

Small Group Discussion Guide

We were made for community. Even Jesus asked his disciples to pray with him, and God sent the only two people who could relate to him – Moses and Elijah – to encourage him before his showdown with the devil. Everything we learn from God is meant to be practiced in our family and the family of God so we can then take what we've learned to our workplace, neighborhood, and world. That's why I encourage you to go through this study with a small group and apply what you're learning together.

The scope of the book is limited to personal revelation of your identity in Christ, reflection, and learning how to be discipled by the Spirit, but we do not learn or live in isolation. While the book chapters give space to reflect on how we personally can mature to love people the way Jesus loves us, the small group questions focus on how we can corporately reflect Jesus as the body of Christ. We will consider how we can better love and serve one another in community, then put those considerations into practice. Think of the weekly reading as going to class, and the group meetings as going to lab where you practice what you've learned. We will not simply be hearers but doers of the word!

Vision for Small Group Ministry: One of my most powerful healing testimonies came from a small group that met in my home and was practicing listening to the Holy Spirit to minister to one another. When one of the ladies mentioned that she was in sever pain, we all began to pray and seek the direction of the Holy Spirit. Each person then began declaring and doing what they were being shown by the Spirit. One person spoke to emotional wounds from hurtful words that had been spoken and began to remove spiritual arrows from her. Another person shared a vision of where Jesus was and what he was doing with her, revealing the presence of Jesus in the situation. Some people received words of knowledge for healing, some spoke scriptures the Holy Spirit led them to declare, and others began praying spiritual warfare prayers. The result was that this person received ministry to her soul and body from Jesus and his bride, and she got healed in more ways than we had asked, including improved eyesight! When the whole body is working together, there is fullness in ministry because all of the puzzle pieces are present. Your piece matters and so does the piece of the person next to you. We are better together!

I invite you to see this group differently than you may have approached small groups in the past. While it is good to get together to encourage one another, share insights, and pray for one another, I want to challenge you to listen to the Spirit and invite him to lead you. Intentionally invite the Spirit to lead at the beginning of each gathering, but also each time you open your mouth to respond to someone. We are all accustomed to comforting one another from our soul – our personal understanding based on life experiences and empathy – which is good. Yet I want to stretch you to listen for the voice of the Comforter and invite the Spirit of truth to speak through you. This is how my group was able to minister in the situation I described above after having practiced listening to the Spirit to speak and pray according to the intercession of Jesus (which we'll explore in more detail in chapters 8 and 9).

Discussion Format: I encourage you to divide into groups of three to discuss each question if your group has more than five people. Each question can be discussed with a different grouping of three people so that you get to know more people in the group. The advantage of discussing in groups of three is that everyone can share – not just the verbal processors – and more giftings are available to minister to and encourage the person sharing. For instance, one person's strength might be applying the word of God to a situation, while another person moves in compassion and empathy, assuring the person sharing that they are heard and loved. We are admonished to speak the truth in love, so when both truth-telling and

compassion are engaged, we're more accurately reflecting Jesus as the body of Christ. Not every person will embody Jesus perfectly, which is why we are called to love one another in community where all the gifts and graces of the Spirit are present.

The leader guide has a lot of information in it because I'm not simply giving you topics to discuss but discipling you in how to love one another as you share and respond. Small groups are the best way to demonstrate love for one another and practice loving others as Christ has loved us. This is the purpose of the group, so the discussion guide will not only address what to discuss but how to do it to stretch us to grow in love as well as believe that Jesus is present, loving others through us because we remain in him.

Before the First Meeting: Encourage each person to read the introduction before the first meeting and follow the pattern of completing the chapter before you meet each week. You don't have to complete it to come because the discussion questions will be relevant but not necessarily dependent upon completing the chapter. By communicating this to the group, it allows for busy weeks and grace to stay in community if someone falls behind. I also encourage you to pray for each person before the meeting to cut off any spiritual warfare or distractions that might prevent people from coming.

Timing: Depending on the size of your group and how much you like to talk, you should be able to get through the discussion part in about an hour. However, if you can allow 90 minutes, you'll have time for chit chat as people arrive and time for fellowship at the end. I encourage you to always end with prayer and break into groups of three to make sure everyone has time to share and pray. Making sure everyone feels seen, heard, and loved at each meeting is more important than checking off every item on the list, so invite the Spirit to lead you in love and let that be your highest priority.

Fellowship: Sometimes the one-on-one follow-up conversations at the end of the night are the most valuable part of the evening as people connect with one another and encourage each other. If possible, move discussion along so that there is time for people to linger rather than have to rush out the door.

Week 1: Introduction to “Building Your Identity in Christ”

Encourage each person to read the introduction before the first meeting and follow the pattern of completing the chapter before you meet each week. You don’t have to complete it to come because the discussion questions will be relevant but not necessarily dependent upon completing the chapter. However, discussion will be more meaningful for those who finish the chapter.

For the first meeting, I encourage you to have a pizza dinner since the Introduction chapter talks about building our identity in Christ like building a pizza. Dinner can also be sharing time to help the group get to know each other. Whether you have dinner or not, encourage each person to share a little about themselves at the beginning. Allow about 1 hour for the remaining activities below.

