

The Goodness of God

UNIT 1 - THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD

The Standard of Moral Perfection

UNIT ASSIGNMENTS

☐ CONTINUE: [21 Days of Personal Worship](#)

TRUTH

“For I will proclaim the name of the LORD; ascribe greatness to our God! The Rock, his work is perfect, for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is he.”

Deuteronomy 32:3-4

“For the LORD is righteous; he loves righteous deeds; the upright shall behold his face.”

Psalms 11:7

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IN BIBLE

This section of The Journey will equip you with some basic biblical theology regarding the nature of God. Unfortunately, the word theology often elicits a yawn from Christians because they think of it as a boring, impractical intellectual exercise. Not so! Studying theology will help to mature and equip you, making a significant contribution to your spiritual progress. It is neither boring, nor impractical. True, your mind will be exercised as you wrestle with difficult questions about who God is and what He does. But your soul will benefit from this exercise as you begin to see your expanding biblical understanding worked out in a practical, everyday life of faith.

In this unit you will explore one of God's essential attributes – His righteousness – by comparing several passages from the Old and New Testaments. You may find it beneficial to focus on these passages during your personal worship this week. If you use a different Bible reading plan for your personal worship, be sure not to neglect the "S" of PRAISE – to summarize specific applications of the Bible passages for your life.

Deuteronomy 31:24-32:6 – This text contains a portion of Moses' final departing words to Israel. In chapter 32 he begins a song of praise to God that also serves as a warning to Israel.

Compare Moses' description of God in 32:4 with his description of Israel in 32:5. Describe the difference between God and Israel in your own words.

Job 40:1-14 – These verses are part of a lengthy section (chapters 38 – 40) in which God responds to Job's contention that his suffering was unjust.

Put yourself in Job's position. What would have impressed you about God if you were part of this conversation with God?

Psalm 11:1-7 – This song presents God’s righteousness as a reason for the psalmist to hope in God during times of distress.

According to this Psalm, why would God’s righteousness give anyone a reason to hope in Him?

Based on these passages, what do you think it means to say that God is righteous? How is this different from humanity? How is this different from you?

Jeremiah 23:5-6 – This Messianic prophecy portrays the coming Messiah as a King whose reign is marked by righteousness and justice. [Note: when you see the word “Branch,” think of a branch of King David’s family tree. David was promised that a descendant of his (a branch from his root, so to speak) would have an eternal rule.]

Why do you think it is significant that the Messiah would be known as “The LORD is our righteousness?” [Hint: compare this text with Romans 3:21-22, and 2 Corinthians 5:21.]

Romans 3:21-26 – This is a pivotal passage for our understanding of the doctrine of justification by grace through faith in Christ’s sacrificial death. According to Paul, the death of Jesus is ultimately a demonstration that God is righteous.

How does the cross demonstrate God’s righteousness? [Note: this is a complex portion of Scripture and you may need to read it several times. Verses 25 and 26 are the key to answering this question.]

1 John 2:29 – This one verse gives us a test for discerning true and false children of God.

What is this test? How is this test grounded in the character of God?

TO SUMMARIZE

Where does your basic sense of good and evil come from? How do you know what is just or right?

How do you know it is wrong to commit murder or to steal?

The answer that might have popped into your mind first is “The Bible.” True, the Bible does codify and reinforce that which is right and wrong, and it still has tremendous influence in our society. But, if “the Bible” is your answer, how would you answer this question – In cultures where the Bible has no influence at all, how do people know what is right and wrong, good and evil? Now what is your answer? Not sure? Perhaps this illustration will help you.

Try to imagine that you have received a summons that requires your attendance as a witness at two military executions. You find yourself at an overseas military base somewhere in the Middle East. You are seated with a group of witnesses. On your left is a squad of riflemen standing at attention. To your right there is a pockmarked concrete wall with a solitary wooden post stuck in the ground. You hear a drum roll and a prisoner is led to the post, tied there and blindfolded. The charge is read aloud. The prisoner has been found guilty of masterminding several suicide bombings that resulted in the deaths of dozens of civilians including children. The prisoner is defiant. He shouts curses at the group of witnesses and even threatens the lives of your children. You have never witnessed an execution. You aren't even sure you believe in capital punishment and you haven't been looking forward to this. Yet, as you hear the squad commander giving the order and the report of the rifles something inside you says, "Yes. Justice was done. This was right."

The prisoner is removed and the second prisoner is brought out. You are shocked as you see a small boy of nine or ten years led to the post, tied and blindfolded. His charge is read aloud to the witnesses and you can't believe what you hear. He is guilty of no crime, except being the eldest son of the man who was just executed. You are in a panic. You know this is wrong. You need to stop this somehow. You stand up to protest.

Regardless of your cultural or religious background, chances are you would have had a similar reaction to both executions. Why? What creates that instinctive feeling that approves of one execution, and not the other? The answer is that God stamped the image of His own righteous character upon humanity and gave us an *innate sense of what is just and right. This sense, which we call the conscience, was designed to function as the ears of the human soul. And though the fall has left humanity spiritually deaf, the echo of God's righteous will can still be heard as that indistinct feeling that something is right or wrong.

