



intentional evangelism initiative



BEGIN WITH PRAYER



LISTEN WITH CARE



EAT TOGETHER



SERVE WITH LOVE



SHARE YOUR STORY

BLESSED TO BLESS

How God's Mission to Reach and Restore People
Can Happen through You and Your Church.



The Evangelical Covenant Church

MAKE AND DEEPEN DISCIPLES

BY BETH SEVERSEN AND RICK RICHARDSON

[COVCHURCH.ORG/BLESS](https://covchurch.org/bless)



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Welcome to the small group Bible study guide on the five missional practices of BLESS! This guide will help you facilitate your group discussion.

You may choose to designate a leader to help facilitate your time together. Each time you meet we suggest that participants bring a notebook where you can write down your responses to reflection questions. In this way you can record what you hear God saying to you during the session and refer back to those reflections later.

Our goal with this guide is create a robust six-week small group curriculum that is rooted in Scripture and practical in application to help people live their faith effectively among unchurched neighbors and friends. If your church is looking for more than six weeks of small group material, you may choose to divide these sessions in half. If your group doesn't make it through all the content in each session, please feel free to choose which aspects of the study fit best for your context.

To begin,
ask someone
to read the
overview aloud.

What is BLESS?

Since the beginning of our story with God, God has demonstrated his deep love for us through his blessing. In turn, we become a blessing to others. (GENESIS 12:2).

BLESS is a new way of thinking about loving our neighbors. BLESS is five missional practices that help us introduce people to Jesus. We often engage with these practices every day with our friends and family. By vectoring these practices outward to include people who may be far from God, we can bless and bring people to new life in Christ. Every one of us can easily and naturally live out the five BLESS missional practices with unchurched people.

THE FIVE BLESS MISSIONAL PRACTICES:

1. **Begin with prayer.** Jesus and others have blessed you through prayer. We can bless others who don't know Jesus yet by praying for them.
2. **Listen with care.** Jesus and others have listened to you and heard you. We can bless others who are far from God by listening to and hearing them.
3. **Eat together.** Jesus and others have accepted you and invited you to their table. Let us accept and invite others who don't know Jesus yet to our table.
4. **Serve in love.** Jesus and others have served you in ways that changed you. We can serve others who do not know God in ways that can change them.
5. **Share your story.** Jesus and others have shared their story with you in ways that have changed you. We can share your story with others so that they may draw near to God.

Take time now to read this illustration of the power of the BLESS approach together as a group either silently or aloud.

God's strategy of blessing others often helps people progress on their journey toward Jesus. Jesus practiced blessing others when he healed Peter's mother-in-law (MATTHEW 8:14-15), when he ate supper with an ostracized tax collector (MATTHEW 9:10-11), when he talked with a marginalized woman (JOHN 4), and when he took time to bless children (LUKE 18:15-17).

Note that BLESS is not meant to create a new list of do's and don'ts. In this process, we remember how we have been blessed and loved. In turn, we give out of what we have received. We do not just give to others out of a sense of responsibility or guilt. We give out of the grace that we have received.

As Jesus taught,

"I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing" (JOHN 15:5).

The truth in that verse captures Jesus's pattern for blessing others!

So as we enter into the lives of others who are far from God, we find that Jesus is already there. He is already at work blessing them, drawing them into him, working in them to convict and convince them of his love. Our task is to discern where God is already at work and to join God in that work. We are assistant "blessers," working for and with the Holy Spirit. That's encouraging!

OPENING STORY

In his book *The Missional Entrepreneur: Principles and Practices for Business as Mission*, theologian and media specialist Mark Russell offers a compelling contemporary case study of one way to incorporate the BLESS approach. Russell researched twelve "business as mission" (BAM) groups in Thailand and the various ways they approached their ministry.

Operating under a BAM model means creating profitable, sustainable business that is intentional about pursuing kingdom impact on people and nations. The goal is to leverage the power of business to address spiritual, social, economic, and environmental needs.

Russell studied six companies that focused primarily on developing successful, local businesses that enhanced the local economy. Any impact on Thai people that moved them toward faith in Christ was viewed as a byproduct of their work. Although conversions were welcomed and celebrated, they were not the main focus. Russell called these businesses the "blessers."

The second group of six businesses viewed conversion as their main priority. Developing a successful business was considered a byproduct or

secondary goal. These businesses originated outside of Thailand and they used their work as a means to gain access to the country, hoping to bring a Christian presence of those who did not know Jesus. These companies were much more concerned with the spiritual destiny of local residents than with their economic improvement. Russell called these six businesses the “converters.”

What he discovered was that the blessers did much more social good, employed more people, and generated more income than the converters did. That was the blessers’ goal, and they met it.

The blessers also saw more conversions take place. And even more surprising: the blessers experienced more people converting to Christ by a ratio of 48 to 1! A whopping 96 people gave their lives to Christ through the blessers over a several-year period. In contrast, the converters, who identified their primary goal as spiritual conversion, in fact saw only two people make new faith commitments to Jesus Christ over the same period.

Why was there such disparity? The blessers built more deeply genuine relationships, hired people for longer term, invested more capital in the economy which created greater income, and built deeper trust with the community. So when the founders and leaders of blesser companies did talk about their faith in Jesus at the right time, the local residents listened. They were genuinely interested and influenced profoundly by the blessers’ natural, relaxed manner of sharing their faith.

On the other hand, the converters never really became a part of the local community, partly because their agenda overshadowed their relationships. That is often how the process of spiritually influencing others works. People do not care about our agendas unless they know we “get” them as people and that we care and are committed to their well-being. People want authentic relationships.

Take a few minutes to discuss as a group how you respond to this story from Thailand.

THE FIVE BLESS MISSIONAL PRACTICES:



PAY IT FORWARD

One premise of this study is that we have been blessed by God and it is out of his blessing that we are able to bless others. He first loved us and enables us by his love, power, and Spirit to reach out and love others. It is only by his love and grace that we are able to fully love others.

Share a time when you were cared for or blessed by someone in your life, that led you to turn around and care for and bless someone else.

During Session 1 we will explore the overall BLESS approach to reach and restore people, starting with those who are close to us yet seem far from God. Each succeeding week we will dive more deeply into one of the BLESS practices.

Ask the group to read the Opening Story silently or ask someone to read it out loud. (Or you may choose to share your own story(ies) of coming to faith in Christ through God's blessing and others.)

SESSION 1: Blessed to BLESS!

THE BIG IDEA: Since the beginning of our story with God, God has demonstrated his deep love for us through his blessing. In turn we become a blessing to others.

OPENING STORY (FROM BETH)

This is a story about a young student. As a young kid, she was responsible, full of life, a good student. But in high school, she started hanging out with some peers who did not influence her in positive ways. She began lying, and her schoolwork suffered. She started participating in destructive behaviors—first shoplifting, then drinking heavily. Often she passed out and did not know how she'd gotten home. She was smoking pot daily with the “cool” girls, and she loved being a party girl, even though sometimes her behavior scared her.

And then an extraordinary turn of events changed her life. Three girls began to pursue her. They asked her to hang out with them. They invited her to activities with them. They began to bless her through their friendship. As time passed they began inviting her to a Bible study. Time after time the girl said no. “No way. No thanks. No, I’ve got something else going on. No, I’m good.”

But they were relentless—week after week, month after month they kept inviting her, until finally she said yes. She figured they’d stopped bugging her if she just went to their Bible thing once.

So she went. And she saw students worshiping God. She heard them talking about the Scriptures as if they were relevant to their lives. She experienced genuine, life-giving community. She experienced worship. And she realized how hungry she was—hungry for love, for community, for the Scriptures. And hungry for God. She began to wake up in her heart and soul. Over the next several months she gradually came to faith in Jesus.

The relentless pursuit of those three friends—for over time they had become friends—changed the trajectory of her life. That girl, who was truly headed for trouble, is now headed for eternity with Jesus.

That's my story of how Jesus powerfully transformed my life. He used three women who were intentional in reaching out to me, who took the initiative with me, who relentlessly pursued me. They made themselves and the good news accessible to me. They demonstrated God's love to me by not judging me or making me feel like I wasn't good enough. They ignored the stuff in my life. They were truly blessers!

Why do I have such a heart to see others come to know Jesus, no matter what they have done or how they have lived? Why am I so committed to being a friend of sinners and encouraging other believers to do the same? I bless, because I have been blessed.

