

# THE GOSPEL-CENTERED COMMUNITY

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## LESSON 4 — FAITH WALKING THROUGH LOVE

### BIG IDEA

In the first three lessons of this study, we've laid a foundation for gospel-centered community. We've seen that God himself is in community and that he made us in his image as communal beings. We've seen that the fall has turned us in on ourselves, causing us to sabotage meaningful relationships with others through our unbelief and idolatry. And we've seen how Jesus redeems us, restores our capacity for community, and calls us into his new community (the church), the context for our ongoing transformation. Now we come to a "hinge point" in the study—the concept of "faith working through love" (Galatians 5:6). We will never love one another as God intends unless we understand how faith in the work of Christ provides the foundation and the motivation for love. This lesson establishes a core principle that we'll return to in Lessons 5 through 9.

### NOTES:



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## LESSON 4 ARTICLE — MAKING IT COUNT

In the past three lessons, we've tried to lay the foundation for a gospel-centered community. We've seen that God himself is in community, and that he made us in his image as communal beings. We've seen that the fall has turned us in on ourselves, causing us to sabotage relationships through our unbelief and idolatry. And we've seen how Jesus redeems us, restores our capacity for community, and calls us into his new community (the church), the context for our ongoing transformation. We've seen how our failures in community drive us more deeply into the gospel, and how the good news of the gospel frees us for richer and more life-giving community.

The current lesson is a hinge point in this study. In Lessons 5 through 9, we're going to examine some of the defining marks or characteristics of a biblical community—things like humility, honesty, and forgiveness. In other words, we're going to consider what our communities should look like. The Bible is not vague on this matter; it's full of teaching about how God's people should relate to one another.

But before we can get to the *shoulds*—the imperatives—of gospel-centered community, we have to get clear on how the gospel empowers us to obey. Otherwise, God's ideals for community will overwhelm us, driving us to despair and defeat.

Consider these exhortations:

- “Love one another with brotherly affection; outdo one another in showing honor” (Romans 12:10).
- “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen” (Ephesians 4:29 niv).
- “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you” (Ephesians 4:32).
- “Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger” (James 1:19).

Think for a minute about how difficult it is to obey these commands—not in the abstract, but with actual people you know. That guy or that girl. Every time. With the right attitudes and motives. Are you beginning to feel the tension? Where can we find the power to live up to this ideal?

When confronted with these kinds of demands and expectations, we tend to respond in one of two ways:

**Resolution.** “I’m going to do that.” I have a high view of my willpower and my moral ability. If I think I’m succeeding, I will quickly become self-righteous: “I did this; why can’t others?”

**Resignation.** “There’s no way I can do that. I might as well not even try.” I have a faulty view of God and his standard: it’s not even worth trying if it seems beyond me or if it will reveal my faults and failures. This is also a subtle form of self-righteousness: “I shouldn’t have to keep the rules.”



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Both resolution and resignation are alive and well on the pages of Scripture. The Pharisees and religious leaders were masters of resolution and the self-righteousness that accompanies it. In one of his teachings, Jesus mocks the way a Pharisee might pray: “God, I thank you that I am not like other men. . . . I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get” (Luke 18:11–12). On the other hand, the irreligious Gentiles tended toward resignation. They flaunted their “freedom” from God’s law: “They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity” (Ephesians 4:19). The difference between the two groups was evident in their approach to circumcision.

Circumcision was a rite God had commanded in the Old Testament to physically mark his covenant with his people (see Genesis 17:1–14). The Jewish Christians prided themselves on their obedience to this command. They even argued that Gentile converts to Christianity should be circumcised. But the Gentiles enjoyed their freedom from this practice. For this reason, circumcision became one of the most contentious issues in the early church.

Circumcision might seem like a strange issue to fight about. But it’s really not so strange when you think about it. It was a good thing, given by God, that had become a boundary marker—a way of determining who was “re-ally spiritual” and who wasn’t. We have all sorts of similar markers in our day: church attendance, small group involvement, external appearance (clothes and “look”), political views, language, preferred Bible translation. Scrupulous people identify themselves by these things. Skeptical people identify themselves by their “freedom” from these things. But either way, we’re not identifying ourselves by Jesus. And that’s a problem!

The book of Galatians was written to a church rife with conflict over the issue of circumcision. After spending four chapters applying the truth of the gospel to the question, the apostle Paul summed the matter up succinctly in one verse: “For in Christ Jesus, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love” (Galatians 5:6).

