

The Community of St Cuthbert

Introductory Study Guide
for Spiritual Support Groups

Five New Testament Studies

Welcome!

from the Prior of the Community of St Cuthbert, Rev Dr Richard Briggs

I am delighted to welcome you to the adventure of being part of the **Community of St Cuthbert**. Our community is about living out our Christian faith together, as we grow in knowing and trusting our Lord Jesus Christ. This is a journey for all of us – young and old, beginners or experienced in the Christian life.

One of the Bible's words for those of us who follow Christ is 'disciple' – which basically means 'follower', or 'learner'. In the Community of St Cuthbert we want to be disciples together, recognising that we need each other's help, support and encouragement. This is why we are developing **Spiritual Support Groups**.

We also grow spiritually when we hold each other accountable. To do that involves having a Spiritual Support Group where we first of all encourage each other. That enables us to share with each other what we want to be held accountable for. Then we can lovingly and faithfully follow up with each other in later meetings how we are doing.

To focus our discipleship, the Community of St Cuthbert was launched in 2020 with five **Rhythms of Grace**. You can read more about them in this booklet. This booklet also contains 5 introductory studies on the rhythms of grace that a Group can work through together. There are two different introductory booklets you can use for this, and we recommend that your group uses both of them. This one offers five **New Testament studies**. Another booklet offers five Old Testament studies. In each case, there is one study on each rhythm of grace.

I hope you will find this an exciting and rewarding part of the life of our church. Please do get in touch if you have questions, as we develop our Community and its resources through 2021. Your group leaders will also have ways of contacting further support and help.

(You can contact Richard at prior@stnics.org.uk)

Five Rhythms of Grace

Prayer: Resolve to pray each day. Spend time with God in prayer, listening to God as well as speaking to Him. Pray for at least ten minutes each morning or evening.

Hospitality: Practise hospitality. Look at the way the church played a role in the life of the early church in Acts 2. Consider how Jesus - especially in Luke's Gospel - links food and welcome in parables and in action. Break bread together with those who know Jesus and those who have yet to know him as a way of expressing God's love.

Study: Set aside time for study and learning, read a passage from the Bible each day. Use reading notes or study guides to deepen your understanding of the Bible and wider issues of theology. Read a Christian book, listen to a podcast or watch a film that will encourage, inspire and challenge you.

Justice: Serve others and work for justice. Recognise God's bias to the poor at home and abroad. Undertake acts of generosity without being asked. Get involved in a community initiative that will help others. Oppose inequality and injustice whenever you encounter it.

Witness: Share your faith with others. Participate in God's Mission both locally and globally. Ask God to give you the courage to share your faith, look for opportunities to explain what you believe to close friends or relatives, and get involved in a world-mission initiative: offer prayerful, practical or financial support

Spiritual Support Groups

Spiritual Support Groups give structure to our dispersed community.

They consist of small groups of people who commit themselves to meet regularly to encourage and support each other in their desire to become people deeply rooted in God and to grow in spiritual maturity.

What happens when the group meets?

We recommend that a group plans to meet for about an hour (or an hour and a quarter maximum). It is better to have an hour together every week than a longer meeting every two or three weeks. A typical meeting might look like this:

- Opening catch-up 10 mins
- Study - 20 mins
- Closing question – what has challenged you, what can we pray for – ask one person to note it down - 10 mins
- What encouragements/challenges can we catch up on - 10 mins (*This is where accountability comes in – e.g. what did we say we would do last week and have we done it?*)
- Time of prayer - 10 mins

It is important that each member in turn is given space to speak honestly about some aspect of their current Christian journey. After a member has spoken in this way, there will be a short time for silent reflection, followed by a time when the other members can comment on what has been said. It is usual at the end of each meeting for each member to choose some specific task to work at in the days leading up to the next meeting.

How often do groups meet?

All the practical questions about how, when and where a group meets will need to be decided by the group, whose leaders will be in regular communication with the Prior of the Community. In this way we hope each group will feel part of the larger community and not isolated or left on its own.

Introduction to the Studies

This booklet contains five introductory **New Testament studies**, one on each of the rhythms of grace. Each study follows the same format:

- we focus on a short passage of scripture
- there is a short note on where the passage comes from
- there are some questions to help groups focus on what the passage says
- there is an invitation to ask how we can live in a way that honours this particular passage

It is important that each member of the group is invited to participate in the reflection on how to live in the light of the passage.

Two additional points:

(i) the goal of responding to passages of scripture is transformation of our lives. This is based on a good understanding of the passage, but often there is more than one way of helpfully understanding Bible passages. Studying together can therefore enrich us, and groups will develop habits of listening to each other's insights and not having one person teach everyone else their own way of looking at the Bible.

(ii) In 2020-21 we cannot ignore the COVID pandemic, and the difference this might make to how we live as disciples, so each study also ends with an optional further question about how each rhythm of grace might be different right now during COVID. Groups will make their own decisions about how much time they want to give to that discussion.

Justice

James 2:1-8

Have one person read the passage out loud to the group, and then let everyone read it again silently to themselves.

where does the passage come from?

We do not know much about the background to the letter of James, except to note that it covers a lot of very practical issues about the life of faith. These clearly include struggling with experiences of poverty (see James 2:6). We are looking at the only passage in it (apart from 1:1) that actually mentions Jesus!

what does the passage say?

