

Finding Focus

*Seeing Yourself
the Way God Sees You*



Six Bible Studies

by

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Study 1

Known and Loved

Focus

For each woman to grow in her self-acceptance as God's unique creation, known and loved by him and redeemed by Jesus Christ

Challenges

Cultural and personal expectations, accomplishments, failures, moral shortcomings, lack of faith, anger, disappointment and weakness can undermine our identity.

Scripture

Genesis 1: 26-31, Psalm 139

Who are You?

We live in a world that strives to define us. Often, we are told to simply believe in ourselves and be brave--to just be ourselves. But who is that? These attempts to define us can dredge up insecurities and cause us to wonder if we are of any real value. Shame, or the deep feeling that somehow there is something wrong with us or that we are a mistake, rather than a person who makes mistakes, can debilitate our sense of self and impact our relationships with others and with God.

Our culture judges us by externals, so we polish up our image. At the same time, we try to find ourselves by looking within. But God invites us to live beyond both surface definitions and our own strengths and weaknesses. He wants us to find our worth by seeing ourselves as he sees us. We are his: dearly loved, fully known, and created for relationship with him.

We begin to see ourselves the way God sees us by looking at how, God as our creator, breathed life into us and put his beautiful design on us. Here, we find a rich sense of our belovedness. Before we could do or be anything, we were uniquely designed, known and loved by him. This is true for each of us, giving us inherent dignity and worth in the deepest part of ourselves.

The account of creation found in Genesis 1-2 affirms that God created all that is--including us--and called it good, bringing order from chaos, filling emptiness and lighting the darkness. Both stories of creation found in Genesis 1 and 2 have their high point on the final day of creation, the creation of humans, the masterpiece of God's creative work. Genesis 1:27 states that, "*God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them.*"

The Hebrew word for image is *tselem*, which means, "to cut off or chisel." As Jessica LaGrone notes in her study on Genesis, "We are, in one sense, a chip off the old block of the God of the universe; the only part of creation said to directly "bear the image" of God." The most beautiful things we can imagine—the Tetons, the Great Barrier Reef or the starry night sky—are not as precious or valued as we are to God.

Questions for Reflection

What do you think it means to be created in God's image? How does this give you value?

What cultural influences can you identify that try to shape your identity?

How does this change how you see yourself? Others?

Where do we look to find our value as a culture? As women and mothers?

Where do you look for your value? How does this impact your self-worth?

There can be confusion around positive self-worth and arrogance. What is the difference?

How God Sees You

This Psalm affirms God's creative power in forming us, his intimate knowledge of each of us, and his presence with us. God's creation is beautiful and good. He declared it so when he created the world, and he distinguished humanity as very good. We are the crown of his creation.

Scripture

Section 1-Psalms 139:1-6

(NRSV)

O Lord, you have searched me and known me.

You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away.

You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways.

Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely.

You hem me in behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.

Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it.

Questions for reflection

Who of your family and friends knows you best?

What are some of your feelings or thoughts about God's intimate knowledge of us?

How is being fully known freeing? How is it difficult?

John Calvin said, "True wisdom consists in two things: Knowledge of God and Knowledge of Self." How is knowing God connected to knowing ourselves?

Section 2

Psalm 139: 7-12

Where can I go from your spirit?

Or where can I flee from your presence?

If I ascend to heaven, you are there;

if I take the wings of the morning

and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,

even there your hand shall lead me,

and your right hand shall hold me fast.

If I say, " Surely, the darkness shall cover me,

and the light around me become night,"

even the darkness is not dark to you;

the night is as bright as the day;

for darkness is as light to you.

Questions for Reflection

How does God's constant, inescapable presence make you feel?

Does it comfort you, or make you fearful?

Do you wish you could hide from God?

What role does shame play in hiding who we are from one another and from God?

How does this loving attention from your Creator change your opinion of yourself and your worth?

Section 3

Psalm 139:13-18

*For it was you who formed my inward parts;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.
My frame was not hidden from you when I was being made in secret,
Intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.
In your book were written
all the days that were formed for me,
when none of them as yet existed.
How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God!
How vast is the sum of them!
I try to count them-they are more than the sand;
I come to the end--I am still with you.*

Questions for Reflection

What are some of your unique qualities? How easy or hard is it to talk about these qualities?

What are some of the emotions you feel as you think about being fearfully and wonderfully made?

What qualities have shifted for you in your self-description since having children?

How does sin distort your image of yourself and of God?

How does Jesus deal with the fear or shame we may feel when we are so completely known?

Thoughts and Reflections





Study 2

Accepted and Free

Focus

For each woman to know that she is completely accepted and forgiven in Jesus Christ, and to live a life of abundance, joy and freedom.

Challenges

We often try to earn our freedom by working harder, and find instead perfectionism, self-justification, self-loathing or despair. Our successes lead to pride, our failures lead to despair.

