

This lesson series has been prepared for use in

Home Group Meetings

And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.

Acts 2:42

Series 1: Life in the Community of Light

Number of lessons: 7

Focus of series:

1. The benefits that come to us when we live in open, honest, accountable relationships with Jesus and with other believers.
2. The dangers of keeping parts of our lives hidden from others.
3. The elements of true accountability between group members.
4. Encouragement for group members to come fully into the light by making themselves vulnerable and determining that they will trust others even when it seems difficult.

These lessons may be freely copied and used within a local assembly or house church. They are not available for resale.

Life in the Community of Light

*In Him was life, and the life was the light of men.
And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness
did not comprehend it. John 1:4-5*

Lesson 1: This series of lessons will focus on the benefits that come to us when we live in open, honest, accountable relationships with Jesus and with other believers. The purpose of this first lesson is to establish that Jesus came to bring light into our lives. It is to show that light reveals truth whereas darkness hides truth. Some of God's people continue to live in darkness, which is the devil's domain. This is not the will of God.

Read Genesis 1:1-3

God established at the very beginning of the Bible the superiority of living in the light. In the opening sequence of creation events, God spoke into a world covered with darkness and said, "Let there be light" (Genesis 1:3). The Bible tells us that immediately there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good; and God divided the light from the darkness (v.4). **From this point on, the Bible always portrays light as something good while darkness is linked with ignorance, sin, and Satan.**

The world we live in today is described as Satan's kingdom. His spiritual army is called "the rulers of the darkness of this age" and he is called "the ruler of this world" (Ephesians 6:12; John 14:30). When Jesus appeared to Paul, He told him that his ministry as an apostle would be to turn people "from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God" (Acts 26:18). He wrote that believers have been called "out of darkness into His marvelous light" and delivered "from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love" (1 Peter 2:9; Colossians 1:13).

The reason Satan's power is described as darkness is because his greatest weapon is keeping people trapped in a spiritual place where they cannot see clearly, where they have no spiritual insight or discernment, and where they can hide the truth about themselves. By doing this he can keep them in ignorance, in isolation, and in bondage to sin.

The first human beings to experience the power of darkness were Adam and Eve. In the beginning they lived in the light of God's Presence. But the Bible says that when they sinned, they immediately "sewed fig leaves together and made themselves coverings. And...hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden" (Genesis 3:7-8).

Why did Adam and Eve hide from God? 1) Because they did not want to have their sin exposed; and 2) because they did not want to accept responsibility for their actions. We know this because when they were confronted by God, both of them passed the buck: Adam blaming his wife and Eve blaming the serpent.

The consequence of the first couple's unwillingness to humble themselves and accept responsibility for their sin was expulsion from the garden of Eden. Ever since that event, all human beings have been born into a world dominated by Satan, sin, and the power of darkness.

Read Ephesians 4:17-18

What does Paul mean when he says that people who live in darkness are walking "in the futility of their mind"? (Their thinking is useless. They may think they are smart, but they are actually ignorant of the spiritual realities that make life meaningful.)

What does he mean when he says, "Having their understanding darkened"? (They have no insight into spiritual things. They do not understand God or the ways of God.)

What does he mean when he describes them as "being alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them"? (They are disconnected from both eternal life and the knowledge of how we should be living now. Ignorance does not mean unintelligent; it means to be without certain knowledge.)

This is not the condition God's wants His people living in, since the Bible says that Jesus came "to give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death" (Luke 1:79). Sitting in darkness and the shadow of death is the natural condition of all men and women without Jesus Christ. Unfortunately, it is also the condition of some who have come to Jesus.

Because some believers continue to walk in darkness, Paul warns, "Let us cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light. Let us walk properly, as in the day, not in revelry and drunkenness, not in lewdness and lust, not in strife and envy" (Romans 13:12-13). This passage describes light as armor. **This is because light protects us from the things that could harm us spiritually.** Light enables us to see. To live as a Christian without spiritual enlightenment would be like a blind man trying to fight with a sword.

Read Proverbs 4:18-19

The Bible depicts the way we live our lives as like walking along a pathway. According to Solomon, our lives can be "like the shining sun, that shines ever brighter unto the perfect day" or "like darkness. Those walking in darkness do not understand how life works. They do not have a proper view of reality. This is why they continually stumble and are not able to understand why. On the other hand, those walking in the light are continually gaining a better understanding of life, which protects them from the forces that could cause them to stumble.

To live in darkness means living in secrecy. It means keeping the thoughts and intents of your heart hidden. It means keeping various parts of your life off-limits to others. Those who live this way are living under the power of Satan, since he is the ruler of darkness and of everything that is kept in darkness.