OPENING DISCUSSION

1. Where do you resonate with Beth's story?
2. How has God blessed you and drawn you toward faith? Who were the blessers in your faith journey?
3. How has God blessed you recently (either directly through circumstances or through another person)? How could you use that experience to turn and bless someone else?
4. How do you feel about being a witness to those who are far from God about what God has done for you?

THE CALL OF ABRAM: GENESIS 12:1-3

When we meet Abraham in Scripture, he is in the country of Haran, far north of where Israel is located today. God called Abraham to leave his home and wander until he arrived in the land that God had promised him. God called Abraham to leave his homeland because he loved Abraham. And through Abraham, God showed he loved the whole world.

Ask someone
to read the
passage aloud.

The Lord had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you. "I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

Ask someone
or several people
to read the
passage aloud.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. In what ways does God promise to bless Abraham?
2. How do you think Abraham might have felt when God called him to leave his country?
3. What is God's ultimate aim in blessing Abraham?
4. How has God blessed you or promised to bless you?
5. What do you think is God's ultimate aim in blessing you?

JESUS CALLS HIS FIRST DISCIPLES: LUKE 5:1-11

Nearly 2,000 years later Jesus engaged with a man named Peter in the same way God had engaged with Abraham. He blessed Peter so that Peter could bless the world.

One day as Jesus was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret, the people were crowding around him and listening to the word of God. He saw at the water's edge two boats, left there by the fishermen, who were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little from shore. Then he sat down and taught the people from the boat.

When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch."

Simon answered, "Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets."

When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink.

When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken, and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon's partners.

Then Jesus said to Simon, "Don't be afraid; from now on you will fish for people." So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Jesus has a dream to reach and restore the world. He calls Peter to join him in his dream, promising that he will reach many people. But first, Jesus blesses Peter with a great catch of fish. In part, through this blessing Jesus promises to provide for Peter as he leaves behind everything to give his life to catching people.

1. How do you think Peter might have felt when Jesus first asked him to take his boat out so Jesus could teach, and then asked him to place his partially cleaned nets back into the water? Why do you think he might have felt this way?
2. Why do you think Jesus performs this miracle?
3. How does Peter respond when he sees the catch of fish, and why do you think he responds that way? (See Isaiah 6:1-8 for a parallel passage.)
4. What do you notice about what Jesus says to Peter after Peter falls down and confesses he is not worthy?
5. In what ways does God bless Peter in this experience?
6. How do you think God wants Peter to bless others as a result of being blessed?
7. What are some fears Peter (or you) might have about being sent out as a witness? How does this text address those fears?
8. What does this passage show us about the mission of Jesus?
9. What do you think God might be saying to you in this passage?

LIFE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Jesus calls all disciples further into blessing those who are far from God. In your life, when have you especially felt God leading and choosing and blessing you?
2. How did God provide for you along the way as you responded?
3. How has Jesus called you to be a witness and to fish for people?
4. What might that cost you?
5. How might God provide?

LIFE APPLICATION

Take a moment to reflect in silence on these Scripture passages, questions, and stories from this week's session, and write down your thoughts. Here are a few questions to guide you.

1. What are you hearing God say to you?
2. How do you want to respond?
3. What steps will you take?
4. What do you want us to ask you about next week as a way to encourage you and keep you accountable during our times together?

Take some time to share together what you sense God saying to you.

PRAY ALOUD IN UNISON

Jesus, thank you for choosing us. Thank you that you provide. And thank you that you have bigger dreams for our lives than we have. Thank you for blessing us. Help us to be witnesses and to catch people for you. Help us to bless others who don't know you yet.

Take a few moments to write down your next step.

1. What did you sense God saying to you in Session 1?

2. Next Step: _____

3. Prayer: _____

4. Accountability: _____

BLESS TOOLBOX: BELONG OUT THERE!

Do you struggle to build significant friendships with others who are not Christians? This helpful tool can help you begin to deepen connections with others whom you can bless.

To bless others, we need to be in relationships with them. We need to “belong out there,” as Peter did. He was a fisherman in the world with many connections to people he could then turn around and bless. Here are some ways to connect and develop relationships with people who are not part of the church.

1. JOIN SOMETHING

Join something you enjoy in order to connect with those who are far from God. If we only spend time with Christian friends, we will have few opportunities to bless people who do not know Jesus.

Consider joining a golf league or the local school council, coaching a kids’ sports team, or taking an art class. Another place to connect is to join a support group in an area we have struggled, such as addiction or loss.

For example, after her kids were grown and out of the house, Beth’s friend Julia joined an organization that helps families who struggle with addiction. Julia’s own son had a history of addiction, and she wanted to reach out to families who might be dealing with many of the same issues and concerns her family had encountered. There, Julia met Gloria and gave her a book that she thought might encourage Gloria and her family. She warned Gloria that the book was “Jesus-y” but that still, Julia believed it would help her.

A few weeks later Gloria called Julia and said, “I didn’t know Jesus was for people like me and my family.” Another few weeks passed, and again Gloria phoned Julia, asking if they could get together so Gloria could “do that thing that the book you gave me tells you to do.”

“What thing?” Julia asked. Gloria responded, “You know, that thing where you invite Jesus to be the center of your life and to forgive you. I was thinking maybe Thursday you could put on the coffee pot, and I could drop by for coffee and we could do it then.”

Gloria scheduled her own inauguration into the kingdom of God!

2. INVITE PEOPLE TO JOIN YOU IN SOMETHING YOU LOVE

Another great way to connect with people outside the church and to deepen relationships is to invite others into something you’re already doing or that you would like to do. You could start a weekly pickup basketball game or a book club and invite people who might be far from God to join you.

You don't have to reach out to people alone. Reach with a friend. If you are an introvert, for example, partner with an extrovert to bless others and belong out there!

1. What do you love to do that you could do with people who are far from God?
2. What have you struggled with in your life or your family's life that could provide an opportunity to connect with others who have struggled in similar ways?
3. What step could you take to move toward joining something that could connect you relationally to people far from God?

Ask God to connect you with people who do not know him. Then try one of these ideas to “belong out there” and share what happens when you return to the group next time.

This image shows a full page of blank, cream-colored paper with horizontal blue or grey ruling lines, typical of notebook paper. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There is no handwriting or other markings on the paper.

Welcome to Session 2 of the small group Bible study guide on the five missional practices of BLESS. Since the beginning of our story with God, he has demonstrated his deep love for us through his blessing. In turn we become a blessing to others (GENESIS 12:2).



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THE FIVE BLESS MISSIONAL PRACTICES:

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2. **Listen with care.** Jesus and others have listened to you and heard you. We can bless others who are far from God by listening to and hearing them.
3. **Eat together.** Jesus and others have accepted you and invited you to their table. Let us accept and invite others who don't know Jesus yet to our table.
4. **Serve in love.** Jesus and others have served you in ways that changed you. We can serve others who do not know God in ways that can change them.
5. **Share your story.** Jesus and others have shared their story with you in ways that have changed you. We can share your story with others so that they may draw near to God.

Let's review the five BLESS missional practices that help us introduce people to Jesus.

SESSION 2: Blessed to BLESS

How God's Mission to Reach and Restore People Can Happen through You and Your Church

As you recall, BLESS is a new way of thinking about loving our neighbors through five missional practices that help us introduce people to Jesus. By vectoring these practices outward to include people who may be far from God, we can bless and bring people to new life in Christ. And we bless those friends, relatives, acquaintances, neighbors, and coworkers out of what we have received from God and others. Jesus lives in us, gives to us, and then gives us strength and wisdom to give to others. Loving people to Jesus is not so much about pressuring them as blessing them.

Every one of us can easily and naturally live out the five BLESS missional practices with unchurched people.

THE FIVE BLESS MISSIONAL PRACTICES:



PAY IT FORWARD

Is there any way that you felt blessed by God or by others this week?
Does that help you think about ways you might bless others?

FOLLOW UP FROM SESSION 1

Did anyone take a step to connect with others or to “belong out there” this week? What happened and how did it go?

Ask the group to read the Opening Story silently or aloud (or share another story illustrating God's answer to prayer).

Begin with Prayer

THE BIG IDEA: Today we are going to explore how we have been blessed by Jesus and others in prayer, so we begin with prayer to bless those in our lives who are far from God. God has blessed us through prayer, and so we bless others who are far from God through prayer. We give out of what we receive.

OPENING STORY (FROM RICK)

I will never forget the day God answered my mom's prayers, despite the fact that she does not even believe in God.

