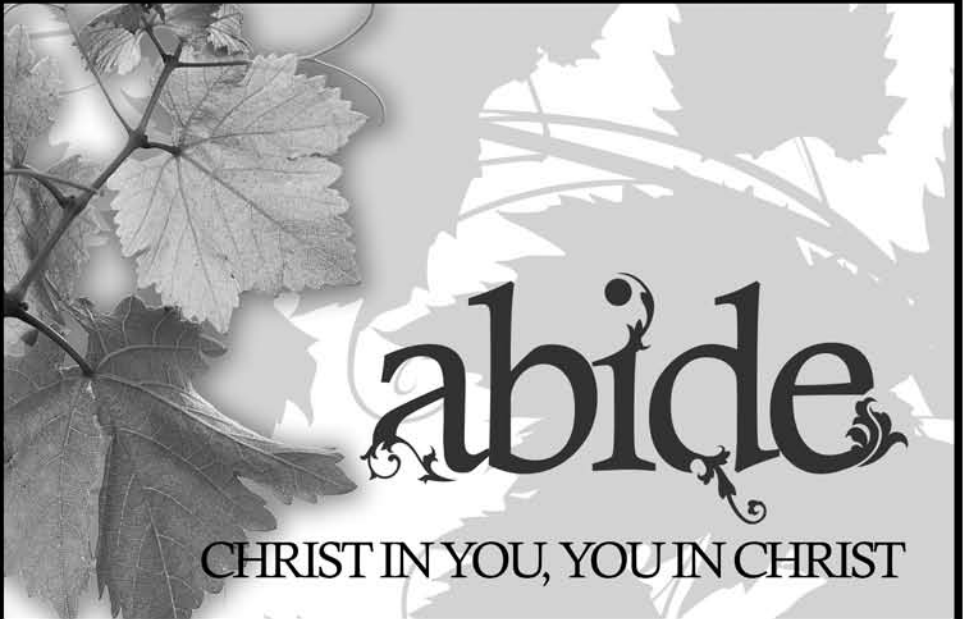




SMALL GROUP BIBLE STUDY



LESSON 8

Abide Through Community

Key Text: John 15:1-17; cross-references

Introduction

“Remain in Me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself, it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in Me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in Me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from Me you can do nothing.”

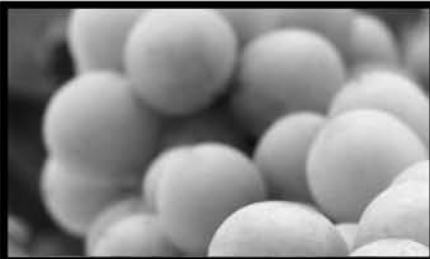
For the last seven weeks, we have been meditating on the meaning and implications of these words that Christ spoke in John 15:4-5. We have learned that these words are an invitation to all Christ-followers to pursue and grow in a deep, intimate relationship with Jesus Christ. He is calling us to abide in Him—to remain connected to Him through His Spirit each and every day of our lives. He is reminding us that we need Him desperately not only for salvation, but also to live out our salvation and to fulfill the purpose of being placed “in Him,” which is to bear fruit for the glory of God.

Not Motions or Activity

The command to abide is not calling us to go through the motions of religious ritual or activity. Christ is encouraging us to surrender control and depend on Him daily, spending time with Him through His Word and prayer. This is how we connect with Him, hear from Him, know His will, and align ourselves with His plans and purposes each day.

The Holy Spirit

Last week we learned that the Holy Spirit is our helper, our teacher, and our guide. He is the Counselor sent to us by Christ to be in us, forever sealing us in the Vine. He is our advocate, interceding for us in accordance with God’s will, and giving us the words of God— just as Christ did when He was on the earth, and continues to do at the right hand of the Father.



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God has “set us up” to succeed in glorifying Him with our lives. He sent His Son to save us when we were dead in our sins. Christ is now at the right hand of the Father, living to make intercession (pray) for us (Romans 8:34). And He has given us the Holy Spirit to be our helper and our guide.

The key to abiding is not activity—it is intimacy. God has given us everything we need in order to abide in Christ. We cannot do it on our own. We must remain in Him.

Before you begin today’s lesson, spend a few minutes reviewing the key points of this series with your group. Use the following questions to help guide your review.

- 1) What does it mean to abide in Christ?
- 2) What is the purpose of the branches?
- 3) How does God tend to branches that aren’t bearing fruit?
- 4) How does God tend to branches that are bearing fruit?
- 5) Why should we abide in Christ through His Word? How is the Bible useful in our lives?
- 6) How did Christ teach us to pray?
- 7) What is the role of the Holy Spirit in a believer’s life?

