

# COMMUNITY GROUP LAUNCH CURRICULUM





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# VISION FOR BIBLICAL COMMUNITY







# WELCOME & OVERVIEW

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Welcome to the launch of your new community group! The Connecting & Community Teams are praying for you as you begin your time together.

Onward's vision for community is to *connect people in authentic relationships that lead to spiritual transformation through Jesus Christ.*

We pray that your community group would grow to become like the early church in Acts...

“And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.” (Acts 2:42-47)

Over the coming weeks, you’ll learn about the six core values of community as well as healthy marks of community groups. The six core values are grouped in pairs under three questions to help you grow in your relationship with God. These questions provide a framework to help you deepen your daily relationship with Christ (John 15:5), remove anything that is hindering your relationship with him (Romans 7:22-23), and move forward in his will for you to love and serve the community in which He has placed you (Matthew 28:19-20).

Key Questions	How Are You Feeding Your Soul?	How Are You Feeding Your Flesh?	How Are You Feeding Others?
Core Values	Devote Daily Pursue Relationally	Live Authentically Admonish Faithfully	Counsel Biblically Engage Missionally

As you work through each lesson, your group can expect to cover these things:

1. Weekly Readings
2. Group Discussion Questions
3. Life Maps

To get the most of each lesson, make sure to:

1. **Pray** that God would instruct you through his Spirit and through his Word.
2. **Grab your Bible, a pen, and the launch curriculum** so you can thoroughly engage with the content.
3. **Prepare throughout the week** to read and meditate on the questions (not just the night before!).
4. **Come ready to share** with your group what you've learned!

Grace and peace,

**The Community Team at Onward**

LESSON 1

# GROUP EXPECTATIONS





# LESSON 1 INTRODUCTION

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In Lesson 1, you will study some of Onward's foundational beliefs about membership and the commitments that you, as a Onward Member, have made to the church and to those in your community group.

Specifically, you will look at the following topics and discuss them with your group:

- Church membership and the membership covenant
- Four stages of a community group
- Community commitment and support
- Life Maps

God designed the church to reflect him to a hurting world. In his grace, he invited us to join him as a church in his mission to love, serve, and call others to him. And as we continue to love others, the world will see Christ in us (John 13:35).

Though you've already signed the membership covenant, in this lesson you will re-read and discuss the covenant with your group. This will remind you of your commitments to believe in Christ, to belong to the church, to be trained in God's truth, and to be strong in a life of ministry and worship for the purpose of growth in your relationship with Christ.

You'll also discuss the four stages of community groups. Being aware of these stages of growth at the beginning of your group will help you navigate difficulties as your relationships mature.

Finally, you will begin to learn how to share your story or Life Map. We'll give you a framework to build your story (Appendix A) so that you can share it with the group at some point in the coming weeks. These times of sharing are an excellent way for your group members to get to know one another.

Our prayer for this first lesson is that you will leave with a better understanding of what to expect in community and excitement for what God will do in you individually and as a group.

# WHY CHURCH MEMBERSHIP MATTERS

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For many, church membership can feel like signing a contract with a shady company who will try to take advantage of you and pocket your money. For others, it might feel like living under a judgmental, arrogant system designed to wrestle you into submission.

But that's not how God designed the church. He isn't trying to rip you off or tear you down. The God who sent Jesus to die on the cross for you is the same God who created the church. He wants to make you joyful and purposeful. He wants you to heal and thrive. And one of the primary means he's given to do that is through deep relationships with Christians in the church.

## FOR YOUR GOOD

Ultimately, church membership matters because you matter. In Romans 12:3-13, the author, Paul, uses the analogy of a body to describe the church. Each part of the body—the ear, the heart, the eye—has a different function that works together to create a healthy body. If the eye isn't there, the body suffers. If the foot stops working, the body has a harder time moving. It's the same with the church. Each person plays a valuable role in the overall health of the church. If a person doesn't participate, the whole body hurts. The church needs you.

We have each been given talents to use for God's glory. The church gives us the opportunity to use those gifts to grow his kingdom. We can find joy while serving together in the purpose and design for which we were created by God.

## SERVE OTHERS

In grace, God has invited Christians into the church to grow as we care for one another. Scripture lists fifty-nine different “one another” passages, encouraging us to peace, devotion, and patience with one another in the body of believers (John 13:34; Romans 12:10,16; Ephesians 4:25,32; James 5:16, et al.) . As a member of a church, you can fulfill those in a way that you would never be able to accomplish independently.

God designed human beings for relationships. Right from the beginning, God saw that it was not good for mankind to be alone (Genesis 2:18); He knew that we could not survive on our own. So, God gave us community within the church and urges us to be unified (John 17:11). God calls us to

commit to a body of believers to strengthen us in our faith, and to demonstrate his love to each other and the world. Love cannot happen on its own; it must have an object. God asks us to extend that love to him and to other people.

## HELP WHEN YOU NEED IT

Because humans are born with a sinful nature, it is natural for us to drift toward sin and away from Jesus. So, God established caretakers in the church to watch over our souls and to keep the body of Christ healthy. People who become members of a church willingly submit to those God has given authority to oversee the care of its members. When a Christian is stuck in sin, the Bible encourages other Christians to go privately to that person to help him recognize sin and turn from it. Should no repentance (turning from sin) or resolution occur in a private meeting, Scripture instructs members to widen the circle to other trusted friends and church authority. If the member is still unwilling to turn from sin, the caretakers will eventually ask him to leave the church until he is ready to turn from sin and heal. This process, found in Matthew 18:15-17, protects the overall health of the church and encourages the person in sin toward repentance.

This care and correction process is not intended to humiliate or degrade people. It is done in humility and kindness to help members become and remain healthy. Others can often recognize the sin in our lives better than we can alone. And we have all sinned (Romans 3:23). So, before we help others see their sins, we should humbly remember to acknowledge and deal with our own shortcomings first and pray that God and trusted friends would pull us back to him when we wander (Matthew 7:2-4).

“My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.” (James 5:19-20)

**ADDITIONAL SCRIPTURE STUDY:** *Matthew 18:15-17, 1 Corinthians 5:1-12, Hebrews 13:17, Acts 20:28-30, 1 Peter 5:1-5, 1 Corinthians 12:12-27, Acts 2:37-41, Acts 6:1-7, 1 Timothy 5:3-17*

## PERSONAL REFLECTION

1. Is there anything from your past experience or contained in this lesson that creates any concerns or fears about being a member of Onward?
2. What are some of your talents that can be used in the church to bless others?
3. What kind of relationships do you hope for in the church? List a few ways you can build them.



# ONWARD'S MEMBERSHIP COVENANT

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If you have completed Onward's membership process, you know that our vision is to approach our mission of loving God and serving others like soldiers on a battleship rather than passengers on a cruise ship.

Below is the Membership Covenant that every Onward member has signed. Re-read the commitments you made, then answer the personal reflection questions.

## MEMBERSHIP COVENANT

Having trusted in Christ alone as my Lord and Savior, and being in agreement with the calling, commitments, convictions, core values, beliefs, and governance of Onward Community Church, I now am called to unite with the Onward family. In doing so, I commit myself to the Lord and to the other Members of the family to protect our unity, share in, serve, and support the ministry of my church family through pursuing:

### **BELONGING TO HIS BODY...**

- by living life as a fully devoted follower of Christ.
- by attending faithfully.
- by dealing biblically with conflict and refusing to gossip.
- by following the leadership in submitting myself to the care and correction of leadership should the need arise.
- by praying for its health and impact.
- by warmly welcoming those who visit Onward and committing myself to community with those who attend.
- by having a community group that will know me and help me as I seek to love God, love believers, and love unbelievers.

### **HELPING OTHERS BELIEVE IN CHRIST...**

- by developing relationships with the unchurched, de-churched, dead-churched, and unmoved.
- by sharing my story of grace with others.
- by praying for the salvation of non-believers with whom I have a relationship.

### **BEING TRAINED IN GOD'S TRUTH...**

- by committing myself to read, understand, and apply the Bible.
- by affirming the inspiration, infallibility, and authority of God's Word, as well as the other core doctrines found in Onward's Statement of Beliefs.
- by availing myself to the tools and resources of the church which are designed to further my understanding of and deepen my commitment to applying God's Word.
- by preparing myself to give a "ready defense" for my faith based on God's Word.

### **BEING STRONG IN A LIFE OF MINISTRY AND WORSHIP...**

- by serving others in ministry.
- by giving graciously as God has graciously given to me.

## **PERSONAL REFLECTION**

1. As you read through this covenant, what feelings or questions did it produce in you?
2. Which areas of the covenant do you believe are strengths for you? Weaknesses? Why?
3. What is one thing you can do this week to grow in one of these areas?

# THE FOUR STAGES OF COMMUNITY

Groups who are committed to stay together pass through four key stages: the Honeymoon Stage, the Differences Stage, the Acceptance Stage, and the Community Stage. As you begin to do life together, you'll notice a natural progression from one stage to the next. The tendency is to stop at Stage 2

("Differences") when conflict arises;

people either leave the group or retreat

to Stage 1 ("Honeymoon"). However,

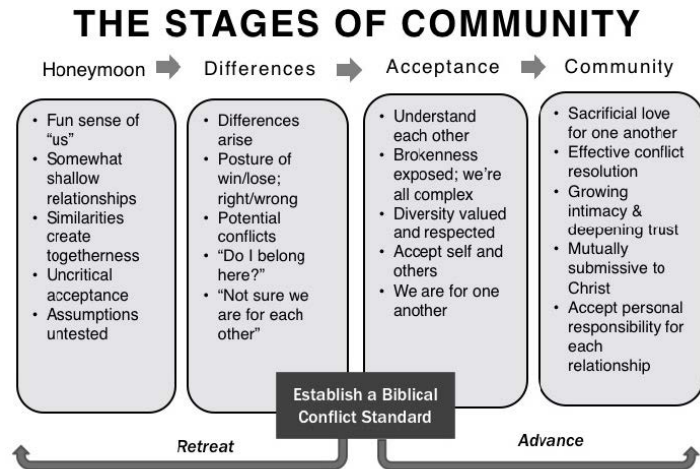
if your group matures onto Stages 3

("Acceptance") and 4 ("Community"),

you will experience new depth, rich

relationships, and God's beautiful design

for provision through community.



## STAGE 1: HONEYMOON ("THIS IS AWESOME...")

This stage is primarily characterized by a fun sense of "us." Since the members of the group are just getting to know one another, the relationships will be somewhat shallow, which is perfectly acceptable for this season. You may notice similarities between the other members of your group and accept everyone without criticism even if you find them a bit odd or quirky. If you're new to a community group or struggle with opening up, you may love this stage.

If you are ready to dive deep with your group, this stage may frustrate you because you are just beginning to learn about one another. Either way, it's important to get on the same page with your group in the "honeymoon" phase by finding similarities on which to build a strong foundation for your relationships as you move forward.

## **STAGE 2: DIFFERENCES (“WOW, WE’RE DIFFERENT...”)**

As you continue to get to know your group, differences in personality may become more obvious and create conflict. This is a pivotal stage for your group to grow in deeper relationships with each other. For some, conflict can feel like a natural hurdle to overcome as the group progresses. But for others, conflict can feel threatening. Some people may become more concerned about winning than mutual growth during seasons of conflict. A few members may even question the future of the group.

Groups can choose two paths in this stage. Path one is to retreat to the honeymoon stage and stay shallow. Though this may seem like a good idea, going back will not produce rich, authentic community. Path two is to develop a biblical standard of conflict resolution that will enable your group to safely and maturely deal with differences (we’ll discuss this in more detail later). Path two is the only option if you hope to experience true biblical community.

## **STAGE 3: ACCEPTANCE (“THESE DIFFERENCES ARE GOOD...”)**

Stage 3 is often when your group starts to value its diversity. As Paul discusses in 1 Corinthians 12, diversity among the body of Christ is essential, valued, and respected. When your group is unified, you encourage and engage each member with their respective strengths and value them despite their weaknesses.

During this stage it is important to continue practicing conflict resolution and to stay engaged despite differences in your group. This builds trust and growth in appreciating the group’s diversity. Intimacy and love for one another will deepen as you continue in this stage.

## **STAGE 4: COMMUNITY (“WE NEED / LOVE EACH OTHER...”)**

When group members sacrificially love one another and are able to grow closer together while resolving conflict in a biblical manner, you have reached Stage 4: Community. You accept each other’s differences. You have established a biblical conflict resolution standard. You mutually submit to one another out of reverence for Christ (Ephesians 5:21) and love for each other. You are willing to sacrifice for the benefit of one another without expecting anything in return (Philippians 2:1-11).

One of the best ways to set your group up for success is to set realistic expectations. If you and your group get on the same page from the beginning, you can often avoid conflict in the future. Unmet expectations can be a big source of conflict.

## COMMITMENT

The most important expectation in community is commitment. Setting expectations as an entire group is imperative to the success of your group. When everyone understands what is expected of them individually, it helps the group be more committed to each other.

At the end of this launch group, together you will establish the ongoing structure and commitments for your community group. But during this launch season, begin to demonstrate commitment by attending each meeting on time. It communicates that everyone's time is important, that biblical community is a priority, and that you are committed to growing together during this season. If someone is struggling to attend the group or consistently shows up late, it is loving to have a one-on-one conversation with that person to understand why. If it becomes clear that the person is unable to commit after individual discussions, involve your community Launcher, Shepherd, or Staff Director to help navigate these conversations.

## GROUP LEADERSHIP AND SUPPORT

Speaking of group Leaders, Shepherds, and Directors, did you know that your group will have a lot of support to help you continue to grow in life together? Because of the importance of healthy community in the life of the church and the responsibility of church leaders to care for each member, great effort is made to establish and equip mature leaders who can support your group needs.

Community Group Leaders are members who are a part of your community group. A Group Leader's role is to be a model of Christian maturity, personally demonstrate how to live out the core values of community, help the group through any pastoral care issues that arise, and provide communication to and from the group with church leadership. For details about the commitment and role of a Community Group Leader see Appendix B.

In addition to a Community Group Leader, your group will also have the support of a Community Group Shepherd and Community Group Director. Shepherds are experienced, trusted lay leaders outside of your community group who oversee and provide support for your group when it is needed. A Shepherd will meet regularly with your Community Group Leader and may occasionally step into your group to help through conflict, major decisions, family or personal crises, unrepentant sin, or theological questions. Each Shepherd reports to a Community Group Director who is a staff member of the church. Directors are granted authority by the Elders to give oversight and direction for community groups. In some instances, a Director may step into a group along with Shepherds and Group.

Leaders to help when additional support is necessary. Directors meet with Shepherds regularly to hear how your group is doing and provide communication to and from the church. The Directors report to the Campus Pastors and Elders. With this structure, your group has a direct line of support and communication through all levels of the church family. Below is a picture of the support and care structure for every member of this church. You are not alone as you commit to live and grow together in community.

