

## Small Group Guide

### THE CHARACTER OF GOD

*The Church at Brook Hills    Dr. David Platt    February 10, 2013    Isa. 43:15; Prov. 17:15; Tit. 2:11*

This guide is a tool to help you lead your group into spiritual transformation. Use it as a resource to train your group into potential disciple-makers and lead your group in discovering, owning, and applying the truths of God's Word. There may be aspects you do not want to use and there may be instances where you just want to focus on a particular point or truth. Some questions may bring out emotions and cause people to dwell on an aspect of their relationship with God. Your role is to help facilitate this encounter with God in His Word with His Body, not just to complete the guide. Use this as a flexible teaching tool not a rigid group task list.

### **Relate . . .**

*Begin your group time by engaging in relational conversations and prayer that may include the following elements:*

***Welcome**—a simple, brief time to greet one another (especially new friends), enjoy refreshments, and make announcements.*

***Review**—a time to review the truths discussed last week and report on how members have had success or frustrations in applying those truths during the week. (The leader will want to provide encouragement and shepherding during this time.) Periodically, the leader will also want to review the gospel and allow members to share reports about opportunities they've had to share the gospel. Occasionally, the leader will want to review the vision for the group and discuss ways to accomplish that vision better.*

***Prayer**—a time of general prayer with the whole group praying for struggles regarding the application of truths, for those with whom the group is sharing the gospel, and for understanding of today's truths.*

### **Reflect . . .**

*Use the following summary and questions to review this week's message and reflect on its implications for our lives. (As a training tool, leaders might want to have various members summarize the teachings in their own words each week sharing how they think the Scripture applied to the original hearers and how the principles apply to us today.)*

### **Message Outline**

#### **THE CHARACTER OF GOD** Isaiah 43:15; Proverbs 17:15; Titus 2:11

#### **Ultimate Questions...**

- Who is God?
- Who am I?
- How is Jesus unique?
- What does it mean to follow Jesus?
- Why is this important?

#### **Gospel Threads...**

- The Character of God
- The Sinfulness of Man
- The Sufficiency of Christ
- The Necessity of Faith
- The Urgency of Eternity

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#### The Character of God...

- Knowing this Gospel Thread...
  - God is the holy, just, and gracious Creator of all things.
  - God is holy (Isaiah 43:15).
    - God is perfectly unique, completely separate, and absolutely pure.
  - God is just (Proverbs 17:15).
    - God justifies the innocent and condemns the guilty.
  - God is gracious (Titus 2:11).
    - God shows the guilty free and unmerited favor.
- Weaving this Gospel Thread...
  - Talking about God as Creator...
    - Acknowledge the glory of God in creation every chance you have.
    - Acknowledge the presence of God in specific facets of your life.
      - God is working in my life (in this way)...
      - God is blessing me (in this way)...
      - God is leading me (in this direction)...
      - God is guiding me (to make this decision)...
      - God is teaching me (this truth)...
      - God is showing me (this realization)...
  - Talking about the holiness of God...
    - Speak about God with reverential awe.
    - Speak about yourself with genuine humility.
    - Draw attention to attributes that distinguish God from people in this world.
    - Draw attention to ways in which God reigns above the gods of this world.
  - Talking about the justice of God...
    - Express confidence in God before others even when things go wrong.
    - Express remorse before God and others when you do something wrong.
    - As you work for justice in the world, speak about the Judge of the world.
    - As you observe evil and suffering in the world, speak with hope about the world to come.
  - Talking about the grace of God...
    - Constantly point out evidences of God's grace in and around you.
    - Consistently credit God as the source of everything good in and around you.
    - Continually acknowledge your need for God's grace.
    - Unceasingly express your gratitude for God's grace.

#### Digging Deeper

This week's message continues in the sermon series *Threads*, which addresses believers' responsibility to verbally share the gospel with others. An adage attributed to St. Francis of Assisi expresses the idea of sharing the gospel and, if necessary, using words, and many Christians have comfortably settled into the mindset that if their lives glorify God, then they will not need to verbally proclaim the gospel. Although a life that reflects the righteousness of God is consistent with God's command to His people, it cannot be void of lips that proclaim the gospel. Guide small group members to identify why sharing the gospel with our words is essential. Examples can include 1) Jesus modeled verbally sharing, 2) Scripture always presents witnessing as verbalizing and living a life of righteousness, 3) Because of God's common grace, there are people who live "good" lives but who aren't believers, and 4) Without verbalization, no one will know why believers live the way they do.

