

THE GOSPEL-CENTERED COMMUNITY

LESSON 8 — A GRACE-FILLED COMMUNITY

BIG IDEA

Because we are made in the image of God, we all long to be part of an accepting, loving community. But sin has distorted our understanding and tainted our desires in this area. Sometimes we settle for a flimsy sort of “acceptance” that doesn’t confront unbiblical beliefs or behaviors. In other situations we can make people earn our acceptance through their performance. Our deep dysfunction in this area is only healed when we allow the gospel to transform our hearts and lives. When we understand and believe that God accepts and forgives us in Christ, we gain a right understanding of what it means to accept and forgive each other. And as we walk in the power of God’s Spirit, we live according to a new set of desires and abilities. This is how the gospel forms a grace-filled community.

NOTES:



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LESSON 8 ARTICLE — A GRACE-FILLED COMMUNITY

God's "varied grace" (1 Peter 4:10) is multifaceted in its effects and manifold in its beauty. It saves, blesses, secures, sanctifies, enables, and sustains us. But how does grace shape a community? To answer that question, let's first consider the hindrances to grace in our hearts: **pride** and **fear**.

In our **pride**, we don't just want to be accepted; we want to be *acceptable*. Have you ever told God that you would "never do that again"? If you can just get a fresh start, you will do better? We may think we are asking for grace, but what we really want is a second chance to earn God's favor. But grace is unmerited, undeserved favor: "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). Pride also gets in the way of forgiveness. Do you ever find yourself explaining your sin to God rather than confessing it? Blaming people or circumstances, claiming ignorance, comparing yourself to others? We want to justify ourselves before God, but the Bible says we have been "justified by his grace" (Titus 3:7).

In our **fear**, we are pretty sure that God does not accept us. We don't want to talk to God about our sin because we imagine that he is tired of having the same conversation over and over. Or we think that God cannot forgive what we have done. Rather than ask for forgiveness, we try to hide our sin from God because we fear his rejection. The good news is that Jesus "gave himself for us to redeem us from **all** lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession" (Titus 2:14).

A gospel-centered community begins with people who are growing in grace. As we receive God's grace toward us in Christ, we are able to give grace to others. We can "welcome one another as Christ has welcomed [us]" (Romans 15:7), and we can "forgive one another as God in Christ forgave [us]" (Ephesians 4:32). However, if we want to be conduits of grace to one another, we must confront the various ways that pride and fear hinder the flow of grace in our relationships.

Our **pride** manifests itself in a desire to measure up—to do whatever we think will earn people's approval. That varies, of course, depending on what your community values most. In the first century, you were "in" if you were circumcised, kept the dietary laws, and observed the Sabbath. In many churches today, being accepted as an insider means reading the right books, voting for the right political candidate, being passionate or vulnerable, serving the poor, or speaking the right lingo. We earn acceptance by living up to the standards of the community and we offer acceptance on the same basis. Sometimes we withhold forgiveness from those who have hurt us deeply or who don't "deserve" it yet.

Consider a few examples of how pride short-circuits the work of God's grace in community.

- Stacey rarely talks during her small group discussions. When her group leader asked her about it, she shared that she doesn't want to talk unless she knows exactly what she is going to say. She wants to say the right things so that people will accept her. In this case, Stacey's pride (or fear) keeps her from engaging in honest discussion.



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- Steve loves his small group. It is the highlight of his week and he is a faithful, prepared participant. Its members are his main social network and he often expresses how much he appreciates being vulnerable and open with people he trusts. But when others are invited to visit the group, Steve is aloof and says little. He explains that he is unwilling to share personal things with people who haven't proven themselves to be trustworthy. He wishes the group could be closed to "outsiders" so that he could be himself. His desire for control leads him to reject anyone new.

Our fear manifests itself in a desire to protect ourselves. We think people would not like us if they really knew us. Consequently, we don't want to ask for forgiveness because that means admitting the full extent of our sin. We don't want to be judged or rejected, so we cover our sin. We excuse it, blame it on others, downplay it, hide it, lie about it, anything but admit it and ask for forgiveness. Think about your relationships: How often do people in your community admit that they have sinned against someone and ask for forgiveness? We usually stop short of this because we are afraid of being known as we really are. Here are a couple of examples.

- When Kyle's wife caught him viewing pornography, he said he was sorry, but he didn't acknowledge the offense against his wife and the consequences of his sin. Instead he tried to explain that his behavior was pretty common for guys and that he didn't do it very often compared to a lot of guys he knows. When his wife asked him to talk to the men in their small group about it and seek their help, Kyle resisted. He said they probably did the same thing, but if they didn't, he did not want them to think of him as perverted or weak. He minimized his sin rather than confessing it.
- Mary was afraid to tell her new community group about her battle with anxiety. She was sure that people would treat her differently if they knew. She managed to keep it hidden for a while, but one night she had a panic attack in the middle of the group discussion. She felt exposed and embarrassed but then something unexpected happened. Nobody freaked out. In fact, they prayed with her, talked her through it, and then went on with the discussion. That night freed Mary from her self-concern and enabled her to focus on the needs of others.

So how does the gospel work to create a grace-filled community? To put it simply, the gospel puts to death the pride and fear that hinder our relationships with God and others.