## SHEPHERDING STRUCTURE



“Moreover, look for able men from all the people, men who fear God, who are trustworthy and hate a bribe, and place such men over the people as chiefs of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens. And let them judge the people at all times. Every great matter they shall bring to you, but any small matter they shall decide themselves. So it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you.” (Exodus 18:21-22)

“Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.” (Hebrews 13:17)

## PERSONAL REFLECTION

1. Which stage of community development sounds most exciting to you? Why?
2. Which stage of community development is least appealing to you? Why?
3. What questions or concerns do you have about how the church supports and cares for you as a member through the shepherding structure of community groups?

# LESSON 1 DISCUSSION & ACTIVITY

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Review the Life Map Activity below. Then, be ready to answer the following questions based upon this lesson. Come to your group ready to discuss your answers.

1. Is there anything about your past experience or contained in this lesson that creates any concerns or fears about being a member of Onward? (Personal Reflection on pg. 14)
2. Which areas of the Membership Covenant do you believe are strengths for you? Weaknesses? Why? (Personal Reflection on pg. 16)
3. Which stage of community development is most exciting to you? Least exciting to you? Why? (Personal Reflection on pg. 21)
4. Are you willing to commit to participating fully in the launch of this community group during the next several weeks? Why or why not? (write your answer below)

## **LIFE MAP ACTIVITY:**

In the coming weeks, each person in your group will take turns sharing his or her Life Map to help you begin to know one another. Read Appendix A to learn about Life Maps and different ways to create one. During the last 30 minutes of your group time, your Launcher will share his or her Life Map with the group. Your turn is coming, so start to think about how you might present your own Life Map!



LESSON 2

# HOW ARE YOU FEEDING YOUR SOUL?





# LESSON 2 INTRODUCTION

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Three key questions that a healthy community group should regularly ask one another are:

1. How are you feeding your soul?
2. How are you feeding your flesh?
3. How are you feeding others?

In this lesson, you will focus on the first question, “How are you feeding your soul?”

Two ways to nourish your soul are knowing God through his Word and pursuing relationships with his people. As you’ll learn, a healthy community group starts with your own relationship with Jesus. As you grow with him, you’ll find that you can more easily love and serve your group.

Over the next few weeks you will cover Six Core Values that mark healthy community groups and lead to spiritual transformation. The first two core values are “Devote Daily” and “Pursue Relationally.” You will learn what these values mean and how to implement them into your daily life.

This lesson will help your group have some foundational conversations to build relationships with one another and to learn how to follow Christ together. Authentic biblical community doesn’t develop overnight, but if you’re committed to growing together, your group will understand and see God’s goodness in the many ways that He uses you in each other’s lives.

To prepare for each meeting, read the material on your own and consider the personal reflection questions. When you meet as a group you will share your answers to the Group Discussion Questions at the end of each lesson.

# DEVOTE DAILY

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“I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing.” (John 15:5)

## COMMUNITY CORE VALUE #1:

Devote daily to a personal relationship with Jesus.

## IT STARTS WITH YOU AND JESUS

If you’ve ever flown on an airplane, you’ve heard the safety message about oxygen masks that will deploy in the event of an emergency. After explaining the function of the masks, the flight attendants add another message: first put the mask on yourself, and then help others. In other words, first make sure that you’re connected to the source of life, and then you’ll be able to help others do the same.

Community works the same way. When you’re first connected to Jesus, the source of life, you will be able to help others connect to him and receive life from him as well. But unless you’re walking with Jesus, building intimacy with him, and drawing your strength from him, you won’t have anything to offer others. Apart from Jesus, you can do nothing and will bear no fruit (John 15:5). Like a branch disconnected from the life-giving vine, you will wither once your own resources are exhausted. But if you are connected to Jesus, he will breathe continual life, love, and joy into you (John 15:10-11), and you’ll be able to pass that on to others.

## INVESTING IN YOUR RELATIONSHIP DAILY

When you read the word “devote,” that may bring up thoughts of “doing your devotional” or “having a quiet time,” which may or may not be positive, depending on your experience. The dictionary defines devotion as love, loyalty, or enthusiasm for a person. In being devoted to Christ, what you’re really doing is expressing love, loyalty, and enthusiasm for him! That’s truly life-giving and anything but stale.

Just like in your relationships with others, your relationship with Christ requires an investment of time and energy on your part. In his case, it should be a priority every day. The greatest commandment that Jesus gave is to love God with everything you have (Matthew 22:37). The best thing you can do for yourself and for those in your community group is to be fully invested in your relationship with Jesus and fully devoted to following him.

## DEVOTING THROUGH DISCIPLINE

One of the ways you can invest in your relationship with Jesus is to discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness (1 Timothy 4:7b). “Discipline” is another one of those words that can bring up pleasant or unpleasant thoughts, depending on your experience. Put simply, discipline means forming and practicing habits that help you grow spiritually. These are God-given means to grow in godliness and are not a spiritual to-do list that measures your love for God or makes God love you more. The reason we need to practice the disciplines is that it’s not enough for us to TRY to be like Jesus; we must TRAIN to be like Jesus.

The most common ways to connect with the Lord on a consistent, daily basis are through the practice of personal spiritual disciplines as outlined in the Bible. Below are some practical suggestions for three of the most common personal spiritual disciplines:

**Reading the Bible.** When you commit to reading your Bible, it’s important to create a plan, a place, and a time. Like any well-meaning goal, the intention to read your Bible daily can get lost in daily routines. Creating a plan will increase your likelihood of sticking with it. If you don’t know where to start, check out [jointhejourney.com](http://jointhejourney.com) and follow along with each day’s reading, or read a chapter of Proverbs each day (e.g. on the 10th day of the month, read Proverbs 10, etc.).

Find a time and a place during your day when you know you can be consistent and distraction-free. For many people, this time is during the mornings before the day begins (but mornings are not required). If you feel like your time is minimal right now, simply commit to 15 minutes of reading the Bible and praying. You’ll be surprised how much you can fit into that small of time.

When you finish reading, choose one thing that you can think about during your day and later share that with a friend or someone in your community group. Remember, the goal of reading your Bible is to learn about God so that you can love him more and apply his wisdom to your life. After

you read, ask yourself, “So what? How can I apply the lessons learned to help me love God more and love others better?”

As you discuss what you are learning together, keep in mind that some group members just bought their first Bible, and some have been studying it for years. Extend grace to those who are still learning the basics of God’s Word. Regard God’s Word as your group’s ultimate source of wisdom, doing your best to interpret Scripture correctly. When in doubt about what the Bible says about a topic, ask your Community Shepherd!

**Prayer.** It is easy to make prayer complicated, but it doesn’t have to be. Prayer is simply talking to God. Thank him for the gifts he has given you and let him know what’s on your mind. This can happen at dedicated times each day, occasional prayer retreats, or simple conversations with God in little moments throughout daily activities. If you like a more structured approach to life, the acronym ACTS is a helpful tool to recall prayer topics:

**A**doration—Praise God for who he is.

**C**onfession—Confess your sins to God.

**T**hanksgiving—Thank God for his gifts to you.

**S**upplication—Make your requests known to God.

For many people it is also helpful to keep a prayer journal. Sometimes writing out your prayers can stir affections for God. A prayer journal also makes it easy to recall what is on your prayer list and to celebrate answered prayers. Writing your prayers can also help you stay focused while praying.

**Journaling.** Writing down what God is teaching you is also an effective way to devote daily. This often looks different for every person, but going back to read how God was working in your life months or even years earlier can remind you of God’s faithfulness when life feels difficult. It can also provide a big-picture view of how God is growing you spiritually over a long period of time: what he is teaching you, the aspects of your life he is maturing, how he is caring for you, etc. If writing everything out feels overwhelming, you can also bullet a few points instead of writing full sentences.

To get you started, ask yourself a few questions:

- What did I do well today?
- What could I do better tomorrow?
- What did I learn while reading the Bible?
- What did God reveal to me about himself or myself today?
- Am I upset or worried about anything that I should bring to God?
- How can I rest better this week?
- In what ways have I been trying to earn God's love rather than enjoying the love He has freely shown me?

## SHARE WHAT YOU'RE LEARNING

As you grow in godliness, share that growth with others! God can use what he's teaching you to encourage and challenge your community group as well. Make a point of sharing what God is teaching you and how you are applying those teachings to your life.

Determine a time, place, and plan for growing together spiritually. Consider designating each member a day of the week to share what he or she is learning from God. People could share from God's Word, podcasts, sermons, books, or worship songs that blessed them. Memorizing verses together as a group or sharing a prayer calendar to remind you all to pray for people or events can also help you grow together spiritually.

## PERSONAL REFLECTION

1. How have you grown spiritually this year? In what ways would you like to keep growing?
2. What spiritual disciplines do you practice? Which are the most life-giving to you? Why?
3. How do you think community might help you grow in your relationship with Jesus?

## IDEAS FOR LIVING OUT THE CORE VALUE

- Have a time, location, and plan in place to grow your relationship with Jesus every day
- Keep a journal of what you're reading and what God is teaching you and share this regularly with your group; ask others what God is teaching them, too
- Keep a list of things that you are praying for yourself and for others, and share God's answers to those prayers
- Choose Scripture to memorize and meditate on as a group
- If you are learning the Bible for the first time, ask your leader(s) about recommended resources or classes for learning God's Word.

## SUGGESTED RESOURCES

- Join the Journey online devotional: [jointhejourney.com](http://jointhejourney.com) • The Bible Memory App: [BibleMemory.com](http://BibleMemory.com)



# PURSUE RELATIONALLY

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“Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor.”

(Romans 12:10)

## COMMUNITY CORE VALUE #2:

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Pursue deep relationships with one another based on love and acceptance.

## DEVOTED TO ONE ANOTHER

Has anyone in your life been devoted to you? If so, that person probably showed it by caring for you, putting your needs first, learning and doing things that brought you joy, and investing time to know you better. While the first community core value is about being devoted to God, Scripture also calls us to be devoted to one another. Being devoted to someone else means investing time and energy into the relationship, loving that person as a brother or sister, and putting his or her needs above your own

(Philippians 2:3). There’s also a commitment to love even when it’s difficult, because a true friend loves at all times (Proverbs 17:17). Biblical community gives your group an opportunity to practice devotion to one another and experience the joy and growth that it brings. Doesn’t that sound great?

## LIFE BEYOND THE GROUP MEETING

Typically, groups meet together for a few hours every week for their “official” group time. Those are really important times, but your group’s relationships can’t stop there. We are called to share life together, not just meet for a few hours each month.

To grow your relationships, you will need to regularly initiate with one another outside of your official meeting time. Initiators don’t wait for the phone to ring; they make the call! This takes effort and intentionality because everyone is busy, but it’s incredibly important. Participate in regular life together, building in as much overlap as possible in your lives outside of your official meeting times.

# PRACTICAL PURSUIT

Here are some practical ways that your group can pursue deep relationships with one another. The possibilities are limitless, but the four below will get you started.

**Fellowship.** Acts 2:42 describes how believers in the early church did life together. Among other things, they devoted themselves to fellowship with one another. Fellowship can be defined as “a friendly relationship among people.” In other words, be friends! Don’t view the people in your group as just your community group but not your “real” friends. Treat each other like you would treat your good friends. You may not feel like you are good friends with those in your group. It might even be hard to build those friendships. In fact, the Greek word translated “devote” in this verse implies persistence, perseverance, and endurance despite difficulty. It will take work! But intentional fellowship will grow into true and lasting friendship as you continue pursuing and investing in each other.

**Care.** God has made the body of Christ in a special way so that the members can care for one another (1 Corinthians 12:24-26). Your group is a smaller expression of the larger local body of Christ, and you are called to care for each other like you would care for yourself. Look for practical ways to meet one another’s needs. Follow up on something that was shared, write an encouraging note, bring a meal, help with an errand, or find a way to assist in times of crisis.

**Prayer.** All Christians should devote themselves to prayer (Colossians 4:2). So, pray for the members of your group on your own and pray with each other. Seeking God together is a powerful way to grow relationships. Make note of prayer requests for each person, pray during group time, and be faithful to follow up on those requests.

**Fun.** Just because community has some serious intentionality doesn’t mean that it can’t be a lot of fun! There is definitely a time to laugh together (Ecclesiastes 3:4). Play together often. Find out what others like to do and spend time doing those things together. The acronym T-I-M-E will help you grow your love for each other:

**T**rips/travel—Plan a fun weekend retreat away or staycation with your group.

**I**nterests—Take turns participating in each other’s interests and pastimes.

**M**eals—There is nothing like good food and conversation to build relationships.

**E**ntertainment—Find affordable and fun experiences to make memories together.

## EMBRACING IMPERFECTION

As you read about ways to build and pursue relationships with your community group, you may be thinking, “That’s all great, but I’m not sure I even like these people.” We all bring expectations into community, and one of those may be to spend time with others who are just like us, who are easy to know and like, who don’t have problems, and who won’t require us to get outside of our comfort zone. That’s pretty idealistic, and usually isn’t how it works in real life.

Jesus said that it’s not healthy people who need a doctor, but the sick (Matthew 9:12). It’s not perfect people who need community, but the broken, the needy, and the imperfect. That’s all of us! It means that things can get messy at times. People won’t be exactly who you expect or want them to be. Remember, you may not be exactly what someone else is expecting or looking for either!

When we practice real, biblical community, we get a firsthand look at the struggles, pitfalls, and challenges that all of us experience in our day-to-day lives. Community can be messy, but we experience true life when we are known and cared for by others. God will connect your hearts together as a group. When that happens, you will move past being frustrated by your differences to seeing the beauty in them and fully embracing them by God’s grace. You will be able to accept and pursue one another in the same way that Jesus accepts and pursues you (Romans 15:7).

## PERSONAL REFLECTION

1. Have you ever experienced real acceptance in a relationship? Explain your answer.
2. When is the best time during the day for you to initiate with others (e.g. during your commute, over mealtime, before bed, etc.)? What makes that the best time for you?
3. What are some of your common reasons (or excuses) for not initiating with others throughout the week?

## IDEAS FOR LIVING OUT THE CORE VALUE

- Make a plan on how you can stay connected throughout the week and follow up with one another regularly
- Nominate a “social chair” who helps to coordinate time together outside of the group.
- Build in as much natural life overlap as possible (e.g. going to church together, sharing meals, going to kids’ games, etc.)
- Take personal responsibility and initiative to develop the relationships in your group.
- Go on a group retreat to spend extended time with one another

## SUGGESTED RESOURCES

- Community Group Retreat Guide (in the Appendix C)
- GroupMe app: [groupme.com](https://groupme.com)

# LESSON 2: GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS & SHARING LIFE MAPS

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1. How have you grown spiritually this year? In what ways would you like to keep growing? (Personal Reflection on Page 30)
  
2. How do you think community might help you grow in your relationship with Jesus? (Personal Reflection on Page 30)
  
3. Have you ever experienced real acceptance in a relationship? Explain your answer. (Personal Reflection on Page 34)
  
4. For these two core values, list one way that you need to grow personally and one way that you can contribute to the group:
  - Devote Daily Personal Growth Area:
  
  - Devote Daily Personal Contribution:
  
  - Pursue Relationally Personal Growth Area:
  
  - Pursue Relationally Personal Contribution:

## LIFE MAPS

The last 30 minutes of your group time can be dedicated for an individual (or couple) to share their Life Map, answer any questions, and pray together. If your Launcher has not yet shared their Life Map, this would be a great opportunity.



