

Cottonwood Creek Church

RELATIONSHIPS • CHRIST AND OUR RELATIONSHIPS • EPHESIANS 2:11-22 • NO DATE

MAIN POINT

Through Christ, our relationships with God and with others are restored to what God intended them to be.

INTRODUCTION

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

Have you ever experienced a time of intense loneliness? What emotions did you feel during that time?

How do you feel when you are part of a healthy team? What are the characteristics of a good team?

In Ephesians 2:11-22, Paul explained how those who were “far off” had been brought near to God and to the community of God (vv. 11-13). In fact, in Christ the division between Jew and Gentile was erased, there was peace between the two groups, and all those who believed in Christ together became “one new man” (vv. 14-18). Paul then switched to the metaphor of a building, explaining that every believer is part of a new temple that is being constructed as a dwelling place for God (vv. 20-22).

UNDERSTANDING

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

| HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ EPHESIANS 2:11-13.

Have you ever been excluded from a group? Why? How did that make you feel?

Do you remember what your life was like before you placed your faith in Christ? How would you describe your life at that time?

The Jews were God’s chosen people (Deut. 7:6; 10:15; 14:2), had received solemn promises from God (such as the Abrahamic Covenant in Gen. 15 and the Davidic Covenant in 2 Sam. 7), and had a future hope (Jer. 29:11). Paul urged his Gentile readers to remember that before the coming of Jesus, they had none of these things: “Remember that you were at that time

separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world” (v. 12). Before Jesus, the future looked grim for the Gentiles. They were far away from God, with no hope of ever being forgiven or accepted.

The good news of the gospel is that God did not leave the Jews or the Gentiles to die without hope. Paul was emphatic in the next verse that their present reality was drastically different: “But now ...” (v. 13). Instead of being “far off,” Gentile believers in Christ were “brought near.” Because of His sacrificial death on the cross, Jesus opened a way to God not only for Jews, but also for Gentiles.

| HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ EPHESIANS 2:14-19.

Are there any ethnic groups whom you have a hard time accepting as your brothers and sisters in Christ? According to this passage, how should we view other believers who have a different ethnic background than us?

Have you ever spent time with believers from other countries? How well did you connect with those believers? Why?

In both ancient and modern times, the Jewish people and the Gentile nations around them have not lived in harmony. Therefore, it is unsurprising that Paul referred to “hostility” in this passage (vv. 14, 16). In particular, Paul referred to “the dividing wall of hostility” (v. 14). This most likely is a reference to a five-foot wall that stood in the temple courts in Jerusalem, dividing the outer “Court of the Gentiles” from the inner courts where Jewish people were allowed go. On this wall was an inscription that warned Gentiles not to proceed any further, under penalty of death.

That is why Paul’s words here were so remarkable: “He himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility” (v. 14). Through Christ, the wall that divided Jews and Gentiles was torn down! In fact, these two diverse groups were merged into one: “That he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace” (v. 15). The two groups were so united that they could be viewed as a single entity.

| HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ EPHESIANS 2:20-22.

Think of a building made from stone blocks. What is the relationship between the various stones? Do all the stones need to be the same size and shape? What would happen if you removed one of the stones?

How should this building metaphor affect the way that we think of one another within the church?

In these last few verses, Paul switched to a metaphor that Jesus Himself used to refer to the church: the people of God as a building. In a climactic moment of His earthly ministry, Jesus said, "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:18). Later in the New Testament, Peter developed this concept, identifying Jesus as the cornerstone and individual believers as "living stones ... being built up as a spiritual house" (1 Pet. 2:4-6). Here in Ephesians 2:20-22, Paul identified Jesus as the cornerstone and the believers as a temple building; he also added the idea that the apostles and prophets are the foundation of the building.

What was Paul's point? Just as a building needs every stone to be in its right place integrated with the stones around it, so the church needs every member (Jew, Gentile, black, white, and brown) to be joined together in harmony. We need each other. Different ethnic groups bring different skills and passions that help enhance the other ethnic groups within the church.

APPLICATION

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

Are there any ethnic groups you struggle with accepting into the family of God? How will you commit to pray for those believers and ask God to change your attitude toward them?

Do you know of any missionaries or ministries in other countries? What are some ways that you can support or encourage them this week?

How does unity within the church among people from many different backgrounds serve to display the good news of the gospel to the world?

PRAYER

Close by praying that God would reveal any ways we might have created boundaries for those who are different from us in the church. Pray that our church would be united because of Christ, and that the Holy Spirit would reveal the ways we need to pursue this further.

COMMENTARY

| EPHESIANS 2:11-22

2:11. The Ephesian church seems to have experienced friction between Jewish and Gentile Christians. That would explain why Paul goes into a discussion of the relationship between those two groups at this point. In verse 11, Paul shows the Gentiles' hopeless condition before salvation by contrasting them with the Jews. God's plan of salvation in the Old Testament came through the Jewish nation. That still didn't mean that all Jews were truly redeemed. It only meant that the message of redemption came through the Jewish nation. The Ephesians, as Gentiles, did not have natural access to that message of salvation. Paul contrasts the conditions of the Jews and Gentiles to show the Ephesians how significant their salvation is.

Circumcision was a source of pride for the Jews. It was a visible sign of their historic relationship with God. Therefore, it was a term of derision—a religious slur, if you will—for the Jews to call the Gentiles uncircumcised. The Jewish nation had forfeited their special position with God, because, while they were physically circumcised, their heart attitude was not one of submission to God. So Paul says the Jews were called to circumcision, which is performed in the flesh by human hands. He implies that, while they were physically circumcised, their heart was not, as it were, circumcised (submissive to God).

2:12. Paul emphasizes that the Gentiles were:

- separate from Christ
- excluded from citizenship in Israel
- foreigners to the covenants of the promise
- without hope
- without God in the world

What a bleak litany!

