



Living to Others

AN INTRODUCTION TO
COVENANT GROUPS

by Aaron Menikoff

IT'S TIME TO GROW IN GRACE

If you are reading this, it's probably because you've decided to be part of a Covenant Group at mvbc. I'm really glad you did! We have a lot of good work to do together.

Being a Christian implies belonging to a community. Your engagement in a Covenant Group is a great way to get involved in the lives of others. In this study, I want you to think about why this is so important and what it might look like. J. C. Ryle wrote, "We cannot live to ourselves only in this world." He understood that every Christian is to spend his life living to others. That's really what this study is about.

A Covenant Group is a meeting where members come together to disciple each other. Discipleship is not limited to Covenant Groups—not at all. But in these small groups, we are committed to helping each other grow in knowledge and grace. When Peter ended his second letter, he encouraged the believers to "grow in grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 3:18). If there were a key verse for our Covenant Groups, this might be it. A Covenant Group is a place to fill our hearts with glorious truth about Jesus—that's *knowledge*. But the overarching goal of all this knowledge is that we depend more deeply on God as the all-sufficient Provider of everything we need—that's *grace*.

Think about the people in your Covenant Group. (Really, picture their faces). These very people need to grow in knowledge and grace. You are a gift from God to them and they to you. You are in each other's lives to help one another grow in grace. How do you need to grow?

Take a moment to take stock of your spiritual health. How are you doing? Maybe you became a Christian a long time ago. For whatever reason, Jesus seems distant. Maybe you are struggling to feel the depth of his mercy and peace. Maybe you are a relatively new Christian who is really excited about following Christ, but you are a bit unsure of what it all means. Maybe you're in a real sweet spot in your Christian life. You are growing and eager to share what God is doing in your life. It doesn't matter where you are in your Christian journey. If you belong to God, he will use you to help others grow in grace.

My prayer is that God will use this introductory study to prepare you to give the most and get the most out of the Covenant Group.

Study Questions

Read 2 Peter 3:14–18. What does Peter mean by "grow in grace" (v. 18)?

Read Philemon 1–7. How did Philemon refresh the hearts of the saints?

How are you doing spiritually?

A SMALL GROUP PRIMER

Small groups, as we know them in the church today, are a relatively modern phenomenon. Though small groups of Christians have always spent time together for encouragement and accountability (read Acts 2), it wasn't until the late 20th century that churches began to organize these groups. There are a couple of reasons for this. First, there was the rise of the megachurch. It's hard to feel connected when you gather with hundreds, even thousands of people on Sunday morning. Small groups were a way to make large churches seem smaller. Second, there was the rise of the megalopolis. Big cities and good cars mean we can easily live far away from one another and still be part of the same church family. But distance can make it difficult to connect with each other regularly. In short, small groups became popular because of growing churches and cities.

The relative novelty of small groups should teach us that they are not essential to our life together in a local church. Discipleship is essential (Matt. 28:19). Small groups are simply a permissible and practical means to the biblical end of discipleship. The author of Hebrews makes that very clear: "But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called, 'today,' that none may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin" (Heb. 3:13). Christians are commanded to be in each other's lives so that we can help one another resist temptation.

It's easy to forget just how dangerous sin is. We're prone to let our spiritual guard down. A police officer who patrols the sketchy part of town every night may soon forget just how dangerous the streets really are. But a good officer will stay alert. The same is true for the Christian. Every day we face all sorts of trials and temptations, and they can wear us down. That's why God has given us the church. These brothers and sisters are to keep us alert so that we may live holy lives pleasing to God.

You don't have to be in a Covenant Group. You must, however, have other believers in your life to help you wage war against your sin. It often seems like much of my job as a pastor is simply showing others from Scripture that God doesn't call us to live the Christian life alone. I'll say more below, but for now, understand that Covenant Groups are a *practical means* to the *biblical end* of Christian discipleship.

Study Questions

Read Hebrews 3:7–4:1. Describe the danger the Israelites faced in the wilderness.

What kind of rest is the author referring to (vv. 3:11, 18; 4:1)?

How are you most tempted to be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin (v. 13)? Is there a particular sin that you find yourself most hardened to?

How has God used other believers to exhort you to fight sin?

Are you more likely to be too dependent on or too distant from other believers?



