



FIRST LOVE

BUILDING GOSPEL-CENTERED RELATIONSHIPS

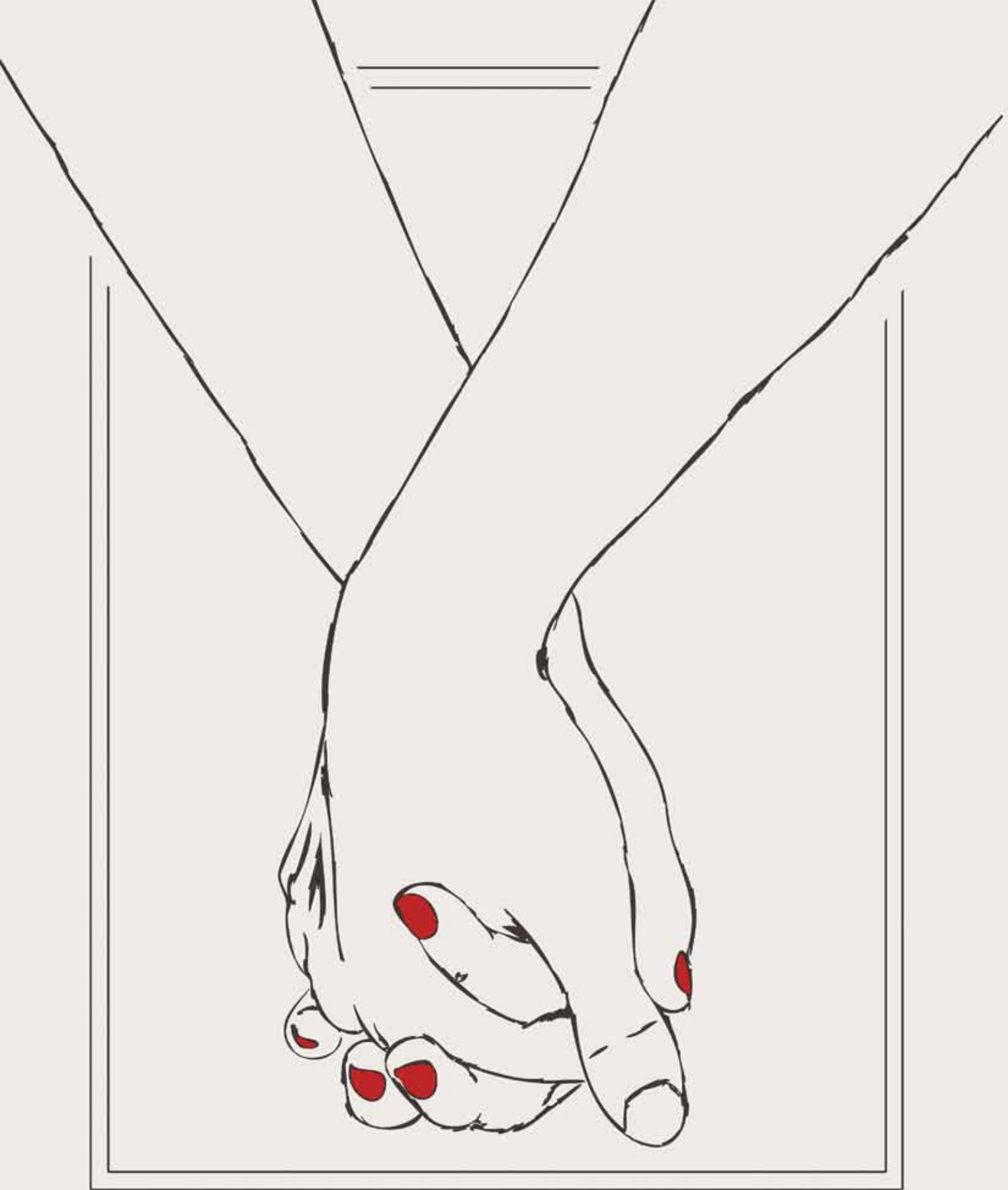
FIRST LOVE

BUILDING GOSPEL-CENTERED RELATIONSHIPS (EPH. 5:21-32)

SMALL GROUP STUDY GUIDE

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INTRODUCTION: WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS GUIDE

In an era of church splits, high divorce-rates, frequent job-turnover, and sports free agency – our culture is prone to lack a strong level of commitment that it once had. Thus, it is time for the Church to address relationships and the spiritual elements that make them function well. The gospel has much to say about how to conduct our relationships, so it is with great anticipation that we start our series called “First Love.”

