25-31.

Paul directs husbands to love their wives with sacrificial commitment. Christ died so His church could be seen as spiritually pure and dedicated exclusively to Him. Only sacrificial love in marriage is love that reflects God.

Husbands are called to love in a particular way. What does that love look like?

Husbands, what does it mean to love your wife on a daily basis without any expectation, hidden agenda, or strings attached?

Husbands, name an example of when you loved your wife like Christ loves the church.

Wives, is it possible to proactively love your spouse? What does this love look like?

Wives, how can you show grace through no-strings-attached acts of kindness to your spouse?

How does a relationship of grace reflect the gospel? How can you and your spouse keep these ideas as a common part of your marriage?

What are the spiritual benefits of having a marriage based on grace?

A husband is not to view his leadership as a superior status but as a commitment to sacrifice everything for his wife. Just as Christ nurtures His followers, a husband is to humble himself to seek his wife's best interests, provide unselfishly for her welfare, and give priority to their relationship above all human relationships. In return, a wife can wholeheartedly love and respect her husband.

When we live in this type of relationship, we place others' needs above our own. Our relationship with God grows as we allow His love to continually impact our lives. On our own, this type of proactive, sacrificial love is not possible. Practically, it involves not only actions, but also attitudes, thoughts, and words, as Paul outlines in Ephesians 4.

| HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ EPHESIANS 4:29-32.

In marriage, when might we be tempted to offer negative comments? How can we use affirming speech instead?

How might others lead us to negative comments without our even realizing it?

Paul disagrees with the adage, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." The truth is that words are powerful, either building up or tearing down. Sadly, our culture doesn't always promote language that encourages and edifies.

What are some practical ways we can use our words to build up our spouse? How does positive speech give grace to those who hear?

We can help, not hurt, with our speech. When we do, we give evidence that God's grace is moving in our life, helping us extend grace to those we speak to.

How do our relationships with others reflect a different way of life? How do our marriages?

According to Ephesians 4:31, what are the wicked ways that grieve the Holy Spirit?

Do you think the Holy Spirit is grieving over your marriage? Why or why not?

Discuss what Paul might mean by the terms kind, tenderhearted, and forgiving in verse 32. How are each of these terms a reflection of God's love for us?

Kind means caring or showing love practically. Tenderhearted refers to being moved in one's insides in response to a need and then acting. Forgiving is literally "acting with grace" and extending undeserved favor. Paul pointed out specifically that forgiving is a God-like quality. Because He forgave in Christ, we are to forgive others.

How often do you think on God's grace when you consider how to treat your spouse?

How might reflecting on the cross affect your actions?

APPLICATION

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

How does your marriage compare with God's intentions for the marriage relationship?

What is something you can do this week to show love and respect to your spouse? to someone in your family?

What are some practical ways we can remember God's great gift of forgiveness daily? How might those daily reminders reframe our attitudes, words, and actions toward our spouse?

PRAYER

Ask the Holy Spirit to help you look inward and be honest about your view of God and of your spouse. Pray that your marriage would truly reflect Christ and the church.

COMMENTARY

| EPHESIANS 5:25-31

5:25-30. The words translated love and loved are forms of the verb (Greek, agapao) used in John 3:16 for God's sacrificial concern for the world. Such love is more than mere affection or emotion; it includes actions based on care for the object of love. Although many husbands have literally died for their wives (and vice versa), Paul's focus is more on the responsibility of the husband to live for his wife than to die for her. These verses provide the theological foundation for understanding a husband's responsibility to his wife. To make her holy describes what

happens now (in this lifetime) to believers as a result of Jesus' self-giving. Everything in our conversion as well as in our daily Christian living has as its goal setting us apart for Christ. Paul explained this as an experience of cleansing. The image of washing helps us understand what being holy means. To present the church to Himself describes what will happen (throughout eternity) to believers as a result of Jesus' self-giving. The verb present suggests a bride on her wedding day approaching her beloved groom, and the phrase in splendor hints at the bride's wedding attire. No bride would want to appear on her wedding day in a spotted, wrinkled gown. The words holy and blameless sum up the effect of Christ's love and sacrifice for His people. And the Lord will most certainly accomplish this result in His people, for holy and blameless are the same words used to describe God's plan for His chosen ones from the foundation of the world. Christian husbands are to love their wives in the same way that Christ does. This means they are to do all they can to make their wives more beautiful (in the spiritual sense of being holy and blameless). Husbands are to love their wives as their own bodies. A husband is the head; the wife is the body; and the husband loves his body. It is as if their wives were an extension of the husbands' own bodies. When the apostle wrote that he who loves his wife loves himself, he used the verb loves (Greek, agapao, sacrificial concern).

