



INTENTIONAL RELATIONSHIPS

DISCUSSION GROUP GUIDE

Welcome to the Intentional Relationship series! The main purpose of this study is to prime a group or congregation for an Explore God Community Outreach Initiative, which will center on the series [The 7 Big Questions](#). However, if you're not planning to be involved in a Community Outreach Initiative, this series can also be used as an effective stand-alone group study.

Explore God's singular mission is to help you find practical answers in dealing with today's real-life challenges. We hope our materials facilitate good conversations about issues that deserve deep, intelligent, and nuanced consideration. If we give you something valuable to think about in your own life, then we've done what we've set out to do.

Objective

This study is intended for Christians who have become somewhat enveloped in the comfort of their Christian community. We'll take a look at our relationships and how they relate to Jesus' call to his disciples in Matthew 4:19: "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will send you out to fish for people."

We'll consider the importance of stepping outside of our comfort zones to discover the mission field in which God has placed us. We'll also discuss active ways to build genuine friendships with nonbelievers. Ultimately, we believe these friendships can lead to meaningful spiritual conversations.

Format

Intentional Relationship Training is divided into three sessions:

- Session One: "God's Purpose for Relationships"
- Session Two: "Intentional Engagement"
- Session Three: "Spirit-Led Conversations"

As you progress through the study, you'll notice that each session is further divided into three parts:

- Biblical Lesson: Learn through Scripture
- Small Group Discussion: Receive support and encouragement in a small group setting
- Action Steps: Individually reflect on the lesson and make changes in your world

Resources

For this study, we've gathered information from the following sources:

- *The Holy Bible*, New International Version © 2011.
- Dave Ferguson, *Discover Your Mission Now* (Naperville, IL: Community Christian Church, 2014).
- Westwood Community Church, *The Bless Lifestyle* (Excelsior, MN).

Thanks

We appreciate the opportunity to explore God with you. To continue the conversation, please join us on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [Google+](#), [Pinterest](#), [YouTube](#), [Vimeo](#), and [Instagram](#), and follow #ExploreGod. We'd love to hear from you. Feel free to e-mail us at info@exploregod.com.

INTENTIONAL RELATIONSHIP TRAINING

STUDY GUIDE

1

Session One: God's Purpose for Relationships

Cultural Relationships

We are intentional about many aspects of our lives. We set up college funds before our children are teething; we spend hours choosing what we will wear that day. We research neighborhoods for months before selecting a home; we even put considerable thought into a shopping list before we head to the grocery store.

When it comes to relationships, however, we live in a culture that lacks a certain amount of intentionality. Relationships often seem to just . . . “happen.” In many seasons of our lives, we simply gravitate toward whoever is already around us. “Happenstance” friendships describe most of the relationships in our lives.

John and Lisa, a Christian couple in their thirties, recently reflected on the relationships in their own lives. They had both easily formed friendships throughout their school years, naturally shifting from preschool to elementary to middle school, along their respective clans of neighborhood playmates. In high school, they added church youth groups to their social circles. College proved to be a time of adjustment, but they soon fell in step with peers from their classes, campus ministry, and dorm.

In each season of their lives, John and Lisa were both provided with an environment in which friendships could easily “happen.” They found their niche time and again in every circumstance. That is, until they graduated from college.

After graduation, social networking became increasingly more difficult. John and Lisa moved to a new city. As Lisa transitioned into her new roles as a wife, mother, and corporate climber, she struggled to find time to form new friendships. “I was really lonely,” she said.

John also struggled. “We had a lot going on, but we also felt disconnected. I didn’t exactly know what to do about it, but we decided to check out a church.”

In time, they found a church where they quickly became plugged in. Lisa said, “We made some really awesome friends. Our kids are the same age, and we meet every Saturday night for potlucks and Bible study.” John and Lisa again found their niche.

The Blessings of Great Community

This couple was blessed to cultivate relationships in their church. A gospel-centered Christian community is important for our own growth and for loving others in the Body of Christ. It also provides the prayer, support, and partnerships we need in order to engage the nonbelieving world.

The fellowship of believers and their abundant rewards are described in Acts 2:42–47:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

This great community shared the joys of learning, like-minded ministry, a sense of belonging, daily friendships, and thriving growth.

The Challenges of Great Community

Being part of a Christian community certainly brings incredible blessings. John and Lisa were relieved to find other families with whom they had so much in common. However, involvement in a Christian community can also lead to great challenges.

Over time, John began to realize that all of their relationships existed in the “bubble” of their church community, disconnected from the rest of his world. “It’s been great, but we’ve spent so much time investing there that we don’t really have many other friends,” he said. “So all of our friends are Christians. Didn’t mean for it to happen—it just did.”

Lisa recognized the problem, too. When she was invited to spend one morning with a playgroup outside of her church community, she realized she was missing something in her relationships. “There’s something really refreshing and authentic about diversity, about everyone just being themselves and doing life together. I want friends like that,” she said.

