

Small Groups, 2009-2010
Main and Oklahoma Church of Christ, McAlester, Oklahoma
Revised January 2010

Touching Hearts, Transforming Lives

Our small group initiative has two goals: helping people find Jesus, helping believers become disciples. These two goals require two things. First, hearts must touch hearts so that every heart can touch the heart of God. Second, believers must take seriously the challenge to be transformed into the image of Jesus Christ so that our lives accurately reflect the life of Jesus. This is the essence of discipleship—becoming like Jesus.

A Model of Spiritual Transformation

What's the first thing that comes to mind when you think of spiritual growth? Many Christians picture an individual meditating or praying. While that concept accurately portrays one aspect of Christian spirituality, it does not tell the whole story.

Three Aspects of Transformation

The question of spiritual transformation is not new to the Christian faith. It has been a primary issue, though described and sought in different ways, throughout church history. From the time the Spirit of God descended upon the believers in Jerusalem, God has been transforming the souls of individual believers in the context of local Christian communities. Preaching never has been and never will be the only element needed for the transformation of Christians into Christ's image. Likewise, small-group Bible studies, personal Bible study, Sunday school classes, or even one-on-one discipleship efforts are not sufficient for spiritual growth, because these focus solely on communicating biblical information. There is a growing emphasis on transformation which touches the believer's inner and outer life—not just transformation of the intellect. This is the essence of touching hearts (inner life) and transforming lives (outer life). Three broad approaches to spiritual transformation have developed.

Fellowship Model

One approach is to create fellowship opportunities. Churches develop structured settings for members to build relationships with others. They launch small groups that meet in homes. They may convert their Sunday school classes into times of social engagement. These groups enable believers to be intimately involved in one another's lives. The fellowship model focuses on corporate prayer for one another, growth of interpersonal intimacy, and support for each other in times of need. This approach effectively connects believers within a church body.

Spiritual Disciplines Model

A second approach emphasizes disciplines such as meditation, prayer, fasting, and solitude. Such writers as Dallas Willard and Richard Foster have done excellent work on the spiritual disciplines. This approach takes seriously the inner life and intimacy with God. However, when used in isolation, this approach can make people think spiritual transformation is a private matter. Even though the spiritual disciplines include shared

elements (worship, service, and fellowship), some people treat the private exercises (silent retreats, journaling, meditating on Scripture, prayer, and fasting) as primary.

Counseling Model

A third approach relies heavily on personal introspection. Christian counseling emphasizes areas of sin or personal character flaws that cause interpersonal problems or destructive behavior. Counseling seeks to understand the roots of such problems by looking at one's heritage and temperament. Usually in one-on-one interaction, the counselor probes for the root issues hidden beneath the surface problem. Discovering these deeper issues can shed light on a person's consistent failure to make wise choices. This approach focuses on identifying and dealing with those internal obstacles that prevent spiritual growth. Dealing with the issues is a key component in spiritual transformation.

TOUCHING HEARTS, TRANSFORMING LIVES—an Integrated Approach

These three approaches are all valuable, but when taken alone they each have weaknesses. The fellowship model can fail to guide believers toward growth. The spiritual disciplines model can neglect to emphasize authentic and intimate Christian community, which is necessary for growth. The counseling model can fail to value the role that spiritual disciplines can have in growth, or it can focus so much on deficiencies that the person never benefits from the resources of God's grace. It can focus too intently upon the person's sin and failure and not enough on God's enabling power toward growth in holiness.

This **TOUCHING HEARTS, TRANSFORMING LIVES** series brings in elements from all three approaches. This series tries to balance the inward and outward elements of spiritual transformation. Its theme is: **“Experiencing divine power through relationships; striving together toward maturity in Christ.”**

A certain context is essential to the transformation process. That context is authentic community in which people come to trust each other. This is the process we call “touching hearts.” Though one-on-one relationships can be effective, multiple relationships are more effective. While one individual can spur another toward growth, that one individual has limited gifts and abilities. Also, although the spiritual disciplines are valuable, they are means toward the end of complete transformation of the believer's inner and outer life. The spiritual disciplines are not ends in themselves. Believers must understand sin's dynamic in their lives, seeing potential blind spots or obstacles to their spiritual well-being and learning to deal with the root issues beneath their areas of struggle.

One working definition of Christian transformation is:

Spiritual transformation is “the process by which God forms Christ's character in believers by the ministry of the Holy Spirit, in the context of community, and in accordance with biblical standards. This process involves the transformation of the whole person in thought, behavior, and styles of relating to God and others. It results in a life of service to others and testimony for Christ.”

While the transformation process may become an end in itself, the ultimate end is Christ's glory. He is the One adored by those who experience His presence and are transformed by Him. They, in turn, seek to exalt Him in the world.

Because each person is unique, God's formative process is unique for each. And though the Spirit of God is the One who transforms souls, each individual has personal responsibility in the process. Many spiritual disciplines can contribute, yet God is primarily concerned with transforming the whole person, not just patterns of behavior. For this reason, no one method is the single critical component.

