

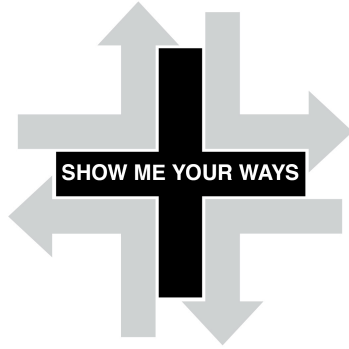
Show Me Your Ways Through Grace (Psalm 51)

Grace - one of the fundamental building blocks of Christianity. It is a gift given to us even though we don't deserve to have it. Our salvation is not based upon how good we are, nor is it prohibited by how sinful we have been. Well, thank goodness for that! We have all sinned, we are all less than perfect, but with the gift of grace, God places us all on level ground.

Psalm 51 presents to us one of the best examples of true repentance in all of Scripture. In it, David expresses his deep need for God's mercy and forgiveness. Can't we all identify with that need? The words of the Psalm lead us to the place of hope within confession: God can and will forgive us of ANY sin, great or small. No sin is too great to be forgiven.

In verse ten, David asks God to "create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me." Here David illustrates a fundamental key to repentance. Sin is not first a matter of behavior; it is first a matter of the heart. Although our situation and relationships in our lives that lead us to sin often are in need of a transformation, what really needs to be transformed is our hearts. We need hearts that are clean and focused on the glory of God. We need grace to shape and transform what we love, what we crave, and what we serve. Although we will succumb to our sinful ways again and again, God never turns His back to us. Again and again God will wrap His loving arms around us and bestow this gift to us, transforming our hearts to be pure for His glory. The gift of grace should encourage us and lead us to follow Christ and His ways with all that we have and all that we are.

Grace is a gift we have been given with no strings attached. We have done nothing to deserve such a wondrous and loving gift. We should respond to that gift by allowing grace to become the dominant theme in our lives. This gift of grace should lead us to strive to show grace to others just as God has been gracious to us. As we see in verse 13, David responds to God's grace by saying, "Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will turn back to you." The more we experience God's forgiveness, the more we will desire to share it with others. Thanks be to God!



Show Me Your Ways Through Love (1 John 4:7-11)

One of the first songs I learned in the many summers of Vacation Bible Schools at my grandmother's church was called, "God is Love." It was a beautiful song that could be sung in a round:

*Love, love, love, love
The Gospel in one word is love.
Love your neighbor as yourself
for God is love.*

God's love reaches far beyond the boundaries that we as humans tend to set in order to define love. When asked to define love, most of us would first tend to describe it as a feeling. Upon probing further, most of us would find that it is about so much more than just feelings. Love is an action. This passage tells us something about the nature of God's love. We know that God loved the world that He gave us His only Son. God does not love us from some far away place. Rather, through Jesus, God comes to stand with us and by us, God comes to us as one of us to share our hurt and our suffering, our joys and our triumphs. From this we know that love involves giving. If we love, we give of ourselves.

God's love is **unconditional**. There are no strings attached to the love that God has for us. It is never a matter of "being good enough" for God's love. God loves everyone always and no matter what.

God's love is **faithful**. God never takes back His promise to love us. In the times of our lives where we have little faith, God's love remains faithful. We may turn away from God, but God never turns away from us. God's love is never ending.

God's love is **transforming**. God loves us and forgives us of our sins and accepts us as we are, no matter what our lives have entailed. God's love enables us to become "new." When we experience the saving love of God, we can't help but be transformed, become different than we were before, as we learn to live in a relationship with God and our fellow human beings.

By God's very nature, He is love. God *defines* love, not like a dictionary defines love, but God is the very definition of love itself. To understand what true love is and to be able to truly love others, we must know God and His love for us by being in relationship with Him, seeking His will for our lives, and by showing those around us His love by our actions towards them.

Discussion Questions and Reflection Activities

Below is a list of Scripture passages dealing with the love of God.

Allow each member of your group to choose a passage. Have them read it and take a few moments to reflect on what it says to us about God's love. Share your findings with the group.

Psalm 36:5; 36:7; 48:9; 52:8; 86:15; 136:26;
Jeremiah 31:3;
John 3:16;
John 15:9;
Romans 8:35-39;
Ephesians 2:4-5

1. How have you experienced God's amazing love?
2. How have you seen His love in action?
3. How has God's love for you inspired how you respond to the world around you?

Using the word **LOVE**, write an acrostic poem that helps define the word in the context of our lesson for today.

Prayer:

O God, we are so grateful for the love that you continuously and graciously bestow upon us even when we do not deserve such love. We give thanks that at the very core of Your being You are love. Express Your love through me today to all the people I meet, whomever You place into my path. In Your loving name we pray. Amen.

Discussion Questions and Reflection Activities

Prayer Psalm

Have copies of Psalm 51 and pens or pencils available for everyone in your group. Tell the group that you will be reading the psalm to them. Have them listen closely to the words and imagine what David must have been experiencing as he wrote this prayer.

Read the psalm slowly, giving the group time to hear with new ears what the psalm is saying. When you are done reading, discuss the following questions:

1. How do you think David felt as he wrote Psalm 51?
2. What do you think stirred within him to inspire these words?
3. What does this psalm tell us that David believed about God?