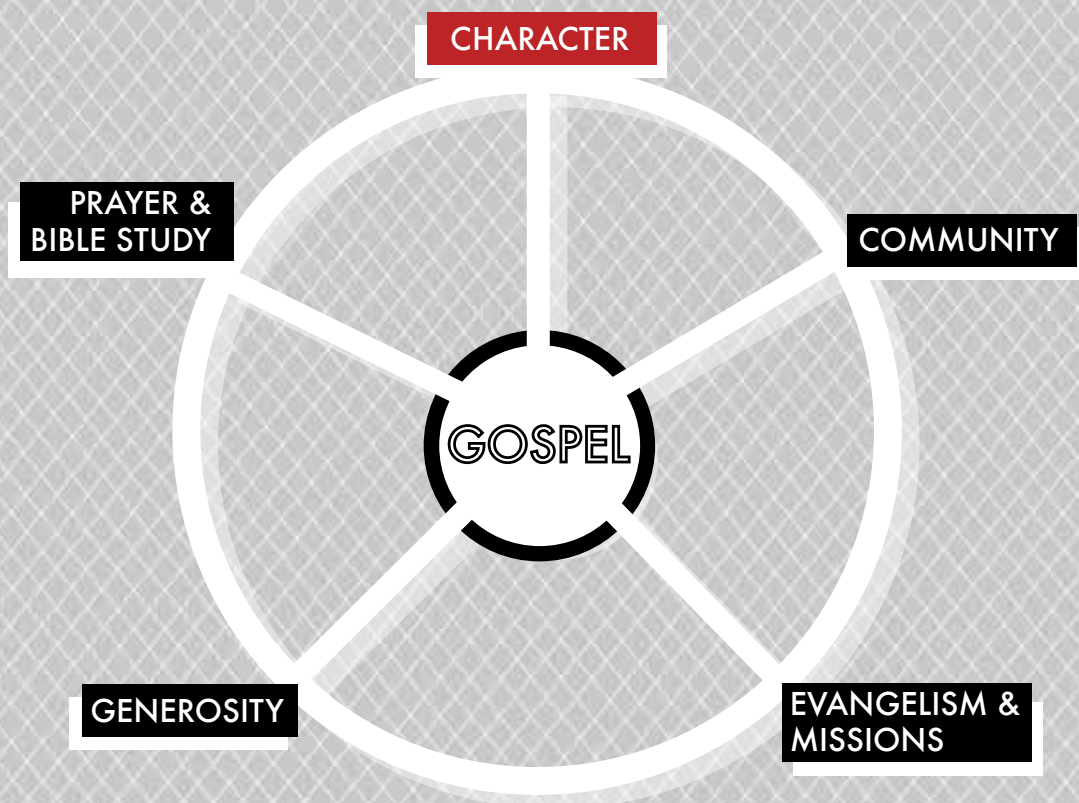
In chapters 2 and 3 of Revelation, we read about churches that had some of their relationships out of whack. The solution for them was to re-establish their relationship with God, referred to as their “first love” in Rev. 2:4. When we keep this primary relationship with God in proper order, then we will have the wisdom and motives to carry on the rest of our relationships in a healthy manner. But, when we seek from relationships that which only God can provide – deep satisfaction, significance, self-worth, lasting beauty – then we will end up disappointed, unfulfilled, and longing. Both parties in the relationship will be crushed emotionally. But God will never fail you as your true father, brother, and friend.

For Singles. This guide is designed to allow you to reflect on the wide variety of relationships that you will have over the years. First and foremost, it will point you to your relationship with God, which will culminate in unfathomable intimacy. If you are seeking marriage eventually, this guide will help distill what to be looking for in a life-long partner.

For Married Couples. “First Love” is a relationship series, and marriage is the most intense and long-term of all relationships. Much of this series will be directed at keeping your marriage strong. As part of the online resources (see below), this series will have exercises, challenges, and “date nights” to help you put these principles into practice specifically in your marriage.

For Non-married Couples. Use this guide, and Brad Hambrick’s marriage resources (see Resources section), to help you prepare for the marriage you are working toward. These materials will help you properly grow in intimacy, within the right bounds, as you head for marriage. They will also help you look for and prepare to be, the kind of life-long mate that will be a helpful blessing to your future spouse.

The Wheel is our diagnostic grid for discipleship at Summit. For this series on relationships, we will focus on the spoke named “character.” Pastor J.D. says often that “there are no marriage problems, just single people problems that become magnified in marriage.” Our relationships will begin to be enhanced if we work on our individual character. Our individual character will grow most as we turn to the author and perfecter of our salvation, Jesus Christ.



RESOURCES

There are several resources in this guide and a few outside of this guide that we want to point out to you:

Personal Study

Each personal study has a Bible passage, explanation, reflection questions, study questions, and a prayer guide. This is the “homework” you will need to do before group time to really get the most out of your small group experience.

Group Study

After each personal study is the group study for that week. This provides a simple order for the evening of your small group study. Most of the evening will be spent discussing what you have learned and reflected on in your personal study. If you are a group leader, see the online resources (below) for help in guiding the discussion.

Video

We’ve asked several teachers, couples, and individuals in our church to share wisdom on the topic of relationships. This feature will certainly be a highlight of this series.

Online Resources

Weekly, the pastoral staff will add suggestions and insights to help your small group discussions go deeper. Some will be prayer suggestions, ideas for dates with your significant others, weekly challenges, articles, and so forth. Check [The City and SummitRDU.com/FirstLove](http://TheCityandSummitRDU.com/FirstLove) to find this information.

Marriage Resources

Brad Hambrick, Counseling Pastor at The Summit Church, has developed a series of seminars and written resources for anyone who is married or preparing for marriage. You will undoubtedly find, in the course of this study, that there are areas of your relationships that need further attention. These resources will prove invaluable as you explore these topics further. Links to these will be part of the online resources.

For Further Study

The pastoral staff has identified three main sources of material in this study that we would like to commend to you:

- 1) Brad Hambrick’s resources (mentioned above)
- 2) Tim Keller’s *The Meaning of Marriage*
- 3) John Piper’s *This Momentary Marriage*

Use any of the three to supplement your study of relationships.

PART 1

SINGLENESSE & MARRIAGE

PERSONAL STUDY | 1 CORINTHIANS 7:1-16, 32-35

THEME VERSE

“I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another.” (*1 Corinthians 7:7 ESV, Paul, referring to his own singleness*)

Seeing your current circumstances as God’s gift to you will help you navigate your relationships.

Paul and Jesus were single men. God used both of them to a great degree. The early church, in fact, countered the ethos of its day in viewing singleness as an acceptable, even admirable relationship status (Tim Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, Penguin Books, 2011, pp. 194-197). Paul’s personal satisfaction is on display in 1 Corinthians 7, where he commends singleness. He also warns of the restrictions and anxieties that come with marriage. Does he favor singleness to marriage for all Christians? No. After all, he is the same writer who gives us the exalted view of marriage found in Ephesians 5 and elsewhere in the New Testament.