A well-rounded set of activities provides the greatest catalyst for growth. For example, providing for the needy helps us understand and participate in Christ's love for the outcast, needy, lonely, and depressed. A small group offers the chance to encourage a struggling believer, learn from others how to apply God's Word personally, and comfort someone in his or her grief. A regular time for prayer can help us reflect upon God's intimate love, remember personal needs and the needs of others as they are brought before God, release anxieties to God, and express dependence upon God. Spiritual transformation occurs neither exclusively in private nor exclusively in public. For the character of Christ to be developed most fully, believers need an inner, private intimacy with God; an active, working love for others; and a pursuit of Christ-like integrity.

TOUCHING HEARTS, TRANSFORMING LIVES depends on effective group dynamics. Groups do not have to be led by trained ministers or spiritual leaders. Group leaders are more like facilitators—they do not have to have all the answers because group members learn from each other. The leader's role is to create an environment that fosters growth and encouragement.

The Theme of this Series

Instead of aiming for competency in a set of skills or techniques that will lead us to spiritual transformation, this series helps people identify the areas that must be developed in a believer's life. In other words, while it is necessary for a believer to know the "how-to" of the Christian life, it is not sufficient. Knowing how to do personal Bible study and being good at sharing Christ with others are praiseworthy skills. Developing these skills, however, is not the end goal but the means by which we live out who we are as new creatures in Christ. That is why this series starts with four critical components of the Christian life: identity, community, integrity, and ministry. These will provide the foundational concepts for a study of transformation based on Romans 12.

This series proposes that the Christian life involves:

knowing your identity in Christ,

so that....

you can make yourself known to others in a Christian community,

so that....

you can pursue a lifetime of growth in the context of community,

so that....

you are best equipped to glorify Christ by serving others.

Our Identity

To understand our need for transformation, we must understand who we are currently, both as individuals and as members of the body of Christ. We must know our identity. Who we are has been shaped by our past. Therefore, we grow as we explore various aspects of our identity, such as our heritage and temperament. What do these tell us about who we are and what we value? The interaction during this study bonds us and builds trust among us. Our goal is not to analyze, criticize, or control each other but is to grow and affirm what God is doing in and through one another.

In *Identity*, we ultimately want group participants to see themselves in light of their identity in Christ. Many of the values we live out stem from such influences as personality, family background, and culture. Not all of those values are contrary to our new identity in Christ. For example, the value a person places on honesty, a value he learned from his parents, is affirmed by his identity in Christ.

It can take a long time for the Spirit of God to transform our values to line up with our new identity in Christ. We cooperate with the Spirit when we reflect on what our values are and how well they line up with our identity in Christ as described in Scripture.

One very significant characteristic of our identity in Christ is that we are part of the body of Christ. The Christian life cannot be lived in isolation.

Our Community

While talking about *my* place in Christ, I must pay attention to *my* place in Christ as a part of a faith community. Understanding our corporate identity in Christ is crucial for a healthy community transformation process. The *Community* helps us understand how a Christian community develops and helps us experience a growing sense of community. Transformation depends on the relationships that come from our being known and valued in a faith community.

In order to experience intimate community in the biblical sense, we must learn to reveal ourselves to others. We need to honestly, freely, and thoughtfully tell our stories. Our modern culture makes it easy for people to live isolated and anonymous lives. Because we and others move frequently, we may feel it is not worth the effort to be vulnerable in short-lived relationships. However, we desperately need to keep intentionally investing in significant relationships.

Real involvement in others' lives requires more than what the term *fellowship* has too often come to mean. Real involvement includes holding certain values in common and practicing a lifestyle we believe is noble, while appreciating that this lifestyle does not make us perfect. Rather, this lifestyle is a commitment to let God continue to form us spiritually.

Community includes a group exercise, "Life Story," that has been tremendously effective in building community and enhancing self-understanding. "Life Story" walks a person through the process of putting together a personal, creative presentation of the most formative relationships and experiences of his or her life. As people share their stories with each other, a deep level of trust and commitment grows.

Our Integrity

When a group experiences *Identity* and *Community* together, members build significant intimacy and trust. Now we are ready to pursue a harder step. It is the heart of this

approach to spiritual transformation. Many believers greatly underestimate the necessity of intimacy and trust for successful growth in Christian holiness. But we must be able to share honestly those areas in which we need transformation. We can deal with deep issues of growth only in a community in which we are deeply known by others. We need others who have our best interests at heart. They must also be people we trust to hold sensitive issues in genuine confidence. Transforming comes as we grow with integrity.

Why does the pursuit of Christian holiness need to occur in community? There are at least two reasons. First, we need accountability in the areas of sin with which we struggle. When we confess our struggles to a group, we become accountable to all of the members to press on toward growth. Because the group is aware of our sin, we cannot hide it in darkness, where it retains a hold on our life and can make crippling guilt a permanent fixture in our walk. If we are struggling, we have not one but several people to lean on. In addition, the corporate, or group, setting increases the likelihood of support from someone else who has struggled in the same way. In one-on-one accountability, one person may not be able to relate well to the other's struggles. He or she may have different areas of struggle.

