



The Story Church Discipleship Groups | Spring 2021

Introduction:

Christians believe salvation is all about God's grace, right? No amount of good works can get a person into heaven; only trusting in Jesus can do that. So what's the point of living a good life after deciding you believe in Jesus? Why should Christians subject themselves to discomfort, self-sacrifice, and self-discipline if simply believing in Jesus is enough to punch their tickets to heaven? Part of trusting Jesus means allowing him to shape our lives - not just in eternity - but in the here and now. In this series, we'll explore the ways God's saving grace can transform the believer's character in this life. From your love life to your priorities to your personality, God calls out and equips believers to live lives that are shaped by the cross of Jesus Christ.

Session 1: A Cross-Shaped Marriage

[WATCH THE SERMON HERE](#)

Discussion Questions:

What is the source of most of your marriage expectations?

Potential Sources: Parents marriage, movies/tv shows, friends marriages, siblings marriages, Biblical marriages, etc...

How do you typically react when your expectations are not met?

Personal.

Read Ephesians 5:31-32. *"For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church"*

List out the guiding principles you find in a marriage and in a relationship with Christ. What is the same? What is different?

Some of the same guiding principles: trustworthiness, loyalty, submission, putting others interests above your own, self-giving, taking up your cross (JOYFULLY!), and hope.

What are the characteristics of a me-shaped marriage? How can these be destructive in your faith and in your marriage?

- 1. My marriage is a pain - Builds resentment*
- 2. My spouse is the problem - So much easier to point externally than search internally*
- 3. I'm not happy. So I'm out - My marriage or faith isn't making me feel good, so I should bail.*

What are the characteristics of a cross-shaped marriage? How can these produce fruit and life in your faith and in your marriage?

The antidote to a me-shaped marriage is to pursue holiness in a cross-shaped marriage. Characteristics include - pursuing holiness together, believing there is joy set before you, joyfully enduring seasons of struggle, perseverance that produces hope, and resting in the goodness of God.

Read Hebrews 12:2. *"For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."*

What is the joy set before you in your faith? What is the joy set before you in your marriage?

There is real joy and life found in Christ. 1 Peter 1:8-9 "8 Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, 9 for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls."

The joy set before you in your marriage can be the peace that surpasses all understanding throughout every season. And it can be a vision for the joy in your future marriage.

How can you joyfully endure seasons of suffering?

James 1:2-3 "2 Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, 3 because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance."

Romans 15:13 "13 May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."

Romans 5:3-5 "3 Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; 4 perseverance, character; and character, hope. 5 And hope does not put us to

shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us."

Why is there no such thing as neutral in your faith and in your marriage?

You're either taking a step forward or you're drifting away. If you're neutral, you are drifting away.

What does the author of Hebrews mean by "scorning its shame?" How can you scorn shame? How can you fight for your faith and for your marriage?

Prayer and daily intentional rhythms of loving God and others. Not believing the lies that the enemy tells you that you're too far gone, or that God can't forgive you for what you've done, or comparing ourselves favorably to others. You can fight for your marriage and your faith by reading Scripture - personally or with your spouse. You can fight by hitting your knees in prayer.

List out a practical step forward you can take today to pursue holiness in your life. How can your group hold you accountable and pray with you for this next step?

Personal. Lead by example.



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Session 2: Cross-Shaped Masculinity

[WATCH THE SERMON HERE](#)

Discussion Questions:

How would you define "character"?

Personal, but we've talked about character being "who a person really is at their core," or "who you are when no one is watching."

Why is it important for Christians to talk about developing character?

Character formation is the work of the Holy Spirit within every believer.

Read Genesis 2:15, 18, 20-25

The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. Then the Lord God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him." But for Adam no suitable helper was found. So the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and then closed up the place with flesh. Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.

The man said,

"This is now bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
she shall be called 'woman,'

for she was taken out of man.”

That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh. Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.

What was God’s first observation about the man? What does this tell you about the importance of relationships and community in a man’s life?

“It’s not good for him to be alone.” It says that God designed us for real relationships and authentic community.

Have you noticed any negative stereotypes or low expectations of masculinity in our secular culture (media, academia, entertainment, or social sciences)? If so, jot down an example or two here.

Personal

Why do you think boys and young men are falling behind in school and graduating from college at a lower rate than women?

Personal. Pastor Eric outlined a few possible reasons for this in his *Friday Grace & Truth* email/podcast from April 16.

What was Eric’s point in comparing “female hysteria” to “toxic masculinity”?