Scripture

Romans 8, Ephesians 1

Lay Your Burden Down

We long for acceptance, but guilt or shame may keep us from experiencing it. Whether we have willfully turned from God, failed ourselves or others, or been wounded, we crave a fresh start. The heaviness of a wrong--done by us or against us--is a burden that robs us of joy and freedom. Forgiveness, offered generously by God to us, and in turn by us to others, opens us to experience freedom.

God offers us acceptance freely and generously, but we still feel a need to be worthy or to earn it. We seek acceptance by living in a way that meets the standards for a good or right life. Our idea of what behavior meets those standards can harden into rules and become the basis for judging ourselves and others. The subtle sin of pride slips in as we evaluate our goodness based on these rules. Likewise, when we fail to meet these standards, we

experience despair, which corrodes our sense of belovedness. When we try to live by rules--even good ones--to earn acceptance or forgiveness, we become judgmental, both of ourselves and others. The result is condemnation, not freedom.

Instead of this self-defeating cycle, God invites us to experience freedom. When we receive acceptance and forgiveness, it works its way in our hearts so we can know our God-given identity, even in the midst of struggle or failure. Freedom from condemnation is a gift from God alone--we cannot generate it or deserve it. It is not a self improvement project.

Understanding this freedom makes us humble; we recognize we are no better or worse than anyone else. When this permeates our core, we can forgive others the way we have been forgiven. We have hope to love ourselves again and to try again, because we know we are loved with a love that is stronger than our darkest pain or secrets. God invites us to discover his purposes and to make them our own.

This our deepest, sacred identity: beloved daughters, forgiven and free to partner in God's work.

Questions for Reflection

How does the culture define a good person?

What is the difference between a good person and an accepted person?

How can trying to be a good person become a trap for you?

Living Authentically in Freedom

Living fully and freely gives us energy for life. We are freed from the fear that we have to be perfect to be worthy of love and belonging. We are freed to admit our faults and failures. We are freed from the endless task of self-justification. No more are we bound by the deep despair that comes with focusing on our shortcomings and the way we and others are hurt or damaged. We can be confident in this freedom--we are not going to lose it, because we didn't earn it.

Scripture

Romans 8:1-12

New Living Translation

So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus. And because you belong to him, the power of the life-giving Spirit has freed you from the power of sin that leads to death. The law of Moses was unable to save us because of the weakness of our sinful nature. So God did what the law could not do.

He sent his own Son in a body like the bodies we sinners have. And in that body God declared an end to sin's control over us by giving his Son as a sacrifice for our sins. He did this so that the just requirement of the law would be fully satisfied for us, who no longer follow our sinful nature but instead follow the Spirit.

Those who are dominated by the sinful nature think about sinful things, but those who are controlled by the Holy Spirit think about things that please the Spirit. So letting your sinful nature control your mind leads to death. But letting the Spirit control your mind leads to life and peace. For the sinful nature is always hostile to God. It never did obey God's laws, and it never will. That's why those who are still under the control of their sinful nature can never please God.

Questions for Reflection

This passage tells us of the complete and abundant welcome God offers us in Christ. As you reflect on this, do you think it is easy or hard for people to receive this from God?

What gets in the way of receiving acceptance and forgiveness?

What is the difference between conviction that results from wrongdoing and shame that comes from feeling we are bad?

What is the role of the Holy Spirit in our life, according to these verses?

How would changing our focus from self-judgment and condemnation to compassion and forgiveness free us to live more fully?

What spiritual practices might strengthen our sacred identity?

Forever Loved

We can trust that nothing will separate us from God's love in Jesus Christ. The same power that raised Jesus from the dead is at work in us through faith. In this passage, Paul reminds us that we are no longer judged, but instead, when we belong to Christ, we disarm guilt and judgment.

It's easy to hear the voice in our head saying we are not worthy of love, especially when shame rears its ugly head. Our identity as God's accepted, forgiven daughter is lost. Paul creates a strong and dramatic comparison: through Christ, we have moved from the death sentence of separation from God to life through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Scripture

Romans 8:31-38

New Living Translation

What shall we say about such wonderful things as these? If God is for us, who can ever be against us? Since he did not spare even his own Son but gave him up for us all, won't he also give us everything else? Who dares accuse us whom God has chosen for his own? No one—for God himself has given us right standing with himself. Who then will condemn us? No one—for Christ Jesus died for us and was raised to life for us, and he is sitting in the place of honor at God's right hand, pleading for us. Can anything ever separate us from Christ's love? Does it mean he no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or hungry, or destitute, or in danger, or threatened with death? (As the Scriptures say, "For your sake we are killed every day; we are being slaughtered like sheep." No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us.

And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Questions for Reflection

How do you express love to your children? How do you like love expressed to you?

How has God expressed his love for us according to this passage?

What are some of the ways he describes the love of Christ? What contrasts does he set up to help us understand the love of Christ?