However, when she considered what it would take to include nonbelievers in their life, Lisa paused, concerned. She wasn’t sure how she would broaden her relationships without losing her community. “Either I can continue to grow as a Christian, or I can reach out to nonbelievers,” she said.

This subtle lie is a more sinister issue in Christian community than many of us realize. This “either/or” lie assumes that we cannot grow in deep ways in our faith when we are engaged in community with non-Christians. The truth is that this is not an “either/or” decision; it is a “both/and” decision. We can be both part of a Christian community and reach out to nonbelievers. We were never intended to be without one or the other.

For example, how do we become more loving? In part, we become more loving by loving the nonbeliever. Matthew 5:43–47 describes how we are to love people outside of our community:

You have heard that it was said, “Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?

Christians who are very engaged within a church community often find themselves with limited opportunities to engage with the world. Perhaps without realizing it, many Christians wind up like John and Lisa. They spend all of their time greeting their own people and loving those who love them, leaving little time to consider the nonbelievers around them.

In spite of the couple's demanding schedule, the comfort of their church community, and the subtle "either/or" lie, John believed something should change in their relationships. "I don't know what it will look like exactly, but I think it's important. Jesus did it, and as his disciples, it's not only doable but sort of . . . what we're called to be doing, isn't it?" he asked.

The Purpose of Disciples

Although John and Lisa were blessed to feel so connected within their church, Jesus calls his disciples to purposes that are greater than the boundaries of a Christian community. Matthew 4:18-19 describes the first time that Jesus called his disciples: "As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. 'Come, follow me,' Jesus said, 'and I will send you out to fish for people.'"

From the disciples' response to this pivotal moment, we learn that a disciple follows Jesus. When Peter and Andrew laid down their nets to follow Jesus, great things were in store for them—the same great things that are in store for us as Jesus' disciples. When we follow Jesus, God works everything in our lives for two purposes: transformation and transfer.

Transformation

A disciple of Jesus is being transformed by Jesus for his or her own good. Romans 12:1-2 describes the body of a disciple as a living sacrifice to God:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

From these verses, we learn that transformation is a result of the renewal of the mind. With a renewed mind, a disciple is able to resist conformity to worldly patterns, including the typical ways in which relationships are formed. In place of conformity, a disciple gains an understanding of God's good and perfect will in his or her life.

Transfer

As a disciple is transformed, he or she becomes passionate about that which Jesus is passionate: other people. People are the reason Jesus entered our world. Luke 19:10 tells us, "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost." Jesus makes clear his passion for other people in Matthew 22:36-39: "'Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?' Jesus replied: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"

When we embrace his commandments, Jesus uses us to spread knowledge of him for his glory and for the good of others. Second Corinthians 2:14-16 describes how God takes pleasure in us sharing our knowledge of Christ:

But thanks be to God, who always leads us as captives in Christ's triumphal procession and uses us to spread the aroma of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we

are an aroma that brings death; to the other, an aroma that brings life.

Jesus' love for people is anything but passive—and he doesn't want ours to be, either. In fact, Jesus tasks his disciples with clear instructions to transfer His love to other people intentionally. In Matthew 28:18–20, Jesus says: “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”

As we passionately fulfill our two purposes—transformation by Jesus and the transfer of his love to others—we play our part in God's redemptive plan for the world.

The Simple Plan

God has one plan to redeem people: he will use his own people to build his kingdom. In fact, God created his Church for this very purpose. As his people, we engage with the world for three reasons.

1. We engage the world around us simply because this is who we are.

First Peter 2:9–10 defines our identity as a community of believers: “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”

2. We engage the world around us because it is a natural fruit of thankfulness for God's work in our lives.

Consider the abundance of grace and glory to God in 2 Corinthians 4:13–15:

It is written: “I believed; therefore I have spoken.” Since we have that same spirit of faith, we also believe and therefore speak, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you to himself. All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God.

3. We engage the world around us as others are intrigued by our lives.

Colossians 4:5–6 describes the manner with which we can represent our faith well: “Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.”

As God's people, we have been mercifully chosen to engage the world around us in faith and thanksgiving in order to glorify God. Our passionate and faithful engagement with the world can result in relationships that are more than just happenstances. Keeping in mind our purpose as disciples of Jesus, we can intentionally form relationships with nonbelievers that lead to spiritual, meaningful conversations.

BLESS with Intentionality

With a deeper understanding of how their relationships related to God's plan, John and Lisa were ready to make some changes in their life. “OK,” Lisa asked, “so how do we start building relationships with nonbelievers and join God in his redemptive work in the world?”

In their book, *Discover Your Mission Now*, authors Dave and Jon Ferguson and Tim Sutherland describe the five core action steps of missional people. Their acronym, BLESS, serves as a practical, step-by-step plan for building relationships with nonbelievers. The acronym is a reference to the blessing given by God to Abraham to change the world in Genesis 12:2: "I will bless you . . . and you will be a blessing."

The BLESS acronym stands for:

- B**egin with prayer for those to whom we are sent.
- L**isten to the people to whom we are sent.
- E**at with those to whom we are sent.
- S**erve the needs we discover among those to whom we are sent.
- S**hare our story with those to whom we are sent.

