

Community Group Formation and Launch

What is Community?

Biblical community is a group of people committed to following God and loving one another in the context of deep, authentic relationships.

When we say “community,” we are talking about people who are

- Committed to meeting regularly- we suggest weekly (Hebrews 10:24-25)
- Desiring to grow in godliness and help you do the same (Ephesians 4:15)
- Devoted to knowing God’s Word and applying it to every area of life (2 Timothy 3:16-17)
- Under the authority of godly leadership in a healthy local church (Hebrews 3:17)

Why do you need it?

God created you to be in relationships. In Genesis 2:18, after God made man in his image, he said that it wasn’t good for him to be alone.

Whether you are someone who enjoys your independence, someone who regularly struggles with feelings of loneliness, or someone who lands somewhere in between, God never meant for you to be alone! God created everyone with a need for relationships. When Jesus walked the earth, he said the two greatest commands in Scripture are to love God and love others. Through Jesus, we can all have a relationship with God. Through God’s design for community, we can also have a deep and meaningful relationship with other Christians.

Isolation is dangerous. Isolation is a breeding ground for destructive thoughts and harmful choices (Proverbs 18:1). You have an enemy, Satan, who wants to see you fail (1 Peter 5:8). By separating yourself from God’s people, you are making yourself an easier target. When left to yourself, it’s easier for the enemy to deceive you. But when you are consistently surrounded by God’s people, they can be voices of reason against harmful thoughts, emotions and decisions.

You may be surrounded by people and still feel completely isolated. God wants more for you than shallow relationships that lack authentic connection. He wants you to experience the freedom that comes from being courageously vulnerable and trusting him with your reputation. He designed you to be fully known and fully loved.

You are worth loving and knowing. God loves you fully and loves you. He’s not ashamed of you and he doesn’t require that you “clean yourself up” before coming to him. Part of the way he wants to show his love is through his people. Opening up to others can be hard, especially if you have been hurt in the past. But one goal of

community is to create a safe place where each member can be open, honest, and accepted.

God loves you fully- despite the messy parts- whether or not you believe it. No matter who you are or what you have done, you are worth loving and knowing!

Life is better together. God's Word says that two are better than one (Ecclesiastes 4:9-10). Everyone has different strengths and different weaknesses. You have gifts that can complement other's weaknesses and likewise, they have gifts that can complement yours. God made each of you that way so that, together, you would more effectively represent him to the world around you (1 Corinthians 12:27).

No matter how awesome you are, there are parts of your life that you cannot clearly see on your own. Others can see these "blind spots" more clearly than you. A great way to grow is to find people that are willing to be honest with you about areas for growth that they see in your life. Plus, it is much more fun to go through the ups and downs of life with people who love you. Without question, you are better with the help of others.

Are you ready?

The following core values of community come directly from God's Word so that you can thrive in your relationship with him. Since God created you and knows what's best for you, his words are worth taking seriously. God wants you to experience the full life for which he created you. Pursue him alongside others and you just might grow together to love him more. Let's get started!

Pursue Relationally

*Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor.
Romans 12:10*

Friendships are forged, not found.

Whether you realize it or not, as you are forming community, you will be walking in with expectations. Maybe your expectations for your relationships in community have been shaped by popular TV show or existing friendship. We often have expectations that relationships will be easy and effortless; people will meet, immediately click and become best friends. It is possible for this to happen in a community group, but it is more the exception than the rule.

In community, Jesus is the glue that bonds you. Initially, you may have to work harder to connect with some member of your group. Working hard to connect with someone is not a sign that something is wrong! God is strategic in bringing people together. If someone is different than you, it's likely you can learn things from that person that you wouldn't learn otherwise. You will need to work to really get to know the people in your group to form deep friendships.

A part of fulfilling God's commandment to love him and love others is meeting people right where they are regardless of whether it feels easy or difficult. This means that you need to be intentional to learn about the members in your group and work to build friendships because you have the most important thing in your lives in common- Jesus.