The only reason any believer would willingly live in darkness is because he or she has something to hide. Think about this: If you were in a completely dark room, you could have mud all over your face and no one would know it. You could keep that truth about yourself hidden. You could even make an obscene gesture toward someone and that person would not know it. This is the power of darkness. It is the power to hide truth.

Discussion Points:

1. Why is the word "darkness" a good word for describing people who are without God?
 - *People without God are without spiritual insight or understanding.*
 - *People without God don't want their sins to be known.*
 - *People without God tend to lead detached, hidden lives.*
2. When Adam and Eve were hiding from God, were they really hidden?
 - *No, God could see everything about them. Neither the fig leaves nor the trees hid anything from God. His eyes penetrate the darkness.*
3. What would have been a better response for Adam and Eve to have taken after they sinned?
 - *To have been humble and honest before God.*
 - *To have accepted responsibility for their actions.*
 - *To have asked God to have mercy on them and forgive them.*
 - *To have made a firm commitment not to disobey God again.*

Life in the Community of Light

*In Him was life, and the life was the light of men.
And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness
did not comprehend it. John 1:4-5*

Lesson 2: This series of lessons focuses on the benefits that come to us when we live in open, honest, accountable relationships with Jesus and with other believers. The purpose of this lesson is to show that when we keep parts of ourselves hidden in darkness, the result is detachment and isolation. This is because whatever is hidden is alone and is unknown by anyone else. Walking in the light means participating in open, honest fellowship.

Read Proverbs 4:18-19

People who are walking in darkness have certain attributes. For example, John writes, He who hates his brother is in darkness and walks in darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes (1 John 2:11). We must understand that in this context, hatred does not necessarily mean you have strong feelings of animosity toward someone; it only means you are failing to love. And where love is absent, there is a lack of connection, or what the Bible calls *fellowship*.

This is why John writes, If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth (1 John 1:6). In other words, a person may say he has a relationship with Jesus, but if he is disconnected from the members of the body of Christ, he is not telling the truth and he is failing to practice the truth. Since darkness is a great deceiver, many people who are walking in darkness convince themselves that they are in the light even though others can see that they are not.

Read 1 John 4:20-21

John brings together the need to love both God and our fellow believers when he writes, If someone says, I love God, and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? And this

commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also (1 John 4:20-21). Anyone failing to love his brother is in a state of disconnection, which is how most of the people of the world live. This is because, in spite of their sincerest efforts, there is a limit on how much genuine love and truth anyone can experience apart from Jesus Christ. It is only through Jesus, the Light of the World, that genuine fellowship can be achieved. Yet many of God's children live outside of fellowship.

Whatever is in darkness is hidden and therefore unknown. And since relationships are based on people knowing one another, whatever is in darkness is out of relationship. **This means that the less a person is willing to be open and honest about himself, the less genuine relationship he will experience and the less he will have the capacity to love other people.** This is why, in the context of Christian fellowship, darkness equals detachment and isolation, which is why darkness is not good, since God said that it is not good that man should be alone (Genesis 2:18).

Read 1 John 1:5-7

If darkness equals isolation, then light equals genuine relationship. It is in this sense that John writes, God is light and in Him is no darkness at all...if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin (1 John 1:5,7). This passage tells us that the purpose of the cleansing blood of Jesus can only be understood in the context of relationships: God washes away our sins so we can live in relationship with Him and with one another. If we are willing to live in genuine relationship, we can count on the blood to do its work. But if we are not, then we have no promise of cleansing.

John wrote that those who are walking in the light are practicing the truth. This means they are doing the things the Bible says are necessary for experiencing godly relationships. This includes all of the following activities:

- Weeping and/or rejoicing with one another (Romans 12:15).
- Caring for one another (1 Corinthians 12:25).
- Serving one another (Galatians 5:13).
- Bearing one another's burdens (Galatians 6:2).
- Bearing with one another (Ephesians 4:2).

Being kind to one another (Ephesians 4:32).
Forgiving one another (Ephesians 4:32).
Submitting to one another (Ephesians 5:21).
Teaching and admonishing one another (Colossians 3:16).
Comforting and edifying one another (1 Thessalonians 5:11).
Exhorting one another (Hebrews 10:25).
Confessing our trespasses to one another (James 5:16).
Praying for one another (James 5:16).
Loving one another (1 Peter 1:22).
Being compassionate toward one another (1 Peter 3:8).
Being hospitable to one another (1 Peter 4:9).

Those who are unwilling to do these things are continuing to walk in the darkness that Jesus came to deliver them from. But Jesus is saying today, "Let us cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light" (Romans 13:12). To wear the armor of light means participating in open, honest fellowship.