As we progress through this study, we will dig deeply into each of these five habits of missional people. Let's begin by focusing on the first step.

Begin with Compassionate Prayer

Our prayers are intended to prepare our minds and hearts, as well as those of the people with whom we want to build relationships. Consider Jesus' mind-set and heart toward nonbelievers in Matthew 9:35–38:

Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."

From this Scripture, we learn that Jesus had compassion on the people around him. He saw them as sheep without a shepherd—lost without love—the very people for whom he was sent to this world to die. As his disciples, we have been sent as workers to share his compassion with others.

Adopting his mind-set and heart of compassion naturally leads to an attitude of empathy. As we begin to view nonbelievers as more than "projects," we become aware of what they are facing in their lives—and how they may be feeling harassed and helpless. We can privately pray for their specific issues, such as health problems, marital difficulties, or financial uncertainties.

By keeping them at the top of our minds in genuine prayer, we are preparing the tip of our tongues for our next step: genuine engagement. Together with Jesus' blessing, we faithfully begin the journey of stepping out of our comfort zones and into intentional relationships with the nonbelievers in our world.

"Come, follow me . . . and I will send you out to fish for people." —Matthew 4:19

Small Group Discussion

After reading Session One, divide participants into groups of 4–8 people to discuss the following prompts.

1. How do you identify with Lisa and John's experiences?
2. Describe the world in which you live outside of the church and the people with whom you interact.
3. Tell us about the closest friendship you've built with a non-Christian in recent months or years.

Action Steps

This week, we'll practice the first habit of missional people: B—Begin in prayer. Please be prepared to share your reflections next week.

1. Identify three nonbelievers who are already in your world with whom you might prayerfully consider building a closer friendship. Consider these social connections:

- Family
- Family connections
- Coworkers
- Associations
- Neighborhood or community connections
- Recreational activities
- Kids' connections
- Friends of your friends
- Casual acquaintances

2. What do you know about each of these three people? Pray daily for them, for any specific joys and struggles of which you may be aware. Pray also that they have opportunities to hear the truth and that they are receptive to you.

"He made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ." —Ephesians 1:9

3. Pray for yourself and your discussion group, that God enable each disciple to truly be a blessing to others. Here are some things to pray for yourself:

- Guidance from the Holy Spirit

"But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you." —John 14:26

- Opportunities to do good

"And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ." —Colossians 4:3

- Wisdom to make the most of those opportunities

"Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone." —Colossians 4:5-6

- Boldness to say what needs to be said

"Pray also for me, that whenever I speak, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should." —Ephesians 6:19-20

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STUDY GUIDE

2

Session Two: Intentional Engagement

Bridging the Relationship Gap

Christians like John and Lisa, who want to step out of the comfort zone of their church communities, often express a common concern. They've become so accustomed to spending time with like-minded people that they aren't sure how they'll relate to others in genuine ways.

After praying for a few nonbelievers in their community, John and Lisa still felt apprehensive. "Honestly, we don't really know what to talk about with them," John admitted. Lisa agreed, adding, "We can't really relate to a lot of what they say. I feel uncomfortable and find myself filling the gaps with awkward laughs."

Richard, an accountant in his forties, shared similar concerns about talking to his coworkers. "I'm not interested in being the awkward religious guy. I'm already the 'generally awkward guy,' and that's enough," he said, laughing. "Besides, there's this unspoken rule that everyone knows: 'Do *not* talk about religion at work!' I feel like I'll offend someone."

The missional habits in BLESS provide two next steps beyond prayer to help Christians bridge this initial relationship gap between themselves and nonbelievers. Many are surprised to learn that these steps actually have little to do with saying the right thing—and everything to do with simply listening and eating.

Listen Genuinely

In this fast-paced world of demands and distractions, truly listening to another person is a simple but precious gift. Jesus modeled a profound example of genuine listening in Luke 18:35–43, even amidst his own set of demands and distractions. Let's look at this story:

As Jesus approached Jericho, a blind man was sitting by the roadside begging. When he heard the crowd going by, he asked what was happening. They told him, "Jesus of Nazareth is passing by." He called out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Those who led the way rebuked him and told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!"

Jesus stopped and ordered the man to be brought to him. When he came near, Jesus asked him, “What do you want me to do for you?” “Lord, I want to see,” he replied. Jesus said to him, “Receive your sight; your faith has healed you.” Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus, praising God. When all the people saw it, they also praised God.

In this significant passage, we see that Jesus responded to the call of a single blind man in spite of the buzz of the surrounding crowd. In fact, Jesus insisted on hearing his plea as others tried to hush the man. Their interaction is particularly poignant when we realize that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem, where he knew he would be put to death in the coming days. Even his own impending torture and death did not deter Jesus from listening to a man in need.

Jesus modeled for his disciples how to listen to other people with genuine interest and a compassionate heart. He also showed that the distractions and anxiety of the world around us neither dictate our ability to listen nor excuse us from paying attention to those in need.

