



WEEK 4 GROUP GUIDE | MESSAGE BY SHAWN JOHNSON

START

To get things started, go around the circle and answer this question:

Totally unrelated to the discussion today, what is the worst prank anyone has ever played on you?

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, Shawn spoke about the God's love for people who were not used to receiving love, much less friendship; from anyone. When Jesus walked the streets of this earth, He walked with purpose and intention. This kind of living provides us a clear picture of what mattered to Jesus. He was not conventional and broke through all the barriers that people believed kept them from God. He was not concerned with their social standing or any choices they had made in the past. As Shawn pointed out, Jesus didn't just want to see heaven get more crowded, he wanted to restore the relationship with His people and live with and love them.

By looking at Jesus' life, and examining who He spent time with, it is obvious to see that He chose the most unlikely individuals to surround himself with. Jesus sat down and ate dinner with the most despised people in the city. The kind of people we avoid because they make us uncomfortable. The kind of people you don't make dinner plans with, much less acknowledge in public. Can you imagine willingly and intentionally spending time with people who ridicule your beliefs and how you live your life? Maybe take it even further, imagine purposefully spending time reaching out to people who intentionally have hurt people you love?

Jesus ran to those opportunities. Why? Because He knows the intrinsic value of people who are all made in the image of God. People are created with 'Imago Dei,' which is a theological term, applied uniquely to humans, which denotes the symbolic relation between God and humanity. The term has its roots in Genesis 1:27, wherein "God created man in his own image. . ."

Being made in the image of God means that regardless of what you believe about yourself, you are an image bearer. There is not one person you have ever looked eyes with who does not matter to God.

Is it difficult for you to believe that you could be loved by God, given your struggles, sins, and chapters of your life that you are not proud of?

Many of us would agree that God loves us. Why do you think it is so hard to believe that God actually likes us?

Scripture reveals to us that God is omniscient and omnipresent, meaning He knows everything about you and is ever-present. There is not a thought or hidden intention that He is not aware of. For some, this leads us to feelings of condemnation, but for others it makes us thankful there is a God who knows us and still loves us. Do you feel more discomfort knowing God knows your every detail or more reassurance of his love and closeness?

GROW

For some of us, when we hear "God loves you just the way you are, no matter what you've done..." etc., we tend to tune out immediately.

This could be because we have heard it so many times or been around church for so long that we have become numb and immune to allowing the gospel to penetrate our hearts and actually believe it for ourselves. For others, we assume that God loves everyone else except us because our lives have not turned out the way we wanted. We can falsely believe that if God truly loves us, we will not experience pain or loss. We can falsely assume that God is a heavenly butler and he will just bring us all the things we want. The good news is that Jesus understands and emphasizes with our struggles. Jesus knew full well the death and pain that this fallen sin-stained world will inflict on people. In spite of our sin, Jesus came to save the world and because of his love chose to be obedient to his heavenly Father and go to the cross for us.

The good news is that the Lord in His love died for us. His shed blood covers every single past, present, and future sin of ours. This is why Jesus exclaimed that it is "finished." But do we believe it is truly finished, especially when we seem to continually fail to live a holy life? How did Jesus act around those who know deeply that they have not lived a holy life?

Let's read Luke 15:1-7

Greg Carey's commentary on Luke provides insight to Jesus' behavior:

Note one aspect of the setting: "All the tax collectors and sinners were drawing near in order to hear him" (15:1). Sage preachers will ask, "Why? What is it about Jesus that attracts tax collectors and sinners to him?" Here we want to avoid vain romanticism about Jesus' winsome personality and follow Luke's lead instead. Luke provides a mixed message: Jesus seeks to bring sinners to repentance (5:32), but not once does Jesus actually scold or correct a sinner. Instead, he eats with them. Four times Luke reports (a) meals in which (b) Jesus receives criticism for (c) his relationship with sinners, but (d) Jesus never once comments on the sinners' behavior (5:27-32; 7:36-50; 15:1-32; and 19:1-10). We might note that all three of the parables in Luke 15 assume celebrations, or meals...

Jesus mission on this earth was to save us by living a perfect and sinless life, showing us His great love and to cross the finish line by going to the cross, dying and defeating sin and death once and for all. Jesus shows us who God is; A King. A Servant. A Redeemer. A Savior.

Jesus is compassionate and well aware of the sins that entangle and weigh us down, yet he pursues us with his love and shows us that religion won't save; only a relationship with Him can. No hoops to jump through, no qualifiers, just a relationship with the one and only God who can forgive and restore.

Life is hard. We were never promised an easy life, but the Lord joyfully reassures us through John 16:33, "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

Why do you think this non-religious and rough crowd all pressed in to listen to Jesus?

What does it say about who God is, that Jesus was willing to befriend these people and stand up publicly to the religious condemners?

Where are you in your journey with God? Are you questioning, resentful, doubtful, hopeful? Explain why.

Do you feel that God sees you as worth leaving all the others to come and find you?

MOVE

It is no secret that we are constantly bombarded with messages about what will make us happy, what will bring us peace. Every commercial, ad, magazine and social media platform continues to feed us the next big thing that will make our lives complete. We are led to believe that what celebrities do, believe and wear should be important to us. Oprah's next powerless new-age cocktail of pithy one-liners tells us we already have what it takes deep inside of ourselves to save us. If we just eat enough blueberries and kale and have enough time on the yoga mat, we will be guaranteed peace and wholeness. All these attempts to save ourselves fall short and leave us longing for a voice that is bigger than our own. A relationship with the God who created us is the one and only way to truth and peace.

We serve a God that does not waiver on what He offers us, nor does He care about what the world has to say. He is steadfast and clear. Just as real as the promise He offers us is the reality of heaven and hell. We were sent on this earth to love people and point them to Christ, and the best way we can do this starts with our own love relationship with Jesus.

Read Deuteronomy 31:8 and 1 Timothy 1:15-16.

Just as the sheep in the parable, so can our hearts and minds be prone to wandering. Life's obstacles seem to take us hostage, and before we know it, we are going through the motions, leaving little margin for God's love to supernaturally guide us. However, as the shepherd that is intimately aware of each of his sheep, so is the Lord intimately aware of our hearts. We can't wander out of His sight or His thoughts. For some of us, the Shepherd stands next to us; God has found us and is just waiting for us to surrender our own ways and ask him to lead us. If that is you, then all of Heaven is just waiting to celebrate you! For others of us, we have known the Shepherd, but have wandered away; maybe this is the day that you need to listen to the Shepherd's voice and return.

What stands out to you most in this week's study?

According to 1 Timothy 1:15-16, if you are a follower of Christ, that means Jesus showed you mercy and now you display God's "immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life." We might not sense it, but our lives now point to God's goodness. Is there someone that comes to your mind that you need to reach out to? Is there someone this week you need to invite to church?

PRAY

As a group, spend some time praying for each other, and asking God to make clear His specific message of love for you today. 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 you are seen by God. And you are desperately loved by God.

Mark 8:36

What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?