

SESSION 04

# Stay Together to Grow



# Overview

In the first century, no one had witnessed a community like the church of Jesus. They weren't related by blood, ethnicity, or class, and yet they were a family. At their tables, men and women were treated equally. They shared everything. They bore witness to the power of the resurrected Jesus.

But they were also a mess.

We need only read the New Testament letters to see that these communities were riddled with imperfections. They were real people with real problems.

In the same way that we tend to draw an over-idealized picture of the Early Church, we can have a romanticized vision for our own community — one that unfortunately leaves many of us disillusioned and disappointed. As we aim to mature in our discipleship to Jesus, we must all come to terms with this: there is no avoiding real people with real problems. In fact, that is the only context where we will truly be formed into people of love.

What we need is a better vision: a vision to stay in community.

# Reflection Questions

When instructed, circle up in triads (smaller groups of 3-5 people) and discuss the following questions:

- 01 Share your experience confessing your sins this week.
- 02 What would need to happen for you to make confession a more regular rhythm in your life?
- 03 How did the act of confession impact your sense of shame or disconnection from God?
- 04 What has this experience shown you about how to confess and how to receive someone else's confession well?

# Teaching

## Key Scripture

1 Corinthians 3v1-4

## Session summary

- Though the early church was a revolutionary and compelling example of community, they were also real people with real problems.
- Our idealized visions of community often prevent us from staying to foster real community.
- Living in Christian community is difficult because:
  - It is not centered on shared opinions or preferences but on our shared apprenticeship to Jesus.
- Living in close proximity to others leaves us vulnerable to wound and be wounded.
- We grow into people of love in community when we accept its imperfect nature.
- If we determine it's time to leave a community, we must end well and in a way that allows us to re-engage with another community healthily.
- There are two primary reasons to stay in community:
  - It takes a long time to build a deep community.
  - We need this kind of deep, long-term community to grow.
- In order to stay in community, we must:
  - Deal with conflict.
  - Practice forgiveness.
  - Commit to never stop growing.
- The goal is for God's thoughts to become deeply imprinted in our minds, so that in both challenging times and moments of joy, we begin to think and feel as he does, seeing the world through his eyes and responding as he would if he were us.

# Teaching Notes

As you watch Session 04 together, feel free to use this page to take notes.

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# Discussion Questions

Now it's time for a conversation about the teaching. Pause the video for a few minutes to discuss in small groups:

- 01 As you listened, what resonated with your heart and mind?
- 02 How have you experienced the consequences of idealizing community, either personally or from someone else?
- 03 What stood out to you about the six stage Cycle of Community?
- 04 What would be the primary challenges or temptations you face to staying in community?



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# Closing Prayer

End your time together by praying this liturgy:

Help us Father, to be real with  
each other, to be real about  
what it means to be one body,  
and to stay in persevering love  
with one another as we pursue  
your presence, your kingdom,  
your love.

Amen.



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# Exercise

Now it's time to translate the last four weeks of learning and practice into a plan. What are the right next steps for living into community? What is the Spirit stirring in your heart? Who is God "spiritually adopting" you to?

The following reflection questions are designed to help you discern God's invitations to you in the next stage of your spiritual journey.

- Pause for a moment to quiet yourself before God. Take a few deep breaths. Let yourself come to stillness.
- Invite the Holy Spirit to fill your mind and imagination, and guide your heart into his will.
- Then, prayerfully reflect on the following questions:

**01 Start by closing your eyes and imagining your life 3-5 years from now.**

**02 What's your ideal vision of living in community?**

How do you dream of doing life in a more relational way? What kind of close friends do you have? What does your kinship group look like? What kind of rhythms do you live by? How do you move through life together? Just dream for a few moments and write down your preferred future.

**03 Next, what next steps do you sense the Spirit inviting you to take to move toward this vision?**

This could be something like, get coffee with an acquaintance to see if they could become a closer friend; invite a family over for dinner; talk to your friends about forming a kinship group or table community; meeting with a confessor, etc. They are likely small. Write down 2-3 next steps.

**04 Revisit the Four Circles of Community chart on page 34.**

Prayerfully consider the names with question marks. Through this Practice, has the Spirit continued to place any of these names on your heart? Is there anyone you can remove the question mark from?

**05 For those with question marks still remaining, is there any next step you sense the Spirit inviting you to take with them specifically?**

(Getting coffee, sharing a meal, having a hard conversation, etc.)