5:31. A couple's unity is based on recognizing that previous family ties are to be reprioritized after marriage. Husbands and wives are intentionally to leave their parents, the human relationship that normally dominates the life of children. This leaving includes emotional and spiritual separation from one's parents too—and likely physical and financial separation as well—so that the marriage relationship can be primary. If leave puts the matter negatively, then be joined puts the new relationship positively. Be joined could also be translated "united to" or "bonded with." The two will be one flesh includes the intimacy of sexual union, but it extends to all other dimensions. The husband and wife are to be united in their values and decisions as they join together emotionally and spiritually.

| EPHESIANS 4:29-32

4:29. Paul gave concrete examples of how Christ followers live out this worthy walk, beginning in verse 25. In each case, a prohibition is balanced with a command. Here, it is not corrupting talk but wholesome speech. By corrupting talk Paul meant what is vulgar, crude, or abusive. This is a characteristic of the non-Christian lifestyle that believers have renounced. What is to replace it? Speech that is intentionally good for the building up of others (Prov. 15:23).

4:30. Parents grieve when their children squabble. How much more must the Spirit lament when believers squabble with one another? After all, He is Holy, and He intends for us to become more and more holy. This is why He sealed us when we were converted. From the beginning of our

Christian life when we were sealed until the end when we are fully redeemed, we are to grow in being like Christ.

4:31. In verses 22-24 Paul had used the notion of taking off (the old man) and putting on (the new man) in reference to the decisive change that happened at conversion. Here he used similar language to speak of six sinful attitudes and actions. Believers constantly seek to keep these removed from their lives. They are all poisonous to personal relationships. Bitterness can be translated "sourness," referring to a cynical or resentful outlook. Anger refers to an outburst of rage or a flash of irritation. Wrath (negatively) means "a sullen, settled angry attitude" (but see 5:6 for God's wrath). Clamor refers to loud voices raised in a quarrel or in a brawl. Slander means "speaking evil of others, wishing to hurt their reputation." Malice summarizes all of the preceding and can also be translated "evil" or "wickedness."

4:32. In contrast to the six vices are three virtues by which believers are to relate to one another. These are God-like qualities He has extended to us. Kind means caring or showing love practically (see 2:7 for God's kindness). Compassionate (tenderhearted) refers to being moved in one's insides in response to a need and then acting. Forgiving is literally "acting with grace," and forgiving the offenses of others is certainly one of the best ways to extend undeserved favor. Paul pointed out specifically that this is a God-like quality. Because He forgave in Christ, we are to extend forgiveness to others.

Cottonwood Creek Church

GRACE-BASED MARRIAGE • REACTIVE GRACE • MATTHEW 5:38-48 • NO DATE

MAIN POINT

Every aspect of a believer's conduct must be characterized by a righteousness that surpasses mere appearance and comes from the heart.

INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

What messages does our culture send about the power of self and the need to be self-sufficient? Where are these messages the strongest?

Are there any similarities between these messages and Christian tenets? What are the differences?

In what area of your life are you most drawn to self-sufficiency or selfishness—family, work, church, friendships? Why do you think that is?

Jesus taught a radically different way of relating to other people—living for others rather than yourself. In short, we are called to live submissively. Just as in biblical times, this approach runs counter to worldly values today. Jesus expects us to put others before ourselves consistently; it's not about words but about actions motivated by love. When we are wronged, it calls for a response of grace rather than punishment.

UNDERSTANDING

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

| HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ MATTHEW 5:38-42.

What was the original intent of “eye for eye” and “tooth for tooth”? How was this law being perverted?

In the Books of Moses, the command about revenge was said three times: Exodus 21:24; Leviticus 24:20; Deuteronomy 19:21. Without such a legal principle, the loss of, say, one tooth, could lead to the revenge of knocking out two teeth, which could escalate further. Recompense

was to be proportional to the damage inflicted. In its Old Testament form, this law of retaliation kept legal judgments from being excessive.

What stands out to you about the four examples Jesus gave His followers in verses 39-42? How do these apply to our lives today?

