



## Cultivating Kindness through Scripture and Community A Four-Week "Do Unto Others" Study for Adult Small Groups

Welcome to **Cultivating Kindness**, a small group study created to complement the *Do Unto Others* kindness campaign! Our hope is that as you engage in this campaign you are sending a message to your community that kindness is the most important behavior we can exhibit as we seek to de-polarize our communities and love our neighbors.

In this four-week study, small groups will explore the scriptural call to bless others, and wrestle with what this looks like in our day-to-day lives. Specifically, we'll look at why we struggle so much with loving our neighbors, and how the complexity of the world can challenge our most basic assumptions. All the while, we'll explore how to engage with people both inside the congregation and outside our church on a journey toward practicing the Bible's great love ethic: **"Do unto others as you would have them do to you."** (Matthew 7:12)

### Overview

- Week 1 - Calling: The call of Abraham and Sarah.
- Week 2 - Fear: The universal experience of fear.
- Week 3 - Gospel: Jesus teaches us how to love others within and beyond our walls.
- Week 4 - Church: Intentionality in the life of the Church.

### Weekly Format

- Focus Scripture (*Recommended as pre-reading before the session.*)
- Ice-Breaker Activity
- Contexting\*
- Prayer \*
- Lesson\*

*\*Our recommendation is that your group actually read aloud the contexting, prayer, and lesson sections of each session. You can do this by going around one by one with each person taking a paragraph. The benefit to this approach is that it eliminates the need for homework to be done ahead of time and encourages participation.*

- Discussion Questions (*The main portion of the study.*)
- Closing Prayer (*Consider a simple format of sharing of joys and concerns followed by a prayer at the conclusion of each session.*)



## Week 1: Calling

**Focus Scripture:** Genesis 12:1-3

### **Ice Breaker:**

Many of us had to memorize the “golden rule” in elementary school. What were some other things you had to memorize in elementary school?

### **Contexting:**

*Do unto others as you would have them do to you*, that rule we were all taught as kids, sounds like such a simple principle to follow. If most people pledge allegiance to that rule, though, why does it seem like we live in a society marked by spiteful division? In this *Do Unto Others* campaign, we will live into an intentional season of growing in kindness towards our neighbors. In order to do so, this group study will examine the Bible’s rich meaning behind the simple rule and then encourage members to model it to the world.

### **Prayer:**

*Lord, give us comfort as we navigate a world filled with hatred and division. Show us how we might grow in kindness and love, and give us bravery to share it with our neighbors. Thank you for the blessings you have given to us, and make us be a blessing to the world around us. It is in the name of your Son, who showed us true love, that we ask this. Amen.*

### **Lesson:**

The quest to establish a family in a peaceful community was difficult. All around, people were scrambling to claim ownership of homes and land, but there were far more people than housing options. The ones who did secure homes closed themselves off from their neighbors, content with the fact that they had secured what they needed for themselves. The ones who were not able to acquire homes had to bounce around from one place to another. It was a time of chaos.

This chaos stemmed from an identity crisis. In recent memory there had been strong leadership that connected a vast network of communities, each of which had their own culture and characteristics. But that leadership and unifying ethos was fading. In its place, villages and states pursued their own interests, creating barriers meant to safeguard their communal identities. When connective leadership failed, it became every group for itself.

The effect of this identity crisis was a movement towards anxiety fueled by scarcity of resources. People had to define themselves against those *outside* their communities, ensuring that outside cultures didn’t sweep away what made their land and way of life special. But when communities sectioned themselves off, it meant that locals had to fight among themselves for limited resources. Now, neighbors had to define themselves against other neighbors *within* their communities, too. It was all “us” vs “them,” among both neighbors and outsiders.

