



Small Group Discussion Guide



PREPARATION

❏ STUDY

Spend the week studying Colossians 1:3–8. Consult the commentary provided and any additional study tools to enhance your preparation.

❏ DETERMINE

Determine which discussion points and study questions will work best for your group.

❏ PRAY

Pray for our pastors and this week's message, the upcoming group time, your group members, and their openness to God's Word.

❏ LANDING POINT

We thank God for each other in our prayers.



GROUP DISCUSSION

❏ **CONFIDENTIALITY** | What's said in the group stays in the group.

❏ **NO CROSS-TALK** | Be considerate of others as they share. Refrain from side conversations and texting during group time.

❏ **NO FIXING** | We are not in the group to fix each other. Jesus does that part.

❏ **SHARING** | Be sensitive to the amount of time you share. Don't talk too much or too little. Every person brings something valuable to the group.



INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

REAL FRIENDSHIP

There are a lot of songs, movies and books about the power of a great friendship. How a good friend is there for you when times get hard; how a friend is someone you can call on any time day or night; how friends pick each other up when they fall down, encourage each other to be better people and keep you going when you're ready to quit.

Researchers have found that solid friendships are critical to emotional and even physical health. The famed Nurses' Health Study from Harvard Medical School found that the more friends someone has, the more likely they are to live a joyful life no matter their circumstances, and the less likely they are to develop physical impairments as they age. The results were so significant that the researchers concluded that not having close friends is as detrimental to your health as smoking or obesity.¹

Yet it seems to be getting harder and harder in our overscheduled, social media-driven world to have real, deep friendships. Researchers have found that social media has changed the way we interact with other people. We feel like we're more connected than ever, but we're only connected with a "simulation" of a person, not the *real* person. Vulnerability, authenticity and intimacy are getting harder and harder to find.²

🗣️: *Describe your closest friendships. How do you encourage and strengthen each other? Is there anything lacking your friendships?*

🗣️: *Are vulnerability, authenticity and intimacy hard for you? Why or why not?*



LEARN

Select 2–3 questions to discuss as a group.

PAUL'S THANKS

In the beginning of Paul's letter to the Colossians, the first thing he tells his audience is that he thanks God for them, for their faith in Christ and for their love for people. Paul usually gives thanks for his readers in the opening of his



letters, but the thanksgiving in Colossians is one of the more elaborate ones. His thankfulness almost turns into preaching!

The Colossians have a strong faith in the gospel that is bearing much fruit in their church. God is working in them and through them, and Paul is thankful for it. Not for what they are doing for Paul, but what they are doing for the kingdom. Paul was writing this letter while he was in prison in Rome, yet his prayers are full of thankfulness that the gospel is increasing in the world. Even in prison, Paul's concern isn't for his own suffering, but for the growth of the gospel.

🗨️: *Why was Paul thankful for his friends at Colossae?*

🗨️: *How does this compare with your idea of what makes a great friend?*

GODLY FRIENDSHIPS

There is no doubt that close friendships are beneficial, but godly friendships are invaluable in a believer's life. We were not made to go through life alone. Every believer needs friends who will pray for and with us, keep us accountable and remind us of God's truth—friends who will help us grow in our relationship with Jesus.

In the Bible, we see examples of good and bad friendships. When Job was going through his time of suffering, his friends did not give him very godly advice. But friendships like Ruth and Naomi, David and Jonathan, and Paul and Timothy show us what a godly friendship should include—sacrificial love and loyalty, intimacy and spurring one another on to love and good deeds (Hebrews 10:24).

Though we all love our friends and family, there is a deep love that cannot be experienced except with other people who follow Jesus. The mutual love of Jesus and shared mission bonds you with other believers in a different way than how you are joined with your biological family. That's why we so often refer to others in the church as "my church family." Jesus even said that Himself when He said that anyone who does the will of His Father, anyone who shares in God's mission to spread the Gospel to the world, is His family (Matthew 12:50).

Q: *How are your relationships with your church family or Christian friends different than your relationships with other friends and family?*

Q: *If you don't have this kind of connection with a godly friend, how can you make steps toward finding one? If you do have a friendship like this, how can you strengthen it?*



LIVE

Select 2–3 questions from this section to answer.

THANK GOD FOR YOU

Before we get to the thanksgiving part of Colossians, it is worth noting that Paul prays regularly for his Christian friends. This is a consistent practice of his. Paul says the same things to most of the other churches he writes to as well. But is this true of us? How many of us pray for our Christian friends on a regular basis? Or do we only pray for them when they're struggling with something or have specifically asked for prayer?

Secondly, Paul says that when he prays for them, he always thanks God for them. Is this true of us? How many of us take the time to thank God for our Christian friends and family? For the way they have impacted our faith? For the good things they are doing for the kingdom?

Q: *Why is it important to pray for our Christian friends regularly, not just when there is a specific need?*

Q: *How is thanking God for someone different than thanking that person directly?*

BEARING FRUIT

Paul is thankful for the Colossians because they are bearing fruit. He has heard through Epaphras, his friend and their pastor, that the fruit of the Spirit is increasing in their lives. Paul isn't thanking the Colossians for donations

they sent to him or ways they have helped him in his ministry. He is thankful for them because they are growing in their faith in Christ and love of others, because the Spirit is growing fruit in their lives.

