



— WEEK 1 —

GROWING TOGETHER

■ in Communication ■

READ TOGETHER

God didn't create us to live in isolation! "It is not good that the man should be alone," He says in Genesis 2:18, so He created Eve.

We're created to communicate ... but we're not always good at it. We get mad and forget to listen. We hear things wrong and don't give each other the benefit of the doubt. We don't say the things we need to, and we say a lot of things we're sorry for later. And unfortunately, it's often the worst when we're talking to our own family. The ones we love can hurt us the most, and we can hurt them the most.

The good news is, we can all get better. And as we let God work in our hearts, we can keep on getting better and better as we practice doing what He says. We can also remember that nobody's perfect, and everybody is a work in progress, so we all need grace every day.

And remember the most important communication of all—talking to God and hearing what He has to say to you! The more we communicate with God, the better we can communicate with others.

Here are four biblical principles you can practice together for better communication:

1. 1 Corinthians 12:14–26: Remember that "different" doesn't always mean "better" or "worse." Sometimes it's just *different*.
2. Ephesians 4:26–27: Don't let little problems turn into big ones by keeping them inside. Talk about what's wrong. Use respect and gentleness.
3. Philippians 2:3–4: Practice good listening skills. Don't just wait for the other person to quit talking so you can start talking. Remember that the other person is important and so is what he or she has to say.
4. Ephesians 4:15, 29: When you have to tell someone he or she is doing something wrong, wait until you're calm and can do it lovingly. Make it a chance to help him or her get closer to God.

Communication

PRAY TOGETHER

Father, help me talk to others the way You want me to, so that they see how much I love You. Give me the courage to go to anyone I have a problem with and talk to him or her about it with gentleness and respect so we can solve the problem. Help me listen and not get mad when someone points out something I'm doing wrong. Remind me to ask what someone means if I think he or she is being unfair, just in case I'm wrong. Teach me to give a loving answer even if someone tries to pick a fight with me. Amen.

MEMORIZE TOGETHER

"Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God."

—James 1:19–20, *ESV*

GROW TOGETHER

Handy Hint: Be sure to read through the week's activities in advance. Some of them might need a few extra materials, and some days may need to be switched depending on your schedule.

SUNDAY

As a couple: Think of an issue that's causing *minor* friction in your marriage. Talk about it together—but switch roles. Be honest (not sarcastic) about what you feel your spouse would really say, and avoid getting defensive about how he or she portrays you. How does what your spouse has been hearing differ from what you thought you were communicating?

As a family: Play the classic "telephone" game (where one person whispers a message to the next, and that person passes on what they heard; if you need more people, invite some friends). Each time, be sure to write



down what the first person said and what the last person heard. What if it was a really, really important message? What can happen to a family when what we say isn't what others hear?

MONDAY

As a couple: Swap a chore with your spouse, such as washing the dishes and cleaning out the car. Watch each other without criticizing or making suggestions (unless your spouse is about to burn the house down). Did your spouse do the chore exactly the way you would? Did it still get done? Did the world end? Talk about other, more important situations in which you do things differently and that's okay.

As a family: Make a list of some ways the individuals in your family are different (boy or girl, loud or quiet, morning person or night person). Now make a list of some ways you're all the same (we all like spaghetti, we all believe in Jesus, we all like to visit grandma). Which cause the most fights? Which are more important? Bonus round: Choose an item on your "same" list as a code word to remind you what really matters when differences cause friction. Spaghetti!

TUESDAY

As a couple: Share with each other the story of a fight or conflict you remember from

Communication

your childhood and how your family dealt with it. Did your families handle conflict the same? How has that shaped the way you handle conflict in your marriage? Make a list of differences in the way you approach conflict and keep it handy to help you communicate during your next argument (it's okay, we all have them).

As a family: Make a "Bubble Bomb" out of baking soda and vinegar (it may take a little practice). Talk about how the "bomb" works just like an argument: When somebody gives you "vinegar," there's no explosion unless you add your "baking soda." The Bible says, "A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger" (Proverbs 15:1, *ESV*).

WEDNESDAY

As a couple: Pick a recipe you've never made before from a good cookbook. One of you has to prepare the dish while the other reads the instructions aloud one step at a time—just once. Will you end up with an edible dish, or will there be a breakdown in communication?

As a family: Have each family member tell a story about a special memory. Make sure everyone is really listening by asking each family member a question afterward, such as "What kind of day did your sister say it was?" Talk about how it felt to have everyone really listen. Talk about doing for others what you'd like them to do for you.

THURSDAY

As a couple: Write each other letters about something the other does that's frustrating—but make it a love letter. Be honest and specific about the problem, but also put it in the context of your love for each other and your desire to have a strong, lasting marriage. Be honest and specific about that, too.