The second benefit of corporate pursuit of holiness is that without the encouragement and stimulus of other Christians, we are often blind to the ways in which we need to grow. In the counsel of many who care for us, there can be greater wisdom. If some believers are blind to being hospitable, the hospitality of another believer can spur them on to develop that quality in their own lives. If some never think about how to speak encouraging words, the encouraging speech of another can become contagious.

Our Ministry to Glorify Christ

With *Identity*, *Community*, and *Integrity* in place, believers are prepared to discern how God wants them to serve in the body of Christ. "Where can I serve?" is not an optional question; every believer should ask it. Nor is this a matter simply for individual reflection. Rather, we can best discern where and how to serve while in community with people who know our past, interests, struggles, and talents. The community can affirm what they see in us and may know of opportunities to serve that we're unaware of.

The Layout of These Materials

Each of the sessions has the following features:

- *Session Aim* states the goal or purpose of the lesson.
- *Preparation* tells what assignment(s) you need to complete in advance to get the most out of the group. This section will help you get ready in advance.
- *Bible Text*. The sessions include a biblical exercise. This section will give you the text, and perhaps help guide your advance Bible study as you identify the principles of the passage or texts. A biblical exercise is a self-study in which you'll spend time outside the group studying a passage from Scripture.
- *Introduction* introduces the topic for the session. Some of the principles from the text may be expanded in this section.
- *Welcome/Icebreakers* will provide some questions or exercises to start the group thinking about the lesson and to get to know one another better.
- *Worship* suggests some exercises the group may want to include as part of their introductory devotional time.

- *Bible Study* provides material around which group discussions and exercises will focus. You should read the “Introduction” and “Bible Study” sections before your group meeting so you will be prepared to discuss them.
- *Application* wraps up the session and suggests some ways group members may want to use the session concepts to change their lives during the next week.
- *Conclusion* sets the scene for the next group meeting and lists “homework” assignments to complete before the next session meeting.

Each session includes all three aspects of transformation: personal introspection, spiritual disciplines, and the experience of God in relationships. God’s Holy Spirit is at work in your life in all three of these areas.

A Method for the Biblical Exercises

The biblical exercises will guide you through a self-study of a passage that relates to the session topic. You’ll begin by making observations about the passage. Pay attention to the following categories:

Who? -- Identify persons in the passage: the descriptions of persons, the relationships between persons, and the conditions of persons.

What? -- Identify subjects in the passage: the issues or topics being addressed.

When? -- Identify time in the passage: duration of time that passes and when the events occurred in relationship to one another.

Where? -- Identify places in the passage: the descriptions of locations, the relationships of places to other places, and the relationships of persons to the places.

Why? -- Identify purposes in the passage: the expressions of purpose by the author and/or the characters.

How? -- Identify events in the passage: the descriptions of events unfolding, the relationships between events, and the order of events.

Six categories aid the process of observation: “look for things that are (1) emphasized, (2) repeated, (3) related, (4) alike, (5) unlike, or (6) true to life.” By observing the passage, you can better interpret the passage, determining what the main point of the passage is. Then you can reflect on how the main point applies to your life. Be sure to ask for God’s guidance in this process. After all, the purpose of Scripture is for God to speak to us and, as a result, for our lives to be transformed.

Proposed Schedule (subject to change)

Mark your calendar for the following small group meetings and activities.

September	1—Small Group Kickoff (Let’s Begin: Touching Hearts, Transforming Lives)
October	2—Introduction: Be Transformed
November	3—Transformed by Knowing our Identity
December	4—Transformed by Being Known in a Faith Community
January	5—Transformed by Confession
February	6—Transformed by Trials
March	7—Transformed by the Spirit
April	8—Transformed by the Resurrection
May	9—Transformed: Growing with Integrity, Serving Others, Glorifying God

Let's Begin: Touching Hearts, Transforming Lives

Session Aim

This session is designed to allow group members to catch up on the events of the summer, to connect or reconnect with group members, and to begin to form new friendships and commitments. The session also introduces the theme and concepts that will guide the small group activities during the coming months.

Preparation

Good news! Nothing special you have to do before the first session!

Bible Texts

2 Corinthians 3:7-18; Rom. 12:1-2

Introduction

The process of touching hearts and transforming lives depends on the work of the Spirit within us individually and together. Transformation comes because we know who we are, because of our place in the faith community, through lives of integrity, and acts of service to glorify our God. Be prepared to discuss how these four ideas—identity, community, integrity, and service—work together. Why is the sequence important? That is, in what way is identity the foundation upon which can be built life in the community, life with integrity, and a life of service?

Welcome/Icebreakers

Which is more important to you—touching hearts or transforming lives? Why?

How do these two concepts interrelate?

Describe a time when your heart was touched in a special way.

When has your life been changed? What were the events, people, circumstances, etc.?

Worship

Share some songs or Scriptures about change and transformation. Pray about God's transforming power in our lives.

Bible Study

Read the verses above and discuss their message of transformation.