Jesus modeled how to pursue relationships with people by leaving the comfort of heaven to come to earth. He pursued you and died for you while you rebelling against him and uninterested in a relationship with him (Romans 5:8).

True community is forged by choosing to walk through life's ups and downs with people who desire to follow God. You don't "find" community, you forge it. Like Christ pursues a relationship with you despite your shortcomings, interests, and personality quirks, you too can pursue relationships with the imperfect members of your community group.

Healthy community is also missional community! One thing we can say about life is that it is rarely static. The same can be said for community. Changes will happen in your group from time to time. Someone may move away, a person or couple might feel led to start another group, or maybe your group has some space and can add more people. Our groups are never meant to be a "holy huddle" or "click". Our hearts should reflect the heart of Jesus and should be on the lookout for ways to invite others in when we are able. Every single one of us has been invited in to the blessing of community so we should invite others in when we can. Group dynamics may change, it may take some time to develop trust and authenticity, but giving others the blessing of community is ALWAYS worth it!

Practical ways to pursue relationally

Get creative when it comes to building relationships with people in your community. Though the possibilities are endless, here are a few tips to get you started:

Spend time together. When Christians first began gathering together as a community, people devoted themselves to teaching, learning, fellowship (connecting in friendship), sharing meals together, and praying together (Acts 2:42).

Choose a regular meeting time when you and your group members share what you are learning in God's Word, confess your struggles, process your day to day life, counsel one another with scripture, and pray together,

In addition to the scheduled group time, pursue the members of your community group outside of that meeting time. Text, go to lunch, have coffee. Ask each other questions about life, family, the past, what you are currently going through and other intentional conversation topics.

Have fun. Following Jesus shouldn't be boring! If it is, you are doing it wrong. Jesus is far from boring, and Christians should follow suit. God's Word says there is a time for everything, including laughter and fun (Ecclesiastes 3:1, 4).

Be serious about growing in your faith, but also make time to enjoy each other, have fun, and create memories. Building relational trust with one another through the fun times will make those serious conversations easier. Community isn't a business relationship, it's a friendship. Life together is hard, and it's even harder when you only focus on the hard things (Philippians 4:8).

You can make almost anything fun. Be creative! Here are a few ideas: try a new restaurant, play a game of basketball, go to a movie, have family fun nights complete with minute to win it games for the kids, hike a trail, go to the park, have play dates with your kids, and make s'mores around a campfire. The possibilities are endless!

Find ways to show your care. Jesus was radically committed to caring for people. Early Christians were, too. This Christ-like care is not the kind of passive care that communicates to someone, "let me know if you need anything," forgets about it and goes back to everyday life. Rather it is proactive care that recognizes a need and prioritizes finding a way to meet it. This can be as simple as showing up to be with someone who is hurting, writing a note to someone in your group who needs encouragement, or offering a listening ear to someone who needs to talk things out. It can be as elaborate as giving up something that you own because someone else needs it more (Acts 2:45), helping pay someone's rent who was recently laid off from work, or attending a funeral as moral support. Make it a priority to pray and be on the lookout for needs in your group that you can meet! Even little acts of kindness go a long way to let others know you care.

Become a student of each other. Not everyone is like you. That seems simple, but you'd be surprised at how much conflict can come from expecting people to respond or feel cared for in the same ways that make you feel loved.

Learn about the people in your group. What do they like? How do they best receive criticism? What encourages them? How do they feel loved? What discourages them?

Don't expect people to be perfect. Even if you are living in a biblical community the right way, it will be messy. You'll get a clear look at your own sin struggles, pitfalls and areas for growth, and quirks. You'll get to see these things in others, too. But the messiness of sinful people in committed relationships provides an opportunity to model God's love to one another. This kind of love isn't dependent on performance or approval, but rather on the love that Christ has shown to all of us.

Jesus said that it's not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick (Matthew 9:12). Perfect people don't need community, and no matter what your mom told you, you are not perfect. Like to rest of the world you need Jesus. Knowing this allows you to bear with people in their imperfections. Since you are not perfect, you should not expect others to be perfect.

