

life groups' study guide



Life Groups exist at Kingsway to provide authentic relationships for spiritual growth, caring for one another, and reaching out to others.

Baggage: The Effects of our Sins

“So, if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.”

– Jesus, to us (John 8:36)

Anyone who has ever undertaken a long-distance hike has a unique understanding of the idea of “baggage.” In fact, many of the men at Kingsway hike nearly 60 miles over a week every summer on the Appalachian Trail, often with 30-40 lbs. packs strapped to their backs. Shouldering a backpack to walk into school or to a meeting is one thing. But to wear a heavy backpack for 7-8 hours a day during a long-distance hike is something entirely different. One begins to hurt in places you never knew existed.

Humorist Bill Bryson writes of his own experiences on the Appalachian Trail, especially his initial discoveries about hiking the AT:

I was hopelessly out of shape—hopelessly. The pack weighed way too much. Way too much. I had never encountered anything so hard, for which I was so ill prepared. Every step was a struggle.

The hardest part was coming to terms with the constant dispiriting discovery that there is always more hill...Still you stagger on. What else can you do?

When, after ages and ages, you finally reach the telltale world of truly high ground, where the chilled air smells of pine sap and the vegetation is gnarled and tough and wind bent, and push through to the mountain's open pinnacle, you are, alas, past caring. You sprawl face down on a sloping pavement of gneiss, pressed to the rock by the weight of your pack, and lie there for some minutes, reflecting in a distant, out-of-body way that you have never before looked this closely at lichen, not in fact looked this closely at anything in the natural world since you were four years old and had your first magnifying glass...

But perhaps it is also raining, a cold, slanting, merciless rain, with thunder and lightning playing on the neighboring hills. Perhaps a troop of Eagle Scouts comes by at a depressing trot. Perhaps you are cold and hungry and smell so bad that you can no longer smell yourself. Perhaps you want to lie down and be as the lichen: not dead exactly but just very still for a long, long time.¹

For anyone who has ever experienced the Appalachian Trail, Bryson's accurate portrayal of the experience brings a smile to one's face, that kind of knowing smile which comes from an understanding of shared adversity. And yet, there are many parallels we can draw between walking the Trail and walking through life itself.

Q:: For anyone who has ever hiked, what are some of the parallels that can be made regarding life?

Q:: What, if any, spiritual parallels are there between the two experiences?

Discussion:

Scripture tells us, and real life confirms, that sin exists within the fallen human condition. Not only does sin exist, but we as sinners each suffer from "the Sin Effect". The Sin Effect references the residual impact that sin can have in a person's life. Depending on the nature of the sin, the residue can be minimal, or it can be much more than that. And left unresolved, it can become debilitating.

Romans 3:23 acknowledges that "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." The apostle James goes further in describing the effects of sin when it is left unchecked. "Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth to death" (1:15).

So, what do we do with the sin in our lives? If we don't deal with it, it doesn't just go away. Instead, like the hiking analogy, each unresolved sin can be like adding another weighty burden to the backpack you carry around through life...and another...and another. It can get to the point where it weighs you down so much that you are bent over, hardly able to even see way forward.

Q:: Why do we struggle sometimes to get the sin in our life resolved—whether it's a hidden sin or a broken relationship, etc.?

Q:: Why do we tend to assume, "If I just let it go, it will go away"? But, why doesn't it go away?

Q:: How does that unresolved sin affect us?

¹ Bill Bryson, *A Walk in the Woods: Rediscovering America on the Appalachian Trail* (New York: Broadway Books, 1998), 35-36.

Confession and the Sin Effect

One of the by-products of the Sin Effect is that it manifests a tendency toward hiddenness, which breeds isolation. We may have something that is not resolved in our life, and Satan uses our shame, and even our pride, to cause us to retreat into our own little private world.

But, we're not made to be alone. This is exactly what God confirmed to Adam before creating his life-mate, Eve. On the contrary, we are made for relational community. In fact, God Himself embodies this kind of relational community perfectly within His own character. That is the true nature of the Trinity—the perfect manifestation of the ideal community.

Where God wants to bring us together—with one another and with Him—the Sin Effect tends to pull us apart. That is why God provides the means to restore the brokenness which comes through sin.

Q:: Read 1 John 1:9. This very famous verse has a lot to tell about this concept. What does this verse tell us about the relationship between the confession of our sins and God's forgiveness of our sins—how do they fit together?

Q:: If God knows everything, including our sins, then why do we need to confess them to Him?

Q:: Read James 5:16. Why is confession to each other so important?

Q:: This verse tells us that healing comes through confession. How does that happen?

Often, confession seems too difficult, so we resist—and even abandon—the idea. For the sake of expediency, we assume we can “just deal” with whatever the issues are in our lives. But instead of our pack getting lighter, it begins to feel heavier and heavier with “the weight of the world” on our shoulders.

Q:: Read Matthew 11:28-30. What does Jesus say about burdens? Why is His yoke so light?

Application:

The Bible provides principles and divine directives about being vigilant to the potential temptation of sin. But it also tells us that God will provide a way out if we seek it (1 Corinthians 10:13) so that we can eliminate the residual impact of the Sin Effect in our lives.

God is in the redemption business. That's why Christ came to earth in the first place, to save us from ourselves.

But God's redemption extends far beyond just our salvation. He also wants to redeem every part of us. This is why Paul tells us that “if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has gone, the new has come (2 Corinthians 5:17).

God redeems the burdens we put in our backpack through our sins. Instead of being weighed down by the baggage of our past, God allows us—if we're willing—to bring out the stones in our backpack in order to help those who may be struggling in the same areas of life. In this way, God brings meaning and valuable to what would otherwise be the hopeless regrets from our past.

When we allow God to redeem us, we find freedom that is almost unimaginable. We are set free! We have been freed by our Savior, Jesus Christ (John 8:34-36).

Q:: Have you ever been in a situation—either personally or corporately—when confession has taken place? What was the result?

Q:: How has God used some of the sin from your past to minister to other people who are on life's journey?

Q:: How did being able to use your failings from the past to help someone else affect you in turn?

Question for Reflection: Are there any areas of your life that are still being impacted by the Sin Effect? That is, do you need to go through a process of confession, forgiveness and reconciliation? If so, are you willing to do what it takes work through that process? Who can/should you go to start that process?