FIVE BIG IDEAS FOR CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

I love watching basketball. (I enjoy playing, too, but it is a very humbling experience.) I appreciate that a good basketball team is made up of five players committed to working together. Each athlete has to set the proper pick, go after the loose ball, and hustle back on defense. Jack Ramsey, who led the Portland Trailblazers to their *only* NBA championship (sigh), famously said, “Teams that play together beat those teams with superior players who play more as individuals.” Like those five players who know how to put the team first, the church needs members willing to serve the body as a whole rather than playing as individuals.

To understand what I mean, you need to grasp the following five big ideas for Christian community. If you embrace these five ideas, then you are well on your way to understanding just how useful Christian discipleship in general, and Covenant Groups in particular, can be. So grab a cup of coffee, open up your Bible, and consider what it looks like to be called to Christian community.

1. The call to Christian community is a call to come and die.

³⁴ And he called to him the crowd with his disciples and said to them, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ³⁵ For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it. ³⁶ For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his life? ³⁷ For what can a man give in return for his life? ³⁸ For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

—Mark 8:34–38 (ESV)

Look closely at verse 34. Jesus spoke these words after announcing that he must suffer, be killed, and then be raised from the dead (Mark 8:31). Peter refused to accept the idea that Jesus had to suffer. Jesus wanted his disciples to understand that not only must *he* suffer, but anyone who follows him must suffer as well. This is the cost of discipleship.

Of course, we must not forget that salvation is a free gift from God. None of us can boast that we have done anything to deserve God’s favor. We have all been graciously saved through God’s work on our behalf (Eph. 2:1–10). The gospel is *good* news because we didn’t do anything to deserve it.

Yes, salvation is free, but the life it brings is costly. What did Jesus mean when he told his disciples they had to carry their cross? The cross was a first-century method of capital punishment. To carry your cross is to die. But die to what? First, we die to our desires. To be a Christian is to submit your will to God’s (Matt. 6:10). Second, we die to our ambition. To be a Christian is to follow Christ—he is the pacesetter now (1 Pet. 2:21). Third, we die to our sin. We can no longer live the way we did before we submitted our lives to Christ. We must walk in the holiness that Jesus modeled (Gal. 2:20).

What does this have to do with Christian community? Those who follow Christ will inevitably put others before themselves. Being part of a Covenant Group shouldn’t fundamentally be about what you can gain, but what you can give. There is nothing more radical than being a Christian. It presses us into the messy details of one another’s lives. We refuse to live for ourselves, and agree to roll up our sleeves and live life together, for another.

Study Questions

How have you carried your cross in order to follow Christ?

How hard is it for you to let others help you?

How hard is it for you to help others?

2. The call to Christian community is a call to share the righteousness of God.

21 But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—²² the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵ whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. ²⁶ It was to show God's righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. ²⁷ Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith. ²⁸ For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.

—Romans 3:21–28 (ESV)

In Romans 1:1–3:20, Paul establishes that when it comes to our sin, we are without excuse. We all deserve God's wrath and judgment. We come into the world as unrighteous sinners who are unable and unwilling to glorify God.

But verses 21–28 of chapter three tell us that there is a way for the unrighteous to become righteous. It is through “faith in Jesus Christ” (v. 22). By God's grace, through this faith, we are “justified,” which means we are declared righteous. Because of Jesus' death in our place, when God looks at us, he no longer sees an unrighteous enemy, he now sees a holy friend. When we respond to the gospel in faith, God gives us a righteousness that wasn't ours. That's why theologians have called it an “alien” righteousness—it's a righteousness that belongs to God, it's a righteousness we didn't deserve, it's a precious gift.

So, what does this have to do with Christian community? When we gather together as the whole church or simply as a smaller group of brothers and sisters in Christ, the only thing we all have in common is *this* alien righteousness. When mothers enjoy one another's company it's because they share motherhood. When fans meet up to cheer their favorite team it's because they share a passion for the game. When voters gather to support their candidate, it's because they share a commitment to that politician. But what do believers share when they gather? One thing: the righteousness of God.

Think of those in your Covenant Group. What do you share with them? You may all have different jobs, different interests, and different backgrounds. But each of you has been transformed by the glorious gospel of God. And through this gospel, God has given you his righteousness. That's the main thing we all share—this makes us family. When you come together, give thanks to God for the righteousness that we now have in common.

Study Questions

How would you explain how God saved you?

Read Romans 3:21–28. What do you share with every Christian?

What are some ways you can remind others that the gospel unites?