Rather, the New Testament views both singleness and marriage as God’s gift to individuals, when seen in a gospel-centered light. For the single person, there is freedom and opportunity to pursue interests and relationships outside of marriage. There is even opportunity for greater devotion to God’s interests while you are single. For the married person, there is the devotion of/to one person. The intimacy that comes from such a relationship can be deeply satisfying. Conducted in a gospel-centered way, the intimacy in marriage can be a unique and powerful witness to the way God loves his people (see section 6 on intimacy).

At different times and in different ways, human culture has made too much or too little of marriage and singleness. Doing either can lead to discontentment and/or broken relationships. In Paul’s day, most cultures saw marriage and child-rearing as the way to significance, influence, and personal security. It was through offspring that a person was remembered and cared for in old age. But Corinth, itself, had another influence running through it: Stoicism. Stoicism was a philosophy that elevated self-control and taught that eating, sex,

and other “mundane” physical activities were base and evil. Paul has to correct the Stoic view of sex in verses 1-5 by saying that, within marriage, sex ought to be practiced frequently as part of the intimacy of spouses. Paul then has to correct the “idolatry” that many cultures (including aspects of First Century Jewish culture) had towards marriage by radically commending singleness.

In our culture today, we have a social and political battle over marriage. Conservatives, many of whom are religious, see marriage as something worthy to protect at all costs. At the same time, American consumer-culture has elevated individualism and self-actualization above commitment and self-sacrifice. The gospel calls us to keep these approaches to relationships in check and to figure out how we can use our relationships to glorify God. After all, in Keller’s words, our current relationship status is “penultimate” to the day when we become “wedded” to God as his people. We will no longer be married to a spouse, but we, as a people, will be the spouse of God.

What this means for us today is to conduct our relationships, whether deep with one person in marriage, or wide with many in singleness, in a way that points forward to our future marriage. For those who are single and choose to remain so, they can point to the true and better marriage at the end of time. For those who are married, they will strive to provide a picture of what that relationship will look like in Heaven. For those who are working towards marriage, they will choose spouses for more permanent, lasting, character-driven reasons than merely status, money, security, et cetera.

SELF-REFLECTION

Respond to the questions below as honestly as you can. The scale for the “rated” questions is as follows: Strongly Disagree (1), Disagree (2), Neutral (3), Agree (4), Strongly Agree (5).

1. I feel content in my current circumstances regarding relationships: 1 2 3 4 5
2. My friends and family know that I am a Christian based on how I conduct my relationships: 1 2 3 4 5
3. I cultivate my relationship with God in a way that shows that it is the primary relationship in my life: 1 2 3 4 5
4. I relate to my friends of the opposite sex in a dignified and pure manner: 1 2 3 4 5

i. If you are single, do you want to be married? Why or why not? If yes, what are you looking for in a spouse?

ii. If you are married, are there aspects of your relationship that you hope will change? How does the gospel influence the way that you will seek that change?

HOMWORK QUESTIONS

Work through these questions before you get to small group and come ready to interact with the Scriptures and questions below.

1. Share one thing about your relationship status that makes you grateful to be in that season now?

2. Read 1 Corinthians 7:1-5. What principles for sexual ethics can you draw out of this passage?

3. How does the relational intimacy of marriage relate to sex? (More on this topic in session 6).

4. Read verses 6-16. What about his singleness do you think Paul was recommending to others?

5. How do these verses inform a person's search for a spouse?

6. Read verses 32-35. What is currently making you anxious about your relationships? How can your relationship with God inform the way these relationships are going?

WEEKLY CHALLENGE

What will you do in response to this study? Come to small group ready to brainstorm ideas, and then follow up with each other the next time you see each other. Find suggestions at SummitRDU.com/FirstLove.

My challenge this week will be:

PRAYER

Read Revelation 21:1-8.

Pray that you would long for this day more and more, because your desire for intimacy with God surpasses all your other desires.

Ask God to sanctify you in the way you are behaving toward those closest to you. Ask him to call this picture to your mind when your relationships are not going as you would hope.

Ask God on behalf of those who do not know him, that he would bring them into his family.

GROUP STUDY | 1 CORINTHIANS 7:1-16, 32-35

REFLECT

Review your responses to the self-reflection questions in your personal study. What stands out to you?

VIDEO

Introduce the video topic to your group and press play!

WATCH VIDEO: FIRST LOVE SESSION 1

VIDEO NOTES

Use the space below to jot down anything that impacts you while watching this video.

VIDEO RESPONSE

What are your big “take-aways” from this week’s video?

DISCUSS

Turn to your homework questions from this week’s personal study. Walk through the questions and discuss your responses with the group.

Share with one another what you are considering for your “challenge” this week.

PRAY

Follow the prayer guide in your personal study section to pray together over what God is teaching you. Use this time to pray for one another’s needs, as well.

PART 2

LEARNING TO LOVE

PERSONAL STUDY | GENESIS 1:26-28; 2:18-25

THEME VERSE

“Then the LORD God said, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.’” (*Genesis 2:18*)

There is dignity in our distinctions as male and female, and we leverage our differing strengths to serve the other in our relationships.

Genesis 1-3 is the foundation for every passage in the Bible about the relationships between men and women. From the very beginning, we were designed to complement each other in a way that accurately reflects who God is. This text tells us that God created mankind in his image, and this image included two parts: male and female. There was distinction from the start between men and women: the very first mention of humanity comes with the mention of gender.