Jesus was the Messiah, the Savior of the Jewish nation. The nation of Israel had been given promises (covenants) by God that they would have a Messiah. This gave them hope and afforded an avenue to God for them. Not being Jews, the Gentiles did not have these advantages. A Gentile might convert to Judaism; but then he would no longer be a Gentile but a converted Jew. Therefore, true Gentiles were utterly without hope even with their many religions and many gods. The one God did not acknowledge them because they did not acknowledge him.

2:13. God, because of his mercy and love, did not leave them in this hopeless condition. Christ abolished the distinction between Jew and Gentile. All people are now considered the same before God. His death on the cross made this wonderful thing possible.

2:14. God wants peace to be both horizontal and vertical. That is, he wants Jews and Gentiles to be at peace with one another; and he wants both of them, now reconciled to each other, to be at peace with him. Christ is the one who gives us peace with God, for he himself is our peace. Mutual animosity and hatred toward each other erected a wall of separation between Jews and Gentiles. Christ abolished the wall by making them one before him.

2:15. The Jews kept the law, with its commandments and regulations. Gentiles did not. This created a barrier between them. Jesus' death satisfied the law and therefore eliminated it as a barrier. Since neither Jew nor Gentile had to obey the law to find salvation, the means of distinguishing between the two kinds of people vanished. Again, this created peace between hostile parties.

2:16. God's purpose included more than simply uniting two parties previously at war. He wanted the new creation of one party now united horizontally to find vertical union with God. The cross destroyed both the human hostility and the hostility between people and God. This is true reconciliation—overcoming human barriers and breaking down walls that separate people from God.

2:17. Paul quoted Isaiah 57:19 to show the Word of God expected the Messiah to bring reconciliation of Jew and Gentile. Those who were far away are the Gentiles. Those who were near are the Jews.

2:18. Jesus, the Messiah, did preach the message of peace to Jews and Gentiles. In the cross he reconciled them to each other. He sent the Holy Spirit to all who believe. The Spirit opened the door to God's immediate presence. Here we see the Trinity's work in salvation. The Father developed a plan of grace for salvation through faith. The Son carried out the plan in his ministry to Jew and Gentile and in his death on the cross. The Spirit became the means of immediate access to God the Father.

2:19. Redeemed Jews and Gentiles are no longer estranged from each other but are fellow citizens of the kingdom of God. Race or nationality make no difference. All are redeemed people through Christ's cross. God's people represents the NIV interpretation of the Greek *hagion*, literally, "holy ones." Other interpreters see the holy ones as Israel, Jewish Christians, the first Christian generation, all believers, or the angels of heaven. The contrast may be between who the Gentiles were—aliens—and who they now are— kingdom citizens along with those who have always been kingdom citizens— Jews. In that case they have extended the meaning of holy ones so that it is no longer limited to Jews but also includes Gentiles, now meaning all believers. The reference could maintain the discussion of being seated in the heavenly realm and allude to the angels as other inhabitants there. Most likely, it is a general reference to people of God from all

generations and uses the contrast of the Gentiles' previous state to enhance the understanding of their present state. Alienated foreigners with no citizenship papers, they have joined the people of God with heavenly citizenship. Not only are they citizens of a heavenly kingdom, but they are also members of a spiritual family, God's household.

2:20. Paul switches to the metaphor of a building and declares that both Jews and Gentiles are "stones," as it were, of a building. The building rests on a solid foundation—the faith, testimony, and life of Christ's closest followers, his apostles. It also rests on the foundation of prophets. These are usually taken as New Testament prophets who proclaim and explain the Word of God. It may well include also the work of the Old Testament prophets in laying the foundation on which Christ built.

The key is not the foundation, however, but the cornerstone, a term taken from Isaiah 28:16 and probably interpreted in light of Psalm 118:22. The question is which building stone is meant: the cornerstone to which all other stones of the foundation are connected, or the capstone or keystone which is the last stone placed in the top of the structure over the gate. Isaiah 28:16 apparently refers to the foundation or cornerstone, but Psalm 118:22 may refer to the top keystone. Ephesians can be interpreted in light of either imagery, but the setting of Christ as head over all things (1:10,20-23) may point to the keystone interpretation as the most appropriate here.

2:21. The stones are forming a living, spiritual temple to glorify the Lord. In the Old Testament, the presence and glory of God inhabited a literal stone building. Now God dwells not in a stone building but in the hearts of believers. Christ is the unifying factor that takes the separate stones and creates a temple. This temple is holy, set apart for God. In this temple God receives worship and praise. The hearts of believers is thus the basic worship place in God's kingdom on earth.

2:22. Paul concludes with a pointed reminder to the Gentile Ephesians. They had no room or reason for self-pity. God included them. In Christ they are being built into God's temple along with the Jewish Christians. All together they form one worship center where God lives through the presence of his Spirit.

Cottonwood Creek Church

RELATIONSHIPS • TWO WAYS TO APPROACH JESUS • LUKE 7:36-50 • NO DATE

MAIN POINT

God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.

INTRODUCTION

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

Have you ever had an important person come to your home for dinner? What preparations did you make? How did you treat that person when they arrived?

Think of a time when you had to ask someone for forgiveness. How difficult was it to do? What made it so hard?

Pride is an obstacle that stands in the way of close friendships. Humility is the key to our relationships with others—including our relationship with Jesus. In Luke 7:36-50, two people interact with Jesus: 1) an outwardly religious man who had Jesus in his home but never came to truly know Him, and 2) a sinful woman who washed Jesus' feet with her tears and her hair and experienced His tenderness and forgiveness.

UNDERSTANDING

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

| HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ LUKE 7:36-39.