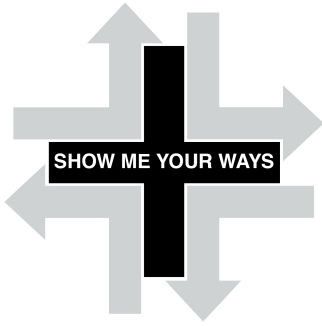
Now give each member a copy of Psalm 51 along with a pen or a pencil. Read the psalm again slowly and have the group follow along, circling any words or phrases that stand out to them.

After you have finished reading, have the participants make a list of the words and phrases they selected. Using those words, have them write a prayer of confession, creating their own psalm.

Using the word **GRACE**, have the group write an acrostic poem that helps define the word in the context of our lesson for today.

Prayer:

Close with prayer by allowing some of the participants to read their psalms. Close the readings/prayer by singing "Amazing Grace" together.



Show Me Your Ways Through Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13; Luke 11:2-4)

Prayer is such an integral part of our lives as Christians. It nurtures the core of our relationship with God. Through prayer we are able to connect and communicate with God, strengthening our relationship as we speak to God and listen for God's response.

In Matthew 6:9-13, we are given the perfect model for prayer, The Lord's Prayer. Jesus gave this prayer to His disciples to use as a pattern for meaningful prayer. When we pray, we should **praise God**: "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be your name," God is majestic and holy, but also a loving and very personal God. We honor God's name by using it appropriately and respectfully. Respecting and remembering the holiness of God helps us to be in the right frame of mind to communicate with him about our needs. All glory is God's!

When we pray, we should **pray for God's work in the world**: "your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." God's kingdom will be complete when evil is abolished and God establishes the new heaven and earth. God's purpose for us and this world is perfect. Through our willingness to obey God, we offer ourselves to be active in following God's will, open to God's guidance, leadership, and trusting that God will provide what God knows we need in this life.

When we pray, we should **pray for our daily needs**: "Give us this day our daily bread." We acknowledge that God is the one who sustains us and provides for us. God knows what we *need* on a daily basis. We cannot stock up on God's provision and then walk away from God until our stores are low. It is by our faith that we know God's provision is there for us where we are, as we are, and when we need it most.

When we pray, we should **pray for help in our daily struggles**: "Forgive us our debts, as we have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen." Forgiveness is the cornerstone of our relationship with God. God has forgiven us, now we must forgive those who have wronged us. By doing so, we show God's grace to those around us. We have all found ourselves in a place of temptation. As Christians, we pray for God to deliver us from such bondage. We pray for God's strength to overcome what is tempting us and choose the path God sets before us instead. By doing so, we acknowledge that God's kingdom is the perfect kingdom.

Discussion Questions and Reflection Activities

Prayer is the way that we spend time with God. When we pray, we talk to God, and we listen for God's response to us. Below are several ways we can enter into conversation with God.

1. **Hand Prayer:** Trace your hand on a sheet of paper. In the palm, write the name for God of your choosing (e.g. Father, God, Protector, Healer, etc.). On each finger, write the name of a person, or a situation, for which you would like to pray. If you have more than five names/situations, you can write more than one on each finger. Throughout the day, look at your own hand, remembering the person/situation that was on each finger. Pray for those people/situations.
2. **Breath Prayer:** A huge aspect of prayer is quieting ourselves enough to hear God's response to us. Many of us have trouble with this aspect. Our lives are busy and hectic and finding a time and place to quiet our spirits feels impossible on some days. By using the Breath Prayer technique, we are able to focus and quiet ourselves so that we can listen for what God is saying to us.

To begin, choose a scripture passage on which you would like to focus (e.g. Psalm 46:10 "Be still and know that I am God"). Find a place where you can be comfortable and quiet for a few moments. Take a few slow, deep breaths, imagining that you are breathing in all that is good and from God. As you exhale, imagine that you are letting go of all that seems not to be of God. When you are quieted, inhale and "hear" the words, "Be still." As you exhale, "hear" the words, "and know." Continue repeating the phrase to yourself as you inhale and exhale. Other scripture suggestions: Psalm 23, Isaiah 43:1, Isaiah 30:15. You can also use verses from your favorite hymns.

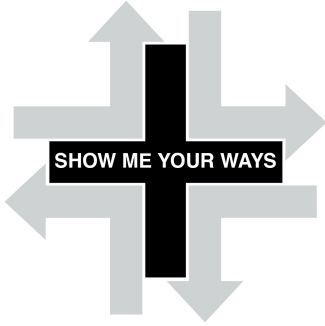
Discussion Questions

1. Discuss what methods of prayer people in your group may use (praying aloud, journaling, etc.)
2. Discuss the importance of a prayer life.
3. Think about committing to a prayer challenge as a group. Examples include: committing to praying for your church daily until your next meeting; committing to praying for someone in need in your church or community daily until your next meeting; creating prayer partners within your group and committing to pray for one another daily until your next time of meeting, etc.

Using the **word PRAYER**, write an acrostic poem that helps define the word in the context of our lesson for today.