Help make your group a safe place by confessing your shortcomings first. Ask others to help you overcome areas of sin in your life and don't enable others in their sins. Be committed to help one another fully follow Christ in all areas of life. Be committed to following Jesus and growing in godliness together.

Recap

Pursue relationships with people even when it is difficult. Initiate with others rather than expecting them to initiate with you. Appreciate differences by becoming a student of one another. Have fun. Care for one another. Be committed to growing in full devotion to Christ together. Do these things even when no one is doing them for you. Pursue friends because Jesus pursues you.

Reflection

1. Have you ever experienced biblical community as described in this chapter? Does this type of biblical community make you excited or apprehensive?
2. Are you naturally someone who initiates in relationships or do you wait for others to come to you? What will be the biggest roadblock to pursuing people in your life? How can you overcome that?
3. Do your expectations of community tend to be more idealist or messy?
4. Let's get to know each other by answering the following questions:
 - What are some of your favorite things to do?
 - What kind of things encourage you? What kinds of things discourage you?

- If someone needed to have a hard conversation with you, how would you best receive that?
- How would you describe your overall personality?
- What are some things about your personality that can be frustrating to others?
- What fears do you have about being fully known by others?

Live Authentically

Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. James 5:16

How are you doing...really?

Christianity has earned a bad reputation over the years because many Christians have settled for "playing church." You show up on Sunday with a smile, and when someone asks you how you are doing, you say, "I'm good," even though life is actually really messy. The truth is, many people who put on a smile are really falling apart inside,

Not everyone who wears a smile is hiding something. Maybe you really are "fine." Or you could be like many others who show up at church Sunday after Sunday, but during the week they deny, numb, or escape their pain through various means. Often, it seems easier to go through the motions of looking "fine" than opening up your life to be truly known by others. What is God wants something different for his people? What if church was a place to be fully known and fully loved? What if church was a place where you could experience freedom, healing, and no more shame?

A healthy biblical community can help you realize that you do not have to be perfect to be accepted. You can be fully known and fully loved. God wants his people to be a means of grace and mercy to those who are willing to live authentically (Proverbs 28:13).

Bring it into the light

Rigorous honesty takes courage. There is always the risk of rejection when you open up and share vulnerably about sins, fears, hopes, dreams, and hurts. The truth is you can't hide anything from God. He already knows it and loves you perfectly. But if you desire to experience God's love, grace, healing, and acceptance in a tangible way, God has provided a way through his people. The Church is called the "hands and feet" of Christ.

The truth is that many people have secrets that they've sworn they'll take to the grave and never tell a soul. Many hide under the guise that they are just "a private person." But the reason privacy is important might be because it feels safer to hide things than to open up and be vulnerable about the difficulties of life.

If you are hiding or holding something back, it's time to be courageous. It's time to be completely honest with God's people and give them the opportunity to love you fully. They probably won't do it perfectly, but do not believe the lie that "if people knew THAT, no one would accept you."

God tells us that we need to confess our sins to him (1 John 1:9) and to one another (James 5:16). Some people think you need a priest or a counselor to truly confess, but Scripture says that other Christians who love you and are devoted to Jesus are qualified to care for you and pray for you. Isolation keeps you a slave to sin and shame. Step into the light so that you can find the healing and freedom God wants for you. What you conceal won't heal.

How to confess

There's no specific formula for confession, but here are a few pointers that will help.

Confess early. It's been said, "Sin will take you farther than you want to go, keep you longer than you want to stay, and cost you more than you want to pay." The earlier you confess, the better off you are and the less likely you are to make excuses for your sin. Just like weeding a garden gets harder the longer it is neglected, confession becomes more difficult as more time passes. Silence allows sin to grow, so share as soon as possible when you become aware of a sin. Don't hide it. Don't wait until everything is figured out and under control to be honest with your community.

Confessing sin quickly helps keep you from slipping deeper into it. For example, confessing lustful thoughts may be the very thing that prevents you from reaching out for pornography. Sin never stops growing when left in the dark (James 1:15). Confessing sin at the thought level can keep you from taking action on the temptation.