Supplies:

- Optional pizza dinner (Daiya makes a good gluten free, dairy free pizza that can be found in the freezer section of many grocery stores for those with food sensitivities.)
- Tissues for when tears flow.

Share: Ask each person to share what pizza topping best describes them and why. This should be a fun icebreaker that ties into the theme of being toppings on God’s pizza.

Worship: If possible, play the song “Tend” by Emma Rose/Bethel Music. (It is linked at the bottom of the Introduction chapter at TillingMinistries.com.) If showing the YouTube video, you can enable captions so people can sing along. Or simply play the song and invite people to close their eyes and envision themselves yielding to the Lord through the visual pictures painted by the song.

Prayer: Invite the Holy Spirit to open the eyes of your heart and fill your group with hope that God is about to do an amazing work of transformation in all of you.

Remaining in the Word: Tonight’s Bible study focus is on raising our expectations and maturing in Christ.

1. **Read John 15:5-12:** *“I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶ Anyone who does not remain in me is thrown away like a useless branch and withers. Such branches are gathered into a pile to be burned. ⁷ But if you remain in me and my words remain in you, you may ask for anything you want, and it will be granted! ⁸ When you produce much fruit, you are my true disciples. This brings great glory to my Father. ⁹ I have loved you even as the Father has loved me. Remain in my love. ¹⁰ When you obey my commandments, you remain in my love, just as I obey my Father’s commandments and remain in his love. ¹¹ I have told you these things so that you will be filled with my joy. Yes, your joy will overflow! ¹² This is my commandment: Love each other in the same way I have loved you” (NLT).*

Discuss: According to Jesus, what will be the result in our lives when we “remain” in Jesus, remain in his love, with his words remaining in us? List them all. What would the church be like if everyone remained in Jesus and experienced these outcomes? Why do you think people settle for less?

2. **Read Ephesians 3:16-19:** *“I pray that from his glorious, unlimited resources he will empower you with inner strength through his Spirit. ¹⁷ Then Christ will make his home in your hearts as you trust in him. Your roots will grow down into God’s love and keep you strong. ¹⁸ And may you have the power to understand, as all God’s people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love is.*

¹⁹ May you experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully. Then you will be made complete with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God."

Discuss: How does this passage illustrate God's pizza – building our lives on the revelation of the many ways Christ has loved us relationally (the crust), the power of the Spirit to produce the fruit of Jesus' life within us (sauce), and the love of the Father which strengthens us to remain in Christ (cheese)? When we read scripture, worship, and pray, do we expect to encounter God's love and be filled with "all the fullness of life and power that comes from God" or are we just going through religious motions? How is our expectation linked to our experience of God? How does our experiential knowledge of God's love impact fullness of life and power in us?

Remaining in Christ Listening Activity: God promises in Jeremiah 29:13, *"If you look for me wholeheartedly, you will find me."* Tonight, we will practice "looking" for God with spiritual eyes when we pray. We will raise our expectations by waiting on the Lord with ears tuned to hear his voice. We will pray with belief that God is present because we remain in Christ, that he hears us and desires to respond to our prayers.

Spend a few minutes in silence with each person individually praying for Jesus to give you his heart for your group. Ask him what he would like to do and then listen with expectation for a response. The Spirit may speak through a picture that forms in your mind (which is often symbolic), a word, a scripture, an impression, or a physical manifestation (like heat). After a few minutes, begin to pray as a group, declaring whatever Jesus has shown you (even if you don't have full understanding yet). If you don't receive a specific word, God may be sowing hunger in you to simply pray for more of him. Pray into that desire and invite God to come and reveal himself to your group.

Loving One Another: As we pray for one another, we demonstrate the love of Jesus who intercedes for us to receive mercy and help from God. If there's not enough time to do prayer requests as a group, break into groups of three to pray for each other. Let everyone know that they will be praying for the person on their right before people share prayer requests, so they can be listening to the person and to the Holy Spirit as they share. Then go around the circle and share either one way you want to grow through this study (e.g. getting rooted in scripture, growing in love, hearing the Spirit more, etc.) or a pressing prayer request. This is not time to ask for prayer for someone else, but prayer for you so the group can support you. Sharing our needs is how we grow in intimacy and learn how to receive ministry as well as give it. (Women, especially, often struggle to receive ministry, but all of us need to receive as well as give. The label "Caregiver" can become a negative one when we believe no one cares for us.)

After sharing requests, join hands to symbolize remaining in Christ as a branch of the Vine, then invite everyone to pray for the person on their right with belief that the Spirit is leading them to pray.

Close by praying the Ephesians 3:16-19 passage over the group and encourage everyone to hold out their hands to receive as an act of faith:

"I pray that from his glorious, unlimited resources he will empower you with inner strength through his Spirit. ¹⁷ Then Christ will make his home in your hearts as you trust in him. Your roots will grow down into God's love and keep you strong. ¹⁸ And may you have the power to understand, as all God's people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love is. ¹⁹ May you experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully. Then you will be made complete with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God."