Prayer:

Ask a member of your group to lead a closing prayer, thanking God for the opportunity to spend time together and alone in prayer. Ask for guidance when we pray, so that we may quiet ourselves in order to hear God's will for us.



Show Me Your Ways Through Worship (Isaiah 6:1-8)

In Isaiah 6:1-8 we learn about Isaiah's call to be God's messenger to the people of Jerusalem. As Isaiah entered into the presence of God he cried out, "Woe is me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord God Almighty." Isaiah was so overwhelmed and affected by the greatness of God, and his realization of his own human shortcomings. The enormity of God was pressing upon him so that he felt crushed. His sins were exposed and he felt his death was imminent, as he had seen God with his own eyes.

When Isaiah's lips were touched with a live burning coal, he received the cleansing of God. His guilt was removed, his sins paid for. As a result of his cleansing, he was able to hear and respond to the call of God upon his life. He answered with enthusiasm even knowing that the people to whom he spoke would not listen.

Worship is turning to God, listening to God, and responding to God. In our traditional worship services, there is a familiar flow to which we move. As we enter into our worship space, we encounter God. We come into contact with our family, neighbors and community, many of whom have greatly influenced our faith journey. We know that God has called us all to come and worship together. In our midst is the Holy Spirit, moving and compelling us to worship together. We prepare ourselves to worship God with our Call To Worship. Often it is a scriptural quote such as Psalm 95:1, "O come, let us sing to the Lord; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!" The call proclaims that the focus of our time together is to worship God and that we should prepare ourselves for the Holy Spirit to move in our midst.

Next, just as Isaiah did, we come face to face with how sinful and unworthy we are to be in the presence of God. We fall short of who we should be as God's children, both as an individual believers and as a community of faith. But, as a result of God's grace and goodness, we are free to admit our guilt and wrongdoings not in fear, but in the comfort of our faith. We are called to confess our sins and the sins of the world, to turn back to God, and ask God to make right those things that we have done wrong.

Following our time of confession comes our Assurance of Pardon. We are reminded and reassured that God is a gracious and forgiving God. We are reminded that Jesus died for our sins and we are thus reconciled to God. Nothing can separate us from the love that God has for us.

Because we are forgiven, we are free to worship God, hear God's calling for us through His Word proclaimed, and act on that calling. We can hear the Word of God proclaimed with open ears and open hearts. Together we seek to understand what it has to do with our lives, both individually and as a community of believers.

We are then given a charge to “Go!” God commands us and empowers us by the Holy Spirit to go out into the world and follow the Word of God, to let our very lives be an example of God’s love and grace.

Discussion Questions and Reflection Activities

Scripture: Isaiah 6:1-8, Psalm 95:1-7

As Christians, worship is the central avenue through which we praise God, receive forgiveness, hear the Word of God read and proclaimed, and receive direction as we strive to live lives that reflect our faith.

Questions:

- Why does God call us to worship?
- How does God call us to worship?
- Why do we come to worship?

Have members of your group look up these scripture references:

Psalms 124, 34, 100, and 95; Ruth 2:4; Romans 1:7; Luke 24:34; Romans 5:5; Isaiah 57:15; John 4:24; and 1 John 4:7-8.

What is the passage saying?

Find a word (or words) that describes God or Jesus.

What is being said in your passage that calls to us as Christians?

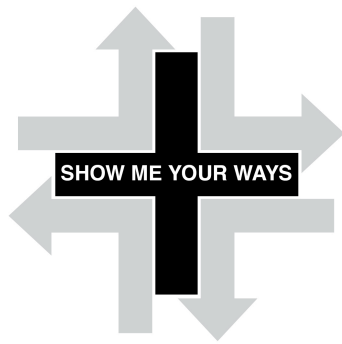
Next, ask the group to write a call to worship based on one or more of these Scripture passages. Small groups may be formed for this part of the activity. Invite them to share their calls to worship.

How does a call to worship set the tone for the rest of the worship service? What would our worship service feel like if there were no call to worship? How can we present the call to come and worship to members of our community who do not currently have a place of worship?

Using the word **WORSHIP**, write an acrostic poem that helps define the word in the context of our lesson for today.

Prayer:

Close with prayer asking God for direction in calling others to worship. Pray for guidance for living a faith-filled life, one that draws others to the love of Christ. Pray for meaningful worship experiences so that we can share the joy of Christ with others who may not know His love.



Show Me Your Ways Through Giving (Matthew 2:1-12)

We have all experienced the joy and often surprise of receiving gifts. Coming down the stairs on Christmas morning to a living room transformed into a toyland are some of the most magical memories of my childhood. But as I grew older, I gradually became aware of a much deeper joy, the joy of giving. The act of sharing a part of myself with someone else, whether through giving a gift that had been carefully selected for them, or simply through the giving of my time and talents to fulfill a need, brought a deeper sense of joy and satisfaction to my soul. I quickly came to realize that the act of giving was indeed a gift in and of itself.