Let's use 1 Peter 3:18 as a framework to see how this happens: "For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the Spirit."

Though Jesus was without sin, he suffered the consequences of sin in his community. His own people did not receive him (John 1:11). His closest friends betrayed and denied him (Mark 14:10, 71). He was mocked and murdered by those who did not understand him (Mark 15:16–32). Jesus suffered these things for us, "the righteous for the unrighteous." We are no different from those who rejected and persecuted Jesus. We cultivate anger and contempt in our hearts toward people made in the image of God. We pretend to be something we are not. We go behind people's backs to gossip and steal. We are passive-aggressive. We



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manipulate people and situations to get our own way. We put others down to feel better about ourselves. This is the bad news: Our own sin is the thing that hinders the flow of grace in our community.

But the good news is that Jesus suffered and died on our behalf, “that he might bring us to God.” When we receive the grace of God toward us in Christ, our fear and pride are put to death, and we are brought to life spiritually by God’s gracious Holy Spirit.

- In our *pride*, we show favoritism toward those we like or who can help us, but Jesus sought out the outcasts and welcomed them in. Now by his Spirit we “show no partiality” (James 2:1).
- In our *pride*, we are envious when good things happen to others, but Jesus placed our good before his own. Now by his Spirit we “rejoice with those who rejoice, [and] weep with those who weep” (Romans 12:15).
- In our *pride*, we harbor offenses and are unwilling to forgive, but Jesus forgave both his enemies who crucified him and his friends who deserted him. Now by his Spirit we “bear with one another . . . and forgive each other” (Colossians 3:13).
- In our *fear*, we exert our power to control people and situations, but Jesus restrained his power and went willingly to the cross. Now by his Spirit we can walk in “humility and gentleness” (Ephesians 4:2).
- In our *fear*, we want to run when relationships get difficult, but Jesus endured the cross for those who sinned against him. Now by his Spirit we “bear with one another in love” (Ephesians 4:2).
- In our *fear*, we are afraid to confront the sins of others, but Jesus dealt honestly with sin wherever he encountered it. Now by his Spirit we can gently restore those who are caught in a transgression (Galatians 6:1).

Becoming a grace-filled community requires us to identify our tendencies toward pride and fear, look to Jesus to be freed from our pride and fear, and then freely love others as God has loved us, in dependence on the Holy Spirit. This week’s exercise will help us with all three things.



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LESSON 8 EXERCISE — GROWING IN GRACE

One of the greatest blessings of the gospel is the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, who lives within every one of God’s people (Romans 8:9–11). To grow in grace means to continually rely on the Spirit’s power rather than on our own instincts or preferences.

The chart below identifies six specific ways that our pride and fear hinder community. Identify which tendencies are present in your life and then consider how the Holy Spirit frees and empowers you to live differently. Spend some time in prayer repenting of sin and asking the Spirit to reign in your community.

These Sinful (Non-Accepting) Tendencies	Are Rooted in Pride or Fear	Here’s How Gospel-Driven, Spirit-Led Acceptance Would Look Different
Favoritism: I show preference toward those I like or those who can help me.	These people have earned my respect. They have something I need. They are more desirable than others who have less to offer.	“Show no partiality” (James 2:1). The Spirit empowers me to treat every person with love, patience, and kindness, honoring them as image bearers of God.
Control: I exert my power to control or manipulate people or situations.	I am trying to manipulate these people to do what is “right” in my eyes. If they do what I want, I am more accepting of them.	“Humility and gentleness” (Ephesians 4:2). The Spirit moves me to humility (my rules are not the standard), which frees me to love others whether or not they “play by my rules.”
Avoidance: I flee or avoid when relationships get difficult.	These people are not living up to what I expect of them, so they’re not worthy of my acceptance. I guess that’s “just the way these people are” (but if they want to be that way, I don’t want to relate to them).	“Bear with one another in love” (Ephesians 4:2). The Spirit gives me patience to bear with others, love to believe the best about them, and faithfulness to stay engaged with them despite their faults and failures. I am empowered to move toward them as God moved toward me.
Peacekeeping: I am hesitant to confront the sins of others	Everyone has faults and weaknesses. Who am I to confront someone else?	“Restore others in a spirit of gentleness” (Galatians 6:1). The Spirit gives me a true love for others that yearns to see them glorify God fully. I am grieved by their sin (not just annoyed with it) and motivated by love to confront them in a spirit of gentleness.
Party Spirit: I just relate better to “these people” rather than “those people.”	“These people” are more like me (therefore I uncritically accept whatever they believe, say, or do). After all, what they believe, say, or do is right!	“May there be no divisions among you” (1 Corinthians 1:10). The Spirit brings unity and peace within the whole body of Christ, causing me to love those unlike me. The Spirit triumphs over classism, racism, cliques, factions, and divisions.
Unforgiving Spirit: I just can’t forgive this person or these people; their offenses against me are too willful, too consistent, or too hurtful.	I’m not as bad/hurtful as they are; their sin against me is much worse than my sin against God and others. If I forgave them, they’d essentially “get away with it.” Justice wouldn’t be served.	“Bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other” (Colossians 3:13). The Spirit empowers me to be gracious and forgiving toward the faults and failures of others. I can trust God to bring redemption and justice.