Barriers to Listening

Many obstacles can interfere with our mission to build intentional relationships, and perhaps the most common problem is finding the time to listen to others. Work demands, existing commitments, and our own troubles can elbow opportunities out of our schedules. When we intentionally carve out space in our schedule, we create opportunities for new relationships.

John and Lisa, for their part, realized that their calendar allowed little time for people outside of their church community. As they reevaluated the way they spent their time and started to make changes to their lifestyle, Lisa said, “I won’t lie. Finding the right balance between church and kids and work and all the other stuff is challenging.” John nodded, adding, “But we’re learning to say no and not overcommit ourselves so that we can have time to just hang out and be available for the unscheduled stuff.”

Another common hesitation in reaching out to others is the concern that the conversation may, as Lisa and Richard put it, feel awkward or be perceived by the other person as pushy or offensive. Richard said, “My desire to share my faith has actually kept me from simply getting to know people. I feel like for years I’ve been frozen in a state of, ‘I don’t know how to share my faith, so I’m not even going to try and get to know people.’”

Genuine interest and a compassionate heart, however, can lead to surprisingly natural conversations. When we focus more on discovering the other person and less on ourselves, we can “draw out” a person’s story.

The best approach is to pursue him or her with questions that are gentle, nonthreatening, and open-ended. As the other person responds, allow the questions to progress naturally from his work experiences to his community to the kind of world he hopes for.

At appropriate times, you can tell a bit about yourself and your own story to share transparency and to create a level playing field. Reflecting on a recent conversation with a coworker, Richard said, “The conversation really took off when I told him about my struggle to do something more meaningful. I admitted my midlife crisis, in other words!”

Remain careful, however, not to dominate the conversation with your details. Always spend more time asking questions than talking about yourself. As Dale Carnegie said in *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, “You can make more friends in two months by becoming interested in other people than you can in two years by trying to get other people interested in you.” Be interested, not interesting.

Once you’ve become engaged in natural conversation, another challenge is the likelihood of hearing information about their life that might make you uncomfortable. That’s OK. In these instances, consider how Jesus related to the adulterous woman in John 8:1-11:

The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group and said to Jesus, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?” They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him. But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, “Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground. At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. Jesus straightened up and asked her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” “No one, sir,” she said. “Then neither do I condemn you,” Jesus declared. “Go now and leave your life of sin.”

A compassionate attitude is especially necessary when others share differing beliefs about God, religion, or spirituality. Although you may feel pressured or tempted to correct their thinking or debate with them, remember Proverbs 20:5: “The purposes of a man’s heart are deep waters, but a man of understanding draws them out.” An opportunity to share truth may present itself in the future, but for now, your goal is simply to understand who they are—their background, spiritual understanding, fears, and desires. Why do they feel the way they do?

One great question to diffuse an uncomfortable conversation is, “What do you mean?” For example, suppose your friend says, “Christians are so judgmental.” Rather than argue, try asking, “What do you mean by ‘judgmental’?” This invites your friend to explore and explain his beliefs; it also gives you the opportunity to learn more about the perspective of your friend. A good follow-up question is, “How did you come to believe that?”

If your friend appears to be very dogmatic or rigid in his beliefs, simply thank him for sharing, then move the conversation on to another topic. Privately, continue to pray for openness and for ways that you can be a resource to him. And if he asks you for your belief or opinion, affirm that you understand where he is coming from but that your experience has been different. With this approach, you will build trust and comfort into the relationship, opening the door to getting to know each other better.

Sharing a Meal

Like listening, simply eating with someone can have a significant impact on another person. In fact, in biblical days, eating with someone was a sign of acceptance. You might imagine, then, that Jesus bucked tradition when he dined with sinners at the beginning of his ministry in Matthew 9:9-13:

As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector’s booth. “Follow me,” he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him. While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew’s house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?”

On hearing this, Jesus said, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”

From this story, we learn several things about Jesus’ attitude toward dining with others. We discover that he did not reserve mealtime solely for the socially acceptable; he welcomed many outside of his immediate community to eat with him. We see that he did not seem concerned about their reputations—nor his own. He did not judge their sinful pasts or let them interfere with his desire to know the people around him. We are also directly reminded of his mission: he came to this world for those people with whom he was eating.

Through the simple act of sharing a meal, Jesus squashed traditional attitudes and boundaries related to mealtime. Even today, however, there are still quite a few other obstacles that can get in the way of our ability to reach people through food.

Barriers to Sharing a Meal

One hindrance to sharing mealtime is the assumption that the food should be well-prepared or impressive. However, keeping it simple—such as ordering pizza and making a salad—allows you to focus your attention on the friendship, not the food.

In her book *Bread and Wine*, author Shauna Niequist advises, “Focus on making people comfortable, on creating a space protected from the rush and chaos of daily life, a space full of laughter and safety and soul . . . I’m talking about feeding someone with honesty and intimacy and love, about making your home a place where people are fiercely protected, even if just for a few hours, from the crush and cruelty of the day.”