What qualities can replace our desire for revenge when it surfaces?

In the first century, this law of retaliation was an excuse for taking personal, private revenge. Some religious teachers—forgetting the principle of mercy—supposed equal retaliation was always required. Jesus, however, taught a better way for His followers. Those whose hearts He has cleansed have no need to retaliate. They don't need to get even. They can forego the right to vengeance, believing that ultimately the Lord will judge all evil. Thus when God's people refuse to retaliate, they show they trust God to judge all things fairly in the end. In verses 39-42, Jesus offered four examples of what it means not to oppose an evildoer. In each instance, the natural tendency to retaliate or insist on one's rights is overcome by a heart made pure by Christ.

How did Jesus' life exemplify His teaching to go beyond the call of duty?

What do we communicate to God and others when we take Jesus' command in this passage seriously?

Jesus' followers will act with greater kindness and more love than the law requires. We are to bear imposition. We are to resist the tendency to retaliate and instead are to work for the good of those seeking to injure us. Consider ways you could serve others by self-sacrifice. Remember the truth that giving up your rights, possessions, and time shows respect both for God and for others.

| HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ MATTHEW 5:43-48.

Jesus quoted a Scripture His audience knew: "You shall love your neighbor." Here Jesus included an additional part of the saying people knew but which had no basis in Scripture. The command to hate your enemy was a perversion of the command to love one's neighbors. Yet because we find it easy to despise our enemies, we can understand why religious people of Jesus' day thought it right to hate their enemies.

What was the main point of the law to love your neighbor and hate your enemy? How did Jesus' interpretation differ from the Pharisees'? How did this raise expectations for His followers?

Have someone read Romans 12:17-21. How does God's command in these verses compare with His command in Matthew 5:43-44?

How did Jesus' life exemplify this principle?

Jesus' understanding of the command to love your neighbor was to put no limits on who our neighbors are. Neighbors include even our enemies and persecutors. Our Lord Himself is the ultimate model of this. While on the cross, Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them" (Luke 23:34). He set the ultimate example for us when He showed love to His enemies by forgiving those who crucified Him.

Why is it so hard for us to love our "enemies"? How does this description of love challenge you in your marriage?

How does this type of love in our marriage overflow to other relationships?

Read verse 48 again. What does it say about God that He demands perfection from us, and yet when we can't achieve that, He fulfills His own demands in our place?

What are some ways you can let God's law drive you to His love this week?

APPLICATION

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

Have you sought revenge in your marriage? If you feel comfortable sharing, what was it that fueled that response? How would Jesus want you to respond differently after hearing the truth of His Word?

Which of the qualities we've discussed today do you want to cultivate most right now? How would your life be different as God helps you to put this quality into action?

How does the gospel help you follow Jesus' command to react with grace?

Why is it often hard to remember our brokenness and need for God? What can you do this week to be more aware of your dependency on Him when working to live out a grace-based marriage?

PRAYER

Divide into couples or small groups. Spend a few minutes sharing areas for improvement where God's law needs to have more impact on your attitude and response to difficult situations.

COMMENTARY

| MATTHEW 5:38-42

As many do today, the scribes and Pharisees of Jesus' day must have taken the "eye for an eye" passages (Exod. 21:24; Lev. 24:19-20; Deut. 19:21) as justification for hurting others at least as badly as they had been hurt. The law was not given to exact revenge, but to legislate justice. Breaking the law has consequences, but personal vengeance has no place. These passages have often been wrongly taken as a minimum guideline for retaliation. What Jesus clarifies is that they were always intended as a maximum or a ceiling for retaliation, and that mercy was always an acceptable intention underlying these laws.

For the kingdom servant, legalistically "letting the punishment fit the crime" and insisting upon a "pound of flesh" falls short. We must actually consider blessing the repentant criminal. Mercy (withholding deserved punishment) and grace (giving undeserved gifts) are legitimate norms of conduct.