Discussion Points:

1. When John writes, "God is light and in Him is no darkness at all," what is he telling us about God?
 - *That God does not hide any parts of Himself from us. He makes Himself fully known. After all, He is perfect in all His ways; so what would He have to hide?*
 - *That God is completely available for relationship with every one of us. He is not holding parts of Himself back for some hidden purpose.*
2. In what ways are you failing to walk in the light by practicing the truth?
 - *Read slowly through the list above and talk about what it looks like to "put the truth into practice." Let each member talk about at least one area where he or she is failing and make a commitment to improve.*

Life in the Community of Light

*In Him was life, and the life was the light of men.
And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness
did not comprehend it. John 1:4-5*

Lesson 3: This series of lessons focuses on the benefits that come to us when we live in open, honest, accountable relationships with Jesus and with other believers. The purpose of this lesson is to show the futility (uselessness, worthlessness) of trying to hide parts of ourselves from God and His people. God will eventually bring everything out into the light. It is also to encourage people to make the choice right now to step into the light of relationship and accountability.

Read 1 John 1:5-10

Darkness is not good because isolation is not good (It is not good for man to be alone Genesis 2:18). Light is good because relationships are good for us. They are healthy for us. They help us to live right. They help us develop godly character. **They are redemptive, because they help us to recognize our shortcomings and repent.** But, if we say that we have no sin [if we are unwilling to admit our shortcomings and failures], we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us [we remain in darkness] (1 John 1:8).

Read Hebrews 4:12-13

Just because a person will not acknowledge his shortcomings does not mean they are not there. This is why those who will not admit their shortcomings are deceived. The truth is, God sees all our shortcomings quite clearly. David wrote, Indeed, the darkness shall not hide from You, but the night shines as the day; the darkness and the light are both alike to You (Psalms 139:12). Jesus Christ has eyes like a flame of fire (Revelation 1:14). He is able to search the minds and hearts of all His children (Revelation 2:23). He sees into darkness as though it were light. Thus the Bible says, All things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account (Hebrews 4:13).

Read John 3:19-21

Concerning the coming of Jesus, Isaiah declared, The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in the land of the shadow of death, upon them a light has shined (Isaiah 9:2). But not everyone appreciates this light. Jesus said, And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God ” (John 3:19-21).

Those who have never received the light are bound under the power of darkness. But those of us who have experienced the power of Jesus Christ are now free to choose which kingdom we will live in: the kingdom of darkness or the kingdom of light.

The sad reality is that some of God s own children love darkness rather than light. They say they love Jesus but do not practice the truth and instead practice evil. This means that they are not living in true relationship because they are hiding parts of themselves from the light, which prevents them from being able to truly love. Those who are open and honest come to the light that their deeds may be clearly seen. But those who love darkness do not want their deeds to be exposed.

Read Ephesians 5:8-13

The Bible says that we were once darkness, but now [we] are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness, righteousness, and truth)... (Ephesians 5:8-9). It is God s desire that each of us accept our place in His community of light. Like plants, we all need light to grow and become fruitful. When we refuse to come into the light, His Spirit is prevented from producing the good fruit He wants to bring into our lives. We are to have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them (5:11).

President Woodrow Wilson said, Secrecy breeds corruption; and it is certain that wherever there is secrecy, there will inevitably be corruption. God s light is the great revealer of secret things. As Paul said, All things that are exposed are made manifest by the light, for whatever makes manifest is light (Ephesians 5:13). God wants us to be

pure. He came in the flesh to destroy the works of the devil (1 John 3:8). This means that Jesus came to shine light into the darkness in our hearts so we could recognize our sins, repent, and be connected into godly relationships.

Read Luke 8:16-17

In a properly structured New Testament assembly, the believers are to be accountable to one another. This is because Jesus knows the danger of living a hidden life. He said, "No one, when he has lit a lamp, covers it with a vessel or puts it under a bed, but sets it on a lampstand, that those who enter may see the light. For nothing is secret that will not be revealed, nor anything hidden that will not be known and come to light" (Luke 8:16-17). Since everything will eventually come to light anyway, why try to avoid exposure now? Why not just be open and honest now? This is especially important, since Paul said that the day would come when God will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ (Romans 2:16).

Read Ecclesiastes 12:13-14

After spending many years trying to figure out the meaning of life, Solomon finally wrote, "Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is man's all. For God will bring every work into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil" (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14).