What are some of the things that make us doubt God's love for us?

How does this passage disarm these doubts?

How would knowing this love in your soul change your sense of identity?

Living in Abundance

So often we feel constrained, like we don't have enough to be able to give in all the areas of our lives that call to us. We live, work and love as if we will run out, as if we are scraping the bottom of our hearts and coming up empty. How can we give what we don't have? Yet in this passage, Paul talks in the language of abundance.

Like a river overflowing its banks, Paul is barely able to contain himself as he explains the implications of blessing and joy found in Christ. The life of freedom is spacious and generous, with fear and reservation replaced by joy and graciousness.

Scripture

Ephesians 1:3-14

New Living Translation

All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms because we are united with Christ. Even before he made the world, God loved us and chose us in Christ to be holy and without fault in his eyes. God decided in advance to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ. This is what he wanted to do, and it gave him great pleasure.

So we praise God for the glorious grace he has poured out on us who belong to his dear Son. He is so rich in kindness and grace that he purchased our freedom with the blood of his Son and forgave our sins. He has showered his kindness on us, along with all wisdom and understanding.

God has now revealed to us his mysterious plan regarding Christ, a plan to fulfill his own good pleasure. And this is the plan: At the right time he will bring everything together under the authority of Christ—everything in heaven and on earth. Furthermore, because we are united with Christ, we have received an inheritance from God, for he chose us in advance, and he makes everything work out according to his plan.

God's purpose was that we Jews who were the first to trust in Christ would bring praise and glory to God. And now you Gentiles have also heard the truth, the Good News that God saves you. And when you believed in Christ, he identified you as his own by giving you the Holy Spirit, whom he promised long ago. The Spirit is God's guarantee that he will give us the inheritance he promised and that he has purchased us to be his own people. He did this so we would praise and glorify him.

Questions for Reflection

What are some of the spiritual blessings we've received in Christ?

How would focusing on those change our perspective on ourselves? How would it shape our identity?

What terms of abundance do you see?

How does this text invite us to live out of abundance rather than scarcity?

We are often tempted to define ourselves by what we are *not* (thin enough, smart enough, accomplished enough, etc). How does this text invite us to celebrate who we are in Christ?

How might this lens of blessing change our perspective on ourselves, our identity, and the focus of our attention and energies?

A Quote to Consider

What does a woman living in this identity of freedom look like?

She is "a person of character who rings true wherever you tap her. She keeps promises. She weeps with those who weep, and perhaps more impressively, rejoices with those who rejoice. She does all these things in ways that express her own personality and culture--with also a general "mind of Christ" that is cross-culturally unmistakable.

Her motives include faith--a quiet confidence in God and in the mercies of God that radiate from the self-giving work of Jesus Christ. She knows God is good; she also feels assured that God is good to her.

Her faith secures her against the ceaseless oscillations of pride and despair familiar to every human being who has taken refuge in the cover of her own being and tried there to bury all her insecurities under a mound of achievements.

When her faith slips, she retains faith enough to believe that the Spirit of God, whose presence is her renewable resource, will one day secure her faith again."

--Cornelius Plantinga





Study 3

Staying Grounded

Focus

For each woman to address the issues of fear and anxiety that rob her of joy and contentment.

Challenges

The world can be a big and frightening place. We are afraid something bad may happen, or that we or our children will not have enough. Anxiety and fear are a natural response, but they can lead to obsessive worry that undermines our identity and joy as God's beloved children.

Scripture

Philippians 4, Matthew 6

Finding Solid Ground

Fear, anxiety, and worry come so easily to us. Our thoughts are almost too quick to catch as they race from one scenario to the next--illness, global politics, local crime, school choices, nutrition, family issues, career decisions--and we are overwhelmed. Sometimes, they settle on one worry, and we obsess about a threat or a need. We want to protect and ensure the happiness of our families and ourselves; we don't want any of them to hurt or face failure.

Taking care of ourselves and our families is one of our responsibilities, but focusing our energies on creating the perfect environment free of failure, stress or harm does not guarantee success or happiness. The truth is, we are not in control and this wild world feels like a precarious place. We feel out of control, and worry takes root.

When anxiety becomes our identity, we are destabilized; there is no solid ground when we cannot control all the uncertainties that threaten our well-being. Focusing on our fears leaves us feeling defeated, and we are lost in destructive worry. When we are filled with anxiety, we can't have peace or joy.

Questions for Reflection

Is there a specific worry or fear that weighs on you?

How has your anxiety changed since you became a mother?

How do you deal with your worry and fear?

Trading Worry for Joy

Our identity as God's beloved creation, chosen and adopted into his family, means that we have someone to take our worries to, someone who can actually do something about them. God is our caring father, the only parent who can keep his promise to make everything work out right. Here, we can find joy.