My wife and I were out hiking with my parents in a wilderness area in the San Juan Mountains of Southern Colorado. After about forty-five minutes, my parents decided to return to the car. Before they turned back, my dad carefully described the fork in the path we would eventually come to and which fork to take to get back to our car.

It was a hot day. We each had half a bottle of water and were wearing short-sleeve shirts. Then as we crested a hill, we heard loud grunts and scuffles—and suddenly we saw two black bears rise up on their haunches, look at us for a moment as they seemed to decide whether we were food or to be feared. They lumbered away before we even had a chance to feel anything but shock.

We were not interested in hanging around after that! We immediately hurried back toward our car. When we reached the fork, we took the path my dad had told us to take.

Fifty feet beyond the fork, my cell phone rang even though we were miles from any cell tower. I answered and hear my mom on the other end shouting, "Turn back! It is the other fork!" They quickly explained that my dad had misread the map. If we had continued down that path, we would have ended up on a mountaintop five miles away from any road.

By that time it was late afternoon. We were low on water, and as the sun set the temperature dropped. An hour or two more in the wrong direction would have left us on a mountain, with little recourse but to await the arrival of a rescue team from the emergency forest service.

We had no desire to turn back toward the bears, but after several attempts we finally returned and found our way.

Here was the odd thing. From the time we turned around until the time we came within sight of our car, I had no cell service. Nothing. Not a single bar. Just "no service" on my screen. How did my parents get through at just the moment they did?

When we arrived back at the cabin my mom gave me a big hug and said, “I prayed for you!” That evening as we sat down to dinner, she offered to say grace, giving thanks for the miracle of a cell phone that shouldn’t have worked. In my heart, I thanked God for hearing the prayers of my mother, the atheist!

OPENING DISCUSSION

1. What struck you from this story?
2. We start this session by asking how God has blessed us through prayer. When have you experienced answered prayer in your life and how did it encourage you?
3. Do you think God answers the prayers you pray for the unchurched people in your life? When have you seen that happen?
4. Do you feel God answers prayers of the unchurched people in your life, and have you ever seen that happen?

JESUS PRAYS FOR US (ROMANS 8:34B-35)

We bless others through prayer because we have been blessed through prayer. We are blessed to bless others! In Scripture we see how Jesus prays for us out of the same love that led him to die for us, and Jesus teaches us how to pray.

“Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?”

Ask someone
to read the
passage aloud.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Do you believe Jesus is praying for you right now? Why or why not?
2. What do you think Jesus might be praying for you at this stage of your life?
3. What might Jesus be praying for one or two unchurched people in your life whom he loves and wants to reach?

Ask someone or
or several people
to read the
passage aloud.

JESUS TEACHES ON PRAYER: (LUKE 11:1-12)

One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples."

He said to them, "When you pray, say: 'Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us. And lead us not into temptation.'"

Then Jesus said to them, "Suppose you have a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have no food to offer him.' And suppose the one inside answers, 'Don't bother me. The door is already locked, and my children and I are in bed. I can't get up and give you anything.' I tell you, even though he will not get up and give you the bread because of friendship, yet because of your shameless audacity he will surely get up and give you as much as you need.

"So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.

"Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What do you think the disciples were wondering about prayer? Why do they ask Jesus to teach them how to pray?
2. What stands out to you about the basic prayer Jesus gives his disciples to pray?
3. Is there anything in that prayer that helps you know how and what to pray for your unchurched friends and family members?
4. What do you think is the point of the story about bread needed late at night? The story about eggs and fishes?
5. Why do you think we need to keep on asking, seeking, and knocking when it comes to prayer in general and especially prayer for unchurched family and friends? Why do you think those prayers are usually not answered quickly?

6. How can we pray for the Holy Spirit to be present and at work in the lives of our unchurched family and friends?
7. What gives you encouragement and faith to keep on praying when it seems like it takes forever to get the answers we long for?

LIFE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Where have you been blessed in your life by the prayers of other people for you?
2. How do you want to approach prayer for the unchurched people in your life?
3. How might we respond? Could you start a BLESS prayer list and listen to the Spirit as you write out prayers for your list?

FRANC MODEL

Use the following model to help you pray for and bless people in your spheres of influence where you live, work, and play.

1. Friends
2. Relatives
3. Acquaintances
4. Neighbors
5. Co-workers and colleagues

Start your spiritual influence list, which you can use to begin to pray.



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Where is God already at work in your family, friends, and others?
2. Where does God want you to join in the work God is doing in your circles of influence and with the people you are seeking to draw toward yourself?
3. How does God want you to bless the people in the places God has sent you?

Listen to God and write down prayers for five people God lays on your heart.

1. _____ : _____
2. _____ : _____
3. _____ : _____
4. _____ : _____
5. _____ : _____

SMALL GROUP PRACTICE

Pray in pairs or as a group for someone or several people on your BLESS list.

LIFE APPLICATION

Take a moment to reflect on the Scripture passages, questions, and stories from this week's session and write down your thoughts. Here are a few questions to guide you. Share with your small group what you sensed God saying to you.

1. What do you hear God say to you?
2. How do you want to respond?
3. What steps will you take?
4. What do you want us to ask you about next week as a way to encourage you and keep you accountable during our times together?

PRAY ALOUD IN UNISON

Lord, help us to ask and keep on asking, to seek and keep on seeking, and to knock and keep on knocking when it comes to praying for our unchurched family and friends. You promise that if we are persistent, you will answer. You promise that if we cry out to you, you are good and will respond. You promise to give the Holy Spirit to those who ask. And you promise to convict and draw people toward you by your Holy Spirit.

Take a few moments to write down your next step.

1. What did you sense God saying to you in Session 1?

2. Next Step: _____

3. Prayer: _____

4. Accountability: _____

HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT

1. When will you finish your initial BLESS list?
2. Where will you keep it?
3. When and how often will you pray for unchurched family and friends?
4. How and when might you let your friends know you are praying for them?
5. When and how might you pray with them?
6. Under what circumstances might it be appropriate for you to ask them to pray for you?

Welcome to session 3.

For review, the leader can summarize the five BLESS missional practices below.



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5. **Share your story.** Jesus and others have shared their story with you in ways that have changed you. We can share your story with others so that they may draw near to God.

SESSION 3: LISTEN WITH CARE

Blessed to BLESS: How God's Mission to Reach and Restore People Can Happen through You and Your Church

Since the beginning of our story with God, God has demonstrated his deep love for us through his blessing. In turn we become a blessing to others (GENESIS 12:2).

As you recall, BLESS is a new way of thinking about loving our neighbors through five missional practices that help us introduce people to Jesus. By vectoring these practices outward to include people who may be far from God, we can bless and bring people to new life in Christ. And we bless those friends, relatives, acquaintances, neighbors, and coworkers out of what we have received from God and others. Jesus lives in us, gives to us, and then gives us strength and wisdom to give to others. Loving people to Jesus is not so much about pressuring them as blessing them.

THE FIVE BLESS MISSIONAL PRACTICES:



PAY IT FORWARD

Whom did you bless this week and in what way? Have you ever had an experience of being prayed for that was meaningful in your life? How can you give that experience to someone else in the coming week?

FOLLOW UP FROM PREVIOUS WEEK

What progress are you making in developing your BLESS list and praying for people on your list?

Ask the group to read the Opening Story silently or ask someone to read the story aloud. (Or share a story from your own life of listening to others and blessing them.)

Listen with Care

THE BIG IDEA: Jesus and others have listened to you, heard you, and valued who you are. We bless others who are far from God by listening to, hearing, and valuing their stories that reveal who they are. In this way we help them take another step toward Jesus.

So how can we learn to ask good questions and listen well to the stories of others?

OPENING STORY (FROM BETH)

One morning at my \$10-a-month gym I headed toward the Stairmaster and noticed a woman around my age working out on a machine that was new to me. I climbed onto the machine next to her and asked her to help me select my settings. We talked for a few minutes and then I asked Shea (not her real name) about her personal workout for that morning. Her plan was intriguing to me, so I asked if I could join her as I would enjoy learning some new things and also getting to know her. She agreed, though we both agreed that we needed to be done right at 8:00 am.