For ongoing sin struggles, make a plan ahead of time for confession and repentance. Commit to confessing within minutes or hours of the sin. Have someone regularly ask you how you are doing in that area and be ready to share details. But don't wait until someone asks you how you are doing.

Confess often. Make confession a regular practice when you meet with your community. Use your group meeting as an intentional time to confess, but also connect with members of your group throughout the week to share, even if you feel like you are always the one confessing. If you aren't sure what to confess, ask yourself the following questions:

- Are there any choices I made today that didn't honor God?
- If my thoughts were on a movie reel, what would I be ashamed of someone seeing?

- If I could see Jesus standing next to me, what would I not have done?
- Did my thoughts, attitudes, and actions today reflect pride, anger, fear, insecurity, or another heart issue?

When you are confessing sin, discuss what you think led to the sin. If you aren't sure of the reasons, ask others for help to examine the desires that drove your decision. Talk about the inner need you tried to fill. Talk about what was happening in the time leading up to your sin. With your community, try to identify the root issue of the sin, so it can be pulled out of your life altogether.

Confess in detail. Share as much detail as you can remember about the sin as long as you are not causing the listeners to be tempted. Sharing details will help release you from feelings of shame and keep you from "managing information" (confessing only parts of your sin rather than the whole truth). Holding back details can hinder you from identifying sin patterns that need to be addressed and keep you from experiencing the freedom God has for you.

I confessed- now what?

After you confess, you'll likely feel a weight lifted off your shoulders. Praise God! The next step is to repent, which means to actively turn away from the sin you confessed (Proverbs 28:13). This is when following Jesus becomes a reality. To experience the freedom God offers, you need to not just turn from your sin, but go a completely different direction (2 Timothy 2:22).

After you confess a sin, come up with a plan to change. Set up protective measures that will guard you from making the same mistake again. For a recurring sin struggle, you may need to take steps that feel extreme in order to run away from sin and begin healthy new practices to fully follow Jesus (Matthew 5:30). For example, if you struggle with looking at pornography, you may need to get rid of your smart phone or home computer and plan a bible study with others during the time when you are routinely tempted.

The last step is to move forward. The Bible says that when righteous people fall, they get back up and keep going (Proverbs 24:16). By God's grace and the power of the Holy Spirit, you can move past what you have done and press on toward Christ (Philippians 3:13-14), confident that there is nothing you could ever do to make God stop loving you (Romans 8:38-39).

What to do when someone confesses

Pray. When someone in your group confesses sin, the first thing the Bible tells you to do is pray for healing (James 5:16). Ask that God would heal that person and restore any relationships that may have been hurt by the sin. Pray for protection and strengthening against further temptation. Thank God that Christ paid for that specific sin and offers healing and freedom. Celebrate the fact that God is working in their heart.

Listen well and respond with kindness. Thank the person for sharing and encourage that person from God's Word. It is easy for people to become overwhelmed by shame over their sin or harm that they have caused others. Be a reassuring voice that echoes God's healing and grace (Psalm 34:5).

Sometimes, when someone confesses, it is that person's first big, vulnerable, step of courage. But there may be more steps to take. He or she may leave out necessary details for fear of being "too much." Give that person the opportunity to take more steps of courage after you have affirmed and encouraged the first step. Ask if there is anything else to confess. Leave the door open for that person to tell you more details.

Be wise. If someone starts a confession with, "I want to tell you something, but you can't tell anyone," kindly let that person know that you will not promise to keep secrets. Though you should never gossip, it can be harmful to keep secrets when someone is in danger or a threat to others, Instead of making that promise, communicate that you want to honor God's will and to love the person through any circumstance.

Building trust takes time and effort

Most people don't go out of their way to share their struggles. Thankfully, there are things you can do to help people feel more comfortable confiding in you. These all come down to the same simple truth- be trustworthy. Commit to being someone who builds trust with others.