## 06 Now think about each circle and your Rule of Life, or your regular routines.

Do you have an intentional meeting with each group in your schedule? If so, write it down. (For example, you could write down church on Sunday under village or tribe, Tuesday night dinner under kinship group/community, and Saturday morning discipleship band under intimates.) If not, do you feel any leading to begin meeting with a group more intentionally? Write down a possible plan ...

## 07 Now revisit the Kinship chart on page 38.

Prayerfully review. Are there any names you want to add or subtract?

## 08 What are the invitations of the Spirit to you?

What next steps do you sense a leading to take, to turn the idea of a kinship group into a reality?

End by quietly offering your dreams, desires, questions, and fears to God. Ask him, who “sets the solitary in families,” to pastor you into community, and incrementally shape you into a person of love.





# Keep Growing (Optional)

The following resources were created to enhance your experience of this Practice, but they are entirely optional.

## Read

*Made to Belong* by David Kim (Chapters 08-10 and Conclusion)

## Listen

Rule of Life Podcast on Community (Episode 04)

## Bonus Conversations

If you would like to slow down this four-week Practice to give your community more time to sit in each week's teaching and spiritual exercise, you can pause and meet for an optional conversation in the Appendix.



May God who “sets the  
solitary in families,” make  
you into a family.

May he bind your hearts  
together in his love.

May he heal you, grow  
you, and form you into  
people of love.



Continue the  
Journey

# Further Practice

You are not going to find and form a kinship group in four weeks. This short Practice is only designed to get you moving on a lifelong journey. The weekly rhythm of sharing a meal that you've been practicing is meant to be integrated into your Rule of Life, should you so choose. You may choose to make a weekly community meal a rhythmic part of your discipleship, or you may want to find another pathway into community.

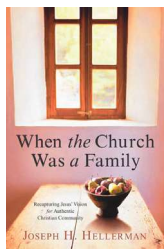
Where you go from here is entirely up to you, but here's a few ideas of how you could go deeper into community.

- 01 **Go on retreat with your group:** find a cabin in the woods, book an Airbnb in the sun, or reserve space at a local retreat center, and go away for a few days with your community. Find something meaningful to fill your time — hearing from an older, wiser mentor in the faith, hosting deep conversations, prophetically praying over each other, etc. Make sure you eat lots of meals and find time to play together to joyfully connect.
- 02 **Go on vacation together:** go camping or take a road trip or do whatever you love to do to rest, but try doing it together as a community.
- 03 **Build regular touch points into your weekly routine:** repurpose things you already do to serve a double function. Go to the gym with another community member. Schedule a standing Saturday morning group run or play date at the park. Sit together at church. Join the same book club. Take an online course together.
- 04 **Host sabbath dinners:** start inviting over a few close friends or family you can really relax with for a sabbath feast. Make it celebratory. Practice gratitude, share highlights of the week, sing a song, sit around a fire pit, rejoice together in God.

- 05 **Begin therapy:** find a trusted, Christian counselor and begin the journey of healing from your past in order to more deeply enter into relationships of mutual trust and love.
- 06 **Go through more Practices together:** visit [practicingtheway.org](http://practicingtheway.org) to consider running the Practicing the Way course or another one of our nine Practices.
- 07 **Move closer to each other:** consider moving to be closer to brothers and sisters you sense God is spiritually adopting you to. Community is all about proximity. The closer you are, the easier and more spontaneous life together can actually be. The farther apart, the most difficult. If appropriate, consider becoming roommates or moving into the same apartment complex or onto the same street or living in multi-generational housing or more radical ideas like co-housing or homesteading.

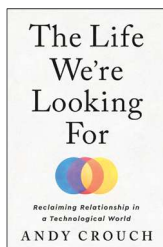
# Recommended Reading

Here are some of our favorite books on the practice of Community for those of you who desire to learn more:



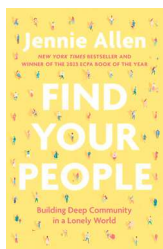
## ***When the Church Was a Family* by Joseph Hellerman**

An incredible book on the biblical and cultural meaning of “family” in the New Testament. It paints a compelling picture of the church as a “strong group” community in a culture of radical individualism.



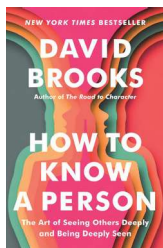
## ***The Life We're Looking For* by Andy Crouch**

A beautiful vision of life in community in the digital age, with an inspiring chapter on kinship groups.



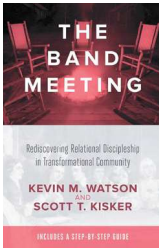
## ***Find Your People* by Jennie Allen**

An honest look at how to find and form community in our transient time, that is both inspirational and pragmatic.