If you were to host Jesus in your home, how would you greet him at the door? What would you talk to Him about over dinner? What questions would you ask him?

What prevents you from getting to know Jesus better through prayer and the reading of His Word?

We are not told (as we are in other stories) that this Pharisee had any impure motives for inviting Jesus over. To his credit, he was willing to pay the necessary expenses to host Jesus and presumably Jesus' twelve disciples as well. The fact that they reclined at the table (v. 37) makes it clear that this was a formal occasion, not a casual meal. This Pharisee had an opportunity that many other Pharisees did not: he had the chance to truly get to know who Jesus was. He

had Jesus in his home, eating across from him. Think about what that must have been like! And yet, for all of his advantages, he still had a major obstacle that prevented him from truly getting to know Jesus: pride.

The pride of this Pharisee can be seen in a few different ways. His pride can be seen in the words he spoke to himself: “If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner” (v. 39). This man’s logic was wrong, and therefore his conclusion was wrong. He assumed that a true prophet would have no dealings with sinners, probably because he saw himself as righteous and had no dealings with sinners. His pride can also be seen in what Jesus later said about him: “I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet ... you gave me no kiss ... you did not anoint my head with oil” (vv. 44-46). In that culture, washing feet, giving a kiss, and pouring oil on the head were all ways that people would honor a guest—but the Pharisee did none of these things for Jesus. It is clear that the Pharisee was keeping Jesus at arm’s length. His pride was preventing him from truly getting to know the Savior.

| HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ LUKE 7:40-47.

Have you ever been deeply in debt but then paid it off through discipline and hard work? How did that make you feel? Did you feel a sense of accomplishment?

How would you feel if you owed someone \$100,000 and they suddenly forgave your debt? How would you feel toward that person? How would that change your life?

The key to humility is realizing how much you owe God and how much He has forgiven you. The woman in the story had a reputation for being a sinner. We are not told what kind of sin she had committed, but it was clear that everyone in the community, including herself, knew that she was a sinner. She could not deny it. So she approached Jesus with a spirit of humility. Her immense number of sins had been forgiven by Jesus, so she loved Him immensely.

Meanwhile, the Pharisee was apparently unwilling to admit all his sins, so he did not receive much forgiveness. Undoubtedly, as a pious Jew, this Pharisee regularly went to the temple to make sacrifices for his sin and believed, according to the Mosaic Law, he was forgiven of those sins (for example, see Lev. 5:1-6:7). But clearly he was blind to the pride in his heart and to the numerous sins that he committed every day.

| HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ LUKE 7:48-50.

How often do you come humbly before God, confessing your sins? What prevents you from doing so more often?

Are you walking humbly with God on a daily basis? How can you remind yourself daily of your need for God's mercy?

As a result of her humility, the woman received grace and mercy from the Savior. Over and over in Scripture, God makes it clear that the humble receive His blessings: "Towards the scornful he is scornful, but to the humble he gives favor" (Prov. 3:34). "But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word" (Isa. 66:2). "Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you" (Jam. 4:10). Numerous other verses could be cited here, but Jesus' words to this woman illustrate this truth perfectly: "Your sins are forgiven...Your faith has saved you; go in peace" (vv. 48, 50).

APPLICATION

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

What sins in your life are preventing you from growing closer to Jesus? Are you willing to confess those sins and receive His forgiveness?

Is there anyone at work, at school, or in your family whom you look down on? What is one way you can serve that person this week?

How will you seek to share Jesus' offer of forgiveness of sins with others this week?

PRAYER

Pray that God would give you a spirit of humility as you recognize the grace you have been shown in Christ.

COMMENTARY

| LUKE 7:36-50

7:36. Ironically, just after Jesus scolded the Pharisees for not accepting either John or himself, a Pharisee invited Jesus to have dinner (cf. 11:37; 14:1). Jesus did not play favorites. Pharisees accused him of being a party boy with the tax collectors and sinners, but he accepted dinner invitations from the Pharisees, too, without asking about their motives. At the dinner, he assumed the normal position of lying beside a low table propped on his arm with his feet pointing back away from the table.

7:37-38. An uninvited guest also appeared—a woman known only for her sins. This is a distinct event from the similar narrative in the other Gospels (Matt. 26:6-13; Mark 14:3-9; John 12:1-8). The meal was apparently a special, public celebration, possibly connected with the Sabbath or another Jewish festival. At such times outsiders could enter the open door, sit by the wall, watch, and perhaps beg for leftover scraps.

The woman came for a different purpose. She came to see Jesus. Not only to see, but also to anoint. She came believing in the saving purposes of Jesus and wanting to honor him. Some think she had previously received forgiveness, possibly through John's baptism, and wanted to express appreciation for it. Perhaps she simply knew of Jesus' ministry to the poor and needy and wanted to express her gratitude for what he was doing.

Whatever the precise motive, she came to honor Jesus. She carried an expensive perfume in an ornate perfume jar made of expensive alabaster. Moving to Jesus' side of the banquet room, she eased down beside his feet crying. Why did she cry? Sorrow for sin? Joy at seeing Jesus? Mixed emotions? Luke does not say. Having dampened Jesus' feet with her tears, she took down her hair to dry Jesus' feet. Then she kissed his feet, showing her strong emotions that led to this action. The kiss showed mixed emotions—gratitude, devotion, reverence, care.

After Jesus' feet were washed, she perfumed them, not with standard olive oil but with expensive perfume. Perhaps in the hubbub of the party, her actions had gone unnoticed. The strong scent of the perfume now called attention to her. How would people react to this sinful woman showing such affection for Jesus? How would Jesus react?

7:39. You could predict the Pharisee's reaction—horror that his honored guest would let a sinful woman touch him. Did not Jesus know who she was? Had he not heard of her bad reputation? Did not this new "prophet" have powers to see who this woman was? How could Jesus possibly let this continue without rebuke and dismissal?