Think about how your own life reflects a combination of a life lived in righteousness while also verbally proclaiming the gospel. If you focus more on witnessing with your lifestyle, continue to look for opportunities to intentionally weave these gospel threads as you speak with others. Ask God to open opportunities for you to share as well as to make you aware of opportunities when they arise.

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Last week, you identified and helped your small group identify fears that can prevent them from sharing the gospel. Often, fears arise because believers think that sharing the gospel entails taking a tract or a marked Bible and drawing out the entire plan of salvation with every gospel-centered conversation they have. Help members understand that while we should be able to lead someone to faith in Christ, it takes time to cultivate a relationship and to earn the right to share the gospel. Throughout the relationship, we can proclaim the gospel in parts over time as we season each conversation with God's truth. Lead members to think of conversations as part of a giant tapestry, with each conversation being a thread that is woven through the circumstances and relationship we share with others. As threads are continually woven, a picture of the whole gospel is ultimately shown to others.

The first thread addressed is the Character of God. This thread is the starting point for the gospel, as the rest are tarnished if one's belief in God is flawed or non-existent. The Character of God is primarily focused on God as the holy, just, and gracious Creator of all things. Show small group members how these truths are essential to the rest of the gospel while also creating a tension that only Christ can solve. Also, challenge small group members to think through and to practice how they would explain these terms and concepts to an unbeliever, a child, or an international who knows limited English. As we share the gospel, we cannot assume that people understand church vernacular.

- **Holy:** There is no one like God, and He is completely set apart from everything else. God is without sin and absolutely pure. Without the belief in this truth, the sinfulness of mankind is without consequence.
- **Just:** God judges rightly and always gives discipline and punishment when it is deserved and sets the innocent free. Without the belief in this truth, there is no need to fear God's wrath for our sin, nor was there no need for Jesus' sacrifice. In addition, this truth raises the question of how a holy and loving God can forgive sinful people.
- **Gracious:** God shows unmerited favor according to His holy and just character. God gives us what we do *not* deserve as wretched sinners – forgiveness, a relationship with Him, and eternity with Him. Without the belief in this truth, we cannot believe in His goodness to send His only Son to redeem us. A practical comparison of grace would be the scene from *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* by C.S. Lewis after Aslan's forces rescue Edmund from the White Witch and when Aslan privately converses with Edmund to forgive and restore him. After his treason, Edmund did not deserve forgiveness but judgment, yet Aslan not only forgave him but welcomed him back.
- **Creator:** God made everything, and all of it is for His glory. Without belief in this truth, God is not who Scripture reveals Him to be.

Using these four descriptors of God and the prompts in the outline, brainstorm with your small group in how to weave this truth into everyday conversation. You may even want to ask each member to partner with another and practice having a normal conversation while intentionally looking for ways to talk about God. When engaging in conversations with others, direct small group members to find out what that person thinks and knows about God. What kind of God do they believe in or not believe in?

Guide your small group members to consider common questions that people have regarding God's character. For example, how can a good God allow evil in the world? Does a loving God send people to Hell? How can the wrathful God of the Old Testament be the same loving God depicted in the New Testament? Is God's character consistent from the Old Testament to the New Testament? How would you respond to these questions about God's character? What Scripture could you use to share as part of your response?

People of all faiths and those with no faith have a lot of personal opinions about who God is, and these opinions often do not reflect the revelation of God in His Word. Sharing about God to these people can be intimidating because believers may not feel they are well versed enough in apologetics to be able to share. Encourage your small group to begin memorizing the Threads verses and to begin with the verses regarding God's character (Isa. 43:15; Prov. 17:15; Tit. 2:11) so that they can share a biblical picture of God to others.

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Also, reassure your small group members by reminding them it is unlikely that they will have an automatic answer to every question that someone might ask them. As a small group, discuss how you can respond when someone asks such a question. Assure believers that it is okay to admit when they do not know the answer, but advocate that they be willing to research for an answer and to use the opportunity to arrange for a follow-up conversation with the person.

#### *Message Summary*

The most loving thing a Christian can do, if he or she truly believes the gospel, is to share it with others. Sharing the *entire* picture of salvation is not an opportunity that we often have with those in our sphere of influence, but over time in our everyday conversations, we can weave a picture of the gospel in which those around us can be faced with the whole truth of God and His plan to redeem sinful man. The first of five *Threads* sermons, this message centers on the character of God. The starting point for the gospel is the character of God. He is the holy, just, and gracious Creator of the universe, and this truth is essential for understanding the whole picture of the gospel. Therefore, we must intentionally look for and be aware of opportunities that arise to speak to the character of God in our everyday conversations.

#### *Group Discussion*

Use the following questions to help review the application of God's Word to our Head (What does God want me to know?), to our Heart (What does God want me to desire/value?), and to our Hands (What does God want me to do?).