The one mile (5:41) refers to the practice of the Roman soldiers requiring civilians to carry their burden for one mile. By Roman law, the soldier could require no more than one mile of a single porter, but Jesus' kingdom servants (in representing the gracious spirit of their king) are to go beyond what is required of them.

| MATTHEW 5:43-48

The first part of Jesus' quote in 5:43, "Love your neighbor," is one of the central commands of the Bible (Lev. 19:18; Matt. 22:34-40). But mistaken thinking came with the second portion: "and hate your enemy." Here again, the human inclination is retaliation or revenge, which might seem like a logical corollary flowing out of the first statement. But the reality is that "hate your enemy" is far removed from God's intended meaning in "love your neighbor." In the parallel passage in Luke (10:25-37), Jesus explained through the parable of the good Samaritan that every human in our sphere of influence is our neighbor. Therefore, by definition, Christians are to love everyone and hate no one.

Jesus used a different approach to make the same point. He emphasized two principles to urge His followers to love all people. First, He urged them to follow the example of their Father in heaven. The Father gives gifts (sun and rain) to good and evil alike, and so we, as believers, ought to love and pray for our enemies (Luke 23:34; Rom. 5:8). By this we will show ourselves "sons of your Father in heaven." He teaches us to love everyone because God does.

The ultimate expression of this pattern is the command to imitate the Father in 5:48, Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. Jesus used teleios, a Greek word that means “having reached its end, mature, complete, perfect.” The goal for the kingdom servant is to behave like his Father, and so to reach the mature level of supernatural transformation.

Second, Jesus urges us to show ourselves distinct from the rest of the world. This is actually the flip side of the first argument, to be like the Father. If we show partiality and if we love only those who love us, we are like unbelievers. If, on the other hand, we show love impartially, guided by grace and mercy, then we show ourselves distinct, and we shine before the world (5:14-16), bringing glory to the Father. All six examples are striking in their implications, but this one in particular stands out as exemplifying mercy and grace, the supernatural qualities of God’s kingdom servants.

Cottonwood Creek Church

GRACE-BASED MARRIAGE • HONEST GRACE • MATTHEW 18:15-20 • NO DATE

MAIN POINT

A grace-based marriage is marked by both grace and truth. It requires being gracious even in the midst of conflict and disagreement.

INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

When it comes to conflict, are you more of a “mama bear” who will protect yourself or others at all costs, or do you tend to be a sweeper-under-the-rug who would rather not deal with the conflict?

How would you describe your spouse when it comes to dealing with conflict? What does that mean for conflict resolution in your marriage?

How might our life experiences affect the way we deal with conflict?

Each of us has a natural tendency when it comes to dealing with conflict. Today, as we discuss confrontation in love, we will discover there are times we want to sweep the situation under the rug and ignore it, but we can't. The dirt will not disappear from under the rug until someone removes it. We will discover this is true with conflict as well. Husbands and wives are called to remain respectful even when faced with circumstances that require speaking the truth in love.

UNDERSTANDING

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

Jesus asked how believers should treat one another when they sin, then provided a clear process to resolution for those courageous enough to forge ahead. In a four-step formula, Jesus detailed how believers can resolve conflict.

| HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ MATTHEW 18:15-17.

How does Scripture instruct us to approach the one who sins against us?

Taking this first step calls for confrontation. The offender needs to know his offense, repent of his action (or inaction), and make amends with his brother or sister in Christ. This approach

places both parties on an equal standing and allows a fair discussion of the sin and its consequences.

How does this apply to a marriage conflict? Why would public confrontation be completely inappropriate?

How many conflict situations do we discuss openly with someone not in the conflict before ever speaking to the offending spouse, friend, or fellow believer? What does this say about our motive?

In contrast to speaking publicly, what benefit does a private confrontation offer for both parties?

This approach places both parties on an equal standing and allows a fair discussion of the sin and its consequences. To do otherwise suggests that revenge, not reconciliation, is the motivation. By maintaining privacy in the dispute, those involved can agree quickly and move forward together.

What does unresolved conflict among Christians say to a lost world?

Within the church, and especially within Christian marriages, the hallmark of relationships is an observable unity. In the eyes of a lost world, unresolved conflict questions the integrity of Christians and the authenticity of their faith.

How does Jesus' teaching go against our human nature?

Jesus' teaching in this first step runs counter to human nature. A believer hurt by another often expects the sinning one to come humbly to him, confess the wrongdoing, and repent. Yet the Lord said the wounded disciple is to initiate the reconciliation. By taking responsibility for restoring the relationship, the offended believer becomes the peacemaker God desires. The effort portrays absence of pride and demonstrates concern for the church.

What are strengths and weaknesses in applying the second step of conflict resolution, outlined in verse 16?

What qualities would you need to look for when choosing these one or two witnesses?

