

SESSION 5

We Strengthen One Another

GETTING STARTED

DISCUSS: When has someone shown that they really had your back?

RECAP (PAGE 95): I was embarrassed. I was at the gym, but at that moment I was hardly doing anything productive. I was lying flat on my back with heavy barbells pressing against my chest. No matter how much I tried to push, my arms refused to cooperate. They had given up under exhausted protest. I knew the first commandment of strength training and gym etiquette, but I had broken it—and now I sheepishly faced the consequences.

When lifting weights, always enlist a spotter—someone who both pushes you to persevere and intervenes if your arms give out. Yet there I was, imprisoned by the weights on my chest because I foolishly thought I could do it on my own.

I also need a spotter in my Christian life—and you do too. God gave us the church to be that help. Fellow Christians embolden us to persevere, and they intervene when our souls are discouraged and we feel beaten and weighed down by life’s troubles. As God’s Spirit works through us, He uses us to strengthen one another in a world that calls us to follow a different path.

GUIDE: Direct attention to **The Point** on page 96. Invite group members to fill in the blanks.

THE POINT: We STRENGTHEN one another to LIVE as God desires.

STUDY THE BIBLE

GIVE BIBLICAL CONTEXT: In Ephesians 4–6 Paul dealt in general with the Christian life. He laid out the practical application of the first three chapters’ theological truths about Christ, salvation, and the church. Chapter 5 addresses how Christians relate to the larger society. The issue of the proper relation of Christians to culture (or the church to the world) provided a larger context for discussion of specific issues. At times Paul’s teaching resembled John’s instruction about not loving “the world or the things in the world” (1 John 2:15).

RECAP (PAGE 96): From the beginning, people have tried to convince Christians that we can pursue Jesus while still sinning like the world. But that can’t be. In his Letter to the Ephesians, the apostle Paul noted the contrast in verse 8 between who we once were to who we are in Christ. Living a life different from the world around us isn’t easy; it’s actually going to be quite difficult—but difficult doesn’t mean impossible.

READ: Ask a group member to read aloud Ephesians 5:8-14 on page 96.

GUIDE: Direct your group’s attention to the following heading on page 96: **We can help each other STAND against the sinful ways of the world.**

RECAP (PAGE 96): The challenge of holiness is seen in the two-fold opposition we face.

- ▶ **We battle temptations from the inside, from our own hearts.** Each of us has sinful desires that come from our own sin nature. You and I may have different struggles and long for different things, but the “old self” still draws us to sin.
- ▶ **We face temptations from the outside, from the sinful world.** Others lure us to compromise our faith by participating in things God opposes.

Like heavy barbells, this multi-directional opposition weighs heavily upon us. But with the Holy Spirit living inside us and “spotters” like the people of God walking alongside us, we can stand against any opposition thrown at us.

Our rugged individualism foolishly convinces us, *I’ve got this. I don’t need anyone’s help. I’m strong enough on my own.* But no matter how we may think we can face sin on our own, it’s simply not possible. Why? Because God never created us to withstand sin in isolation. He has hardwired into our spiritual DNA a persistent need for spiritual support from the Holy Spirit and from the body of Christ.

DISCUSS: Why is it significant that Paul said we “are light” (v. 8) rather than “like light”?
[ALTERNATE: How does life in darkness contrast with life in the light?]

READ: Ask a group member to read aloud Ephesians 5:15-17 on page 97.

GUIDE: Direct your group’s attention to the following heading on page 97: **We can help one another make wise use of our TIME.**

RECAP (PAGE 97): Moses prayed, “Teach us to number our days carefully so that we may develop wisdom in our hearts” (Psalm 90:12). Similarly, Paul taught the Ephesians to “Pay careful attention, then, to how you live—not as unwise people but as wise—making the most of the time” (Ephesians 5:15-16). Time matters. What distinguishes us isn’t how much time we have, but what we do with the time we’ve been given.

DO: Instruct group members to complete the activity, **Making the Most of My Time**, on page 97, on their own. If time allows, invite volunteers to share their responses.

Making the Most of My Time: Record your primary activities for your typical week in the spaces below.

Sunday Monday Tuesday Wednesday Thursday Friday Saturday

*Circle two or three places where you can intentionally leverage your time for God.
What is God calling you to add, remove, or change?*

DISCUSS: How might we be tempted to misuse time? [*ALTERNATE: What practices help you make the most of your time?*]

READ: Ask a group member to read aloud Ephesians 5:18-21 on page 97.

GUIDE: Direct your group's attention to the following heading on page 97: **We strengthen one another as we're FILLED with the Spirit and live in mutual submission.**

RECAP (PAGE 97): When Jesus saves us, He also changes us. That change doesn't happen through a few simple tweaks here and there; rather, it's a total transformation of heart, mind, and will. The Holy Spirit of God coming to reside in us is means of that transformation. Rather than being intoxicated by selfishness and self-rule, the Holy Spirit leads us instead to worship and submit to God. Worship and submission foster right relationships with both God and other people.

DISCUSS: What are some specific ways we can turn to the Holy Spirit for strength? [*ALTERNATE: What are some of the results of being filled with the Spirit?*]

DISCUSS: How have you seen the teachings in these verses strengthen relationships?