- The example of 1st century favouritism described in vv.1-4 makes sense to us, but can you express it in contemporary language that might apply today?
- How do you respond to the statements about the poor and the rich in v.5?
- What experiences do we have of dealing with people who are 'poor' and 'rich' in church life today? Do we have poor or rich neighbours? (v.8)
- Look also at James 2:12-13. How does it help to shape our thinking about justice?

how can we live in a way that honours the passage?

Each person talk about an example where you or someone you know has:

- seen judgment triumph over mercy *or*
- seen mercy triumph over judgment

What did you learn about justice from that experience that helps you in living for Christ?

reflecting in a time of COVID:

If poverty is increasing under the pressure of the COVID pandemic, what might the book of James be saying to us as a church today?

Study

2 Timothy 3:10-17

Have one person read the passage out loud to the group, and then let everyone read it again silently to themselves.

where does the passage come from?

2 Timothy is sometimes called a 'Pastoral Letter' (or 'epistle'), concerning practical matters of life in the church. It addresses Timothy in a way that suggests Timothy will carry on Paul's ministry after Paul is finished – so it is full of wisdom and advice about leading God's people forward.

what does the passage say?

- What might it mean in v.15 that 'holy scriptures' can make readers 'wise for salvation'?
- Scripture is described as being 'God-breathed' (or 'inspired') in v.16 and therefore useful. What does the passage say it is useful for?
- The argument of 2 Timothy 3 is that studying scripture leads to the way of life described for example in vv.10-11. Share how you have found that does or does not work out in practice.

how can we live in a way that honours the passage?

Each person talk about your own experience of times when reading and studying scripture has made you wise or has been useful in the ways described in v.16. What can you learn from each other's experiences with scripture?

reflecting in a time of COVID:

Scripture equips God's people for 'every good work' (v.17). What sorts of scripture-shaped 'good works' might we need in response to the COVID pandemic? Discuss your different views on this in the group.

Prayer

Luke 18:1-8

Have one person read the passage out loud to the group, and then let everyone read it again silently to themselves.

where does the passage come from?

The gospel of Luke contains many stories and parables that are not found in any other gospel – especially in Luke chapters 10–19. Many of them are about how salvation works out in practice, and draw on an image from daily life and then apply it even more to God. (Note: *This study on ‘the parable of the persistent widow’ clearly links to another of our rhythms of grace – justice.*)

what does the passage say?

- Why does Jesus tell this parable? (v.1) Does it have that effect on you?
- Widows would have had very few defenders or advocates in the society of Jesus’ time. Who might be in a similar position today?
- Why does the unjust judge change his mind?
- How does God’s justice (in v.7) encourage us to ‘always pray and not give up’?

how can we live in a way that honours the passage?

Each person talk about what most encourages you to keep on praying. In what practical ways can your group help to point one another to God’s justice as an encouragement to persevere in prayer?

reflecting in a time of COVID:

In what ways does the COVID pandemic make it easier or harder to pray? Discuss your different views on this in the group.

Hospitality

Acts 2:42-47

Have one person read the passage out loud to the group, and then let everyone read it again silently to themselves.

where does the passage come from?

This story from early on in the book of Acts describes some of the earliest days of the church, when all the believers were gathered together in Jerusalem. It is probably not supposed to be a 'blue-print' for all Christian living – it does not even describe what happens through the rest of the book of Acts. But what can we still learn from it?

what does the passage say?

- These early Christians are shown engaging in several activities in this passage. Name some of them and consider whether they are activities that we do (or could do) today in our homes.
- What do you think makes this description of hospitality in practice specifically a Christian way of living? Does the passage offer any hints about this?
- Some people think v.45 suggests they sold all their possessions, while others think they used some of them to raise funds, but still kept their own homes, for example. What do you think? How might that relate to us?

how can we live in a way that honours the passage?

Each person talk about a time when you have experienced some of the things described in this passage from Acts 2 in your own life. What do you think enabled people to practice such hospitality?

reflecting in a time of COVID:

Can the practices of Acts 2 apply to our socially-distanced and on-line fellowship during the COVID pandemic? Discuss your different views on this in the group.

Witness

Matthew 5:13-16

Have one person read the passage out loud to the group, and then let everyone read it again silently to themselves.

where does the passage come from?

Matthew 5–7 is known as ‘the Sermon on the Mount’ – a collection of Jesus’ teachings about how we live and what values we hold. These chapters are addressed to his disciples (Matt 5:1-2), but are also aimed more widely at ‘the crowds’ (Matt 7:28-29).

what does the passage say?

- Salt had many uses in Jesus’ time, as it does today. What are some of the uses of salt, and how do they help us understand being ‘the salt of the earth’?
- Why does Jesus tell his listeners that they *are* the light of the world, rather than telling them *to be* the light of the world. What is the difference?
- V.15 imagines someone having to take active steps to stop their light shining, and points out that nobody does that. Can we relate that to how we live as the light of the world?
- What is it that points people to God in this passage?

how can we live in a way that honours the passage?

Each person talk about some aspect of their life that might be salt or light in the way this passage describes, as a witness to God. Spend time as a group encouraging and affirming one another in your lives of witness.

reflecting in a time of COVID:

What are some of the ways that our light can shine during the COVID pandemic, when we might not so easily be out and about meeting and interacting with people?