7:40-43. Jesus displayed his prophetic powers in a different way. He read the mind of Simon. He told him a short parable. A banker loaned money to two men, two year's wages for one and two month's wages for another, a denarius being the standard daily wage for day laborers. Neither man could pay. Unexpectedly, the banker showed grace and removed the debts from their records. Each man went from hopeless bankruptcy to a new start in life. Obviously, both gained new affection for the banker. But Jesus had a crucial question: Which man loved the banker the most? Simon had a ready answer: the one with the larger debt. Of course, Jesus acknowledged the proper answer.

7:44-46. Then he turned the answer on Simon, comparing the sinful woman to the proud Pharisee. Anyone could guess how that comparison should turn out. Respected Simon had no fear of comparison with her. Then Jesus raised a new standard of comparison. In the flurry of party preparations, the host had forgotten the obvious act of politeness to his honored guest. He had not even had his dusty feet washed and dried. Nor had Simon greeted Jesus at the door with the common kiss on the cheek. Such acts were not mandatory for a host, but were quite frequently observed, especially for a guest of Jesus' stature.

Jesus took the comparison one step further. The woman had poured perfume on Jesus' feet, but Simon had not brought olive oil for anointing a guest's head (see Ps. 23:5; 141:5; Amos 6:6; Matt. 6:17; Luke 10:34). Such an act would show extreme respect and courtesy to the guest. Simon had shown neither. The woman had strained her resources to purchase expensive perfume, not for Jesus' head but for his feet. Who won out in the comparison?

7:47-50. Finally, Jesus was ready to make his point. Her many sins were forgiven. Jesus did not dispute the woman's condition with Simon. Both agreed how sinful she was. The question was how acceptable she was. Simon was repulsed at the sight of her presence. Jesus let her touch, kiss, and wash him. Why? Because she loved much. Because she was a human in need of divine grace. Because she needed what Jesus had to give—forgiveness and salvation. Ignoring any reply or reaction from Simon, Jesus spoke to the woman. Your sins are forgiven!

Now party guests gasped. How could anyone forgive sins? That was God's job. Who did this man Jesus claim to be? Again Jesus ignored them, focusing on the woman and her need: "Go on without worry. Your faith has saved you." Yes, Jesus the Savior's call for faith found a person ripe for the call. This was not a disciple of John the Baptist. Nor was she a religious leader in Israel. Nor was she a pious individual studying the Pharisees' decisions and seeking to obey their law. This was a woman, a sinner and an outcast. The least of these had become greater than the contemporary religious heroes. Only sinners answer the call for faith. Self-righteous people fail to see their need of it.

Cottonwood Creek Church

RELATIONSHIPS • WORDS THAT FLOW FROM THE HEART • LUKE 6:43-45 • NO DATE

MAIN POINT

Out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks.

INTRODUCTION

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

Is there anyone in your life who you struggle speaking kindly to? What is going on in your heart that causes you to speak so harshly or critically toward them?

What is the most effective way to change how we talk to people?

A popular trend in fast-food restaurants is the Coca-Cola Freestyle soda machine. Many restaurants are removing traditional soda machines with multiple dispensers and replacing them with the Freestyle machine, which has a single dispenser. Previously, if you wanted a different soda, you simply placed your cup under a different nozzle. But now, you can get over 100 different flavors of soda from the same nozzle! In the new machines, there are multiple sources of syrups connected to the same nozzle and a computer changes the combinations of source material coming out of that nozzle.

The words coming out of our mouths operate the same way that new soda machines do. In Luke 6:43-45, Jesus taught that what comes out of our mouths has its source in our hearts. If our hearts are full of love toward people, then loving words come out of our mouths. But if our hearts are full of criticism, then critical words come out.

UNDERSTANDING

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

| HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ LUKE 6:43-44.

If you have ever had a garden, what was your experience with your plants? Did all the plants produce the same amount? Did they all produce the same quality?

Was there any difference in the care you gave to the various plants in your garden that caused these differences?

How did Jesus connect the growth of various plants with the condition of our hearts in this passage?

As a Master Teacher, Jesus frequently used familiar things from everyday life to teach profound truths. True to form, in the first two verses of our passage, Jesus used an analogy from agriculture: “For no good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit, for each tree is known by its own fruit” (Luke 6:43). Any farmer or gardener knows that some plants produce more than others, and the quality of the produce can vary from plant to plant. The word “good” in this verse carries the meaning “useful,” and the word “bad” carries the meaning “useless.” For a farmer, the value of a tree is not based on how good it looks or how tall it is. A tree is only valuable (“good”) if it produces a quality crop.

Jesus drove His point home by saying, “For figs are not gathered from thornbushes, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush” (Luke 6:44). At this point, Jesus was not comparing trees of the same species that varied in the quality of their production. He took the analogy one step further by talking about entirely different species of plants! Thornbushes and bramble bushes were worthless plants to a farmer and often considered a nuisance. They produced nothing of value, so it would be foolish to expect to find figs or grapes growing on them. The source (the plant) determined whether or not anything of value was produced.

| HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ LUKE 6:45.

When was a time where you did something good that required careful planning?

When was a time from your childhood where you did something bad that required careful planning?

Just as things are in the plant world, so they are in the spiritual world: the source determines the product. The “heart” in Scripture refers to the inner being of a person: the seat of our emotions, thoughts, decisions, convictions, and commitments. In this passage, Jesus explained that people’s hearts are like treasuries or storehouses. You can either store up good things in your heart, or you can store up evil things. The wickedness of an evil person starts in their heart and only later manifests itself in their actions.