Shea and I chatted as we made our way around the weight machines, and then we headed for the mat room to begin our crunches. At one point, I looked over at her and said, “Hey, Shea, what are you looking forward to in your life?” She was quiet for a moment, her mood sobered, and then she responded, “Peace.” It was three minutes to 8:00, and I knew we both needed to head out the door, but I felt that nudge, maybe even heard that whisper, “Ask her what she means.” I took a deep breath and said, “Peace? Unpack that for me a bit.”

Shea went on to tell me that five years earlier as a single mom with three young adult boys, she had started to date a really nice guy. They had been going out for five or six weeks when he began to drop things. Then he backed his car into the closed garage door. Within months her friend had lost all his motor skills and then his cognitive functions. He lost his job, his house, and his kids. Shea and her sons talked about it and made a decision to take this man in and look after him. They invited him into their home, and for the past five years Shea had fed and cared for this man every day before she left for work. At the end of each day, she came home, fed him supper, and helped get him into bed.

Then on a recent checkup the physician had told Shea that her friend’s need for care had gone beyond her abilities. He needed to be admitted to a facility that provided twenty-four-hour care. So for the past month, Shea had left the gym each morning to have breakfast with her friend before running to work. Each evening she stopped back

in to see him. “We hardly had time to get to know one another before he became ill,” she said.

Shea wept as she concluded her story. There on the gym floor we hugged each other, and I asked if I could pray for her. She nodded. After listening to her story I prayed what I believe God’s Spirit whispered to my heart—that she might know how pleased the Father was with her decisions and with the sacrifices she and her boys had made to care for a stranger.

OPENING DISCUSSION

God our Creator has made each of us in his image—each of us reflects that image in our own unique way. God often leads us to people we have a heart for. Sometimes we connect with them through shared interests or shared activities. Sometimes we connect through shared experiences of pain or heartbreak. Every one of us has aspects of our lives that can be a bridge to others.

1. What unique experiences has God given you that can help you identify with other people?
2. Can you think of a time when God used something from your life or background, or even your brokenness, to help you reach out to someone who was unchurched?
3. Who has God given you compassion for and why?
4. What did you notice about Beth’s approach to blessing Shea through listening?

PHILIP AND THE ETHIOPIAN: ACTS 8:26–40

We bless others through listening with care. We listen to discover where God is at work in someone’s life in order to join God in his work. When we listen, we respond out of our unique background and to the unique opportunities God gives us. Listening includes responding to the nudge of the Holy Spirit—and remembering that the Spirit’s nudges often come in the form of interruptions.

Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake (which means “queen of the Ethiopians”). This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet. The Spirit told Philip, “Go to that chariot and stay near it.”

Ask someone or several people to read the passage aloud.

Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. “Do you understand what you are reading?” Philip asked.

“How can I,” he said, “unless someone explains it to me?” So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

This is the passage of Scripture the eunuch was reading: “He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth.”

The eunuch asked Philip, “Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?” Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.

As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?” And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing. Philip, however, appeared at Azotus and traveled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What stands out to you in this story?
2. What do you know about Philip’s background (see Acts 6:1-7)? What similarities might Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch have in common in terms of being different from the other people they lived near?
3. How did Philip hear and respond to the Spirit’s leading? In what ways can you relate to his response?
4. What evidence did Philip have of God already working in the Ethiopian man’s life? How was he able to discern what it meant?
5. How did Philip contribute and join the work God was doing in the Ethiopian man?
6. What was the man’s response to his baptism? What consequences were there for blessing a whole nation?

The story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch’s spiritual transformation follows a pattern of being willing to be interrupted, noticing where God is working, responding to the nudge of the Spirit, asking questions and listening—and then speaking into where God is already at work.

Ask someone or several people to read the passage aloud.

A BLIND BEGGAR RECEIVES HIS SIGHT: LUKE 18:35-43

As Jesus approached Jericho, a blind man was sitting by the roadside begging. When he heard the crowd going by, he asked what was happening. They told him, "Jesus of Nazareth is passing by."

He called out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

Those who led the way rebuked him and told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!"

Jesus stopped and ordered the man to be brought to him. When he came near, Jesus asked him, "What do you want me to do for you?"

"Lord, I want to see," he replied.

Jesus said to him, "Receive your sight; your faith has healed you." Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus, praising God. When all the people saw it, they also praised God.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What do you notice about this situation? What is going on?
2. Why does the blind man cry out when he finds out it is Jesus, and how does he express faith? (Note that Jesus later tells him his faith has made him well.)
3. How do the crowds and disciples following Jesus to Jericho respond to this man, and why?
4. How does Jesus show that he listens, that he responds, and that he values this man?

LIFE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. When have you cried out to Jesus, and felt that he listened, heard you, responded, and that he valued you?
2. In what ways do you need to grow in listening to others and in showing that you value them?
3. In your life, who is far from God right now that you want to listen to more deeply, and to care for and value?
4. In what ways do you hunger to learn better how to listen to God and look for clues of his work in the lives of your friends and family who are far from God?

SMALL GROUP PRACTICE

Pray in pairs or as a whole group for a person God has laid on your heart.

LIFE APPLICATION—LISTENING EXERCISE

In this exercise model one of the conversations below with a partner and then ask everyone to try out a second set of questions in pairs, with one person initiating the conversation and listening and the other person responding.

QUESTIONS TO HELP YOU LISTEN TO ANOTHER PERSON'S STORY

1. What made you choose to go into your present job (or your most recent one if you are looking for work now)? What is something you enjoy about that role?
2. What is a dream or hope you have for your life right now?
3. What might keep you from reaching your dream?
4. How does the spiritual side of your life affect whether or not you reach your dream?
5. If it seems appropriate to the conversation, ask your new friend if you can pray for them for the fulfillment of their dream.

As you practice listening, don't talk. Listen to your partner, their struggles, and their pains. And when asking questions, try to listen to the Holy Spirit for guidance as well.

This READ strategy can help you hear others well:

R*Repeat what the person shared until they let you know they feel heard.*

E*xperience—name the emotions the other person experienced in the story they shared.*

A*ffirm every true thing you can about their position or experience.*

D*isclose—only now do you “disclose” your view or offer a challenge.*

Take a moment to reflect on the Scripture passages, questions, stories, and exercises from this week's session and write down your thoughts. Here are a few questions to guide you. Share with your small group what you sense God saying to you.

1. What are you hearing God say to you?
2. How do you want to respond?
3. What steps will you take?
4. What do you want us to ask you about next week as a way to encourage you and keep you accountable during our time together?

PRAY ALOUD IN UNISON

Lord, help us to listen to others and to you. We want to bless others by listening, responding, and valuing them. We want to hear about the experiences in their lives, and we want to hear and see what you are doing in their lives so we can collaborate with you. Lord, thank you that you have listened to us and loved and valued us. We want to bless others!

Take a few moments to write down your next step.

1. What did you sense God saying to you in Session 3?

2. Next Step: _____

3. Prayer: _____

4. Accountability: _____

CLOSING REFLECTION

God uses our unique backgrounds, passions, pains, and compassion to reach others who share our similar stories, qualities, and interests. God has prepared us to bear witness to Jesus out of our own identities. When we ask God to show us where he is at work and how we can join him, we begin to notice people and recognize the Spirit's nudges. We become aware of God's work in their lives and where we can contribute.

HOMEWORK

1. Think about your life experiences and how they could help you connect with people with shared experiences who are far from God.
2. Pray for an opportunity to have a significant conversation this week with someone on your BLESS list or someone else who is far from God.
3. Seek out a conversation where you can ask questions and hear an important story that has helped make another person who they are.

Welcome to Session 4.

For review, the leader can summarize the five BLESS missional practices below.



intentional evangelism initiative

THE FIVE BLESS MISSIONAL PRACTICES:

1. **Begin with prayer.** Jesus and others have blessed you through prayer. We can bless others who don't know Jesus yet by praying for them.
2. **Listen with care.** Jesus and others have listened to you and heard you. We can bless others who are far from God by listening to and hearing them.
3. **Eat together.** Jesus and others have accepted you and invited you to their table. Let us accept and invite others who don't know Jesus yet to our table.
4. **Serve in love.** Jesus and others have served you in ways that changed you. We can serve others who do not know God in ways that can change them.
5. **Share your story.** Jesus and others have shared their story with you in ways that have changed you. We can share your story with others so that they may draw near to God.

SESSION 4: Eat Together

“The table is the place where you connect and belong. It is a place where the past remains alive in the memory of the very old, and the future sparkles with possibility. It is enchanted. We lean close together, we share a glass, we tell a story. Through this simple human relating, the universe feels as though it is right again.” —DANIEL HOMAN

Since the beginning of our story with God, he has demonstrated his deep love for us through his blessing. In turn we become a blessing to others
(GENESIS 12:2).