LIVE IT OUT

ACTIVITY (OPTIONAL): Bring a dumbbell to your gathering. (Anything from two to fifteen pounds will work.) Remind group members of the story from the beginning of the session about trying to lift weights without a spotter. Invite group members to share a burden or weight they are carrying. Ask them to hold the dumbbell as they describe the burden. Then, pass the weight around the circle. As each person takes the weight, invite them to share a burden they have. Afterward, ask group members to pray for these burdens each day this week, emphasizing that we have daily opportunities to strengthen and support each other in prayer.

SAY: "How might God use you to strengthen others in His church? How might you allow His church to strengthen you?"

GUIDE: Direct group members to review the three bulleted statements under **Live It Out** on page 98. Call on volunteers to share (1) which of these statements is something they want to pursue further, or (2) ways this study will transform their prayer lives this week.

- ▶ **Identify.** Through prayer and introspection, identify recurring sins and temptations that weigh you down. Confess those things to God, and ask Him to bring others into your life to strengthen your walk.
- ▶ **Influence.** As you experience strength and victory in your own life, look for opportunities to influence others by being a selfless and submissive member of your church.
- ▶ **Invite.** Invite another Christian or group of Christians to be a part of your fight against temptation. Confess your temptations to them, and allow them to confess theirs to you. Stand together against those struggles.

GUIDE: Invite each person to gather with two or three Christ-followers of the same gender this week for a deeper discussion, using **Talk It Out** (page 98) to guide their discussion. Encourage group members to spend time each day in God’s Word with the devotions found in the **Daily Study** section (pages 99–102).

PRAY: Close your Bible study time with prayer.

DIG DEEPER

Use the commentary below as you prepare to lead the session.

[VERSE 8]: Paul used a classic word picture to present the Christian and non-Christian approaches to life: light and darkness. When a person is enslaved to sin, that person is in darkness, including spiritual blindness and ignorance. Christians, however, are “light in the Lord.” They live as “children of light.”

[VERSES 9-10]: The light Christians experience is manifest in several ways. Paul described these characteristics as “fruit of the light” (although some old manuscripts have “fruit of the Spirit”). Paul named “goodness, righteousness, and truth,” general moral virtues or character traits. Christians should engage in testing or assessing the moral options facing them. The ultimate standard for their decisions should be “what is pleasing to the Lord.”

[VERSE 11]: Those who remain in darkness have a different lifestyle. Rather than producing fruit, they are fruitless. Christians should not participate in the sinful practices of the darkness. If Paul had stopped there, we might mistakenly think we’re pure or holy simply by avoiding sins. However, Paul encouraged us to go beyond merely avoiding sin and expose evil actions.

[VERSES 12-14]: Paul wasn’t inspired at this point to give his original readers any examples of the sins or vices they needed to avoid and expose, but he clearly knew some first-century activities were extremely shameful. Paul knew exposing sins could lead to positive change when the sin becomes visible. Ultimately, “God is light” (1 John 1:5), but Christians can help illuminate a dark world as witnesses to that light. Paul used the analogy of a “sleeper” awakening and meeting Christ who would “shine” on that person.

[VERSE 15]: Paul’s readers needed to give “careful attention” to how they lived. Becoming a Christian had been a life-changing experience. They had moved from an “old self” to a “new self” (Ephesians 4:22-24). As Christians, they were disciples or learners. They needed instruction in the basics of Christian ethics. Christians with a Jewish background could draw on the moral lessons of the Old Testament, but Christians with a pagan background would especially need to unlearn some bad habits. They needed to be wise rather than unwise.

[VERSE 16]: Christians need to demonstrate wisdom in their use of time. The Greek word here refers to a time or a moment that's significant, such as a child's birth, a wedding day, or other pivotal life moments or opportunities. Paul urged us to "make the most of the time." The popular phrase "seize the day" (Latin *carpe diem*) is close to Paul's meaning here. Paul emphasized the wise, appropriate use of time "because the days are evil."

[VERSE 17]: Wisdom's opposite is folly. Paul warned readers against being foolish. In the Bible, folly and wisdom aren't primarily intellectual categories. Wisdom includes a person's worldview and value system. An intellectually brilliant person, a genius, might be a criminal. According to Paul, true wisdom is understanding "what the Lord's will is." Discerning and doing the will of God are central to biblical wisdom.

[VERSE 18]: Paul accented another worldview contrast: the abuse of wine. Although wine was a popular drink in the ancient world, biblical writers were aware of the dangers of alcohol abuse (Proverbs 23:29-35). By contrast, a Christian should "be filled by the Spirit." Some Christians struggle because they are in step with our culture rather than with God's Spirit. We're to fill our time with activities that honor God or contribute to the cause of Christ.

[VERSE 19]: This verse seems to reflect the context of public worship. Many scholars suggest "psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs" might not be totally separate categories. The "psalms" are likely from the Old Testament. The other compositions might be early Christian creations.

[VERSE 20]: This verse might still reflect public worship, but it also might be about the Christian life in general. We know that giving thanks is more than praying before a meal. The entire Christian life is to be an expression of gratitude to God for His gift of salvation.

[VERSE 21]: Paul presented a general principle that could be applied in many life situations: mutual submission by all Christians. Paul described it as "submitting to one another." Many people today, both Christians and non-Christians, struggle with the notion of submission. Paul didn't promote groveling or a totally passive lifestyle. But as Christian we're to have a submissive spirit toward all believers. Paul noted that our submission to others should be based on our "fear of Christ."

GROUPS MATTER.

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