Discussion Points:

1. Since God has told us that every secret thing will be revealed and brought into judgment, why do some people try so hard to keep the contents of their hearts secret? This could include refusing to disclose secret fears, desires, motives, thoughts, lusts, jealousies, hatreds, and other sins.
 - *Some people are afraid of being embarrassed or humiliated.*
 - *Some people are afraid of the unknown, therefore afraid of change.*
 - *Some people are simply unwilling to change.*
 - *Some people love their sins and do not want to give them up.*
2. How does the reality of a final judgment impact your life? (In the discussion of this question, consider the following passages)
Acts 24:15-16 *I have hope in God, which they themselves also accept, that there will be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and the unjust. This being so, I myself always strive to have a conscience without offense toward God and men.*
1 John 3:2-3 *Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.*
Hebrews 4:12-13 *For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. 13 And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account.*
3. Since we will all be required to give an account to God at the final judgment, how could we begin preparing for that final accounting today?
 - *We can make ourselves accountable to one another.*
 - *We can become accustomed to confessing our sins and giving reports to others about our spiritual lives.*
 - *We can work hard at overcoming any resistance we feel about being completely open and honest with other believers.*

Life in the Community of Light

*In Him was life, and the life was the light of men.
And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness
did not comprehend it. John 1:4-5*

Lesson 4: This series of lessons focuses on the benefits that come to us when we live in open, honest, accountable relationships with Jesus and with other believers. The purpose of this lesson is to show through Scripture that personal relationships between believers are the bedrock of apostolic ministry. It is also to establish the link between godly relationships and biblical accountability.

Read Matthew 18:20

When Jesus walked the earth, He accomplished His works of ministry by personally connecting with people and giving them His grace and truth. This brought healing, restoration, and growth into their lives, which enabled them to fulfill their purpose to glorify God. But with Jesus gone physically, there needs to be a way for us today to connect with Him spiritually. Jesus explained how this would happen when He said, For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them (Matthew 18:20).

After His ascension, the way Jesus accomplished ministry through the original believers was *by people coming together*. This pattern can be found throughout the New Testament. For example, according to Acts 1:6, it was only after they had come together that Jesus had His final meeting with His apostles. And Acts 2:1 says, When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. Only then did Jesus begin the outpouring of the Spirit on all flesh.

Read Acts 2:38-47

On the Day of Pentecost, immediately after Peter presented the plan of salvation and three thousand people were baptized into the body of Christ, we read of the believers meeting together in both public gatherings and private homes. The Bible tells us that they continued steadfastly in four activities:

1. The apostles' doctrine [teaching the Word].
2. Fellowship [sharing their lives, their hearts, and their possessions].
3. Breaking of bread [eating meals together].
4. Prayers [which includes worshipping together].

These four activities are God's provision for building strong relationships between His people. The Bible says the early Christians practiced these activities from house to house, which can also be translated *in various private homes*. The Bible goes on to say that as all who believed were together and had all things in common, the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.

There are many other verses that describe the early church as being a body of people gathering together for mutual instruction, support, and encouragement. For example....

Acts 4:31 says, And when they had prayed, the place where they were assembled together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness. ”

1 Corinthians 14:26 says, How is it then, brethren? Whenever you come together, each of you has a psalm, has a teaching, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification [growth]. ”

Hebrews 10:24 says, And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together.... ”

God has set each of us in the body of believers so we can be blessed, encouraged, and helped by one another. All godly relationships include the ability of everyone involved to influence one another. This influence includes biblical confrontation, speaking the truth in love, rebuking, correcting, and instructing. This is the essence of biblical accountability.

Read John 8:12

Acts 2 describes a community of believers who are together in close personal relationships and whose lives are well known to one another. It is a description of what it means to follow Jesus as the Light of the World and to experience the *light of life*. The believers we read about in the Book of Acts are not hiding in the shadows, but are out in the open, living their lives as spiritual epistles of Christ, known and read by all (2 Corinthians 3:2-3).

Read Matthew 5:14-16

The New Testament Church is intended to be a *community of light*. It has been designed by God to be a reflection to the world of His own character and nature. In the church there should be *no darkness at all*. This means that all secret sins, hidden agendas, and undercover operations are out of order. The church is a body of people fitly framed and compacted together as a demonstration of God's power to unite in genuine relationship what the devil has kept divided and living in darkness for millennia.

But there can never be the kind of real relationships the Bible speaks of without biblical accountability. This means that believers must be willing to 1) share their struggles and failures; 2) be open to correction and instruction; 3) be willing to make sincere commitments; and 4) be glad to give reports on their progress.

Confession, instruction, commitment, and reporting are the key elements of biblical accountability. When God's people practice this kind of accountability, every member of the body experiences the redeeming light of truth shining into their lives. We are no longer a people who walk in darkness.

These elements can be practiced on a regular basis within the relational dynamics of our home group. What we experience among ourselves will provide the foundational accountability in our lives that can then extend to the entire local body. What we learn in our home group can also be practiced in our homes between family members, in our ministries within the assembly between ourselves and those who are overseeing us, and on our jobs.

