

THE GOSPEL-CENTERED COMMUNITY

LESSON 9 — A MISSIONAL COMMUNITY

BIG IDEA

Since Lesson 5, we have been exploring some of the defining marks of a biblical community: joy, humility, honesty, and grace. In this last lesson, we're going to consider one final characteristic of a gospel-centered community: mission. A gospel-centered community is a community that is moving toward others as God has moved toward them. Moving toward others is what traditional missionaries do when they leave their homeland and go to a foreign culture. Although everyone isn't called to move far from home to share the gospel, all Christians are called to leave their comfortable routines and move toward their neighbors who don't know Christ. The Father sent the Son; the Son sent the Spirit; and the Spirit sends the church. As those changed by the Spirit through the gospel, we are a "going" people, always moving toward others as God has moved toward us.

NOTES:



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LESSON 9 ARTICLE — A MISSIONAL COMMUNITY

Now that we've reached the last lesson of this study, let's review where we've been. We began in Lesson 1 with a biblical theology of community: God made us for community; sin destroys community; Jesus redeems us for community and in community. In Lessons 2 and 3, we considered how community shapes our understanding of what Christ has done for us along with our progress in applying it to our lives. We also considered how the gospel works to form and transform our experience of community. In Lesson 4, through the biblical principle of "faith working through love," we saw that our failure to love others is really a failure to believe and apply the truths and promises of the gospel. And in Lessons 5 through 8, we explored some defining marks of a biblical community: joy, humility, honesty, and grace.

We're ready now to consider one final characteristic of a gospel-centered community: *mission*. A gospel-centered community is a *missional* community. If you are a Christian, then you are a sent one, a missionary—you are on mission. Mission isn't just something we do; it's an expression of who we are in Christ. It's a natural overflow of the gospel's renewing work in us.

To set the stage for our conversation, let's consider three common misconceptions about mission and missionaries.

1. The word missionary refers only to those who are specially called by God to go to other cultures to preach the gospel.
2. To reach non-Christians with the gospel message, we need to "do things differently"; we need special programs, targeted evangelistic activities, investigative Bible studies, etc.
3. Some people are gifted by God as evangelists to win people to Christ; others are gifted to serve the church and build young Christians into mature disciples.

It's not that these statements are entirely false. The problem is that they shortchange the Bible's teaching about the scope and means of God's mission as explained below. Consider how the verses below extend our understanding:

1. **All Christians are missionaries.** Being part of God's family means we are all sent to others with the good news of salvation from sin and death. That is part of our identity as the new family of God. Some of us are called to share the gospel with our neighbors across the street. Some of us are called to share the gospel with our neighbors from other countries and cultures. But all Christians are sent by Jesus to bring their faith to the broken world. "As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you" (John 20:21). "God . . . through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation. . . . Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us" (2 Corinthians 5:18–20).
2. **There is a time and place for special events and strategies.** However, Scripture and history make clear that God intends to reach non-Christians through the normal activity of the church. Paul



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assumes that unbelievers will be present in church gatherings: “If all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, the secrets of his heart are disclosed, and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you” (1 Corinthians 14:24–25). And the church in Acts saw many people saved through the normal rhythms of worship and community: “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 2:46–47). When the church was scattered in Acts 8, “those who were scattered went about preaching the word [of God]” (Acts 8:4). The mission of God goes forward through the people of God, wherever they are and in whatever they do.

3. **No gift or personality type is exempt from the mission of God through the church.** There is diversity in our gifts and roles, but unity in our calling. Every Christian is called to Christ’s mission: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit [evangelism/conversion], teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you [discipleship]” (Matthew 28:19–20). And because the gospel is the key to both conversion and sanctification, evangelism and discipleship are not two different things, but one continuous activity. The mission is to enjoy God and live for his glory—and to help others do the same (1 Corinthians 10:31).

So what does it mean to be a missional community? There are hundreds of ways to answer that question, but for the sake of simplicity, let’s focus on one simple idea: *Mission means moving toward others as God has moved toward us.*

Mission means moving toward. In Western culture, many churches and Christians have adopted a “come to us” mentality: “We’re here and available; if people want to know about Christ, we welcome them.” Though this approach is common, it doesn’t accurately reflect how God has treated us. If God had waited for us to come to him, we’d still be dead in our sins! Before God saved us, we were “foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures” (Titus 3:3 NIV). We weren’t seeking God, so God deliberately moved toward us. He stepped out of heaven and into time and space and history: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). The message of the gospel is that God moves toward us while we are running in the opposite direction. So, as we follow Jesus into mission, we don’t merely wait for others to come to us. We take the initiative. We go to them.