LESSON 3

# HOW ARE YOU FEEDING YOUR FLESH?







# LESSON 3 INTRODUCTION

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Recall the three key questions a healthy community group should regularly ask one another:

1. How are you feeding your soul?
2. How are you feeding your flesh?
3. How are you feeding others?

This lesson will focus on the second question, “How are you feeding your flesh?” “Feeding your flesh” can be described as giving way to the desires of your sinful human nature or following Satan’s temptations to lead you astray. We all have sinful natures and Satan came to steal, kill, and destroy (John 10:10). Though sin can taste good at the time, it is destructive to you personally and to God’s work through you in the world. God has something better for you.

To learn how your group can help one another resist Satan and your sinful desires, in this lesson you will study these community values: Live Authentically and Admonish Faithfully.

Living authentically means sharing struggles and honestly confessing sin to one another. Admonishing faithfully means living out God’s command to love and care for each other by identifying sin that harms our relationships with God and with others. The point of identifying, confessing, and confronting sin in yourself and those you love is not to embarrass or shame anyone, but to remind each other that God’s will and way is best. In Christ we are free to be fully known and fully loved, and to experience all that God has planned for our lives.

Honestly addressing sin in yourself and in others can feel daunting—especially if you have been hurt or rejected in the past. But if you can learn to practice these biblical principles in a healthy way, it will create a stronger community group built on trust and understanding and propel you into a deeper relationship with God.

As you move forward in this curriculum, remember to answer the Group Discussion Questions at the end of the chapter, and share one person/couple’s Life Map.

# LIVE AUTHENTICALLY

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“Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.” (James 5:16)

## COMMUNITY CORE VALUE #3:

Live authentically, sharing our struggles.

## HOW ARE YOU DOING, REALLY?

Have you ever worn a mask? Maybe you dressed up as a superhero when you were a kid or went to a party in costume. Those masks can be fun, but when it comes to community, having a mask on isn't a good thing.

It may not feel like you're wearing a mask right now. However, we can all be tempted to make ourselves appear like something that we're not, or to make it seem like we're doing just fine when, in reality, we're struggling or walking in sin. The result of that kind of mask is isolation, which destroys community and goes against all sound wisdom (Proverbs 18:1).

Authentic community helps you take off your masks and stop conveying that you have it all together. It helps you be fully known and fully loved. In community, you commit to being completely honest with one another. This means sharing authentically and giving others permission to know the real you. Your community can then encourage and lovingly challenge you to move toward Christ (Hebrews 10:24-25), and to not be hardened by the presence of sin in your life (Hebrews 3:13). Sharing your true condition with others isn't about shame, punishment, or condemnation; it's about love, joy, and freedom (Romans 8:1, John 8:32)!

## KNOWING THEIR CONDITION

In addition to sharing how you're really doing, part of living in community is knowing how the other members of your group are doing. Just as you should strive to be fully known, you should strive to fully know others (Proverbs 27:23) so that you can understand how to best love, care for, and support them.

In Genesis 4, we see the importance in taking care of one another in this way. When God asks Cain the whereabouts of his brother, Cain responds, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” It’s a sarcastic question, because instead of caring for his brother, Cain has killed him. God knows this and wants Cain to honestly deal with his sin. God soon punishes Cain for his violence and hatred towards Abel, who Cain should have been caring for all along. We are all called to do what Cain failed to do and be our “brother’s keeper,” who can help bear one another’s burdens (Galatians 6:2).

## TIME AND TRUST

If the idea of sharing how you’re really doing with your group gives you the cold sweats, you’re not alone. It can feel scary and vulnerable to reveal weakness and struggles to others. That kind of sharing requires trust, which usually takes time to build. And that’s okay! If you have a foundation of love and acceptance (see core value “Pursue Relationally”), you can take steps towards being really honest with each other. As you share, and your group responds in a loving way, you’ll find that it builds trust, and that it becomes easier and more natural to be completely transparent.

## BRING IT INTO THE LIGHT

With that in mind, what does it mean to authentically share about sins and struggles? It means bringing those things to the light (Ephesians 5:11). That isn’t easy to do, since it goes against our sin nature to expose those things (John 3:20). But as Christians, the Bible calls us to live as children of God who walk in the light as we follow him (Ephesians 5:8, John 3:21). This means that we need to confess our sins to each other (James 5:16). Each of us has the responsibility to quickly and fully confess our sins to others. Confession may feel like punishment, but it’s actually a gift from God! Confession brings mercy, forgiveness, fellowship, healing, purification, and restoration.

Be honest about what you’re struggling with and why. Don’t just focus on the behavior, but also on what’s going on in your heart, which is where sinful behavior comes from (Matthew 15:19). Since the way you live comes from your heart (Proverbs 4:23; 27:19), if you only confess your actions, the root of the problem will remain unaddressed and in the dark.

## CONFESSION HAPPENED – NOW WHAT?

In response to any sin that is confessed, the Bible tells us that we should pray for healing (James 5:16). This is a powerful way to support one another as a community group. When someone confesses sin, pray for that person right away. Ask God to heal his or her heart. Share verses from

Scripture that speak to what was shared (see core value “Counsel Biblically”). Celebrate the fact that God is working! Remember to accept each other, just as Christ has accepted you (Romans 15:7). Be kind to each other, be compassionate, and forgive each other in the same way that God has forgiven you (Ephesians 4:32).

After you confess, you’ll probably feel like a weight has been lifted from your shoulders. You experience forgiveness, and fellowship is restored (1 John 1:7,9). The next step is repentance, which is actively turning away from the sin that you confessed (Acts 3:19). Your group should help you process what steps of repentance to take—how you can turn to move toward God, away from your sin (2 Timothy 2:22).

The last step is to move forward. The Bible says that when a righteous person falls, they get back up and keep going (Proverbs 24:16). By God’s grace, Christians can move past sinful behavior and press on towards Christ (Philippians 3:13-14), being confident that nothing we do could ever make God stop loving us (Romans 8:38-39).

Don’t isolate in the dark with your sin. Come out of hiding, confess to your community, and enjoy the life and healing that follow.

## PERSONAL REFLECTION

1. When have you felt comfortable sharing a real struggle with someone? What was it about that person that made you feel safe?
2. Has anyone in your past broken your trust after you shared something personal? How did you respond to that broken trust?
3. Is there anything you're struggling with that God is prompting you to share or confess?

## IDEAS FOR LIVING OUT THE CORE VALUE

- Share your detailed stories and testimonies to gain an appreciation for each other's unique background, wiring, and struggles
- Be willing to proactively self-disclose what's going on in your heart; don't wait for people to ask the perfect question but be willing to go first
- Set aside intentional time for accountability in between regular all-group meetings
- Share struggles and celebrate victories in real time rather than waiting for the next meeting
- Pray for healing and victory the moment sins are confessed—these prayers are powerful

# ADMONISH FAITHFULLY

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“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.”  
(Colossians 3:16)

## COMMUNITY CORE VALUE #4:

Encourage and admonish one another faithfully towards maturity.

## GO! FIGHT! WIN!

If you’ve ever been to a sporting event, you know how important it is to have encouragement. Whether it comes from cheerleaders, fans, teammates, or coaches, encouragement helps athletes perform to their best potential, drawing strength from those who are supporting them.

The same is true in community. Life can be hard, and we all need reminders and encouragement from those around us, such as:

- Be bold, be strong (Ephesians 6:10, 19)
- Keep your eyes on the prize (Philippians 3:14)
- Don’t lose heart (1 Thessalonians 5:14)
- Keep doing good (Galatians 6:9)
- Finish well (1 Corinthians 9:24)

You need other Christians to encourage you to be all that God has created you to be and to remind you that true life can only be experienced in Christ and through obedience to him. Others need this same encouragement from you.

## REMINDING OF GOD’S BEST

The word “admonish” from Colossians 3:16 means reminding one another about life in Christ. It means telling others God’s truth and being a loving, positive influence to help them walk in that truth. It doesn’t mean controlling their behavior or beating them up for their sin. Admonishment should be delivered with patience, grace, and compassion. If someone doesn’t respond well initially, admonishment could become a warning, a loving rebuke, or even a strong correction (1

Thessalonians 5:14a, 2 Timothy 4:2). But the motivation for admonishment should always be someone's growth, not shame. God is patient, slow to anger, and abounding in love (Psalm 103:8), and it's his kindness that leads a person to repentance (Romans 2:4b). As you admonish one another and seek to restore one another from sin, it must be done in a spirit of gentleness (Galatians 6:1). When done properly, admonishment should point everyone's eyes toward Christ so we can all see him as the treasure above all things.

It can take courage to do this well and thoroughly. It might be easy to speak into the 98% of someone's life that is relatively straightforward to address. There might be the "last 2%," though, that you're hesitant to speak into because you don't know how that person will react. You might be afraid of hurting that person's feelings or uncovering a deeper issue. Though you should always deliver the message with love and grace, the most loving thing you can do for someone is to share the "last 2%" of what you see. Base your admonishment on Scripture, be rooted in love (Ephesians 4:15), and remember that wounds from a friend can be trusted (Proverbs 27:6). Before admonishing someone, ask yourself a few questions: Does this person really need to be admonished? Am I the right person to do it? When would be the best time to admonish this person? Does this person know that I love him or her? Do I have similar sin in my own life that also needs to be addressed? These questions will help you approach the conversation sensitively when it becomes clear that sin is affecting that person's life and relationships.

## KEEP / STOP / START

A practical way to think about encouragement and admonishment is to answer three questions for yourself, and to help others answer for themselves. Something like this: In order to fully obey God's Word and pursue His best for me, what do I need to:

- Keep doing? (Encourage one another to keep up the good work.)
- Stop doing? (Point out sin or unproductive behaviors to turn away from.)
- Start doing? (Suggest new opportunities to pursue Christ more fully.)

Thoroughly and lovingly processing these questions will help your group point one another toward Christ. This can look different for each group and member. Some people may want help in specific areas, such as memorizing Scripture or sharing the gospel. Others may want a general time of confession and repentance.

During group time, ask one another how you're doing in those specific areas. Be vulnerable to share how you're doing. 1 John 1:7 says, "But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin." As you listen to others in your group, strive to nurture an environment of trust. Don't respond to other people's confessions with shame or quick fixes. Listen, pray, and counsel biblically (you will learn more about counseling biblically in Lesson 4).

## **RESPONDING TO ADMONISHMENT FROM OTHERS**

Just like it is wise to prepare before you admonish someone else faithfully, it is also wise to prepare for how you will respond when someone in your community group admonishes you.

There is a good chance that someone in your group will admonish you in a way that is imperfect and frustrating. You might be tempted to become defensive or argumentative. You might even want to go on the attack and start pointing out the other person's flaws. Though these are natural human responses to admonishment, try to be patient and listen to understand what is being said (James 1:19-21). Attempt to receive admonishment as an opportunity for growth. If you are able to receive reminders of God's truth in a way that is humble, gentle, patient, and loving—even when they are delivered by imperfect people—it will help everyone in your group grow (Ephesians 4:32).

In Lesson 6 you will learn more about working through conflict biblically and how to avoid destructive responses to admonishment.

## **YOU ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR YOU**

Remember, the ownership for living authentically and admonishing faithfully falls on you, not on others. While others are involved to support and help you (Galatians 6:1-3), it is not their primary job to track you down and ask specific questions in an effort to make you share. You are responsible for your own spiritual health. All of us will give an account for how we steward our own lives (Galatians 6:4-5). So, be proactive in sharing what is really going on with you.



## PERSONAL REFLECTION

1. How do you best receive encouragement? Admonishment? Who has encouraged and “sharpened” you well in your life?
2. How are you doing at encouraging and lovingly helping others recognize sin in their lives? In what ways can you grow?
3. Does anything come to mind that you need to keep doing, stop doing, or start doing?

## IDEAS FOR LIVING OUT THE CORE VALUE

- Find out each other’s plans for growth and actively help one another reach them
- Celebrate large and small victories frequently in all areas of life
- Write someone a note telling them how you have seen them grow
- Don’t just admonish and then leave; be willing to walk through the situation deeply with one another

## SUGGESTED RESOURCES

- Appendix D: Confession of Sin
- Conflict Field Guide (Note: this will be covered in Lesson 5)

# LESSON 3: GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS & SHARING LIFE MAPS

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1. When have you felt comfortable sharing a real struggle with someone? What was it about that person that made you feel safe? (Personal Reflection on Page 43)
2. How do you best receive encouragement? Admonishment? Who has encouraged and “sharpened” you well in your life? (Personal Reflection on Page 47)
3. How are you doing at encouraging and lovingly helping others recognize sin in their lives? In what ways can you grow? (Personal Reflection on Page 47)
4. What are some helpful ways that your group can encourage and admonish one another in love?

## LIFE MAPS

The last part of your group time can be dedicated to a group member (individual or couple) sharing their Life Map (instructions for completing and sharing your Life Map can be found in Lesson 1). The group can plan on the last 30 minutes of your time for an individual (or couple) to share their Life Map, answer any questions, and pray together.

LESSON 4

# HOW ARE YOU FEEDING OTHERS?





# LESSON 4 INTRODUCTION

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Congratulations on making it halfway! Keep up the good work.

In this lesson, you will learn about the last of the three community questions, “How are you feeding others?”:

1. How are you feeding your soul?
2. How are you feeding your flesh?
3. How are you feeding others?

Scripture encourages you to not isolate in your relationship with God. As you receive forgiveness for sins, feed your soul with God’s Word, and dwell daily in his love, try to extend the same gifts that you receive from God to others. In Matthew 22:36-40, Jesus says that the greatest commandment is to “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind.” He then says that the second greatest commandment is to “Love your neighbor as yourself.” The principle of “loving your neighbors” is wrapped up in the last two of the Onward’s six community values:

Counsel Biblically and Engage Missionally. Counseling biblically might be an overwhelming concept. Many people feel inadequate to counsel others in times of stress. But God gave his Word so that you could encourage people with his wisdom. One benefit you gain from abiding daily in God’s Word is that you are better prepared to counsel biblically. Your own opinions matter but sharing God’s opinion is more loving. This lesson will discuss how to counsel with Scripture while lovingly communicating to others.

Outside of your community group, God commissions you to tell others about Jesus (Matthew 28:18). While sharing Christ takes various forms for different people, the command is the same: God wants you to lovingly share the good news of Christ with those in your neighborhoods and cities. As you respond to God’s call as a group, you will find that he does incredible things through people who are faithful to share Christ with others.

# COUNSEL BIBLICALLY

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“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

## COMMUNITY CORE VALUE #5:

Offer and receive biblical counsel in all areas of life.

## THE BIBLE OVER OPINION AND EXPERIENCE

If God spoke to you, would you listen? A well-known pastor said, “If you want to hear God speak, just read the Bible out loud.” That’s an amazing thought! When you read the Bible, you’re not just reading truths written down thousands of years ago, you’re also hearing the very words of God spoken to you today.