This week, we are going to finish our study of the Parable of the Vine in John 15:1-17. We will see that it is God’s plan that we abide in Christ as a community of believers. We were never meant to live our lives in Christ alone. We need one another. Throughout John 15:1-17, the pronoun “you” is always plural. Notice that Christ says “branches” and not “branch.” In verse 14 He uses the word “friends,” not “friend.” He is addressing His disciples not as individuals, but as a group united in Him.

Opening Prayer

Begin your time in study of God’s Word by praying for your group. Pray that God will open the heart of every person and reveal Himself to you all in a new way as you study and discuss His Word together. Pray that the Holy Spirit will guide you into the truth and show you all how to apply what you learn to your lives in a practical way. And pray that God will be glorified through your discussion today.

Key Study

We are going to begin today by looking at three different passages that teach us about abiding in Christ through community. As these passages show us, the goal is not just to attend “church.” **In fact, nowhere in Scripture do we see “church” as a place.** Scripture describes “church” as a people united in Christ. Yes, we may gather in different locations around the globe, but “church” is not a location, a denomination, or a building.

The first part of the key study today will be observing and discussing passages that teach us how God defines the Church theologically. The second part will focus on passages that teach us how we should abide together practically through community.

1 Corinthians 12:12-26

“The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. Now the body is not made up of one part but of many. If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. And if the ear should say, “Because I am

not an eye, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!" On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unrepresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it."

A Comparison

In this passage, Paul makes a logical comparison between the physical body, and the Church. This passage is where we get the term, "Body of Christ" to describe the community of believers all around the world. In verse 12 Paul says that even though a physical body is made up of different parts, it is still one body. It is the same with all of the "branches" in Christ. We are all different, but we are still "in" the same Vine and we bear the same fruit of that Vine. We may live in different places, speak different languages, have different strengths, and worship together in different ways, but if we are worshipping the same God through Christ, then we are one Body.

United

Notice in verse 13 that it is the Spirit living in us that unites us. Paul encourages us in verses 14-16 not to compare ourselves to one another. A foot is different from a hand, but both are important parts of the body. Just because one isn't like the other doesn't mean it isn't a part of the body. It is the same with Christ's Body. In fact, verses 17-24 show us that the differences and diversity within the Body strengthen it.

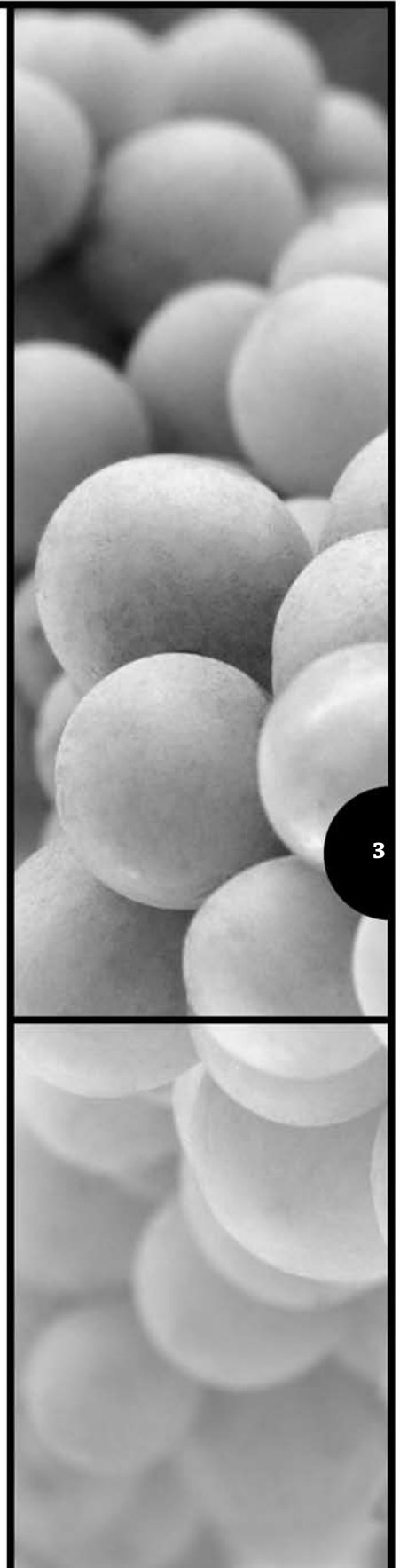
Lastly, we see complete unity in verses 25-26. There is to be no division in the Body. When one part suffers, we all suffer. When one part is honored, we all rejoice. This is an important truth for the North American church today. Many times there seems to be an attitude of competitiveness and criticism between different church "locations." We allow superficial things like music style and how formally or casually we dress for worship gatherings to divide us or unite us. According to this passage if we tear one another down, we are tearing ourselves down and injuring the Body of Christ because we are one in Him.