As the story goes, everything in God’s good creation was going quite well. At the end of every day, God declared that everything he made was “good.” That is until day six and the creation of man. Can you imagine the newly minted universe in all of its excellence? Everything in the entire universe was perfect. Every branch on every tree was perched exactly as God intended, every animal scurried exactly as they were designed to do, every star dangled in the exact right place in the night sky, but one thing was off. There was no woman on the scene. Man was alone, and thus we see the very first negative in all of the created order. There was a man without a woman.

Man was alone and he searched for “a helper fit for him.” In Hebrew, “fit” literally means “like opposite him” (Tim Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, Penguin Books, 2011, p. 173) So, God in his kindness created a woman. Men and women were made to be “like opposites” of each other. They were gifted differently and designed distinctly to complement each other. Together, not as individuals, they would accurately reflect the image of God and fulfill what God had called them to do. There is something in being a man that reflects God that being a woman doesn’t, and there is something in being a woman that reflects God in a way that being a man never could. There is equal dignity in each gender, but where one falls short the other is supposed to make up for it. We are “like opposites.”

This should bring about great humility in us. First, we need the other gender's help. They bring gifts to relationships (romantic or otherwise) that we lack. Secondly, we were created to help. God did not form relationships for each person to serve themselves, but to give away their strengths in service to another. When we begin to navigate the, sometimes strange, seas of relationships, this humility guides us to shift our thinking. Instead of asking, "What can I get out of this relationship", we begin asking, "What can I give?" Instead of dwelling on our own needs, we start to ask, "How can I help?" When we ask these questions, we are learning to love one another the way Christ modeled for us. He came to earth in perfect humility, "not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many"(Mark 10:45). We must give away our strength for the good of another in relationships, and in so doing, we will marvel at the grace of God that did the same for us in Christ.

SELF-REFLECTION

Respond to the questions below as honestly as you can. The scale for the "rated" questions is as follows: Strongly Disagree (1), Disagree (2), Neutral (3), Agree (4), Strongly Agree (5).

1. I work well with people of the opposite gender because I appreciate the strengths they bring to the table: 1 2 3 4 5
 2. In romantic relationships, I uphold the honor of my partner in the way we interact physically and emotionally: 1 2 3 4 5
 3. I do not harbor any ill-will toward the opposite gender as a result of how I've been wronged in past relationships: 1 2 3 4 5
 4. In relationships, I seek to serve and give before expecting to receive: 1 2 3 4 5
-
- i. What specifically have you learned to value and appreciate in someone of the opposite gender?

 - ii. How do the distinctions between genders help us serve one another in relationships?

HOMEWORK QUESTIONS

Work through these questions before you get to small group and come ready to interact with the Scriptures and questions below.

1. What are ways that you observe dignity in our distinctions as male and female in our relationships (marriage and otherwise)?

2. Read Genesis 1:26-28. What does it mean for men and women to be made in the image of God?

3. Why is it significant that from the very beginning God created and distinguished gender?

4. Read Genesis 2:18-24. God claims that he will make a “helper fit for” Adam. What does this tell us about the way men and women should relate to each other in a relationship?

5. If God originally designed the relationship between men and women to be complementary, what are practical ways we can “help” our spouse?

6. How does God's original design for gender help us learn to love one another?

7. These verses come right before mankind falls into sin. How was the originally harmonious relationship between men and women distorted by the fall? How is it repaired by the gospel?

WEEKLY CHALLENGE

What will you do in response to this study? Come to small group ready to brainstorm ideas, and then follow up with each other the next time you see each other. Find suggestions at SummitRDU.com/FirstLove.

My challenge this week will be:

PRAYER

Read John 14:15-31.

Thank God for giving us a Divine Helper in the Holy Spirit.

Spend time meditating on the fact that one of God's goals in the gospel was to bring you into fellowship with him.

Ask God for the peace from him that outlasts any anxiety, worry, or troubling circumstances.

GROUP STUDY | GENESIS 1:26-28, 2:18-25

REFLECT

Review your responses to the self-reflection questions in your personal study. What stands out to you?

VIDEO

Introduce the video topic to your group and press play!

WATCH VIDEO: FIRST LOVE SESSION 2

VIDEO NOTES

Use the space below to jot down anything that impacts you while watching this video.

VIDEO RESPONSE

What are your big “take-aways” from this week’s video?

DISCUSS

Turn to your homework questions from this week’s personal study. Walk through the questions and discuss your responses with the group.

Share with one another what you are considering for your “challenge” this week.

PRAY

Follow the prayer guide in your personal study section to pray together over what God is teaching you. Use this time to pray for one another’s needs, as well.

PART 3

COMMUNICATION

PERSONAL STUDY | EPHESIANS 4

THEME VERSE

“Speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.” (*Ephesians 4:15*)

Communication is the conduit for reaching the significant goals that God has for us in our relationships.

When you read through Ephesians chapter 4, a couple of phrases stand out. The first is a repeated command to “speak the truth.” It occurs directly in verses 15 and 25, and passively in verse 21. The gifts mentioned in verse 11 mostly involve those who are communicating God’s truth to the church. Conversely, the author warns about “deceitful schemes” and “corrupting talk” which are counterproductive. “Speaking truth,” especially in verses 15 and 25, is an essential part of love.

The second concept repeated throughout this chapter is “building up” in order to reach maturity. Maturity, defined by this chapter, is becoming more like Christ (vv.13, 15, 24). Such is the goal of Christian community, and anything that distracts from it is to be avoided. This passage makes clear that we are all different, with different gifts from God, but heading toward the same collective end. This shared goal is part of the unity that marks Christian relationships.