It's almost impossible for our minds to focus on the positive, joyful things in life while we are worried and anxious. We cannot hold these opposites together. Choosing to take our concerns to God and putting ourselves in his wise, loving care lifts us out of the dread of excessive worry. We turn our attention to our loving Creator and his good plans for us, and anxiety is pushed out by gratitude, making way for peace and joy. We cannot control our circumstances, but we can control what we think about. We can choose faith instead of fear.

This text gives us help to change our focus. Paul is not talking about being full of happiness, the fleeting feeling that comes when our lives and plans are going well, or when a good event happens. Joy is a gift from God. Joy wells up when we trust God and his peace comes to calm our anxious hearts and minds, whether we are happy or troubled about the circumstances of our lives and the world around us.

Scripture

Philippians 4:4-9

New Living Translation

Always be full of joy in the Lord. I say it again—rejoice! Let everyone see that you are considerate in all you do. Remember, the Lord is coming soon. Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus. And now, dear brothers and sisters, one final thing. Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise. Keep putting into practice all you learned and received from me—everything you heard from me and saw me doing. Then the God of peace will be with you.

Questions for Reflection

What does it mean to rejoice in the Lord? Is this a feeling or a choice?

What is the connection between worry and prayer?

Do you pray when you are worried? How could you get in the habit of going to God first?

Can you think of a time that you experienced God's peace?

How would focusing our thoughts on good things help us experience less worry and discover more peace and joy?

What are some ways you can fix your thoughts on God's blessings and good gifts this week?

Birds and Wildflowers

Often, our anxiety spins around the fear of not having enough, or not being able to provide the best for ourselves or our family. We live in a culture that offers the best of life in education, medical care, food, recreation, beauty and opportunity. These are considered essential to life; we feel like we are cheating our family out of true happiness if they are not benefiting from every possible source. We strive to create a safe, happy life by securing the

ultimate resources. When we are scrambling to seize happiness, joy and calm are lost. We block God's peace, which cannot exist alongside the disquiet and stress of our efforts to maintain control over our domain.

To let go and believe—to have faith in God—that we have enough, we are good enough, and we will be taken care of is one of the secrets to contentment. In this passage, Jesus gives us an alternative to anxiety. The best is found with God, in his kingdom. Paul explains that “the Kingdom of God is not a matter of what we eat or drink, but of living a life of goodness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit (Romans 14:17).”

Kingdom life is a gift of the Holy Spirit, who lives in us. Faith in God, our good and trustworthy father, is the antidote to worry. As we learn to lean into trusting him, the characteristics of faith will be more and more a part of who we are. “The Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control (Galatians 5:22-23).

Scripture

Matthew 6:19-34

New Living Translation

Don't store up treasures here on earth, where moths eat them and rust destroys them, and where thieves break in and steal. Store your treasures in heaven, where moths and rust cannot destroy, and thieves do not break in and steal. Wherever your treasure is, there the desires of your heart will also be.

Your eye is a lamp that provides light for your body. When your eye is good, your whole body is filled with light. But when your eye is bad, your whole body is filled with darkness. And if the light you think you have is actually darkness, how deep that darkness is!

No one can serve two masters. For you will hate one and love the other; you will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.

That is why I tell you not to worry about everyday life—whether you have enough food and drink, or enough clothes to wear. Isn't life more than food, and your body more than clothing? Look at the birds. They don't plant or harvest or store food in barns, for your heavenly Father feeds them. And aren't you far more valuable to him than they are? Can all your worries add a single moment to your life?

And why worry about your clothing? Look at the lilies of the field and how they grow. They don't work or make their clothing, yet Solomon in all his glory was not dressed as

beautifully as they are. And if God cares so wonderfully for wildflowers that are here today and thrown into the fire tomorrow, he will certainly care for you. Why do you have so little faith?

So don't worry about these things, saying, "What will we eat? What will we drink? What will we wear?" These things dominate the thoughts of unbelievers, but your heavenly Father already knows all your needs. Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need.

So don't worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring its own worries. Today's trouble is enough for today.

Questions for Reflection

What in our life is temporal? What is eternal?

How can you connect this life of faith with your daily life and work?

Where does Jesus' teaching stand in contrast to societal values? How would moving towards Jesus' attitude expressed here refocus your values or concerns, relieve anxiety and bring joy?

What circumstances do you have in your life that require you to have faith?

What fears come up for you? How might you address them with God's compassion and grace?

For Personal Reflection

These passages urge us to stop worrying and start praying. Prayer is conversation with God. Prayer gives voice to our faith. God tells us in scripture that he knows and loves us, is concerned about all the details of our lives and even knows what we need before we ask.

We can't always stop and have an extended prayer time, but we can come to God in the moment with whatever is on our mind, even if it is simply, "Help!"

Take a few minutes to write out some of your anxieties. Write down some things to be thankful for in the midst of these worries. Now, write a short sentence or phrase prayer that you can reach for in difficult moments--something that expresses you trust in God and reminds you of your identity as his beloved daughter.