Scripture being inspired by God means that he is the source of all of it (2 Timothy 3:16-17). As such, it has the authority to speak into our individual lives, but also into how life works in general. Jesus said that all authority in heaven and on earth belongs to him (Matthew 28:18). Since all authority belongs to him and his Word expresses his will for our lives, every part of our lives is subject to the authority of Scripture. Nothing is off limits to God and his Word!

When discussing the things that come up in community, you may be prone to lead with your own opinions and experiences to offer advice or counsel. That often feels easier than digging into what the Bible says about a particular topic. Your opinions and experiences may be valid, but it’s important to remember that God is the authority on ALL topics, and that his thoughts are not our thoughts, and his ways are not our ways (Isaiah 55:8). We shouldn’t supplement our opinions with Scripture; we must form our opinions based on Scripture. This is critically important! The effectiveness of your community will increase alongside of your biblical literacy.

## YOU CAN OFFER BIBLICAL COUNSEL

The Bible says that, as Christians, we should counsel and instruct one another (Romans 15:14). You may be thinking, “How can I offer counsel from God’s Word? I’m not a professional counselor!” The good news is that you don’t have to be one; you simply have to be a student of God’s Word. If you don’t know the answers, you can ask the question: “What does the Bible say about that?” Search for the answers together during group time or give yourselves time to research and come back with perspective from God’s Word.

You might also be hesitant to share what the Bible says on a given topic because you are also struggling to living faithfully in that area. If that’s the case, you should examine your own life and deal with anything that doesn’t line up with Scripture before pointing out the same in someone else’s life (Matthew 7:5). However, this doesn’t mean you stay silent! Be honest about where you’re struggling, and then point others to the truth of God’s Word.

Counseling biblically can be hard, but there is good news: God will give you the ability to do it (2 Peter 1:3)! His Word is living, active, and sharp, able to determine and judge our thoughts and intentions (Hebrews 4:12). Share God’s Word in a situation, then watch him work.

As you’re offering counsel, it’s important to be sure that you’re using Scripture correctly, and not just grabbing verses out of context. Study God’s Word so that you understand its true meaning, then apply it generously to life!

## HOW TO COUNSEL OTHERS BIBLICALLY

The acronym “WALKS” is helpful to remember how to counsel others biblically.

**WALK WITH GOD:** Your relationship with others will only be strengthened if you are abiding daily with Jesus. God helps you see your own shortcomings and transforms you as you continue in a daily relationship with him. Being able to recall Scripture that God is using to change your own life improves your ability to counsel others biblically with grace and truth.

**ASK QUESTIONS:** When someone opens up about a struggle or dilemma, try to understand what is underneath. Behaviors (whether good or bad; sinful or not) are driven by beliefs. Sin is a symptom of what is going on in someone’s heart. Don’t focus only on managing the symptoms of

sin but try to reveal the heart so that it can be healed. Asking questions helps reveal the heart behind the behavior.

For example, to understand the person's story you might ask, "What is your background? Do you come from a family of divorce or single parent? Were you an only child? Did you have traumatic or significant experiences growing up, such as sexual abuse or unhealed wounds?" "How do you function under stress?" Or, to understand the circumstances you could ask, "What happened leading up to the event or decision? Who did you talk with? Did you have a tough day? What are you feeling?" And to try to understand motives you could carefully ask questions such as, "How is this struggle benefitting you? What were you trying to provide for yourself? Were you trying to escape from something?"

**LISTEN AND LOOK UP WHAT GOD SAYS:** Listening takes great patience and discipline. It may be tempting to try to fix the situation, but this is not what God asks us to do. Speak only words that encourage others to share further or that show you are listening. Romans 12:15 says to Weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice." Resist desires to try controlling how a person feels. Don't invalidate feelings by saying things like, "You shouldn't feel that way because God loves you." Feelings are real, even when they are misleading. Ask how that person feels, listen to understand, and acknowledge the feelings rather than making assumptions. Try to be empathetic.

After listening to someone speak, listen to God. Pray in the moment for the right words to say and recall Scripture that you've studied. Pray that God would reveal any sin in you as well. Psalm 139:23-24 says, "Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me and lead me in the way everlasting." Remember that it is only by God's grace that you are not struggling with the same sin. 1 Corinthians 10:12-13 says that if you think you are standing firm (e.g. "I would never do that") to be careful that you don't fall. No temptation has seized you except what is common to mankind.

**KINDLY COMMUNICATE GOD'S WORD:** The best way you can relate God's Word in counseling situations is face-to-face, communicating with "kindness, gentleness, humility, and patience." (Colossians 3:12).



There may be explicitly clear scripture to share regarding a situation, such as the command to flee from sexual immorality (1 Corinthians 6:18). Some counsel may center on biblical principles that apply to the circumstance, such as how to handle debt (Scripture doesn't call debt a sin, but it does have a lot of warnings about it). Or, sometimes your counsel could remind others of God's character in seasons of suffering, or when tragedy occurs. Communicate Scripture with sensitivity, grace, and love. Share from God's Word without hostility. Always speak the truth with hope for the goodness of God toward those who are willing to trust and obey his Word.

**SUPPORT GOING FORWARD:** Galatians 6:2 tells us to "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ." One of the most important things you can do when counseling biblically is to faithfully stand by your community as they journey through difficulties. This shows that you won't abandon them when things get tough or messy.

After you have given counsel with Scripture to someone struggling through an issue, ask that person what next steps might be. Ask him or her to develop a plan. Be willing to help with the plan so that it aligns with biblical instruction. Ask how you can help that person move forward. Accountability may look different for each person, so don't assume that you know exactly what that individual needs. Remember, you are not responsible for the outcome of your counsel. God is the one who changes hearts.

## RECEIVING BIBLICAL COUNSEL

The Bible is full of encouragement to listen to wise counsel. The Proverbs say that not having guidance leads to failure but having an abundance of wise counselors brings victory (Proverbs 11:14). They also say to listen to counsel and accept discipline in order to be wise (Proverbs 19:20). Wisdom is available to us from God's Word, and from God's people sharing his Word.

Sometimes you may hear counsel from others that isn't what you want to hear. If it's from God's Word and lines up with what Scripture teaches, then try to humbly accept the truth (James 1:21). Humbly receiving biblical counsel isn't always easy, but it is always wise. Humility is the fear of the Lord (Proverbs 22:4), and the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Proverbs 9:10). If you want to be wise, humble yourself and listen to what God is saying through his Word and his people.

## DOERS, NOT JUST HEARERS

It doesn't stop at listening to God's Word—it is also important to put it into practice in daily life. This is a process called application. Ask, "How can I make this truth from God's Word become a reality in my life?" Your community group can help you process and answer this question.

Don't fool yourself by only listening to God's Word without applying it to life (James 1:22). Jesus said that those who hear his words and put them into practice are wise and have a solid foundation, but those who hear and don't respond are foolish people who will collapse when tough times come (Matthew 7:24-27).

Be wise! Help one another know what God's Word says and apply it to your lives.

## WITH GOD, YOU HAVE WHAT IT TAKES

As a Christian, you are not doing this alone. In John 14:16, Jesus said, "I will give you another Helper [the Holy Spirit], to be with you forever." You have been given everything you need for life and godliness (2 Peter 1:3), so you have nothing to fear. You have his word, his Spirit, and each other! Go and share his truth in love.

## PERSONAL REFLECTION

1. Do you see the Bible as relevant, applicable, and authoritative in your everyday life? Why or why not?
2. Do you feel competent to offer biblical counsel to others? How can you grow in this area?
3. How are you at receiving biblical counsel from others? Is it easy or hard for you to humbly accept truth from the Bible? Explain.

## IDEAS FOR LIVING OUT THE CORE VALUE

- Commit to making Scripture the authority and guide for your counsel to one another
- Regularly ask, “What does the Bible say about that?”; allow time to pray and search for what God says rather than giving reactionary advice
- Search the Scriptures yourself before asking the group for counsel
- Memorize Scripture that addresses common situations in community
- Practice counseling biblically as a group: Read Appendix E regarding the biblical view of sexual purity, then discuss how you would counsel someone who has never learned what the Bible says about this topic and is living according to cultural norms

## SUGGESTED RESOURCES

- Counseling Through Your Bible Handbook, June Hunt • [gotquestions.org](http://gotquestions.org)

# ENGAGE MISSIONALLY

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“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:19–20)

## COMMUNITY CORE VALUE #6:

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Engage intentionally with our communities and the world to make disciples.

## GET OUTSIDE THE LIVING ROOM

Picture this: a group of athletes want to perform at a high level in their sport. They’ve committed themselves to their training. They’ve received instruction and encouragement. They’ve been honest about their weaknesses and have disciplined themselves to strengthen those areas. They’ve been reminded of their potential, and everyone is supporting them. And then, when the big moment comes, they are unwilling to leave the huddle. That would be tragic. All the work that they put in would be negated by the fact that they didn’t get in the game when it mattered.

In community, it would be equally tragic if all the investments we make in each other’s growth didn’t “leave the living room,” so to speak. If your group is only inwardly focused, you’re missing a big part of what God wants for you. We are all God’s workmanship, created to do good works, which God has prepared in advance for us (Ephesians 2:10). If your community group doesn’t impact the way you believe, think, and act outside of group, then it isn’t working properly.

## THE GREAT COMMISSION

In the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20), Jesus tells His followers to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them, and teaching people to obey everything he had taught. This commission applies to every believer; therefore, it applies to your group.

You are called to multiply yourselves and create other fully devoted followers of Jesus. This means sharing the gospel, loving others, and teaching them God’s truth. This may feel daunting, but you aren’t doing it alone! Jesus will go with you (Matthew 28:20), and your group can support you as well.

## ONE GOAL, LOTS OF PATHWAYS

Fulfilling the Great Commission might look different for everyone. Each one of you has special gifts and should use them to serve others as a good steward of God's grace (1 Peter 4:10). You are uniquely wired to serve God in the way that he wants you to. You may not feel particularly gifted, but God can use you in significant ways.

As you get to know each other, your community group can help identify and build upon your spiritual gifts, which God has given to each of you for the common good (Romans 12:3-8, 1 Corinthians 12:4-11). You can encourage each other to serve individually, and you can also leverage your collective gifts to serve together.

Some community groups choose to serve together, investing the group's time and resources in one neighborhood, cause, or organization. Other groups rotate their experiences, partnering with an individual member who is passionate about a specific service opportunity or even starting a new ministry. A few community groups even take international discipleship trips together. The possibilities are endless!

With your group, consider how you can love and serve:

- The local body of Christ (Galatians 6:10)
- Other believers (1 Peter 4:10)
- Non-believers (Luke 19:10)
- The poor and needy (James 1:27, Proverbs 14:31)
- People in other nations (Acts 1:8, Matthew 28:19)

Regardless of how you choose to serve together, all community groups should regularly encourage members to engage daily in the mission—sharing Christ in word and deed with neighbors, schoolmates, coworkers, family members, and even strangers. A community group should be a “team on a mission” where each member is gifted, equipped, and deployed as an active participant in God's plan to make disciples. Pray that you all would be effective in this mission and that God would use you to build his Kingdom!

## PERSONAL REFLECTION

1. What, if anything, makes you uncomfortable with sharing the gospel (e.g. fear, lack of knowledge, etc.)? When did you last share the gospel? How can you grow in this area?
2. Are there specific causes, people, or regions for which God has stirred your heart?
3. Do you know your spiritual gifts? If not, how can learn them? If you do, how are you using them specifically to impact others for Christ?

## IDEAS FOR LIVING OUT THE CORE VALUE

- List ten people you would like to tell about Jesus and pray for opportunities to share
- Practice sharing your testimony (your story of becoming a Christian and God's work in your life) with each other to get comfortable sharing with others
- Decide how your group will serve together and how often. Quarterly? Annually?
- Appoint someone in your group as "Service Chair" to find service projects and schedule opportunities (note: this can be someone's "official" place of membership service!)

## SUGGESTED RESOURCES

- When Helping Hurts: The Small Group Experience by Steve Corbett
- [onwardcc.org/serve](http://onwardcc.org/serve) for great serving resources

# LESSON 4: GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS & SHARING LIFE MAPS

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1. Do you feel competent to offer biblical counsel to others? How can you grow in this area? (Personal Reflection on Page 57)
2. How are you at receiving biblical counsel from others? Is it easy or hard for you to humbly accept truth from the Bible? Explain. (Personal Reflection on Page 57)
3. What, if anything, makes you uncomfortable with sharing the gospel (e.g. fear, lack of knowledge, etc.)? When did you last share the gospel? How can you grow in this area? (Personal Reflection on Page 60)
4. List below one service possibility that God has put on your heart, and the person at the top of your Top Ten list who you wish to see come to Christ. Take time to pray for these opportunities as a group.

## LIFE MAPS

The last part of your group time can be dedicated to a group member (individual or couple) sharing their Life Map (Instructions for completing and sharing your Life Map can be found in Lesson 1). The group can plan on the last 30 minutes of your time for an individual (or couple) to share their Life Map, answer any questions, and pray together.





LESSON 5

# CONFLICT AND COMMUNICATION





# LESSON 5 INTRODUCTION

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In this lesson, you will look at two topics that are critical to the spiritual strength and emotional health of community groups: conflict and communication.

As you deepen your relationships with one another, conflict is unavoidable. At the first sign of conflict in your community group, you may ask yourself, “Did I make a huge mistake getting in this group?” As you have tough conversations and experience conflict with others, you may even be tempted to leave the group. But God’s people are called to respond to conflict in a way that is remarkably different from the world. Conflict actually provides an opportunity for you to glorify God, serve other people, and grow to be like Christ.

Jesus said, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God” (Matthew 5:9). Though conflict is inevitable, healthy community groups will commit to respond to conflict with biblical principles to maintain “the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3). They actively pursue peace and reconciliation instead of accepting premature compromises or allowing relationships to wither.

In the first part of this lesson, you will read the Conflict Field Guide. You will see a few key ideas surface, like keeping short accounts with one another (Ephesians 4:26), taking responsibility for your own contribution to the conflict (Matthew 7:3-5), showing your brother his fault (Matthew 18:15), and seeking reconciliation (Matthew 5:23, 24).

Finally, you will study some communication patterns that can be a roadblock to conflict resolution. Sinful human beings (Romans 3:23) will never communicate with one another perfectly, but you can become more aware of your own tendencies when responding to conflict and learn to recognize destructive communication patterns as they begin to surface.

# Conflict

## FIELD GUIDE

**CONFLICT IS OUR CONSTANT OPPORTUNITY.** Onward Community Church is committed to resolving conflict in a way that glorifies the Lord, edifies the body of Christ, and reflects the principles laid out in Scripture. Since all relationships – including those among believers – will be faced with disagreements at different times, all **Onward Members**, as followers of Christ, commit to the following biblical principles as a guide for resolving these issues. We trust that the following information will serve as a continual resource for you as you strive to serve others, grow personally, and glorify the Lord in the context of conflict.