## ***How to Know a Person* by David Brooks**

An exploration of really learning to listen and love another soul.



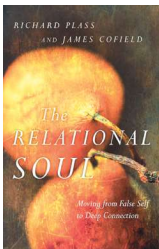
***The Band Meeting* by Kevin Watson and Scott Kisker**

A short, compelling summary of both the Methodist discipleship band model and the heart of true Christian community.



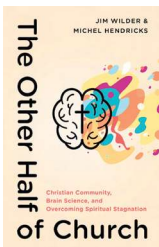
***Made to Belong* by David Kim**

Our recommended reading for this Practice and an excellent overview of finding belonging in community.



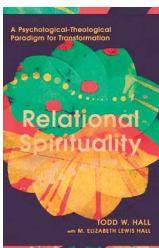
***The Relational Soul* by Richard Plass and James Cofield**

A stunning introduction to attachment theory and spiritual formation.



***The Other Half of Church* by Jim Wilder and Michel Hendricks**

A provocative take on the need for a whole brain, relational approach to discipleship, based on easy-to-read overviews of recent learnings from neuroscience.



***Relational Spirituality* by Todd Hall**

An in-depth, academic work that is best read with a few others, this is a seminal work on the relational nature of spiritual formation.

# The Practices

Information alone isn't enough to produce transformation.

By adopting not just the teaching but also the practices from Jesus' own life, we open up our entire beings to God and allow him to transform us into people of love.

Our nine core Practices work together to form a Rule of Life for the modern era.

**Sabbath**

**Solitude**

**Community**

**Prayer**

**Generosity**

**Service**

**Fasting**

**Scripture**

**Witness**

## WHAT'S INCLUDED:

### Four Sessions

Each session includes teaching, guided discussion, and weekly exercises to integrate the Practices into daily life.

### Companion Guide

A detailed guide with question prompts, session-by-session exercises, and space to write and reflect.

### Recommended Resources

Additional recommended readings and podcasts to get the most out of the Practices.





# The Course

An eight-session primer on spiritual formation.

Two thousand years ago, Jesus said to his disciples, “Follow me.” But what does it mean for us to follow Jesus today?

The Practicing the Way Course is an on-ramp to spiritual formation, exploring what it means to follow Jesus and laying the foundation for a life of apprenticeship to him.

## WHAT'S INCLUDED:

### Eight Sessions

John Mark and other voices teaching on apprenticing under Jesus, spiritual formation, healing from sin, meeting God in pain, crafting a Rule of Life, living in community, and more.

### Exercises

Weekly practices and exercises to help integrate what you've learned into your everyday life.

### Guided Conversations

Prompts to reflect on your experience and process honestly in community.

### Companion Guide

A detailed workbook with exercises, space to write and reflect, and suggestions for supplemental resources.



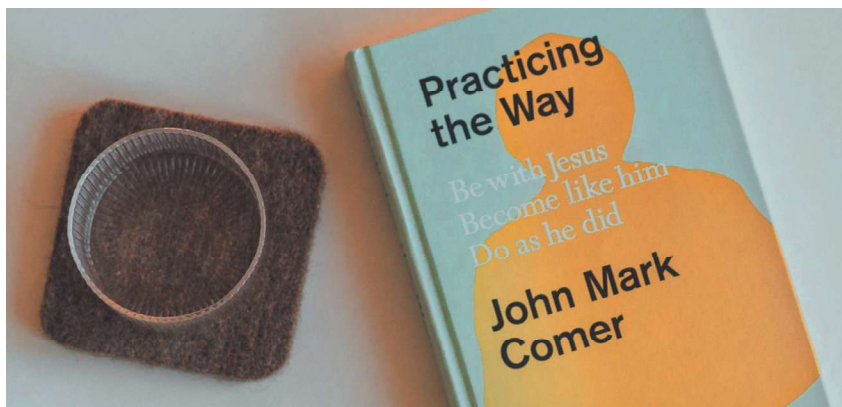
# Practicing the Way:

## *Be with him. Become like him. Do as he did.*

The first followers of Jesus developed a Rule of Life, or habits and practices based on the life of Jesus himself. As they learned to live like their teacher, they became people who made space for God to do his most transformative work in their lives.

Practicing the Way is a vision for the future, shaped by the wisdom of the past. It's an introduction to spiritual formation accessible to both beginners and lifelong followers of Jesus, and a companion to the Practicing the Way Course. This book offers theological substance, astute cultural insight, and practical wisdom for creating a Rule of Life in the modern age.