WHAT IS BLESS?

As you recall, BLESS is a new way of thinking about loving our neighbors through five missional practices that help us introduce people to Jesus. By vectoring these practices outward to include people who may be far from God, we can bless and bring people to new life in Christ. And we bless those friends, relatives, acquaintances, neighbors, and coworkers out of what we have received from God and others. Jesus lives in us, gives to us, and then gives us strength and wisdom to give to others. Loving people to Jesus is not so much about pressuring them as blessing them.

THE FIVE BLESS MISSIONAL PRACTICES:



PAY IT FORWARD

Whom did you bless this week and in what way? Have you ever had an experience of being unexpectedly invited to a meal that was meaningful in your life? How can you bless someone with an experience like that in the coming week?

FOLLOW UP FROM PREVIOUS SESSION

What progress are you making?

1. How are you praying for the people on your BLESS list? What specific prayer are you asking God to answer on behalf of the unchurched people on your list?
2. How are you listening to the people on your BLESS list? What question(s) did you ask someone on your list this week? How did they respond?

Ask the group to read the story silently, or ask someone to read it out loud.

Eat Together

THE BIG IDEA: In order to reach those who are far from God, Jesus ate and enjoyed community with people who were marginalized and excluded by the religious leaders of his day. We bless others who are far from God by eating and enjoying community with them. When we eat together with non-Christians, we extend hospitality and invite them to taste God's kingdom. In this way we help people take another step toward Jesus.

How do we practice hospitality and create community with those who don't know Jesus yet? Eating together is one way we can be hospitable and enjoy community with people.

OPENING STORY

In *Influencer: The New Science of Leading Change*, authors Joseph Grenny and Kerry Patterson tell the compelling story of Danny Meyer, a successful restaurateur in New York City. Every restaurant Danny opened was ranked in the top 40 of Zagat's ratings of customer preference—almost as soon as they opened. Grenny and Patterson trace his success to his ability to create an incredible customer service experience for his guests.

In one story a distraught woman hurried into Gramercy Tavern, one of Danny's restaurants in Manhattan. She had forgotten her purse in the taxi that dropped her off for lunch, and she was frantic.

One of Danny's well-trained hosts responded immediately. He seated the woman with her party, telling her to enjoy her lunch and not to worry about her bill. Then he got to work.

He asked the woman for her mobile phone number and then, assuming she had left her phone in the purse, asked a colleague to repeatedly call the number. Thirty minutes later when the taxi driver finally heard the phone and answered the call, he was many miles north in the Bronx. The host arranged to meet the taxi halfway between their two locations, paid the driver for his trouble, retrieved the purse, and presented it to the woman just as she was finishing her lunch. Imagine her response!

Danny Meyer taught his staff to "always be collecting dots" (ABCD). In other words, as they noticed specific details about a guest's needs or desires, they were able to serve them more effectively. They paid attention to food preferences, seating choices, body language, emotions, etc., and then used that information to create a customized guest experience. Danny found that the employees who were best at collecting dots were also the most capable of creating unique and special experiences for their guests.

Ask someone or several people to read the passage aloud.

That is hospitality. It's behavior that illustrates the missional practice of eating together. Imagine visiting a church that was as attentive as Danny's staff and practiced that kind of hospitality!

ZACCHAEUS THE TAX COLLECTOR: LUKE 19:1-10

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way.

When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly.

All the people saw this and began to mutter, "He has gone to be the guest of a sinner."

But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount."

Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What do you think Jesus saw in Zacchaeus that caused him to call him out? Why might he have decided to go eat with this man?
2. What do you think Jesus is communicating when he invites himself to eat in Zacchaeus's house and on his turf?
3. How does Zacchaeus respond? Why do you think he responds that way?
4. Jesus makes clear that today salvation has come to Zacchaeus's house—what do you think that means?
5. Why is the practice of hospitality and of eating together so powerful?
6. What experiences of hospitality have had an impact on you? How?

Ask participants
to each read a
paragraph aloud.

More than once Jesus was accused of eating with sinners and tax collectors (SEE MATTHEW 11:18FF.). Tax collectors were Jews who worked for the Romans and who often over-taxed their own people, pocketing the difference. They were reputed to be corrupt and were considered traitors for colluding with the Romans. First-century historian Josephus wrote that tax collectors were excommunicated from the Jewish synagogue, the holy place of worship in their culture.

Eating with Jesus changed Zacchaeus's life. Jesus's hospitality toward him communicated acceptance, created connection, and affirmed his worth. After their encounter, Zacchaeus demonstrated magnanimous generosity toward all he had wronged.

Jesus also practiced hospitality by receiving the hospitality and service of others. He received the love and service of those who were outcast. The leaders and rulers objected whenever Jesus ate with marginalized people. But Jesus loved staying in the homes of people like Zacchaeus. He affirmed people by receiving and valuing whatever they had to give him.

Biblical hospitality is not primarily about entertaining people. It does not mean creating a perfect home or opening your door to friends and family who will do the same for you. It isn't serving costly gourmet meals to people of your own social status, or higher.

True hospitality is sharing what you have. It's sharing your life with others, communicating acceptance and affirmation by sharing meals. It's welcoming the stranger and the outsider into faith. Hospitality is including those who have little, people who are lonely, people who may be different from you. It is meeting people's need for kindness and acceptance, food, and welcome.

And it is not only giving what we have to others, but it is also receiving as valuable what others give to us. This kind of hospitality, equality, and intimacy is missional to the core. May we learn this practice of regularly eating with the people in our neighborhoods, networks, and communities!

LIFE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. When have you experienced the bonding power of hospitality and eating together?
2. What have you learned about how to cultivate opportunities to eat with others?

SMALL GROUP PRACTICE

EXERCISE ONE

Divide into pairs and think about the spheres of influence in your life. Consider ways to add to or deepen your practice of eating with others.

1. Family
2. Work
3. Play
4. Past Friends and associations

In a thirty-second “brain-dump” list on paper separately and then with your partner all the ways you could practice hospitality or eat with others.

Discuss how many times a month you can make it a goal to eat “missionally” with others. How can you help each other make this practice a regular spiritual discipline in your life?

Many people use summers to build relationships through block parties and backyard barbecues. Can you think of any opportunities you might have to invite neighbors to gather and share food and community?

EXERCISE TWO

Select two of these practices and follow the instructions.

1. Find a common interest with your partner and talk about it. Notice how it helps you connect with each other.
2. Find a place where you differ in values from your partner. How and to what degree you can communicate acceptance in spite of your differences? How you can learn to genuinely affirm with discernment the values of those outside Christ’s family when you disagree with them?
3. Identify a strength in your partner and find ways to affirm him or her in that strength. Discuss what impact affirmation can make. What could help you notice and affirm the strengths of others, particularly those outside the family of God?
4. How could you begin to ask for and receive the gift of hospitality and service from others?

LIFE APPLICATION

Take a moment to reflect on the Scripture passage, questions, story, and exercises from this week’s session and write down your thoughts. Share with your small group what you sense God saying to you.

Take a few moments to write down your next step.

1. What did you sense God saying to you in Session 4?

2. Next Step: _____

3. What invitations could you make for eating and deepening conversation to four people who are still finding their way home to God in the next month?

1. _____ 3. _____
2. _____ 4. _____

4. Accountability: What do you want us to ask you about next week as a way to encourage you and keep you accountable during our times together.

5. Prayer: _____

PRAY ALOUD IN UNISON

Lord, where have you sent me, and whom do you want me to bless this week? Open my eyes to see who you want me to be hospitable toward and to include in a meal this week. Show me who to invite for dinner, lunch, or coffee. Help me to include those who are often excluded from our community. Give me the time, the courage, and the compassion to reach out and invite those who have been left out. Help me become more like you, Lord Jesus.

HOMework

1. Ask God whom you should invite to the table this week.
2. Pencil in time on your calendar for a coffee, lunch, or dinner with someone in your life who is unchurched.
3. Discuss with your family or roommates how to coordinate and plan a meal this week to invite unchurched friends.
4. Extend the invitation to an unchurched friend through a personal invitation such as a call or text.
5. Think about some questions and topics of conversation to address while you are eating together.
6. Reflect on these skills of hospitality and how you may direct them toward someone on your BLESS list over a meal:
 - Identify common interests and celebrate them.
 - Notice what people like and don't like and act on what you learn.
 - Ask about and accept people's values to whatever degree you can authentically do so.
 - Identify something in the other person that you admire, remembering that they were made in God's image.
 - Anticipate people's needs and try to meet them.
 - Notice and receive the gifts people give you.