Now let's consider the righteous character of God. In your Bible study this week, you learned that God is righteous (Psalm 11:7), just, upright and without sin (Deuteronomy 32:4). When theologians speak about the righteousness or justice of God, they are referring to His moral perfection and purity as an essential attribute of His nature. Righteousness is intrinsic to the essence of who God is. And because God is morally perfect, He always acts and speaks in total harmony with His righteous nature. Therefore, in both His nature and His behavior, God is the ultimate standard of what is morally right and good and just. All His will, works, decrees, commands, warnings, judgments, promises, blessings and mercies are necessarily righteous, just, and good.

Therefore, as Job discovered, God is beyond accusation of any wrongdoing. He is so unimpeachably righteous that even the suggestion that He may not be is an outrageous offense. God challenged Job most severely on this point, *"Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty?"* (Job 40:2) *"Will you even put Me in the wrong? Will you condemn Me that you may be in the right?"* (Job 40:8) Even in showing mercy to sinners, God remains righteous because He does not fail to punish their sin. But instead of punishing them for their own sin, God punishes a substitute (Christ) on the cross so that God can both justify those sinners who trust in Christ and demonstrate His perfect justice. Thus, Paul teaches that the cross is a demonstrative proof of the righteousness of God. (Romans 3:25-26)

So then, knowing that God is righteous and always acts in accord with His righteousness, how does this theology translate into our lives of faith?

First, because God is both righteous and almighty, His work in the world and in your life can be completely trusted. God never thinks, says, or does anything that is unrighteous, unjust, or wrong. And He is strong enough to always enact His will. This makes Him wholly trustworthy and dependable. You can follow Him knowing that He is absolutely worthy of all your best obedience, worship, and hope. Do you see evil in the world? It will ultimately be condemned. Do you see righteousness in the world? It will be rewarded. Are you in a situation that challenges your trust in God? Are you concerned that He may not prove to be faithful or capable to guide, protect, and sustain you? Then consider His righteousness. Meditate on Deuteronomy 32:4 or Psalm 11:7 and watch your trust in His righteousness grow strong. Then you will understand that God's control of all things (including your life) is completely good and wise and just.

Second, your understanding of God's righteousness should strengthen your hope in the gospel. A righteous God requires righteousness in His creatures and always punishes unrighteousness. Since you have no righteousness of your own, your only hope of salvation is to receive righteousness as a gift from God through the gospel of Jesus Christ. The prophet Jeremiah foretold that Jesus would be known as *"the LORD is our righteousness"* (Jeremiah 23:6). And He has become so because God freely grants His own righteousness as a gift to those who trust in His Son (Romans 3:22). Has your relationship with God cooled? Is it less vital to you than it once was? Then be reminded that your own hope of righteousness (and thus, your acceptance by a righteous God) is entirely dependent upon the gospel of Jesus Christ. Consider the hopelessness of living without your Savior, and be amazed that you have so undeservedly received such a profound gift.

Third, understanding the righteousness of God will help you to discern those who are truly God's children, as well as help you discern God's work in your life. According to 1 John 2:29, God's children will reflect God's nature. Thus, since He is righteous, His children will manifest righteousness in their lives. If you see God's righteousness being manifested in your own life, it can be a great source of assurance for your faith. On the other hand, your knowledge of the righteousness of God should serve as a warning of spiritual danger if you don't see righteousness growing in your own or in anyone else's life.

EQUIPPING

Job's sufferings really challenged his faith in God's righteousness. Perhaps you have had difficulties of your own that tested your faith in a similar way. If so, review God's answer to Job in Job 40. Put yourself (and your problem) in Job's position.

How does God's answer satisfy you, or not satisfy you?

Describe an area of your life where you really struggle to trust God to do what is best.

How does the theology of God's righteousness help you?

Review Jeremiah 23:6 and Romans 3:25-26.

How does the theology of God's righteousness affect your hope in Jesus as your savior? How does the theology of God's righteousness affect your hope in Jesus as your savior?

Review 1 John 2:29.

How does the theology of God's righteousness strengthen (or challenge) your assurance of salvation?

ACCOUNTABILITY

Before your Journey Group meeting, use the questions below to examine your life in light of the truth you explored this week.

In what ways does your life reflect the righteousness of God to the lost world?

Are you struggling to surrender any area of your life to the control of the Holy Spirit?

Is there an area of your life where you struggle to trust that God will do what is best for you?

How have you attempted to impact someone on your prayer list this week?

How are you doing in developing a personal worship habit?

Did you complete the mission assignment this week?

MISSION

SERVING

For several weeks now you have been praying for people on your missional prayer list. Please continue building a daily habit of prayer for the least and lost that you are concerned about.