[Your group facilitator may spend a few minutes explaining the foundations or details of the small group effort in 2009-2010.]

Application

Your assignment before the next meeting is to build relationships within your group.

Think of ways you can encourage various group members.

Share specific prayer requests from group members.

Plan to send cards, make phone calls, and encourage one another.

Think also of potential group members—those within the church family who are not actively involved, and those among your friends, family, and neighbors who would enjoy and appreciate sharing an activity such as this. Invite at least one other person to the next group meeting.

Conclusion

The next lesson is a detailed study of Romans 12. Try to find before the next meeting to read the chapter several times.

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Introduction: Be Transformed

Session Aim

This session is designed to help group members begin thinking about some of the specific things that are part of the transformation process—both results and processes. The session expands the concepts that will be explored throughout this study series.

Preparation

Read Romans 12 several times. Especially note verses and statements that relate to our identity as Christians, our shared life in the faith community, the importance of integrity, and the importance of service.

Also begin a list of items that are important parts of the transformation process, for example, a new way of thinking, a different attitude toward God's mercy, etc.

Bible Text

Romans 12

Introduction

Despite the fact that we sometimes do not like change, transformation is a major theme of the New Testament. Biblical transformation is internal and results in genuinely changed lives. Despite the fact that most people who come to Christ anticipate significant changes in their lives, the contemporary church has not consistently expected changed lives as a requirement for faithful Christians.

[Note: some groups may wish to reverse the time of shared singing and prayer and the discussion lead-ins/icebreakers.]

Welcome/Icebreakers

What is one of the most difficult changes you have ever experienced?

Share a goal that you reached (or did not reach) that required some kind of major transformation in your life.

What are the most significant changes in your life during the past year?

What are the most significant changes in your spiritual life during the last year?

Worship

Sing songs relating to the four major concepts of this study series: Christian identity, shared life (fellowship), integrity, and service. Suggestions: Give Me the Heart of a Servant; Change my Heart, O God; Have Thine Own Way; Make Me a Servant. Share a time of prayer, accepting prayer requests that especially related to changing our lives and the lives of others.

Bible Study

Study Romans 12. [The group may want to read the passage together.]

What is the significance of Paul's beginning point: "in view of God's mercy...."?

If a person clearly sees God's mercy, what impact does that have on the person's self-identity (according to this chapter of Romans)?

What impact does it have on a person's lifestyle?

Spend some time discussing the difference between externally motivated change (conformation) and internally motivated change (transformation, metamorphosis).

Why do you think changing our lives is so difficult for us?

Do you agree or disagree with the point made in the introduction section above that the contemporary church does not have a high expectation for changed lives among its members?

Application

How does the world squeeze us into its mold?

What are some of the strongest pressure points today for the average Christian?

What are some of the strongest pressure points today for a teenager?

What are some of the strongest pressure points today for our families?

What does it mean to you to present yourself (your body) as a living sacrifice in everyday life?

How does presenting yourself relate to the gifts that are mentioned later in the chapter?

How does presenting yourself relate to the practical admonitions (vv. 9ff)?

Conclusion

Your assignment is to be spiritually aware of the way the world would change our lives or move us away from the value systems of Christianity.

Spend some time in prayer (individually, with your family, or with a Christian friend) about the way God wants to transform your (our) lives in Christ.

Choose one person that you will try to influence for good by letting them see the changes in your life or relationship. Look for times to explain your commitment to living a changed life.

Transformed: Knowing our Identity

Session Aim

The focus of this session is on the relationship between transformation in Christ and our identity in Christ. The transforming power of Christ refashions our identity, and an awareness of who we are in Christ makes possible a continuing transformation process.

Preparation

Talk to five people who claim to be followers of Christ, and ask them this question: What words would you use to describe our “identity” in Christ? Make a list of the responses you receive to share with the group during discussion.

Bible Text

2 Corinthians 5:1-21, especially vv. 11-21

Introduction

To understand the need for continuing transformation, we must understand who we are, both as individuals and as members of the body of Christ. We must know our identity. Who we are has been shaped by our past. Therefore, we grow as we explore various aspects of our identity, such as our values, goals, and heritage. What do these tell us about who we are? This study seeks to bond us and build trust among us. Our goal is not to analyze, criticize, or control each other, but is to grow and affirm what God is doing in and through one another.

Many of the values we live out stem from such influences as personality, family background, and culture. Not all of those values are contrary to our new identity in Christ. For example, the value a person places on honesty, likely a value learned from parents, is affirmed by one’s identity in Christ.

It can take a long time for the Spirit of God to transform our values to line up with our identity in Christ. We cooperate with the Spirit when we reflect on what our values are and how well they line up with our identity in Christ as described in Scripture. One aspect of identity transformation involves our value system.

One very significant characteristic of our identity in Christ is that we are part of the body of Christ. The Christian life cannot be lived in isolation.

Welcome/Icebreakers

What were (are) some of the most important values of your parents?

What values that you personally hold are most significant in establishing your identity in Christ?

What are the “identity markers” that matter most to you in your Christianity?