Good or evil stored up in a person’s heart manifests itself in several ways, but in Luke 6:43-45, Jesus focused on words: “Out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.” Because our words are evidence of what is going on in our hearts, Jesus said on another occasion that we will be judged for the words that come out of our mouths: “I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be

justified, and by your words you will be condemned” (Matt. 12:36-37). Since Jesus takes our words so seriously, we should consider how to make an effective change.

Think of a time when you struggled with a certain sinful behavior. Did you ever try to overcome that sin by just trying harder? If so, how did that turn out?

In your experience, how are lasting changes made when it comes to spiritual issues? Are you willing to provide an example from your own life?

A thornbush can't produce figs...unless God miraculously changes that thornbush into a fig tree. Similarly, a bramble bush can't produce grapes unless God supernaturally modifies it and turns it into a grapevine. In other words, we can't do this on our own. We need God to change us from the inside out.

Just as you can't give yourself a physical heart transplant, you can't give yourself a spiritual heart transplant either. We can't make lasting changes on our own. We need Christ to change us from the inside out.

APPLICATION

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

If you are consistently critical in your speech, what is going on in your heart that is causing you to say those words?

When considering your patterns of speech, where do you specifically feel that you need Christ to change your heart?

How will you act to submit this to Him and seek accountability from others in this area?

PRAYER

Pray that God would change your heart in order that your speech would glorify Him.

COMMENTARY

| LUKE 6:43-45

6:43-45. Go to the orchards. Look at the fruit trees—old trees, limbs just barely hanging on, leaves dried and withered, infested with bugs. What kind of fruit do you expect from trees like these? Then look at the strong tree—limbs rising to the sky, loaded with beautiful green leaves, no bugs

in sight. What kind of fruit will you look for on these trees? Now look in the mirror again. What kind of fruit do you expect from what you see there? Do you have a spiritual mirror to look at yourself? Does God's Word reflect back at you the kind of person you are and the kind of fruit you are bearing? You must fit some category. Fig tree or thornbush, grapevine or brier?

Listen carefully to fellow believers. Study God's Word diligently. Find out what category you are in. Get the real picture of the real you. Want to know what kind of person you are? Listen to yourself. God has a spiritual rule. You are what your heart is. An evil heart produces evil results. A good heart produces good results. How do you know what the heart is producing? Listen to the mouth. Your daily conversation issues from your heart.

Cottonwood Creek Church

RELATIONSHIPS • CLOSE FRIENDS • HEBREWS 10:23-25 • NO DATE

MAIN POINT

As we run the Christian race, we need Christian friends who share a common foundation, a common commitment, and a common culture.

INTRODUCTION

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

Think about a fire. Why do coals tend to go out when they are separated from each other?

Have you ever experienced a season of life when you were separated from Christian community for several weeks or months? What were the circumstances? How did that affect your walk with Christ?

Jesus once told His disciples, "You are the light of the world" (Matt. 5:14). However, like pieces of charcoal, if we are not in community with other believers, our "light" tends to go out. We start acting and thinking more like the world. We start to give in to temptations. Our devotion to Christ wavers. The Book of Hebrews was written to a group of Jewish Christians who had faced persecution and were being pressured to turn from Christ back to the practices of Judaism. The book is a call to persevere. Three verses from chapter 10 make it clear that a key to Christian perseverance is Christian community.

UNDERSTANDING

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

| HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ HEBREWS 10:23.

What are some examples of false teachings Christians are tempted to follow today?

What are some examples of sinful choices Christians are tempted to make today?

When a Christian adopts false teachings or gives in to temptation, how does that affect their walk with Christ?

In Hebrews 10:23, the biblical author called his readers to “hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering.” These Jewish Christians had been persecuted for their faith and were being tempted to turn back to the teachings and rituals of Judaism. Earlier in the book, the author pointed out how Jesus is superior to the angels (Heb. 1-2), superior to Moses and Joshua (Heb. 3-4), and superior to the sacrificial system and priesthood of the Old Testament (Heb. 5-10). Consequently, it made no sense to turn back to the inferior system and practices of Judaism.

Instead, these Christians needed to hold onto the teachings (or “confession”) of the church, and to do so “without wavering.” The prophet Elijah once asked the Israelites, “How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him” (1 Kgs. 18:21). The Israelites of Elijah’s day were “wavering” between following the true God and following a false one. In a similar way, Christians today are tempted by the world to abandon the clear teachings of Scripture and to compromise. Some Christians give in to that temptation and consequently “limp” their way through life, like the ancient Israelites.

| HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ HEBREWS 10:24.

What are some ways that our small group can “stir up one another to love and good works”?

How can we as a church work together to share God’s love with the world? What are some current outreach events that our church is doing? How can we as a small group get involved in those activities?

In the next verse, the author of Hebrews took things one step further: “let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works” (Heb. 10:24). As Christians, we are called not only to believe in the gospel, but also to carry out the work of God. Paul once wrote, “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:10). Loving others and carrying out good works that benefit others are natural next steps after salvation.

The Greek word used for “stir up” is related to the word used to describe Paul’s emotions when he visited the city of Athens: “his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols” (Acts 17:16). That emotion drove Paul to share the gospel boldly in that city. In a similar way, we need to be motivating one another to carry out acts of love and good deeds. When we come together as Christians, we are not here just to learn more about God together. That knowledge should translate into action.

| HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ HEBREWS 10:25.

What are some common reasons why Christians today refuse to come to church?

How does being with other believers help you in your Christian walk?

Finally, the author of Hebrews exhorted his readers to continue to meet together regularly: “not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another” (v. 25). Christians need other Christians. Just as a single piece of charcoal will dim and cool when it is separated from the others, a Christian’s light will dim when we are separated from other Christians. Our passion for “love and good works” (v. 24) cools when we are not around other believers who are excited to do the work. Our faith in Christ wavers and doubts creep in when we are spiritually isolated. There is a reason why many churches emphasize “accountability groups.” We need other Christians to hold us accountable to stay faithful.