Study 4

Created for a Purpose

Focus

For each woman to live with purpose and hope, fully engaging in the life and work that God has given her as part of God's family.

Challenges

In the busyness of daily life, we can lose sight of the big picture. Life can feel overwhelming and small at the same time, leaving us wondering what all our work is accomplishing and causing us to wonder why we are here and if our life matters.

Scripture

Romans 8, Philippians 2

Full and Complete

Our culture focuses on accomplishments and productivity: You are the sum of all the things you do. Searching for meaning becomes a search for something meaningful to do. As a result, work is done, tasks are accomplished, but it can leave the soul empty.

Putting on the lens of scripture, we see that God's vision is much bigger. This vision isn't about finding the right job, or discerning the right vocation. It's not about increasing productivity. Scripture gives us a solid foundation of purpose that motivates and informs our choices and plans. We do not need to work to secure our own destiny--that's been done for us. We don't need to fear that we won't have enough, or that we will lose ourselves--we are full and complete in God's love and plan.

God is committed to being in relationship with you, even adopting you into his family. He works in you so you live and love more and more like a member of his family, resembling Jesus. He gives you work to do that furthers his purpose, so we can join him as he restores the love relationship between himself and all humanity and heals and remakes the brokenness of the world.

This is the ultimate purpose, the highest form of productivity. Secure in our identity, we can look up from our fears and struggles to see the world around us through God's eyes.

Questions for Reflection

What comes up for you when you reflect on your purpose?

How can we separate who we are from what we do?

Living in God's Family

Part of our sacred purpose is to join God's family as his children and partner with him, as individuals and as the Church, in his work in the world. As you read the following passage, reflect on how this purpose influences your sense of identity.

Scripture

Romans 8:15-17, 29-30

New Living Translation

So you have not received a spirit that makes you fearful slaves. Instead, you received God's Spirit when he adopted you as his own children. Now we call him, "Abba, Father." For his Spirit joins with our spirit to affirm that we are God's children. And since we are his children, we are his heirs. In fact, together with Christ we are heirs of God's glory.

And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them. For God knew his people in advance, and he chose them to become like his Son, so that his Son would be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. And having chosen them, he called them to come to him. And having called them, he gave them right standing with himself. And having given them right standing, he gave them his glory.

Questions for Reflection

What is our position as God's children?

How does knowing God as our father compare to knowing that he is our Creator?

How does being a mother enhance your understanding of being a child in God's family?

Growing as His Children

God's purpose for us is to become like Jesus. He brings us, his beloved creation, into his family and then transforms us into people who bear a strong resemblance to Jesus. This purpose is simple, yet profound enough to encompass all of life: We are becoming more like Christ so we can share in God's plan, engaging our world in love, walking in the world the way Jesus does, participating in God's work of redeeming and restoring his world.

This was his plan from the beginning, *"For God knew his people in advance, and he chose them to become like his Son, so that his Son would be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters."*(Rom 8:29).

It's his work in the present, *"The Lord—who is the Spirit—makes us more and more like him as we are changed into his glorious image"*(2 Cor 3:17-18).

It's the certainty of our future, *"Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is."*1 John 3:2 (ESV)

Questions for Reflection

How does your identity as a member of God's family who is becoming like Jesus affect your sense of purpose?

How does this purpose inform what you do with your time? How does this purpose affect how you see your choices?

Do you see evidence of yourself becoming more like Jesus?

Participating in His Work

As we grow into thinking and acting more like Jesus, our lives and our work are in step with God's work in the world. This passage provides a foundation for that life work. Jesus demonstrates radical humility and service that comes from the fullness of who He is. When we follow him, we imitate his humility not because we are worthless or empty, but because we are secure in our identity as beloved children who will share in his work now and in the glory to come.

Scripture

Philippians 2:1-16

The Message

If you've gotten anything at all out of following Christ, if his love has made any difference in your life, if being in a community of the Spirit means anything to you, if you have a heart, if you care— then do me a favor: Agree with each other, love each other, be deep-spirited friends. Don't push your way to the front; don't sweet-talk your way to the top. Put yourself aside, and help others get ahead. Don't be obsessed with getting your own advantage. Forget yourselves long enough to lend a helping hand.

Think of yourselves the way Christ Jesus thought of himself. He had equal status with God but didn't think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what. Not at all. When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became human! Having become human, he stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process. He didn't claim special privileges. Instead, he lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death—and the worst kind of death at that—a crucifixion.

Because of that obedience, God lifted him high and honored him far beyond anyone or anything, ever, so that all created beings in heaven and on earth—even those long ago dead and buried—will bow in worship before this Jesus Christ, and call out in praise that he is the Master of all, to the glorious honor of God the Father.