What did Jesus mean when He commanded believers to "tell the church" in verse 17?

The point of this third step is that the grievance is made more public with the result that the rebellious Christian has no place to hide. The purpose of the local church membership's wider

involvement is remedial. This step brings the issue out in the open for all to view and also rallies the resources of believers to find a resolution. Yes, exposing problems in the church can be distasteful, but Jesus' process serves as a testimony to the integrity of the Christian faith.

Why is this process so important? Which step do you struggle with the most?

| HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ MATTHEW 18:18-20.

What does verse 18 have to do with the conflict resolution steps outlined in the previous verses?

The church's actions have been anticipated in heaven. This verse does not offer us blanket authority but places an even greater responsibility on us to act in a heavenly manner, in love.

What encouragement do verses 19 and 20 offer believers as we seek to resolve conflict? What encouragement does Scripture offer for a grace-based marriage?

Following steps three and four, which include the church, these verses affirm a church's effort to restore a fallen member, and they reflect heaven's joyful participation in such an effort. Verse 20 also promises, however, a special sense of Christ's presence in the midst of two or three who are gathered in His name, that is, those who reflect the nature and will of Christ. A husband and wife gathering in His name is one of the greatest God-honoring actions we can take.

APPLICATION

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

How do we avoid preaching or being "holier than thou" in our attitudes when we confront another in love?

What steps have you taken to address conflict with grace and truth this past week? Based on the Scripture passage we studied today, what about your approach to conflict needs to change?

How has prayer together encouraged or impacted your marriage? What do you need to do to make this a more frequent occurrence in your marriage?

PRAYER

Ask group members to reflect silently on any situations in which they need to seek reconciliation with their spouse or a fellow believer. Ask them to pray silently for the person and about the situation. Lead a prayer, asking God for courage and boldness to approach the conflicts in our

lives with both grace and truth. Ask God to help your group and local church body be agents for reconciliation.

COMMENTARY

| MATTHEW 18:15-20

18:15. Fellowship is a fragile commodity and can be disrupted by a number of factors. Jesus outlined in this passage a four-step approach for dealing with conflict between church members.

The first step if your brother sins against you is to go and rebuke him in private. Two matters are important here. First, the offended party is to take the initiative. Second, this step involves confrontation and is fraught with great potential for either abuse or misunderstanding. We are likely to be met with “I have done nothing to sin against you!” Or, “You are the one who deserves rebuke!” For this reason, we should be very careful as we take this course of action.

18:16. If the first step in the process of reconciliation fails, then the second step is to take one or two with you. This approach has the advantage of establishing the good will of the offended party in the sight of two fellow Christians. Hopefully it also introduces the influence of one or two wise brothers or sisters who can aid in restoration. This kind of testimony is established in Deuteronomy 19:15 as a means of ensuring accuracy in legal proceedings.

18:17. If the offender still pays no attention, then the third step should be taken. The matter is then to be brought before the church. This verse contains two of the three uses of the word church in the Gospels, the other being in Matthew 16:18. Interestingly, Jesus was speaking of an institution that was yet to be established. Thus He was anticipating problems that would arise and explained how the body of believers could participate in healing. The fourth and final step in the process is to let him be like an unbeliever and a tax collector to you. In the Old Testament an offender could be cut off from participation in the covenant community, and Jesus counseled a similar step here. But even it is to be redemptive.

Exclusion from community in the first century certainly was more effective than is usually possible today. In most of our churches we lack an intimate fellowship in which we are privy to the lives of all other members. Whatever the case, disputes among members should be handled with sensitivity and flexibility.

18:18. This verse repeats almost verbatim the words of the second half of Matthew 16:19. The church’s actions have been anticipated in heaven. This verse does not offer us blanket authority but places an even greater responsibility on us to act in a heavenly manner, in love.

18:19-20. These two verses are to be interpreted in the context of restoring a straying church member. The promise in verse 19 is not a blank check for any request. On many occasions two . . . on earth agree about a matter and yet their request is unfulfilled. Instead, these verses affirm a church's effort to restore a fallen member, and they reflect heaven's joyful participation in such an effort. Verse 20 also promises, however, a special sense of Christ's presence in the midst of two or three who are gathered in My name, that is, those who reflect the nature and will of Christ.