APPLICATION

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

Based on this passage, how important is it for you to be part of a Christian community?

Who are your closest friends? Do those friends inspire you to greater acts of love for God and for others, or do they pull you away from following Christ?

What are some practical ways we can “stir up one another to love and good works” this week?

PRAYER

Pray and thank God for the gift of Christian community through the local church. Ask for further means to stir one another up to love and good works, that you might persevere until the return of Christ.

COMMENTARY

| HEBREWS 10:23-25

10:23. This exhortation appeals to us to maintain spiritual consistency. We are urged to hold firmly to the hope we profess. This hope offers glory which beamed more brightly than the glories of the old order. Unswervingly denotes an object which stands absolutely straight, not

departing from the perpendicular. We are to lay hold of Christ and never let go, even in the slightest. No persecution, real or feared, was to lessen the ardor of these believers for Christ.

Is it really possible to live unswervingly? If holding on to the promises depended on personal commitment, we would all be in trouble. God is faithful to provide strength and stamina for endurance. His faithful character is beyond all doubt. In his strength we hold on unswervingly. We will read heroic examples of spiritual steadfastness in chapter 11.

10:24. This exhortation calls us to responsibility to one another. The appeal to consider demands concentrated attention. The goal of this attention was to spur one another on toward love and good deeds. As Christians we have a corporate responsibility. We must help others who stumble and falter. We must concentrate on the needs of others and not on our individual salvation only.

We can spur people toward either good or bad works. Hebrews calls us to lead others to a practical expression of love and an attractive display of unselfish deeds.

The three important virtues of faith, hope, and love are mentioned in three consecutive verses (see 1 Cor. 13:13). Faith provides assurance. Hope promises an incentive to obedience. Love provides a foundation for prodding believers to godly living.

10:25. To spur other believers forward in the Christian life, followers of Christ must meet together. Some of the readers of Hebrews were neglecting to meet together for worship, and this limited their ability to give and receive encouragement toward good works.

Christians who meet together with the aim of promoting godliness and love for one another can be remarkably successful in their ventures. Regular fellowship with believers is an essential ingredient in Christian growth. The readers of Hebrews knew that the Day of Christ's return was drawing near. The closeness of this day compelled them to stimulate one another in an outburst of energy and concern.

Persecution may have led some believers to drop out of the fellowship. The remedy they needed was to begin meeting again. The verses following in 26-31 showed the final outcome of neglecting to meet with other believers. Such careless living could produce a contempt for Jesus and a renunciation of Christianity.

Cottonwood Creek Church

RELATIONSHIPS • HOW TO HANDLE CONFLICT • JAMES 4:1-12 • NO DATE

MAIN POINT

When we are tempted to fight with other brothers and sisters in the church because of unmet desires we should seek to humbly submit to God, trusting Him to give us what is best.

INTRODUCTION

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

Think of the last time you were sinfully angry at someone. Do you consider that sin to be on the same level as what Cain did to Abel in Genesis 4? Based on Matthew 5:21-22, what would Jesus say about that sin?

How can we handle disagreements and conflicts in a biblical way?

Thankfully, not all fights end in murder but, just like with Cain, fights often lead to anger. And according to Jesus, being angry with your brother is just as sinful as murdering him: “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment” (Matt. 5:21-22).

UNDERSTANDING

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

| HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ JAMES 4:1-5.

Is it possible to desire the right thing the wrong way? Explain.

Think of a recent conflict you had with someone. What was at the root of that conflict? What did you or the other person desire that you could not get?

Is there currently anything in your life that you desire for selfish reasons?

In verse 1, James traced all quarrels to the fact that “your passions are at war within you.” In the next few verses, he made it clear that these desires (“passions”) were selfish ones. The believers wanted what someone else had (“covet,” v. 2). Similarly, Cain’s passions or desires caused him to quarrel with his brother. Cain coveted what Abel had.

James's readers were asking God for things so that they could use them for their own advantage ("you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions," v. 3). In other words, they were being greedy. They were acting like the world, and thus were becoming friends of the world. This led James to point out, "Whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God" (v. 4). Similarly, Jesus once said, "No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money" (Matt. 6:24).

| HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ JAMES 4:11-12.

Read Matthew 7:1-5. Based on that passage, how can we avoid judging people inappropriately?

Is there anyone in your life whom you have condemned, either privately in your heart or publicly to others? Do you know all the facts in the situation? Are you able to accurately evaluate that person's motives?

In order to speak critically against someone, you first have to judge them, so James addressed that issue as well: "The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law." A common misconception today is that the New Testament teaches that all judging is wrong, but this is not the case. Elsewhere in the New Testament, believers are instructed to judge whether or not someone is a false teacher (Matt. 7:16) or judge a believer who is unrepentant (1 Cor. 5:9-13). Paul even instructed believers to judge civil disputes between Christians (1 Cor. 6:1-6). On the other hand, the type of judging James addressed here was prohibited by both James and Jesus (see Matt. 7:1).

In Matthew 7:1-5, Jesus said that the best way to avoid judging people inappropriately is to keep a humble attitude. Take a good look at your own faults before you point out the faults of others. When we judge others, we do just the opposite: we focus on their sin and turn a blind eye to our sin. James wrapped up this section by saying, "There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy" (v. 12). There is only one Person who has the right to sit in the judgment seat, and we are not Him.

| HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ JAMES 4:6-10.

Has God ever used you to diffuse a conflict? What changed in your heart to bring about resolution?

Is it possible to only do some of these commands, or do they all work together in unison?