Do not gossip about what people share with you. Do not speak poorly of anyone or listen passively while other do. When others share with you, actively listen and respond with love and kindness. Do the hard work ahead of time to build trust and make your group a safe place where people feel comfortable to share.

Recap

Confess and find healing. Repent and find freedom. Confess early, often, and in detail. God loves you and knows what's best for you. Make the courageous choice to let other people into your struggles, sins, and hurts. Together with a group of Christ-followers, make a plan to help you walk in God's will. Address what happened in your heart and mind to lead you to sin. Look to God for healing and restoration, Draw on God's strength to help you replace sin with godly habits. Rely on the people in your community to help you though the pain that comes from consequences of sin. Create an environment in your community where confession is consistent, expected, and responded to in a loving way.

Reflection

1. When have you felt comfortable sharing a real struggle with someone? What made that person feel safe to you?
2. Has someone in your past broken trust with you after you shared something personal? How did you respond to that broken trust?

3. What excites or scares you about giving someone permission to see the real you?
4. How convinced are you that you need to confess your sin and struggles with others in your community group? If you're not comfortable with that idea, what steps can you take to prepare your heart?
5. Is there anything you are currently struggling with that God is calling you to share or confess?

Counsel Biblically

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be equipped for every good work. 2 Timothy 3:13-17

The Bible > opinion and experience

It's been said, "If you want to hear God speak, you should read the Bible out loud." When you read the Bible, you are not reading stale truths written down thousands of years ago, but the very words of God spoken to you today.

Unfortunately, when it comes to friends asking for advice, it's much easier to tell people what they want to hear or counsel them based on your own experience. Many well-meaning people give bad advice that seems good at the time. But to truly care for the people in your group, you should resist the urge to rely on your own wisdom or worldly wisdom and instead trust that God knows best. His thoughts are not our thoughts, and his ways are not our ways (Isaiah 55:8-9). Because his wisdom is greater than yours, try not to simply try to use Scripture to support your own opinions, let Scripture *inform* your opinions and guide your counsel. The health of your community depends on each person's resolve to understand counsel from, and apply what the Bible says about everyday situations.

Because God is perfectly good, he has your best interests in mind, and every part of his Word can be trusted. Because of God's goodness and wisdom, it is in your best interest to surrender all areas of your life to him, keeping nothing off limits to God and his Word.

You can do it

The Bible celebrates when Christians instruct one another biblically (Romans 15:4). You might not feel qualified to counsel someone biblically, but if you have a Bible, you have the words of God so you are qualified. Simply be a student of God's Word. If you don't

know the answers right away, just ask the question, "What does the Bible say about this?" Then, search for the answers together during group time; or instead of giving counsel right away, give yourself time to research a topic and come back later with God's perspective drawn from his Word.

Just like anything else, growing your understanding of the Bible takes time, commitment, and practice. Don't settle for counseling from your own opinions just because you don't know much of God's Word. Everyone starts somewhere! Pray and ask God to guide you. Commit to memorizing verses and even passages of scripture that apply to areas of your life in which you need help. Many times, those passages will be useful for others as well.

If you are a follower of Christ, you have everything you need for life and godliness (2 Peter 1:3). So don't be lazy or give up because you have a lot to learn! If you have God's Spirit and God's Word, you can counsel biblically.

How to counsel biblically

Read the Bible in context. If you don't understand the proper context of a verse or passage in Scripture, you run the risk of misunderstanding and misapplying it. Knowing the context means knowing important facts about what you are reading. The author of the book, the time period when it was written, the original audience, and what's happening before and after that verse help determine the meaning of the passage. There are many resources available to help you understand and correctly apply God's Word (study Bibles, Bible commentaries, websites, and similar resources). If you don't know where to start, ask some mature Christians about how they study God's Word. Also, don't forget to ask God to help you. Pray he would help you understand and apply his Word.