The circumstances described here might sound familiar, but what we are talking about is the historical context of biblical Abraham and Sarah. In the ancient region known today



as the Levant – along the eastern side of the Mediterranean Sea – the Ur dynasty ruled vast territories of land around 2000BC. Mysteriously and suddenly, the dynasty collapsed. The surrounding network of cooperative city-states responded, not by sustaining their relationships with one another, but by closing their borders to protect themselves. Some families and cultures did not have the luxury of finding a secure home safe from other tribes and had to adopt nomadic lifestyles in which they wandered the land as shepherds. These families were labeled as backward thinking and poor, while those who settled were the societal elite.

It is notable that the founding family of Israel was called to be instruments of God's blessing in this time of bitterness and division. It was in *this* political chaos and systemic anxiety that God called Abraham and Sarah. Moreover, Abraham and Sarah were one of those nomadic families, one of the have-nots, eventually settling in the land of Haran with their humble possessions and resources, a land safe from outsiders. It was there that the living God appeared:

*The Lord said to Abram [renamed 'Abraham'], "Leave your land, your family, and your father's household for the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation and will bless you. I will make your name respected, and you will be a blessing. (Gen 12:1-2)*

This call from God was both palatable and scandalous at the same time. To leave their land was certainly no small thing, but Abraham and Sarah were both descended from nomads. Moving about is likely more stressful for our modern ears than it was theirs. The second element of that call, too, sounded appealing – *a name that would be respected*. Perhaps they thought God had favored them and would give them status, power, and resources in a safe part of town when they could finally settle.

But it is the last part of that call that changed the world forever – *and you will be a blessing*. Those words were the scandal. Abraham and Sarah's family would be *blessed* so that they would be a *blessing* to others.

Perhaps you know what came next. Abraham and Sarah's descendants became the people of Israel, whom God called to model to the world compassion, justice, and love. They didn't always succeed. But from the Israelites came Jesus, born of God and Mary, who showed us true love.

Notably for our discussion, though, this story of Abraham and Sarah reminds us of the complex realities in our society. "Do unto others" sounds like a great principle to follow until you look around and see limited resources and cultures that conflict with yours. It's not easy to truly love others as we would want to be loved amidst realities that are complex, risky, and fraught. If it were easy, everyone would be doing it.

And yet God's call is the same. God did not make a mistake. God calls us still, in the midst of division, to bless the world – to *do unto others how we would have them do unto us*. In the next few weeks of this study, we'll consider what it takes to truly live that call, trusting that God will give us the strength we need to resist division and promote peace.

## Discussion:

1. The beginning of the lesson described the social context of the ancient Levant, the same context of Abraham and Sarah. What are some connections between that context and ours?

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2. How have the divisions and disagreements in our society impacted you personally?

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3. In this lesson, we see that God called Abraham and Sarah to pursue their calling in the midst of chaos. What is a time in which you have been called to bring peace to a chaotic situation?

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4. What is your experience of political or social tension both within your community and outside your community? How do you think the pursuit of resources impact that dynamic?

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5. What are times in your life in which circumstances made being kind to others complex and challenging?

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## Joys and Concerns and Closing Prayer



## Week 2: Fear

**Focus Scripture:** Leviticus 19:33-37

### **Ice Breaker:**

As a child, what was a fear that you had that you eventually moved beyond?

### **Contexting:**

*Do unto others as you would have them do to you*, that rule we were all taught as kids, sounds like such a simple principle to follow. If most people pledge allegiance to that rule, though, why does it seem like we live in a society marked by spiteful division? In this *Do Unto Others* campaign, we will live into an intentional season of growing in kindness toward our neighbors. In order to do so, this group study will examine the Bible's rich meaning behind the simple rule and then encourage members to model it to the world.

### **Prayer:**

*Jesus, thank you for the hope and confidence you bring to our lives. We feel afraid as we look at the world around us, and we ask that you would bring peace. Embolden us to move beyond fear and to show your love to those around us, and forgive us for the times in which our fear has caused us to act unkindly. Amen.*

### **Lesson:**

In the first session we looked at the environment of chaos in which Abraham and Sarah were called to bless those around them. Communities were responding to the collapse of a dynasty by self-isolating and fighting for the rights to scarce resources. In this session, we are going to consider further the fear that creates such isolation and fighting. In order to do so, we must first talk about anxiety.

