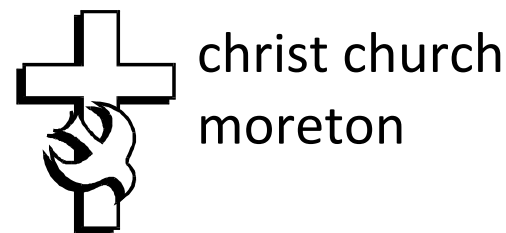


Christ Church Small Groups
Autumn 2021



2021

May the **God of hope**
fill you with all **joy and peace**,
as you trust in him,
so that you may overflow with
hope
by the power of the **Holy Spirit**.

Romans 15:13

The great 20th century pastor and Bible teacher John Stott once wrote something like: Christianity that doesn't begin with the individual doesn't begin; Christianity that ends with the individual ends.

Coming to faith, becoming a disciple, is something that no-one else can do for you. God has no grandchildren, you can't inherit your faith from someone else, it is a commitment you must make for yourself.

But having done that, you need other Christians to travel with you on the journey of discipleship. It is one of the big themes of the New

Testament epistles – how we can be Christians together. In a world which in so many ways rejects the gospel, and wants to press us into its mould, on our own we will never flourish and mature as disciples. On our own we won't know the joy, peace and hope which our theme verse for this year speaks of.

So this term we are going to think about what that means in practice, as we look at some of the 'one another's' of the New Testament – passages which help us to see how we can be a blessing to each other.

The diary for this term looks like this:

w/b Mon 20th September – Home-group 1 – Love one another

w/b Mon 27th September – Home-group 2 – Encourage one another

Wed 6th October – **Prayer Meeting**

w/b Mon 11th October – Home-group 3 – Carry one another's burdens

w/b Mon 18th October – free week

w/b Mon 25th October – Home group 4 – Accept one another

Wed 3rd November – **Prayer Meeting**

w/b Mon 8th November – Home-group 5 – Pray for one another

w/b Mon 15th November – free week

w/b Mon 22nd November – Home-group 6 – Spur one another on

1. Love one another

One of the most famous incidents in the gospels is Jesus washing his disciples' feet, recorded in John 13. They had arrived at the Upper Room, ready for Passover. Their feet would have been dusty, but there was no servant to wash them. And then, Jesus got up, took off his outer robe, wrapped a towel round his waist, got a bowl of water, and washed his disciples' feet. Jesus then told them: *'Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet.'* John 13:14, and then he went on to tell them: *'As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.'* John 13:34-35.

So loving one another should be one of the defining characteristics of discipleship. But what does that mean in practice?

Read Romans 12:9-13

A few years ago, when Christ Church School were picking a vision statement, this passage is what was chosen, not just by the staff and children but also by the parents. It obviously encapsulates something that the whole school community saw as important.

- How does the passage help to explain what it means for love to be sincere?
- What is the connection between loving one another and keeping your spiritual fervour?

- How can loving one another help us to be *'joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer'*?

Paul says that we should *'practice hospitality.'* In part this means being willing to open our homes to one another, but it goes further than that – it involves sharing our lives with one another. But we live in a society where many are busy – and that busy-ness can make it difficult to share our lives with each other in any significant way.

- In what practical ways can you practice hospitality with the other members of your group?

One of the challenges with home-groups is that they can too easily become closed – sometimes there is a reluctance to have new people join, and even if that isn't the case, it might not be easy for someone new to integrate into an established group.

- How can your group practice hospitality to potential new members?

Finally – Paul says we should be *'faithful in prayer.'* In the context it seems to me that this means we should be faithful in praying for one another – it is something that should inevitably flow from loving one another.

- What do you need the rest of the group to be faithful in praying about for you?

2. Encourage one another

Last time we ended with an encouragement to be faithful in prayer for one another. Have you been aware of answers to those prayers? Has praying faithfully been a blessing for you as well as for the others you have been praying for?

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Most of you will probably have heard me talk about one of my favourite people in the Bible – Barnabas. We don't know much about him – he mostly appears in Acts as one of Paul's companions. One thing we do know about him was that Barnabas was almost a nickname. His real name was Joseph, but he was called Barnabas, because it means 'son of encouragement.' And throughout Acts we find him acting in a way which encouraged other believers.

The New Testament word for encourage is Parakaleo. It means to "come alongside to help, to stand with." You encourage someone when you come alongside someone and help carry the load, you help them keep going. You support them on the way. And all of us need that. We all need Barnabases.

Read Hebrews 3:7-15

It is all too easy to think of encouragement just in terms of telling someone they are doing well. But this passage starts with a long quotation from Psalm 95, which warned about the danger of ignoring what God says: *Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.*

- What sort of things might tempt us to *be hardened by sin's deceitfulness* (v.13)?
- How can we encourage one another so as to prevent this from happening?