What I'm getting at, friends, is that you should simply keep on doing what you've done from the beginning. When I was living among you, you lived in responsive obedience. Now that I'm separated from you, keep it up. Better yet, redouble your efforts. Be energetic in your life of salvation, reverent and sensitive before God. That energy is God's energy, an energy deep within you, God himself willing and working at what will give him the most pleasure.

Do everything readily and cheerfully—no bickering, no second-guessing allowed! Go out into the world uncorrupted, a breath of fresh air in this squalid and polluted society. Provide people with a glimpse of good living and of the living God. Carry the light-giving Message into the night so I'll have good cause to be proud of you on the day that Christ returns. You'll be living proof that I didn't go to all this work for nothing.

Questions for Reflection

What would the world look like if we as Christians (literally, little Christs) were actually living this way?

Describe what you think a life of energetic faith would be for you. How can we tap into this energy?

What fears keep you from embracing this way of living?

How does this life of faith translate into the work you do?

How can you connect this life of faith with your daily life and work?





Study 5

Living in Our Bodies

Focus

For each woman to have a holistic appreciation for her body, recognizing its inherent value, its imperfections and limits, and its capacity to enter energetically into the life of love that God offers us.

Challenges

Our culture views the body as an end in itself and is obsessed with perfecting it and maintaining youth through fitness and a healthy lifestyle. We are left with unattainable standards of beauty and performance for our physical selves.

Scripture

Romans 12

Impossible Standards

The culture gives us many messages about our bodies. Work-out regimens, healing diets, cleanses and a wide-range of supplements-- from vitamins to blue algae--all promise glowing, lasting health. If diet and exercise fail, we are offered cosmetics to eliminate our hard-earned smile lines or dermatological intervention to rid us of the inevitable droop at the jawline or the bust line.

With all this available to us, there is pressure to conform to the image of beauty and perfection. Our identity is tangled up with our body. If we are unhappy with how we look, feel or perform, we consider may ourselves worthless; we have failed.

This is backwards. We are beloved; our bodies were created in order to reflect the Creator, each in our individual way. That is what defines our worth and success.

Questions for Reflection

What informs a woman's view of her body?

What messages did you grow up with about your body?

How has your view of your body changed after having a baby?

How is your identity tied to your body?

Living for God in our Bodies

Our bodies are amazing. We experience the beauty and goodness of the world through our senses--the glory of a sunset, the taste of sweet and savory foods, the sound of music and laughter and voices, the feel of a caress or cool rain on our skin, the smell of apple pie baking.

Our brains give us consciousness and a sense of self. We can understand history, set goals, re-live memories, solve problems, know other people and experience the range of emotions. Our minds and bodies are connected in ways we don't consciously understand; we have gut feelings and reactions that are more instinct than rational thought.

We also have a soul, and it is through our bodily experience of the world and emotions that God is able to communicate with us, even going so far as to join us in physical form to communicate his love to us. The Gospel of John makes the amazing claim that in Jesus, *"The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory."* (John 1:15).

We were lovingly created as integrated beings; we have the awe-inspiring capacity for love and relationship with our Creator and our fellow creatures in a living, breathing, feeling, thinking body. Romans reminds us of the interconnectedness between our bodies, our minds, worship and God.

Scripture

Romans 12:1-2

New Living Translation

And so, dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to give your bodies to God because of all he has done for you. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice—the kind he will find acceptable. This is truly the way to worship him. Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect.

Questions for Reflection

What has God done for you? Why is it important to remember these mercies?

What does it mean to be a "living sacrifice?"

How does God view our offering?

How does the interconnectedness of body/mind/soul work together in these verses to love and serve God?

What message do we receive about our bodies in these verses?

How is this message counter to what the culture tells us?

What freedom might come from embracing God's way or his will?

Embodying Christ in the World

Paul compares our lives in service with fellow Christians to the beautiful, seamless functioning of our physical bodies. We embody Christ in the world as we live in community with other believers.

This is a sense of identity and purpose that supersedes our individual bodies while celebrating their design and abilities. In service to God, we turn our focus from simply caring for and perfecting our own bodies to the much bigger purpose of bringing Christ's presence and healing to a hurting world.

Paul describes values, attitudes and actions that mark the way believers live with each other. Embracing and living these values in our daily life is a beginning to the slow but promised transformation of body, mind and soul that happens as we pray, reflect and worship.

Scripture

Romans 12:3-21

New Living Translation

Because of the privilege and authority God has given me, I give each of you this warning: Don't think you are better than you really are. Be honest in your evaluation of yourselves, measuring yourselves by the faith God has given us. Just as our bodies have many parts and each part has a special function, so it is with Christ's body. We are many parts of one body, and we all belong to each other.

In his grace, God has given us different gifts for doing certain things well. So if God has given you the ability to prophesy, speak out with as much faith as God has given you. If your gift is serving others, serve them well. If you are a teacher, teach well. If your gift is to encourage others, be encouraging. If it is giving, give generously. If God has given you leadership ability, take the responsibility seriously. And if you have a gift for showing kindness to others, do it gladly.