Discussion Points:

1. Ask members to talk about why personal relationships are essential to apostolic ministry.
 - We need other people we can be open with about our shortcomings.
 - Since we all have blind spots, we need other people to evaluate our lives and help us to see what we are unable to see.
 - We need to receive instruction and counsel from outside of ourselves. None of us have all the answers.
2. Ask members to talk about how making themselves accountable has helped them to grow (or how they see it could help them grow).
3. Ask each member to talk about one relationship he has formed since being part of this home group that has helped him grow spiritually.

Life in the Community of Light

*In Him was life, and the life was the light of men.
And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness
did not comprehend it. John 1:4-5*

Lesson 5: This series of lessons focuses on the benefits that come to us when we live in open, honest, accountable relationships with Jesus and with other believers. The purpose of this lesson is to review the key elements of biblical accountability. It is also to identify what is appropriate sharing in a home group setting and what is not.

Begin by reviewing in detail the key elements of biblical accountability:

1. Confession

Read James 5:16

The word *trespasses* can include any thought, desire, attitude, word, or action that is not in the character of Jesus Christ. To confess our trespasses to others is to bring the truth about ourselves out into the light. To be unwilling to confess is to keep the truth about ourselves hidden in darkness. **The first step in becoming accountable is being willing to admit failures, shortcomings, character flaws, relationship problems, functional problems, and deficiencies in spiritual matters.** All of us need a place where we can talk openly about our spiritual lives without having to face condemnation and rejection. This kind of safe environment is what a home friendship group is intended to provide.

2. Instruction

Read Proverbs 9:9; 12:1; 19:20

Natural light is always moving forward —always invading darkness. This means that when we are living in a community of light, the members of the body will be sincerely interested in how we are doing spiritually and doing what they can to help us grow. This should not be viewed as *butting in* or *invading* our privacy. ”

By definition, agape-love is aggressive, always interested in the well-being of others. Those who are really motivated by love cannot help but

take the initiative in blessing those around them. Like natural light, they will always feel compelled to confront darkness wherever it is found. Being accountable is not just a matter of having a group of safe people to open up to; it is also having a group of safe people who will confront you when they see you struggling. This is a good thing, even though it may sometimes make us uncomfortable.

When advice is given that has not been asked for, that can indeed constitute *butting in*. Therefore, we should understand that because love is gentle, it will not go where it is not welcomed. Just as a piece of paper is enough to block the light of the sun, so it is that a simple “I don’t want to talk about that” is enough to block the light of God’s love. This is not to say that there will be times when people really do have nothing significant to talk about or have a legitimate reason for not discussing a particular matter in the group. But many times an unwillingness to talk means that something is being purposefully kept in darkness.

The Bible places a high value on the willingness to hear and learn from others. This is important because none of us have all the answers within ourselves. **We all need to receive input into our lives from outside ourselves.** We all need to gain insight into ourselves by listening to other perspectives. If we could solve our problems all by ourselves, we would not need a Savior.

3. Commitment

Read Proverbs 22:17; 23:12

The Hebrew word for *hear* means both to hear *and* to obey. In other words, it indicates more than just listening to what others have to say; it also means putting their counsel into action. This is why we are told to *apply our hearts*. This is what it means to make a commitment. If we hear good instruction, we must then take the next step and commit to putting it into action. Without a firm commitment to act, it is unlikely that anything in our lives will change.

4. Reporting

Read Romans 14:12

The last step in biblical accountability is making a follow-up report on how well or how poorly you did in keeping your commitment. This brings the process full circle. It began with confession (making an honest

report about a problem) and it must continue with open reporting until change is internalized. Through the ongoing process of confessing, receiving instruction, correction, or counsel, committing to new behaviors or disciplines, and then giving a report on our progress, we can over time experience real growth into the likeness of Jesus Christ.

Through this continual exposure to light we can overcome the effects of walking in darkness and see the power of Jesus destroy the works of the devil in our lives. This is God's plan for preparing us to stand before Him on that Day when we will have to make a final accounting of our lives directly to Him.

Read Proverbs 11:14

When we say that it is important for us to be open and honest about ourselves, we are not saying that everyone must share everything about themselves with every member of the body.

There is a difference between *hiding* and *not exposing everything*. When we are hiding, we are keeping things from people because we don't want to change or become accountable. This is not the same as withholding certain information about ourselves for the sake of someone else. There are some things about us that might unnecessarily hurt other people if they knew.

It is not necessary that we open ourselves up to everyone, but it is necessary that we be *open to the body* and not hide out. Everyone does not need to see our dirty laundry, but it will help us if someone does. Those who are deliberately hiding aspects of their lives are keeping themselves from becoming connected to the body in the way God has purposed. This prevents them from receiving the benefits that are available to those who are genuinely attached to the body of Christ.