In our Scripture text today we read the familiar story of the Magi coming to visit the baby Jesus. They traversed thousands of miles to see this baby, born king of the Jews. When they finally found him, their response was one of joy, worshipping, and gift giving. In that moment, the actions of the Magi symbolize for us that all of life and all that we are, comes from God, who gives life. In John we read that God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him may not die but have eternal life (John 3:16). The act of giving is a reflection of who God is. God is the Giver and because God gives, we live.

When the spirit of our giving is rooted in God's love, we are sharing with others the gift of life. We are reaching beyond the confinements of our society that often urges us to get all that we can possibly get, and we are opening the doors to eternal life, the gift that transcends time, as we know it. When we give of ourselves, God is able to show us, and the receiver of our gift, who He is and what He can do, and, most importantly, how very much is His love for us.

Each day we are presented with so many opportunities to give, to show others the love that Christ has for us all. All too often, we are too distracted and busy to notice those opportunities, or we see them and think we are not qualified to fulfill what that opportunity is presenting to us. We are often far too quick to place limitations upon ourselves and deny the gifts of giving that God is placing in front of us. We feel we don't have much to give and therefore are of no great importance to anyone, even to God. Why should we even try? God calls us to be no less than our best. God created us in His own image. God gives abundantly. We cannot hide behind the walls we surround ourselves with, walls of self-doubt and questioning whether or not we are qualified for the task at hand. The issue is not how much we have (or how gifted we are), but what we do with what we do have. Our presents from God can become to others the presence of God.

Discussion Questions and Reflection Activities

Read Acts 20:22-38. Pay attention to verse 35. Discuss the following questions:

1. Share a time when you found it more blessed to give than to receive.
2. Do you see yourself, your women's group, your church, your community more as a giver or receiver? Why?
3. Discuss the following statement: "Those who know the joy of receiving tend to lose the joy of giving." Do you think this holds truth? Now alter the statement just a bit, "Those who know the joy of receiving tend to gain the joy of giving." How does Christ's call in our lives fit in the altered statement?
4. When the Magi encountered the Christ Child, they responded with joy and worship and gift giving. How are we moved to respond when we encounter Christ in our lives?

Activity

1. Have a small paper sack or gift bag for each member of the group with their name on it. Have enough note cards or slips of paper on hand so that each person has one for every other member of the group. Have each person complete the following sentence about the other people present in your group, putting one on each card:

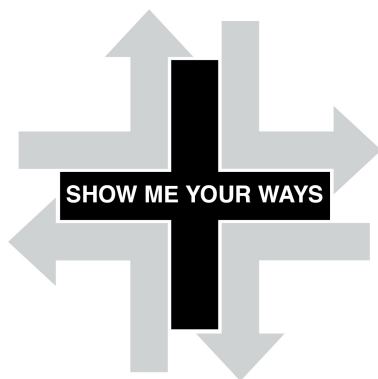
A present you give me from your presence is your...(warmth, care, friendliness, etc.)

Once the cards have been completed, place them in each person's bag. These may be taken home and serve as our reminders how we can give presents from our presence.

2. Using the word GIVING, write an acrostic poem that helps define the word in the context of our lesson for today.

Prayer:

Close with a prayer thanking God for the gifts we have been given. Ask God for help in being a giver so that we may share His love and life with those around us. Close with singing the hymn, "They Will Know We Are Christians by Our Love."



Show Me Your Ways Through Sacrifice (Romans 12:1-2)

Unfortunately, in our society today, the word, “sacrifice” has lost much of its true meaning. The dictionary defines the word sacrifice as “an act of giving up something valued for the sake of something else regarded as more important or worthy.” How many times have we caught ourselves saying that we really had to sacrifice in order to get or achieve something we really wanted?

In our passage today, Paul is speaking about how we as Christians should be a living sacrifice. Jesus dying on the cross for our sins was the ultimate sacrifice. Through Christ’s death and resurrection we experienced the power of grace. Our lives are to be transformed, shaped and ordered by the power of that grace. No longer are we to shape ourselves - our thinking and our doing - by what the world has to say. We are to literally live out our faith. Our every action, word, and thought should be in response to the transforming power of grace that came to us through Christ’s sacrifice.

What does that mean for us today as Christians? It is a great challenge to put aside the ways of the world, to not be tempted to allow ourselves to become content with where we are and with what we have. It is too easy to live in our little bubble and go through the motions of worship and being a Christian and not even realize that we are not giving our all to God, not even coming close to being a living sacrifice as we are called to do.

There is a popular contemporary Christian song by Matthew West called “The Motions.” In it he speaks of not wanting to simply go through the motions of living the Christian life. He desires to have the “all-consuming” passion of being a living sacrifice for God, of giving everything, all that is in him, to God and God’s work in this world. That is how we are called to live for God. To give our all to God, trusting in God’s will for our lives, living to honor and obey God in all that we are and in all that we do.