Worship

This week we want to celebrate Jesus' power in our life. The group may want to sing a couple of "power" songs, or favorites of any theme focused on Jesus.

Pray about the ways Jesus wants to reshape our identity.

Bible Study

According to the context of 2 Corinthians 5, what kind of things did the Corinthians point to as evidences that they were Christians?

Often our homes give us identity. If money were no object, what room of your house would you begin to remodel? Why?

What room of your "spiritual house" would you begin to remodel?

Kitchen—where the real 'cooking' occurs

Living room—what people see

Den—where I spend my leisure time

Garage—where all my 'junk' is stored

How would this remodeling project improve your self-identity in Christ?

If you were an ambassador for your country, where would you want to be sent?

Where has God sent you as his ambassador?

What are the challenges of maintaining a Christian identity in the place where God has sent you?

Focusing on vv. 17-21, what are some of the identity makers or identity markers that Paul mentions in this text?

Application

For thought: Which one area of your life would you most like to change to live a more consistent Christian life (maintain a more consistent Christian identity)? Share it with the group as appropriate.

Why is "reconciliation" valuable to you?

How does "reconciliation" influence your Christian identity?

In discussing reconciliation, are you thinking primarily about your relationship with God, or also about relationships you have with other people?

Conclusion

Think of one factor that inhibits your Christian faith or testimony, and resolve to work on it this week. (Share it with one other person and pray together about it if possible.)

Try to be especially aware this week that you are called to be an "ambassador" wherever you go.

Seek to be a person of reconciliation wherever you go, making clear your identity in Christ.

Transformed: Being Known in a Faith Community

Session Aim

The focus of this session is on the relationship between our transformation in Christ and our involvement and role in a Christian faith community. Every Christian should be concerned about what level of involvement is necessary to make certain that spiritual growth occurs continuously. Transformation is not only an individual challenge; transformation occurs best in the context of a support group. (Think about AA and NA.) To grow in the likeness of Jesus demands a spiritual support group. This lesson discusses how the faith community can help bring about transformation.

Preparation

Talk to five people who are actively involved in church. Choose people whom you admire for their Christian walk and involvement. (These can be from your small group or from other groups; from this church or Christians who are involved in other congregations.) Ask them about the connection between individual faith and their church involvement. Ask them about the spiritually transformative experiences of their lives. Make a list of the responses you receive to share with the group during discussion.

Bible Text

2 Corinthians 5:11-21

Introduction

Understanding our shared identity in the church is crucial for a healthy community transformation process. We must understand how a Christian community develops before we can experience a growing sense of community. Transformation depends on the relationships that come from our being known and valued in a faith community.

To experience intimate community in the biblical sense, we must learn to reveal ourselves to others—to honestly, freely, and thoughtfully tell our stories. It is easy to live isolated, anonymous lives. We may feel it is not worth the effort to be vulnerable in short-lived relationships. We must keep intentionally investing in significant relationships. This includes holding values in common and practicing a lifestyle we believe is noble. This lifestyle is a commitment to let God continue to form us spiritually.

Welcome/Icebreakers

“Life Story” is a group exercise that is tremendously effective in building community and enhancing self-understanding. “Life Story” asks you to think about the most formative relationships and experiences of your life. As people share their stories with each other, a deep level of trust and commitment grows. Please note that you are encouraged to participate only as you are comfortable in telling the stories of your life.

What is the most life-changing thing that has ever happened to you? Was the change good or bad?

What single event had the greatest positive spiritual impact on your life?

What event led to doubting God? To trusting God?

What event or events have been important to including you in the church?

Worship

The group may want to spend a brief time in singing, prayer, and Scripture reading.

Suggested theme: how our lives are shared in fellowship and encouragement.

Suggested approach: let individual group members choose a song (first verses) or a Scripture to share; let group members participate in developing a prayer list.

Bible Study

Read 2 Cor. 5:11-21.

What concepts in this text suggest “togetherness”?

What verses from this text suggest the church as “support group”?

Find verses that tell us that what one person does has an impact on the faith of others.

To what extent are you aware of having a ministry of reconciliation?

--I try to help people find reconciliation frequently

--I don't think much about the conflicts other people have with one another or with God

--I think about reconciliation mostly in the context of church

--I don't understand what this ministry is about

Application

What one thing would you most like to see as part of the church experience to help us build faith and know one another? Share this idea with the group as appropriate.

Think about the “life stories” you heard earlier. Share one or two of the ideas that impressed you the most.

How could we use such stories to share faith with one another and with those about us?

Conclusion [continued from previous lesson]

Think of one factor that inhibits your Christian faith or testimony, and resolve to work on it. (Share it with one other person and pray together about it if possible.)

Try to be especially aware that you are called to be an “ambassador” wherever you go.

Transformation through Confession

Session Aim

The focus of this session is on the power of confession as a part of the continuing transformation process in the life of a Christian. Our accountability to God and one another helps us grow. Our commitment is more solid in our own minds and the possibility of renewal and transformation is more certain the context of a faith community.

