

Dgroups: Pursuing Holiness Together

Intro.

A dgroup is a group of 2-4 members of the same the gender who meet frequently (ideally once per week) to pursue holiness through study of Scripture, confession and repentance of sin and prayer. The Bible commands believers to pursue holiness (1 Peter 1:16). Therefore, the expressed purpose of dgroups at Mercyview is the mutual pursuit of holiness. It is our contention that without the support and encouragement that healthy dgroups provide, many Christians will struggle to obey the command of the Scripture to be holy. Fighting sin and resisting the enemy in isolation are all but impossible. We need each other. The Bible raises our need for dgroups by talking plainly about our brokenness in sin, while commanding us (Christians) to pursue holiness. The following is the biblical support, some clarifying definitions, and practical instruction for dgroups at Mercyview.

Biblical Support

So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.

Romans 8:12-13

Romans, like most of Paul's epistles, was written to a local church. Romans is the most robust example of Paul's theology in the New Testament. However, it was not likely written as a summary or system of Paul's thought. In fact, Romans was written to address specific problems that were occurring in the Roman church. A large portion of the book of Romans is devoted to addressing the Christian's relationship with Mosaic Law. Scholars believe that the Roman church was predominantly Jewish in its early days. However, as the Christian faith spread across the Roman Empire, more and more Gentile believers began entering the church. In Romans, Paul addresses many of the issues associated with Gentile believers and the Law. By the time we reach chapter eight in Romans, we have learned that the law doesn't have the power to save, that all of humanity is guilty of breaking the law and that grace is what actually saves sinners. In Romans eight, Paul emphasizes the importance of life in the Spirit. Verses twelve and thirteen serve a strong warning against Christians living in the flesh.

So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh.

Romans 8:12

Since Christians have been purchased by Christ and indwelt by the Holy Spirit, we are no longer slaves to the flesh. As a result, we should not live according to its desires. The Bible teaches that prior to conversion, a person is a slave to sin. Consequently, the person does not have the

ability to not sin. However, at conversion the believer is fundamentally changed. The core of his or her being and identity are different. Colossians 1:13 teaches that at conversion God rescued the believer from *'the domain of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved son.'* After being rescued, the sin of a believer is no longer the results of slavery but the result of temporary amnesia or a voluntary submission to slavery.

For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.

Romans 8:13

If you live according to the flesh, you will die. Paul was speaking to Christians in the church of Rome. If he was speaking to believers in Rome, then the principle remains the same for believers today. If you, Christian, live by the flesh, then you will die. The habitual pursuit of the works of flesh will always lead to death. Our hope is the power of Spirit, by which we can put the flesh to death through the pursuit of holiness.

It is our contention that this pursuit of holiness is best done in relationships with other believers.

Additional Biblical Support

Proverbs 11:14 says:

Where there is no guidance, a people fails, but in an abundance of counselors there is safety.

The world, the enemy and the flesh want you alone. If they get you alone, you will fail. Failing in this case means sin or the pursuit of flesh, which according to Romans 8:13 leads to death.

These two passages paint a scary picture. Isolation leads to pursuit of the flesh or sin, which leads to death. In order to combat the enemy, the world and the flesh; we must stand together with the power gospel and Spirit to put our sin to death by pursuing holiness.

And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him—a threefold cord is not quickly broken.

Ecclesiastes 4:12

Can we be honest with each other? Life can be hard. An individual sin issue, the results of sin, a difficult life circumstance, a relational struggle, etc. can overtake, overwhelm and trample on top of you. Ecclesiastes teaches us that together we are stronger, more resilient and better able to fight against our sin, its results and the difficult circumstances in life.

In addition to the purposes of fighting our sin and pursuing holiness, groups offer believers a place and relationships that bring mutual encouragement. Life is messy, sin can be suffocating, and going at it alone is not really an option. When speaking of Christians, the Bible never talks about individual or 'lone ranger'. In fact, most of the 'you' pronouns in the New Testament are plural in the original language. Paul and other authors assumed believers to be in relationships in the church.

Dgroups are an important avenue by which Christians have an opportunity to be in purposeful relationships with one another. The relational support a dgroup provides is vital to the health of a Christian and the church.

Clarifying Definitions

Dgroups may quickly go astray. There are two prevailing errors dgroups often fall into.

Moralism: a school of thought that suggests performing certain deeds while avoiding others earns greater favor from God. The moralist believes doing good deeds earns them greater favor with God. In moralism, one is accepted and accepts others based on moral performance. The moralist will steer a dgroup with guilt and shame. This mentality will suck the life out of the participants and stifle their pursuit of holiness. If pursuing holiness becomes about forcing each other to keep rules and then shaming each other when the rules aren't followed, then the group will turn into a draining, spirit crushing activity that that will likely not continue.