You can order your copy or get copies for your community at [practicingtheway.org/book](http://practicingtheway.org/book).



# The Circle

Practicing the Way is a nonprofit that develops spiritual formation resources for churches and small groups learning how to become apprentices in the Way of Jesus.

We believe one of the greatest needs of our time is for people to discover how to become lifelong disciples of Jesus. To that end, we help people learn how to be with Jesus, become like him, and do as he did, through the practices and rhythms he and his earliest followers lived by.

All of our downloadable ministry resources are available at no cost, thanks to the generosity of The Circle and other givers from around the world who partner with us to see formation integrated into the Church at large.

To learn more or join us, visit [practicingtheway.org/give](https://practicingtheway.org/give).



# For Facilitators

Before you begin, there are three easy things you need to do (This should only take 10-15 minutes).

- 01 Go to [launch.practicingtheway.org](https://launch.practicingtheway.org), log in, create a group, and send a digital invitation to your community. This will give your group access to the Spiritual Health Reflection, videos, and all sorts of valuable extras. Encourage your group to bring along their Companion Guide to each session, as it contains the discussion questions and space to take notes.
  - You can order a print version at your preferred retailer or find a free digital PDF version at [launch.practicingtheway.org](https://launch.practicingtheway.org). We recommend the print version so you can stay away from your devices during the practices, as well as take notes during each session. But we realize that digital works better for some.
  - Note: You can order the Guides ahead of time and have them waiting when people arrive for Session 01, or encourage people to order or download their own and bring them to your gatherings.
- 02 Send a message to your group encouraging everyone to take the Spiritual Health Reflection before your first gathering, which can be found at [launch.practicingtheway.org](https://launch.practicingtheway.org).
- 03 If your group has not been through the Practicing the Way Course, invite them to watch this short primer before you gather for Session 01 of this Practice.

For training, tips, and more resources for facilitating the Community Practice, login to the Dashboard at [launch.practicingtheway.org](https://launch.practicingtheway.org).



# Bonus Conversations





For those of you who want to spend longer sitting in this Practice, we've included an additional four weeks of material in this Guide to go deeper in Scripture and discussion.

You are welcome to pause in between sessions for these additional conversations, or skip over them.

Explore some of the additional resources available for the Community Practice at [launch.practicingtheway.org](https://launch.practicingtheway.org).

# Be Family Around a Table

We all feel the divisiveness of our present moment. It seems increasingly true that the more different we are — be it politically, socioeconomically, religiously, or racially — the less likely we are to be in relationship with one another, let alone be in the same room. These days, differences and divisions often blur together. Sadly, the same can be true in the Church, where we can be tempted to prioritize other allegiances over our shared kinship as siblings in God's family.

In the time Paul lived, this kind of divisiveness was as true religiously as it was culturally. That's why Paul is so clear in his letter to the Ephesian church: Jesus has created one new family. The question is: Despite our differences, will we live like that is true?

**Read Ephesians 2v11-22**

## Discuss the Scripture

- 01 What most stands out to you from this text?
- 02 Reflect on what this text has to say about your previous position before being adopted into God's family. What thoughts or feelings emerge for you?
- 03 What differences seem to create division in our surrounding culture? What about in church community? How are they similar or different?
- 04 What barriers do you experience to seeing someone as your brother or sister in Christ? What invitation do you sense there from this text?

## Discuss the practice

- 01 Describe what sharing a meal looked like for you this week.
- 02 What was one of the feelings you experienced going into the meal, and did that feeling change throughout or after your time together? If so, how?
- 03 What about the time sharing a meal felt ordinary? Why do you think it is important to embrace the ordinary nature of these meals?
- 04 What resistance do you experience, if any, to the idea of sharing a weekly meal in community? What is compelling about it?

## Repeat the Exercise

This week's exercise is to share a meal together. If you are here, it likely means that your group has decided to gather together for these Bonus Conversations in addition to the four sessions. We encourage you to begin these gatherings together just as you would a regular session for this Practice — around a table with a good meal.

# Share Your Joys and Sorrows

After spending the better part of his letter to the Roman Church recounting Jesus' mercy and grace, Paul makes a turn in Chapter 12 to how we are to respond to such good news. For Paul, our response is certainly not a solo effort; rather, he writes a list of exhortations that can be seen almost like "house rules" for the family of God. In today's Scripture, for every encouragement in this list that can be lived out individually, there are almost two commands that require other people. Paul makes it clear that our response to God's mercy unfolds in the context of relationships — one meal, one open door, one shared tear at a time.