Both masculinity and femininity are qualities of God’s good design for humanity. When we categorize, in blanket fashion, issues experienced by some women as “female hysteria” and issues experienced by some men as “toxic masculinity”, we communicate the idea that “femininity” is inherently prone to hysteria and “masculinity” is more easily given to toxicity. Both assumptions are false and harmful. There is nothing innately wrong with masculinity or femininity, and we should be careful not to communicate otherwise with the language we use to describe men and women.

Read Matthew 5:38-42

You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you that you must not oppose those who want to hurt you. If people slap you on your right cheek, you must turn the left cheek to them as well. When they wish to haul you to court and take your shirt, let them have your coat too. When they force you to go one mile, go with them two. Give to those who ask, and don’t refuse those who wish to borrow from you.

Summarize some of the ways Christians have misinterpreted these teachings of Jesus over the years.

We've interpreted "turn the other cheek", "give the shirt off your back," and "go the extra mile" to mean "Just let people run right over you with impunity, and whatever you do, don't ever be assertive or mean or unpleasant."

What did Jesus actually mean with "Turn the other cheek," "Give them the shirt off your back," and "Go the second mile"? How is this different from the "doormat philosophy" we often associate with Jesus?

When we look more closely at Jesus' words, it's clear that he's teaching his disciples to stand strong and not to flinch in the face of evil. To resist evil without becoming evil. It is a refusal to take violence and oppression lying down, and to stand up to sin in all its forms.

How should this new understanding of Jesus' teachings in Matthew 5 shape our vision for masculinity today?

Somewhat personal, but the main idea in the sermon was that we need more men who follow Jesus' lead and respond to evil and adversity with non-violent strength and non-macho courage.

What does Christian masculinity look like?

Jesus, duh.

But let's dig deeper and ask group members to describe what that actually means in practical terms. How would the call to "be a man like Jesus" change the life of an ordinary guy in 2021 America?

What should be the #1 priority for Christian parents who are raising boys today?

To raise them to be disciples of Jesus Christ, period.

If you're a man, list a few practical ways you intend to change in order to become more like Jesus.

Personal

If you're a woman, what are some practical things you can do differently to support or encourage your brothers in Christ as they seek to follow Jesus more closely?

Personal

the cross-shaped life

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Session 3: Cross-Shaped Masculinity

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Discussion Questions:

Why is forgiveness such a tender topic for so many of us?

Personal, but maybe because we've all been hurt & heartbroken.

Read [Matthew 9:1-8](#). What does this story say about Jesus' perspective on forgiveness?

Forgiving a person is harder than fixing them.

Forgiveness is a greater miracle than healing is.

If it's true that who you are under pressure is who you really are, who are you?

Personal.

As he died on the cross, under an immense amount of pain and pressure, Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." What does this tell us about the true character of Christ?

Forgiveness is an essential part of his nature, and even under tremendous pressure and pain, he is gracious toward even his enemies.

Imagine if, instead of offering forgiveness, Jesus said something like, "Father, make them pay." How might that change the way we look at Jesus?

While this sentiment would be understandable, given his circumstances on the cross, it might also lead us to see Jesus as incapable of living up to his own lofty moral standards. After telling his followers to love and forgive their enemies, saying something like "Make them pay", even under duress, would be hypocritical.

What are some of the key differences between the dominant social philosophy in our culture (oppressors/villains vs. oppressed/victims) and the way of Jesus Christ?

Jesus and the gospel help us to see that, in this fallen world, even the oppressors are oppressed by the Enemy, and even villains are victimized by sin. "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." - Romans 3:23

When Jesus said "...they don't know what they're doing", was he excusing the soldiers' bad behavior? What's the difference between forgiving sin and passively enabling sin?

No - he never said that what the soldiers were doing was okay. In fact, he frequently called out the evil deeds being done by sinners. The difference between forgiveness and enabling sin is that, while the goal of enabling someone is making them happy, the goal of forgiving someone is to make them holy.

What is the connection between being forgiven by God and forgiving others who've sinned against us? (See Ephesians 4:32, Matthew 6:14-15)

It's a correlative relationship. The more receptive we are to God's forgiveness of our sins (through the cross of Christ), the more capable we will be to forgive others).

How has the past year been a time of testing for you and your faith? What has the stress, pressure, and pain of the pandemic, the shutdown, the election, etc., revealed about your character?

Personal

What's the relationship between forgiveness and empathy?

Walking a mile in someone's shoes - or at least attempting to imagine what they've been through or what burdens they're carrying - can often inspire us to condemn people less and forgive them more.

Can you think of someone (or a bunch of someones!) against whom you're still holding a grudge? What is that unforgiving resentment doing to your soul? What steps can you take to begin a process of true forgiveness?

Personal.

For more on this important topic, check out this short episode of the Maybe God Podcast called "[Forgiving an Enemy](#)".