Thus, we see that communicating with one another in a deep and meaningful way is critical to reaching our goal. We speak the truth in love in order to build each other up. When we communicate well, we share the different gifts that God has given us in each other. We also can awaken each other to the blind spots that are holding us back from maturity. Far beyond trying to build someone’s self-esteem with positive affirmation, Christians are to be honest with each other about what is holding us back from Christ-likeness. This feedback may hurt, but done in the context of love and unity, it is this truth that helps us grow.

This passage is mainly about the church body as a whole, but there is very little about this passage that isn’t also true about a romantic relationship, though on a smaller and intensive scale. Couples need to bear with one another in love,

maintaining the unity of the one relationship (vv. 2-3). We bring very different gifts and personalities into a marriage (vv. 11-14), but both sets of strengths are needed for the couple's growth. The goal for a marriage is maturity more than happiness – and it is more loving to seek each other's maturity (vv. 15-16). We have to address the anger in our relationships and not “sweep it under the rug” (v. 26). Both parties have to be active and productive for a marriage to be strong (v. 28). Finally, tenderhearted forgiveness is essential for maintaining any romantic relationship (v. 32).

An important part of the good news of Jesus Christ is that he will one day make us perfect, as he is perfect. At the cross, he won for us the status of righteousness, but our behavior doesn't yet match up with this. God has given us the Church, the Holy Spirit, spouses, and other relationships to help in our sanctification (the process of becoming perfect). As verse 30 says, our place in Heaven has been sealed. We will one day be perfect. We show belief in the gospel when we work towards that perfection even now. We listen to others as they call us to greater maturity in Christ.

SELF-REFLECTION

Respond to the questions below as honestly as you can. The scale for the “rated” questions is as follows: Strongly Disagree (1), Disagree (2), Neutral (3), Agree (4), Strongly Agree (5).

1. I place my spouse's/friend's feelings above telling them something they need to hear: 1 2 3 4 5
 2. I seek to listen more than talk in my relationships: 1 2 3 4 5
 3. I value honesty over “saving face”: 1 2 3 4 5
 4. I feel safe to express my thoughts and opinions with those closest to me: 1 2 3 4 5
-
- i. Do you find it difficult to speak the truth in love to your spouse or a friend? Does wanting to keep them happy or avoid conflict prevent you from saying what you think needs to be said?
 - ii. What other difficulties are inhibiting free and honest communication in your closest relationships right now?

HOMWORK QUESTIONS

Work through these questions before you get to small group and come ready to interact with the Scriptures and questions below.

1. Recall some of the best advice you've ever received. How did that advice help you change or grow?

2. Read Ephesians 4:1-16. How does the "grace given to each one of us" affect our unity?

3. Why are the gifts mentioned in verse 11 vitally important for the health of the Church?

4. Read Ephesians 4:17-32. Based on this passage, what are some of the markers that a Christian has been renewed in her/his mind?

5. Why is forgiveness an important part of working towards maturity?

6. What are some areas of desired growth in the way you relate to those closest to you? How can you ask for other people/your small group to help you?

WEEKLY CHALLENGE

What will you do in response to this study? Come to small group ready to brainstorm ideas, and then follow up with each other the next time you see each other. Find suggestions at SummitRDU.com/FirstLove.

My challenge this week will be:

PRAYER

Read Ephesians 3:14-19.

Praise God – his love for us in Christ is unsearchable. It is so great that we need “strength to comprehend” it.

Ask God to help you better comprehend his love so that you might better love others.

Ask God to show you where your love for others does not reflect his self-giving love.

“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.” (John 13:34)

GROUP STUDY | EPHESIANS 4

REFLECT

Review your responses to the self-reflection questions in your personal study. What stands out to you?

VIDEO

Introduce the video topic to your group and press play!

WATCH VIDEO: FIRST LOVE SESSION 3

VIDEO NOTES

Use the space below to jot down anything that impacts you while watching this video.

VIDEO RESPONSE

What are your big “take-aways” from this week’s video?

DISCUSS

Turn to your homework questions from this week’s personal study. Walk through the questions and discuss your responses with the group.

Share with one another what you are considering for your “challenge” this week.

PRAY

Follow the prayer guide in your personal study section to pray together over what God is teaching you. Use this time to pray for one another’s needs, as well.

PART 4

CONFLICT & FORGIVENESS

PERSONAL STUDY | JAMES 4:1-12

THEME VERSE

“What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?” (*James 4:1*)

Unhealthy conflict is devastating to relationships, but the road to forgiveness goes through the cross of Christ.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if people could simply renounce their bad habits and decide to respond to conflict in a gracious and constructive way? Then we could all float away on clouds while cupid strums Kumbaya on his harp. Down here on Earth, however, conflict is real and regular. Depending on where you are in your relationships, this study may prove to be pivotal in your life. I hope so. The Bible isn't just a set of ideas; it is the living and breathing Word of God. When you are confronted by it, the Holy Spirit uses it to convict and change you.

So listen, from a guy who fights his pride on a daily basis, I ask you to lower your guard for a few moments as you read and pray through this study. I suggest you find a quiet place to work through the guide this week, because you may get angry and chuck it across the room. But seriously, let's build a new paradigm together for conflict resolution, because, like you, I don't want to live an angry, bitter life. I want to live a peaceful, joy-filled life. And right now you need to hear that such a life is not just possible, but prescribed and available to someone who follows Christ.

Have you ever had a splinter? It's painful digging all the way down through the skin to get a hold on the splinter to pull it out. But the most painful part is down at the spot where the wood is stuck in the flesh. Like a doctor finding a really deep splinter, James gets right to the root of why conflict happens. Ken Sande, in his book *Peacemaking for Families*, gives great insight here:

This passage describes the root cause of destructive conflict: Conflicts arise from unmet desires in our hearts. When we feel we cannot be satisfied unless we have something we want or think we need, the desire turns into a demand. If someone fails to meet that desire, we condemn

him in our heart and quarrel and fight to get our way. In short, conflict arises when desires grow into demands and we judge and punish those who get in our way. (Ken Sande, “Getting to the heart of Conflict,” from *Peacemaking for Families*, Tyndale 2002.