In verses 7 through 10, James gave ten commands to help us regain a proper posture toward God and others. They can be organized under three statements: 1. Reach for God (3 commands): "Submit yourselves therefore to God...Draw near to God...Humble yourselves before the Lord." 2. Repent of sin (6 commands): "Cleanse your hands...purify your hearts...Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom." 3. "Resist the devil" (1 command).

These commands are accompanied by promises. When we resist the devil, "he will flee from you" (v. 7). When we draw near to God, "he will draw near to you" (v. 8). When we humble ourselves before the Lord, "he will exalt you" (v. 10). Humility replaces our selfish desires with God's desires. Instead of seeking our own ends, we start seeking God's ends. Instead of striving to bring about the result we want, we trust God to give us exactly what we need.

APPLICATION

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

Are there currently any major conflicts happening in our church? If not, think back to the last conflict within our church. Based on this passage, how would God have us handle such conflicts?

How does handling conflict in the way James exhorted stand in contrast to the wisdom of the world?

How can handling conflict in a God honoring way serve as a gospel witness to those outside the church?

PRAYER

Pray that God would lead you to handle conflict in a way that honors Him and others.

COMMENTARY

| JAMES 4:1-12

4:1 While pride and selfishness are natural to fallen humanity and often serve as a basis for advancement in worldly rank, James names them as the source of wars and fights within the congregation. "Wars and fights" indicates physical conflict among members and/or factions

within the congregation. The source of conflict was the cravings...at war within you. "Cravings" refers to the pleasures of life, the pursuit of which leads to conflicts.

4:2-3 Two statements distinguished by paired opposites (desire...do not have and murder and covet...cannot obtain) and two direct assertions (fight and war and do not have because you do not ask) describe the problem to which the circumstances had led. People were actually killing one another to appease their misplaced desires! Their desires were unappeased because they were asking with wrong motives. The source of conflict was selfish desire and envy run amok (3:13-18).

4:4-5 Adulteresses refers to the congregation's unfaithfulness to God. Self-centeredness is cast as diametric opposition (hostility) to God. The phrase the Spirit who lives in us yearns jealously plays off "the cravings...at war within you" in verse 1, demonstrating the difference in attitude between a Spirit-filled life and one enslaved by selfish cravings.

4:6 The phrase but He gives greater grace introduces the main point—God's grace is able to overcome unfaithfulness. The exhortation to repent is backed by a stark reality expressed in Pr 3:34 and quoted here by James: God resists the proud. "Resist" is a military term used to describe an army arrayed for battle. To remain in sinful pride is to invite God's battle array against you. In contrast to this, God gives grace to the humble (1:17).

4:7-9 James issued ten commands needed to resolve the conflict within the congregation. The theme is repentance and forgiveness. The use of imperatives followed by and suggests that the result of each command is conditioned by the response to it, which yields the idea, "if you do X, then Y results." "Submit to God" carries the idea of self-humbling; "resist the devil" suggests an active resistance against temptation. Sinners and double-minded people are parallel ideas that characterize both the teachers and the congregation. "Double-minded" recalls the doubter of 1:8.

4:10 The words humble yourselves...and He will exalt you summarize the path to having forgiveness from God as well as reconciliation among members of the congregation.

4:11-12 Criticism is malicious, judgmental speech toward others. It violates the "royal law" (2:8) and by extension the Mosaic law. Since the One who gave the law also judges according to it, there are never grounds for critical speech directed toward another member of the congregation.

Cottonwood Creek Church

RELATIONSHIPS • FORGIVENESS AS A WAY OF LIFE •

MATTHEW 6:14-15; MATTHEW 18:21-35; LUKE 23:33-36 • NO DATE

MAIN POINT

Since God forgives us for all the times we sin against Him, we should be willing to forgive others of the comparatively few times they sin against us.

INTRODUCTION

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

Think of a time when you asked for forgiveness from someone. Did the other person forgive you? How did that make you feel? How did that affect your relationship?

Why is forgiveness such a powerful force in our relationships?

Forgiveness is a powerful force. When forgiveness is given, healing is made possible and lives are rebuilt. When forgiveness is withheld, wounds are left open and lives are destroyed. The words “I forgive you” are some of the most powerful words in the world. In fact, Jesus once said that our willingness to forgive others determines God’s willingness to forgive us.

UNDERSTANDING

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

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

Is it hard or easy to forgive someone? Why?

Based on these passages, how important is it for us to forgive others? Why is it so important?

In some places in the New Testament, the Greek word used here for “forgive” is translated as “leave.” For example, the same word was used in Matthew 4:20 when Peter and Andrew “left their nets” and followed Jesus. Paul used the same word to refer to “divorce” in 1 Corinthians 7:11-13. So the word “forgive” in Matthew 6 is related to the idea of leaving or forsaking something. When you forgive someone, you abandon your right to seek retribution or revenge.

In the previous few verses, Jesus provided His disciples with a model prayer that included this statement: “Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.” Note the past tense that occurs in that sentence: “as we also have forgiven ...” The pattern Jesus described is this: first, we forgive other people of the ways they have sinned against us; second, we go to God to ask him to forgive us of the ways we have sinned against Him. Jesus taught this pattern in various ways during His earthly ministry.

| HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ MATTHEW 18:21-35.

Were you surprised to learn how the two amounts in the parable compared (160,000 years’ worth of wages versus four months’ worth)? How does that impact your understanding of the parable?

How hard is it for you to forgive someone? How often do you hold grudges? How long does it take for you to forgive?

Jesus also taught this principle of forgiveness in the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant. What prompted this was a question from Peter: “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” Jesus taught that the number should be unlimited when He replied: “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.” Jesus then explained this concept further through the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant.