In Christ Jesus. That’s the gospel. We are united with Jesus through faith: his life is credited to us, his death is in our place, his resurrection is our “newness of life” (Romans 6:4). When we rest in the good news that God saves us through our faith in Christ, we increasingly understand our new identity “in Christ Jesus.” This changes everything about how we live. Circumcision and uncircumcision don’t “count” anymore. They lose their value and meaning as marks that identify the people who belong to God. The only thing that does that now—and the thing that empowers our new life in community—is faith working through love.

Notice the precision of this phrase, “faith working through love.” It’s not faith by itself. It’s not love by itself. It’s not resolution (trying really hard to love) or resignation (falling back on my “faith” to excuse my lack of love). It’s faith working through love. We can deduce at least two principles about faith and love from this phrase.

Where there is no faith, there can be no real love. Faith is the energy that empowers love.

Where there is no love, there is no real faith. The absence of faith can be discerned most clearly through the absence of love.

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Applying these principles to our life in community, we see that:

We often discover our failure of faith only when we examine the details of a particular situation where we have failed to love. The lack of love always indicates unbelief, or a lack of faith.

We can own up to our lack of love only when we are appropriating the truth of the gospel into our own lives—that is, resting by faith in Christ’s righteousness and God’s love for us.

What counts is faith working through love. This is how the gospel empowers us to actually obey God’s commands for Christian community. As we fail to meet God’s standards for community (for example, as we judge others, isolate ourselves, avoid difficult people, etc.), we see our lack of love and are forced to confront our lack of faith (our fundamental unbelief in the good news of the gospel). Our love problem is really a faith problem. As we rest more fully in Christ’s righteousness and God’s love for us, we are empowered by the Holy Spirit to love others as God has loved us. Our faith works itself out in love.

This simple truth is the foundation of gospel-centered community, and it’s a reality we’ll return to over and over again in the rest of this study. Our lack of love always reveals a lack of faith—a “gospel disconnect.” So the way to build deeper community (love) is to delight in the gospel more fully (faith). As we dwell on all we have received in Jesus and invite the Holy Spirit to work it down deep into the fabric of our hearts and lives, we’ll be able to admit our lack of love, receive God’s grace, and move toward others as God has moved toward us.

## LESSON 8 EXERCISE — FAITH WORKING THROUGH LOVE

“For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love” (Galatians 5:6).

The goal of this exercise is to take the basic biblical command of “faith working through love” and apply it practically in your everyday existence. Do this exercise in community. Talk honestly with one another. “You can’t see your own face”—you need others to help you see yourself rightly. So, as a group, walk through the steps below one at a time. Then close by praying together.

1. Below are some specific ways the Bible commands us to love one another. Pick the one that challenges you most.
  - “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs . . .” (Ephesians 4:29 niv).



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- “Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger” (James 1:19).
- “Admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all” (1 Thessalonians 5:14).
- “Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God” (Romans 15:7 niv).
- “I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree and that there be no divisions among you” (1 Corinthians 1:10).

2. As you seek to obey this command, do you tend toward resolution (“I’m going to make this happen!”) or resignation (“I have a hard time in this area. Maybe I’ll just give up.”)?

3. What would “faith working through love” look like in this area?

- How does your failure in this area—your lack of love—reveal a lack of faith? Where is there unbelief in your heart? What “good news” about God and his grace are you not really believing? (This is where we really need to invite others to speak into our lives. We want to help each other articulate specific areas of unbelief and get below the surface by sharing our own relevant stories. If we could figure things out on our own, then what’s the point of the exercise? We need others to tell us what they see in us.)
- How might a deeper confidence and joy in God’s love, in Christ’s righteousness, and in the Holy Spirit’s presence work itself out in greater obedience to this command?

Finally, close the group by praying out loud together. Those who are willing can confess their unbelief and ask the Holy Spirit to convince them more deeply of the truth of the gospel so that they can more freely love others.

## SAMPLE RESPONSES

If you are having a hard time knowing how to respond to the exercise, here are two examples of what good answers might look like.

### DAVE

Dave finds it hard to commit to any one thing for long. Nothing seems to really grab his attention—not even a relationship that requires more than a few weeks or months of commitment. His attendance at your community group is pretty haphazard though probably the most consistent thing he does.

When you talked with Dave about this, his response was, “I just don’t like being tied down. If I do something because I want to, then I like it and it’s good. But when I feel like I’m being forced to do something, it feels artificial. I don’t want to have to pretend with people who should love me as I am.”

### JAN

Jan is a mom with three children and a husband with a busy career. Every day is a whirlwind for her as she works tirelessly to invest in her kids’ lives and activities. She generally seems “put together,” arriving for group on time, ready to go, but she’s not always the friendliest person.

1. Below are some specific ways the Bible commands us to love one another. Pick the one that challenges you most.

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• “I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree and that there be no divisions among you” (1 Corinthians 1:10).