Setting aside our idea of perfection at mealtime is critical to fulfilling our mission as disciples. Alan Hirsch and Lance Ford, authors of *Right Here, Right Now*, write, “If every Christian household regularly invited a stranger or a poor person into their home for a meal once a week, we would literally change the world by eating!”

In addition to meal preparation, another common concern of Christians is that spending more time with worldly people could cause us to adopt more worldly ways. While we intentionally find ways to relate to the nonbelievers around us, we must remember that we have been set apart as disciples. John 15:19 says, “As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world.”

We can guard against worldly habits by finding strength and encouragement in our church community and in regular prayer with God. With godly help, our actions and speech can remain rooted in gentleness and respectfulness in spite of the influences around us. Galatians 5:22–23 tells us, “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.”

Another obstacle to eating with others is the temptation to rest in the comfort of close friends. As many of us do, Jesus had formed intimate friendships within his inner circle by the end of his ministry. However, he still sought opportunities to eat with others, as we see in Luke 19:1–10:

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way. When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.” So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly. All the people saw this and began to mutter, “He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.” But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, “Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.” Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”

Jesus knew he would die just six days later, which makes this interaction even more incredible. Even with this knowledge, he refused to withdraw into the comfort of his community. He instead reached out to spend time with Zacchaeus, a sinner. From the very start of his ministry to the very end, Jesus’ actions and words proved that he never passed up an opportunity to seek and save the lost.

We, too, are surrounded by opportunities to spend time with people outside of our community. As disciples, we are called to become like Christ, boldly identifying and spending time with the nonbelievers around us. We should hold these words of Christ as a compass:

“For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” —Matthew 9:13

Let us shed our fears and assumptions and knock down the barriers standing in our way.

Small Group Discussion

After reading Session Two, divide participants into groups of 4–8 people to discuss the following prompts.

1. What or who came into your mind and heart during your reflection and prayer last week?
2. Which barrier(s) to listening and eating seem the most daunting to you?
3. Tell us about a memorable conversation or meal you've shared with a nonbeliever in recent months or years.
4. Practice asking simple, gentle questions by pairing up with another participant you do not know well. Begin by choosing a question from one of the three categories below—work experience, community, or the world—and then continue the conversation for five minutes. Once one partner has shared, reverse roles.

Do not feel restricted to these questions; feel free to create some of your own that feel natural to you. The aim is to have some questions in your mind to start the conversation, but be open to improvisation as the conversation moves along.

These examples revolve around work. However, you can apply the same line of thinking to any topic. Focus your questions around their recreational interests, their family, their service or community involvements, etc.

General opening question:

What's the biggest thing going on in your life these days?

A. Questions about his or her work experience:

What do you do in your job or line of work?

What do you most enjoy about what you do?

What have been some of the surprises or challenges you've encountered in your work?

B. Questions about his or her community:

With whom do you most enjoy interacting in your work?

What do you most enjoy about those relationships and/or interactions?

What do others close to you think about your work?

C. Questions about the world he or she wants:

If you could change one thing about your job/work, what would it be? Why?

What do you hope to be doing in two or three years?

What do you want your job/work to give you more of in the future? Less of?

Action Steps

This week, we'll continue with the first habit of missional people in our acronym, BLESS, and begin practicing the next two habits: L—Listening and E—Eating. Please be prepared to share your reflections next week.

1. B—Begin with prayer:

Continue to pray for the people whom you have identified as nonbelievers. Pray for their unique joys and struggles and for their receptiveness to you. Pray also for yourself and your discussion group, that God will provide wisdom to make the most of your opportunities.

“Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.” —Colossians 4:5-6

2. L—Listen with empathy:

Get to know others by being genuinely interested in them and having a compassionate heart. Use gentle questions like those in the Small Group Discussion section to guide an intentional conversation. Pray that the Holy Spirit helps you focus less on talking and more on listening.

“My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.” —James 1:19

“To answer before listening—that is folly and shame.” —Proverbs 18:13

3. E—Eat with people outside your community:

Carve out time during the next two weeks to share a simple meal with them, praying that the Holy Spirit helps you pay more attention to the friendship than the food.

“Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.” —Hebrews 13:2

INTENTIONAL RELATIONSHIP TRAINING

STUDY GUIDE

3

Session Three: Spirit-Led Conversations

At the Doorstep of Meaningful Conversations

After weeks of prayer and intentional actions, John and Lisa reflected on the progress of a budding relationship with neighbors, a couple named Chad and Courtney. “They were really skeptical when we first invited them to dinner,” said Lisa. “But it’s been really fun. Rather than feel intimidated, I’ve been genuinely interested in what is going on in their lives.”

“Yeah, they thought we were going to ‘get all evangelistic’ on them,” said John. “But we actually listen to what they have to say instead of trying to somehow turn the conversation to talk about faith.”

Lisa said, “Apparently, when they left our house the first night and we hadn’t talked about God at all, they were shocked. They were even more shocked the next time we hung out and didn’t say a thing about our faith.”

“They’ve come to realize that we’re OK, that we’re genuine, and that we aren’t going to push our beliefs on them,” said John.