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*Scriptures to read and remember when considering how you are going to handle conflict: Proverbs 6:16-19, Proverbs 17:14, Proverbs 20:3, Matthew 5:23-24, 1 Peter 5:5-7, Ephesians 4:1-3, Proverbs 18:19.*

### Watermark's Commitment to Biblical Conflict Resolution:

#### THE PEACEMAKER'S PLEDGE

As people reconciled to God by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we believe we are called to respond to conflict in a way that is remarkably different from the way the world deals with conflict. We also believe conflict provides opportunities to glorify God, serve other people, and grow to be like Christ. Therefore, in response to God's love and in reliance on His grace, we commit ourselves to respond to conflict according to the following principles:

**GLORIFY GOD** - Instead of focusing on our own desires or dwelling on what others may do, we will seek to please and honor God – by depending on His wisdom, power, and love; by faithfully obeying His commands; and by seeking to maintain a loving, merciful, and forgiving attitude.

#### GET THE LOG OUT OF YOUR OWN EYE -

Instead of attacking others or dwelling on their wrongs, we will take responsibility for our own contribution to conflicts – confessing our sins, asking God to help us change any attitudes and habits that lead to conflict and seeking to repair any harm we have caused.

#### GO AND GENTLY RESTORE YOUR

**BROTHER** - Instead of pretending that conflict doesn't exist or talking about others behind their backs, we will choose to overlook minor offenses, or we will talk directly and graciously with those whose offenses seem too serious to overlook. When a conflict with another Christian cannot be resolved in private, we will ask others in the body of Christ to help us settle the matter in a biblical manner.

**GO AND BE RECONCILED** - Instead of accepting premature compromise or allowing relationships to wither, we will actively pursue genuine peace and reconciliation – forgiving others as God, for Christ's sake, has forgiven us, and seeking just and mutually beneficial solutions to our differences.

By God's grace, we will apply these principles as a matter of stewardship, realizing that conflict is an opportunity, not an accident. We will remember that success in God's eyes is not a matter of specific results but of faithful, dependent obedience. And we will pray that our service as peacemakers brings praise to our Lord and leads others to know His infinite love. These principles are so simple that they can be used to resolve the most basic conflicts of daily life. But they are so powerful that they have been used to mediate and arbitrate bitter divorce and child custody actions, embezzlement situations, church divisions, multi-million dollar business disputes, malpractice lawsuits, and terrible sexual abuse cases. These principles are briefly discussed below. For a more detailed explanation, please see *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict*, by Ken Sande (Baker Books, 2nd ed. 1997).

"We must picture Hell as a state where everyone is perpetually concerned about his own dignity and advancement, where everyone has a grievance, and where everyone lives the deadly serious passions of envy, self-importance, and resentment." - **C. S. LEWIS**

# 1. At The Trailhead: Understanding the Landscape

## SEE CONFLICT AS AN OPPORTUNITY

Conflict is not necessarily bad or destructive. Even when conflict is caused by sin and causes a great deal of stress, God can use it for good. (Romans 8:28-29) As the Apostle Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 10:31-11:1, conflict actually provides three significant opportunities. By God's grace, you can use conflict to:

Glorify God by trusting, obeying, and imitating Him.

Serve other people by helping to bear their burdens or by confronting them in love.

Grow to be like Christ by confessing sin and turning from attitudes that promote conflict.

These concepts are totally overlooked in most conflicts because people naturally focus on escaping from the situation or overcoming their opponent. Therefore, it is wise to periodically step back from a conflict and ask yourself whether you are doing all that you can to take advantage of these special opportunities.

## GLORIFY GOD

When the Apostle Paul urged the Corinthians to live "to the glory of God," he was not talking about one hour on Sunday morning. He wanted them to show God honor and bring Him praise in day-to-day life, especially by the way that they resolved personal conflicts. (1 Corinthians 10:31)

As mentioned above, you can glorify God in the midst of conflict by trusting Him, obeying Him and imitating Him. (Proverbs 3:4-6; John 14:15; Ephesians 5:1) One of the best ways to keep these concerns uppermost in your mind is to regularly ask yourself this focusing question: "How can I please and honor the Lord in this situation?"

## Preparing for the Journey

### GET THE LOG OUT OF YOUR OWN EYE

The most challenging part of peace-making is set forth in Matthew 7:5, where Jesus admonishes us to "...first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye."

There are generally two kinds of logs you need to look for when seeing your part in the conflict. First, you need to consider your own attitudes and biases. Critical, negative or overly sensitive attitudes easily lead to unnecessary conflict. One of the best ways to do this is to spend some time meditating on Philippians 4:2-9, which describes the kind of attitude Christians should have, even when they are involved in a conflict.

The other log you must deal with is actual sinful words and actions. Because we are often blind to our own failures, we must have honest friends who will help us take an objective look at ourselves and face up to our contribution to a conflict.

The most important aspect of getting the log out of your own eye is to go beyond the confession of wrong behavior and face up to the root cause of that behavior. The Bible teaches that conflict comes from the "desires at war within you" (James 4:1-3; Matthew 15:18-19). Some of these desires are obviously sinful, such as wanting to conceal the truth, bend others to your will or have revenge. In many situations, however, conflict is fueled by good desires that you have elevated to a sinful place, such as an unhealthy craving to be understood, loved, respected or vindicated (1 Peter 2:23).

Any time you become excessively preoccupied with something, even a good thing, and seek to find happiness, security, or fulfillment in it rather than in God, you are guilty of idolatry. Idolatry inevitably leads to conflict with God. It also causes conflict with other people. As James writes, when we want something but don't get it, we kill and covet, quarrel, and fight (James 4:1-4). Having done the hard work of discovering your part in the

conflict, it is time to take action. Below is a clear, seven-step process to help you first examine yourself and then move forward as a peacemaker:

- 1. Ask the Lord and others for help with self-awareness. (1 John 1:8)**
  - Ask God to show you where you have been guilty of "wrong worship," which is to say where you have been focusing your attention and love on something other than the Lord and His desires. "Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me and know my anxious thoughts; And see if there be any hurtful way in me; And lead me in the everlasting way." (Psalm 139:23-24)
  - Specifically identify and renounce the desire contributing to the conflict.
  - Deliberately pursue right worship. Fix your heart and mind on God, and seek joy in Him alone.
  - Give others permission to speak into your life, and regularly ask them to help you see any "logs" both in attitude and action.
- 2. Address everyone involved as soon as possible. (Matthew 5:23-24, Proverbs 6:1-5)**
- 3. Avoid "if, but, and maybe." Don't make excuses; be specific, when possible, with both attitudes and actions. (Luke 15:17-24)**
- 4. Apologize. Express sorrow for the way you affected someone. (Luke 15:21)**
- 5. Ask for forgiveness. (Proverbs 28:13)**
- 6. Accept the consequences. (Luke 19:1-9)**
- 7. Alter your behavior. Commit to changing harmful habits. (Ephesians 4:22-32, John 8:11).**

As God guides and empowers these efforts, you can find freedom from the idols that fuel conflict and be motivated to make choices that will please and honor Christ. This change in heart will usually speed a resolution to a present problem, and at the same time improve your ability to avoid similar conflicts in the future.

## 2. Beginning the Journey: Hitting the Trail to Love Your Friend

### Go and Gently Restore Your Brother

#### DON'T SWEAT THE SMALL STUFF OVERLOOK MINOR OFFENSES

Another key principle of peacemaking involves an effort to help others understand how they have contributed to a conflict. Before you rush off to confront someone, however, remember that it is appropriate to overlook minor offenses. (Proverbs 19:11) As a general rule, an offense should be overlooked if you can answer “no” to all of the following questions:

- Is the offense seriously dishonoring God?
- Has it permanently damaged a relationship?
- Is it seriously hurting other people?
- Is it seriously hurting the offender himself?

### Don't Spread the Big Stuff

#### TALK IN PRIVATE

If you answer “yes” to any of these questions, an offense is too serious to overlook, in which case God commands you to go and talk with the offender privately and lovingly about the situation (see Matthew 18:15).

As you do so, remember to:

- **Pray for humility and wisdom.** (1 Peter 5:5)
- **Plan your words carefully;** think of how you would want to be confronted. (Proverbs 15:1-2; 16:23)
- **Anticipate likely reactions,** and plan appropriate responses; rehearsals can be very helpful. (Proverbs 20:18)
- **Choose the right time and place.** Talk in person whenever possible. (Proverbs 16:21; 27:12)
- **Assume the best** about the other person until you have facts to prove otherwise. (Proverbs 18:17)
- **Listen carefully.** (Proverbs 18:13)
- **Speak only to build others up.** (Ephesians 4:29)
- Ask for feedback from the other person. (Proverbs 18:2)
- **Trust God.** (Psalm 37:3)

### Don't Stop if You've Been Stiffed

#### TAKE OTHERS ALONG

(Matthew 18:17)

If an initial confrontation does not resolve a conflict, do not give up. Review what was said and done, and look for ways to approach the other person more effectively. Then try again

with even stronger prayer support. If you have done all you can to share your concern, and the matter is still unchanged in that it is “too serious to overlook,” you should ask one or two other people to meet with you and the person you have approached to help you resolve your differences. (Matthew 18:16-20)

#### DON'T STOP IF IT GETS STICKY

As unfortunate as it is, there are times when the only solution left is to expand the circle of accountability and wisdom to include an even wider community within the body of Christ. It is imperative that the process is not stopped short of any Scriptural admonition to diligently preserve the unity that the Lord intends. Where conflict persists, it is the job of the wider community of faith to speak boldly into the matter and, where necessary, separate itself from hard hearts that refuse to deal with matters “too serious to overlook.” (Matthew 18:17a; 1 Corinthians 5:1-2) That may include necessary separation until such a time as when the sin issues creating the conflict are acknowledged and dealt with.

#### GO AND BE RECONCILED

One of the unique features of biblical peacemaking is the pursuit of genuine forgiveness and reconciliation. Even though followers of Christ have experienced the greatest forgiveness in the world, we often fail to show that forgiveness to others. To cover up our disobedience, we often use the shallow statement, “I forgive her; I just don't want to have anything to do with her again.” Just think, however, how you would feel if God said to you, “I forgive you; I just don't want to have anything to do with you again.”

Praise God that He never says this! Instead, He forgives you totally and opens the way for genuine reconciliation. He calls you to forgive others in exactly the same way: “Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.” (Colossians 3:12-14; see also 1 Corinthians 13:5; Psalm 103:12; Isaiah 43:25) One way to imitate God's forgiveness is to live with these actions and attitudes when you forgive someone:

- I will not dwell on this incident.
- I will not revisit this incident or use it against you.
- I will not talk to others about this incident.

- I will not allow this incident to stand between us or hinder our personal relationship.

Remember that forgiveness is a spiritual process that you cannot fully accomplish on your own. Therefore, as you seek to forgive others, continually ask God for grace to enable you to imitate His wonderful forgiveness toward you.

#### NEGOTIATE IN A BIBLICAL MANNER

Even when you manage to resolve personal offenses through confession and forgiveness, you may still need to deal with substantive issues, which may involve money, property, or the exercise of certain rights. These issues should not be swept under the carpet or automatically passed to a higher authority. Instead, they should be negotiated in a biblically faithful manner. As a general rule, you should try to negotiate substantive issues in a cooperative manner rather than a competitive manner. In other words, instead of aggressively pursuing your own interests and letting others look out for themselves, you should deliberately look for solutions that are beneficial to everyone involved.

As the Apostle Paul put it, “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others” (Philippians 2:3-4; see Matthew 22:39; 1 Corinthians 13:5; Matthew 7:12).

A biblical approach to negotiation may be summarized in five basic steps, which we refer to as the PAUSE principle:

- Prepare (pray, get the facts, seek godly counsel, develop options)
- Affirm relationships (show genuine concern and respect for others)
- Understand interests (identify others' concerns, desires, needs, limitations, or fears)
- Search for creative solutions (prayerful brainstorming)
- Evaluate options objectively and reasonably (evaluate, don't argue)

If you have never used this approach to negotiation before, it will take time and practice (and sometimes advice from others) to become proficient at it. But it is well worth the effort, because learning the PAUSE principle will help you not only resolve your present dispute but also negotiate more effectively in all areas of your life.



# 3. Enduring Difficulties On The Journey: What To Do When The Trail Gets Rough

## BE PREPARED FOR UNREASONABLE PEOPLE

Whenever you are responding to conflict, you need to realize that other people may harden their hearts and refuse to be reconciled to you. There are two ways you can prepare for this possibility.

First, remember that God does not measure success in terms of results but in terms of faithful obedience. He knows that you cannot force other people to act in a certain way. Therefore, He will not hold you responsible for their actions or for the ultimate outcome of a conflict.

All God expects of you is to obey His revealed will as faithfully as possible (see Romans 12:18). If you do that, no matter how the conflict turns out, you can walk away with a clear conscience before God, knowing that His appraisal is, “Well done, good and faithful servant.”

Second, resolve that you will not give up on finding a biblical solution. If a dispute is not easily resolved, you may be tempted to say, “Well, I tried all the biblical principles I know, and they just didn’t work. It looks like I’ll have to handle this another way” (meaning, the world’s way).

A follower of Christ should never close the Bible. When you try to resolve a conflict but do not see the results you desire, you should seek God even more earnestly through prayer, the study of His Word, and the counsel of His church. As you do so, it is essential to keep your focus on Christ and all that He has already done for you (Colossians 3:1-4).

It is also helpful to follow five principles for overcoming evil, which are described in Romans 12:14-21:

- Control your tongue; “Bless those who curse you.” (See also Ephesians 4:29).
- Seek godly advisors; identify with others, and do not become isolated.
- Keep doing what is right (1 Peter 2:12, 15; 3:15-16).
- Recognize your limits, instead of retaliating, stay within proper biblical channels.

- Use the ultimate weapon: deliberate, focused love (John 3:16; Luke 6:27-31).

At the very least, these steps will protect you from being consumed by the acid of your own bitterness and resentment if others continue to oppose you. And in some cases, God may eventually use such actions to bring another person to repentance. (1 Samuel 24:1-22) Even if other people persist in doing wrong, you can continue to trust that God is in control and will deal with them in His time. (See Psalms 10 and 37) This kind of patience in the face of suffering is commended by God (1 Peter 2:19) and ultimately results in our good and His glory.

## GET HELP FROM ABOVE

None of us can make complete and lasting peace with others in our own strength. We must have help from God. But, before we can receive that help, we need to be at peace with God Himself.

Peace with God doesn’t come automatically, because all of us have sinned and alienated ourselves from Him. (Isaiah 59:1-2) Instead of living the perfect lives needed to enjoy fellowship with Him, each of us has a record stained with sin. (Matthew 5:48; Romans 3:23) As a result, we deserve to be eternally separated from God. (Romans 6:23a) That’s the bad news.

The good news is that “God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3:16) Believing in Jesus means more than being baptized, going to church, or trying to be a good person. None of these activities can erase the sins you have already committed and will continue to commit throughout your life. Believing in Jesus means, first of all, admitting that you are a sinner and acknowledging that there is no way you can earn God’s approval by your own works. (Romans 3:20; Ephesians 2:8-9)

Second, it means believing that Jesus paid the full penalty for your sins when He died on the cross (Isa. 53:1-12; 1 Peter 2:24-25). In other words, believing in Jesus means trusting that He exchanged records with you at Calvary – that is,

He took your sinful record on Himself and paid for it in full, giving you His perfect record.