Dave’s answer: “I chose the 1 Corinthians passage because I feel like sometimes I create divisions in the group. When you ask me to take a turn lining up refreshments or leading our prayer time, I don’t really want to say, ‘Yes, you can count on me.’ But when I don’t say that, I feel a lot of tension with you. I’m not being argumentative or trying to be divisive, but I really get the sense that it’s not okay for ‘me to be me.’”

• “Admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all” (1 Thessalonians 5:14).

Jan’s answer: “The last part of the verse from Thessalonians really grabbed me, ‘be patient with all.’ I’m so not patient. Not just here, but in every area of my life. I have so much to do; I don’t have the time to be patient. I need people to be ready to go and to stay on track or my whole world falls apart. So when someone in the group shows up late or forgot it was their week to get the snacks, I just think, ‘What is wrong with you! My life is way harder than yours, but I’m here and ready to go. You need to take things more seriously.’”

2. As you seek to obey this command, do you tend toward resolution (“I’m going to make this happen!”) or resignation (“I have a hard time in this area. Maybe I’ll just give up.”)?

Dave’s answer: “I’d like to say I struggle with resignation, but I’m not sure I struggle all that much. I just figure, ‘This is how I am,’ and go with it. The few times when some of you have told me that I’m not taking my responsibility to the group seriously, I’ve tried to improve a little bit. But really, I know I won’t get better, so I don’t try all that hard.”

Jan’s answer: “I didn’t even know ‘resignation’ was a possibility! I’m a ‘I’m going to make this happen’ person. And I expect others to be the same way, especially my kids and my husband. I can let things slide when things don’t happen, but not if you didn’t try your very best.”

3. What would “faith working through love” look like in this area?

• How does your failure in this area—your lack of love—reveal a lack of faith? Where is there unbelief in your heart? What “good news” about God and his grace are you not really believing? Dave’s answer: “Well, I never thought about my not wanting to be committed as a lack of love! I just assumed that we should all make allowances for each other. I guess I can admit that my lack of commitment to all of you is actually unloving because it’s selfish on my part. I really just want to do what is easy for me without thinking about anyone else. So I guess that isn’t very loving.

“I think at some level I don’t believe that God will really take care of me and fill me up. That’s why I want to keep my options open. If I don’t feel like something will be enjoyable, I don’t want to do it. I guess this ‘I’ll only do what I feel like’ mentality is an idol—I don’t find Jesus completely satisfying. I need the freedom to pursue the next thing that will make me feel complete. Without that freedom, I don’t trust Jesus to be enough for me.”

Jan’s answer: “I can be chilly with people. I’m not all rah-rah about the latest movie or book because I don’t have time for those things. But I didn’t really think of that as being ‘unloving’ to others. Well, maybe I did a bit, especially when I found myself thinking, ‘You have no idea how easy your life is compared to mine.’

“What I’m starting to see is that when I’m so gung-ho on seeing that my agenda gets pursued, I tend to leave people in the dust. I feel like that’s how God treats me: if I work hard to be a good mom and wife, if my



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house is all put together, if I'm doing the right things, then God is happy with me. But if I'm running behind and don't have my devotions, it feels like God is saying, "Jan, if you loved me you wouldn't be so disorganized and miss your time with me. It's okay, but I want you to do better.' Maybe you've seen me treat others that way."

• How might a deeper confidence and joy in God's love, in Christ's righteousness, and in the Holy Spirit's presence work itself out in greater obedience to this command?

Dave's answer: "I guess if I was thinking through the article, neither 'obeying the rules about being committed to the group' nor 'disobeying the rules about being committed to the group' is really the issue. The issue is: am I loving the people God has called me to love or not? So when I'm feeling like I'd really rather do something else—going to a movie instead of being here or hanging out with other friends—I probably need to take some time to see what Christ is offering me. He offers me the satisfaction of being known and loved by him completely; finding freedom from having to satisfy myself and remembering that he can make me feel fulfilled in ways that other things just can't; reminding me that part of how he meets my needs is through all of you and part of the way he meets your needs is through me. When I think of things that way, it does make me want to be present to catch up with you and find out how God has been working in your life."

Jan's answer: "I want to be organized and focused, but I don't want to be someone who loves those things more than she loves other people. I suppose what it comes down to is that if I could really believe God loved me—even though I am a mess and not doing all the things I know I should do—I'd look at life differently. Instead of comparing myself with others or wanting everyone to know how hard I have it, I think I could rest in him more, really look to what he's already done for my identity and security instead of what I need to do. That would change the way I think about my to-do list and help me to take time to love people more."