Antinomianism: literally means, 'against the law.' Antinomians believe that the moral law of God is no longer applicable for the Christian. The Antinomian does not considering the weight of sin nor the commands for holiness found in the Bible (Romans 8:13, 1 Peter 1:16). The antinomian misinterprets the nature of grace by claiming that they are free to sin because 'grace abounds (see Paul's discussion in Romans 6).' An antinomian group may have one or multiple members consistently struggling with the same sin, while never growing past it. The antinomian does not consider the need for their cooperative work with God in sanctification. As a result, the members of the group will not grow in holiness.

Thankfully, there is another way to pursue holiness together!

Gospel-Centered Accountability: Indicatives and Imperatives.

The good news is there is another option. To pursue gospel-centered accountability we must to study the New Testament. Does the Bible issue imperatives or commands? Yes! So then how does one pursue the commands in Scripture without being a moralist or an antinomian? Let me suggest the answer is found in the epistles of the New Testament. The New Testament is full of imperatives, but these commands are always grounded in indicative statements. Indicative statements speak to the reality of your new identity and life in Christ or what God has done on your behalf. These statements communicate the truth of gospel and how it relates to you. The Bible never tells a Christian to become something that they are not; rather, it encourages believers to be who they are in Christ! An example from the New Testament may be helpful:

Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, 2 to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all people. 3 For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another. 4 But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior

appeared, 5 he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, 6 whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, 7 so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. 8 The saying is trustworthy, and I want you to insist on these things, so that those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works. These things are excellent and profitable for people. 9 But avoid foolish controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law, for they are unprofitable and worthless.

Titus 3:2-9

Look closely at verses 1 and 2. Paul gives a list of seven imperatives; (1) submit to rulers, (2) be obedient, (3) do good work, (4) speak evil to no one, (5) avoid quarreling, (6) be gentle and (7) be courteous to all people. This could be a great guide to being a good citizen of any society. They are good and commendable things. Thankfully, Paul doesn't end this discourse in Titus with imperatives. Take a look back at verses 3-7. In these verses Paul gives an incredibly clear description of the gospel. In this discourse Paul affirms the believer's identity in Christ, which is characterized by 'newness,' brought about by the Holy Spirit. The believers' new identity brought about by Jesus frees him or her to pursue the imperatives in the Bible. Without the indicatives described in verses 6-7, the imperatives of verses 1-2 are impossible obey in a sustained fashion. Consistent obedience is a mark of authentic faith. A simple example of this pattern may be, 'you can stop sinning because Christ died to free you from sin, while giving you the ability to obey God.'

This is the pattern that we must follow. Whenever you encounter a command in scripture look for the the indicative statement. Likewise when encouraging another believer to pursue holiness, remind them of the indicative; their identity in Christ. Commands that are not grounded in the gospel may turn into moralism. On the other hand, refraining from accountability and the pursuit of holiness may be antinomianism. The Biblical teaching gives commands and grounds them in the gospel. We must hold each other accountable for holiness. But we must do it through the power of the gospel.

Do you see the difference between Gospel-centered accountability and the errors of moralism and antinomianism? The moralists says, 'I will obey in order to gain acceptance.' The antinomian says, 'I won't obey because I don't have to obey. The one pursuing gospel-centered accountability says, 'I will strive to obey because God saved me, which allows me to pursue holiness.

Learning from Jesus

Examining Jesus' ministry is vital to knowing how we should interact with each other. Jesus perfectly interacts with a vast array of people. Many of these interactions are markedly different. Why? Likely, because Jesus interacted with each person based on his or her life, attitude, position, heart posture, etc. An instructive example of this paradigm is in John 3 and John 4. In

John 3 Jesus encounters Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a Pharisee; one of the religious leaders of the time. He approached Jesus with religious pride and arrogance. In turn, Jesus directly confronted him for his religious pride. Jesus may be providing us with a model of how to interact with the religious, self-righteous and unrepentant believers. Upon close inspection of the text, Jesus rebuked Nicodemus and presented the gospel to him in a way that he would understand. He connected the truth of the gospel with two texts in the Old Testament that Nicodemus would have known (Ez. 36 and Numbers 21). Jesus rebuked his pride and built a bridge to connect the gospel to his life.

In John 4, Jesus encounters a Samaritan woman at a well. By virtue of her ethnicity and gender she was on the opposite end of the moral, religious, and social spectrum compared to Nicodemus. The Samaritan woman had been married five times and was currently living with a man who was not her husband. Jesus lovingly and gently guided her to the truth, all the while not shying away from the fact that she needed to repent of her sin. To help her understand the gospel he used what was available; a well. Jesus helped her understand the gospel by making a connection between the life giving water in the well and the better eternal life giving water made available by Jesus.

