

Growing Deeper

This Is Us: Rediscovering what it means to be family.

Week One: The First Relationship

Genesis 3:6-20

Spend FIFTEEN - Day One

1. British anthropologist J. D. Unwin made a disturbing connection between the state of a nation and the state of the families within the nation. “Families are the foundation of a nation. When the family crumbles, the nation falls because nations are built upon family units. They are the true driving social force. A nation will not be strong unless the family is strong. That was true in the ancient world and it is true today.” Does he overstate his case, or do you agree with him? Why?
2. How would you describe the quality of families in the U.S. today? How about your own family?
3. The prophet Jeremiah records a dire warning about a nation whose families are crumbling: read Jeremiah 10:17-24. What is the description of family life in this passage? What consequences to the society are there?
4. What is Jeremiah’s plea to God in verses 23-24?
5. Now see God’s promised answer in Psalm 27:5. What is it?
6. You might have noticed the word “tent” was in both these passages. What do you think that word represents in our lives? What does it mean for God to “keep me safe in his dwelling” or “hide me in the shelter of his sacred tent”?
7. End your FIFTEEN by praying Jeremiah’s prayer from verses 23-24. Ask God to lovingly guide and restore all the families of his people. Ask him to sustain and strengthen your own family. Thank him that he welcomed you into the shelter of his own family, by adopting you as his child.

Spend FIFTEEN - Day Two

8. It shouldn’t be too controversial to say that the strength of a family is built correspondingly on the strength of the marriage that began the family. Think of your own marriage, or your parents’ marriage. What is (or was) the quality of that marriage?
9. German missionary and marriage counselor Walter Trobisch evaluates the strength of a marriage relationship according to Genesis 2:24. Turn there and read the verse. What are the three actions in this description of marriage?
10. Trobisch summarizes these as 1) leave, 2) cleave, and 3) one flesh, and he says they are the three parts of any marriage. Let’s focus on the first one today. What does it look like for the people in a marriage to “leave” their father and mother? (Think about wedding ceremonies you have experienced.)

11. How is this leaving action different in our culture today from 60 years ago? How about compared to Bible times? What part might be the same?
12. What consequences are there for a marriage when either half of the couple doesn't "leave" their parents behind in a healthy way? (Think about the possible problems with mothers-in-law...)
13. What truth about marriage might God be communicating to us by commanding that we "leave" our families of origin when we get married?
14. Close your FIFTEEN by thanking God for his vision for marriage. Ask him to guide the marriages amongst yourself and your extended family.

Spend FIFTEEN - Day Three

15. Today we continue to work through what it takes to have a healthy marriage. Read again Genesis 2:24. What are the three parts of this verse that define marriage?
16. Let's talk about the second action: "cleave." This is an old-fashioned word. What do you think it means, practically, for spouses to "cleave" to one another?
17. Another word for this aspect of marriage is "love." Some cultures practice arranged marriages. How might this change the way love is a factor in the marriage?
18. Walter Trobisch, German missionary and marriage counselor, describes it this way: "The literal sense of the Hebrew word for 'to cleave' is to stick to, to paste, to be glued to a person. Husband and wife are glued together like two pieces of paper. If you try to separate two pieces of paper which are glued together, you tear them both. If you try to separate husband and wife who cleave together, both are hurt—and in case they have children, the children as well." In what ways can a healthy couple exemplify being glued together?
19. What are some unhealthy practices that might show a couple is not cleaving well together?
20. When love is lost in a marriage, what effect does it have on the other two parts of the triangle, the legal commitment (leaving) and the physical connection (one flesh)?
21. What are the possible negative consequences of romantic love and attachment without the commitment of marriage?
22. Many of us have experienced a "tearing apart" of relationship. If you are still wounded from such a trauma, end your

FIFTEEN by submitting that wound to God in prayer, and ask for his healing.

Spend FIFTEEN - Day Four

23. There's a trend in our culture right now that believes our body is an "accidental" (non-essential) part of our identity. This is why a person can decide that he/she is a different gender or orientation than what their biology indicates. How is integration of our bodies and souls an important truth of our Christian faith?
24. Let's look again at Genesis 2:24. What are the three inter-connected parts of a marriage?
25. Let's not beat around the bush: what does "one flesh" refer to?
26. What are the negative consequences in a marriage where the couple is not physically intimate with each other?
27. What are the problems when sex is practiced outside of the bond of marriage? (See Hebrews 13:4 for some help.)
28. On the other hand, how is marriage strengthened when sex is used in the context God designed it for? (See 1 Corinthians 7:3-5.)
29. Close your FIFTEEN by thanking God for the gift of sex! As part of that, confess any times where you have used the gift wrongly, and ask God to help make your sex life holy and pleasing to him.