Mission is concerned for others. Throughout the Bible we see God’s persistent concern for the stranger, the outsider, and the sojourner. He instructed Moses: “You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God” (Leviticus 19:34). And he encouraged Paul in the pagan city of Corinth: “Go on speaking and do not be silent; for I am with you . . . I have many people in this city” (Acts 18:9–10 NASB). Like our Father in heaven, we long to see strangers become friends. We long to see those who are alienated from God reconciled to him. So we do everything in a way that’s hospitable toward unbelievers. In our prayer meetings, our worship services, and our community groups, we expect non-Christians to be present. We are always thinking about how to welcome them, how to serve them, and how to love them.



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Mission is rooted in the way God has moved toward us. A missional posture can be sustained by sheer will power . . . for awhile. But not for the long haul. Consistently moving toward others as God has moved toward us will bring us into constant conflict with the idols of comfort, control, and approval. The only thing that can defeat these idols and empower us to live a life of mission is a constant remembering and rejoicing in what Jesus has done for us.

A gospel-centered community is a community of people who are increasingly orienting their lives around God's mission. They are moving toward others as God has moved toward them. They are looking for opportunities to bless and serve others so that more and more people might become worshipers of Jesus. They are talking about both the heart foundation of mission (their joy, love, delight in Jesus) and the practical implications of mission (how they will live on mission together). They are becoming disciples who make more disciples.

We want you to spend the rest of this lesson talking honestly about how your community is doing in mission. The exercise at the end of the lesson gives a number of helpful questions through which you can assess your life together. Indulge in a free-flowing, honest, gracious conversation, and may you experience God's Spirit moving toward you so that you might move toward others.



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LESSON 9 EXERCISE — LIVING ON MISSION

This week's exercise is designed to stir up some good, healthy, formative conversation about how you are doing as a missional community. How you answer these questions will depend somewhat on the kind of group you are: the questions can apply to a whole church, a community group, a mission team, or a dozen other possibilities. Maybe you'll get to all the questions or maybe you'll only focus on a few. Either way, be gracious and truthful as you offer your reflections, and listen carefully to the thoughts of others. Rest assured, the Holy Spirit wants to move God's people out into mission. Satan wants to keep that from happening.

Mission means moving toward others as God has moved toward us.

IN RELATIONSHIP

- Does each person in our group have genuine friendships with non-Christians? (The mark of this is not whether you would call particular non-Christians your friends, but whether they would call you their friend.)
- Does our group create space to engage those relationships together? Are we a group of isolated Christians living individual lives or are we living on mission together? Do we know each other's non-Christian friends?

REPENT: What sin do we need to repent of?

BELIEVE: What grace do we need to ask for and expect?

ACT: What practical action do we need to take? Who will take the lead?

IN PRAYER

- Are we praying together for specific non-Christians in our lives and neighborhoods?
- Do we pray big, kingdom-oriented prayers—for conversion of unbelievers, for conviction of sin, for God's kingdom to come and his will to be done in our city, for the nations? Or do our prayers tend to be focused on our own needs and problems?
- Would our prayers give the impression, to an outsider, that we actually *believe* in a sovereign, gracious, glorious, beautiful, holy God?

REPENT: What sin do we need to repent of?

BELIEVE: What grace do we need to ask for and expect?

ACT: What practical action do we need to take? Who will take the lead?

IN LANGUAGE AND POSTURE

- Is our language accessible to outsiders? Or do our conversations tend to be sprinkled with Christian lingo, inside jokes, or church references that only make sense to our "tribe"?
- Do we speak positively of our city and of those who don't know Christ? Do we have appropriate gospel humility—not taking ourselves too seriously, admitting our weaknesses, not being defensive or rude toward our critics? Are unbelievers glad to know us, even if they don't believe the gospel?



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- Do we talk about the need for gospel work around the world, giving a voice in our community to those who may otherwise go unnoticed?

REPENT: What sin do we need to repent of?

BELIEVE: What grace do we need to ask for and expect?

ACT: What practical action do we need to take? Who will take the lead?

IN ACTIVITY AND PRESENCE

1. Do we gather in a place that non-Christians find hospitable and welcoming? Is there anything about our place of meeting, our time of meeting, or the dynamics of our gathering that would make it difficult for an outsider to enter in?
2. Are we actively engaging the neighborhood in which we gather? Or do we drop in, study the Bible, and head out again? Do non-Christians see us working for the good of the neighborhood or only furthering the needs of our own group?
3. How are we involved in the mission of God to other places and cultures—either sending or going?

REPENT: What sin do we need to repent of?

BELIEVE: What grace do we need to ask for and expect?

ACT: What practical action do we need to take? Who will take the lead?

Close with a time of prayer, repenting of sin and asking God for the grace you need to be faithful to the missional calling he has given you as individuals and a group. Thank him for his promise to give you what you need to move toward others as he has moved toward you.