When you believe in Jesus and receive His perfect record of righteousness, you can really have true peace with God. As you receive this peace, God will give you an increasing ability to make peace with others by following the peacemaking principles He gives us in Scripture, many of which are described above (Phil. 4:7; Matt. 5:9). If you have never confessed your sin to God and believed in Jesus Christ as your Savior, Lord, and King, you can do so right now by sincerely praying this prayer:

*Lord Jesus, I know that I am a sinner, and I realize that my good deeds could never make up for my wrongs. I need your forgiveness. I believe that you died for my sins, and I want to turn away from them. I trust you now to be my Savior, and I will follow you as my Lord and King, in the fellowship of your church.*

If you have prayed this prayer, it is essential that you find fellowship with other Christians in a church where the Bible is faithfully taught and applied. This fellowship will help you to learn more about God, grow in your faith, and obey what He commands, even when you are involved in a difficult conflict. Let us know how Onward might be able to serve you as your place of fellowship.

## GET HELP FROM THE CHURCH

As God helps you to practice His peacemaking principles, you will be able to resolve most of the normal conflicts of daily life on your own. Sometimes, however, you will encounter situations that you do not know how to handle.

In such situations, it is wise and appropriate to turn to others in your community or to spiritually mature persons around you who can give you advice on how you might be able to apply these principles more effectively.

When individual advice does not enable you to resolve a dispute, you should ask one or two mutually respected friends to meet with you and your opponent to help you settle your difference through mediation or arbitration (Matt. 18:16-17; 1 Cor. 6:1-8).

## PERSONAL REFLECTION

1. How was conflict handled in your home while growing up? How do you think that affects your view of conflict now?
2. Do you have a tendency to run from conflict ("peace-faking") or create unnecessary conflict ("peace-breaking")? Give one example.
3. Do you have conflict with anyone now? What steps can you take to move toward peace in this relationship and in your ability to resolve conflict in the future?

## IDEAS FOR LIVING PEACEMAKING PRINCIPLES

- Pray that God would reveal any unresolved conflict in your life; ask him to show you any "logs" in your eye (Matthew 7:3-5)
- Process with your community group about how to best reconcile any known relationship conflicts (consider family, co-workers, friends, etc.)
- Memorize scripture with your group that will help you during conflict
- Ask loved ones to list some ways that you can grow in how you respond to conflict

## SUGGESTED RESOURCES

- Conflict Field Guide in this lesson or at [onwardcc.org/conflict-field-guide](http://onwardcc.org/conflict-field-guide)
- Ministries: re|engage (for marriages), re:generation (dealing with resentments/hurts/fears)



# HEALTHY COMMUNICATION

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Handling conflict in a healthy way begins with managing yourself. This is difficult—especially during conflict. It requires honesty about your shortcomings, a humble assessment of your response patterns, and care for how to best communicate with love. The Bible says it this way: “And the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth.” (2 Timothy 2:24-25)

In this lesson, you will learn about common destructive communication patterns and helpful tips when choosing your channels of communication. Knowing your own patterns and planning how to best communicate will save your group many headaches!

## BEWARE OF DESTRUCTIVE COMMUNICATION PATTERNS

Study the list below of destructive communication patterns that often appear during conflict. See if you can identify your natural tendencies. Try not to be a **W-E-N-I** when you communicate!

**WITHDRAWAL:** When one person prematurely “checks out” of a conversation without any chance for understanding or resolution. It may appear gracious (“I don’t want to fight about this”), frustrated (“You just do what you want”), or apathetic (“I really don’t care”). The person may also stop engaging or physically leave the room. (Proverbs 3:11-14)

**ESCALATION:** When a conversation’s intensity increases because of inflammatory comments or someone raises the emotional stakes. Common escalation methods include: bringing up side topics or sensitive issues, exaggerations, and character attacks. (Proverbs 15:1)

**NEGATIVE INTERPRETATION:** When a listener receives a message negatively, falsely assuming the speaker had poor intentions. For example, a negative interpreter might receive the comment, “Are you feeling okay?” to mean the speaker thinks his or her physical appearance looks bad. (Proverbs 3:5-8)

**INVALIDATION:** When someone responds in a way that minimizes or denies the significance of another's feelings, ideas, logic, or goals. Rather than listening and understanding, an invalidator discredits. Responses such as, "That doesn't make sense!", "How can you believe that?", and "You're being silly and irrational" are examples of invalidation. (Proverbs 18:2)

## CHOOSING THE RIGHT METHOD OF COMMUNICATION

In recent decades, technology has given us the ability to communicate with each other in many new ways. While electronic communication is a tremendous blessing, it is also a common source of strife. Communication channels like email, text messaging, and social media allow for quick exchanges, but without the context of body language and tone, they can also generate misunderstandings. You likely know of someone in your workplace, family, or friend group who sent an electronic message that created conflict.

Like most tools, electronic communication can make life easier when used properly; but when not used properly, it can fracture relationships. To minimize this risk in your community, here are six suggestions to help you choose the best manner and method of communication:

1. **Stick to the facts in electronic communication.** Navigating emotional topics is difficult in face-to-face conversations, but it is almost impossible in electronic communication. So, keep electronic communication to factual or organizational conversations like, "Do you want to meet up for dinner soon?" Or "Letting you know that lunch with Dad went well. More details later. Thanks for praying."
2. **Don't use electronic communication for conflict resolution.** Electronic communication is a terrible medium for conflict resolution. Expressing ideas and articulating emotions in a healthy way is almost impossible without the benefit of tone, body language, and vocal inflection. All of these are essential elements of good communication.

In addition, electronic messages easily become "one-sided" statements rather than two-way communication. Rants or debates in emails and texts can communicate selfishness ("I want to make sure you hear me") rather than a desire for mutual understanding. So, always try to resolve conflict face-to-face. If you're unsure about whether to send a message, ask yourself if the message has the potential to be misinterpreted. If so, don't send it.

3. **Do use electronic communication for encouragement.** While text and email are bad channels for resolving conflict, they are good for encouraging someone. Sending a quick praise by text or emailing how you've seen someone grow builds relationships. In fact, encouragement by any means will strengthen your group.
4. **Keep electronic communication short & simple.** If you are writing more than five lines, your message might be too long and run the risk of others not reading it carefully. If you find yourself writing more than five lines, it is probably best to make a phone call or shorten the message to "just the facts."
5. **Meet face-to-face when possible.** Electronic communication is a good secondary means of communication, but face-to-face communication is always best. If you feel more comfortable sharing something electronically rather than during your group time, it may indicate that a sensitive issue needs discussion; the group will likely benefit from talking with you about the issue when you are all in the same room. If you don't feel like you can adequately or safely articulate something to the entire group, start by sharing with one or two group members face-to-face, so that they can help you open up to the group.
6. **Calling is second best.** If you have something to process, but face-to-face communication isn't possible, a phone conversation is more helpful (and less risky) than electronic communication. Even so, always try your best to resolve conflict face-to-face.

## CONCLUSION

Healthy communication takes work, especially during times of conflict. Guarding against your natural destructive communication patterns and being purposeful in the way you communicate will help build relational trust as you work together through life with your group. Pray that God would give you the courage, patience, and wisdom to make the most of the opportunities he puts before your group to pursue peace with one another.

"Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no "root of bitterness" springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled;" (Hebrews 12:14-15)

## PERSONAL REFLECTION

1. Which destructive communication patterns (W-E-N-I) are a struggle for you?
2. When have you used electronic communication in a way that caused harm?
3. What method of communication do you prefer? Why?

## IDEAS FOR HEALTHY COMMUNICATION PRACTICES

- Memorize 2 Timothy 2:24-25 as a group (see page 71)
- Ask family and friends which destructive communication patterns they most often see in you, then pray that God would help you respond differently during conflict
- As a group, commit to resolve conflict face-to-face

# LESSON 5: GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS & SHARING LIFE MAPS

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1. How was conflict handled in your home while growing up? How do you think that affects your view of conflict now? (Personal Reflection on Page 70)
2. Which destructive communication patterns (W-E-N-I) are a struggle for you? (Personal Reflection on Page 74)
3. When have you used electronic communication in a way that caused harm? (Personal Reflection on Page 74)
4. What are some of your concerns about working through conflict with your group? Where do these concerns come from?

## LIFE MAPS

The last part of your group time can be dedicated to a group member (individual or couple) sharing their Life Map (instructions for completing and sharing your Life Map can be found in Lesson 1). The group can plan on the last 30 minutes of your time for an individual (or couple) to share their Life Map, answer any questions, and pray together.



LESSON 6

# LIFE TOGETHER







# LESSON 6 INTRODUCTION

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Welcome to Lesson 6; You've made it to the lesson of your group launch. Congratulations!

Now that that you've learned why community is important and discussed principles that will help you live in community, your group will discuss how to apply what you have learned. It is time to structure your group and set expectations for how you will interact.

Because biblical community is a priority to help you grow spiritually, it is something to begin to schedule your life around. To prevent the busyness of life from crowding out your community time, in this lesson you will discuss specifics: meeting days and times, how you will share ownership, and how you will work on developing relationships.

You will also discuss expectations for how you will process life together. The best groups work together as a team, involving one another early when making important life decisions or facing difficulties. Sometimes, even simple life choices or conflicts are worth discussing as a group because they can reveal hidden sin, hurts, or fears. We all need God's wisdom working through his

Word and his people to make wise choices—especially when the chaos of life or our sinful human natures make it difficult to see clearly. God wants you to experience his blessings in every area of life. The more you are able to share life together and build trust as a team to counsel biblically and support one another with patience, kindness, grace, and truth, the more likely you will know the joys of life in community as God intends.

# SETTING YOUR GROUP UP FOR SUCCESS

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“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.”  
(Colossians 3:16)

God has given his Spirit, his Word, and his people to protect you, build you up spiritually, and provide for you. That’s good, because all of us are naturally prone to wander into sin. Since biblical community is a priority for your overall spiritual health, it is something that you should begin to schedule your life around. Setting specific meeting days and times to block your calendar will help prevent the busyness of life from crowding out community.

Also, it is important to structure how you will spend your time when you are together. Life updates are important, but be sure to make time to ask each other:

1. How are you feeding your soul?
2. How are you feeding your flesh?
3. How are you feeding others?

Single adults Men’s and women’s groups can address these questions weekly during group time. Married groups have found it helpful to alternate group times, meeting with the same gender to discuss these questions one week, then meeting as couples the following week to process life.

Remember, relationships are strengthened throughout the week, so work to connect outside of your set group time, too. If your group feels crunched for time, try to email updates during the week to keep others informed and to prioritize discussion topics when face-to-face.

Share in the ownership of your group. Volunteer to serve your group in areas of giftedness and be willing to participate in one another’s lives in different ways so that you can experience the joy of fellowship that God intends for you together.

The following questions will help you discuss group expectations and roles going forward. What you decide as a group now does not have to go on forever, but it will provide a starting point that can be adjusted in the future when necessary.

## WHEN DO WE MEET?

The healthiest Men's and Women's groups meet weekly. Most groups meet for two hours every week. The healthiest married groups meet together as couples every other week, and then the husbands and wives meet separately in same-gender groups in the off weeks.

When life gets busy or children get sick, many groups struggle with knowing whether or not to meet. When considering whether you should miss your group meeting, a helpful comparison would be that if something would cause you to miss work, then it might also be something that would cause you to miss your group meeting. Discuss with your group when it is okay and when it is not okay to miss your meeting so that you do not frustrate one another. Wedding showers, happy hours with co-workers, family in town, etc., are all scenarios to discuss.

When you think it may be best to miss the group, assume a posture of humility and ask for your time commitment back. Try this: "Hey everyone, my family is in town tonight and I'd like to ask if I can miss our group time. Would you please give me back the time I committed to you? If you are okay with me missing, I'll touch base soon. Thank you for considering." Even if you miss the group, be sure to share how you are doing with the group and any prayer needs, concerns, or praises from the week.

## WHERE DO WE MEET?

Most groups meet in homes, which can create a warm environment for people to connect. Some groups choose to rotate each session in different homes or take turns hosting every month. This can also allow groups to coordinate shared childcare, if necessary. During some seasons meeting space might be available at your church campus. If group meeting space is a need, have your group leader(s) ask your church staff representative about the possibility of meeting on campus.

## HOW WILL WE FELLOWSHIP?

Fellowship is essential to building trust within your group. Romans 12:10 says, "Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor." Be intentional. Lead out in pursuing each member relationally. You can plan dinner or coffee with group members to hear their stories of grace and get to know them, or schedule fun local activities together. You can

invite group members to events already on your calendar (sports, work functions, etc.). Serving together is also a good way to build relationships and use your gifts collectively as a group.

When your group is starting up, a retreat is a great way to bond and get to know each other (read Appendix C for ideas about planning a retreat). Try to plan to go on a community group retreat at least once a year—getting away together is always best.

## **HOW WILL WE SHARE GROUP OWNERSHIP?**

The best groups share ownership. All responsibilities should not fall to your Community Group Leader(s). Ask group members what they are passionate about and how they would like to use their gifts. Then, assign ownership to an area for which they are passionate. While every person may not have a designated role, it is important for everyone to participate with their gifts and passions as integral parts of the group.

Below are a few examples of some possible ownership roles within a group:

### **ADMINISTRATIVE**

This person will be in charge of keeping the group moving forward. He or she can send out prayer requests after each meeting or help implement a plan to follow up on group initiatives. Reminding groups of events, meetings, and serving opportunities would also fall under this role. **FUN AND**

### **FELLOWSHIP**

This person finds creative ways to have fun together and build relationships outside of group time. Examples include planning meals, retreats, or events with other community groups.

### **SERVICE**

The person in this role will find and coordinate opportunities for the group to serve together, considering each member in their area of service or passion. Note that this role can be someone's "official" place of church membership service!

## PERSONAL REFLECTION

1. What are the best days and times of the week for you to meet with your community group (if married, list gender-specific and couples times)? List two possibilities.
2. What are some ways that you personally can share ownership with the group?
3. What are some things that you will commit to do in order to build relationships with members of your community group outside of your scheduled meeting time?

## IDEAS FOR SHARING GROUP OWNERSHIP

- Take a personality or strengths assessment and discuss the results together as a group
- Take time to share about your gifts and passions (service areas, people groups, pastimes, restaurants, travel destinations, etc.)
- Plan a retreat somewhere away from home
- Designate some roles for group members and find ways for everyone to contribute

## SUGGESTED RESOURCES

- Read Appendix C: Community Group Retreat Guide
- Read Appendix G: Curriculum Suggestions & Resources
- [onwardcc.org/serve](http://onwardcc.org/serve) for great serving opportunities

# PROCESSING VS. REPORTING

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Once you determine when your group will get together and how you will share ownership, it is important for your group to talk through expectations for how you will discuss important topics. Setting expectations up front about how you will process information together can help your group when big decisions are being made or a family crisis occurs.