You have learned that missional living is making the gospel known to all people through word and deed, across the street, track, and ocean. For the next several weeks you will concentrate on demonstrating the gospel through service to the least and the lost. You and your Journey Group will partner together in a small service project of your group's choice. Your project could be anything from writing letters to servicemen and women in harm's way, to doing yard work for an elderly neighbor, to visiting a children's hospital, or to serving a meal at a homeless shelter. At your next meeting, your Journey Group leader will have several options for a service project for your group to discuss. Your Mission assignment for the next several weeks will be to participate in the planning and execution of your Journey Group's project.

As soon as you read about serving you had some sort of mental and emotional response. What was your response? Did you think about the obstacles that might prevent you from participating (e.g. schedule, priorities, travel, disinterest, anxiety, discomfort, etc.)? Take a moment to describe your response and any obstacles you perceive in the space below.

Now bring your response to God in prayer. Tell Him what you think and feel. Ask Him to help you respond to this opportunity to take up His mission as Christ would, and to give you the right motives

SUPPLICATION

“Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ 32For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. 33But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.”

Matthew 6:31-33 (ESV)

God knows all your needs; seek His kingdom as your first priority and He will provide for you. When you have a need, ask, but also examine your motive in asking.

My prayer request regarding the truth for this week:

My prayer request regarding a situation in my life:

My prayer request regarding living a missional life:

[illegible]

FOOTNOTES

*The fall corrupted every part of humanity including the human conscience. Thus, the conscience, by itself, is not a reliable witness to what is righteous. We use words like "crooked," "twisted," "perverted," "depraved" and "darkened" to describe the effect the fall has in obscuring our inner sense of right and wrong. Those effects can be seen in individuals in varying degrees. For example, your conscience may not accuse you of wrong when you speak unkindly to someone or spin the facts of a situation in your favor. In contrast, apparently, Hitler's conscience didn't accuse him of wrong despite his heinous wickedness. So, since every person's conscience is corrupted to a greater or lesser degree, it must be renewed so that it rightly responds to the righteousness of God. God mercifully does this in two ways. First, He reveals His righteous nature and will in the Bible and through His Son in order to instruct the conscience in what is righteous. Second, in Christians, the Holy Spirit continually works to renew the conscience through the means of Bible reading and study. *"I have stored up your word in my heart that I might not sin against you"* (Psalm 119:11).

UNIT 2 - THE LOVE OF GOD

For All People, and for His People

UNIT ASSIGNMENTS

☐ **COMPLETE:** Prepare for your upcoming service project

TRUTH

“For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

Romans 5:6-8

IN BIBLE

Last week, you learned that God is the ultimate standard of what is right, just and good. He is morally perfect. All His works demonstrate that He is completely righteous and His judgment is always irreproachably just. Knowing this should encourage your reliance on the gospel since without it, you would be without hope that you could stand before His righteous judgment.

This week, you will explore an aspect of God’s goodness that gives you grounds for such hope – the love of God – and you will find that God expresses His love in two very different ways. You may find it beneficial to focus on these passages during your personal worship this week. If you use a different Bible reading plan for your personal worship, be sure not to neglect the “S” of PRAISE – to summarize specific applications of the Bible passages for your life.

Deuteronomy 7:6-9 – This text is part of a long speech Moses gave to the new generation of Israelites before they entered the Promised Land. In these verses, Moses reminds the people why God chose them and delivered them from Egypt.

What does it mean that God chose Israel to be His “treasured possession?” (7:6). Aren’t all people God’s people? Did God love Israel more, or differently, than the other peoples of the world?

Was Israel more worthy of God’s special love than other nations? Explain your answer. (7:7)

Why did God choose Israel? Give two reasons. (7:8)

What does this passage teach you about the nature of God’s love?

Jeremiah 31:1-7 – In this passage, the prophet Jeremiah is foretelling a time of blessing and redemption for Israel that would come after a period of punishment because of their unfaithfulness to God. Jeremiah offers Israel hope by reminding them of God’s past dealings with them.

What event is Jeremiah recalling from Israel’s past in verse 3? Why is it such an important demonstration of God’s love for Israel?

Why does Jeremiah call Israel the “foremost of the nations” in verse 7? [Hint: Compare this with Deuteronomy 7:6. Note: “Jacob” is a frequent Old Testament synonym for the nation of Israel.]

How does this passage add to the understanding of God’s love given in Deuteronomy 7:6-9?

Matthew 5:43-48; Luke 6:32-36 – These parallel passages describe the love of God toward all people whether Jew or Gentile, Christian or non-Christian, and righteous or unrighteous.

How is the love of God described in these passages different from that described in the Old Testament study passages?

Romans 5:5-8 – Here Paul describes the quality of God’s love by appealing to the greatest, most tangible, and most costly demonstration of that love.

How does the death of Christ demonstrate God’s love?

How is this demonstration similar to the love God demonstrated to Israel in the Exodus?

How does this demonstration go beyond the love demonstrated in the Exodus?

Ephesians 2:1-7 – This passage helps us understand God’s love for His people by connecting God’s love with His grace. Take careful note of the use of pronouns – “you,” “we,” and “us.”