Anxiety, technically speaking, is our bodies' response to real or perceived danger. Those words, *real or perceived*, are important. Our bodies respond to danger by pumping adrenaline into our system, activating the "fight or flight" response. This process is normal and good. For example, if a man were to encounter a bear on a hike, it is a good thing that his body would respond with adrenaline. Meeting a bear *should* give him anxiety – it can keep him alive.

The problem for us, though, is that our body responds to *perceived* danger in the exact same way. As we encounter something that may not actually be dangerous, our brains can tell us that it really is dangerous. We meet a stranger who is just a normal person, but our bodies react with anxiety. We stand up to speak in front of a room of colleagues and feel cold sweat on our brows. Those situations may not actually be dangerous, but when that process is activated, adrenaline flows. Our heart rates increase, we may sweat, shake, or panic. Unlike the response to true danger, this kind of anxiety stemming from perceived danger is unhelpful and can lead to all sorts of problems.

For all of human history, one of the primary "triggers" that causes this adrenaline response is encountering difference. Our brains stay calm when patterns stay the same. When we spend time with the same people, participate in predictable social norms, adhere to familiar beliefs, and go to the same places, our brains do not protest. But when change comes to our lives, dangerous or not, anxiety is triggered. Depending on the scale of the change, we either work through it or



we don't. We step up and grow, or we shrink back in fear.

One way this shows up is in our relationships with other cultures. We humans have historically struggled to interact with people who are different than the people in the culture in which we grew up. Our brains have responded to differences in race and culture with that adrenaline response of anxiety. In the ancient world, it could be true at times that encountering other people groups was a danger, as the threat of violence was real due to fights over land. Of course, this threat was not universally true. Not every foreigner brought violence. Nevertheless, fear of others has always been a universal human experience.

It is interesting that the Old Testament law codes made so many demands upon the Israelites, God's people, to practice compassion to foreigners. While taking threats of violence seriously in their ancient context, the Israelites nevertheless understood that God called them to care for people outside their cultural boundaries. In Leviticus (a book of the Bible containing part of the Old Testament law codes), God's people were commanded to love immigrants just as they loved themselves (19:34). They were commanded, at harvest time, not to harvest all the way to the edge of their fields, but to leave those crops for the immigrants among them (23:22). And while they oftentimes failed – at times, horrifically – the call was to treat others how they wanted to be treated themselves. Why? In the Old Testament, that command is rooted in a simple reminder: the Israelites were themselves once foreigners in the land of Egypt, but God had compassion on them. They were therefore called to extend God's compassion to others.

Anxiety is a normal response when we meet those who are different than us. It always has been. The question for the Israelites back then – and for us today – is if that anxiety is stemming from *real* or *perceived* danger. God's call upon the Israelites was for them to trust that not every person who was different was a real danger to them. In fact, some of the most important people in the Old Testament were foreigners who made a redemptive impact: Rahab, Ruth, and Balaam. For the Israelites to respond to God's call, they would have to work through the anxiety they felt and extend love to people who were different but not dangerous. Or, they would have to work through their anxiety and love people who really could have been dangerous, allowing their love to disarm their enemies' danger.

In our world today, much of our hatred and division stems back to the fundamental human fear: difference. People in our society feel anxiety due to increasing awareness of other cultures, growth of minority populations, contrasting political views, and loss of religious influence. Even if there is an example of violence resulting from a person who looks different, people can unhealthily extend that fear to every person who looks different. But our discipleship journey asks us to reflect over whether those differences are *real* or *perceived* danger. In other words, is the anxiety we feel helpful or unhelpful? What do we really have to fear by loving others the way we want to be loved? What is the actual danger there? When we step out and form relationships with people who are different, we may find more commonality than we thought possible.