It is unrealistic to think that all relationships will be equal or that all will have the same level of trust and intimacy. But as members of the body of Christ, we should be striving to build close, open, and honest relationships within our home friendship group. The home group is where genuine relationships can be developed and biblical accountability practiced on an ongoing basis.

Discussion Points:

1. What kinds of issues are appropriate for confessing and talking about in a home friendship group?
 - *Character flaws (dishonesty, laziness, losing temper, etc.).*
 - *Relational problems (difficulty trusting, not respecting the boundaries of others, loneliness, sadness, etc.).*
 - *Functional problems (difficulty at work, failure to accomplish household tasks, etc.).*
 - *Struggles with temptation.*
 - *Deficiencies in spiritual disciplines (not praying regularly, not studying the Bible, not fasting, not being faithful to church services, not reaching out to the unsaved, etc.).*
 - *Confusion or deficiencies of understanding.*
2. What kinds of issues would not be appropriate for discussion in a home group?
 - *Talking about people who are not present in the meeting, except in a situation where there is a need to formulate a plan for confronting the person in question. (If a person is not there, then there is nothing the group can do about them. People should focus on themselves, not others.)*
 - *Sexual problems.*
 - *Severe marital problems (abandonment, physical abuse, unfaithfulness).*
 - *Issues from the past that have already been dealt with and resolved.*
 - *Doctrinal disagreements and holiness issues which may risk causing someone present in the meeting to stumble.*
 - *Matters that have absolutely nothing to do with our spiritual lives.*

These kinds of issues should be taken to the elders of the church.

Note: Some Christian women believe that to bring up issues concerning marital disputes or their husbands' spiritual problems is a betrayal and lack of submission. This is not necessarily the case. When problems are brought up for redemptive purposes (rather than for malicious reasons), it is not a failure to submit, but may actually be true submission to Jesus. If a wife is not sure what is appropriate, she should consult with the elders of the church.

Life in the Community of Light

*In Him was life, and the life was the light of men.
And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness
did not comprehend it. John 1:4-5*

Lesson 6: This series of lessons focuses on the benefits that come to us when we live in open, honest, accountable relationships with Jesus and with other believers. The purpose of this lesson is to describe some of the symptoms that indicate a person is walking in darkness (which means living detached from the body in isolation). It is also designed to help people realize that there are parts of their lives that are still in darkness and how they can overcome the power of darkness by bringing those parts into the light.

Read Romans 12:4-5 and Ephesians 4:16

The Bible describes believers as members of one another who are joined and knit together by what every joint supplies (Romans 12:5; Ephesians 4:16). It describes them as those who rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep, those who have compassion for one another (Romans 12:15 1 Peter 3:8). These descriptions depict a body of people who are closely connected to one another in open and honest relationships.

When people are connected together in this way, they will enjoy the good fruits of being part of the body of Jesus Christ. Ephesians 5:8 says,

Walk as children of light (for the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness, righteousness, and truth). We all need the benefits of goodness, righteousness, and truth.

But some people seem to be unable, or unwilling, to connect in so intimate a way. To whatever degree any believer fails to connect, he or she will experience the fruit of isolation, which is all bad. The list that follows describes the symptoms displayed in the lives of people who are failing to connect with the body.

Depression and/or anxiety (they often go hand in hand)
Feelings of meaninglessness
Feelings of guilt and/or badness

Addictive behaviors
Distorted thinking
Feelings of emptiness
Feelings of sadness
Irrational fears
Panic
Rage (outbursts of anger)
Excessive care-taking (doing for others what they should be doing for themselves)
Fantasizing
Feelings of un-reality (what I'm experiencing is not real)

These symptoms are evidences of isolation. Anyone who persistently experiences any of these symptoms is too detached and isolated to be spiritually healthy. The solution is spiritual healing and growth, but this can only come through honest connection to both the Lord Jesus and members of His body.

Many people who struggle with forming healthy relationships within the body of Christ have fundamental problems with boundaries. **This means that they are unclear about what their responsibilities and freedoms are in their personal relationships.** They may take on responsibilities that are not really theirs or they may fail to accept responsibilities that clearly are theirs. They may take liberties that are hurtful or they may not experience all the freedoms that are theirs due to pressure coming from other people. All of these relational problems have at their heart a lack of truth. This is why detached people are invariably lacking in closeness, openness, and honesty.

What follows is a list of characteristics that erect barriers to forming godly boundaries. All of these frequently have their roots in past injuries to the heart resulting from abuse, neglect, abandonment, etc.