Spend FIFTEEN - Day Five

30. We've had a lot of frank discussion this week about the realities of marriage. But why does this matter so much, theologically? Why do you think marriage is so important to God and to Christians?
31. Look at Ephesians 5:25-32, focusing especially on the last verse. To what does Paul compare marriage?
32. The solution to the mystery is that the relationship of marriage actually mirrors our relationship with Christ. In what way are Christ and the Church like a husband and wife?
33. Let's use our rubric from the week—*leave, cleave, one flesh*. How did Christ leave his father to join with us? See John 3:13 and 16:28.
34. In what way did Christ cleave to us in love? Look again at Ephesians 5:25-27.

35. How did Jesus Christ join himself to us? See Romans 8:9-11.

36. Close your FIFTEEN by thanking God for all that he did to marry himself to us. Ask him to strengthen your relationship with him, and ask for his vision to strengthen your marriage and the marriages of all those in his covenant community, the church.

Week Two: *The World's Toughest Job*
Hebrews 12:5-11

Spend FIFTEEN – Day One

1. What one word would you use to describe the parenting style of your family of origin? Explain your answer.

2. If you could change one thing about your mom, what would it be?

3. If you could change one thing about your dad, what would it be?

4. If you are a parent now, how has your parenting style been similar or dissimilar to your parent(s)?

5. Read Hebrews 12:5-11. Who disciplined you as a child?

6. Do you believe the discipline you received was too strict, too lenient, or about right? How did it shape you?

7. Finish your FIFTEEN in prayer. Pray a prayer that reflects your feelings towards your childhood; i.e. thanksgiving, the need to forgive, or for lessons learned.

Spend FIFTEEN – Day Two

8. Read the story of Jesus' parents as recorded in Luke 2:39-52.

9. Out of all the possibilities, what do you think there was about Joseph and Mary that God chose them for the role of nurturing the childhood of his son, Jesus?

10. How does this story help us understand the importance of faith and religious practice as demonstrated by Joseph and Mary?

11. Did you grow up going to church as a child? Did both your parents demonstrate strong personal faith? If so, in what way? If not, how did that affect your relationship with God?

12. Obviously, Jesus' parents were not perfect and yet Jesus honored them as God expects of all children. How does this story help us as parents? How does this story help us as children?

13. Studies demonstrate that children develop patterns of worship based on the example of their father, but religious values based on the faith of their mother. Does that align with your experience?

14. Finish your FIFTEEN in prayer. Pray for young moms and dads in the midst of forming their parenting skills.

Spend FIFTEEN – Day Three

15. As a child, how did your parent(s) treat you different from the neighbor kids?

16. Hebrews 12:5-11. Why do you think there is a link between discipline and respect?

17. How did these verses describe a child raised without discipline?

18. How does our parental relationship affect our basic relationship with God? Out of all the metaphors he could have chosen, why did God choose the term “Heavenly Father,” to describe his relationship to followers, calling them “his children.”

19. Did your parents practice the exact same standards of discipline on all your siblings? Why or why not?

20. What’s the difference between discipline and punishment?

21. Who suffered the punishment for our sins? (See Isaiah 53:5). How is God’s discipline of us different from punishment?

22. What’s the ultimate purpose of discipline: to pay for wrong, or course-correction?

23. Finish your FIFTEEN in prayer. Give God thanks for the many times he has disciplined you through a “time out,” “course correction,” or allowed you to suffer the consequence of a wrong decision.

Spend FIFTEEN – Day Four

24. Why do you suppose God designed reproduction of the human race to be done in such a completely dependent way? God could have designed a non-personal form of reproduction accomplished in a non-nurturing process, or even had new humans enter the world completely independent and as fully functioning adults. Why babies, born to people of different genders in a family of origin?

25. Do you think the biggest danger to parenting comes from indulging children or demanding too much from them?
26. What is the danger of either extreme?
27. One of the most important passages for Jewish believers is called the Shema. Read it in Deuteronomy 6:1-9. The word "Shema" comes from the Hebrew word, "to listen." What does God say is so important?
28. According to the wisdom of Moses, what is the best way to pass these teachings on to our children?
29. Finish your FIFTEEN in prayer. Pray for the maturity to honor God's design and seek his help in nurturing children, your own or the children of others.