The point here seems to be that we all have areas of our lives where left to ourselves we will ignore what God says in his word, which is why we need others to keep us alert to this.

There is a big challenge in this, because none of us like having things in our lives which are wrong pointed out to us! The giving of this sort of encouragement has to be matched with humility in the person being encouraged.

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:13 – 5:11

Twice in this passage Paul writes that we should encourage one another (4:18, 5:11). Again it is encouragement rooted in God's word, but here it is not encouragement away from sin but towards hope.

- How does what Paul writes act as encouragement to us?

I said earlier that encouragement means 'coming alongside to help' and both of the passages we have looked at show that genuine encouragement is rooted in the Bible – helping one another to hear it and apply it to our lives. So – as a step towards doing that, can you come to the next home-group with a passage of scripture which you can use to encourage the rest of your group?

3. Carry one another's burdens

Start today by sharing the passages of encouragement for the group you have found since the last session.

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It's an illustration I've used before, but one worth repeating. If you see a flock of geese flying, they will always do it in formation – one at the front, then the rest taking up a V-shape behind. That formation flying isn't just for the benefit of bird watchers like me. As each bird flaps its wings, it creates an uplift for the bird immediately following. By flying in V-formation, the whole flock adds at least 70% greater flying range than if each bird flew on its own.

When the lead goose gets tired, he rotates back in the V and another goose moves up to fly at the front. So the load is shared. It is amazing that God has built into these birds how to care for one another. And if God's purpose for geese is that they should do that – how much more must that be the case with the members of his church. We should be a community where that sort of support comes just as naturally as it does for a flock of geese.

Read Galatians 6:1-10

The first way in which Paul says we should carry one another's burdens takes us back to what we were thinking about last time – how easy it is for any of us to ignore God's word and fall into sin. Here Paul says that if we see that happen, we should do something about it.

- What might prevent us from doing what Paul says in v.1?

- How does carrying each other's burdens fulfil the law of Christ?

Verses 3 and 5 seem to contradict each other. But Paul uses 2 different words – the 'burdens' of v.3 are heavy burdens, the 'loads' of v.5 are much lighter.

- How can we make sure that we are helping those who really need help?
- What might make us *'become weary in doing good'* (v.9)?
- How can we help each other to avoid this?

Putting what Paul says here into practice means that we need to be ready to admit our need of that support – you can't carry someone else's burden if they insist on keeping it to themselves!

- What might stop you from being honest with the rest of your group about the burdens you are carrying?

Part of the vision for our home-groups is that they should be places where this sort of support is found. Real pastoral support should be found within our groups, which, of course, means that those not in a group will to some extent miss out on that support. That is why our goal is that everyone who is part of Christ Church should be part of a small group.

- Who else could you be inviting to be part of your group? How could you help them to take that step?
- And if new people joining your group meant that it became too big, and needed to split – would you be willing for that to happen?

4. Accept one another

Following up on the last part of our last session – have you thought of people you want to help to become part of your group, and how you might help them feel comfortable about doing that?

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There is a small village in Suffolk, just a couple of streets, which in the 1980's had the usual Anglican church, pub, village shop – and 2 Strict Baptist churches. I never did know the details, but there had been a split in the already quite small Baptist church, so some of them had gone off and formed another church. I've no idea whether both or either of them still exist – but what a ridiculous situation.

Ridiculous, but not unique. Splits like that seem to be part and parcel of church life. Somebody says or does something that somebody else takes exception to – and the easy option is to go off in a huff. But it shouldn't be like that.

Read Romans 15:1-7

This is the end of a long section starting at 14:1, where Paul writes: *Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarrelling over disputable matters. One person's faith allows them to eat anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables.*

The issue then wasn't modern vegetarianism, but that most of the meat you could buy in the market had been slaughtered as part of a sacrifice in a pagan temple. So – would it be right for a Christian to eat such meat?

In the church there could be one group who were very careful about what they ate, and another group who thought that it was fine to eat anything because God had created everything for us to enjoy. And Paul says that this isn't a gospel issue, it is one where they should accept each other.

- How might accepting others mean not pleasing ourselves?
- How does the motive of building our neighbour up (v.2) control what we accept in one another?
- How was Jesus the supreme example of what Paul commands in verses 1-2?
- How does Christ's acceptance of us help us to accept one another?
- If we are going to put into practice what Paul has been saying, why will we need endurance, encouragement and hope (v.4-5)?

Of course, there are some issues which the Bible is clear about – in those cases as we've seen in the last 2 sessions, we need to be ready to challenge one another if they are being ignored – Jesus was never light on sin. But like him we still accept each other.

- Are there others in Christ church who you find it difficult to accept, because they are different to you? In those cases, how can you put what Paul writes here into practice?

Pray about those issues together, then be ready to share next time any ways in which you have been able to build a relationship with someone you previously kept at a distance.