Distorted ideas of self, such as "I'm bad" or "I'm unlovable."
Fear of having to experience further emotional pain.
Defensiveness, self-justifying, rationalizing, and blaming.
Denial of one's faults, errors, failures, or misdeeds.
Devaluation of one's faults, errors, failures, or misdeeds.
Projecting the attributes of an abuser onto someone else in a similar relational position.

When people engage in these practices, they keep themselves detached and isolated from others. What they must realize is that just as their hurts from the past came at the hands of other people, their healing from those hurts can only come through other people. **There is no healing outside of relationships.** This creates a difficult dilemma for many, since the thing they fear the most is the only solution to their problem. At some point they must decide to form closer, more honest relationships, regardless of the risks. They can do this by determining that they will do the following:

1. Give up all distorted ideas about themselves and accept what God says about them.
2. Accept the reality that sometimes people must experience pain in order to heal.
3. Stop responding defensively by self-justifying, rationalizing, and blaming others.
4. Stop denying their own faults, errors, failures, and misdeeds, and acknowledge them.
5. Stop devaluing their own faults, errors, failures and misdeeds and admit their seriousness.
6. Stop projecting attributes on others and begin accepting people for who they are.

Most people cannot change these entrenched ways of thinking and responding all on their own. But what they can do is submit themselves to a group of fellow believers who can challenge them whenever they fall back into these unhealthy practices. This is called *making yourself accountable*. This is at least part of what the Bible means when it says that we should *submit ourselves to one another*. For most people, this is the only way they will ever break free from these bondages and begin to experience the benefits and joys of godly relationships.

Discussion Points:

1. Ask members to acknowledge whether they are presently experiencing any of the symptoms listed above. Take note of which symptoms each member identifies with. Ask each member to tell the group about what they are experiencing.
2. Ask members to describe which of the characteristics that inhibit proper boundaries they have experienced and may be presently experiencing.
3. Ask members if they are willing to work at overcoming these ungodly ways of thinking and responding to others. Ask if they are willing to make commitments and be accountable to the group. Write the commitments down for future reference.

Life in the Community of Light

*In Him was life, and the life was the light of men.
And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness
did not comprehend it. John 1:4-5*

Lesson 7: This is the final lesson in this series. It is hoped that by now all the members of the group understand and appreciate the benefits that come to us when we live in open, honest, accountable relationships with Jesus and with other believers. The purpose of this lesson is to encourage all group members to come fully into the light by making themselves vulnerable and determining that they will trust others even when it seems difficult.

Group leader should read this story to the group: Mike had known Dave for many years and they had become good friends. Their families did things together and their children got along well with one another. Mike had been married to Kristin for 10 years, and Dave had been married nearly as long to Linda. While Mike and Dave were good friends, as is typical of men, they seldom confided from their heart to each other. They had good jobs, attended the same church, were active in ministry, and to all appearances, they were successful in life.

In the last year, however, Mike had begun to struggle with feelings for another woman in the church. Although his marriage would have been considered good—he was a good provider, a good father, and to all outward appearances a good husband—he knew that he and Kristin had drifted apart over the past two years. They had become emotionally disconnected and were fulfilling the roles that were expected of them without any real desire to please each other. It was toward the end of that two-year period that Mike had begun to notice Kelly. She was about five years younger, attractive, and single. She was vivacious and always seemed to see the positive in every person and every situation. It made him feel good just being around her.

In Mike's eyes, she was everything he wanted his wife to be, but didn't think she was. He struggled with impure thoughts, knowing they were not right, but never seeming to win the battle against them. Sometimes he would dream about Kelly and wake up feeling guilty about the content of the dream. They would interact at church, sometimes serving on the same ministry projects together. Kelly would flirt with him in a playful way, making him feel like he hadn't felt since he had first dated his wife. Quickly, a struggle with sexual thoughts turned into an emotional attachment—an emotional adultery. Although he was married to Kristin, he had given his heart to Kelly and was fantasizing about a life with her. As a Christian, Mike knew what he was doing was wrong.

He also knew, although they had never had any kind of physical contact, that he was sinning in his heart.

Desperate for help, feeling unable to talk to anyone else, Mike confided in Dave what he was going through. Dave listened, seemingly with a sympathetic and understanding heart. He told Mike he would pray for him and keep the subject between them alone. Dave then went home and told his wife, Linda, figuring that didn't stretch the confidentiality by too much. Linda then told her best friend Lisa, in order to have her pray about it, and Lisa, thinking the more people praying the better, told Brenda. Brenda told her husband Mark, who was the music director for the church. Both of them then decided that they would take it upon themselves to help Mike and Kristin. They thought the best way to do this would be to inform Kelly that Mike, a married man, had an attraction to her, and that she should have as little contact with him as possible.