Spend FIFTEEN – Day Five

30. How would you describe God to a nonbeliever?
31. Read John 4:21-26. How does Jesus describe the nature of God in this verse?
32. See Romans 8:26 and 34. What role(s) do the Holy Spirit and Jesus as God's Son play in granting us access to God as our Heavenly Father?
33. Now read Ephesians 6:1-4. What is the special promise God made to those who were obedient in word and deed to their parents? What special warning does God issue in this verse to fathers? Why is that caution especially addressed to fathers versus mothers?
34. When is the job of parenting done?
35. Finish your FIFTEEN in prayer. Give God thanks for your parents and your children (as applicable). Ask him to help you maintain a spirit of love and acceptance despite the difficulty sometimes caused by hurt feelings or offense.

Week Three: *It Takes a Village*
Acts 2:42-47

Spend FIFTEEN - Day One

1. Who are the core people in your “community”? Which people around you would leave a gap if they weren’t there?
2. What do you think are the defining reasons that move a person from “acquaintance” to “inner circle”?
3. How many of your immediate neighbors (on your street or in your apartment building) do you know? Are they a part of your community? Why or why not?
4. Think about some communities of which you are a part. What did it take to “join” that community (either “formally” or “informally”)?
5. What does it take to join a church community?
6. Read Acts 2:42-47. This passage lists four key features of the early Christian community. What are they? How well did your earlier list match up with the example from Acts 2?
7. Close your FIFTEEN in prayer, thanking God for placing you in a community of his believers.

Spend FIFTEEN - Day Two

8. Start your FIFTEEN by rereading Acts 2:42-47. What are the four key features of the early Christian community? Let’s explore the first one today.
9. GK Chesterton once reflected on what makes an American an American. It’s not our ethnicity, or our geography, or our language. It’s that we hold a common “confession.” What would you say is the common confession of the United States?
10. The cartoon Superman once summarized our national confession as “Truth, Justice, and the American way!” Some might say the Constitution or “Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.” But, when there is disagreement on the American confession, we end up with partisanship, racial tensions, and class struggles. The United States are no longer very united. With that in mind, what would you say is the Christian “confession”? What principle(s) should unite Christians?
11. A Christian community must be “devoting itself to the apostles’ teachings.” Back up a bit from these verses and read Acts 2:14-39, what the Apostles were teaching. What/who was the focus of their teachings?

12. How can a group of otherwise diverse people come together by gathering around spreading the news of Jesus' death and resurrection?

13. How can a family bond be strengthened by joining efforts with a community focused on this same goal?

14. Close your FIFTEEN in prayer, thanking God for giving us a community of believers who passed down their teachings about God. Ask him to unify us around the mission of declaring who he is and what he has done for us.

Spend FIFTEEN - Day Three

15. Begin with reading Acts 2:42-47 again. What four things marked the early church?

16. Today let's focus on "fellowship." What are some real world examples of fellowship? (See verses 44-45 for some help.)

17. Why is fellowship a necessary part of church community?

18. These days, our smartphones allow us to do all of our banking, communicating, scheduling, playing, entertainment, and more from our couch. Does this count as fellowship? Why or why not?

19. Most sociologists agree that smartphones and social media provide the *illusion* of fellowship, but actually increase isolation, anxiety, and depression. What are ways that a true church community could combat these trends?

20. Right now, stop and reach out to someone that you haven't connected with in person for a while. This moment, schedule a time with them—whether it's coffee, lunch, or helping them run errands together. Take one step towards regaining true fellowship.

21. As you conclude your FIFTEEN, pray for the people in your close circle. One by one, naming each person, ask God to enrich them, their lives, and their community.

Spend FIFTEEN - Day Four

22. How often do you share a meal with close friends or with family? How often are you left to grab a quick bite by yourself?

23. Look again at Acts 2:42-47. What is the third important aspect of a true community?

24. Most translations list the third thing as “the breaking of bread.” What do you think this actually means?
25. An obvious answer is sharing a meal together, but only one major Bible translation actually explains what this verse is really referencing: the New Living Translation (NLT). You can find this translation here: www.biblegateway.com/verse/en/Acts%202:42. Why is this an important difference?
26. This verse is not simply referencing meals together, but one specific and important meal: the Lord’s Supper! Look at 1 Corinthians 10:16-18. What is a major benefit of the Lord’s Supper?
27. God could have used a number of rituals to unite us around. What is special about a meal?
28. Just as sharing meals together with family and friends reinforces your bonds, so sharing the divine meal of the Lord’s Supper reinforces the unity of our own Christian community. The next time you receive communion, take a moment to look around at all the people worshipping with you. Maybe you know them, maybe you don’t. Maybe they’re similar to you, maybe they’re not. But, in communion you are supernaturally made into a unified community with them, which is an amazing thing.
29. Close your FIFTEEN by thanking God for his gift of communion to unify his people into a loved community.