“But they were right to be skeptical of us at first,” said Lisa. “They’ve obviously had some bad experiences where they were preached at and didn’t feel respected. I get it. Frankly, I don’t like it when someone tries to convince or convert me!”

John added, “It’s tricky, right? We Christians are often known for being pushy with our beliefs. Right or wrong, good or bad, it’s a stigma that believers sometimes have to deal with.”

With God’s help and by following the missional steps of BLESS, John and Lisa have successfully bridged the initial relationship gap between themselves and their nonbelieving neighbors. Through the simple actions of praying, listening, and eating with their nonbelieving neighbors, they have become aware of their own weaknesses as Christians, have broken down damaging stereotypes, and have opened the door to meaningful conversations.

Now that they are at the doorstep of these meaningful conversations, John is wise to consider the dilemma of conveying their beliefs without being pushy. The next two steps in BLESS will help him do

just that. Through “S—serving” and “S—sharing your story,” John and Lisa can convey their beliefs in a way that draws people to them and, ultimately, toward Jesus.

Serving the Needs of Others

For all of his glory, Jesus lived a life of simple servanthood. Mark 10:45 says, “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” Jesus fulfilled his mission by devoting every word, every action, and every opportunity to the people around him.

One of the most unforgettable examples of Jesus’ service was the washing of his disciples’ feet. Although his disciples protested at first, Jesus emphasized the importance of blessing others through service in John 13:12–17:

When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. “Do you understand what I have done for you?” he asked them. “You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.”

By cleansing his disciples both physically and spiritually, Jesus modeled for us the humble servitude to which we are called as disciples. In John 14:12, Jesus said, “Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father.” Through the cleansing actions of forgiveness and servitude, believers have the power to share great blessings of their Christian faith.

Blessings Through Service

The greatest purpose and blessing of servitude is the opportunity to reflect your faith in God and to transfer his comfort and love in tangible ways. Through faithful words and actions, God uses us as vehicles through whom blessings can flow to others.

One form of service is speaking words of encouragement to the disheartened and compassion to the condemned. Jesus’ love is certainly evident in his treatment of the woman caught in adultery in John 8:1–11, which we discussed in Session Two.

Along with our words, our service must also take the form of actions. James 2:14–17 says:

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

Throughout his life, Jesus emphasized time and again the importance of taking action. Author John Grisham once observed, “Jesus preached more and taught more about helping the poor and the sick and the hungry than he did about heaven and hell. Shouldn’t that tell us something?”¹

In addition to his various forms of service, we can also observe in John 11:1–44 that Jesus adapted to meet the unique needs of each person. After the death of Lazarus, for example, Jesus responded in different ways to two sisters, Martha and Mary. For Martha, the more practical sister who valued action, Jesus addressed her needs through a conversation about her belief and a promise to raise her brother from the dead. But in response to the weeping of the more sensitive sister, Mary, Jesus “was deeply

¹ Associated Baptist Press, “Baptist gathering focuses on unity in diverse understandings, serving Christ,” *The Presbyterian Outlook*, February 25, 2008, <http://pres-outlook.org/2008/02/baptist-gathering-focuses-on-unity-in-diverse-understandings-serving-christ-4/>.

moved in spirit and troubled” (John 11:33). Jesus shared in her grief, not bothering with a lengthy conversation.

Servitude allows us to empathize with others like Jesus did, rejoicing in their personal joys and relieving their burdens by sharing emotions and taking action. He is a powerful example of blessing others in ways that meet the unique needs of each person. Yet even with his example, we still face challenges in meeting the needs of others.

Barriers to Service

Several barriers may get in the way of our ability to serve others, including our divided attention. Without realizing it, we may elevate certain activities to the level of idolatry. We must intentionally make time to serve the Lord. Joshua 24:14-15 says:

Now fear the Lord and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your ancestors worshiped beyond the Euphrates River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.

An abundance of time cannot in itself, however, overcome our begrudging feelings toward certain people. Whether the other person is a beloved family member whom we are motivated to serve or a difficult employer whom we feel doesn't deserve our best, Ephesians 6:7 gives us the same instruction: “Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people.”

Another barrier to our servitude is feeling insufficient, not knowing where or how to begin to serve the needs of another. But through prayer and intentional relationships, we can learn about others' lives and request help in perceiving the needs of the people around us. Isaiah 50:4 says, “The Sovereign Lord has given me a well-instructed tongue, to know the word that sustains the weary.” Pray that the Lord would do the same for you.

Feeling insufficient can also manifest itself into feeling pressure to plan something big. To be sure, some of Jesus' actions were performed on a grand scale, such as orchestrating amazing miracles. Keep in mind, however, that many of Jesus' actions were simply and quietly performed for the people around him. Washing his disciples' feet was just as necessary and impactful as feeding five thousand people. Serving your neighbor is just as important as organizing an international mission trip.

As you faithfully serve the people around you, nonbelievers may become aware that your words and actions are different from the rest of the world. And as your friendships develop, you will naturally be ready to talk about your faith. The next step in BLESS provides helpful guidance in how to share your faith with nonbelievers.