Jesus calls us to show the world his radical love. Perhaps we can all agree on that. But we would do well to remember that doing so may cause some very normal anxiety and fear. Deciding what to do with that anxiety is crucial. Will we respond with fear-driven anger, or will we ask Jesus to help us love better? To do unto others as we would have them do to us takes this kind of Spirit-filled discernment and a willingness to open ourselves up to fear, and yes, even anxiety.



## Discussion:

1. When you consider the bitterness so prevalent in our society, what role do you think fear plays in how people talk and act?

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2. What in our culture brings you fear? Is it real, perceived, or both?

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3. What is a time in your life in which you worked through great fear? What did that teach you, and what can it teach you today?

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4. God frequently reminds the Israelites that they were once foreigners in Egypt, and that they should therefore treat foreigners with compassion. Who are the people today especially in need of compassion?

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5. What are some things you could do to extend compassion to those you mentioned in the last question?

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## Joys and Concerns and Closing Prayer



## Week 3: Gospel

**Focus Scripture:** Acts 1:7-8

**Ice Breaker:**

What is the farthest from home you have ever been?

**Contexting:**

*Do unto others as you would have them do to you*, that rule we were all taught as kids, sounds like such a simple principle to follow. If most people pledge allegiance to that rule, though, why does it seem like we live in a society marked by spiteful division? In this *Do Unto Others* campaign, we will live into an intentional season of growing in kindness towards our neighbors. In order to do so, this group study will examine the Bible's rich meaning behind the simple rule and then encourage members to model it to the world.

**Prayer:**

*Jesus, help us to love those who frustrate us. We ask your help for the transformation of our hearts as we show kindness to others. Especially, Jesus, in a season in which Christians are so divided and angry with one another, teach us to love our brothers and sisters well so that we may have a faithful witness to the whole world. Amen.*

**Lesson:**

In the last session, we explored the ways in which anxiety over difference – which is a normal response – becomes unhelpful when it is a reaction to danger that isn't real. Just like Israel was called to love those outside their community, we have the same call today.

In this lesson we will explore another important call – the call to love people *inside* our communities, too. To do so, we turn to Jesus of Nazareth, whose story is told in the four Gospels. In Jesus we find power to break our fear and to love those closest to us.

We often turn to the stories of Jesus and find a person who radically loved people who were different than him. However, a feature of his story that can get overlooked is his relationship with those in his home community. Many of the people most different from him – his fiercest critics and recipients of his rebuke – were in the synagogues close to home, not in strange faraway lands. Jesus knew that there were fundamental rifts within his home community, oftentimes due to the hypocrisy of religious leaders, the greediness of the wealthy, and the competition over limited resources. In order for his saving message to reach the world, Jesus first had to grapple with the brokenness in his own village.

This feature of Jesus' story clues us into something important: we Christians are called to model love to members within our community if we have any hope of modeling it to the world. In fact, the Bible indicates that Jesus' plan was to share his good news (gospel) with the members of Israel *before* it made it to the rest of the world (Matthew 10:5, 15:24). St. Paul had similar things to say, too, writing in Romans that the advancement of the Gospel was "first to the Jew, then to the Gentile" (1:16). And while it may be unhelpful for us today to think in terms





of first and second, it is a reminder to us that the Gospel is given to people both inside our village *and* outside the village, and that it's the former that we can struggle with the most. It is essential that we engage that struggle today. Christians oftentimes focus on making the world look more like the Kingdom of God, and we are right to do so. However, it is important that we also have our own house in order so that outsiders invited into the community can find a healthy family rather than a dysfunctional mess.

Perhaps the bitterness between Christians themselves is one of the reasons that treating others the way we want to be treated is so complex. Ironically, it may be easy for us to, in theory, be kind to an outsider, even if we secretly fear them. There's enough difference there that we allow a degree of grace with our disagreements, excusing it for circumstances unlike our own. It's when a person is *somewhat* like us, but who disagrees over fundamental issues, that the knives come out. It is no mistake, then, that the world looks at Christianity and sees bigotry. We are so incredibly mean to one another, especially those on different sides of key issues.