Speak the truth in love. It's been said that there are two responses required in hard conversations- especially those conversations when a friend is hurting or struggling with sin. The first is a pastoral response filled with kindness, patience, and empathy, such as, "Thank you for sharing. That sounds really hard. I'm so sorry you're going through that." The second is a biblical response to direct people back to the truth of God's Word in a loving way, like, "May I share with you something from God's Word that challenged me in that area of my life?" Both responses are necessary in caring for people with truth and love. If you always respond with a verse from the Bible without communicating that you care, it can be interpreted that you are insensitive and unsafe. If you only respond with sensitivity and never share truth from God's Word, you're not actually helping people turn from sin. Speak the truth. And do so with love (Ephesians 4:15).

Love without truth is not love at all, and truth without love falls on deaf ears. Don't shy away from sharing truth from God's Word at the appropriate time, but also consider how to communicate in a tone and manner that lets the person receiving counsel know that you care.

Learn to receive it yourself. One of the best ways to show that you are a safe, loving friend is to be humble when receiving biblical counsel yourself. The Bible is full of encouragement to listen to counsel even when it is difficult, like when sin is revealed in your own life. Proverbs 9:8 says, “Do not reprove a scoffer, or he will hate you; reprove a wise man, and he will love you.”

There will be times when counsel you receive from others is not what you hope to hear. When you receive wise counsel from God’s Word, try to humbly accept the truth, rather than respond with defensiveness. Why wouldn’t you listen to God’s wisdom given for your benefit from people who love you enough to share it with you?

Plan on how you will respond when someone from your group shares a hard truth with you. Resolve not to point out the other person’s flaws or try to justify your actions. Be humble to listen and trust the heart of the one communicating God’s Word. If you are uncertain of the counsel given, thank the person and ask for time to consider what that person has shared with you. Lay your pride aside and submit yourself to God’s Word and the counsel of others. Even try going a step further to ask for biblical counsel as it applies to your life. Thank the people in your life who are willing to share (Proverbs 27:6).

Live in Freedom

The Christian life doesn’t stop with just knowing and receiving God’s Word. To experience the abundant life God has for you, you must be willing to apply it! As you’re reading, ask yourself, “How can I make God’s will a reality in my life?” or “How should I live differently because of what I just read?”

If you claim to know God, but don’t read or apply his Word, you are settling for less than God’s best. You might even be heading for destruction. God has given you a guidebook- use it! Pay attention to what Jesus says in Matthew 7:24-27: “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it.”

Some people become hesitant to share with others what the Bible says on a given topic because they, too, have sin in that part of their lives. So prayerfully examine your own life first before pointing out the same issue in someone else’s life (Matthew 7:4-5). Don’t shy away from sharing just because you also need to grow. Apply God’s Word to your own life and ask the other person to grow in that area of life with you.

Always remember, God loves you. He is not trying to keep you from something good; he wants to set you free.

Recap

It's easy to counsel based on your own opinions and experiences, but that is dangerous. Don't rely on "worldly wisdom," but seek God's Word on a matter before you give advice. Read and apply the Bible's instructions to your own life and commit to grow in how you counsel with Scripture. Invite others to counsel you biblically. Check the counsel you receive with Scripture. Can it be supported by what the Bible says? God loves you and has an abundant life planned for you. The key to unlocking this abundant life is reading, studying, and living out his Word in every area of your life. It can feel overwhelming if you have a lot to learn, but remember everyone starts somewhere! With God's Word, his Spirit and his people, you have everything you need for life and godliness.

Reflection

1. Do you trust that God has wisdom for every area of your life? Do you believe that his wisdom is greater than yours? Does the way that you counsel and apply God's Word accurately reflect your answer to those questions?
2. Are there areas of your life that you are not fully surrendered to God? What is keeping you from understanding and applying God's Word in those areas?
3. The health of a community group largely depends on the biblical dependence of its members. How does this motivate you to grow in your own relationship with Christ?
4. Have you ever counseled someone based on God's Word? If so, what was that experience like? Do you have fears or concerns about giving or receiving biblical counsel?