Ephesians 2:19-22

"Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus Himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in Him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by His Spirit."

Family

In this passage, Paul describes believers as "fellow citizens" and "members of God's household." We are a family united in our allegiance to God and His kingdom. God's household was built on the foundation of the apostles, and Christ Himself is the cornerstone. A cornerstone is the most important part of a building. Notice that the Apostles are the foundation on which God's house





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is built. They were the first generation of Christ-followers. Because of their obedience to Christ's mission of making disciples of all nations, we are now "bricks" in His house also. Verse 21 says it is "in Christ" that the whole Church is united and built. He is what keeps the house from crumbling and falling down.

Ephesians 4:11-16

"It was He who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the Body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole Body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work."

This passage says that it is Christ who gifts some within the Body to be leaders. Why? In order to prepare God's people to serve. Notice that this passage does not say the Church leaders are to be the only ones serving. Their gifts have been entrusted to them so that they can prepare each part of the Body to do its work. What happens when we serve? Verses 12-13 say the Body will become mature and unified in the faith.

No Longer Infants

The result of this unity and maturity is that believers will no longer be "infants" in our faith. We will no longer be "tossed back and forth" by the waves of false teaching and popular opinion. Instead, verse 15 says, we will speak the truth in love and grow up into Christ, who is the "head" of the Body. He, so to speak, is the "brains" behind the whole operation. Notice in verse 16 that our growth comes from Christ, but "every supporting ligament" holds us together. God has united us in Christ (the head) through His Holy Spirit. But it is our responsibility to hold ourselves together in this unity by each doing our work as one part of the Body.

Christ and Each Other

Notice in all three of these passages that we need Christ, and we need one another. He is our chief cornerstone and our head. But we are His Body. In a physical body, the body parts are how the thoughts, ideas, and plans of the "brain" are accomplished. Just like the branches bear the fruit of the vine. If each part of the Body is not doing its part, the mission will not be accomplished in the way the Head intends for it to. We do not function independently of one another, but instead are interdependent on each other. We have been united by God's Spirit for our good, and for God's glory.

Using the lesson introduction, explain to your group that the word "you" in John 15:1-17 is always plural. Also point out that Jesus uses the words "branches" and "friends" when He teaches this Parable.

Share with them that today we are going to finish our study of abiding in Christ by seeing that Christ never intended for us to abide in Him apart from one another. We have been placed "in Him" as a community of faith.

A Group Exercise

Break into three groups, and give each group one passage to study together. As before, you can "scale" the exercise to your group—even a breakout "group"

of one is just fine. The group assignments are included below so you can work through them before class if you'd like. Give the groups about 15 minutes to complete their work. Then, have a representative from each group read the passage aloud and share what the group learned. Use the commentary above to help guide discussion.

Group One
1 Corinthians 12:12-26

Read the passage and answer the following questions.

- 1) How does verse 12 describe believers as a whole?
- 2) How are we united according to verse 13?
- 3) What logical comparison does Paul make in verses 14-20?
- 4) How does this affect the way we relate to one another and function based on verses 21-25?
- 5) Why has God combined the parts of the Body and given greater honor to the parts that lacked it according to verse 25?
- 6) Do you think there is division in the Body of Christ today? Explain your answer.
- 7) How can division be avoided, according to verse 25? (Hint: Look for the contrast word "but.")
- 8) According to verse 26, how should unity cause one part of the Body to treat other parts?
- 9) Does the Body of Christ suffer together like this?
- 10) Does the Body of Christ rejoice for one another like this?
- 11) How would the Body of Christ be different if we suffered and rejoiced together?
- 12) What are some ways we could suffer with those who suffer and rejoice with those who are honored?

Group 2
Ephesians 2:19-22

Read the passage and answer the following questions.