Welcome to Session 5.

For review, the leader can summarize the five BLESS missional practices below.



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THE FIVE BLESS MISSIONAL PRACTICES:

1. **Begin with prayer.** Jesus and others have blessed you through prayer. We can bless others who don't know Jesus yet by praying for them.
2. **Listen with care.** Jesus and others have listened to you and heard you. We can bless others who are far from God by listening to and hearing them.
3. **Eat together.** Jesus and others have accepted you and invited you to their table. Let us accept and invite others who don't know Jesus yet to our table.
4. **Serve in love.** Jesus and others have served you in ways that changed you. We can serve others who do not know God in ways that can change them.
5. **Share your story.** Jesus and others have shared their story with you in ways that have changed you. We can share your story with others so that they may draw near to God.

SESSION 5:

Serve in Love

Since the beginning of our story with God, he has demonstrated his deep love for us through his blessing. In turn we become a blessing to others
(GENESIS 12:2).

WHAT IS BLESS?

As you recall, BLESS is a new way of thinking about loving our neighbors through five missional practices that help us introduce people to Jesus. By vectoring these practices outward to include people who may be far from God, we can bless and bring people to new life in Christ. And we bless those friends, relatives, acquaintances, neighbors, and coworkers out of what we have received from God and others. Jesus lives in us, gives to us, and then gives us strength and wisdom to give to others. Loving people to Jesus is not so much about pressuring them as blessing them.

THE FIVE BLESS MISSIONAL PRACTICES:



PAY IT FORWARD

How have you been blessed by others or by God this week? What opportunities have you had to bless others who need to know Jesus?

FOLLOW UP FROM PREVIOUS WEEK

What progress are you making in the missional engagement steps below? Share something from your life this week related to one of the steps below.

1. How are you praying for the people on your BLESS list? What specific prayer are you asking God to answer on behalf of the unchurched people on your list? (Remember, Jesus's words: *"Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened,"* MATTHEW 7:7-8.
2. How are you listening to the people on your BLESS list? How were you able to listen to someone on your list this week, and how did they respond?
3. How are you eating with people on your BLESS list? What steps have you taken to make that happen?

Session 5

Ask someone to read the story aloud, or share another story that illustrates serving others in love.

Serve in Love

THE BIG IDEA: Jesus has served us so that we can bless others by serving them in practical and sometimes sacrificial ways. Others experience God's love and invitation through our acts of kindness and practical service.

OPENING STORY (FROM RICK)

We were headed off on a family vacation, and a neighboring family had agreed to take care of our pets—a dog, two cats, and a gerbil. But the day before we were to leave we learned that one of our cats was diabetic and would need shots twice a day. We went to our neighbors and told them we would board the cat with a vet, so they wouldn't have to deal with the hassle of his medication.

They responded, “No, we'll take him. We're glad to do it.”

So off we went for two weeks. When we came home, the cat was fine, and our neighbors had faithfully given him shots every day for two weeks. They told us how happy they had been to do it, and they also had some stories of funny and awkward moments of getting the cat to go along with his therapy!

We were blown away, and to say thank you we took them out to a nice Spanish tapas restaurant. At that meal we had one of the most significant and profound spiritual conversations I had ever had. The man worked as a police commander and saw his spiritual vocation as providing pastoral and crisis care for police officers who had been involved in violence against others. He hadn't gone to church in years, but he was living out his calling. He and I connected on a deep level, challenged each other, and had a profound spiritual engagement. We continue to check in with each other and challenge each other today. He now attends a vibrant, biblically centered church, where his vocation is blessed and encouraged. He has been on a spiritual journey of coming home to God, and our relationship was one step on that journey.

What had allowed us to go so deeply with each other, even though he had had negative experiences with the church and Christians? The answer: he had helped me when I needed it. Nothing builds trust like being in a vulnerable position of receiving from others.

Earlier in my life I had been taught to practice “care evangelism,” where I earn the right to be heard by caring for others. This experience taught me to practice *mutual-care relationships and outreach*, where I seek both to give and to receive as part of a trust-building process. That day my friend and his wife demonstrated the kind of service Jesus gives and the kind we are called to give—especially to people who are still finding their way home to God.

Ask someone
or several people
to read the
passage aloud.

DISCUSSION

God wants us to serve those who don't know him yet—in small ways and also sometimes in big ways. We can offer a word of affirmation to a discouraged soul, presence and care to someone grieving, a kind act to a stressed colleague, a helpful hand around the house, appreciation for work no one usually notices, or a courageous conversation with someone. All these acts of service communicate love and value to the people we serve. What's more, the act of receiving gifts and service from those around us can be an even greater act of love and humility.

Think about people who have served you in a way that made a difference in your life. Or think about people who have exhibited the kind of service Jesus practiced in your life. Share about a person you know who exemplifies these qualities and what you notice about their impact on the lives of others.

JESUS WASHES HIS DISCIPLES' FEET: JOHN 13:1-17

It was just before the Passover Festival. Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.

The evening meal was in progress, and the devil had already prompted Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, to betray Jesus. Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.

He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?"

Jesus replied, "You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand."

"No," said Peter, "you shall never wash my feet."

Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me."

"Then, Lord," Simon Peter replied, "not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!"

Jesus answered, "Those who have had a bath need only to wash their feet; their whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you." For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not everyone was clean.

When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. “Do you understand what I have done for you?” he asked them. “You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.

Ask someone
to read the
passage aloud.

THE GREATEST AMONG YOU: LUKE 22:24-27

A dispute also arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest. Jesus said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Foot washing was an act performed only by slaves and servants. Feet got exceptionally dirty and grimy and calloused in the arid conditions in which Jesus lived. For the person in power to wash feet would have been considered an outrage and scandal in Jesus’s day.

Jesus, secure in his status with God (JOHN 13:3), is able to do the menial, invisible, unclean, and thankless tasks that higher status people refuse to do (JOHN 13:4). He also gives his followers security and status that they can rest in and serve from (LUKE 22:29-30).

Jesus served others through affirmation and kindness, but also by challenge and speaking hard truths. He did small practical things (such as telling parents of a girl he had just raised from the dead to give her something to eat), but he also healed and radically included those who were hurting and marginalized.

1. What kind of menial service might be a contemporary parallel to foot-washing today?
2. How did being secure in his identity and status with God help Jesus serve others?
3. How did a habit of loving and serving the people in his life prepare Jesus to love them in even more sacrificial ways at the end of his life?

Ask a participant
to read the
paragraph aloud.

4. In what other concrete and practical ways did Jesus serve people journeying toward faith in God?
5. In what concrete ways did Jesus receive service from people who were journeying toward God?
6. Why is radical service such a countercultural activity?
7. Who can you identify who has been a servant like Jesus instead of lording their status over others?

Great acts of service and suffering have often changed the course of history. Mahatma Gandhi went on a hunger fast in order to bring Muslims and Hindus together in the rioting cities of India after independence from England. Martin Luther King Jr. moved the conscience of a nation with his letter from a Birmingham jail, where he was incarcerated in the service of justice.

Above all, Jesus went to death on a cross to bring forgiveness and healing to the whole world. But what makes everyday life meaningful are the small acts of service we extend to each other day in and day out. Those small acts of service are also the first wave and expression of God's love to people who are still finding their way back to God.

LIFE REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Learn the skills of true service—how to help people in ways that accord dignity and communicate love the way they can hear it. Which items in the list below most stand out to you? Why? Can you think of a concrete example of serving in that way?

1. Affirming someone's strengths and character
2. Showing kindness
3. Giving gifts
4. Meeting concrete needs
5. Giving practical help with tasks
6. Asking for help, or letting other people serve you
7. Engaging in courageous conversations that speak truth in love
8. Believing in a person's potential
9. Grieving together
10. Expressing value to people who might not be valued by society or your community
11. Serving in the community together with unchurched friends or acquaintances

LIFE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Think about people who have served you in a way that made a difference in your life, or ways you have seen someone exhibit the kind of service Jesus practiced. Tell a story about an experience of being served and why it was meaningful.
2. Which acts of service come naturally to you? Where would you like to grow? Do you care for people in the ways you want to feel loved, or in ways you think they want to feel loved? Does your service build up the dignity of others? How well do you receive from others?