This is the moment I get frustrated in a study like this, because I’m hearing that a major reason I’m engaged in a destructive conflict has to do with me, not the other person. James, as if he’s talking to a child, basically tells us we are fighting because we can’t have what we want. He even takes a jab at my prayers saying I pray trying to use God to get my way in a conflict. Ouch! Well, the digging down to the source of the pain never is fun, but you can’t heal until the splinter is out. So here is the unadulterated truth: Your heart plays the central role in your conflict. You cannot possibly resolve conflict with another until you deal with your own desires in the matter. Here are a couple of principles to keep in mind as you move into self-reflection and study:

1. Good things can become God things. So often, conflict between husband and wife is over a good thing like sex. The wife may desire sexual fulfillment, but the husband isn’t providing it. When this desire becomes a controlling demand that causes the wife to resent the husband, it has moved from a good thing to a god thing, or what we can call an “idol.” An idol is something other than God that controls your heart and mind. What’s the first step? James 4:6-8 – humble yourself, and then draw near to God.

2. You are a sinner first, sinned against second. In any conflict, the road to forgiveness is through Jesus. You must remember, if you are a Christian, that you’ve been forgiven of cosmic treason against God. He loved you and you betrayed him. Yet instead of punishing you, God punished Jesus instead. So if you feel justified in your judgment or punishment of someone, you must first remember how God chose to deal with you. When Jesus says “abide in him” this is what he’s talking about abiding in. Is this truth governing the way you interact?

3. Remember the big picture. I get lost in a moment sometimes and forget that God has a bigger picture in play. Like Joseph thrown into the pit, I cannot see what God is doing outside of it and God seems silent in the moment. When in conflict, remember: God is bigger than that moment, no matter how heavy it is. God is not surprised by where you are. He is able to deliver you from it if you will trust him and his ways.

SELF-REFLECTION

Respond to the questions below as honestly as you can. The scale for the “rated” questions is as follows: Strongly Disagree (1), Disagree (2), Neutral (3), Agree (4), Strongly Agree (5).

1. I am slow to anger in disagreements with loved ones: 1 2 3 4 5
2. I spend time praying and examining my motives before engaging in conflict with another: 1 2 3 4 5
3. A healthy conflict is one where I convince you I’m right: 1 2 3 4 5
4. There are a few issues that seem to regularly generate conflict between myself and a certain loved one: 1 2 3 4 5

Time for a little idol hunt. Let’s see if there are any splinters down there.

i. What are you preoccupied with? What is the first thing on your mind in the morning and the last on your mind at night?

ii. How would you honestly complete this statement: “If only _____, then I would be happy, fulfilled, and secure.

HOMework QUESTIONS

Work through these questions before you get to small group and come ready to interact with the Scriptures and questions below.

1. Read James 1:1-3. What does James say is at the root of quarrels?

2. What are the passions, or strong desires, that were involved in the most recent conflicts you have had?

3. Notice how James quickly ties our quarrels with people to our quarrels with God. How does James' remarks here convict or challenge you in how you've been approaching God?

4. Read James 4:1-12. In verses 4-5 James challenges his reader to remember the "jealous" love of God for you. What does it mean for you to be a "friend of the world" to the point that you are an enemy of God? Make sure your answer includes what this looks like for you personally.

5. List out all of the commands James gives the reader in verses 6-10. What is the underlying theme of these commands?

6. What does it mean to humble yourself before God? How would doing so help you approach the conflicts you are in right now?

7. According to Scripture, what is the secret to forgiving someone? What pain, desires, or idols are keeping you from that right now?

8. Who in your life do you need to go to now and resolve conflict that is hampering your relationship?

WEEKLY CHALLENGE

What will you do in response to this study? Come to small group ready to brainstorm ideas, and then follow up with each other the next time you see each other. Find suggestions at SummitRDU.com/FirstLove.

My challenge this week will be:

PRAYER

Reread James 4:1-12.

Ask God to reveal the idols in your life that may be driving you into destructive conflict.

When rightly understood, the gospel message is powerful because it breaks the heart's desire for sin. Ask God to help you understand the gospel message more deeply than you ever have before.

Ask God for the wisdom and grace you need to approach another person with whom you are in conflict.

Specifically pray for the person you listed in question 8. Ask God to grant grace to both of you as you seek gospel-driven reconciliation.

GROUP STUDY | JAMES 4:1-12

REFLECT

Review your responses to the self-reflection questions in your personal study. What stands out to you?

VIDEO

Introduce the video topic to your group and press play!

WATCH VIDEO: FIRST LOVE SESSION 4

VIDEO NOTES

Use the space below to jot down anything that impacts you while watching this video.

VIDEO RESPONSE

What are your big “take-aways” from this week’s video?

DISCUSS

Turn to your homework questions from this week’s personal study. Walk through the questions and discuss your responses with the group.

Share with one another what you are considering for your “challenge” this week.

PRAY

Follow the prayer guide in your personal study section to pray together over what God is teaching you. Use this time to pray for one another’s needs, as well.

PART 5

DECISION-MAKING

PERSONAL STUDY | EPHESIANS 5:15-33

THEME VERSE

“Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.”
(*Ephesians 5:17*)

When deciding on a potential partner, choose someone who seeks the will of the Lord.