**Read Romans 12v9-16**

## Discuss the Scripture

- 01 Which verse in the text most stands out to you, and why?
- 02 Share about a time when you were on the receiving end of a person living out one of these verses. How did that impact you?
- 03 What part of this text seems most counter-cultural or radical in our present moment, and why?
- 04 Consider one piece of this text you can put into practice this week. Which part is it, and what are you wanting to do?

## Discuss the practice

- 01 Describe how sharing your highs and lows around the table went at your last meal.
- 02 What feelings did you experience as different people shared? Joy? Compassion? Sadness?
- 03 What felt natural or unnatural about this exercise?
- 04 What themes or patterns did you notice as you went around the table, if any? How has this exercise impacted your view on the importance of honesty in community?

## Repeat the Exercise

We encourage you to share highs and lows during your meal together as a way to continue growing in trust and connection with one another. You might even consider following up with someone later in the week about what they shared if that would be suitable and helpful. Remember, transformation begins, not from where we think we *should* be, but from where we *actually* are. Sharing a personal celebration and challenge you're facing is a great starting place for bringing more of your honest self to your community.

# Confess Your Sins

As humans, there's perhaps nothing we desire more than to be fully loved. But to experience that depth of love, we have to bring our whole selves — “warts and all” — before someone we trust. To truly be loved, we must first take the risk of being fully known.

In today's Scripture, we see two paths described: walking in the light and walking in the darkness. For John, the light, though exposing, is where God's love and forgiveness can actually get into us. The dark, however, is where we don't just believe, but live, lies. It's in the shadows of our lives that sin and shame find oxygen. As the saying goes, “We are only as sick as our secrets.”

So how do we change paths? John puts one simple and courageous action at the threshold separating darkness and light: the invitation, in his words, is to “confess our sins.”

**Read 1 John 1v5-10**

## Discuss the Scripture

- 01 What stands out to you about the difference in what this text says about walking in the light compared to the darkness?
- 02 In what ways does thinking about “fellowship” in the context of confession deepen your view of what that word means?
- 03 How does this text match up with your personal experience of confession? How is it different?
- 04 How might the realities stated in this text about what is available in the light influence how you receive someone’s confession?

## Discuss the practice

- 01 Who did you decide to confess your sin to, and what qualities does that person possess that made you choose them?
- 02 How would you describe what your experience of being vulnerable in community has been like in the past?
- 03 What fears, hopes, or expectations did you have going into this exercise?
- 04 What was the difference between how you felt going into and coming out of your time of confession?

## Repeat the Exercise

This week’s exercise is to reconnect with your confessor and confess your sins from the week. While confession is not an easy practice and requires no small amount of courage, our goal as apprentices to Jesus should be to grow towards bringing our sin into the light more frequently. Some people go so far as to have quick check-ins over the phone each morning. While that might seem far off from what you can see yourself doing now, start by confessing again this week and consider how you might make this a more regular practice in your life.

# Stay Together to Grow

In more than half of Paul's letters to first-century churches, he encourages the communities to exercise patience, and nearly a third address their need to forgive one another. We can often view the Early Church through the rose-colored glasses of Acts chapter 2 and overlook the relational strife these communities were constantly navigating.

There is no such thing as life in the family of God that doesn't require patience, forgiveness, and all the attributes we read in today's Scripture. For Paul, the real question was this: are we willing to keep "putting on" the attributes that will transform us into people of love?

**Read Colossians 3v12-14**



## Discuss the Scripture

- 01 Which of the attributes from verse 12 do you feel most compelled to live into currently?
- 02 How have you been personally impacted by someone extending forgiveness towards you?
- 03 What are a few ways you can practically “put on love” in your community on a regular basis?
- 04 How might living this text enable you to stay rooted and committed to your community?

## Discuss the practice

- 01 Share one of your responses from the guided reflection in Session 04.
- 02 Which session or exercise from this Practice was the most impactful for you personally, and why?
- 03 Reflecting on the past few weeks in this Practice, in what ways have you seen your relationship to community change?
- 04 If you could share only one insight or reflection that you want to internalize going forward from this Practice, what would it be?

## Repeat the exercise

For our final week we are working on our plan for next steps to living in community. We invite you to revisit the reflection questions on page 85 this week and continue to prayerfully listen for God’s direction. Focus especially on translating what you hear into action. We hope that as you reflect on your time in the Community Practice, you have begun to see that although living in community is not easy, when pursued with intentionality and commitment, it has the potential to deeply change your life for the better.