Mike soon found out that his secret was no longer a secret when Mark, the music director, said he was praying for him about his problem. Now, in addition to a troubled marriage, he wondered how many others had heard about his problem, and how long it would be before his wife found out, making an already difficult situation even worse.

Mike had just been burned. Already reticent about confiding his feelings to another person, now that he had done so it had blown-up in his face. He was humiliated, his relationship with Dave was damaged, and he decided that he would never go back to that church. He also decided that he would never, as long as he lived, confide his deepest feelings to another person.

Read Zechariah 13:6

How many here feel as though you, like Mike, have been wounded in the house of your friends? This brings us to a very real problem in the church—how do we, as a body of believers, get help for our struggles and temptations when we are afraid to talk to anyone about them? How can we be held accountable for things that we never allow to see the light of day?

The phrase *one another* (or some similar form) occurs over seventy times in the New Testament. It means that we are to reciprocate, returning in like manner the goodness we receive from other believers. If we are forgiven, we need to forgive; if we are loved, we need to love back. The early Christian church functioned as a true community. Even a cursory reading of Acts 2:42-47 reveals a level of community that many modern churches have never experienced. It is worth considering if we are really a community of believers, or are we just a bunch of individuals who attend the same church?

James 5:16 tells us that we are to openly confess to one another. But to acknowledge we have a fault or a problem requires a level of trust that is only available where there is authentic Christian community. Yet if many of the people who populate our churches have had their trust violated, betrayed, and shattered, how will they ever be willing to confide their hopes, fears, temptations, and sins with anyone?

Some may not like this answer, but the answer is: ***We must allow ourselves to be vulnerable.*** This word comes from a Latin root that means to wound. We must stop defending and protecting ourselves and allow ourselves to once more risk being wounded. It is a deception to think that we can keep from ever being hurt again anyway.

Wounds can be either physical or emotional. Both kinds can affect us spiritually, especially the emotional wounds. Physical wounds leave scars on our bodies, but emotional wounds leave scars on our souls. Long after the pain is gone, the scars remind us that we were once hurt.

You can't see a scar on someone's soul, but many times you can discern it by their actions. Although the hurt may be gone, its memory is still there. The person is less likely to place himself in a position to become vulnerable again. Yet, becoming vulnerable is the only way we will ever achieve authentic Christian community—the only way James 5:16 can be practiced in our day-to-day lives. Becoming vulnerable to hurt is the only way we will find anyone we can trust enough to bring to light the hidden things of darkness in our hearts.

Read Proverbs 27:6

No matter how many times you have been hurt by others, you must not let your soul become a walled fortress that no one can penetrate. Something happens to us when we do that. We lose our ability to interact in true community. We place ourselves at risk to act on those hidden things of darkness in our hearts. We lose our ability to be accountable.

Accountability only works when someone is willing to be held accountable and someone else is willing to hold him accountable. A person who has made a walled fortress of his soul will not subject himself to accountability. It is his greatest fear.

The only way to learn to trust is by becoming vulnerable and open to the possibility of hurt. The risk of hurt is high, but don't let that stop you.

Ultimately the rewards of being able to practice James 5:16 with a group of trustworthy brothers and sisters far outweighs any hurts you may experience along the way.

It is unrealistic to insist on perfect trustworthiness. Only Jesus will never fail us. At times, even the most gentle and caring people may inadvertently hurt us. On occasion, someone might hurt us deliberately. But just as Jesus was wounded in the house of His friends yet endured and prevailed, even so we, though we may at times be wounded by our friends, can learn to walk in the light. Though painful, wounds can heal and victories can be won.

Discussion Points:

1. Ask members who made commitments last week to give the group a report on how well they kept their commitments. If they failed in any way, encourage them to make a new commitment for the next week. Take it a week at a time. Members need to become comfortable with reporting their failures. They should never be condemned for failing. Sometime we need to fail a few times in order to learn to look to Jesus for strength. From this perspective, sometimes failure is the best thing that can happen to us. But we must never quit, but must continually make new commitments.
2. Ask members to talk about any difficulties they have in trusting others, especially other members of the group. Consider whether each difficulty is warranted or if there is no real basis for it.

Reminder: Some Christian women believe that to bring up issues concerning marital disputes or their husbands' spiritual problems is a betrayal and lack of submission. This is not the kind of confidentiality this lesson is focusing on. Wives are not required to cover up their husband's sins or problems simply because he doesn't want to be embarrassed or doesn't want to change. When problems are brought up for redemptive purposes (rather than for malicious reasons), it is not a failure to submit, but may actually be true submission to Jesus. If a wife is not sure what is appropriate, she should consult with the elders of the church.