How have you seen the gospel bring different people together?

3. The call to Christian community is a call to keep Jesus central.

¹¹ Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called “the uncircumcision” by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands—¹² 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. ¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴ For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility ¹⁵ by abolishing the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace...

—Ephesians 2:11–15 (ESV)

In this passage Paul elaborates on the result of the free gift of God’s grace. The distinction between Jew and Gentile is gone because of grace. Gentiles can now be God’s people! According to Paul they “have been brought near by the blood of Christ” (v. 13). Now, because of Jesus’ blood spilt for sinners, there is “one new man” (v. 15). Paul is saying that Jesus Christ brings us together. That’s why the call to Christian community is a call to keep Jesus central.

Imagine there was a young man named Ben who really wants to date a young woman named Sarah. Ben thinks they are meant for one another. However, there is a problem: Sarah’s protective, older brother, Sam. Sam doesn’t want his younger sister to get attached to the wrong guy and to get hurt. Ben knows that the only way he can get close to Sarah is through Sam. So Ben invites Sam to lunch and presents his case for why he thinks he and Sarah might make a good couple. Sarah is very thankful for a brother who loves her enough to bridge the gap between her and a potential suitor. Ben can only get to Sarah *through* Sam.

What does this have to do with Christian community? Jesus is our older brother. Through him, we can come together in Christian community. Without Jesus we are lost in our sin, and this sin makes real fellowship impossible. Without the wall-breaking gospel of Jesus we will inevitably put our own interests above those of others. We will look at others as objects who may or may not meet our needs. But when Christ changes our hearts, he literally changes how we view other people. Our whole approach is renewed. We now come to each other through Jesus, eager to help one another grow in grace.

Do you see how important this big idea is? The only way we can have true community is through Jesus. That means we can’t make community our priority, we have to make Jesus our priority. If we pursue community for the sake of fellowship, we will be disappointed. We will still look at others as objects to be used to make us feel comfortable and supported. But if we pursue Jesus for the sake of his glory, we will be drawn to others

with the same goal in mind. God the Father knits us together as we prize his Son, Jesus Christ. We have to keep him central. It is Jesus who brings us together. Let’s not make an idol out of community. Instead, let’s keep our eyes on Jesus, the one who makes community a reality.

Study Questions

What are some ways we can become too focused on community?

How can we keep Jesus central in our lives and Covenant Group?

How would you describe what it looks like to approach someone *through* Jesus?

4. The call to Christian community is a call to rely on the Spirit at work in the gospel.

¹ And I, when I came to you brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. ² For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. ³ And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, ⁴ and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, ⁵ that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

—1 Corinthians 2:1–5 (ESV)

Paul approached the church in Corinth very carefully. First, he made sure not to overwhelm them with his intellect or his rhetoric (v. 1). Second, he refused to distract them with silly conversation (v. 2). Third, he did not intimidate them with hubris and arrogance, but modeled humility (v. 3). Paul’s overarching goal was to make sure that these believers put their faith in the power of God (v. 5). How did Paul do this? He relied upon the Spirit of God to work through the preaching of the gospel (v. 4).

How can a contractor make sure he does a good job building a house? He has to trust that his education, experience, and employees will provide for him the necessary resources. But building a home is different than building a church. A congregation may be full of people with the right education and tons of experience, but unless God is at work through his Spirit, our work is in vain. This is the idea behind two other important passages:

Psalm 127:1, *“Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain.”*

1 Cor. 15:58, *“Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.”*

God is ultimately the one who builds the church. We are called to trust him to knit us together into a family of faith.

And what is true of the whole body of Christ is true of a Covenant Group. The quality of your group isn’t finally dependent upon the expertise of your leader or the ambiance of the home. Though these details are important, what really matters is God’s Spirit at work through the gospel.

Your Covenant Group should not be a place where the gospel is assumed. Rather, the focus of your time should be meditating on and applying the gospel to one another’s lives. God’s Spirit works where his gospel is preached.

Study Questions

How have you seen the Spirit at work in your life?

Why are we tempted to rely on ourselves instead of his Spirit?

What makes a good Covenant Group?

What are some practical ways that a Covenant Group can rely upon the Holy Spirit?

5. The call to Christian community is a call to care for each other.

⁴ I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, ⁵ because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and all the saints, ⁶ and I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ. ⁷ For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.