Don't just pretend to love others. Really love them. Hate what is wrong. Hold tightly to what is good. Love each other with genuine affection, and take delight in honoring each other. Never be lazy, but work hard and serve the Lord enthusiastically. Rejoice in our confident hope. Be patient in trouble, and keep on praying.

When God's people are in need, be ready to help them. Always be eager to practice hospitality. Bless those who persecute you. Don't curse them; pray that God will bless them. Be happy with those who are happy, and weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with each other. Don't be too proud to enjoy the company of ordinary people. And don't think you know it all! Never pay back evil with more evil.

Do things in such a way that everyone can see you are honorable. Do all that you can to live in peace with everyone. Dear friends, never take revenge. Leave that to the righteous anger

of God. For the Scriptures say, "I will take revenge; I will pay them back," says the Lord. Instead, "If your enemies are hungry, feed them. If they are thirsty, give them something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals of shame on their heads." Don't let evil conquer you, but conquer evil by doing good.

Questions for Reflection

How does the church function like a body?

How does this affect your view of your body and your service in the church?

What are some of the gifts God has given you to serve the body? How are you using them?

List the characteristics of a Christ follower that Paul describes.

What is one practice or value from this list that you would like to embody in the coming weeks?

For Further Thought

When Bodies Fail

While we recognize the value and amazing range of capabilities of our bodies, we know all too well how frail they can be. We have a complicated relationship with our bodies, and sometimes they seem to betray us. Though our bodies are tightly linked with who we are, we cannot always control them, and we can be frustrated by weight, infertility, aging, mental illness and many other heartbreaking issues.

Whether it is a sprained ankle or a serious illness, our bodies are vulnerable to ailments and pain. The mind/body/soul connection is the only way of living that we know, but it fails us, and we may feel out of sync with our own bodies, even trapped in them. Eventually, we will die. When we experience the limits of our bodies, it can be a struggle to view our frailty and imperfections with compassion and not disdain.

The Psalmist cries out for God to heal his aching bones in Psalm 6, *"Have compassion on me, Lord, for I am weak. Heal me, Lord, for my bones are in agony."* In the New Testament, Paul suffers from some unknown "thorn in his flesh" that irritates him and persists throughout his life. *"Three different times I begged the Lord to take it away. Each time he*

said, 'My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness.' So now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ can work through me" (2 Corinthians 12:8-9).

We are left with more questions than answers in the heart-wrenching moments when our bodies, or those of our loved ones, fail. Jesus is with us in our pain. He ministers to those in pain because he himself suffered, enduring great physical and emotional pain on the cross. As Hebrews reminds us, he sympathizes with our frailty. We can offer our affliction to Jesus; we can stay present to Christ's presence with us, here and now. There is comfort in walking hand-in-hand with Christ, who knows the depth of our hardship.

Questions for Reflection

How has the frailty and finiteness of our physical bodies affected you, whether in your own pain and suffering, or in loved ones?

How have you or someone close to you sensed Jesus presence in suffering?

How should the community of God's family respond when a member of the community suffers? What has been your experience with this?





Study 6

Deepening Connections

Focus

For each woman to recognize how God supports and encourages her through friendship, and to allow her belovedness as a daughter of God to be the source of her identity and value in her relationships.

Challenges

We feel isolated and lonely when we fear we don't belong, or when we are too tired or busy to make connections. Competition and insecurity alienate us from one another instead of connecting us. Basing our sense of worth on whether or not we are liked feeds insecurity and doubts.

Scripture

John 15, Colossians 3

Sharing the Journey

The relationships we form when we are creating a home, having babies and raising children can be some of the sweetest and deepest of our lives. As we walk together through the unique challenges of this time of intense growth and change, we forge strong bonds. Women who can have deep conversations above the chatter of toddlers, and have seen each other through stomach viruses and potty training have a special closeness. When we

discover a friend, there is joy in connecting and being understood, and peace in feeling at home with another person who sees the real you.

Friendships ebb and flow with the seasons of life as people come into our lives, leave and--more frequently as we get older--come back again. This is God's provision for us, sending different friends at different times and loving us through them. When we see friendship this way, we can hold our relationships with an open hand, trusting God's plan for us and for our friend. We can let go of possessiveness or the desire to control a person or relationship, and simply enjoy the gift of companionship.

Questions for Reflection

What are some of your earliest experiences of friendship?

What are the characteristics of a good friend?

Can you think of a time God cared for you through a friend?

Looking for Our Place

Friendships can be a positive force in our lives, but they can also cause heartache and trouble. The despair of losing a friend or the loneliness of isolation are deep; they leave painful scars that can make it hard to trust again. Cliques and exclusive groups are the bane of relationships; we've probably all felt at one time or another the joy of being inside the group and the pain of being left out. Though we are adults, our inner 7th-grade self is still there, wondering if we are worthy to be loved, if anyone really likes us.