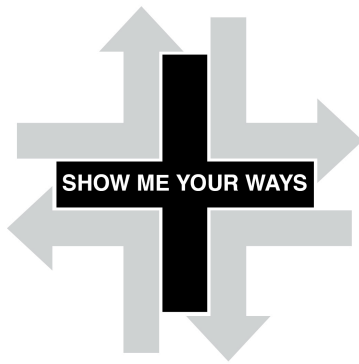
Discussion Questions and Reflection Activities

1. We have all had to make sacrifices at some point in our lives. Describe what that time was like for us. How does it compare with the kind of sacrifice Paul is calling us to in our text?
2. The question that Paul addresses in Romans 12:1-2 is how do we glorify God? How do we live our faith each day? Do you ever find yourself “going through the motions?” If so, how can you change your direction and give your all to God?
3. What are some of the roadblocks that you have come upon while trying to be a living sacrifice? What aspects of our society make it difficult to keep in this frame of mind? What aspects of society make it easy to remember to be a living sacrifice?

Using the word **SACRIFICE**, write an acrostic poem that helps define the word in the context of our lesson for today.

Prayer:

Close in prayer, asking for guidance to seek God's will in all we do, and to truly live our lives as a living sacrifice. Be thankful of the opportunities that God presents to us to be examples of God's grace in this world. Pray for your group and your church to be a shining example of what it means to live a life transformed by grace.



Show Me Your Ways Through Service (Isaiah 58, 61, Micah 6:8)

In Isaiah and in Micah, we see the age-old struggle of humanity to do what is truly good. Because of our sinful ways, our view of what is good and right in the sight of God often becomes clouded with self-righteousness. As the Israelites were prone to do in our passage, we too “offer a day of fasting” to God. Sometimes we too get stuck in the mindset of, “I am going to church each week, I am tithing, I am serving on committees. Surely God will be pleased with me.” We end up going through the motions of faith, but not really living out the life of service to which God has called each and every one of us.

To be certain, God desires for us to be active in our faith community. We are all called as Christians to a life of service. However, in our “serve me” society, we tend to quickly forget what that life may entail. It is too easy for us to fall into the mindset of, “how can we be served, how can our needs be met?” instead of us asking ourselves, “how can we serve others and let our lives be a blessing to them?” In Isaiah and Micah, it is laid out for us very clearly how we are to live this life of faith and faithfulness. We are to seek out the poor and the hopeless and the hungry. With humble and faithful hearts, we are to offer them food, both spiritual as well as physical, shelter, clothing, and love. We are to reach across and bridge the chasms between rich and poor, weak and strong, male and female, slave and free with the love of God that binds all people together and establishes the true community of faith. We are to humbly follow God and God’s will for our lives. Living from God’s word, not our own. Paying attention to God’s will, not following our own desires. Loving all people with the love and compassion that God so faithfully shows to us. Service is truly the heart of our lives as Christians. Our service is not driven by guilt or fear or even duty to God, but it springs forth out of our joy and thanksgivings for what God has done for us.

Discussion Questions and Reflection Activities

Consider this quote by the theologian John Wesley: “Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as you ever can.”

1. How does this quote describe serving God in light of the passages we have studied for this session?
2. We have all hit roadblocks in our lives of servanthood. What holds us back from accepting God’s call to serve? How do we get past these blocks and move forward into God’s service?
3. Recall some influential people in your life that have truly embraced the call to servanthood. What made them stand out from others? How have they influenced your attitude and effort to live such a life?

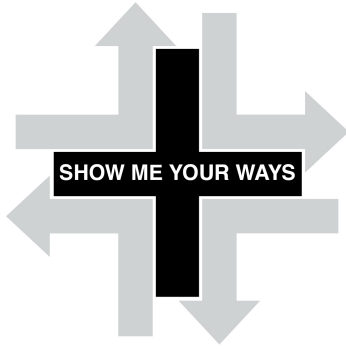
The very foundation of the Cumberland Presbyterian Women’s Ministry is to serve God by serving others. Are there areas within your church or community where your group can make a difference by serving a need and blessing others? Some suggestions: Be a “family” for those in your area nursing homes who have no family nearby. Work with your local schools to help families in need during the holidays and beyond. Take meals to those in need. Write letters and cards to those who are lonely. Write letters of support and encouragement to our missionaries.

Using a poster board or a flat sheet, write a theme such as, “We Are Called to Serve,” or “We Are Christ’s Hands, Serving and Loving One Another,” or “We Serve God by Serving Others,” etc. Have each lady trace one of her hands and write an act of service upon it. Hang it in your place of meeting to remind you of God’s call for your life.

Using the word **SERVICE**, write an acrostic poem that helps define the word in the context for our lesson for today.

Prayer:

Have a member of your group close with prayer thanking God for the privilege and opportunities to serve Him. Pray for our eyes to be open to the many opportunities that we have each day to serve God.



Show Me Your Ways Through The Cross (Philippians 2: 5-11)

How many of us have said to the children in our lives, “You need to adjust your attitude!” As a mother of a pre-teen, an about to be pre-teen, and a small child who thinks she can skip all that teenager stuff and go ahead and be a grown-up, I probably say that more times in one day than the average person says in a week! I wonder how many times our Heavenly Father thinks that in a day about us and our attitudes?