Jesus directly confronted Nicodemus and his pride while gently guiding the Samaritan woman to the truth. In both cases he told them the truth and helped them connect the gospel to their lives. In a dgroup we want help each other confess sin, repent well and believe all the more in Jesus. How people will arrive at confession, repentance and belief may look different according to the attitude and heart posture of group members. Have confidence walking down both paths exemplified by Jesus, as they are appropriate. The repentant and the broken, like the woman at the well, need gracious truth in love. Encourage them with loving, gracious truth. The self-righteous and the proud need to be confronted; not in anger but with firm love. Learn from Jesus in John 4 for the contrite and in John 3 as an example for approaching the self-righteous.

How it Works

HEAR & OBEY (15 MINUTES)

During the week, commit to read 10-20 chapters from the Bible. Come prepared to share what you learned in your study of Scripture. Each person will share what he or she has heard from God in the word. Then share specifically how you can obey what you have learned from the Bible in the coming week.

We recommend that you chose a study or devotional tool as you read the Scripture for the week. At the end of this document there are three such study tools.

Additionally you will find multiple reading plans at the link below:

<http://www.ligonier.org/blog/bible-reading-plans/>

<http://austinstone.org/files/reading-plan.pdf>

REPENT & BELIEVE (30 MINUTES)

Each person spends time confessing their sin and believing the gospel.

Share with one another how you have sinned against God this past week. The accountability questions below may be a helpful tool and will give you some questions to consider. Be specific, and also share your heart motivations behind the sin.

After sin has been confessed, spend time speaking out loud to yourself and to one another the good news of Jesus' work for us. Hearing the gospel spoken helps us to remember and believe the gospel is good news for us!

PRAY FOR EACH OTHER (15 MINUTES)

Spend time discussing and praying for the struggles that you discussed during the Repentance and Belief section. Pray applicable scripture and encouragements over each other. Pray for and think of specific gospel applications that can be made in each other's lives. Be intentional about listening for the Holy Spirit to speak truth and encouragement to group members through your prayers.

ACCOUNTABILITY QUESTIONS

These questions are a starting point for your Dgroup. Develop your own over time!

- How has your anger or fear or anxiety or addiction shown up this week?
- How does that reveal what you're trusting in besides God?
- How have you wasted time?
- How have you felt yourself resisting obeying God this week: in your mission to the lost? In your sacrificial love for community?
- In light of God's love toward you, do you need to reconcile with somebody?
- Are you subconsciously holding a grudge?
- How have you battled sexual or intimacy temptation and how are you preparing to deal with it next week?
- How has the Holy Spirit been testing and growing you this week? Did you respond in faith or grumbling?
- Is anything (school, work, technology, etc.) isolating you from important relationships?
- _____ (Your personalized question)

STUDY TOOLS

The following are several examples of study tools. These are simply options that you may find helpful as you study the Scripture your dgroup has selected. If you already have a familiar method of study that works for you; use it! If you do not have a seasoned method of study, then the following examples are some study methods that we have found useful for studying Scripture.

Reap Method

READ

Open your Bible and ask the Holy Spirit to teach, correct, and train you (2 Timothy 3:16). As you're reading, ask these questions:

- What is happening in this passage?
- What things are emphasized, repeated, related?
- What do you see about God?
- What is God doing in this passage?
- What do you see about man?

EXAMINE

Spend some time reflecting. Ask yourself these questions, and write down your thoughts:

- How do you think the author wants his audience to respond?
- What do you learn about God's character?
- What wrong beliefs about God and myself did I have?

APPLY

After examining the passage, apply the text to your own life. Ask yourself these questions:

- How do I need to repent? What truths do I need to believe? What false beliefs must I turn from?
- What can I do – empowered by the Holy Spirit – today to apply this passage?

PRAY

Pray through the passage and your application, asking God to change your heart and to change your life, based on the time you've spent in God's Word.

After you finish, write down what God taught you. Share what the Lord showed you with your dgroup.

Six Study Questions

Read the passage. Upon completion, answer the following questions as they relate to the text.

1. How does this passage help me adore God?
2. How does it lead me to see and hate my sin?
3. How does it lead me to ask for grace?
4. How is Jesus the best example of this attribute?
5. How is Jesus the ultimate solution to the sin that I am confessing?
6. How is Jesus the ultimate source for the grace I need?

Conclusion

The Biblical command for holiness is not to be taken lightly. The Scriptures are clear; 'if you live by the flesh, you will die.' Pursuing holiness in isolation is all but impossible. We must help each other pursue holiness. For this reason dgroups are imperative. I hope and pray this resource helps you pursue holiness together.