Preparation

After a holiday break, it will be helpful for you to review the previous lessons. The theme of our small group studies for 2009-2010 is "Touching Hearts, Transforming Lives." Clearly transformation is a biblical theme: so far we have studied Romans 12; 2 Cor. 3:7-18, and 2 Cor. 5:11-21. Christian transformation requires that we know who we are—our identity in Christ. Christian transformation always occurs in the context of a faith community where we share relationships—knowing others and being known.

Bible Text: Psalm 32:1 – 11; Romans 3:21-4:8

Introduction

An essential aspect of a transformed life is our willingness and ability to deal with our sins. Many Christians want to deal with sin effectively, but lack effective understandings and strategies to win the battle. In Romans 3:23 and 7:7 – 13, the Bible makes clear that none of us are exempt from the struggle with sin. In Psalm 32 David outlines the consequences of failing to deal with sin and shares some effective steps for dealing with sin. It is interesting that Paul quotes Psalm 32 at the beginning of Romans 4. David begins Psalm 32 with a description of the truly blessed man. Who is blessed? The man who is forgiven! How do we get to this blessed (happy) state? Psalm 32 has a simple formula for such a process. We cannot hide our sins. In hiding our sins we are not only affected spiritually but also physically (v. 3 – 4). We must acknowledge and confess our sins (v. 5). Finally, we are to pray and seek the Lord. In this simple biblical formula lies the key for a life transformed through confession.

Welcome/Icebreakers

What is something you got blamed for when you were a kid? (Think of a time when you really were guilty; think of a time when you got blamed but were not guilty.)

What differences or similarities do you see between guilt and shame?

Worship

Sing songs that focus on confession. Read together Romans 7:7 – 13.

Word (Read together Psalm 32:1 – 11)

1. In verse 3 and 4, David kept quiet about his sin. How do we try to hide our sin today?
2. What prevents us from confessing known sin in our lives?
3. Why do you think we are sometimes hesitant to confess sin, even when we know God will forgive us?
4. Why is confession of sins so important to God?
5. Describe the feelings you have when you have un-confessed sin in your life?
6. What personal testimony can you give about God's forgiveness?
7. What has motivated you in the past to repent of selfish behaviors or attitudes?
8. How do you feel when you repent and experience God's forgiveness?
9. How does God's faithfulness in forgiving us encourage you for the future?
10. What behavior or attitude do you feel like you need to confess today?

Word (Read together Romans 3:21-4:8)

1. How does a person receive righteousness (become righteous)? What does the concept of righteousness mean to you?
2. Discuss the three “everyday” words (commonly used in the first century) which Paul uses to describe what God did in Christ. The words are (1) justified, from the legal system; (2) redemption, from the slavery system; and (3) propitiation or sacrifice of atonement, from the religious system (3:24-25).
3. What does it mean that God is just and justifier (3:26)?
4. How does Paul apply this concept to Abraham (4:1-3)?
5. How does Paul use the quote from Psalm 32—what is his point?

Application

Confession is difficult! This week get with someone you trust and share with them your sins (James 5:16). Let us pray with each other and help one other overcome sin in our lives.

Conclusion

Think of something you would really like to change in your life. Confess it to God, humbly and honestly seek transformation, and keep track of your spiritual growth.

Transformed: Transformation through Trials

Session Aim

The purpose of this small group session is to help us grow in our appreciation of the role trials and problems have in our spiritual transformation. We will seek to understand how God can allow trials and problems through sharing our own experiences and hearing about the experiences of others in our group.

Preparation

Read the Bible texts listed below in advance. With a concordance or Bible dictionary, make a list of other Bible verses that talk about people who were helped in their walk with God through suffering trials (for example, Joseph). What other Old Testament or New Testament personalities can you think of?

Bible Text: James 1:2 – 4; Romans 5:1 – 5; I Peter 4:12 – 19

Introduction

Someone commented that the only things we can count on are “taxes” and “death.” While we can count on those two things, there are many other things we **KNOW** we can count on. We know God loves us, we know Jesus died for us, and we know the Spirit helps us in our weaknesses. We can also count on encountering various trials in our life. Jesus foretold his own trials before he experienced them (Matthew 16:21, 17:22-23, 20:17-19; John 16:33 and Phil. 2:5 – 11). Paul also experienced many trials in his ministry (2 Cor. 11:21 – 33). We should not be surprised when we encounter trials in our life (I Pet. 4:12). Since we are going to encounter various trials, what should our attitude be? In James 1:2, the Bible says we are to rejoice in our trials. How do we develop our faith to a point where we are rejoicing in our trials? This requires both a short and long perspective on our trials. A short perspective is that we live one day at a time (Matt. 6:34) and a long perspective is that we are convinced that God will work out these trials for the perseverance of our faith (James 1:2-4). In this lesson, we will have opportunity to talk about how the group can help each other deal with, endure and benefit from trials.

Welcome/Icebreakers

If you could capture a special moment from the last week which one would you frame? Why?

What is one of the worst “trials” you have ever endured? How did you get through it? When did you think something would be worse than it turned out to be? To what do you attribute the reversal?