Possessiveness can seep in, causing us to become exclusive instead of inclusive, or sneaky instead of open; we can get twisted into knots by comparisons--would I be liked more if I was smarter, or richer, or funnier, or more organized or more spiritual? Envy's corrosive power weakens the bonds of friendship. Our imagination tightens the knots inside, convincing us that others don't have the struggles we do or the insecurities that we feel. Focusing inward on our own pain and neediness, or expecting someone else to meet our needs, makes real friendship impossible.

It's easy to lose ourselves in trying to find validation in the changing opinions of our peers. We crave support and affirmation. We want to be included and valued, but people will let us down. Friends cannot meet our need for purpose and fulfillment, and this expectation results in disappointment and hurt.

The community Jesus creates is different. He is at the heart of this community; it is inclusive, not competitive, and values each individual as an important part of the whole. We must keep rooting down into our sacred identity and our purpose as a beloved collaborator in his purpose of calling a hurting world back to his love and healing.

God exists as a trinity, and this gives us an example of what relationships can look like, including our friendships. As we dwell with Jesus, we are invited to live from a place of freedom and connection with God. The Father has called us His own, the Son has offered us forgiveness and love, and the Spirit empowers us to live out this love in the context of our relationships. There is intimacy and connection in the Godhead, but also room for each to exist as a unique and purposeful part of the whole.

This is the model for friendship; we are connected and loved, but not controlled or dominated. Each person looks to the well-being of the other in love. This passage describes the relationship at the heart of the community God wants to create. We can experience it by grounding ourselves in his love and purpose, and then living fruitful lives together in joyful service.

Scripture

John 15:9-17

(ESV)

As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full. "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. These things I command you, so that you will love one another.

Questions for Reflection

How would it look to abide in God's love?

How has Jesus shown us what the ideal friend is like?

What are the outcomes of living in relationship this way?

Being a Friend

Friendships require risking openness, choosing to be vulnerable and to trust someone enough to be real, masks off, even though we may fear judgement or rejection. This honesty is possible when we are reaching out while firmly rooted in our identity as God's beloved. Then, as we share real life, friends can help balance us, giving us perspective.

Christian friendship has the unique aspect of spiritual support and encouragement. We come alongside each other, living life together. In the community Jesus creates, we are united in God's family; we are sisters, connected through Christ whether we feel that way or not. An integral part of being sisters in Christ is to "encourage each other and build each other up," (1 Thessalonians 5:11), pointing each other towards God and his perspective.

You belong in this community; Jesus himself has made you a part of his family, the body of Christ. Your identity comes from knowing you are loved by God and you belong, enabling you to reach out in honest friendship to others. This is where we can find friendship free of judgement and expectations, relationships not based on equal performance, but on acceptance, forgiveness and grace.

From this firm footing, you can also reach out to those outside the family of God; you can bring the qualities of selflessness and service to a hurting world as part of your collaboration with him. Friendship is a channel to extend God's love and care.

Scripture

Colossians 3:12-17

(ESV)

Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. 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. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Questions for Reflection

What are the characteristics of a friend listed here?

What does it mean to "let the peace of Christ rule in your heart?"

How might this affirmation play a positive role in friendship?

What role does gratitude play in friendship?

How can you "let the word of Christ dwell in you richly?"

How does that change the focus of our friendship?



For Further Reflection

How do you deal with feelings of being left out, sad, insecure?

How can you let those feelings deepen your faith?

How are you nurturing friendship in this season of life, with so many demands?

Does being open and reaching out feel too risky to you?

What kind of friend are you?

How are you modeling friendship? What messages do you want your kids to learn from watching you?

Does social media help or hinder your friendships?

Thoughts and Reflections





Resources

The Cry of the Soul: How Our Emotions Reveal Our Deepest Questions about God
Dan B Allender, Tremper Longman III, Mike Edwards

The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You're Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are
Brene Brown

Wholeheartedness: Busyness, Exhaustion, and Healing the Divided Self
Chuck DeGroat

Broken and Blessed
Jessica LaGrone

Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers
Anne Lamott

The Life of the Beloved
Henri Nouwen

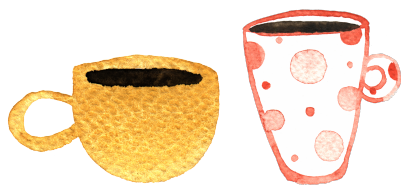
Not the Way It's Supposed To Be: A Breviary of Sin
Cornelius Plantinga

Belonging and Becoming: Creating a Thriving Family Culture
Mark Scandrette, Lisa Scandrette

The Soul of Shame: Retelling the Stories We Believe About Ourselves
Dr. Curt Thompson

Notes





BETTER TOGETHER