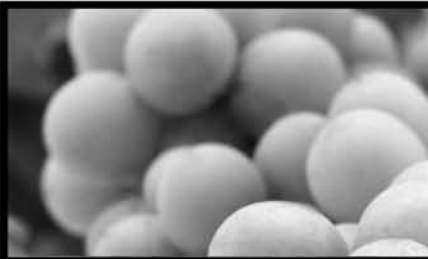
- 1) According to verse 19, how is the community of believers described?
- 2) What were we outside of Christ according to verse 19?
- 3) What is God's household built on according to verse 20?
- 4) What is a cornerstone?
- 5) How are we joined together according to verses 21-22?
- 6) How does this relate to what we have learned in John 15:1-17 about our position in the Vine?
- 7) How is a foreigner different from a family member?
- 8) What is the difference in how you would treat and relate to a family member?
- 9) What does this teach you about how the Body of Christ should relate to one another?

Group 3
Ephesians 4:11-16

Read the passage and answer the following questions.

- 1) What gifts has Christ given some members of the Body, according to verse 11?
- 2) For what purpose, according to verse 12?
- 3) Based on this passage, are the Church leaders supposed to do all of the work? Explain your answer.
- 4) Do you think most believers understand that the role of Church leaders is to prepare them to go and serve? Why or why not?





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- 5) How would the Body of Christ be different if all of its members were serving?
- 6) What is the end goal for the Body of Christ according to verse 13? What are we living for?
- 7) What will be the result of such unity and faith, according to verse 14?
- 8) What are some ways that we can be “tossed back and forth” as Christians in our culture?

Examine verse 16 carefully as you answer these questions.

- 9) From Who does the growth of the Body of Christ come?
- 10) How is the Body held together and supported?
- 11) How is the Body built up? Who builds it up?
- 12) What is the result, then, if each part doesn't “do its work”?
- 13) What does this teach you about your personal responsibility to the other people in this room?

Abiding Through Community

Now let's look at some cross-references that will show us some practical ways that believers are to abide with one another through community.

1 Peter 4:10-11

“Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.”

God has gifted us all in different ways. According to this passage, the purpose of these gifts is to “faithfully administer God's grace in its various forms.” Have you ever thought of yourself as an administrator of God's grace? Everything God has given us is for the purpose of showing others His grace. Not just those who don't know Christ, but also to our fellow brothers and sisters. We should speak the words of God and serve with the strength of God so that our lives glorify Him and not ourselves. However, we cannot speak His words or serve with His strength if we are not abiding in the Vine and walking in the Spirit.

Hebrews 10:24-25

“And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”

Provoke Toward Loving God

The word “spur” in this passage means, “To provoke or to incite.” We should consider how to provoke one another toward loving God and loving others through good deeds (bearing fruit). This truth paves the way for the next statement about continuing to meet together.

How can we provoke one another toward love if we don't build relationships with one another? The “Day” is approaching when Christ will return. The closer this Day gets, the more hardships believers face. This is why we must continue to love and encourage one another so that we do not give up.

Ephesians 4:29-32

“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. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along

with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.”

Words That Build Up

This passage is a “punch in the gut” for most of us. Our words should build one another up in Christ, not tear each other down. We should speak not based on what we want to say, but based on the needs of the listener. Our words should be beneficial. Gossip and negative words grieve the Holy Spirit, which tears down our unity. The Spirit is what unites us, so if we grieve Him it affects unity within the Body. Instead of grieving the Spirit, the Spirit wants to extend compassion, kindness and forgiveness through us to others.

John 13:34-35

“A new command I (Jesus) give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you love one another.”

Love As Christ Loved Us

Jesus commands us to love one another as He has loved us. His love for us is faithful, patient, unconditional and sacrificial—and this is how we should love one another. Notice that Jesus says that our Christlike love for one another (other believers) is how all men will know we are His disciples. Our love will set us apart from the world because only Christ can enable us to love this way. When others see this kind of love in our lives, they will see Christ.

Ephesians 4:1-5

“As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”