Share Your Story

John and Lisa were glad they hadn't hastily mentioned their beliefs to their skeptical neighbors, Chad and Courtney. “I'm so grateful that God helped us hold our tongues, rather than push some agenda with good intentions and terrible timing,” said Lisa.

As their friendship has developed, John has discovered that sharing his faith is an appropriate next step. “They've realized we're genuine, so they *want* us to be authentic. And for us, to be authentic means to be open about our faith and our story, and to share it respectfully as God leads. There's nothing to be ashamed of about that.”

Indeed, an authentic relationship includes sharing our interests and activities as well as our faith. Sharing our story is a natural desire of any believer who knows Christ, like the Samaritan woman who met him at a well in John 4:28-29: “Leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people, ‘Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?’”

In fact, it is not only a natural next step but also our calling to “speak of what we know, and . . . testify to what we have seen” (John 3:11). As Jesus was getting into his boat after freeing a man from demons, the man begged to get in with him. Instead, Jesus replied, “Go home to your own people and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you” (Mark 5:19).

A blind man whose sight was restored by Jesus provided a great example of sharing his story in John 9. In response to an investigation and accusations by the Pharisees—and in spite of his parents’ fear of the Jewish leaders—the healed man concluded in John 9:25: “Whether he is a sinner or not, I don’t know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!”

This man modeled the simple, ready way in which we are to relay our experience with Christ: without concern for eloquent words. Ironically, his plain, simple confidence made his testimony one of the most powerful moments in the Bible.

Barriers to Sharing

From this man’s interaction with the Pharisees, we can also observe the barriers that we might expect when trying to tell our story. One of the most common obstacles is finding the opportunity to share. Believers are rarely provided an opening for testimony that is as clearly defined as the blind man whose story was demanded by the Jewish leaders. However, if we persistently carry out the missional habits of BLESS, opportunities will eventually present themselves.

Another young Christian couple, AJ and Jade, have experienced both ends of the spectrum when it comes to opportunities. “We just got a text from our friend, Michelle, asking us to pray for her family because her cousin passed away. You have no idea how significant that is,” Jade said. “She’s always seemed so closed off to anything spiritual. It means a lot that she trusts us.”

Trying to reach Michelle has required great patience and gentleness on AJ and Jade’s parts. And although they have finally received a glimmer of hope for their friend, many believers may not see the fruits of their labor. Whether we are planting the seeds of faith or reaping the benefits, we must recognize that we are all fellow workers with different roles in God’s harvest. First Corinthians 3:5-9 states:

What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be rewarded according to their own labor. For we are co-workers in God’s service; you are God’s field, God’s building.

AJ and Jade have also experienced the ease of instant results, quite opposite from their experience with Michelle. Although they routinely pay for the coffee of the person standing behind them at their favorite coffee shop, AJ was surprised at one conversation that evolved from their small gesture. “One couple approached us afterward to thank us and ask why we did it, so we admitted that our faith teaches us to be generous,” said AJ. “They were really curious and asked us all these questions.”

“It’s so weird,” Jade said. “We’ve invested in Michelle for years, but it was never so easy to talk about our faith as with this random couple. There were a few times we didn’t know the answer, but we were just honest with them.”

AJ and Jade handled beautifully another common barrier to sharing our story, which is the fear that we won't know what to say or that we won't have all of the answers. But with prayer and the willingness to be honest and transparent, we can follow the lead of the Holy Spirit. If the other person seems open to exploration, you might consider inviting him to check out "[The 7 Big Questions](#)" at ExploreGod.com. The website provides several articles and videos that ease the pressure for you, as a believer, to have all the answers.

And remember: No person has all the answers. It's OK to admit that you just don't know something—after all, we're all still learning. Being able to admit that you don't know everything goes a long way toward establishing authenticity with another person. If the conversation falters, simply drop the topic and move on, continuing to pray and wait for another opportunity.

Although AJ and Jade have recounted positive responses from others, the healed man's story illustrates another common obstacle, which is the fear of facing a negative reaction. In the case of the healed man, the Pharisees rejected his story and threw him out of the city. Yet even in the face of objection, the man spoke without fear and without attempting to convince the Jewish leaders. First Peter 3:14-16 says:

But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. "Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened." But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.

In John 16:33, Jesus said, "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." As believers, we can—and should—be ready to share our story in spite of these challenges, relying on the Holy Spirit to lead our conversations and to stir the hearts of the people with whom we share.

Fishers of Men

Today, Christians who have followed the missional steps of BLESS are marveling at the intentional relationships in their lives. Their dedication to praying, listening, eating, serving, and sharing their story has produced changes in both themselves and in others.

John and Lisa continue to deepen their relationship with their neighbors. "It's kind of awesome that we're helping Chad and Courtney redefine what it looks like to be a Christian," says Lisa.

"Yeah, and it's kind of awesome that they're helping us redefine what it looks like to be a Christian," John adds.

AJ and Jade continue to hang out regularly at their favorite coffee shop. "There's this cool vibe that Jade and I have noticed lately in our conversations about faith with others," says AJ, "that even though we don't see eye to eye on everything, we're all on this shared journey trying to find answers."