- Our sphere of influence is unique to who we are and what we do. How should we view this influence in terms of stewardship of the gospel? How does this view shape our attitudes toward our workplace, hobbies, families, neighborhoods, and anywhere else where we engage others?
- How does our behavior toward sharing the gospel reflect our belief in the existence of and character of God?
- What does the Bible tell us about God's character? Describe His moral attributes. What verses in Scripture describe God's attributes? How have you seen His mercy or steadfast love or righteousness or justice in your own life?
- The holiness of God is revealed throughout Scripture and, specifically, in Isaiah 43:15. How does God's holiness ultimately communicate the seriousness of sin? How should God's holiness lead us toward humility?
- God's holiness distinguishes Him from all other beings and things, yet many people compare His attributes and personality as if He were a human. What are some circumstances in which we often hear these comparisons? (Examples may include tragedies, justification of sin, and even in popular secular songs.) How can we speak of God's holiness in a loving way in these situations? How is God different from man? How is He unique compared to the gods of other religions?
- How has our culture become too familiar with the idea of being a friend of God while not maintaining a biblical view of His holiness and "otherness"?
- How can we share the awesomeness of God when compared to the things of this world that distract from our full worship of Him? (Examples may include voicing thankfulness for God even when things go wrong, acknowledging His call to serve Him over being rich or successful in the world's eyes.)
- God's justice in Proverbs 17:15 assures us that He is a good judge and always condemns the wicked and frees the innocent. How should this characteristic of God lead us to repentance?
- Knowing that God desires justice, why must our actions in the realm of social justice be driven by God's heart for what is right?
- When conversations surround such topics as the horrible realities of the sex trade, the plight of orphans, the needs of widows, and the fight for life, how can we use these opportunities to speak of God's character?
- God's graciousness, as expressed in Titus 2:11, reveals His desire to show favor to those who are undeserving. How does this characteristic proclaim His heart for redemption?
- How does God's grace compared with man's sinfulness reveal that we can do nothing good apart from Him (Jn. 15:5)?

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- What are evidences of God's grace in your life? How can you use these as opportunities to share about God's graciousness? (Examples may include small encouragements in a time of sorrow or struggle, provisions, people in your life, food to eat, your house, a job, help just when you needed it, and family.)
- Romans 1 is clear that the creation around us speaks to the character of its Creator. How can we use beautiful weather, the birth of a child, a breathtaking vista, an entertaining squirrel, snowstorms, the grace of a butterfly, or the complexity of an insect to talk about the God who created it all?
- How can we intentionally use everyday interactions within our families to speak of God's character in these ways?

### **Respond . . .**

*Encourage your group to break out into smaller, same-gender groups where they will respond to the truths of today's study. These groups will share with one another based on the following questions and then close in prayer:*

- What are some of the main truths that God wants you to know from this study?
- How do your thoughts need to adjust to align with these truths?
- According to the truths from this study, what does God want you to desire/value?
- How do your values need to change to align with His values?
- What actions does God want you to take according to the truths of this study?
- What is an action that you can start to implement today or tomorrow?
- What is going to be the most difficult aspect of this study to personally apply?

Close this time by praying for each other, specifically for strength to apply these truths, for personal needs, for the lost people with whom you are seeking to share the gospel, and for our weekly prayer focus as a church.

### **Weekly Prayer Focus ... (from our worship guide)**

- *For Our Lives:* Praise God for His creation of all things, including you. Ask Him to make you holy as He is holy. Praise Him for His justice and perfect judgment to come. Pray for God to develop grace in you toward those around you. Ask Him to reveal to you opportunities to demonstrate His character through your life. Pray for God to grow you in your knowledge of and relationship with Him.
- *For Our City:* This week we are praying for our outreach to the middle school students and staff at Ossie Ware Mitchell Middle School located in East Lake. About one-third of the students there are considered special needs and about 90% are on the federally subsidized lunch program. The Success Academy, a new program at the school in cooperation with Mission Birmingham is launching soon. This program will focus on tutoring and mentoring middle school students on Saturdays. This week we are also praying for Lakeside Baptist, Breck T. Ladd, Pastor.
- *For Our World:* This week we are praying for Brook Hills Long-Term Missionary, Jessica S. serving in North Africa. Jessica was commissioned from Brook Hills this past summer and is part of our North Africa Church Planting Team. Jessica is a pharmacist and serves with the broader team to engage the Arundo, an unreached people group, through medical clinics they provide in the community. Join us this week as we pray for Jessica and for the work God is accomplishing in North Africa.