Worship

Sing songs that focus on overcoming trials and temptations. Read I Peter 4:12 - 19.

Bible Study (Read together the verses listed above)

1. Define the term trials.
2. What makes trials so difficult to endure?
3. How do you usually handle trials?
4. James 1:2 says we are to rejoice in our trials. How do we get to a point where we can rejoice in trials?
5. Describe a time when trials made you stronger.
6. How do we reconcile a loving, caring God with the presence of trials in our life?
7. What prevents us from seeking help in times of trials?
8. What trials are you encountering at this time?
9. How can we practically help each other in the midst of trials?

Application

Everyone faces trials! Share and pray for people you know who are facing trials in their life. As a group develops ways you can help these individuals, send cards, make a home visit, share a meal, etc.

Conclusion

Over the next few weeks, try to be especially aware of how you can help the other members of your small group in facing the challenges of trials.

Transformed: Transformation through the work of the Holy Spirit

Session Aim

The purpose of this session is to help us become more aware of the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives as we seek to live transformed lives, and to understand how we can use the presence and power of the Holy Spirit to become what God desires us to be.

Preparation

Study the Bible text below and be prepared to discuss it in detail. Try to be especially aware of the Holy Spirit in your life in the days just before the group meeting.

Bible Text: Galatians 5:16 - 26

Introduction

Often misunderstood and rarely studied is the work of the Holy Spirit in our life. Yet, scripture is very clear in that if we are going to be transformed then it will be by the Spirit's power. In Galatians 5, we see one of many passages which deal with the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. In this passage we are encouraged to live by the Spirit and not by the flesh (physical appetites, needs, desires, sometimes translated as sinful nature). Paul describes two lifestyles. A lifestyle lived according to the rules of the physical person and the world is filled with selfishness, greed, pride and brutality. The lifestyle characterized by the Holy Spirit is consumed with selflessness, love and self-control. Galatians speaks of a continual struggle between the spiritual and the physical—between the Spirit and the flesh. The key to a Spirit-filled life is to live and keep in step with the Spirit. In this lesson, the group will have the opportunity to discuss what it means to live by and keep in step with the Spirit.

Welcome/Icebreakers

If you could change one personality trait in yourself, what would you change?

If you could add one "spiritual" trait, what would it be?

If you could subtract one "fleshly" trait, what would it be?

Worship

Sing songs that focus on the Holy Spirit's work in our life.

Read Psalm 139:7 – 24 together.

Bible Study (Read together Galatians 5:16-26)

1. In your own words describe the conflict between the sinful nature and the Spirit?
2. Describe the lifestyle that is controlled by the Spirit.
3. Describe the lifestyle that is controlled by the sinful nature.
4. What is the connection between God's word and the Holy Spirit?

5. How is your response of faith necessary in order for the Holy Spirit to have victory in your life?
6. What acts of the sinful nature tend to entangle you?
7. How can a person cultivate the character qualities of the Holy Spirit in his or her life?
8. How do you see the character of the Holy Spirit growing in your life?
9. What can you do this week to nurture the character of the Holy Spirit in your life?
10. How can you and the Spirit get rid of the dead wood that stifles your growth?

Application

Keep in step with the Spirit this next week by picking one of the characters of the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22 – 23) that you need to improve on. Share that with the group and tell why you think you need to improve in that area. Discuss with the group what help you need in order to practice this part of the Spirit's walk and influence in your life. Be accountable to someone in group!

Conclusion

Next month's lesson will focus on the power of Jesus' resurrection as a motivation for our transformation. This is a good time to review some of the factors that are involved in transformation—connecting hearts and lives, the importance of knowing who we are, our connections in a community of faith, the willingness to be accountable to God and other Christians through confession, the place of trials and problems in the development of faith and faithfulness in our lives, and the role of God's Holy Spirit.

Transformed: Transformed by the Resurrection

Session Aim

The purpose of this session is to consider the impact of the resurrection story in our own lives. The session is designed to help us appreciate how our initial obedience to Christ was a picture of his death, burial, and resurrection, and how our continuing Christian lives are also encapsulated in the concept of resurrection, climaxing in our ultimate resurrection to eternal, celestial life.

Preparation

Reread the death, burial and resurrection story in one or more of the gospels (Matthew 26-28; Mark 14-16; Luke 22-24; John 13-21)

Bible Text

Romans 6:1-23

Introduction

While much of the Christian world focuses on the Easter resurrection story of Jesus at this time of year, the reality is that the resurrection is central to daily Christianity. Of the seven sacraments identified by the Catholic church, the Christian church has retained only two—baptism, and communion or the Lord's Supper. Both of these receive their identity and meaning from the resurrection events—those events from Jesus' life that encompass his death, burial, and resurrection.

Welcome/Icebreakers

Resurrection means "to come to life again". Describe a time when you or someone you knew experienced something that felt like new life or beginning again.

When have you have the opportunity to "begin again"?

What does resurrection mean to you? What are some synonyms? What are some antonyms?