In the letter to the Philippians, Paul is writing to a church that has experienced and shared much joy. It was a successful church that had given Paul much support in his ministry. As all churches do at one time or another, the church at Philippi was dealing with a few issues and Paul offered them some encouraging words. The church had become distracted in its witness by discord from within, individualism, and behavior that erred on the side of self-serving rather than serving others. Paul urged the church to “be like-minded” (v.2). This is not a call for all those in the church to be on the same page where all issues are concerned. Rather, Paul is urging Christians to have attitudes like the attitude of Christ - an attitude of love and acceptance, and an attitude of service to others.

Paul reminds the church at Philippi, and us, that Christ laid aside his glory, “making himself nothing” (v.7) and became a man. Christ willingly and out of love for His heavenly Father laid aside His divine rights and privileges and walked among us here on earth, serving and caring for others, showing us God’s loving nature, even to His death upon the cross for our sins so that we may have eternal life. Paul reminds the church that this is the very attitude that created and defined their life together. This is the attitude that should govern the way they think, the way that they act, and the way that they serve all those with whom they come in contact.

Jesus is our example, not only through the words that He spoke, but also through the life that he lived. We are not called to imitate Him, for no matter how hard we try, we can never love so completely as he loves. But we are called to be what we already are “in Him.” We are called to serve Him and one another because we love God. We desire for others to know that love so we must choose our attitude to be one that reflects God’s love for us.

Discussion Questions and Reflection Activities

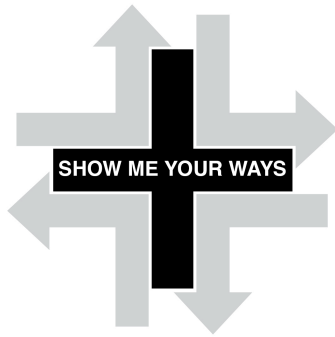
1. What kind of attitude are we portraying to those around us – an attitude of service or an attitude of being served?
2. What are some ways that we can “adjust our attitude” in order to live a more Christ-like life?
3. Read verses 5-8 again. What difference would it make if these verses were lived out in your work life? In your church life? In your family life?

As a group, think of new ways that your circle or group can show to the church and community that your “attitude is the same as that of Christ Jesus” (v. 5). Maybe you can reach out to the youth of your church and help them with a project. Reach out to your local food bank or homeless shelter and volunteer your time as a group. Brainstorm about ideas where you can “adjust your attitude” and be of service to others in Christ’s name.

Using the words **THE CROSS**, write an acrostic poem that helps define the word in the context of our lesson today.

Prayer:

Close with a prayer, expressing gratitude and thanksgiving that Jesus came to dwell among us, showing us God’s deep love for us. Pray for God to give us a servant’s heart so that our lives may reflect God’s love for all.



Show Me Your Ways Through Community (Acts 2:42-47)

When you hear the word, “Church” what is the first thing that comes to mind? A place or a people? The Book of Acts is about the establishment of the Church, the community of believers.

In our passage, we get a glimpse of the life of the first Christians. They were from all walks of life, varied backgrounds, different nationalities, yet they held in common the love of Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit. They became a community of faith,

bound together by their love of God and their love for one another. These early Christians understood themselves to be united in purpose and identity, not a dispersed collection of individuals who “belonged” to a church. The Scripture states that they sold their possessions and goods and gave the money to anyone who was in need. They shared with one another all that they had and took care of each other, as a family should.

So too are we called to be God’s community by learning to live together, serve one another, and love each other **despite** our differences and in all that we do. It is so easy in this day and age to compartmentalize our lives. We create a time and space for religion, for family, for work, and for play. It is easy not to let those areas of our lives overlap.

In the context of our passage, think about what it means to be the Church - to be the group of believers who gather together to do what Jesus has called us to do. We are called to be a community. In this community it is important that we do what we are called to do, but more important may be how we go about doing those things--with love and compassion and in the Spirit of Christ. When we come together in this community, we should do so in ways that honor God. We should treat one another as children of God, meaning that we share even with those who may rub us the wrong way. We take care of each other, pray together, fellowship and have meals together, study the Word of God together, coming together and doing these things because of our love for Jesus. It is in this spirit of community that we find we can do so much more. We are able to step outside of ourselves and participate in extraordinary acts of giving and service. In community we find that we are capable of doing so much more together than we would ever do alone. And in this context, we experience the Joy of the Lord.

Discussion Questions and Reflection Activities

1. Take the word, “Community” and write an acrostic poem that describes who we are called to be as the church:

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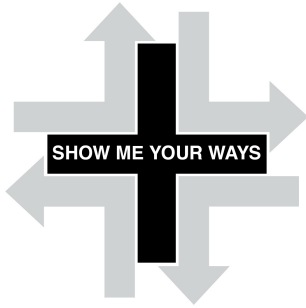
Now do the same using your church’s name, using words that describe how the Holy Spirit is working through your church community to spread the Gospel to others.

2. Discuss ways in which we, both as a local church and as the Cumberland Presbyterian Church as a whole, are striving to call others into the community of Christ. What are areas that we need to improve? What are the things that we are doing well? What are the obstacles we often face when striving to live in a community of faith? How can we deal with these obstacles in a constructive and faithful manner?

3. What are some of the ways that the Christian community influenced your faith journey? Consider ways that your community of faith influences those in its midst now.