Spend FIFTEEN - Day Five

30. Think about the different times you pray during the week. Do you pray more often privately or publicly with a group?
31. Prayer as it is described in most spiritual books today is generally an individual, private thing. But, look at Acts 2:42-47 again. What is the fourth trait of the early Christian community?
32. On a scale of 1-5, how comfortable would you be praying in front of a group of other people? Why is that?
33. How does it feel to have someone pray for you in a group of people?
34. C.S. Lewis has a wonderful quote: “Do not waste time bothering whether you ‘love’ your neighbor; act as if you did. As soon as we do this we find one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you loved someone, you will presently come to love him.” How might this quote apply to prayer?
35. Commit to making time in the next few days to pray with and for another person. This could be your spouse, or a friend, or even a stranger that God places in your path. How might prayer move you towards creating greater community with them?

36. Finish your FIFTEEN by thanking God for the opportunity to pray among our community. Ask him to give you the courage and opportunity to pray with others, that you may be an ambassador for God to the world.

Week Four – *Families That Stay Together*
Micah 6:1-8

Spend FIFTEEN - Day One

1. Have you as a parent ever ranted over a repeated misbehavior of one of your children? Alternatively, has one of your parents ever done this to you? What causes this type of reaction from a parent?
2. Read Micah 6:1-3. What has God instructed Micah the prophet to do?
3. How did God address Israel in verse 3? What does that term suggest he feels about them?
4. Continue reading in Micah 6:4-5. What does God describe in the verses?
5. What feelings might this reminder have produced in those the prophet was addressing?
6. Like a parent that reminds a child of his or her protection and love before disciplining them, God reminded his people of the things he had done to take care of them. Is this likely to make them more or less receptive to his words of correction? Explain your answer.
7. Close your FIFTEEN by asking God to give you a willing spirit to hear and follow his correction.

Spend FIFTEEN - Day Two

8. What does the saying, “The family that prays together, stays together.” mean to you? Do you think praying together is enough to keep God’s people living a life grounded in the ways he has instructed them to live?
9. Read Micah 6:6-7 and notice how the prophet starts small, with a simple sacrifice, but then continues as the list of sacrifices becomes greater and greater? Why might he have done this?
10. As we saw in yesterday’s reading, God had been gracious to Israel, taking great care of them, even rescuing them from slavery in Egypt. How does his act of redemption compare to the sacrifices they offer?
11. The sacrificial system was intended in part to help the Israelites remember what God had done for them. What started as a system to help them be contrite for their sins turned into a tit for tat repayment for wrongs, defeating the purpose of those acts. What types of things do you do to please God? (e.g. attending worship, saying grace before meals)

12. Read Psalm 51:16-17. How does using those things you listed in #11 as a way to please or even appease God also defeat the purpose for which he intended them for us?

13. End your FIFTEEN by asking God to help you realize his love for you is not dependent on what you do, but what he has done for you.

Spend FIFTEEN - Day Three

14. As we were reminded earlier this week, God offers us so much more than we give him. Brainstorm a quick list of the good things he has specifically done for you. (Not a comprehensive list that would take much longer than FIFTEEN minutes!)

15. When you consider all he has done for you, is there anything he could ask of you that would be too much?

16. Read Micah 6:8 and write in your own words what the prophet says God requires of his people.

17. To whom is this verse addressed? What does that suggest about the personal nature of this charge?

18. Read Mark 12:28-34. What did the young man wisely say was better than sacrifices?

19. How did Jesus describe the man who answered wisely?

20. Jesus' response to the man did not refer to salvation. It meant that he understood the heart of God. Spend the rest of your FIFTEEN in prayer asking God to help you seek to love others out of grateful appreciation for all he has done for you.

Spend FIFTEEN - Day Four

21. Read Micah 6:8. Does this verse bring to mind anyone you know? How do they live this out?

22. Does it come naturally to you to act justly and love mercy? Explain your answer.

23. Read Hebrews 13:15-16. How is serving others described in these verses?

24. Do you enjoy serving others or does it feel sacrificial for you to do so?

25. Now read Romans 12:6-8. How can you use your gifts to show love to others?

26. God has gifted each of us in different ways, yet he has called all of us to serve others and to love mercy and seek justice. As you finish your FIFTEEN, pray that God would help you recognize the opportunities to do just that as he puts them in your path.

Spend FIFTEEN - Day Five

27. Look again at Micah 6:8. What is the final command of that verse?

28. Take a moment and assess your walk with God. How would you describe your current “walk” with God?

29. Are you satisfied with the current state of your relationship? How could it be improved?

30. Yesterday we looked at a passage in Romans that talks about how we are all called to serve others no matter how God has gifted each of us. Now read Romans 12:3-5, a few verses prior to yesterday’s reading. What attitude do these verses encourage us to adopt?