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Session 4: Cross-Shaped Conflict

[WATCH THE SERMON HERE](#)

Discussion Questions:

Why is it so important for us to talk about managing conflict well?

Conflict is inevitable. Some conflicts will be interpersonal; others will play out between your own two ears or in your own heart. The way you choose to deal with conflict is up to you. You may not be in control of the conflict, but you are always in control of how you respond to the conflict. And because most of us grew up in families that either imploded with every conflict or swept every conflict under the rug, most of us still haven't learned how to manage conflict well.

What were the events that precipitated the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15?

In 48 AD, Church leaders gathered in Jerusalem to work through a crisis. For 18 years or so, the Church had functioned as a Jewish sect. All the first-generation Christians were Jews. But now some key Christian leaders were seeing Gentiles come to Jesus, and a new vision was taking shape..

What was the conflict?

...some of them were beginning to wonder if they'd been wrong and if, in the aftermath of the cross and the empty tomb, it was still biblical to require Gentiles coming to Jesus to become Jews first. This conflict posed a threat to the Church's mission. So the leaders came together with a sense of urgency.

The leaders in Jerusalem led the church through a four-step process to resolve this conflict.

Step One: Name the _____. (Issue)

Why is it important that we identify the issue when resolving a conflict?

Naming the issue clearly and succinctly sets the conversation up to be concise and productive. When we fail to name the issue, it's easier for the conversation to go off the rails and become counterproductive.

Step Two: Listen to _____. *(Insights)*

Who did the Christian leaders in Jerusalem listen to, and why?

Peter, Paul, and Barnabas. Their insights were especially valuable because Peter, Barnabas, and Paul were not ideologues. They'd been on both sides of the issue. They understood both sides of the argument.

Who are some of the people in your life whose insights you would seek in the midst of a conflict?

Personal

Step Three: Surrender to _____. *(Scripture)*

How were the insights of Peter, Paul, and Barnabas affirmed by Scripture, and what difference did that make to the Christian leaders?

The leaders of the early church were not governed by their feelings or by shifting cultural norms or by the loudest voices in the room. The Bible was their foundation and their framework. They trusted the word of God to guide them, and in searching the Scriptures, they found evidence supporting the testimonies of Peter, Paul, and Barnabas. Centuries before the Jerusalem Council, God had spoken through the prophet Amos to remind His people yet again of His plans going all the way back to Genesis, where He promised to make Abraham the father of MANY nations - not just one or two.

They searched the Scriptures and found evidence that they had, in fact, been wrong by keeping the Gentiles at arm's length because God's heart had always yearned for communion with Gentiles since the very beginning. Make no mistake: absent God's clear and consistent heart for the Gentiles that's evident from Genesis to Malachi, the Jerusalem Council would not have followed their feelings and to overturn the Church's teachings. It took the Word to change their minds.

Many people think surrendering our opinions, emotions, and politics to Scripture is repressive and limiting. How might surrendering to Scripture actually be liberating?

A quote from Eric's sermon: "Conflict used to stress me out before I learned to rely on Scripture, because without the Bible, conflict resolution is all up to us. We must set the right priorities, believe the right ideas, and feel the right emotions in order to achieve the right outcomes. But what's right in this world is constantly changing, and it's absolutely exhausting to keep up with what's right today.

But when you learn to trust the sufficiency of Scripture, what's right never changes. Your understanding of it might change as you listen to insights and search the Scriptures. But it's so freeing to encounter conflict and to know that my opinions don't matter, my feelings don't matter, my mood doesn't matter - all that matters is what God says to us in the Bible about the issue at hand."

Why is this step the most important one of all?

Personal

Step Four: Offer Clear _____. *(Instruction)*

What instruction did James, as the leader of the Jerusalem Church, offer to the other Christian leaders? On what basis did he change course?

He said let's not worry about them getting circumcised or making them eat kosher. We just want the Gentiles here because God wants them here. Then James offered some basic boundaries around idolatry, sexual expression, and eating food with blood in it. And that was it - the instruction was clear and concise, with no room for confusion or misinterpretation. He did all this on the basis of Scripture.

How could these four steps apply to a conflict you've dealt with in the past, or one you're dealing with right now? One step at a time, write a short summary of how a real-life conflict might be addressed with the process found in Acts 15.

Personal

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Session 5: Cross-Shaped Legacy

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Discussion Questions:

Why is it so important for Christians to have conversations about the topic of legacy?

God asks us to not only live for the things of this world, but to set our minds on things above. That requires a reframing of our mind and hearts, seeking God's priorities first, instead of our own. When we set our minds on the things of God, He will lead us to build something that outlasts our time here on earth, by prioritizing the proclamation of the gospel.

