



## WEEK 1 GROUP GUIDE | MESSAGE BY ERIC PARKS

### START

To get things started, go around the circle and answer this question:  
**What is your single most favorite thing to do or eat when camping?**

### SHARE

Welcome to our new series entitled, "Gather Round."

*We have all heard that story that we can't shake. The story that had us at the edge of our seats, that broke our hearts, that warmed our hearts, that made us laugh from the deepest part of our stomach, the one that hit us at the deepest part of our core until tears leaked out. Stories teach us, inspire us, warn us, and ultimately speak to us. The stories in the Bible are not only compelling to listen to, they are filled with the power of the Lord, and the resurrecting grace that is offered freely to every single one of us.*

*As we walk through this series, we will hear stories that we have read many times, and ones that we might not have deemed as significant enough for a retelling. Despite the familiarity of the story, there is always room to ask God, "What are you trying to communicate to me through this story?" Let us walk closely with the characters in the story, listen to their words, their hearts, their struggles, and their triumphs. Each story brings us back to the realization that we have an all powerful, all knowing, and ever loving Father that desperately wants us to let Him be the hero of our own story.*

In the message this week, we were challenged to think about the labels that have been given to us, that we have acquired, that we didn't ask for, and possibly the ones we have let stay with us. For some, a label has overtaken your life, and you may not have even realized how the label transformed from a mere title to defining who you are. Yet ultimately our identity is only found in one place. This place is one that never changes, never moves, never requires qualifications, but is found within the Lord, within His outstretched arms. Despite their popularity, labels were not created by our current culture, but rather have been in existence for thousands of years. We can read of one's man struggle with his label that was not only stealing his physical life, but had stolen his chance of experiencing love and community with those around him.

### **Let's read Luke 5:12**

**Imagine what this leper's life had been like up until the moment he met Jesus. What were the consequences that he paid for his label (think about the tangible consequences, and the emotional consequences as well)?**

**Have you ever had a label, either self-imposed or given by another person, that limited you from engaging with certain people or scenarios?**

## **GROW**

Luke writes that the man was *covered* with leprosy, indicating that he was in the late stages of this disease. As Eric talked about on Sunday, visitors had probably dwindled down to his immediate family, possibly only infrequent visits from his mother. This man knew what it meant to feel alone. He lived with all hope being lost. All dreams of a normal life were not only gone, but they had been absent for a while. Can you imagine the amount of courage it took for a man who accepted a life devoid of hope and healing to resurrect his hope for a different life when he saw Jesus?

Upon seeing Jesus, this man decided that his label, no matter how serious, how terminal, how powerful, was no match for Jesus' power. "*If you are willing, you can make me clean.*" All the doubt, the social stigmas, the rules and regulations this man had upon him, meant nothing to him when he looked into the eyes of our Savior. His label told him he was not allowed to be within six feet of someone, and must proclaim "unclean, unclean!" as they walked by. Yet all the shame and abandonment he felt for years meant nothing compared to the belief he had in the power of our Savior.

### **Let's read Luke 5:13**

In the *Pulpit Commentary*, we can read about the significance of not only the healing, but the actual touch that Jesus offered:

*Verse 13. - And he put forth his hand, and touched him, saying, I will: be thou clean. And immediately the leprosy departed from him.* St. Mark adds here, "being touched with compassion." The Redeemer, at the sight of the man's awful wretchedness - wasting away, shunned by all men, dragging on a hopeless, aimless, weary life - in his Divine pity, with a sudden impulse tosses aside all considerations of ceremonial uncleanness or contagion, and lays his hand on the miserable sufferer from whom all shrank, with his word of power exclaimed, "I will: be thou clean." St. Ambrose writes here how "Jesus, because he is the Lord of the Law, does not obey the Law, but makes the Law." "Here Jesus obeys that Divine eternal law of compassion, in its sudden impulse, which is older and grander than the written Law" (Farrar).

**How does this translate to the Lord's heart for us?**

**What does this mean for those we tend to put labels on in our personal lives, and in society as whole?**

**Are there labels that you believe about yourself that make it hard to trust God? What are they?**

## MOVE

Eric talked about the ruts that labels can create. If the label has been there for enough time it can feel as though we have to get rid of a part of who we are in order to let go of that label. However, the Lord in His grace does not leave us with a piece of ourselves missing. His truth and His love come rushing in to assure of us of our actual identity. Any identity we place in a label, in a person, in a memory, or in a mistake, is actually not our identity at all. We are made in the image of God, and being image bearers means that only He tells us who we are. And we are forgiven, we are washed clean, we are made perfect in Him.

**Do you think there could be certain areas in your life that the Lord might be asking you to trust Him to speak His identity over you? Are there any areas that you have shut Him out of due to shame, embarrassment, pride, or pain?**

Not only is removing the label difficult work, but keeping the label from creeping back in takes intentional work. Getting used to living without its constant stream of condemning messages can feel foreign and uncomfortable. Yet we are not left to fight this battle by ourselves. One of the most powerful weapons we have has always been there, and it is the living word of God. Reading, memorizing, and speaking the verses filled with truth and identity over ourselves is a great place to start in the journey to living without labels.

**Let's finish by reading 2 Corinthians 5:17 and Ephesians 2:10.**

**Do you feel as though you are a new creation in Christ? Why or why not?**

**With the truth that we are image bearers of the Lord, what are some tangible ways that we can begin (or continue) to live like this is a reality in our lives?**

## PRAY

As a group, spend some time praying for each other about the labels and false identities that we all face. If you are in a co-ed group, consider breaking up into men and women's groups to talk more freely.

## TO GO.

Know that your identity is found in a God who loves you immeasurably more than you could ever understand. As you go throughout this week, continue to meditate on these awesome scriptures:

*Philippians 4:13 I can do all things through him who strengthens me.*

*Romans 8:1 So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus. For the power of the life-giving Spirit has freed you through Christ Jesus from the power of sin that leads to death.*

*Ephesians 2:13 But now you have been united with Christ Jesus. Once you were far away from God, but now you have been brought near to him through the blood of Christ.*

*Romans 8:38-39 And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from his love. Death can't, and life can't. The angels can't, and the demons can't. Our fears for today, our worries about tomorrow, and even the powers of hell can't keep God's love away. Whether we are high above the sky or in the deepest ocean, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.*