Prayer:

Invite a member of your group to close in prayer, thanking God for your unique community of faith and asking for guidance in how you can share the good news of Jesus to the whole through your faith community – women’s ministry group, church, youth group, session, etc.



Show Me Your Ways Through Fellowship (Philippians 2:1-4)

Don't you just love to open your mailbox and find a good old-fashioned letter from a friend or loved one? Knowing that someone took the time to let you know they were thinking of you and that they care for you is nourishing to the soul! This study centers on just such a letter. The book of Philippians is a letter from Paul to the Christians at Philippi. Paul was in a Roman

prison at the time he wrote and sent this letter to those at Philippi. It was a letter in which he expressed his love, affection, and appreciation to the Philippian believers.

In this bible study we will focus on Philippians 2:1-4. In this passage, Paul is recalling their life as a community formed by the Gospel. He is affirming their faith and is calling them to progress forward, to build and mature upon their faith and life experiences. Paul, knowing that a strong fellowship lays the foundation to build an even stronger community, encouraged them to have spiritual unity.

Fellowship literally means to hold things in common. It is about relationships and the care and concern we hold for one another. The church at Philippi, much like our own congregations, spent time together, ate meals with together, and took care of each other when needs arose. They became a family. They embodied the spiritual gift of fellowship of which Paul called them to embrace.

When we read this section of Philippians, are we not called to embrace this spiritual gift as well? Paul encourages us to love one another and to be one in spirit and purpose so that we can work together and care for others as Christ calls us to do. Building relationships with those around us is important for this task. It is crucial that we invest time and prayer into our fellowship endeavors. When we gather, we each bring a unique background with us - some are wealthy and some are not; some are healthy and others struggle with illness; some are filled with the Holy Spirit while some are desperately searching. It is at these crossroads where fellowship, showing genuine concern and interest in others, finding common ground in our faith, is crucial. As we spend quality time with each other, we naturally discover one another's needs. As we come to know one another through the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, the love of Christ will then compel us to love and care for each other in practical ways.

Discussion Questions and Reflection Activities

How can we create fellowship? Fellowship tends to thrive when we as Christians live in a worthy manner. When we behave in ways that honor Christ we naturally draw near to one another. When we treat people with the love that Christ calls us to show, fellowship blossoms.

1. Discuss ways that your congregation seeks fellowship? How can we enhance these experiences to strive to reach the fellowship of which Paul speaks?
2. How can your CP Women's Ministry further promote fellowship within your church and community?

Possible Activities

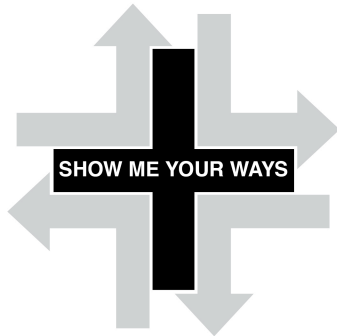
Consider taking on a letter campaign. One of our tasks as Christians is to encourage our fellow Christians in their ministry and fellowship endeavors. There are so many opportunities in which letter writing can fulfill this need.

- Write to **other CP Women's Ministry's** throughout your presbytery, synod, and even on the denominational level. Share with one another the news and goings on of your chapter, encourage each other, share ideas, and pray for one another. This promotes fellowship and unity within our ministry as a whole.
- Write to **our missionaries**. Encourage them in their work. Pray for them. Share with them the joy you experience in your fellowship at home, and rejoice with them in their experiences where they are.
- Write to the **residents and employees at the Cumberland Presbyterian Children's Home** in Denton, Texas. Let the residents know that there are other Christians who pray for them on a daily basis. Lift up the employees in prayer as they give daily doses of guidance and encouragement to those who often feel lost and hopeless.
- Write letters to the **youth** of your congregation. Get to know them on a personal level, encouraging them in their faith journey.
- Write to those within your **congregation and community that are no longer able to be active** in the church and community. Let them know of your love and concern for them. Remind them that even though they can't always be present in the room with you, they are an important and crucial part of the fellowship of the Holy Spirit within your community.

Using the word **FELLOWSHIP**, write an acrostic poem that helps define the word in the context of our lesson for today.

Prayer:

Have a member of your group close with prayer, seeking to find ways to renew and encourage the fellowship of the Holy Spirit within your church and community.



Show Me Your Ways Through Stress (Matthew 11:28-30)

Stress is a part of everyone's life. There is good stress, such as the stress and anxiety involved with preparing for an exciting job interview, and there is not so good stress, such as the stress and anxiety of worrying about a loved one that is facing an illness. We all have experienced stress in one way or another at some point in our lives. It can be a very emotionally draining experience when we feel that we are under a lot of stress and all aspects of our lives are often affected.