Read **Colossians 3:2-4**. Paul writes: **Since you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.**

What is Paul asking believers to do that is opposite to the way in which we often live?

We are constantly being pulled to live for the things of this world. Most of the messages we receive have to do with living for our careers and success, or to get more things and more money. But God always leads us to have more of an eternal perspective, to see beyond the here and now, and to use the gifts he has given us to lead others to know Him.

What advice did Paul offer in verses 9 and 10, as a way to reframe our thinking and to redirect our energy into kingdom-building purposes? **Colossians 3:9-10: "Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator."**

Speak about the concept of being renewed in the image of our creator, what implications does that have for our day-to-day life?

Some of the biggest hurdles we encounter in today's society are distraction, instant gratification, and temptation. How can we overcome these great hurdles on a daily basis?

Personal

What are the practical steps we can take to build a long-lasting legacy?

- 1. Set your minds on things above, not on the things of this world**
- 2. Leave the old self and old practices behind**
- 3. Adopt new practices, and embrace the new self that you have found in Christ**

John Wesley said this about his mother: **“I learned more about Christianity from my mother than from all the theologians in England.”** What did Susanna Wesley prioritize in order to build a Godly legacy through her children? You can find a helpful article about her motherhood style [here](#):

She taught them the bible (doctrine), taught them how to pray, taught them how to praise

In Matthew 6:19-21, Jesus said: **“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”**

Knowing and loving Jesus is one of the greatest treasures we can receive. The implication is that helping others know and love Jesus is also sharing a treasure that far exceeds anything this world has to offer. What are some practical ways in which you have shared the gospel with others? How can we be more effective as the body of Christ in helping each other build a gospel legacy?

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Session 6: Cross-Shaped Struggle

[WATCH THE SERMON HERE](#)

Discussion Questions:

For Christians, how and when does character transformation happen?

By the grace of God, and when we gradually surrender more and more of ourselves to God.

Eph 4:1-2,12-15,17-24 As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love...so that the body of Christ may be built up until we reach all unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ...you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, and they are full of greed.

That, however, is not the way of life you learned when you heard about Christ and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.

What are the key differences between the spiritual “infants” Paul described and the mature believers “attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ”?

Spiritual infants are easily swayed by emotions, trends, and changing social norms. They can be more susceptible to self-indulgence, impurity, and greed. Mature believers are more steady and confident in the foundation on which they stand. They are less given to impulse and indulgence, and more interested in pursuing the righteousness and holiness of God.

What are some of the ways you’ve experienced “The Struggle” throughout your life? How have your struggles affected you?

Personal

Jesus equips his followers to overcome the struggle by teaching us to:

1. _____PREPARE_____ for the Struggle

What are some of the ways Jesus intentionally prepared his disciples for the struggles they were going to face after his death? (Look at Luke 9 and 10 for some help)

He showed them how to do the work of spreading the gospel, then he sent them out to do it. When they returned from doing the work, he evaluated their progress. He also prepared them by warning them about certain things and people, by telling them what was going to happen to him, and by teaching them how to pray.

Before every season of struggle, there is a season of preparation. What are some ways you can use your “downtime” or “slow seasons” more intentionally to prepare for the next struggle?

Personal

2. _____PRAY_____ through the Struggle

What did Jesus do in Luke 11 to further prepare his disciples to overcome their future struggles?

He taught them how to pray the Lord’s Prayer

What is the relationship between prayer and faith? If you are lacking enough faith to believe in the power of prayer, where can you get more faith? (see Ephesians 2:8-9, Romans 10:17)

Prayer is an act of faith. Difficulty praying is often attributable to a deficit of faith. Faith comes from God as a gift to us. If you lack faith, ask God for it, and trust that He will deliver it.

3. _____PERSEVERE_____ beyond the Struggle
Where does the word “persevere” come from, and what does it mean?

Persevere comes from Latin words meaning “thoroughly severe” and it implies toughness, grit, determination, and ferocity.

What role do grit and toughness play in overcoming adversity? What does that have to do with Jesus? (See Hebrews 12:2)

Grit and toughness in tough times can demonstrate a vibrant and growing faithful character in a believer. Jesus took the cross and persevered without condemning the people who nailed him to it. When we learn to respond to the struggle in a similar way, we become more like Christ.

2 Cor. 6:3-10 - We put no stumbling block in anyone’s path, so that our ministry will not be discredited. Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses; in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger; in purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love; in truthful speech and in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left; through glory and dishonor, bad report and good report; genuine, yet regarded as impostors; known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

How has the grace of Jesus Christ transformed your character so far?

Personal

How would you like to see his grace continue to change your character in the future? Be as specific as possible.

Personal