How does Paul describe the default spiritual condition of all people? How does he describe their relationship to God? (verses 1-3)

According to Paul, believers also shared this spiritual condition. But God took action to change believer's spiritual condition and their relationship to Him. Why? (verses 4-7)

The love of God for all people described in the study passages from Matthew and Luke seems very different from the love of God for His people described in Deuteronomy, Jeremiah, Romans, and Ephesians. How would you describe the difference you observe in these passages?

TO SUMMARIZE

Would you argue with someone who told you that God loves people? Probably not. It's generally not questioned that God loves His creation, especially human beings, whom He created in His own image. What if someone told you that God loves you? Depending on your upbringing, this may be a difficult thought for you, but most people who believe in a personal Supreme Being (whether the God of the Bible, or otherwise) assume that this Being loves them and takes a personal interest in their lives. Now, what if someone asked you to describe God's love? Could you say what it is like? What would you compare it to? Is it merely bigger, better, and stronger than human love? Or is it something very different, a category of love that is unlike any of your usual definitions?

The trouble with the usual definitions is that culture and life experiences invariably distort your understanding of God's love and your perception of His love for you. The goal of this unit is to help clear away the cultural fog so that you understand the love of God more clearly, and realize God's personal love for you more deeply.

In our culture, love can connote many kinds of attachments, experiences, and actions including romance, passion, selflessness, sacrifice, kindness, companionship, lust, and fondness. Yet, the dominant, core understanding of love in our culture is that it is emotional and responsive, and thus conditional and changeable. This is exactly what God's love is not.

God's love is not primarily emotional, though it is not passionless, nor without intensity of feeling. It is primarily an action born of a commitment to bless the object of His love. Love is something God does, not just has. In Deuteronomy 7:7 you read that God "*set His love*" on Israel. The word is a verb, an action word indicating that God joined Himself to Israel. He entered into a covenant relationship with them for their benefit. His love for Israel flowed from His commitment to their well-being and was manifest by His actions: provision, guidance, nurture, protection, and giving Himself in personal communion with Israel. So, His love for Israel was a demonstration of His goodness, justice, and mercy toward them.

The reason God set His love on Israel is stated in 7:8, "*...because the LORD loves you.*" This sounds strange and unsatisfying to our ears. When one of us asks our beloved, "Why do you love me?" we want to hear them list the aspects of our character or appearance that they find attractive or admirable. Our romantic sensibilities long to hear how our beloved responds emotionally to us. But, if Israel were to ask God, "Why do you love me?" they would hear, "Because I do; because I chose to bring goodness to you." So, His love was not a response to something lovely or admirable in Israel. In fact, the passage makes it clear that Israel had less to recommend them to God than the other nations of the earth. Still, God set His love on Israel, making them "*the foremost of nations*" (Jeremiah 31:7), simply because He did.

This means that His love is neither conditional nor changeable. God's love is constant and faithful. It creates loveliness rather than looks for it. It flows from the fullness of God's character. It is not an empty pining for what He does not have. It does not vary in its commitment or intensity. Nor is it divorced from moral truth. It embraces His people as they are, but does not leave them as they are. His love is a holy love.

Now the question may have occurred to you, "Does God love all people the same?" Certainly, God loves all people and shows His kindness to them. Jesus made this point beyond question when He taught that God, "*...sends rain on the just and on the unjust*" (Matthew 5:45). This may explain why people typically have an innate sense of, and hope for, God's love. But the study passage in Deuteronomy 7 also reveals that God placed His love especially on Israel in a way that no other nation at that time enjoyed. The fact is, that although all people are equally undeserving of God's love, the Bible is a history of God setting His love on individuals (Noah, Abraham, David), and groups (Israel and the church) in a special way that others do not enjoy. This then raises the question of the difference between the love God demonstrates for all people, and the love He bestows on the few He calls His people. Traditionally, this distinction has been described by the terms common grace and special grace (also called saving grace).

Common grace refers to the goodness and love God shows to all people universally, regardless of their spiritual condition. This is the love described by Jesus in Matthew 5 and Luke 6. Common grace is the demonstration of God's kindness which results in the blessing and prosperity of the whole human race. All of humanity thrives, grows, and enjoys the pleasures of earthly life because of common grace. It is distributed as God wills so that the pleasures of life are enjoyed to a greater or lesser degree by different people. *This means that ungodly people may actually enjoy more of the pleasures of life than the godly. Unfortunately, the ungodly often mistake these temporal blessings for the eternal favor of God. But, common grace does not erase the effects of the fall. The power of sin is not broken and individual sins are not forgiven, though the full destructive power of sin is restrained.