The question for us is if we are willing to treat *neighbors* with kindness just in the same way we would treat the *others* outside the neighborhood. Do we share what we have with other Christians, providing for their needs? Do we speak with love to other Christians? Do we advocate for the truth instead of lies? If Christians are so unable to love each other, how do we expect to love those who are outside our borders?

Jesus loved even the house of Israel that betrayed him, forgiving them with his last breaths. If that is our example, can Republican Christians and Democratic Christians not at least *try* to get along? Can Christians on different sides of social issues get along? If the call was to be kind to outsiders, we may be able to get our heads around that challenge. But if the call is for Democratic Christians and Republican Christians to get along, suddenly that's not so easy. There's a fear in both sides that the other side isn't really Christian, convincing some that poor behavior is excusable in order to teach a lesson. Of course, this fear misses the point.

The gospel – good news – is that the same Spirit at work in Jesus is at work in us today, saving us, making us new, and growing us in grace. The complexities of love among those in the village and outside the village are great. But the spread of that message may just be dependent on Christians getting along.



## Discussion:

1. This lesson suggests that Christians need to get along with each other in order to faithfully witness to the world. Where do you see division among Christians?

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2. How do you think Christians are perceived by the non-Christians in our communities?

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3. We saw in this lesson that Jesus addressed conflict within the Jewish community by directing frustration at religious leaders. If given a listening ear by a prominent Christian leader, what would you want her or him to hear?

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4. Can you think of a person in your life who adheres to a kind of Christianity with which you disagree, but who models love and integrity?

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5. If you were challenged to reconcile a division with another Christian in your life, who is the first person you would reach out to?

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## Joys and Concerns and Closing Prayer



## Week 4: Church

**Focus Scripture:** John 4:4-42

**Ice Breaker:** Describe a time you got lost in a strange place.

### **Contexting:**

*Do unto others as you would have them do to you*, that rule we were all taught as kids, sounds like such a simple principle to follow. If most people pledge allegiance to that rule, though, why does it seem like we live in a society marked by spiteful division? In this *Do Unto Others* campaign, we will live into an intentional season of growing in kindness towards our neighbors. In order to do so, this group study will examine the Bible's rich meaning behind the simple rule and then encourage members to model it to the world.

### **Prayer:**

*God, as we conclude this study, we ask you for the courage to be intentional with those around us. Send us to the places we avoid. Love us so that we can love others. Give us the perception we need to see friends in enemies and to choose new paths. Amen.*

### **Lesson:**

In the last session we examined the dual call to love both those outside our communities and inside our communities. Many Christians, we suggested, can accept the challenge to be kind to outsiders, but struggle to show kindness to other Christians. This complexity leads to a strange acceptance of the principle to be kind to all, but also a subtle dismissal of the same principle when it comes to those who claim our same identity but practice it differently.

In this final session, we turn our attention to the call of the Church. We will bring together the themes we have looked at thus far: chaos, fear, disagreement, and love. Jesus will show us that all those words go together best when they are brought under the banner of *intentionality*.

In John 4, Jesus was in route to Galilee from the Judean countryside. Between his starting point and his destination was Samaria, an area of land inhabited by a group known as the Samaritans. The Samaritans came about through a complicated history. After Assyria and Babylon exiled many of the Israelites as part of their conquest, those who escaped exile fled to the mountains of Samaria. As time passed, those people intermarried with local tribes and cultures. These Samaritans even developed their own form of Judaism, which they thought to be the true form. For all these reasons, most Jews detested the Samaritans and wanted nothing to do with them.

In John 4:4, the text says that Jesus had to pass through Samaria. Geographically, the route makes sense. What is not revealed, though, is that most pious Jews went *out of the way* to avoid the Samaritans. They would bypass the route by going East and then North, a significant detour. For Jesus to take the Samaritan Way was to intentionally choose a way others preferred not go.