Admonish Faithfully

Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. Colossians 3:16

Be the friend who tells the truth

Have you ever gotten food in your teeth, but no one told you? You went to the restroom hours after you ate and realized a piece of pepper was in your teeth just hanging out? How long had you been walking around like that? Or have you ever noticed that someone had food in his teeth and debated telling him? It is awkward if you point it out, but it is also awkward if he figures it out on his own and realizes that you didn't tell him.

Similarly, whenever you notice a character flaw or sin pattern in someone else's life, you may debate whether to point it out. As you read the Bible, you will learn that God calls his followers to help each other mature in godliness and to "sharpen" one another's character (Proverbs 27:17). Specifically, God wants you to lovingly "admonish" sins in fellow Christians. By taking the initiative to admonish a friend, you help your friend grow in his or her relationship with Jesus.

When you allow Bible-believing Christians to continue to live in rebellion, you not only hurt that individual, but you can unintentionally play a part in how that sin hurts other people. Think about it. How many "Christians" do you know who give Christianity a bad reputation? Unaddressed sin causes non-Christians to think, "Christians are so hypocritical." Lots of people don't understand Christianity, because Christians, they think, fail "to practice the goodness that they preach."

In reality, not one Christian is perfect and everyone sins (Roman 3:23). We are all hypocritical at times. But it is important for us to continue to grow to be more like Christ,

to know him more for ourselves, and to reflect Christ to the world. While talking about each other's sins can be awkward or intimidating, your community group will find that, in the end, dealing with sin is worth the discomfort.

Call them up, not out

The word admonish in Colossians 3:16 means to earnestly advise, urge or redirect someone toward God's best. Before you start using this verse as a license to tell everyone how sinful they are, know that the kind of admonishment the Bible talks about does not come from hurt, anger, or a need to prove who is right. Biblical admonishment is always for the purpose of helping someone be the man or woman God wants that person to become. When admonishment is given lovingly and received graciously, it can resolve conflict, diffuse stress, and help everyone involved become more like Jesus.

Biblical admonishment is less about calling people out, and more about calling them up. When you see things in other believers' lives that aren't in line with God's Word, you are serving them by bringing it to their attention. By gently correcting them, you are showing that you care enough to remind them of what is true and helping them see blind spots. You're challenging them to rise to God's standards instead of sinking to the world's low expectations (Ephesians 4:1-2).

Tips for admonishing

Don't just modify behavior. Admonishment is warning people who are not aligned with God's Word in a specific area of life so they can course-correct before further damage occurs. Admonishment shouldn't be an attempt to control their behavior. Instead, it should help them to see blind spots or weaknesses and address the heart issues underneath. Actions flow from the heart (Mark 7:21-23), so ask questions that can help search for a root cause rather than just telling people to do better. Care about their relationships with Jesus and others more than anything else.

Call them to more. The purpose behind admonishment is not to remind people of the mistakes but to help them reach their potential! As Christians, we are called to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord (Colossians 1:10). That's a high calling- an honorable one. Instead of just blurting out that people need to grow, remind them they are children of the King, forgiven, set apart for a divine purpose as followers of Christ. When you do point out an area of growth, remind them you're sharing because you know they want to be more like Christ.

Be sensitive. Admonishment should be delivered with patience, grace, and compassion. Remember, you're calling that person up! Seek to understand, rather than just communicating how he or she is wrong. Ask great questions and assume the best, but don't compromise the truth! When you're ready to admonish someone, consider when you say it and how you say it. In other words, be mindful of appropriate timing, tone, and delivery. Think through how that person best receives admonishment.

Check your own heart. Before admonishing someone, ask yourself a few questions:

- Do I actually need to admonish this person?
- Is this person struggling with a sin issue- something that is affecting this person's relationship with God and others- or is this something that is just bothersome to me?
- What is my motive in admonishing this person? Is it love for the person and for Christ?
- Have I encouraged this person more than I have admonished?
- When would be the best time to admonish this person?

Work hard to build trust with people in your community group before you act on an opportunity to admonish them. When they know you love them, they will be more likely to hear and receive hard feedback.