Special grace refers to the goodness and love God shows only to a specific few with whom He enters into covenant relationship. This is the great love, rich mercy, and saving grace described by Paul in Ephesians 2:4-7. Special grace is redemptive. It removes the sin of the objects of this love, makes them alive in Christ, and places them in right relationship with God so that He may demonstrate the *"...immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus"* (2:7). Special grace is God's determination to bring about the eternal blessedness and holiness of His redeemed people. He commits Himself, even at great personal cost, to their eternal well-being. He bestows the goodness of His mercy on them, grants them His fatherly care and nurture, and provides them an eternal home. Paul tells us that the human mind cannot even imagine the glory of what God has prepared for His people (See 1 Corinthians 2:9).

(The chart at the end of this section may help you understand the differences between these two demonstrations of God's love.)

Who enjoys all these unimaginable privileges? We do – Christ's followers – despite the fact that we are unremarkable, unworthy, and undeserving. God took the initiative to demonstrate this special love for us when we were still unlovely: *"...while we were still sinners, Christ died for us"* (Romans 5:8). There is no greater demonstration of love than His self-sacrifice. And now we experience His love through the outpouring of His Holy Spirit. (Romans 5:5). It's as if God were a great fountain of love overflowing into the empty hearts of believers so that we experience real communion with God – an individual, personal connection with the Lover of our souls. Surely, Paul had this personal connection in mind when he wrote that Christ *"...loved me and gave himself for me"* (Galatians 2:20).

But, maybe you struggle to believe this. You want to believe God loves you in this special, personal way, but you just can't. Perhaps you were raised with so much negativism or a performance orientation from your parents that you just can't quite trust that God loves you just as you are.

If you are in Christ, be assured that He does love you more than you can imagine. And remember that His special love comes to you with no strings attached because of Christ. You cannot (and need not) earn more of it, nor can you forfeit the assurance of it. He loves you – as you are – in Christ, because of Christ, and through Christ. Your whole life, including the joys and the sorrows, are all an expression of God's tender love for you. He will grant you all the caring you need from a truly loving Father with comfort, guidance, correction, provision, nurture, protection and communion. You belong to Him. And nothing in this world or the next will change that.

Daily remember and meditate on God's love for you. A growing perception and experience of God's special love for you will motivate your devotion to Christ. It will propel your journey toward spiritual maturity. And it will empower you to introduce others to God's love. As you perceive how greatly you are loved, you will long to share it more and more.

GOD DEMONSTRATES HIS LOVE TWO WAYS

COMMON GRACE

SPECIAL GRACE

DEFINITION	God's commitment to demonstrate His goodness and justice to all people regardless of their spiritual condition.	God's commitment to demonstrate His goodness, justice, and mercy to an elect people by redeeming them from sin, and bringing them into covenant relationship with Himself.
REVEALED BY	Nature (Natural Revelation) God's natural governance of His creation that allows humanity to thrive and fill the earth.	The Gospel (Special Revelation) God's supernatural intervention in people's lives by His redemptive work in the Old and New Covenants, and especially in the person and work of Jesus Christ.
EXPERIENCED AS	The enjoyment of the temporal pleasures of life, including the fruit of our labors, the ability to build families, communities, and cultures, as well as intellectual investigation of His world and artistic expression.	The enjoyment of personal, eternal communion with God through Christ that springs from God's mercy and pardon for our sins, our adoption as His children, and His promise to bring us eternally home to Himself.
PROOF	<i>"For He makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust" (Matthew 5:45b). See also, Romans 1:19-20.</i>	<i>"God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). See also, Deuteronomy 7:7-8.</i>
EFFECT ON SIN	Infiltrates the fallen world, restraining the full effects of sin, but never contrary to justice nor removing sin's grip from the human heart.	Infiltrates the heart of believers, creating a new nature, breaking the power of sin, and counting Christ's life and death as satisfying the penalty for their sin, thus placing them in right standing with God.
PROOF	<i>"Though grace is shown to the wicked, they do not learn righteousness: even in the a land of uprightness they go on doing evil and regard not the majesty of the Lord" (Isaiah 26:10).</i>	<i>"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold the new has come" (2 Corinthians 5:17).</i>

EQUIPPING

The descriptions of God's love you studied this week may conflict with your understanding of what love is. If so, describe your struggle to accept God's love as you saw it described in the study passages and this material.

The descriptions of God's love you studied this week may conflict with your understanding of what love is. If so, describe your struggle to accept God's love as you saw it described in the study passages and this material.

Do you struggle with the idea that God loves some people differently than others? Explain.

Is it hard for you to accept that God loves you unconditionally? What about when you fail or sin? Journal about the struggles you experience.

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ACCOUNTABILITY

Before your Journey Group meeting, use the questions below to examine your life in light of the truth you explored this week.

In what ways does your life reflect the love of God to the lost world?

What difference has the special love of God made in your life?

Are you struggling to surrender any sinful habit to the control of the Holy Spirit?

What's the best way your Journey Group could help in your spiritual journey right now?

How have you attempted to impact someone on your prayer list this week?

How are you doing in developing a personal worship habit?

Did you complete the Mission assignment this week?