Furthermore, Jesus not only put himself in a region others avoided, he also associated with people whom others dared not associate. In John 4, Jesus dialogues with a Samaritan woman – a shock to Jesus’ disciples. The woman approaches the same well by which Jesus is resting, and he asks her for a drink of water. This woman, too, was surprised that Jesus was talking to her, citing the differences between their people. However, Jesus extends the gift of *living water* to her – the abundant life he came to offer, not just to his own people, but those different than him, too. She then told her whole village, and everyone there came to embrace what Jesus had done.

This account in John is important for us because Jesus had to intentionally go out of his way in order to treat others the same way he would want to be treated. And the people to whom he went – the Samaritans – bore the traits of both outsiders (they were not “traditionally” Jewish) and insiders (they were still Jewish).

It begs the question for us today as to what impact Christians will make if we never associate with people whom we disagree, or if we never mingle with people of other cultures. Sure, we can all adhere to a principle of kindness, but what good does that do if we never have to engage that kindness with different people? What good does it do if we never leave our safe communities? Or as Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, “If you love only those who love you, what reward do you have?” (Matt 5:46).

Many of our churches have become ideological silos. Congregations can become places in which everyone believes the same thing. As soon as a pastor or fellow congregant introduces a different perspective or idea that creates conflict, it is easy and common to simply switch congregations. In pursuit of unity, we have instead pursued uniformity. Coupled with the intense individualistic pressures on our lives – busyness, technology, isolated social media connections – many Christians have created a personalized world in which they never have to rub shoulders with people who think differently or come from a different background.

What sense does it make to *do unto others as we would have them do unto us* if our worlds are entirely curated?

At the end of our journey together in this study, we must face a seemingly obvious reality: it takes intentionality to love well. Radical Christian love that makes an impact for the Kingdom will not just happen, and it definitely won’t come about by never leaving our enclaves. We can follow instead the model of Jesus, who went out of his way to find people different than him. Sure, he had his own efforts back home, and those efforts were important, too. But in his lifetime, he practiced love intentionally, meaning he actually got up and walked to the places in which different people lived. After his resurrection, he then commissioned his disciples to go unto all the world to share the message – to take a detour away from their home towns.



Churches today can change the world with kindness by intentionally associating with people outside their ideological and cultural borders, *in addition* to learning to get along within their own village. Our homogenous congregations are not the test of how well we love; that will require going to the very people we avoid. What good does it do the Kingdom of God if we only give ourselves the chance to be nice to people exactly like us in our like-minded congregations? Is it any surprise that so many of us sit in the comfort of those congregations and hurl insults at other people, all the while pledging allegiance to a message of love?

As the Church, we can work together. We can love together – both in the broader Christian family and outside of it. We can identify places in our communities that we typically avoid (maybe it's a "rough" part of town or an area of poverty). We can do business – literal economic business – with people who lose opportunity to establishments in "nice" parts of town. But we can also look at the church just down the road... that church with the name that sounds so strange to us, with the message board that makes us cringe.

It's all these people we ought to see when we hear that command, to do unto others how we would have them do to us.

The world is in chaos, but God calls us to be a blessing, just like Abraham and Sarah.

We have an opportunity to push through anxiety, trusting that some fear is just perceived.

First we might look to the people in our own villages so that we can invite others to a healthy home.

And then we can get up and go places otherwise ignored.

Calling, Fear, Gospel, Church. – The Holy Spirit is more than capable of sending you on that journey. It may be more important now than ever.



## Discussion:

1. Describe your church community with no judgment. Do most people agree on big issues? Do people come from similar backgrounds?

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2. What would it look like for your church to go places that are usually avoided in your community? Is your church doing this already?

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3. What might the Church miss out on if congregations are made of people who all think the same?

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4. Think of an example from your life in which you intentionally went somewhere you didn't feel comfortable going. Why did you go? What was the impact?

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5. How do you balance the call to love those outside the community and those inside the community?

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## Joys and Concerns and Closing Prayer