Cottonwood Creek Church

GRACE-BASED MARRIAGE • FORGIVING GRACE •
MATTHEW 18:21-25; EPHESIANS 4:32–5:2 • NO DATE

MAIN POINT

A grace-based marriage should be marked by a husband and wife who are willing to forgive one another of their sins.

INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

With which group of people in your life do you have the hardest time showing forgiveness—family, friends, coworkers, employees, church family, or another? Why do you think that is?

Do you think forgiveness is easier to give or receive? Why? Why is forgiveness an important practice for the follower of Christ?

Today is all about forgiveness, both in marriage and in other relationships. True forgiveness means not tallying sins or responding to them with punishment. When we recognize the magnitude of Christ's love and forgiveness for us through the cross, we can forgive as He forgave us. Jesus' parable of the unforgiving slave will help us take a good look at our relationships and attitudes and, if needed, face our need to forgive others.

UNDERSTANDING

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

| HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ MATTHEW 18:21-27.

The context of this lesson is Matthew 18:1-35, which is introduced by the disciples' question, "Who is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" (v. 1). In response, Jesus called attention to a child and pointed out the need of having a childlike dependence on God and His mercy and of taking specific steps to find, forgive, and restore to fellowship a citizen of God's kingdom who sins against another believer (vv. 2-20). Jesus' instruction led Peter to ask Him a question and gave Jesus an excellent opportunity to tell a parable that teaches a powerful lesson on forgiveness.

Thinking back to what we studied last week, do you remember the premise of Jesus' teaching on conflict management?

Why do you think Peter was asking Jesus this question? Why did Jesus respond the way He did?

Responding to Peter, Jesus dramatically increased the number of times one should forgive another to 70 times 7. Some translations have "77 times." Either way, Jesus indicated a person should not keep track of offenses but should forgive without limits. He does not mean we should withhold forgiveness starting with the 491st offense.

How has God's forgiveness in your life motivated you to be more forgiving?

Consider the terms (1) forgiveness, (2) forgetting, (3) reconciliation, and (4) removal of consequences. Must all four responses be present when biblical forgiveness takes place? Why or why not?

Which of these actions did the king practice and which of the actions does God take when we ask for mercy?

What does society in general say is forgiveness? Does society's definition of forgiveness include all of these aspects?

How do you demonstrate that you have forgiven someone? How do you know when God has forgiven you?

God in Christ "erased the certificate of debt, with its obligations, that was against us and opposed to us, and has taken it out of the way by nailing it to the cross" (Col. 2:14). All who believe in Jesus as God's resurrected Son, repent of their sins, and receive Jesus as Savior are graciously forgiven by God because of His immense mercy, not their merit. Not one deserves to be forgiven, "But God, who is abundant in mercy, because of His great love that He had for us" (Eph. 2:4) has forgiven us of our sins and saved us by grace through faith (v. 8). Our sin debt is completely, eternally erased. That's astonishing grace! But this is what the living God is like to those who can never repay all they owe.

| HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ EPHESIANS 4:32-5:2.

How is forgiveness a reflection of God's love for us?

Forgiving is literally "acting with grace," and forgiving one another is certainly one of the best ways to extend undeserved favor. Paul pointed out specifically that this is a God-like quality.

Because He forgave in Christ, we are to extend forgiveness to others.

How often do you think on God's forgiveness when you consider whether you should forgive your spouse? How might reflecting on the cross affect your actions?

The more we reflect on and grow in our understanding of how much God loves us and how much He has forgiven us of, the more we want to treat others the same way.

How does Ephesians 5:1-2 reflect the truth of verse 32? What does it look like to imitate God in the area of forgiveness?

APPLICATION

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

Why is forgiveness such an important part of our marriages? What do we experience when there is a lack of forgiveness?

Continuing to think on the cross this week, consider whom you need to forgive today. Pray for a deeper understanding of your own forgiveness so that you might freely forgive.

How has God worked in your heart during our Grace-Based Marriage series? What impact has our study had on your marriage?

PRAYER

Have group members reflect on Jesus' death for the forgiveness of our sins. Ask couples to pray for one another in their walk with the Lord and their willingness to forgive. Give God thanks and ask Him to renew your determination to live in His Kingdom with a heart of forgiveness because of God's limitless forgiveness to you.