MISSION

14“You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. 15Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. 16In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”
Matthew 5:14-16 (ESV)

Your Mission assignments for this week are to continue building a daily habit of praying for those on your prayer list, and to continue your participation in planning for your upcoming group service project.

Now that you know what your Journey Group’s project will be, think about how this project is, or could be, a vehicle for making the gospel known. As you know, you don’t have to be a Christian to serve or give with compassion. So, how will this project be a uniquely Christian mission? How will this project serve to make the gospel of Christ known to the people receiving your service?

Use the space below to ask God to use you and your Journey Group to make the gospel of Christ known through this service project.

SUPPLICATION

“For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, 39nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Romans 8:38-39 (ESV)

God is always near ready to commune with you. Nothing can separate you from His love in Christ. He is always ready to hear the prayer of His children. He loves to listen when you pray.

My prayer request regarding the truth for this week:

My prayer request regarding a situation in my life:

My prayer request regarding living a missional life:

[illegible]

FOOTNOTES

*For an illustration of this, you need only compare the lives of John the Baptist and his murderer, King Herod. According to Jesus, John was the greatest of men and he enjoyed great favor with God (See Matthew 11:11). Yet, he enjoyed very little of the pleasures of this world. King Herod on the other hand, was a man whose personal power allowed him to enjoy all the pleasures he could imagine. Common grace enabled him to have much of this world's enjoyments, but the special grace granted to John was of far greater, eternal worth.

UNIT 3 - GOD'S FORGIVENESS

Priceless, Costly and Free

UNIT ASSIGNMENTS

☐ **COMPLETE:** Prepare for your upcoming service project

TRUTH

"If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

1 John 1:8-9

IN BIBLE

Last week, you learned about the love that God demonstrates toward all people (known as common grace) and the love God demonstrates for His people (known as special grace). You saw that God's love for His people is His unconditional determination to bring about their eternal blessedness. He offers such a gift at His own initiative, and not in response to any supposed loveliness or worthiness of His people. Therefore, you need not be consumed by the quest to perform well enough to earn God's love. Instead you can rest securely in the enjoyment of God's love. As you do this, God's love will motivate you more and more to live in deep devotion to Jesus and to share His love with those who haven't yet experienced it.

This week, you will focus on a specific expression of God's love: forgiveness of sin. God loves to forgive and His forgiveness is offered freely, though not without cost or condition. You will compare several passages of Scripture that focus either on awareness of sin or forgiveness of sin. You will see that fully experiencing and appreciating God's forgiveness depends upon having an appropriate understanding of the nature of sin as well as the depth and darkness of your own personal sins. You may find it beneficial to focus on these passages during your personal worship. If you are reading other passages for your personal worship, be sure to follow a plan such as PRAISE so that you apply the Scriptures to your life and respond to them in prayer.

Exodus 33:12-34:7 – Previous to the events in this passage, Moses had already brought the Ten Commandments to Israel on stone tablets. But Moses smashed them when he saw that Israel was worshipping the golden calf. He did this as a sign that they had already broken faith with God’s covenant. Now, as Moses receives God’s covenant stipulations a second time, God reveals His name and nature as the God of sovereign grace, mercy, and justice.

What does the phrase, “I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion,” (33:19) reveal about God’s nature?

What does 34:6-7 reveal about God’s nature?

How are God’s love and God’s forgiveness connected in these verses?

What did God mean when He said, “...forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty...” (34:7) Isn’t this a contradiction?

Psalm 32:1-5 – In this passage, David writes about the physical, psychological, and spiritual effects of concealing sin and confessing sin.

What was David's life experience when he tried to conceal his sin from God?

What was his experience when he confessed his sin to God?

Why would David try to conceal his sin rather than confess it? Think about your own life. What makes you avoid or neglect confession of specific sins?

Luke 5:1-11 – In this passage, Peter's spiritual eyes are opened to a new and disturbing reality about Jesus and about his own life.

What was revealed about Jesus in this miracle story that made Peter say to Jesus, "Go away from me..." (5:8)

What was revealed to Peter about himself? Was Peter over-reacting? As far as we know, he was a good law-abiding Jew. Was he really all that bad?

1 John 1:5-2:2 – The Apostle John wrote this letter to oppose false teachings about sin that were infiltrating the church. These doctrines arose from Greek Gnostic philosophy that claimed that special spiritual enlightenment could be received via a spiritual experience. When one received this supposed experience, the regular rules about sin and righteousness no longer applied. In this passage, John uses a series of “if...then” statements to respond to the various claims of Gnostic philosophy. Find the five “if...then” statements in these verses and write them down below.

If we say/claim

then

If we walk

then

If we say/claim

then

If we confess

then

If we say/claim

then

Look at the three verses that begin with the phrase, "If we claim..." From these, see if you can deduce the three Gnostic-inspired teachings about sin that John is trying to refute.

1

2

3

What is required in order to receive forgiveness of sins? Explain your answer.

What attitude toward sin did John want his readers to have?