Imagine you are on a team of people asked to come up with an idea that will be paradigm-shifting for the church. You get to speak into, shape, and help decide what the wisest and best course of action would be. Your team starts meeting weekly and everything is going well. The energy is high; the ideas are flowing; the momentum seems unstoppable. Then one day, one of the team members shares that he made a decision about the project that derails everything you've been working on. He didn't process this decision with anyone and his actions caused problems that could have been avoided with the counsel of other team members.

How would that make you feel?

This is an example of reporting information rather than processing information. Reporting information is sharing it after decisions have been made. It leaves no opening for questions or discussion. Often, decisions made in isolation are careless and motivated by pride or selfishness.

By contrast, processing decisions with others is wise and biblical. Your community group is a part of God's provision to help you process information so that you make good decisions. Processing information together is intentional, proactive, and humble. So when you face decisions or difficult circumstances, remain teachable and let your community help you think through the best course of action. Your community is a team coming alongside you to help.

## WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT THAT?

Inviting others into decisions like job transitions, moving, or how to parent children, may at first seem invasive or controlling. But when done properly, processing decisions with biblical input from your community can prevent harmful mistakes. Here is what the Scripture says about processing decisions with those who counsel biblically:

“Listen to advice and accept instruction, that you may gain wisdom in the future.”

(Proverbs 19:20)

“The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man listens to advice.” (Proverbs 12:15)

“The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple.” (Psalm 9:7)

“Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.” (Galatians 6:2)

Helping each other make wise choices is a form of bearing one another’s burdens. When you are processing important decisions, make sure to get everyone into the room at the same time. Don’t have one-off conversations that would make it easy to frame details in a particular light. Try to help everyone get a full picture of the situation. When you are together as a group, gently ask and receive good questions. Appendix F contains “Ten Wise Questions For Processing Big Decisions.” These questions can be really helpful in processing decisions together.

Sometimes, processing decisions with your group can be painful. A member may point out a problem that you’ve overlooked. Someone may show you a wrong motive or correct your interpretation of Scripture. Should this happen, recall the principles of admonishing faithfully. Proverbs 27:6 says, “Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy.” This process is for your good, not to make you feel less-than or keep you from something good.

When your group disagrees with each other (for example: some may believe that buying a larger house is perfectly fine while others have concerns), use the disagreement as an opportunity to handle conflict biblically. Don’t be afraid to reach out to your Community Shepherd or Director if you need further help.

## WHEN TO CONTACT YOUR COMMUNITY SHEPHERD

After your group completes Lesson 6 of the launch curriculum and all complete their membership process, your group will be assigned a community Shepherd and Director. Recall the Community Group Shepherding Structure introduced in Lesson 1:

### SHEPHERDING STRUCTURE



“Moreover, look for able men from all the people, men who fear God, who are trustworthy and hate a bribe, and place such men over the people as chiefs of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens. And let them judge the people at all times. Every great matter they shall bring to you, but any small matter they shall decide themselves. So it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you.” (Exodus 18:21-22)

“Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.” (Hebrews 13:17)

Shepherds’ and Directors’ roles are to “pay careful attention to...all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made overseers...” (Acts 20:28). Reaching out to a Shepherd in a time of need is good, but it is always best for leaders to regularly communicate with the Shepherd about how the group is doing. Unlike a Community Group leader who is responsible to care for one group, Shepherds may care for several groups. Regular updates about how the group is doing helps a Shepherd stay connected and provide wise counsel in times of need.

When a group hits a significant roadblock, such as unresolved conflict or a member needing assistance with basic needs, always initiate a conversation within your group first. Your group is the first line of support. If the group cannot meet those needs or is unsure how to move forward, contact your Shepherd. The following are a few examples of when it is appropriate to contact your group’s Shepherd to address a specific need:



## **PHYSICAL, MENTAL, OR EMOTIONAL HEALTH**

If anyone in your group experiences major hospitalization or surgery, is struggling with suicidal thoughts, is processing grief, or becomes pregnant out of wedlock, let your Shepherd know. He or she can help your group love that person through the difficulty.

## **FINANCIAL HEALTH**

Community is the first line of defense to help members process financial concerns. Members who lose their jobs or struggle to meet basic needs may find relief from community members who are able to help. However, let your Shepherd know when you are supporting each other financially to ensure needs are being met appropriately and adequately.

## **HABITUAL SIN/UNRESOLVED CONFLICT**

Should a member of your group continually remain stuck in sin, ignore community's advice, or refuse to repent, promptly inform your Shepherd. Some examples include routine lying, sexual immorality, cohabitation, emotional or physical affairs, or substance abuse. A Shepherd can help groups admonish and, hopefully, guide a member to confession and repentance. If your community is having difficulty resolving conflict and relational trust is being threatened, please reach out to your Shepherd. The Shepherd can step in to help resolve conflict and protect relational trust amongst group members.

## **MAJOR DECISIONS**

If a group member is processing a significant life decision, such as divorce, abortion, or moving to another country, let your Shepherd know; he or she can bring wisdom and understanding into those decisions. Or, if your community is processing a major group decision, such as a leader stepping down, adding a new member, a member leaving, or disbanding the group, your Shepherd can help you navigate those conversations, too.

## PERSONAL REFLECTION

1. Are you more likely to process decisions with others or report decisions to others? Explain.
2. What do you think about others giving you counsel in your daily life, struggles, and decisions? Is it hard for you to share personal information that would fully inform their counsel (for example, disclosing how much debt you owe when deciding on a big purchase)? Explain.
3. How do you feel about your group being the first line of support for each other and having support from Shepherds and Directors should the need arise? Explain.

## IDEAS FOR PROCESSING INFORMATION

- Read over Appendix F: Ten Wise Questions For Processing Big Decisions as a group, then as a group, process a decision a group member is facing using these questions
- Have a group discussion regarding fears or encouragements about involving others in life decisions or life struggles
- Invite your Shepherd to a group dinner to build a relationship with him or her

## SUGGESTED RESOURCES

- Appendix F: Ten Wise Questions For Processing Big Decisions

# LESSON 6: GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS & SHARING LIFE MAPS

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1. Below are great questions to discuss during the final stretch of your community group launch.
2. What day and times will we meet as a group? (For marrieds: couples and same-gender times?) Where will we meet? (Personal Reflection on Page 83)
3. What are some ways that we can share ownership as a group? (Personal Reflection on Page 83)
4. What do you think about allowing others to give counsel in the details of your life and decisions? Is it hard for you to share personal information that would fully inform their counsel? Explain. (Personal Reflection on Page 88)
5. What are three ideas that you would support to build relational trust together as a group in the coming months? (examples: a retreat, a group study, a book, a game night, progressive dinners, etc.)

## LIFE MAPS

If everyone in your group has not yet shared a Life Map, spend the time at the end of your group sharing Life Maps, answering any questions, and praying together.



# APPENDICES





# APPENDIX A: SHARING LIFE MAPS

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## DEVELOPING YOUR LIFE MAP

A Life Map is a visual representation of your life from birth to today. It highlights events God has used to mold and shape your character and helps others to know you. The Life Map process gives insight into how God has designed you and worked in your life, and where he is leading you. It will also help your group members get to know one another. During this “Honeymoon Stage,” take turns sharing Life Maps with each other when you gather. This will help deepen your relationships. Below are a couple of different ways to develop your Life Map:

### LIFE MAP – OPTION #1: REFLECT, ANALYZE, ORGANIZE

Use these three steps to help you develop and communicate your Life Map:

#### STEP 1: REFLECTION

Prayerfully consider people, places, and events that have marked your life. Make a list. Be sure to use the Life Map Worksheet on the next page to help you categorize your thoughts. The terms on the worksheet identify categories and describe things to include. Ask yourself the questions for each category and fill in the worksheet.

#### STEP 2: ANALYSIS

Now that you have reflected over your life—your heritage, heroes, high points, hard times, and hand of God moments—it’s time to analyze which of these you want to put in your Life Map. While it would be nice to share everything, focus on the most significant influences and experiences in your life. Spend some time praying through what you have listed. What you choose is totally up to you. You should not plan to spend any longer than 20-25 minutes (individually or as a couple) sharing your Life Map with your community group.

#### STEP 3: ORGANIZATION

Now try to synthesize this information into a logical flow of thought. How do these people, places, and events fit together?

# LIFE MAP WORKSHEET

Name	AGE/LIFE STAGE LOCATION	AGE/LIFE STAGE LOCATION	AGE/LIFE STAGE LOCATION	AGE/LIFE STAGE LOCATION
<b>HERITAGE:</b> How have your family relationships, ethnic, or geographical influences shaped your life?				
<b>HEROES:</b> What relationships influenced your character/shaped your direction (positively & negatively)? How? Why?				
<b>HIGH POINTS:</b> When did you come to know Christ? What experiences have you especially enjoyed? Felt closest to God? Why?				
<b>HARD TIMES:</b> What experiences were especially difficult or painful? Felt furthest from God?				
<b>HAND OF GOD:</b> When/how have you seen God's hand at work in your life? List specific events that illustrate His work in your life.				



## **LIFE MAP – OPTION #2: THREE PEOPLE AND THREE EVENTS**

Option 2 is a shorter, more condensed way to share your Life Map. For this option, come to your group prepared to share:

### **THREE PEOPLE WHO GOD USED TO SHAPE WHO YOU ARE TODAY**

- Who led you to Christ or invited you to church?
- How did your parents influence you as a child or adult?
- Did you have a friend or co-worker who helped you in a difficult season?

### **THREE EVENTS THAT GOD USED TO SHAPE WHO YOU ARE TODAY**

- What season of life was the darkest? Most joyful?
- Is there a moment you will never forget?
- If you thought your life was going to go a different direction than it did, what event made that change?

## SHARING WITH YOUR GROUP

Sharing your story can be as simple or creative as you'd like. Feel free to just write it down and share from the page. Or, present it in a way that is creatively unique to your personality. For example, someone might like to draw a Life Map or use photographs and music that is meaningful. Another person might just share five highlights and lowlights in life. Regardless of how you share, each person (or couple) should plan about 20-25 minutes to share.

# APPENDIX B: COMMUNITY GROUP LEADER EXPECTATIONS

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Being a community group leader is one of the most significant positions of servant leadership at Onward. As part of the shepherding structure in our church body, community group leaders are essentially lay pastors of their groups, serving their “church within a church.” Therefore, leading a community group should be considered the leader’s primary area of service (any additional serving opportunities should be evaluated in light of whether it would hinder this responsibility). While the best groups collectively share ownership for the group (leading one another, shepherding one another), our staff will always look to the group leader(s) for primary communication.

## THE ASK

- Weekly time commitment: 2-4 hours
- Reporting relationship: Assigned Community Shepherd or Director
- Complete Onward membership process (Hebrews 13:17)

## BE A MODEL OF CHRISTIAN MATURITY

- Understand and incorporate the spiritual disciplines of the Christian life (1 Timothy 4:7)
- Have a growing and abiding walk with God (John 15:4-5)
- Have no current habitual struggles or moral issues (drugs, alcohol, sexual immorality, etc.) that would disqualify them from leading at the present time or prevent them from serving with integrity as a role model (1 Corinthians 11:1)
- Have a humble and teachable spirit with an openness to be sharpened by God and others (James 4:6)
- Live a life of integrity, seeking to be above reproach (Ephesians 5:7-10, Proverbs 10:17)

## PERSONALLY LIVE OUT THE SIX CORE VALUES OF BIBLICAL COMMUNITY

- |                      |                       |                       |
|----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| • Devote Daily       | • Counsel Biblically  | • Admonish Faithfully |
| • Live Authentically | • Pursue Relationally | • Engage Missionally  |

## **PASTORAL CARE & SHEPHERDING OWNERSHIP**

- Ensure that the group is providing biblical support, counsel, and care for any issues that arise in group and elevating major issues to the Community Shepherd or Director when appropriate

## **PARTICIPATE IN ONGOING LEADER TRAINING & EQUIPPING**

- Attend Community Group and Leader Training Nights
- Attend leader meetings organized by your Community Shepherd (quarterly)
- Identify and intentionally develop 1-2 apprentice leaders during the first 12 months of the group

## **BE EXCELLENT IN COMMUNICATION**

- With your group: Communicate clearly and initiate regularly with members
- With staff: Pro-actively communicate updates on the status of your group (via email, phone, in-person) as a liaison to your community shepherd, staff, and elders

# APPENDIX C: COMMUNITY GROUP RETREAT GUIDE

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Retreats are an excellent way to get to know your group better. Make them memorable and unique by going to a lake house, AirBNB, or camping ground. If you can make margin in your schedule as a group, try to block off a whole weekend to spend together. You can share meals, play games, or explore nature. Below are a few ideas on how you can choose to structure time.

## RETREAT SCHEDULE EXAMPLE:

This schedule can be modified based on the time your group has available.

### FRIDAY

- Leave town after work
- Share a meal
- Have fun...start making memories through a unique shared experience

### SATURDAY

- Have breakfast around 9:00 AM
- Give folks a couple hours of quiet, intentional alone time (read, pray, journal, etc.)
- Circle up for lunch around noon
- Have fun/make memories together all afternoon
- Circle back up for dinner around 6:00 PM
- Finish the evening with intentional time/discussion or go back to playing games and having fun as a group

### SUNDAY

- Breakfast
- Pray and thank God for the weekend together; talk about favorite memories and
- celebrate/re-live the fun you had together
- Pack up and head home

## WHAT TO PACK

This list could change based on the duration and location of your retreat, but in general, here are some items you might want to include:

- Bible, journal, pen
- Food...lots of food!
- Comfortable, casual clothes
- Games, cards, frisbee, football, hammock, cornhole, washers, etc.
- Toiletries, sheets (sleeping bag), towel, and pillow

## INTENTIONAL TIME

For intentional time together or individually, think of different things you can do to stir your affections for Jesus, such as:

- Read Scripture & pray
- Journal
- Listen to/sing worship music
- Go through a book of the Bible or Christian book together
- Go through Life Maps together

## MAKING MEMORIES

The more unique your experiences, the more memorable your experience. While there's nothing wrong with going to the movies, it probably won't stand out as a memory in the future. Consider playing games, a nearby attraction, or hiking together during your retreat. Games that don't have a winner, but a loser, make for fun memories. Whoever loses has to do something funny or slightly embarrassing. For example, if you are at a lake and there is a beach/park nearby, make the loser walk around with sunscreen asking people if they need any, and when someone says yes, the loser must insist on applying the sunscreen to the stranger.

# APPENDIX D: CONFESSION OF SIN

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Confessing sin might feel terrifying to you. Publicly revealing ways that you fall short can make you feel unworthy, unloved, or unwanted. However, God is not out to make you miserable. He wants you to find healing, seek restoration, and create freedom through the act of confessing your sins to both him and others in your life.

## WHAT IS CONFESSION?

The word confess, in the original language, is comprised of the words meaning “outer/outside,” “same,” “to say.” Literally, confessing is to say the same thing, acknowledge, or agree with (Mark 1:5, Matthew 3:6, Acts 19:18, and James 5:16). So, a practical definition of confession is to vocally agree about disobedience toward God (sin).