31. How might adopting this attitude foster a spirit of humility in you?

32. Close your final FIFTEEN this week by using the words of Micah 6:8 as your prayer. Ask God to help live out these words as part of your daily life.

Week Five – *This Is Us*
Ephesians 4:1-7; 14-17

Spend FIFTEEN – Day One

1. Describe your family of origin. Where did you fit into the pecking order of things?
2. How are you the same or different from your siblings, or parents?
3. Did you always feel special, never feel special, or never really give it much thought? As you look back on your childhood today, how has your self-perception changed?
4. Tom & Dickie Smothers Brothers were a big comedy act that loved to use the phrase, “Mom always loved you more than me.” Did you ever feel that way growing up? Do you think all siblings feel that way about their place in the family?
5. Can you name any siblings in the Bible that fought for attention and honor? Do you think that just goes with the territory, or do most families honor each other and affirm each other in love?
6. Read Philippians 2:1-4. Is that kind of attitude possible in a family? What makes it possible or impossible in your opinion?
7. Finish your FIFTEEN in prayer. Pray a prayer to God about your family of origin... perhaps a prayer of thanksgiving or for acceptance and peace to rise above any lasting resentments or pain.

Spend FIFTEEN – Day Two

8. Read Ephesians 4:1-7; 14-17. What part of the reading especially spoke to you?
9. What are the key descriptive words from verse 2 that describe the attitude God wants to foster in all our relationships?
10. According to verse 3, what is the expected outcome of those attitudes?
11. How does God describe the overall goal in verse 1? How does this description compare to how Jesus said nonbelievers would recognize Christians in John 13:35?
12. In your opinion, is that how Christians are often typecast in our culture... as people of love, patience, humility,

gentleness and overlooking faults in others?

13. Is the reputation Christians have in the world today one we've earned, or one that has been falsely applied by enemies of our faith? Explain.
14. Finish your FIFTEEN in prayer. Pray to be more gracious towards others, both believers and nonbelievers so that your attitude would reflect God's expectations.

Spend FIFTEEN – Day Three

15. Read Ephesians 4:7. Explain it in your own words.
16. Are you a peacemaker by nature or a boat rocker? Can you be both at the same time?
17. Read Ephesians 4:4-6. Are divisions in the Christian faith (denominations and differences in theological perspective) a blessing or a blight upon the church? Why?
18. Does your congregation affirm and speak well of Christian churches different from your own, or do they encourage you to keep your distance for fear of false teachers? Do you agree with that perception?
19. Can a person disagree with another person without becoming disagreeable? Explain your point of view.
20. America seems to be more polarized on race, creed and political perspective than at any time in her history. Do you agree? Is it best to stand firm, compromise, or respectfully disagree?
21. Read Matthew 5:9. Then finish your FIFTEEN in prayer. Pray to the God of peace that he might use you as an instrument of peace in the world.

Spend FIFTEEN – Day Four

22. Read Ephesians 4:14-17. How does verse 15 describe the proper attitude of Christians as an influence in the world?
23. Do you agree with the statement, "Love without truth is not true love. Truth without love is never heard"? Do you think we are known for that kind of balance? Truth and love equally valued?
24. Do you feel your current marriage, family, or closest relationships are a good example of truth and love in balance?

25. Would you describe your family or closest relationships as a place of unity and mutual admiration?
26. Is your family situation more united or dissimilar? What would it take to bring your family into greater harmony? What could you do about it?
27. According to Ephesians 4:15-16 who is the true head of the church, our families, and our lives?
28. Finish your FIFTEEN in prayer. Pray for greater unity in your own family and between Christians and between Christians and those outside saving faith.

Spend FIFTEEN – Day Five

29. There is an old Christian hymn that states, “It is level at the foot of the cross.” What do you think that means?
30. Ephesians 4:16 says we are to “build up each other in love.” What percentage of conversation in your home is “building up,” versus critical in nature?
31. Do you respond better to praise or criticism? Do you believe the best approach is to focus on the positives or attempt to correct the negative behaviors of a person? Explain.
32. Someone has said the church needs less teaching and more doing. Do you agree? Why or why not?
33. Does your family share the same faith-perspective on life? Do you think that is important?
34. Read 1 Peter 3:9-12. How could you better demonstrate this attitude in your life? Do you think it would make a difference?
35. Finish your FIFTEEN in prayer. Re-read 1 Peter 3:9-12 and turn those thoughts into your closing prayer.