Jesus’ words in Matthew 6:14-15 give us one way to test our salvation: “If you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.” The point that Jesus made is that a true Christian has certain characteristics. A born-again follower of Christ who has been washed clean and has the Holy Spirit dwelling inside them will walk in the light, confess their sin, and forgive others. If one or more of those characteristics is missing from someone’s life, that person should take a long, hard look at whether or not they are truly saved.

| HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ LUKE 23:33-36.

Think back to a time when someone hurt you. How hard was it to forgive them?

Now think of Jesus’ experience on the cross. How hard do you think it was for Him to forgive?

Jesus practiced what He preached. There are numerous examples where Jesus forgave someone’s sin, but the most amazing one is found in Luke 23:33-36. Although He was innocent, Jesus was hanging on the cross, experiencing an immense amount of pain, and bearing the

punishment for our sin. Jesus had every right to be angry. He was being unjustly abused and executed. But what did Jesus say? “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” He was doing exactly what He had taught others to do: love and pray for your enemies (Matt. 5:44).

Jesus set an example we can never perfectly follow. Take comfort in the fact that God is gracious: “He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. ... For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust” (Psa. 103:10, 14). If you are currently struggling in this area, that’s normal. It’s OK to be in process. It’s only when we are stubbornly unwilling to forgive someone that we should stop and consider whether or not we are truly saved. A Christian’s life should be characterized by forgiveness. So forgive often.

APPLICATION

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

Is there anyone in your life right now you need to forgive? What is holding you back from forgiveness? Would it be helpful to talk to a pastor or Christian counselor about it?

Is your life characterized by forgiveness? If not, are you willing to humble yourself before God and ask Him to change you? Reach out to a Christian friend or mentor this week to ask for help.

How does living a life characterized by forgiveness point others to the truth of the gospel?

PRAYER

Pray that God would help you forgive others as He has forgiven you in Christ.

COMMENTARY

| MATTHEW 6:14-15

6:14-15. These verses further exhort the kingdom servant concerning the necessity of forgiveness in human relationships if we expect God’s forgiveness. These verses, and 18:21-35, explain 6:12. Receiving God’s forgiveness motivates forgiveness toward others.

Jesus expects us to replace this specific petition with more personalized requests for forgiveness for the specific sins in our own lives. No “meaningless repetition” here. Jesus’ intention might be better reflected if our Bibles printed his words of petition followed by a large

white space, leaving room for us to “fill in the blanks” with our own personal sins. The petitions as he has given them guide us to the important themes for prayer, but he expects us to personalize these principles in our own lives.

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. If the preceding request for forgiveness is curative spiritual medicine, then this request is the preventative medicine. Forgiveness is required to deal with guilt already incurred. Deliverance from temptation and evil is required to prevent our incurring future guilt. The kingdom servant’s petition for both forgiveness and deliverance is a prayer dealing with the power of sin (1 John 1:7-9); both look forward to the day when we will escape the presence of sin.

The kingdom servant who matures and grows in purity and obedience should rely less and less on the prayer for forgiveness and more and more on the prayer for protection. In this life, the kingdom servant will have need for ongoing forgiveness, but the many lessons learned will help in avoiding the traps of temptation in later life. Believers must never let down their guard. We find many exhortations in the New Testament to stay awake and watchful (e.g., Matt. 24:42; 25:13; 26:41).

We will follow the Lord’s example in prayer if we pray regularly for specific spiritual dangers of which we are aware. Perhaps there is a particular area of temptation to avoid, or a particular person who is a stumbling block, or a trial looming in our future. God is interested in the details, and we will recognize his answers more clearly if we have made specific requests.

| MATTHEW 18:21-35

18:21-22 Although forgiving someone only seven times seems stingy, this standard was generous considering the fact that some rabbis required their students to forgive offenders only three times. Interpreters dispute whether Jesus demanded forgiving one’s brother 77 times or 490 times (70 times 7), but Jesus’ point was that forgiveness should be unlimited when true repentance is present.

18:23-27 In Jewish parables, a king symbolizes God and to settle accounts symbolizes divine judgment. The 10,000 talents was equivalent to a billion day’s worth of peasant wages. This was more money than was circulating in all of Palestine. The talent was the largest unit of currency (equivalent to approximately 6,000 days’ worth of wages) and 10,000 is the highest single number that can be expressed in Greek. Thus we see that in this allegory the sum represents the sinner’s hopeless debt to God. Selling the debtor, his family, and possessions would hardly begin to recoup this debt. Forgiving such a loan is an astounding act of grace.

18:28-31 One hundred denarii was equivalent to three months of wages. This was negligible compared to the first slave's debt to the king. The contrast between the 10,000 talents and the 100 denarii shows that the sins of others against us are trivial in comparison to the enormity of our own sins against God. The drudge begged the slave to be patient just as the slave had begged before the king, but the drudge was more honest in his pleas and promises since his debt was actually manageable.

18:32-35 The parable's point is now revealed. Since God has shown believers such great mercy by pardoning their sins, they should in turn forgive the sins of others from their heart. The word jailers literally means "torturers." The debtor's torture would continue until the debt was paid in full. Since the debt could not possibly be repaid, the torture symbolizes eternal punishment.

| LUKE 23:33-36

23:32-33 Being executed between two... criminals fulfilled the prophecy of Isa 53:12, as well as Jesus' words in Lk 22:37. The place where Jesus was crucified was called The Skull. In Aramaic, the name is Golgotha. The Latin equivalent is Calvary.

23:34 Jesus forgave His executioners because they acted in ignorance of who He really was. Some early manuscripts do not include the first part of this verse. The phrase they divided His clothes and cast lots fulfilled Ps 22:18.

23:35-39 Four different groups (the people in general, the leaders, the soldiers, and one of the criminals being crucified) scoffed at Jesus and challenged Him to save Himself. None of them believed that Jesus was the Messiah... the King of the Jews, even though the official inscription above His head on the cross charged Him with posing as "the King of the Jews.