— Philemon 4–7 (ESV)

It appears that the Lord used Paul to save Philemon. Having become a Christian, Philemon invested his life in other believers. He opened up his home, shared his faith, and generally encouraged his brothers and sisters in Christ. Philemon was quick to lavish love on all he met and, as a result, Paul commended him with these words, “the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.”

I didn’t spend any considerable time with Christians until I was a teenager in high school. These believers thoroughly amazed me. I could tell they were different. They spoke differently, spent their time differently, and loved differently. I found their example compelling. When I finally came across John 13:35, I understood God’s plan, “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” Clearly, Philemon was marked by this kind of love.

It’s far too easy for churches to minimize the importance of caring for each other. We spend so much time doing the work of the ministry—preaching the Word, sharing the gospel, supporting missions—that we may be tempted to neglect those doing this work. Please don’t misunderstand me. I’m not saying for one second that we should pull back from preaching and evangelizing. Not at all! But if we fail to love one another in the process then we have missed the point. “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal” (1 Cor. 13:1).

As you begin your Covenant Group, please make it your goal to be like Philemon and refresh the hearts of the saints. How? First, by holding your brothers and sisters accountable, getting to know them well enough to encourage them to live holy lives in a sin-wrecked world (see Heb. 3:12–14; 10:24–26; 1 John 3:16–18; and James 2:14–17). Participation in a Covenant Group is one way we can communicate to others that we need help and that we are willing to give help.

Second, by having gospel-centered conversations. It’s so easy to allow our communication with one another to be dominated by the weather, work, kids, or sports. But the culture of a Covenant Group should be such that it’s natural to talk about what the Lord is doing in your life.

Third, by spurring each other toward evangelism. One of the best ways to care for your Christian friends is by encouraging them to make

much of Christ in their lives. This means challenging them to make Christ known in their neighborhoods and their families. Consider spending some time each meeting praying for non-Christians in your lives who are in desperate need of the gospel.

Fourth, by agreeing to make a regular investment in each others lives outside of the Covenant Group time. This may be through phone calls, emails, texts, and outings. No one expects (or wants) your circle of friends to be limited to your Covenant Group, but take advantage of this season together to particularly comfort and love this small group of people.

Suffice it to say that it is a real privilege to be part of a Covenant Group. Please take your participation seriously. Be faithful, prayerful, and ready to share the comfort and love that come from knowing Christ.

Study Questions

How did Philemon refresh the saints he knew? Share an example of a Christian who cared for you in a time of need.

Brainstorm some practical ways you can be at work encouraging the brothers and sisters in your Covenant Group.

Relationships take time to develop. What can you do to speed up the process?

MOVING FORWARD

These five big ideas are at the heart of what Covenant Groups are about. As you head into this year of sharing life together, remember that the call to Christian community is a call to come and die. It's a call to share the righteousness of God. It's a call to keep Jesus central. It's a call to rely on the Spirit at work in the gospel. Finally, it's a call to care for each other. I pray that through your time together, God would gift you with relationships that last a lifetime.

In this study I've cited several key verses that you will want to return to in the year ahead. All of them point us away from selfish independence toward lavish interdependence. God has called us together. This is a messy, but wonderful reality.

It's far too easy to underestimate how influential you can be in another believer's life. I love the following exhortation offered by J. C. Ryle in his classic book, *Holiness*. He explains that the example we set can be wonderful evidence of the power of the gospel:

We cannot live to ourselves only in this world. Our lives will always be doing either good or harm to those who see them. They are a silent sermon, which all can read. It is sad indeed when they are a sermon for the devil's cause, and not for God's. I believe that far more is done for Christ's kingdom by the holy living of believers than we are at all aware of. There is a reality about such living that makes men feel, and obliges them to think. It carries a weight and influence with it that nothing else can give. It makes religion beautiful, and draws men to consider it, like a lighthouse seen afar off.

Ryle is right. "We cannot live to ourselves only in this world." We have to live for the sake of others. Moving forward, may this year include a devotion to Christ *and* to your brothers and sisters in Christ.

Study Questions

What makes you nervous about being part of a Covenant Group?

What makes you excited about being part of a Covenant Group?

Is there anything in your life you need to change to make your participation in a Covenant Group fruitful?

How can you be praying for your Covenant Group leader in the months ahead?



850 Mt. Vernon Hwy. NW
Sandy Springs, GA 30327
404-255-3133
www.mvbchurch.org