## WHY DO WE CONFESS?

We confess sin because God commands it; he already knows about the sin and he wants us to agree with him about sin. We also confess because it is spiritually healthy for us. Read the comparisons below about the harm of unconfessed sin and the blessings of confessing sin:

UNCONFESSSED SIN LEADS TO:	CONFESSSED SIN LEADS TO:
Hardship for self (Proverbs 28:13)	Life and glory to God (John 3:17-21)
Weariness (Psalm 32:3)	Cleansing (1 John 1:9)
Sickness (1 Corinthians 11:30)	Healing (James 5:16)
Heaviness (Psalm 32:4)	Burdens relieved (Psalm 32:5)
More sin (Genesis 4:6-11)	Freedom and mercy (Proverbs 6:5, 28:13)
Hardening of the heart (Leviticus 26:40-41)	Forgiveness and a clean heart (James 5:15; 1 John 1:9; Psalm 51:10)
God’s discipline/opposition of pride (Luke 18:9-14)	Honor and justification (Luke 18:9-14)
Hardship for others (Joshua 7)	Reconciliation/warning for others (Matthew 5:23-24; 1 Timothy 5:20)
Blocked communication with God (Psalm 66:18)	Worship of God (Leviticus 5:5; Numbers 5:7)
Separation from God (Genesis 3:9; Isaiah 59:2)	Restoration with God (2 Chronicles 7:14)

# TO WHOM, HOW, & WHEN DO WE CONFESS?

## CONFESS TO GOD

Your most important relationship is with God. Sin hurts that relationship. So, your first step when you recognize sin in your life is to confess your sin to God. 1 John 1:9 says, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” God has promised to always forgive your sins, no matter how grave the sin.

Scripture also encourages you to confess these sins to him daily (Matthew 6:11-12a). As you are devoting daily with God, make it part of your practice to also confess sin in prayer or in your journal. Bring to God any sin that the Holy Spirit or Scripture has brought to your conscience. But remember, confession is not what wipes your slate clean. Jesus has already done that at the cross (Colossians 2:13-14). If you forget a sin, know that Christ’s blood cleanses and purifies you from all sin—even those of which you are unaware.

## CONFESS TO ONE ANOTHER

Though it may be uncomfortable or difficult, confessing sin to your brothers or sisters in Christ can be a freeing, healing process. God’s instruction is for your good. James 5:16 says, “Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.” God wants you and your community to be well and to battle against sin together.

Make a regular practice of confessing sin when it occurs. You can send a text to your community group if appropriate or spend some of your scheduled group time confessing. Answering the question, “How are you feeding your flesh?” during community is a great way to open the door for confession.

If you listen to someone confess sin, remember to meet that person’s humility with grace. Offer to pray quickly after confession for healing and victory. Affirm that person’s courage and give help with reconciliation, if necessary. You can also sympathetically share a time when you struggled with sin and God was faithful to restore you.



## TRUSTED QUOTES ON CONFESSION OF SIN TO A BROTHER OR SISTER IN CHRIST

“[Regarding confession, some] flee from this work as being an exposure of themselves, or they put it off from day to day. I presume they are more mindful of modesty than of salvation, like those who contract a disease in the more shameful parts of the body and shun making themselves known to the physicians; and thus they perish along with their own bashfulness” (Tertullian, Repentance 10:1 [A.D. 203]).

“It is necessary to confess our sins to those to whom the dispensation of God’s mysteries is entrusted. Those doing penance of old are found to have done it before the saints. It is written in the Gospel that they confessed their sins to John the Baptist (Matthew 3:6), but in Acts (19:18) they confessed to the apostles” (Basil the Great, Rules Briefly Treated 288 [A.D. 374]).

“If the serpent, the devil, bites someone secretly, he infects that person with the venom of sin. And if the one who has been bitten keeps silence and does not do penance, and does not want to confess his wound . . . then his brother and his master, who have the word that will cure him, cannot very well assist him” (Jerome, Commentary on Ecclesiastes 10:11 [A.D. 388]).

To Augustine, divine, or vertical, confession of sin is “daily baptism” (Sermon, 213). See also very public confession of sin in Confessions, Book II. Chapter 2.2.

“Therefore, a willing confession among men follows that secret confession which is made to God, as often as either divine glory of our humiliation demands it....For He foresaw that this help was necessary for them in order that each one might better be led to a just estimation of himself. And it is fitting that, by the confession of our own wretchedness, we show forth the goodness and mercy of our God, among ourselves and before the whole world” (Calvin, Institutes, III.iv.10).



# APPENDIX E: SEXUAL PURITY

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The Christian struggle for sexual purity has been real since the time when the Bible was written. It has not become easier since the sexual revolution and the advancement of technology made many perversities permissible in society and easily accessible. It is sad because God created sex for good, to be enjoyed freely by two people in a safe, loving, covenant relationship. Unfortunately, many Christians have suffered the damage of sexual relationships outside of the boundaries of God's design. When sex is taken out of its rightful place, people get hurt. A fire inside a fireplace brings warmth and comfort, but let the fire outside of its contained space, and it can burn down a house.

## SEX IS GOOD FOR MARRIAGE

Genesis 2:24 says that "a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh." Hebrews 13:4 says, "let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous." The Bible is clear that sex between one man and one woman within the covenant of marriage is to be celebrated and kept pure.

And sex for pleasure! Song of Solomon 1:2 says, "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth! For your love is better than wine..." In fact, all of Song of Solomon demonstrates how sweet and unifying sex can be between a married couple.

In addition to unity and pleasure, sex produces life, fulfilling God's command in Genesis 1:28 to "be fruitful and multiply." Though we can also build families through adoption, God created sex as a way to multiply through procreation within a home secured by a committed father and mother.

## SEX OUTSIDE OF MARRIAGE DAMAGES

Just like a fire let loose in a house, sex outside of the confines of marriage can damage and destroy. 1 Thessalonians 4:3-8 encourages Christians to keep self-control over our own bodies and to put other's interests above our own. Scripture also tells us that our bodies are not our own, but they belong to God to be used to honor him and to our spouses because we are "one flesh" (1 Corinthians 6:12-20; 7:3-5)

## WHAT DOES THAT MEAN?

For married couples, God wants you to have sex with each other and enjoy it. But if either of you had sexual relationships before you were married, know that God is not angry with you. He forgives sin and can heal you to create a healthy, beautiful marriage. He also wants you to keep others out of your sexual relationship so that you only have hearts, eyes, and minds for each other. So, stay vigilant against any potential threats in your relationship. Be open with community if either of you struggle with pornography (even occasionally), fantasize, or feel an attraction to someone other than your spouse.

For those who are not married, refraining from sexual encounters creates healthier dating relationships that allow you to stay objective without the confusion of sexual intimacy. Keeping “the marriage bed undefiled” before you are married creates a stronger future marriage by practicing trust of God, patience, and self-control. Of course, practically speaking, you also avoid the possibilities of an unplanned pregnancy and contracting sexual diseases.

The practical question of how to remain sexually pure before marriage can be confusing in today’s culture. Specific boundaries can be helpful, but it is far more important to analyze your heart. Following a set of rules might make you feel bridled and frustrated until you understand the why behind them. But if you recognize that your heart is prone to deceit and that God has your best interests in mind, boundaries can be a relief instead of a burden.

Jeremiah 17:9 says, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?” This is certainly different instruction from the “follow your heart” call of today’s culture. So, before you decide what is permissible in your dating relationships, pray, “Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!” (Psalm 139:23-24). Ask God to help you see clearly and trust biblical instruction so that you can experience God’s best for you.

The following guidelines for those not yet married come from our premarital ministry's Purity Pledge, which draws the purity line at light kissing:

1. Holding hands
  2. Hugging
  3. Light kissing
- 
4. French kissing
  5. Kissing on the neck, ears, or other parts of the body
  6. Indirect stimulation of the breasts/genitals (i.e. grinding)
  7. Manual stimulation of the breasts/genitals
  8. Oral stimulation of the breasts/genitals
  9. Intercourse

These boundaries can help you maintain a healthy relationship with God, your boyfriend or girlfriend, your future spouse, and your boyfriend or girlfriend's future spouse should you break up. Please note that for some, any type of kissing is not a good idea. If any of these activities cause a physical reaction and lead your mind to an impure place, they should be avoided.

## SEXUAL PURITY OF THE MIND

In the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:27-28, Jesus made a bold parallel. Those who even thought lustfully had committed adultery in the heart. It's a big claim, but Jesus makes it clear that you should be just as concerned about what you think as you are about what you do. Fantasizing about someone or entertaining thoughts of an intimate relationship with anyone other than your spouse might seem harmless, but it is a grave threat. Don't put yourself in a position to be tempted into sexual sin. Cut yourself off from the things that lead you sin.

Whether you're a man or a woman, married or not, be open with your community about your thought life. Remember that confession can bring healing, and accountability can bring strength. 1 Corinthians 10:13 says, "No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it." Sexual sin is deeply alluring, but God provides a way out. Let those in your community help you when you are tempted. They too have experienced temptation and can help you see clearly beyond the deceitfulness of sin.

## RESOURCES ON PURITY

### BLOGS

- re:generation blog – “Is it OK to Masturbate if I’m Not Lusting?”
- re:generation Issue Sheets – Pornography, Masturbation, Same-Sex Attraction
- Tim Challies – [challies.com/topics/pornography](http://challies.com/topics/pornography)
- Desiring God – [desiringgod.org/topics/sexual-purity/articles](http://desiringgod.org/topics/sexual-purity/articles)

### PURITY QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

1. Why does God call us to walk in purity? Do you believe sex should stay within marriage?
2. Whether single or married, what Scripture should inform how we view and pursue purity?
3. How can the group hold you accountable to walk in purity today and this week?

# APPENDIX F: TEN WISE QUESTIONS FOR PROCESSING BIG DECISIONS

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Thankfully, Scripture gives practical advice on how to wisely process major decisions. The ten principles below are pulled from book of Proverbs. They form great questions to ask yourself and your community when processing big decisions. When processing major decisions, get everyone into the room at the same time. Don't have one-off conversations that would make it easy to frame details in a different light or ignore important topics.

## TEN WISE QUESTIONS FOR PROCESSING BIG DECISIONS

1. DO I HAVE ALL THE FACTS?

| “If one gives an answer before he hears, it is his folly and shame.” (Proverbs 18:13)

2. AM I FULLY ENTRUSTING THIS DECISION TO THE LORD?

| “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths. (Proverbs 3:5-6)

3. IS THE PRESSURE OF TIME FORCING ME TO MAKE A PREMATURE DECISION I MIGHT NOT OTHERWISE MAKE?

| “Desire without knowledge is not good, and whoever makes haste with his feet misses his way.” (Proverbs 19:2)

4. FOR BETTER OR WORSE, WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE MOTIVES THAT COULD BE DRIVING THIS DECISION?

| “All the ways of a man are pure in his own eyes, but the Lord weighs the spirit.” (Proverbs 16:2)

5. HOW SHOULD MY PAST EXPERIENCES INFORM THIS DECISION?

| “Like a dog that returns to his vomit is a fool who repeats his folly.” (Proverbs 26:11)

6. WHAT IS THE COLLECTIVE COUNSEL OF MY COMMUNITY?

“The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man listens to advice.” (Proverbs 12:15)

7. HAVE I HONESTLY CONSIDERED THE WARNING SIGNS?

“There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death.” (Proverbs 16:25)

8. HAVE I FULLY CONSIDERED ALL THE POSSIBLE OUTCOMES FOR EACH COURSE OF ACTION I’M CONSIDERING?

“The simple believes everything, but the prudent gives thought to his steps.” (Proverbs 14:15)

9. COULD THIS DECISION JEOPARDIZE MY INTEGRITY OR HINDER MY WITNESS FOR THE LORD IN ANY WAY?

“Like a muddied spring or a polluted fountain is a righteous man who gives way before the wicked.” (Proverbs 25:26)

10. IS THERE A BETTER OPTION THAT WOULD ALLOW ME TO MAKE A GREATER IMPACT FOR GOD’S KINGDOM?

“The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, and whoever captures souls is wise.” (Proverbs 11:30)



# APPENDIX G: CURRICULUM SUGGESTIONS & RESOURCES

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## ONWARD GENERAL RESOURCES

### JOIN THE JOURNEY

A free online devotional that encourages daily reading of God's Word. Find out more at [jointhejourney.com](http://jointhejourney.com).

### MEN'S & WOMEN'S BIBLE STUDY

Men's & Women's Bible Study helps men and women of all ages become more fully devoted followers of Christ through the study of God's Word. Find out more at [onwardcc.org](http://onwardcc.org).

### RE:GENERATION ISSUE SHEETS

Learn what the Bible says about specific sin struggles. Determine the issue, how to counsel biblically, and healthy next steps for healing when someone in your group is struggling. Visit [regenerationrecovery.org/struggles/](http://regenerationrecovery.org/struggles/).

# RECOMMENDED BOOKS/STUDIES

## BIBLE STUDY

- 30 Days to Understanding the Bible, Max Anders
- Kay Arthur Inductive Study Series
- Living By the Book – The Art and Science of Reading the Bible, Howard Hendricks
- Look at the Book, John Piper/Desiring God
- NLT Study Series – (Genesis, John, Romans, James)

## ABIDING/SPIRITUAL GROWTH

- Experiencing God: Knowing and Doing the Will of God, Henry & Richard Blackaby and Claude King (workbook)
- Experiencing God's Story, Scott Duvall (4 small books)
- Growing in Christ, NavPress
- Growing Strong in God's Family, NavPress
- Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life and Study Guide, Donald Whitney

## TOPICAL GENERAL

- The Treasure Principle, Randy Alcorn
- Respectable Sins: Confronting the Sins We Tolerate, Jerry Bridges
- Crazy Love, Francis Chan
- Unoffendable, Brant Hansen
- Every Good Endeavor, Tim Keller
- The Meaning of Marriage, Tim Keller
- Know What You Believe, Paul Little
- Know Why You Believe, Paul Little
- Search for Significance: Seeing Your True Worth in God's Eyes, Robert S. McGee
- Accidental Pharisees, Larry Osborne

## ENGAGING MISSIONALLY

- Witnessing Without Fear, Bill Bright
- One Thing You Can't Do in Heaven, Mark Cahill
- When Helping Hurts: The Small Group Experience, Corbett, Fikkert
- Tactics, Greg Koukl
- Reimagining Evangelism, Rick Richardson

#### **TOPICAL BOOKS FOR MEN**

- The Purity Principle, Randy Alcorn
- The Samson Syndrome: What You Can Learn from the Baddest Boy in the Bible, Mark Atteberry
- Men of Courage, Larry Crabb (formerly titled The Silence of Adam)
- The True Measure of A Man, Richard E. Simmons III

#### **TOPICAL BOOKS FOR WOMEN**

- Lies Women Believe, Nancy Leigh DeMoss
- Calm My Anxious Heart, Linda Dillow
- Every Woman's Battle, Shannon Ethridge
- So Long Insecurity, Beth Moore



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