TO SUMMARIZE

Perhaps it cannot be overstated that one of the most ferocious predators of personal wholeness, holiness, and happiness is guilt. Guilt can contribute to a variety of physical, spiritual, and psychological ailments. And when guilt is the root cause of these troubles, medication, meditation, and counseling can only treat the symptoms. A far more powerful remedy is needed to treat the cause. In Psalm 32:3-4, you read David's lament about the painful effects guilt had caused in his life, *"...my bones wasted away...Your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped."* These words express the bondage that David experienced due to the guilt of his sins. What restored him to wholeness? The answer is found in verse 5, *"Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the LORD' — and you forgave the guilt of my sin."* Like David, forgiveness is the priceless spiritual commodity we all need to make us whole.

As you studied Exodus this week, you read that God is a God of mercy. He delights to forgive because forgiveness is an expression of His covenant love for His people. In Exodus 34:6-7a, God revealed to Moses that He is, *"...merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin..."* This was incredibly good news for Israel since they had just committed the grievous sin of idolatry when their covenant with God was still only a few days old. It was as if a newlywed had committed adultery while on the honeymoon. Israel needed to know that God forgives sin.

Yet they also needed to know that God does not take sin lightly. He doesn't shrug it off as "no big deal." His justice must be served. Since the dawn of human history, God had revealed time and again that sin must be accounted for, and the penalty for sin must be paid. He reaffirmed this by telling Moses that He would, *"...by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation"* (34:7b). This means that God punishes sinners without exception and even allows the consequences of their sin to impact the lives of up to four generations of descendants. So how can God forgive sin and at the same time hold the guilty accountable? It sounds like there is a contradiction between God's mercy and His justice.

Of course, there are no contradictions in His character. Mercy and justice are reconciled and find harmonious expression in the offering of a sacrifice. Sacrifice is the means by which sin's penalty can be carried out on a substitute so that the sinner can receive forgiveness. In the Old Covenant, God established an elaborate, but temporary, system of animal sacrifices for Israel. Under the New Covenant, God provided His own ultimate sacrifice, Jesus, the Lamb of God. His death demonstrated the greatness of God's mercy in that Christ would die to purchase our forgiveness. But it also demonstrated the wickedness of sin in that only Christ's death could fully satisfy God's justice. This teaches us that forgiveness is not only a priceless commodity; it is exceedingly costly, as well.

Unfortunately, the biblical truth that forgiveness is priceless and costly is so easily forgotten. We usually have no trouble believing that God is a forgiving God. But we often fail to grasp how deeply and desperately we sinners need that forgiveness. Our tendency is to underestimate the number of our own sins. We misjudge the gravity of our sins. We redefine them so that we don't have to think of them as sins. All this amounts to is that we undervalue the high cost of such a priceless gift. This is a tremendous hindrance to our spiritual journey, for we will never fully experience the wonder of God's forgiveness until we appreciate the depth of our own sin. This is what Jesus taught the Pharisees when he said, *"...He who is forgiven little, loves little"* (Luke 7:47).

Consider Peter's experience with Jesus in Luke 5. It is likely that Peter was no more or less moral than any of his contemporaries. But when Jesus revealed His holy power through the miracle of an extraordinary catch of fish, look at Peter's response: *"Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord"* (5:8). Suddenly, in the presence of Jesus, he felt intense shame and guilt for his sins. And yet, that is the very moment when Jesus offered forgiveness and called Peter to follow Him. Peter's spiritual journey with Christ began as soon as the boat touched shore.

John was there with Peter that day and left his nets to follow Jesus as well. Years later, John wrote a letter to a church under his care out of concern for their attitude toward sin. Heretical teachings had crept in, spawned by Greek Gnostic philosophy. Gnosticism (from the Greek word, gnosis, meaning "knowledge") taught that everything in the physical realm was inherently evil in contrast to the inherent purity of the spiritual realm. The physical and the spiritual didn't mix; they had nothing to do with each other. This philosophy led some people in the church to deny the incarnation, saying that the divine Christ could never unite with the physical man, Jesus. Some also claimed that once a person became enlightened by a unique spiritual experience, sin would no longer be an issue affecting their spiritual lives. This gave them permission (so they thought) to indulge in whatever sinful pleasures they wanted without creating any barrier to their fellowship with God.

John tackled these mistaken beliefs in his first epistle (1 John), confronting the false teachings about sin by introducing each with the phrase, *"If we say..."* (some translations, *"If we claim..."*). He begins by reminding his readers that *"God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all"* (1:5). Light is a metaphorical way to describe God's perfect moral purity. Then John confronts the first false teaching in verse 6, *"If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth."* Gnostic influence had led some of John's readers to think that they could nurse sin in their hearts and that it would have no affect whatsoever on their spiritual lives. John's response is that any unconfessed sin raises a barrier that destroys fellowship with God. He tells them flatly that they were living a lie. God is light; He will not fellowship with those who embrace darkness.