EXERCISE

In pairs discuss how you have practiced or experienced one skill from the list above. Next, talk about which area or skill you would like to develop or improve. Who could you choose from your BLESS list to practice your acts of service with? From whom could you ask for help?

Pick two people in the next week to intentionally care for and serve—at least one of whom is still finding their way back to God. Spend a few minutes planning and praying for an opportunity to serve them, and discern your next step. How could serving those who are outsiders to the Christian faith become a more regular part of your life?

Ask a group member to read out loud this example of entering into relationships of mutual care and servanthood.

I (Beth) once asked some staff who serve in a campus ministry how they practiced evangelism with family and neighbors. One said, “We borrow things!” After a murmur of laughter among the group, she explained, “My husband and I intentionally do not purchase everything we need to run our home well. Instead of buying an extension ladder or an electric drill, we borrow from our neighbors. Why? Because borrowing leads to spending time together, thanking them, and a continued swapping of services and doing projects together as neighbors.”

To thank their neighbors, this ministry couple would invite them for a meal. Over dinner they asked what upcoming projects their neighbors had planned for their house, and they offered to pitch in and help out. Through swapping tools and services this couple created community with their neighbors whom they sensed were far from God. Meals and serving one another led to deeper conversations as they prayed to God for direction, asked good questions, and listened well, which led to serving their neighbors better.

LIFE APPLICATION

Take a moment to reflect on the Scripture passage, questions, stories, and exercises from this week's session and write down your thoughts. Here are a few questions to guide you. Share with your small group what you sense God saying to you.

Take a few moments to write down your next step.

1. What did you sense God saying to you in Session 5?

2. Next Step: _____

3. Pray and plan for acts of service toward two people in your life who are still finding their way to God.

1. _____

2. _____

4. Accountability: What do you want us to ask you about next week as a way to encourage you and keep you accountable during our times together

5. Prayer: _____

PRAY ALOUD IN UNISON:

Lord, you have loved and served me both in small ways and with the gift of your life. Whom do you want me to bless this week? Open my eyes to see who you want me to serve in practical ways, and from whom I might also ask for help. Show me who I can serve in love. Help me include those who are often excluded from our community. Give me the time, the courage, and the compassion to serve those who have been left out. Help me become more like you, Lord Jesus!

HOMework

1. Ask God whom you could serve in love this week.
2. Listen to God for whomever you want to serve, asking how God might be at work in their lives and how you might be part of that.
3. Continue to reflect on these skills of hospitality and servanthood:
 - Identify common interests and celebrate them.
 - Notice what people like and don't like and act on what you learn.
 - Ask about and accept people's values to whatever degree you can authentically do so.
 - Identify something in that person that you admire, remembering that they were made in God's image.
 - Anticipate people's needs and try to meet them.
 - Notice and receive the gifts people give you.

Welcome to Session 6.

For review, the leader can summarize the five BLESS missional practices below.



intentional evangelism initiative

THE FIVE BLESS MISSIONAL PRACTICES:

1. **Begin with prayer.** Jesus and others have blessed you through prayer. We can bless others who don't know Jesus yet by praying for them.
2. **Listen with care.** Jesus and others have listened to you and heard you. We can bless others who are far from God by listening to and hearing them.
3. **Eat together.** Jesus and others have accepted you and invited you to their table. Let us accept and invite others who don't know Jesus yet to our table.
4. **Serve in love.** Jesus and others have served you in ways that changed you. We can serve others who do not know God in ways that can change them.
5. **Share your story.** Jesus and others have shared their story with you in ways that have changed you. We can share your story with others so that they may draw near to God.

SESSION 6:

Share Your Story

Since the beginning of our story with God, he has demonstrated his deep love for us through his blessing. In turn we become a blessing to others (GENESIS 12:2).

WHAT IS BLESS?

As you recall, BLESS is a new way of thinking about loving our neighbors through five missional practices that help us introduce people to Jesus. By vectoring these practices outward to include people who may be far from God, we can bless and bring people to new life in Christ. And we bless those friends, relatives, acquaintances, neighbors, and coworkers out of what we have received from God and others. Jesus lives in us, gives to us, and then gives us strength and wisdom to give to others. Loving people to Jesus is not so much about pressuring them as blessing them.

PAY IT FORWARD

How have you been blessed by others, especially those who seem far from God this week? What opportunities have you had to serve others who do not know Jesus?

FOLLOW UP FROM PREVIOUS WEEK

What progress are you making in any of the missional engagement steps below? Share something from your life this week related to one of the steps below:

1. How are you praying for the people on your BLESS list? What specific prayer are you asking God to answer on behalf of the unchurched people on your list? (Remember Jesus's words: "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened," (MATTHEW 7:7-8).
2. How are you listening to the people on your BLESS list? How were you able to listen to someone on your list this week and how did they respond?
3. How are you eating with people on your BLESS list? What steps have you taken to make that happen?
4. How are you serving or being served by people on your BLESS list? How are you serving with people on your BLESS list?

Share this story, or an alternative illustration of reaching out to unchurched people in the context of Christian community.

Share Your Story

THE BIG IDEA: Stories inspire and change us. We have received stories from Jesus and others that nurtured our souls and inspired our hearts. In the same way, we share our stories about what God and others have done for us and how those acts have made a difference in our lives with others. We begin by remembering how God has blessed us, celebrating how God has blessed us, and considering who might want to hear our story. Then we share our story of how God is changing us and changing the world!

OPENING STORY (FROM RICK)

As I prepared to enter college, I took a trip with my ski club. Out on the slopes, I met Karen in an unusual way. I saw her run into another skier—twice! The second time I went to help her up, only to find out that she did not know how to stop. She could get going pretty well, but she needed the help of other bodies in her way to actually stop her downward progress. I offered to help her learn, she accepted, and we were off to the slopes together.

At the end of the evening I asked Karen out. I had to ask several times over the next several evenings, because she had just broken up with someone else, but she finally agreed. Little did I know that her pattern of sailing along fine until she crashed was a pattern that would also come to characterize our relationship.

We just never seemed to be able to communicate very well. Two weeks after we went to prom together Karen she told me she didn't want to date anymore. We had been dating pretty seriously for six months, but now she said she had been uncertain about us from the very beginning.

Have you ever felt rejection like that? It stays in the pit of your stomach, sometimes for months. That experience brought out all my loneliness, all my longing for acceptance and belonging, and my need to feel good about who I was.

After that breakup, I went into a shell and built a wall around myself. Midway through my freshman year in college, I began a series of dating relationships that were my attempt to find love, acceptance, and belonging.

During the next three years of college, I had to be dating someone at all times. If I didn't have someone to go out with, I knew I would be unhappy, and I would have to face what I was feeling inside. So I filled the time with relationships and with escape. I escaped into fantasy and constant music. I escaped into the parties at my fraternity house. As soon as one relationship ended, I started a new one. Sometimes the beginning of new relationships overlapped with the ending of the old ones in very awkward ways.

Then one day I ran into Jim in the student union. He was working at a Christian book table, engaging people in spiritual conversations. I had prayed a prayer to receive Christ as my Savior several years before, but I had drifted away and was fairly anti-Christian by that point. So when I saw Jim I thought, “I eat Christians for lunch. I can ask a few devastating questions, and Jim will probably lose his faith.”

I gave him my best: How can a loving God send people to hell? How can an all-powerful God stand by and let so many innocent people suffer in the world? Why are some Christians so hypocritical? Why are they so narrow, uptight, and judgmental toward other people? Why are they against premarital sex and homosexuality and the freedom and fun and choices of other people?

In the past, well-meaning people had answered my questions saying that I just had to have faith. Well, I didn’t, so their answer never did me any good.

But Jim didn’t respond that way. He replied to my questions with thoughtful answers. He admitted when he didn’t know something. I felt like he took me seriously. I felt listened to and cared for. And my heart began to open up. In the end, he answered my deeper heart questions of seeking belonging, respect, and authenticity.

As I watched Jim, he seemed to know who he was. He seemed to feel a sense of belonging wherever he went, and he gave other people that sense. He was at home with himself, and I felt more at home with myself when I was around him. So I began asking him more questions. He told me he had found a life-changing relationship with God. Did I want that too?