5. Pray for one another

Have you been able to get closer to someone in Christ Church who previously you had kept at a distance?

When I was younger I was a bit of a butterfly. I would take up a new hobby, be really keen for a while, and then lose interest and move on to something else. It wasn't just hobbies – I was the same at work. I'd begin a new project full of enthusiasm, but after a few weeks the novelty would wear off, and I'd want to do something else.

That probably isn't too much of a problem when it comes to hobbies, though it probably does explain why I've never been that good at anything – I just don't stick with it long enough. But it is a problem in the spiritual life. When you are like that, it is all too easy to give up praying because you don't get an answer quickly enough. Throughout this series we have seen how much we need one another if we are to flourish as disciples. But ultimately it is only the Holy Spirit who can keep any Christian's passion for God burning brightly. And that means that whatever else we do for one another, praying for one another is vital.

Read Colossians 1:3-14

I suspect that most of the time we pray for one another, it is praying about some problem or burden. And of course it is important to do

that. But Paul shows us the importance of praying for one another even when things are going well.

- Why would what Paul thanks God for in verses 3-8 be a reason for what he prays for in verses 9-14?
- What does Paul pray for the Colossians? (v9)
- Why does he pray that? (v10)
- What 4 results of living a life 'worthy of the Lord' and 'pleasing to him' does Paul mention? (v10 - 12)
- Why are each of these important? How can we encourage each other in these areas?
- Colossians 1:13 is a great truth, but how is it relevant to what Paul has just been saying about living a life that is worthy of the Lord?

Paul knows that his readers will need '*great endurance and patience*' (v.11). Again it is a reminder that the life of discipleship isn't easy, there will always be things which can discourage us.

- Where in your life are you aware of the need for endurance and patience at the moment?
- How are these situations affecting your relationship with the Lord Jesus and with others in your group?
- How can you as a group pray about those situations?

6. Spur one another on

Having prayed about the situations you talked about at the end last time, have you seen any answers to those prayers? Or has the Holy Spirit given you some words of encouragement you can share today?

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One of the strange things about the Olympic Games this year was the absence of the crowds in the stands. The same was true at many football matches last year – to see a match on TV, but not to hear any cheering from the crowds. And several competitors in all sports commented that they missed the encouragement which their supporters gave. Hearing the crowd cheering you on seems to lift the performance of many competitors.

And something similar is true in the life of discipleship. Throughout this series we've seen ways in which we need one another, and the last is a reminder that one of the things we can do for each other is to inspire us to keep going.

Read Hebrews 10:19-25

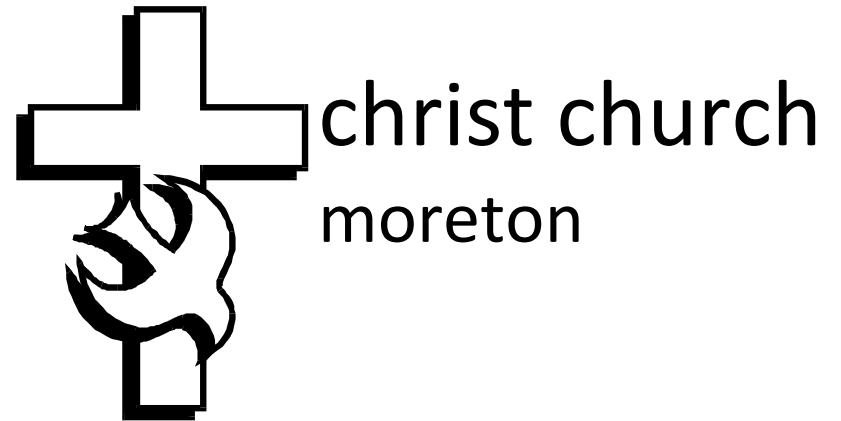
This Sunday will be Advent Sunday. It's the day when most often we start thinking about Christmas, but it is also a reminder that the Lord Jesus will come again, and when he does, it will bring history to an end. As it says in the Nicene Creed, 'he will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead.'

The prospect of Jesus' return as judge could be a worrying one, but as we saw a few weeks ago (in 1 Thessalonians) it should be something which encourages us onwards in our discipleship.

- How is it possible for us to draw near to God? What has Jesus done to make it possible?
- How can we have full assurance of faith?
- Why should realising this make us want to 'spur one another on towards love and good deeds'?
- Why should looking forwards to the return of the Lord Jesus (the Day, v.25) make us want to meet together and encourage one another?

All the times when we meet together should be times when we are spurred on in our faith – challenged to step out in new ways. That is true not only of our corporate worship on Sundays, but even more of our times together in small groups. It can be easy for a home-group to become too comfortable, but there should be opportunities to be pushed out of our comfort zone.

- As this series ends, are you willing for your group to do that? And if so, what can you do practically to make it happen?



making disciples
growing disciples
being disciples