John challenged the second false teaching in verse 8, *"If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves..."* He used the singular noun for "sin" to refer to the sinful nature, as opposed to the many sins we commit. Some believed that once they had this gnosis experience they would no longer have a sinful nature. John countered that these people were self-deceived. He wanted them to understand that denying the existence of their sin nature was a dangerous departure from the truth. John dealt with the third false teaching – that people who had this gnosis experience no longer committed any sins – in verse 10, *"If we say we have not sinned, we make Him [God] a liar..."* Here, John used the past tense verb, sinned, to indicate the sinful thoughts and behaviors that no one is exempt from. In effect, the belief that a mystical experience could make one sinless made God out to be a liar, for it was God who declared, *"...there is none who does good, not even one"* (Psalm 14:3).

Today, Gnosticism isn't a real contributor to modern Christian culture. Nevertheless, the false teachings it spawned still creep into churches, distorting truth, and leading many Christians down precarious paths. It's not uncommon to meet those who believe they can continue to live in direct disobedience to God's Word and still enjoy His fellowship. People have an amazing ability to selectively disregard almost any of God's laws, yet justify their behavior on the grounds of their supposed closeness with Him. As long as they try to be faithful and obedient in most areas, they expect God to wink at the "few harmless liberties" they take. There are also those today who deny the existence of the sin nature. They may deny it altogether or claim that it gets removed after a particular experience. Some will even claim to be able to live completely free of sin.

The Bible says these are all lies that will keep people from becoming mature followers of Christ. A critical milestone on the path toward maturity is the realization that harboring unconfessed sin – any sin – destroys your fellowship with God. You must also accept that sin is pervasive; a nature within you that infected every part of your being, ruling over you and driving your sinful life until its power was broken by special grace. Until you acknowledge the true extent and nature of your own personal sinfulness, you will never fully appreciate or appropriately experience God's forgiveness. God's Spirit spoke through John, *"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness"* (1:9). The link is unmistakable; forgiveness is offered on the condition of confession.

John revealed his purpose in writing so directly to this church: *"I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. He is the propitiation [the sacrifice that removes God's wrath] for our sins..."* (2:1-2a) His goal was not to have them wallow without hope in their guilt. Rather, He wanted them to understand the enormity of their need, so that they would hope in Jesus Christ alone. He is the sinless advocate pleading on their behalf before God. But Jesus doesn't plead their innocence. He acknowledges their guilt and pleads His work on the cross as grounds for their acquittal.

What does this mean to you? How will you respond? Will you entertain and shelter the sins, however small, that drove a stake through your Master's hand? Will you redefine sinful attitudes or behaviors so that you don't have to think of them as sin? Or will you learn the spiritual value of self-examination, confession, and repentance?

You may have heard forgiveness described as a free gift of God's grace. This is so true. God loves to forgive and He will forgive all your sins as He promised. You can rely on His faithfulness. But never forget that the free gift of God was purchased at the cost of His perfect Son. His was the only life that could pay the debt for your sin. Forgiveness was a costly gift you never could have earned. That's what makes it priceless.

EQUIPPING

Christians can sometimes fall into two very different attitudes toward sin that are both spiritually unhealthy. They may take sin too lightly, being dismissive about their sinfulness. Or they may be overwhelmed by guilt and worry that God could not or would not forgive them. If you have ever held either of these attitudes toward sin, take a few minutes to journal honestly about it here.

[illegible]

ACCOUNTABILITY

Before your Journey Group meeting, use the questions below to examine your life in light of the truth you explored this week.

Are you aware of any unconfessed sin in your life right now?

Are you able to trust that God's forgiveness is offered freely to you?

How has the truth you studied this week impacted your spiritual life? Explain.

Were you filled with the Spirit this week? (Recall that being filled with the Spirit means surrendering control of your life to the Holy Spirit, and repenting whenever you become aware that you have taken back control.)

Do you care about the eternal destiny of other people? Explain your answer.

Describe your most satisfying recent experience in personal worship.

**Describe how your spiritual journey has progressed in the past few months.
What has aided or hindered your progress?**

MISSION

Your Mission assignments for this week are to continue building a daily habit of praying for those on your prayer list, and to continue your participation in planning for your upcoming group service project.

Have you found your heart and mind growing in anticipation, or dread, of your group's project? Use the space below to write about how your thinking has developed over the past several weeks.

Now ask God to motivate and empower you with the gospel of love that He demonstrated to you in Christ. Ask Him to make you a conduit of His love to the least and the lost.

SUPPLICATION

"Then He said to them, 'Suppose one of you has a friend, and goes to him at midnight and says to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves; 6for a friend of mine has come to me from a journey, and I have nothing to set before him'; 7and from inside he answers and says, 'Do not bother me; the door has already been shut and my children [b]and I are in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.' 8I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his persistence he will get up and give him as much as he needs."

Luke 11:5-8 (NASB)

God loves to hear from you. Don't be shy. Be bold. Jesus taught us to be persistent in prayer.

My prayer request regarding the truth for this week:

My prayer request regarding a situation in my life:

My prayer request regarding living a missional life:

[illegible]