COMMENTARY

| MATTHEW 18:21-27

18:21-27. Peter asked if he should forgive a brother who sinned against him as many as seven times. Perhaps Peter had accepted Jesus' teaching about the shepherd's compassion for the lost sheep (vv. 10-14) and suggested he was ready to generously forgive fellow disciples seven times. The number seven represented completeness and far surpassed the rabbis' teachings to

forgive an offender and the offense three times. Clearly, Peter thought he was being generous in offering to forgive more than double the rabbinic instruction.

Responding to Peter, Jesus dramatically increased the number of times one should forgive another to 70 times 7. Some translations have “77 times.” Either way, Jesus indicated a person should not keep track of offenses but should forgive without limits. He does not mean we should withhold forgiveness starting with the 491st offense. No matter how many times a person sins against us and repents, Christians should forgive that person. We should not keep record of others’ offenses and the number of times we forgive. Nor should we harbor resentment and a vindictive spirit. Jesus drove home His point by telling a parable about the generosity believers should show others who seek their forgiveness.

Jesus told of a king who took inventory of his assets so he could settle accounts. To his surprise, the king discovered one of his servants owed him 10,000 talents. This represents a huge amount of money—perhaps about \$10,000,000.00. A talent was one of the largest denominations of currency in those days, and 10,000 was the highest number the Greek language could express. Such a huge amount of money indicates that the slave was a man of great responsibility and may have ruled over territory and owed the king the money from taxation. Evidently he lived well above his means, even in that high position. Whether from purposeful deceit or negligent practice, the man had developed an impossible debt. When we consider our relationship to God, we realize that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). We deserve death, “the wages of sin” (6:23). We cannot possibly pay the incalculable debt of sin each of us owes.

According to accepted practice, the king commanded that the man, his family, and his possessions be sold. If the man, his wife, his children, and everything he had were sold, that would hardly begin to repay the debt; but at least it would be a start. The sale would bring judgment against the man for his unfaithful service to the king, and it would serve as an example to others who might seek to defraud the king.

Swallowing his pride, the distressed man fell facedown before the king and begged for mercy and patience, promising to do the impossible—to pay back the full amount, a promise he almost certainly could not keep. Jesus’ account of the king’s response must have startled those listening. He blindsided the disciples, including Peter, with His next statement. Having established the servant’s action and the king’s right to be repaid his money, the master of that slave had compassion on the man, released him, and forgave him the loan. The words had compassion translates the same Greek word that describes Jesus’ compassion for the needy

(Matt. 9:36; 14:14; 15:32; 20:34) Definitely not business as usual! The king not only would not sell the servant and his family into slavery; he no longer would require repayment of the debt.

Jesus was picturing the generous, compassionate forgiveness of God to unworthy sinners who owe Him an impossible debt. The Bible affirms that “the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 6:23). God in Christ “erased the certificate of debt, with its obligations, that was against us and opposed to us, and has taken it out of the way by nailing it to the cross” (Col. 2:14). All who believe in Jesus as God’s resurrected Son, repent of their sins, and receive Jesus as Savior are graciously forgiven by God because of His immense mercy, not their merit. Not one deserves to be forgiven, “But God, who is abundant in mercy, because of His great love that He had for us” (Eph. 2:4) has forgiven us of our sins and saved us by grace through faith (v. 8). Our sin debt is completely, eternally erased. Mercy is God not giving us what we deserve, and grace is God giving us what we do not deserve. That’s astonishing grace! But this is what the living God is like to those who can never repay all they owe. Oh, how we can praise Him and determine with His help to do the “good works, which God prepared ahead of time” for us to “walk in them” (v. 10).

| EPHESIANS 4:32–5:2

4:32. In contrast to the six vices found in earlier verses, here are three virtues by which believers are to relate to one another. These are God-like qualities He has extended to us. Kind means caring or showing love practically (see 2:7 for God’s kindness). Compassionate (tenderhearted) refers to being moved in one’s insides in response to a need and then acting. Forgiving is literally “acting with grace,” and forgiving the offenses of others is certainly one of the best ways to extend undeserved favor. Paul pointed out specifically that this is a God-like quality. Because He forgave in Christ, we are to extend forgiveness to others.

5:1-2. Believers are challenged to be imitators of God. Previously they had been urged to learn about Christ (4:20-21) and not to grieve the Spirit (4:30). Believers cannot imitate God in power, knowledge, or presence, but they can imitate Him in self-sacrifice and in manifesting a forgiving spirit (4:32).