This passage begins with an exhortation to be wise, not foolish or unwise. It sounds simple enough, but what does that mean? For a Jewish writer, like Paul, simply to use the word “wisdom” would be to call on the robust witness of the Wisdom Literature from the Old Testament. Here’s what Wisdom Literature had to say, in sum: The most significant refrain about wisdom in the Old Testament is that “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Proverbs 9:10). Also, avoiding immorality is a top priority, since the Lord “ponders the paths” of individuals (Proverbs 5:21). As for decision-making, Wisdom Literature promotes long-term, rather than short-run thinking. It promotes weighing facts and seeking counsel. It also instills courage, since the Lord would guide and protect those who desired to do his will.

There are two important theological truths that Ephesians 5 adds to our Old Testament understanding of wisdom. First, take into consideration that “the days are evil” (v. 16). Guard against the fact that things in this world will deteriorate and will not always work out according to your plan. Second, God is good. Verses 19 and 20 remind us that he is worthy of our praise at all times. If we remember this, then we will be grateful for what he has given us. We will also keep in mind that seeking his will is better than anything that the world has to offer us.

With this foundation in place, approaching individual decisions can be pretty straightforward. The situation becomes trickier when the decision process involves other people. In that instance, Ephesians 5 hammers home one pervasive principle: submission. In the Christian life, we are all submitting to others and to God perpetually. Every Christian must submit. Submission is even present in the way the Triune God relates to one another. Submission is a sign of respect, deference, self-sacrificial love, and seeking the well-being of others before our own.

The more you practice submission, the more you are humbled when someone comes to you in submission. Fortunately, Paul gives us a great blueprint here for what to do in that instance – do what Christ has done for the Church. He cleansed the Church and made her holy. He gave himself up for her. He cherished her, nourished her, put her needs before his, and loved her as himself. Amidst this kind of response, it becomes safe to submit to others within the body of Christ.

Verses 22-33 bear a great deal of implications for how decision-making needs to happen within a marriage. The wife submits to the husband. The husband honors and cherishes the wife. The husband sacrifices everything for the well-being of the wife. The wife respects the husband. So let us address an individual decision that you must make at the outset. When you are choosing a spouse, choose someone who is wise, and not foolish. Also, choose a spouse that can model the story of Christ and the church. Finally, choose someone who submits gratefully to Christ.

SELF-REFLECTION

Respond to the questions below as honestly as you can. The scale for the “rated” questions is as follows: Strongly Disagree (1), Disagree (2), Neutral (3), Agree (4), Strongly Agree (5).

1. I pray before every important decision that I make: 1 2 3 4 5
2. I talk to godly individuals that I know before I make major changes in my life: 1 2 3 4 5
3. I listen to my spouse and consider what he/she has to say before I make a decision: 1 2 3 4 5
4. Godliness is a top priority in finding a spouse/seeking to become a better spouse: 1 2 3 4 5

i. Have you ever changed a decision based on prayer or God’s Word. What was the end result?

ii. Think of a time when you have helped a friend or loved one in their decision-making process. How did that situation turn out?

HOMWORK QUESTIONS

Work through these questions before you get to small group and come ready to interact with the Scriptures and questions below.

1. Think of one of the hardest decisions you ever had to make. How did you get through it? What help did you have in finally deciding?
2. Read Ephesians 5:15-21. How does gratefulness to God help you be wise in making decisions?
3. How does “submitting to one another” as Christians help the Church be to be wiser?
4. Read Ephesians 5:22-33. How do these verses inform the type of spouse and friend that you are looking for/trying to be?
5. How does the “headship of Christ” over your relationships inform the way you relate to others?

6. What steps can you take in some of your close relationships to become more respectful/sacrificial? How do you anticipate that these steps will be received by the other parties?

WEEKLY CHALLENGE

What will you do in response to this study? Come to small group ready to brainstorm ideas, and then follow up with each other the next time you see each other. Find suggestions at SummitRDU.com/FirstLove.

My challenge this week will be:

PRAYER

Read Revelation 1:4-8.

Take a minute to confess to the Lord the sins you've committed in your relationships. Thank him for allowing himself to be "pierced" for your transgressions.

Thank him for freeing us from our sins and giving us a new way to live.

Read Revelation 1:12-20.

Praise him for being the immortal, unchangeable God who has all of time in his hands.

Ask God for the courage to live for him for the rest of your life.

GROUP STUDY | EPHESIANS 5:15-33

REFLECT

Review your responses to the self-reflection questions in your personal study. What stands out to you?

VIDEO

Introduce the video topic to your group and press play!

WATCH VIDEO: FIRST LOVE SESSION 5

VIDEO NOTES

Use the space below to jot down anything that impacts you while watching this video.

VIDEO RESPONSE

What are your big “take-aways” from this week’s video?

DISCUSS

Turn to your homework questions from this week’s personal study. Walk through the questions and discuss your responses with the group.

Share with one another what you are considering for your “challenge” this week.

PRAY

Follow the prayer guide in your personal study section to pray together over what God is teaching you. Use this time to pray for one another’s needs, as well.

PART 6

INTIMACY

PERSONAL STUDY | SONG OF SOLOMON 2:1-7, PROVERBS 5:15-23, 1 CORINTHIANS 6:12-20

THEME VERSE

“Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.” (*1 Corinthians 6:19-20*)

Sexual intimacy powerfully enhances the relational intimacy between a husband and wife. Used outside of marital intimacy, its purpose is distorted and its effects are dangerous.

Most people are aware that the Bible says a great deal about restrictions on sex. But the Bible’s stance on sex, however, is not prudish or stoic. In fact, the Bible celebrates human sexuality. It is because of the Bible’s high view of sex that it warns so loudly against its misuse. Song of Solomon is an entire book of the Old Testament dedicated to affirming romantic love, deep passion, and sex as part of the human experience. It is filled with physical descriptions of the lovers’ bodies and encouragements to enjoy one another. One verse, Song of Solomon 8:6, even compares romantic love (and the jealousy that accompanies it) to the “flame of the Lord.” God created sex and delights when we use it for its proper purpose.