We all have unique ways of dealing with the stresses in our lives. Some people exercise. Some people turn to food for comfort. Some of us pray and meditate. Some of us become so high strung that it is hard for anyone to be around us. But in our Scripture for today, Jesus offers us an invitation that will conquer even the most stressful situations. He says, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." "Come to me," enter into a relationship with Jesus and your lives will be transformed. He will bring peace into your life and calm the worries of your heart. As we read further, the Scripture states: "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." When we hear the word "yoke" we often think of the piece of wood that unites a pair of oxen as they pull a plow or cart. Most people associate bearing a yoke with hard labor or something painful. But the yoke that Jesus invites us to carry with Him is different. It is not about hard labor, but about joining Him in the yoke so that we can walk and work together! Granting us rest is not about removing what is stressful to us, but about drawing us to Him in a close and trusting relationship. Often the burden we feel is not necessarily removed, but our thoughts and responses to that burden are changed as we begin to love Jesus and trust Jesus, believe His promises and rely on His power. As we respond to His invitation, we begin to feel the weight of our stress shift from our shoulders to His. Although our stressful situation may not be fully resolved, we discover God's peace and relief as we walk with Him, sharing our load together.

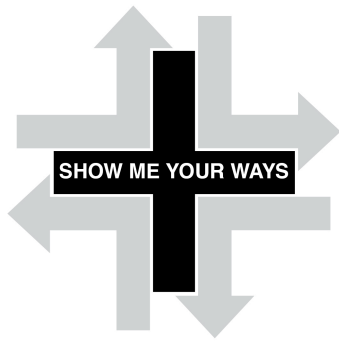
Discussion Questions and Reflection Activities

1. Think of a stressful and trying time in your life. How did you respond to that stress? How did the situation affect other areas of your life? Were you ever able to “share the yoke” with Christ? Share with others about your experience.
2. What are some of the things we are burdened with in our lives today (work, family, health, loss, finances, etc.)? Discuss these together for a few moments. How are we handling these burdens? Imagine that each of these burdens is a rock, about six inches in diameter. How long could you carry them around this room before you would have to stop and readjust your load or rest? Discuss how Jesus can give us rest from our burdens. What do we need to do in order to achieve this?
3. What does it mean to take Jesus’ yoke upon us? By taking His yoke upon us, we are able to follow His direction and do His will for our lives. Christ’s yoke is a perfect fit and because we walk with Him, our burdens are light.

Using the word **STRESS**, write an acrostic poem that helps define the word in the context of our lesson today.

Prayer:

Close with prayer thanking Jesus for sharing our burdens and giving us rest. You might also spend a few moments in silence – resting in God’s presence. Soft, meditative music playing in the background might help folks to relax and rest.



Show Me Your Ways Through Trust (Proverbs 3:5-6)

Trust - a small word with an absolutely enormous meaning! To be able to trust another person or group of people is a fundamental necessity in this world. If there was no trust between people, just imagine the chaos this world would have! Trust is also crucially important when it comes to our faith in God. To have faith is to trust God and to have confidence in God's all powerful and loving presence in this world and in our lives. Solomon calls us to trust in God with ALL of our

heart, and not to lean on our own small, sometimes severely deficient, understanding. We are but humans. God knows what is best for us and is a far better judge of what we need than we will ever be! To trust in God with all of our heart is to trust Him completely in every choice we make. This is not always easy for us. We want to give all of our cares to God. We even verbally and prayerfully hand them over to Him. But often we snatch them right back in a feeble and terribly human attempt to do it ourselves. Solomon reminds us to acknowledge God in all of our ways and God will make our paths straight.

If we put God first in all aspects of our lives, if we are willing to listen to what the Word of God is calling us to do and be, if we lay our prayers at the feet of God and follow His leading, then our paths will be made straight through God's guidance and protection. We must be willing to turn EVERY aspect of our lives over to God and make God a vital part of all we do so that we are constantly working to accomplish God's will for our lives. This kind of living is dependent on our trusting and having faith in our loving God. We do not always understand the paths on which we are led. Our lives are often clouded with situations far beyond our control. Our faith may be shaken to the core during those times. However, for those who cling to their faith as they wrestle with such uncertainties, peace prevails. There is comfort in knowing that our lives are in hands stronger, wiser, and better than our own. Our trust in God blossoms with our acknowledgement of God's sovereignty over life, and the confidence that we always find peace when we seek to follow God's will for our lives.

Discussion Questions and Reflection Activities

To trust in God with all of our heart, we are called to turn every aspect of our lives over to God.

1. How easy/difficult has it been for you to do this throughout your life? Can you share with the group a time or situation where you have struggled with this? What was the outcome? How did it impact your faith and trust in God?

In many areas of our lives we find it easy to trust and have faith in God. However, it is in the areas that we attempt to restrict or ignore God's influence (and we all do to some degree) that we will experience unrest.

2. Give each member of your group a piece of paper and a pen. At the top, have them write today's Scripture lesson (Proverbs 3:5-6). Next, ask them to think of and write down areas of their life where they have not given God their complete trust. Encourage them to include these aspects of their lives in prayer each day, seeking to trust in God's wisdom and direction.

Using the word **TRUST**, write an acrostic poem that helps define the word in the context of our lesson for today.

Prayer:

Close the lesson with prayer. Pray for guidance and direction in seeking to trust God with all of our hearts and in all that we do. Pray for courage to turn over to God those aspects of our lives that we tend hold on to out of fear and lack of trust. Thank God for His loving and nurturing presence in our lives. Pray for guidance so that we can show others God's love and goodness.