Worthy of the Calling

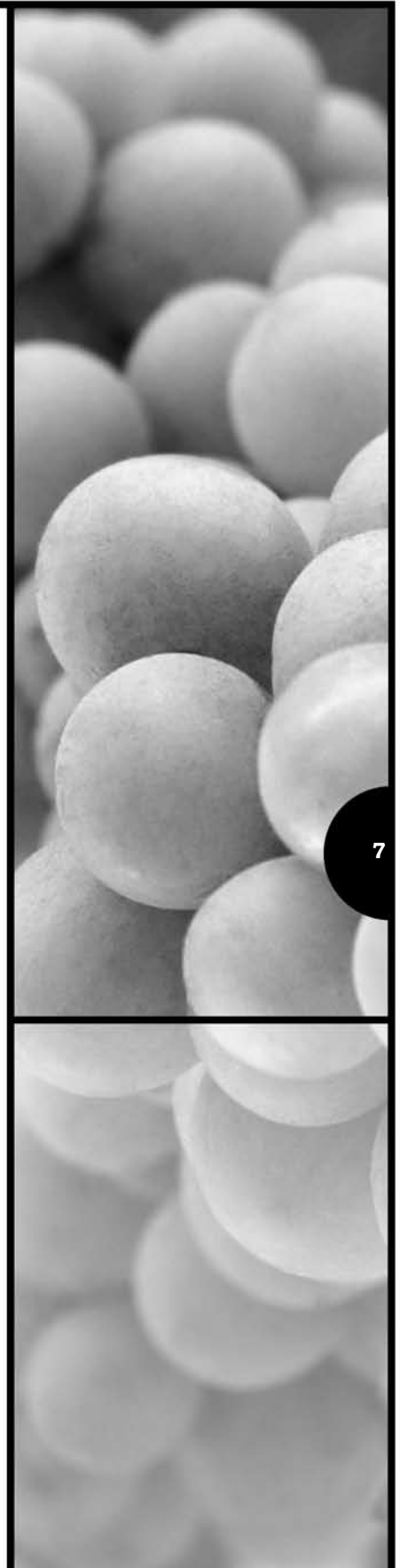
Paul is writing this letter from prison, urging his brothers to live a life “worthy of the calling” they have received. He goes on to describe how such a life should be lived. What kind of fruit will this branch bear? It will bear the fruit of humility, gentleness and patience towards one another. Here again, we see how we should treat other believers. Paul says to make “every effort” to remain unified. Notice that verse 3 doesn’t say to “become” unified. God has already united all believers by sealing us with His Spirit.

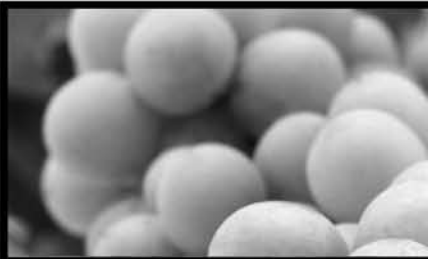
Not “Create” But “Keep”

Our job isn’t to create unity by superficial means, but to “keep” the bond of unity and peace that God’s Spirit has established among all Christ followers. The Greek verb translated “keep” in verse 3 is *tereo*, and it means: “To attend carefully, take care of, guard.” We are to carefully protect the unity and peace that God has given us. Paul uses the word “one” seven times in verses 4-5 to describe this unity. We have “one” Body, Spirit, hope, Lord, faith, baptism, and Father in all.

Recording the Key Points

Have your group turn in their Bibles as you read each of the cross-references above aloud. As you read each verse, discuss it using the commentary above. You may want to make a list on the board of the key points of each verse. Once you have the list, lead the group in a discussion using the following application questions.





- 1) What are some ways that our group can “faithfully administer” God’s grace to one another?
- 2) How can we “spur” one another on towards love and good deeds?
- 3) How can we “keep” (carefully guard) the bond of unity that God has given us?
- 4) Discuss the balance of loving one another the way Christ has called you to, but still being open and inviting to new members. How can you be careful and intentional in both areas?

Conclusion

“Small Groups” provide the best opportunity to participate in the biblical community that we have seen described in God’s Word today. In the North American “church” culture of multi-million dollar buildings and services with thousands of people, we have the responsibility to carefully protect the unity we have in Jesus Christ. We have a responsibility to one another, and to the lost world that is watching how we treat one another.

A Small Group provides the opportunity to encourage and love one another in a deep, meaningful way. Jesus modeled this type of community for us with His twelve disciples. Their unity of heart and purpose became the foundation of the Body of Christ throughout the world. In His last night with the disciples, Jesus emphasized the importance of loving and serving one another. Not only for each other, but for the sake of a lost world that needed to see what God’s love looks like in action.

Will you make an ongoing commitment as a Small Group to abide in Christ together so that you, too can make disciples of all nations?

Afterword

A new study will begin next week. Be sure and invite everyone in your group to continue the journey of making disciples of all nations with your group. However, let your attendees know that if this group hasn’t worked for them, our Local Disciple-Making Office will be glad to help them find another group that might work better.

End by praying for one another that each of you will be faithful to “abide in Christ” for the rest of your lives.