Worship

If the group desires to spend a time in shared worship, songs that would be especially appropriate would be those that tell the life of Jesus or resurrection story, or those that speak of change and newness. Use a concordance to identify Scripture readings that relate to newness in the life of a Christian.

Bible Study

Someone has observed that death is mentioned 15 times in this section. What is the connection between baptism and death?

According to this text, what connects Jesus' death and resurrection with our death and resurrection?

Why does baptism represent a clean break with sin?

After baptism, Christians don't want to sin

After baptism, sin becomes repulsive to Christians

After baptism, sin can no longer be forgiven by grace

What are appropriate actions after baptism? (check out verses 11-13)

What is our motivation? (verse 14)

When in your Christian life did you realize that you don't have to be a slave to your old desires?

What areas of life feel like they are trapping or enslaving you right now? (share as you are willing with the group in preparation for prayer time)

Application

Mediate on the power of resurrection in your life in the next week (or until your small group meets again) by noting those activities where you made a different choice than you would have before you became a Christian. (If you have been a Christian a long time, you may want to think about choices that you make that are different than those of a non-Christian.)

Note how resurrection has changed your life—words, actions, choices, priorities, etc. Come to the next small group session prepared to share some of your observations. (Group members are never asked to share beyond their comfort level.)

Conclusion

Our next study will focus on integrity. Before the next meeting, think about how the resurrection of Jesus from the dead enables us to live a life of integrity—integrating the physical, intellectual, emotional, social, and spiritual components of our life so that we are healthy Christians.

Transformed: Growing with Integrity, Ministering to Others, Glorifying God

Session Aim

As we come to the end of this small group series, let us pray that hearts have indeed been touched and lives transformed. The final session in the series attempts to tie together the guiding principles of the series. The session gives an opportunity to review the main points, and to ask about how our lives are transformed as we use these principles to attain maturity in Christ.

Remember the focus of the series—the Christian life involves:

knowing your identity in Christ,

so that....

you can make yourself known to others in a Christian community,

so that....

you can pursue a lifetime of growth in the context of community,

so that....

you are best equipped to glorify Christ by serving others.

Preparation

Review the sequence of the main themes of our studies. Here is a brief summary to remind you of the journey we have shared. Take time to pray about each aspect of our study (**words in bold** in the description below).

After introducing the theme, “**Touching Hearts, Transforming Lives**”, we spent some time thinking about what the Bible says about transformation.

The first step is to know our **identity in Christ**, escaping faulty assessments and low spiritual self-esteem. Every Christian is of great value to God and God has the power to make us new and fresh through our re-creation in Christ.

When we are confident of our identity and security in Christ, it is easier to participate in the faith community where **we are known** and where **we can know and support others**.

Actually, our participation in a community of faith (church) is a significant part of our continuing transformation into the image of Christ (Eph. 4:11-16).

In the context of the faith community, we are changed as we share the heartache and vulnerability of **confession** in the midst of **difficulties and trials**. We are also changed the presence of the **Holy Spirit** in our lives and the promise of **resurrection** which was secured as we were baptized into Christ, thus becoming participants both in Jesus’ death and in his resurrection.

All of these dynamics help us mature in Christ, becoming **people of integrity**, with hearts dedicated to **serving others** and **glorifying God**.

Bible Text

Ephesians 4:1-32

Introduction

Our Bible text, although lengthy, summarizes the journey we have taken.

4:1-3 reminds us of our identity in Christ and our changed lives. (Note how 4:1-3 points back to all of the transformation concepts of chapters 1-3.)

4:4-6, 12-16 outline some of the dynamics of participation and sharing in the body of Christ.

4:7, 13, 16, 17-32 describe how individual lives are changed and blessed in Christ. As a result we become people of integrity.

Throughout the chapter are references to the challenges of life and the power of God's Spirit within us.

Finally, the chapter outlines how we can serve one another and others, and the importance of glorifying God through imitating him. (Note that many of these concepts continue into chapter 5.)

Welcome/Icebreakers

Using the assignment to note how the resurrection changes our lives, share as the group desires.

What is the closest group you have ever been associated with?

What made the group so close?

What blessings do you especially notice or feel when you participate in a small group?

What challenges or obstacles do you find most difficult in small groups?

Worship

Share a brief time of song and prayer as desired.

Bible Study

What qualities do you use to identify a Christian? What results do you expect when believers live out the presence of Christ in their lives? (4:1-3).

What connections do you see between the unity of the body and our willingness or ability to be known and to know others? (4:4-6)

What differences exist between the unity that is (4:4-6) and that which is to be developed (13-16)?

How does participation in the body of Christ help us mature? (4:12-13)

How could a small group help members develop and use spiritual gifts so each part does it work (16)?

What are the biggest problems with trying to live a Christian life apart from the church?

What blessings do you need from others? What blessings could you pass on to others as you minister to them?

What are some of the ways you see Christians glorifying God?

Application/Conclusion

As your small group comes to a close and we anticipate new groups forming for the next cycle, celebrate your fellowship and the successes of your group. Pray for each member of the group (those present and those not present) that all hearts might be touched and lives transformed.