The purpose of sex is to enhance the intimacy that already exists between spouses. You may have heard analogies for sex comparing it to the “glue” that holds a relationship together or to “oil” in the engine that is marriage. Certainly, sex will be its best for a couple when the relationship is firing on all cylinders (i.e. when there is good communication and the couple is unified, vulnerable, and serving each other well). Conversely, when a couple is experiencing difficulty, reigniting passion can be a great way to affirm commitment to the relationship. When a married couple is united and committed to each other financially, socially, psychologically, emotionally, and spiritually, then the physical “oneness” of sex is the perfect cap on the relationship.

From the first chapters of Genesis to the New Testament, the Biblical concept of “two becoming one flesh” is used for sex (Genesis 2:24). This phrase conveys the great unifying power that sex has, and the Bible speaks to the unity in sex

that goes beyond physical. This is why sex needs to be kept within the confines of lasting, complete, covenanted, and life-long relationships. As Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 6, what you do with your physical body has important spiritual implications, especially when it comes to sex. If you have sex outside of marriage, you will be cementing a relationship physically, spiritually, and emotionally that both parties have not committed to. In addition to the health risks and moral implications, you will be hurting yourself and each other deeply when that cement breaks apart.

Romantic love gives us a powerful picture of the intimacy that we can have with God. God himself uses the analogy to describe his relationship with Israel (see Hosea, for one example). Worship, like sex is a powerful, God-given part of the human experience that binds us together with the other party. But, when directed to the wrong place, both can have devastating effects on our souls. Moreover, God is jealous (like a lover should be) for us to give our worship only to him. Christians look forward to the day when we have an incorruptible intimacy with God beyond anything that we experience in this lifetime.

Sex is a powerful tool that enhances relationships. The Bible sees it as acceptable, and even to be celebrated when used in the right context. It is, however, not a necessary part of the human experience. Contrary to what Western Culture currently espouses, there have been many, many people who have happily abstained from sex throughout their entire lives. As we said in the first study, sex and marriage are only penultimate parts of our existence. You were ultimately designed for union with your Creator, and when you have that, your desire for other things in this lifetime begin to fade into the background. Missing out on that is the real tragedy that we all face.

SELF-REFLECTION

Respond to the questions below as honestly as you can. The scale for the “rated” questions is as follows: Strongly Disagree (1), Disagree (2), Neutral (3), Agree (4), Strongly Agree (5).

1. I view sex as an appetite that everyone needs to fill regularly, regardless of relationship status or circumstance: 1 2 3 4 5
2. I find a way to express my intimacy with God daily: 1 2 3 4 5
3. I find (non-sexual) ways to please my spouse, significant other, or close friend regularly: 1 2 3 4 5
4. I can't imagine being happy without a fulfilling sex life: 1 2 3 4 5

- i. What part of the Christian stance on sex do you find most surprising? Why?

- ii. Do you have unresolved hurt based on past sexual experiences? Take a few minutes to reflect on God's healing for your circumstance. There are resources at SummitRDU.com/FirstLove specifically on this topic. If these feelings remain intense and overwhelming, then it might be time to address this. For those of you who want someone to talk with about this, there will be contact information listed, as well.

HOMEWORK QUESTIONS

Work through these questions before you get to small group and come ready to interact with the Scriptures and questions below.

1. Read Song of Solomon 2:1-7. Why did God include a love poem between two lovers in Scripture?

2. In verse 7 and elsewhere in the book, the woman gives this warning: "Do not stir up or awaken love before it pleases." How does sex before marriage "stir up love" prematurely?

3. How does the relational intimacy of marriage relate to sex? This same question was asked in week 1. Did your answer change or expand throughout this study?

4. Read Proverbs 5:15-23. Christians are taught, ethically, to share just about everything. Why is sex one thing that we keep exclusive?

5. Read 1 Corinthians 6:12-20. How does the physical act of sex affect us spiritually?

6. Verse 19 confirms that the Holy Spirit is not just among a group of believers, but actually dwells within an individual Christian. How does that affect the way you view and treat your body?

7. The Lord makes claims on our ethics and behavior because he both created and redeemed us. What are some ways that you can respond to his redemption by living in a way that pleases him?

WEEKLY CHALLENGE

What will you do in response to this study? Come to small group ready to brainstorm ideas, and then follow up with each other the next time you see each other. Find suggestions at SummitRDU.com/FirstLove.

My challenge this week will be:

PRAYER

Read John 17:20-26.

Thank God for sending his Son and Spirit to be among us and dwell with us.

Thank God for making a way for unity between you and him. Spend time enjoying this unity in prayer and praise.

Ask God for this same sense of unity with other believers around you. Ask God that this unity and love among believers would be a powerful witness to your friends and neighbors.

GROUP STUDY | SONG OF SOLOMON 2:1-7, PROVERBS 5:15-23, 1 CORINTHIANS 6:12-20

REFLECT

Review your responses to the self-reflection questions in your personal study.
What stands out to you?

VIDEO

Introduce the video topic to your group and press play!

WATCH VIDEO: FIRST LOVE SESSION 6

VIDEO NOTES

Use the space below to jot down anything that impacts you while watching this video.

VIDEO RESPONSE

What are your big “take-aways” from this week’s video?

DISCUSS

Turn to your homework questions from this week’s personal study. Walk through the questions and discuss your responses with the group.

Share with one another what you are considering for your “challenge” this week.

PRAY

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