I listened as he explained how he had put other things in the center of his life—first studies, then a girl, then his drive to get a good job. But God had shown up in his life through a friend who lived with Jesus at the center of his life and in the driver’s seat. Jim had asked Jesus into the center of his life and that had made all the difference. Life wasn’t perfect, but he knew he was loved and that God would guide him into a better life, into better choices, and to a purpose beyond himself. Jim told me his life change story.

I wanted that. So I asked Jesus into the center of my life that day, and the direction of my life was forever changed. I found a sense of belonging in Jesus that helped me make better choices about dating, escape, partying, and my future vocation.

I have been serving Jesus for many years now. Life has been full, I have been healed and forgiven of some of my destructive tendencies, and I know I will be with Jesus forever.

How about you? Do you want that sense of acceptance and belonging and direction? Jesus can come into the center of your life too if you will just invite him.

OPENING DISCUSSION

Our stories of how God is changing us help others understand how they too may experience God's presence in their lives. We don't need to memorize a script and quote it verbatim. But when we share naturally and with authenticity how God is working in our life to transform us in meaningful ways, we bear witness to Jesus and join him in his mission to bless the world. Our stories can help awaken curiosity about God in friends who don't know Jesus. That's why we tell our stories, to help others understand God better and to collaborate with God's Spirit in helping draw people to God.

1. Can you relate to Rick's story? If so, in what ways did it resonate with you?
2. What universal needs do you see in Rick's story?
3. What did Rick long for, and how did God meet his needs and longings?
4. How did Jim's story help Rick become curious about God?
5. How could Rick's story help non-Christians understand God better, pique their curiosity, or help them draw near to God?

Ask: Think of a time in your past when God intervened and your life was changed. Set a timer, and ask each member to take 60 seconds to briefly share their story with the group.

THE PARABLE OF THE LOST SON: LUKE 15:11-32

Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So, he divided his property between them.

"Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country, and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

"When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.' So he got up and went to his father.

Ask someone or several people to read the passage aloud.

“But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

“The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

“But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So, they began to celebrate.

“Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’

“The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So, his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’

“‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

This story is often titled the Prodigal Son, but as many scholars and pastors point out, it is also the father in this story who is “prodigal,” investing his resources extravagantly in his son. Although the son has audaciously requested his inheritance early and has squandered it through riotous and self-destructive behavior, his father graciously welcomes him home and extravagantly shows him love, acceptance, and hospitality.

1. What strikes you as remarkable in this story?
2. Why might the son have made this unusual first request of his father?
3. How might the father, family, and community have felt about this son’s request?

Ask a participant to read these paragraphs aloud.

4. In what ways did receiving his inheritance either provide or not provide for the things and life the son longed for?
5. Have you ever tried to meet needs you have in ways that ended up hurting you?
6. What changes the son's attitude and how does the son demonstrate that change of heart in his second request of his father?
7. What do you notice about the father's response to his son's return and repentance?
8. What strikes you about the older son and the father's response to him?
9. With which character (younger son, older son, father) in the story do you most identify and why?
10. What does Jesus's illustration teach his listeners and us about our heavenly Father?
11. This story has been told and re-told with amazing impact throughout history. What do you learn about telling a good story from the way Jesus tells this story?

LIFE REFLECTION

Jesus taught people to tell their story, saying, "Tell them what God has done for you" (SEE LUKE 8:39). In turn, we tell people what Jesus has done for us. We take the love we receive from God and we share it with others. We take the forgiveness we receive from God and we share it with others. And we take the peace that God has given us and we share it with others. There's nothing in your life God has given you and blessed you with that he does not intend for you to share with others. We learn to tell the story of how God has made a difference in our lives.

Recall a time in your life when God worked and your life was changed. In particular, think of a time when a spiritual experience with God was crucial in your life. You may want to think about a time that would relate well to the people you want to bless, reach out to, and mentor in their spiritual journey. The more recent your experience, the easier it will be to share it naturally with others.

A few crucial questions may help guide you in writing your own story of what God has done for you.

1. What struggle, need, crisis, or longing did you experience? Don't summarize—describe the circumstances and relationships that made your need real. Spend time developing this in a compelling way. Sharing an encounter with God is powerful if the problem, struggle, longing, or need is emotionally compelling.

2. How did you encounter God or experience the reality of God in your life in relation to your struggle or longing? What spiritual experiences or relationships did you have? Try to avoid using clichés and jargon about Jesus. In a simple, heartfelt way describe your experience of God's presence and involvement as concretely as you can. What spiritual experience was crucial in your change process? How did you know it was God?
3. How did you respond to that encounter? Sharing any struggles you experienced in responding to God will be as important as sharing the success of finally responding to him.
4. What difference has Jesus make in your life? What has God done for you? Tell your story of the changes as honestly as you tell the rest of your story. As you think about how you are different, share especially how the encounter with God helped you change where you place your identity, security, and loyalty.
5. Think about a person with whom your story might connect. What struggles, needs, longings, lostness, or woundedness might they have that you can identify with? How might you naturally bridge into a deeper conversation that leads to your story?
6. Focus on someone with whom you would like to share your story, and take a moment to pray for that person and for an opportunity to bless them by sharing your story. (For a more complete description of how to share your transformation story see *Beginning Well: Christian Conversion and Authentic Transformation*, by Gordon T. Smith.)

Remember, your story is about an experience with God and how it made a difference in your life. Your story is about how your life was changed. All good stories are.

LIFE APPLICATION EXERCISE

Ten minutes for reflection and story writing

Write out a one-page version of your story of what God has done for you using the tips below. Be prepared to share your story with another group participant.

DISCUSSION

Practice in pairs or with the whole group.

1. Start by describing the person with whom you think your story might connect. If you have somebody specific in mind, share a bit about that person and where that person is in life. If not, talk about the kind of person and stage in life who might be helped by your story.
2. Share your story.
3. Briefly give each other feedback. Here are some questions to help you offer clear and helpful guidance:
 - a. Did you share events and people, and not just your interpretations and feelings?
 - b. Were the people intriguing?
 - c. Was there conflict and struggle?
 - d. Was God the hero?
 - e. Did you avoid clichés and jargon?
 - f. Did the encounter with God ring true?
 - g. Were the changes in your life significant and real?
 - h. Did you seem authentic?
4. End by giving thanks for God's transforming work in your lives.

We hope this exercise will encourage you. How can this kind of missional story telling become a more natural part of your life?

REFLECTION AND SHARING

Take a moment to reflect on the Scripture passage, questions, stories, and exercises from this week's session and write down your thoughts. Here are a few questions to guide you. Then share with your small group or community what you sensed God saying to you.

Take a few moments to write down your next step

1. What did you sense God saying to you in Session 6?

2. What do you think God wants you to do in response?

3. What's your next step?_____

4. What would you like to be held accountable for to the group?

5. Who is God encouraging you to share your story of how he is changing your life and the world?

6. Prayer: _____

Pray aloud in unison:

Lord, you are changing our lives through your deep love for us and by your Spirit who indwells all who love and follow you. Thank you! Thank you that you are continually at work in the world and in our lives, changing us and helping us become more like you. Thank you that you have redeemed us and that we often have new stories of your work in our lives and the world. Whom do you want us to bless this week? Open our eyes to see who it is you want us to share our story of how you are changing us and the world! Deepen our relationships with those who do not know you, that we might have the privilege of blessing them and, in time, introducing them to Jesus.

HOMework

1. Ask God whom you could share your story with this week.
2. Listen to God for whomever you want to invite, asking how God might be at work in their lives and how you might be part of that.

OPTIONAL EXERCISE

1. Watch The Big Story Part 1 and Part 2, by James Choung, on how God is changing the world (3 minutes each):
youtube.com/watch?v=kCVcSiUUMhY
youtube.com/watch?v=p4V60n6KiB8
2. Practice sharing the Big Story with a small group member and ask for feedback.
3. Ask the Spirit to give you an opportunity to share the Big Story as one way to explain how God is changing the world with someone you want to introduce to Jesus. Trust God's Spirit to nudge you when the time is right, as he did Philip.
4. Set a time for coffee to follow up with your friend to debrief the Big Story and invite them into your Christian community.
5. Pray for your friend's journey toward Christ and that he or she will become open to change and seek God.



The Evangelical Covenant Church

MAKE AND DEEPEN DISCIPLES

CovChurch.org/BLESS

This image shows a single page of white paper with horizontal blue or grey ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page, leaving small margins at the top and bottom. There are no vertical margin lines, and the page is completely blank except for the lines themselves.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.



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