And Richard is enjoying getting to know people at work. "It's easy to think that a more meaningful life means quitting my job and volunteering all of my time at a shelter or something. And maybe that is something I should do," he says. "But I'm finding that my purpose is really just getting to know the people God has put in my path and looking for ways to love them the way God has loved us. I think the more meaningful life I was looking for may just have been right in front of me the whole time."

Together, we can join these Christians in stepping outside of the comfort of our Christian communities to discover the mission field in which God has placed us. As we continue to build genuine friendships with nonbelievers and have meaningful conversations, we fulfill Jesus' call in Matthew 14:9:

"Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will send you out to fish for people."

Small Group Discussion

After reading Session Three, divide participants into groups of 4–8 people to discuss the following prompts.

1. Tell us about an experience from the past week in which you listened to and/or shared a meal with others in your community.
2. Who is one of the best servants you've met in your life? What can you learn from him or her?
3. Brainstorm with your group about some things others might share about themselves that could potentially make you feel uncomfortable or challenged, such as "I think the Bible is ridiculous," "I'm gay," or "I hate Christians." Share ideas for gentle, compassionate, nonjudgmental responses.
4. Practice responding to common questions about God and faith. Choose one of the questions below.
 - Does life have a purpose?
 - Is there a God?
 - Why does God allow pain and suffering?
 - Is Jesus really the only way to God? Can't people get to God through other religions or paths?
 - Is Jesus really God?
 - Is the Bible reliable? Can you totally trust it?

Share ideas for responses that affirm the thoughts of the person asking the question, that share your understanding or experiences, and that encourage exploration. Have some people play "devil's advocate" so the group can practice remaining respectful and avoiding words that stir debate. If there is time, choose a new question and practice again.

Action Steps

This week, we'll practice the last two habits of BLESS: S—Serve and S—Share.

1. S—Serve the needs of others to whom you have been sent:

Ask yourself, "What is one need I know of right now in the life of each person with whom I'm trying to establish a relationship? How can I help meet it?" Pray that the Holy Spirit would lead you to perceive and meet the unique needs of others.

"Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." —Galatians 6:2

2. S—Share your story

Prepare for the opportunity to give the reason for your hope, praying for openness and ways to be a resource to others in any way possible.

"But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect." —1 Peter 3:15

Begin by considering the questions below about your life before, during, and after meeting Christ. Write down your thoughts according to this outline:

- A. What was your life like before you trusted Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord?
What were your attitudes, needs, and problems?
What did your life revolve around? What was most important to you?
Where did you look for security, peace of mind, and happiness?
- B. How did you come to accept Christ and give him complete control of your life?
When did you first hear the gospel?
When were you first exposed to biblical Christianity?
What were your initial reactions to Jesus Christ?
When and why did you begin to feel positively about Christianity?
What feelings did you struggle with right before your decision?
- C. What happened after you trusted Christ?
What changes did you see in your life? In your attitudes? In your actions?
How long did it take before you noticed any changes?
What does Jesus Christ mean to you now?

Once your thoughts are on paper, use a highlighter to select the most important feelings, examples, or incidents in each of the three points in the outline. Begin writing your story based on those highlighted parts, making sure to mention what your life was like before you knew Christ, how you came to know him, and what your life is like now.

Guidelines for your story:

- Begin with a story or anecdote with which your friend can connect.
- Be positive throughout.
- Be specific, providing interesting detail.
- Be realistic; Christ doesn't remove all problems, but he does walk us through them.
- Communicate biblical principles but use verses sparingly—only when they directly relate.
- Make sure your conclusion connects to your ongoing faith walk with Christ.
- Set your first draft aside for a day, then take another look with a fresh perspective.
- Go over your story several times so you can communicate it naturally.
- Practice telling your story to a friend or family member who already knows Christ.

Things to avoid:

- Criticizing the Church, organizations, or specific people
- Mentioning denominations, which can be confusing or polarizing
- Glamorizing prior sinful behavior
- Vague terms—such as “joyful” or “changed”—unless you give concrete explanations
- Christian jargon, such as “convicted,” “saved,” “born again,” or “repentance”

Once you have thought through your story, consider sharing it with someone in your small study group as a “practice” run. Then, when the opportunity arises, you will be ready to share it with an individual with whom you have cultivated a relationship. Most people will appreciate your willingness to talk openly about your life and are likely to value hearing about your personal experience.

3. Continue to practice the five missional habits, staying aware of the nonbelievers in your world to whom you have been sent, deepening your preparedness, and seeking opportunities for meaningful conversations.

Familiarize yourself with the resources at ExploreGod.com. Click on “Discuss” and look closely at the series The 7 Big Questions. Click on “Topics” and explore some of the articles and videos related to topics that might interest your non-Christian friends. Look for opportunities to share an article or video from ExploreGod.com and discuss it with your friend. In addition, ask your pastor or ministry leader about how your entire church or ministry might use ExploreGod.com as a resource.

“If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.” —James 1:5