This is so different than what our prayers for others are normally about, isn't it? Typically, we pray about a new job or a conflict in their family or a health concern, some tangible thing. These are also the kinds of prayer people request. But Paul prays for them to grow to be more and more like Jesus. Those other things are important, and God cares about them, but what is really most important is our becoming more like Jesus. How often do we pray for our friends and family to grow in their faith, to bear more spiritual fruit?

♀: *How have others helped spur you on in your spiritual growth?*

♀: *What kind of difference would it make if we all started praying for each other to grow in Christ?*



LEAD

Select 1 question from this section to ask your group.

Action steps for this lesson are straightforward: Do as Paul did. Pray for your Christian friends and thank God for them on a regular basis. Don't just pray for physical needs and requests. Pray for them to grow in their faith and to bear much fruit. Ask them to pray for your spiritual growth. Pray together, even. Share your spiritual struggles and successes so you know how to pray for one another.

That kind of a relationship would take the elements we talked about in the beginning of the lesson: vulnerability, authenticity and intimacy. But it would be so worth it! That is the kind of godly friendship God calls us to have with one another.

“Real love, real friendship, is vulnerable. And risky. And costly. And discomforting. And disquieting. And agitating like sandpaper sometimes. But the alternative is a heart that ends up in a relational casket or coffin. And who wants that?” —Scott Sauls³

Q: *What specific things are holding you back from forming vulnerable, authentic, intimate relationships? Or if you have relationships like this, from deepening them?*

Q: *Make a list of three to five believers you are close with for whom you can begin to pray as Paul prayed for the Colossians.*



PRAY

PRAYER PARTNERS

Be sure to allow extra prayer time for this activity so partners can really share.

Since we are already meeting in a small group with built-in Christian friendships, this is a great time to practice exactly what Paul is talking about in this opening passage of Colossians. Whether these relationships are new or whether you already are really close to the people in your small group, you can spend time in this kind of prayer for one another.

Split into prayer partners and share requests, but only about your own spiritual growth, not any physical needs or needs for others (e.g., “My aunt is having surgery this week.”). Those prayers are important, but they’re not what we’re focusing on here.

Then pray for each other. Remember, this group is confidential, and this is your church family—it’s safe to be vulnerable here. Also remember that vulnerability, authenticity and intimacy are key to real friendships.



FOLLOW UP

Midway through this week, send a follow-up email to your group with some or all of the following:

- Read Ephesians 3:14–21. Then pray this prayer for each Christian friend on your list.
- Ask the group to share any stories or lessons learned where they see God at work in their lives.



PRAYERS OF THANKS IN OTHER LETTERS To every church he wrote to except the Galatians, Paul included in his opening that he thanks God for them in his regular prayers for them (see Rom. 1:8–15; 1 Cor. 1:4–9; Eph. 1:15–22; Phil. 1:3–11; 1 Thess. 1:2–10; 2 Thess. 1:3–12). In Galatians, Paul opened with “I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ for a different gospel” (Gal. 1:6). He wasn’t thanking God for their spiritual growth, he was writing to turn them back to the faith.

CONNECTION TO THE GOSPEL “Introducing a theme that will be important in the letter, Paul now reminds the Colossians that they first heard about the hope stored up in heaven for them through the true word of the gospel. Even as ‘thanksgiving’ frames vv. 3–14, so this focus on the hope that the proclamation of the gospel has brought to the Colossians frames the larger section. . . . Paul elaborates on the Colossians’ experience of the gospel . . . on the power to transform people that it has revealed not only among the Colossians but also in ‘the whole world.’”⁴

JEWISH PRAYER PRACTICES “Regular Jewish prayer times included many blessings, and Paul’s prayer times clearly included many thanksgivings to God. Paul’s mention of thanks is not merely conventional, for the purpose of this letter.”⁵

THE COLOSSIANS’ LOVE FOR OTHERS “This love [‘in the Spirit’] doesn’t simply mean that they all (as we might say) have good feelings about each other. They may or they may not. What matters is that the behavior which marks out so much of the world—lust answer, lies, and so on, which split up families and communities—is being replaced by kindness, gentleness, forgiveness, and an acceptance of one another as members of the same family, even where there were major differences of race, background and culture. This, as far as Paul is concerned, is the true sign of God at work, and he is thrilled and grateful to hear about it.”⁶

ENDNOTES:

1. Taylor, S. E., Klein, L.C., Lewis, B. P., Gruenewald, T. L., Gurung, R. A. R., and Updegraff, J. A. “Behavioral Responses to Stress: Tend and Befriend, Not Fight or Flight” *Psychol Rev*, 107(3):41-429. - <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/10941275?dopt=Abstract>
2. D.C. McAllister, “The Loneliness of Not Knowing Ourselves” *The Federalist*, May 22, 2014 <http://thefederalist.com/2014/05/22/the-loneliness-of-not-knowing-ourselves/>
3. Scott Sauls, *Befriend: Create Belonging in an Age of Judgment, Isolation, and Fear* (Nashville, TN: Tyndale Pub, 2016).
4. Douglas Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon, The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans, 2008), 86.
5. Craig Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 570.
6. N.T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters* (London, UK: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2002), 143.