Be fully honest. Admonishing someone takes courage. Even though you have good intentions, when face-to-face, you may be tempted to shy away from sharing the whole truth to keep the peace. Avoid peace-faking. Do not backtrack or excuse sin if the person becomes defensive. Even with subjects that you would rather avoid, it's important to share the whole truth.

Make encouragement a habit

With all this talk about admonishment, it is extremely important to also encourage each other (Hebrews 3:13). It is easy to know people love you when they continually remind you that they are rooting for you. People have a hard time receiving admonishment when they are not sure you have their best interests in mind. If the person you are admonishing knows you are trustworthy, that person is more likely to listen and apply what you have to say.

Life can be hard. Make a regular practice of encouraging and celebrating the good things you see in your community group members. Tell them specific reasons you're thankful for them and how you see God working through them.

Don't give up

Sometimes people have a difficult time receiving biblical counsel and do not want to address the sin in their lives. If that is the case, do not give up right away. Someone's resistance to admonishment doesn't end your responsibility to love that person, so do not let the resistance become an excuse to sit on the sidelines. If someone is not ready to receive biblical counsel or address the sin, your loving admonishment can turn into a prayerful warning, a gracious rebuke, or even a strong correction (1 Thessalonians 5:14a).

Remember, the motivation behind admonishment should always be love so that the other person might grow in Christ. God is patient, slow to anger, and abounding in loving-kindness (Psalm 103:8). His kindness is what leads someone to repentance (Romans 2:4b). As you admonish and seek to restore one another from sin, do it with a gentle attitude (Galatians 6:1).

If a person responds negatively to biblical counsel and your discussion turns into a fight, that isn't the end for your group. Conflict is an opportunity for your group to love one another and grow closer together. Don't stop when things get tough.

A healthy group commits to respond to conflict according to biblical principles like these:

- Keep short accounts, don't let your anger turn into a grudge (Ephesians 4:26).
- Look at your own heart; are you able to clearly see your own faults (Matthew 7:3-5)?
- Go and show your brother his error (Matthew 18:15). Use God's Word!
- Go and be reunited (Matthew 5:23-24).

There may be painful sparks as you sharpen each other (Proverbs 27:17), but if your group commits to believe the best in one another and respond to conflict according to the biblical principle above, you will grow closer, honor God, and deepen your relationships with Christ.

Respond well to admonishment

It is natural for all of us to respond to a painful truth by defending ourselves. When someone points out a sin or area for growth in your life, try to respond humbly and receive it as constructive feedback from a friend who cares about you. Even if a friend imperfectly delivers that painful truth, it still may be the truth you need to hear.

Here are some common defense strategies that often appear when sin is confronted:

- Withdrawal (shutting down, ending the discussion, or leaving the conversation).
- Escalation (adding fuel to the fire, responding with anger and intensity).
- Negative interpretation (assuming the worst, assigning motive that may not be the speaker's intent).
- Invalidiation (denying the significance of what the person is sharing).

When you start to feel yourself responding in one of the above ways, ask for a minute to gather yourself and pray for God to give you ears to hear. When God readies you, try to receive biblical admonishment with humility, gentleness, patience, and love (Ephesians 4:2-3).

Recap

God is good. He loves you and has your best interests in mind. Admonishment is part of his plan to make you more like him. To accomplish this purpose, he will use others in your life to help you see areas for growth. Likewise, he has called you to admonish other Christians faithfully as you see their sin, blind spots, and areas for growth. Admonishment is never meant to cut others down or control their behavior. Loving admonishment done with gentleness and respect serves to help a friend become more like Christ. Receive admonishment with humility even when it hurts and choose to resolve conflict.

Reflection

1. In what areas of life do you need a friend's admonishment? Ask someone else what areas of your life could look more like Jesus.
2. Have you ever admonished someone before? How did it go?
3. Have you ever noticed sin in another Christian's life and wanted to say something but didn't?
4. What, if anything, will hold you back from speaking the truth to others?
5. How do you typically respond when someone says something to you that is not easy to hear? Are you defensive? Do you withdraw? Do you turn it back on that person? Or do you receive it with humility regardless of whether you agree?

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