As a family: Make a list of things people say around your house that make other people mad or start fights, like "You always make such a mess" or "Stop touching my stuff." Now brainstorm together: What would be a better, more loving way to say that?

FRIDAY

As a couple: It's movie night! Make some popcorn or other tasty treats and settle down on the sofa. You both get to pick a movie, and you both have to watch without complaining, even if it's a film you don't like. Before you hit "play," tell your spouse why you chose that particular movie. Why is it special to you? What does it say to you that you want your spouse to understand?

As a family: It's family board game night! Everybody plays. No cell phones, no tablets, no TV, no radio, just the whole family eyeball-to-eyeball around the table going mano a mano over your favorite board games or trying some new ones. Special snacks will help make it an "occasion."

Handy Hint: Cooperative board games, such as Forbidden Island, let you all work toward a common goal instead of competing.



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— WEEK 2 —

GROWING TOGETHER

■ *in Kindness* ■

READ TOGETHER

How important is kindness? When someone asked Jesus to identify what the greatest commandment was, He said that the first was to love God with your whole self. And the second was, “Love your neighbor as yourself” (see Matthew 22:34–40).

How hard is it to be kind? Sometimes it’s very hard, especially when we’re tired or having a bad day, or when someone is being unfair to us. Our world teaches us to look out for ourselves and stand up for our rights. But that’s not what God teaches. Paul says, “Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men” (Philippians 2:5–7, *ESV*). Being kind means

The Bible says, “Anxiety in a man’s heart weighs him down, but a good word makes him glad” (Proverbs 12:25, *ESV*). When we share “good words” with others, we truly help them—especially when we share the best words of all by telling them about God’s love.

doing thoughtful things, showing our affection, and being gentle and sympathetic with each other—even if we sometimes don’t feel like it.

What’s the opposite of kindness? It isn’t just being mean. It’s being unforgiving, and that usually turns into bitterness. There’s an old saying, “Bitterness is like drinking poison and waiting for the other person to die.” And like mold on a piece of bread, bitterness spreads through your whole life and even to other people. The only way to stop it is through forgiveness.

Here are four biblical principles you can use to practice kindness together:

1. Psalm 34:14, Hebrews 12:14: Don’t just wish or hope for peace. Make it your responsibility to create peace wherever you go by your words and attitude.
2. Galatians 6:9, 1 Peter 3:8–9: Don’t wait for other people to be kind first. Be kind all the time, even when other people aren’t kind to you.

Kindness

3. Colossians 3:13, Matthew 18:21–35: God forgives you for your sins. If you're really grateful, you'll forgive other people the same way and not hold grudges.
4. Galatians 5:22, John 13:35: If you have the Holy Spirit inside you, people will know it from the way you act. You'll be like an apple tree with fruit everyone can see.

PRAY TOGETHER

Father, help me to be kind, especially when I don't feel like it. Help me remember that when people look at me, they're also looking at You, and make me a good representative of Your love. Don't let me hold grudges in my heart and let bitterness take over. Help me to forgive others the way You forgive me all the time. Amen.

MEMORIZE TOGETHER

"Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you."
—Ephesians 4:31–32, ESV

GROW TOGETHER

Handy Hint: Be sure to read through the week's activities in advance. Some of them might need a little advance preparation, and some days may need to be switched depending on your schedule.

SUNDAY

As a couple: On Saturday night, each secretly pick a word or phrase that makes you especially happy to hear from your spouse. On Sunday, every time your spouse uses the "secret phrase," reward him or her with a kiss.



How long will it take to guess each other's "secret phrase"?

As a family: On Saturday night, set out an empty bowl and a bag of small candies your family likes. On Sunday, every time a family member notices someone else in the family showing kindness, put a candy in the bowl. After dinner, count up the candies. Were there more or less than you expected? Why do you think that is? Share the candies as a reminder that kindness is sweet!

MONDAY

As a couple: Today, make your home a criticism-free zone. Any time you or your spouse makes a critical remark to or about one another, put a dollar in the "naughty jar." Use the contents of the jar for a dinner out later. Try not to put enough money in the jar to afford lobster. Talk about how easy or hard it was to stop making critical remarks.

Handy hint: If your spouse thinks what you said was critical, pay up even if you don't.

As a family: Today, your home is a criticism-free zone. Any time a family member makes a critical remark to or about another family member, he or she has to put a quarter in the "naughty jar." Did you have more quarters today or candy yesterday? Why do you think that is? Before bedtime, vote as a family on

Kindness

who gets the contents of the jar. (How hard was it to decide? Why?)

TUESDAY

As a couple: Write down the top three things your spouse does that let you know you're loved. Have your spouse do the same. Try to guess each other's answers in five tries. How well do you know what speaks love and caring for each other?

As a family: Cover the kitchen table with newspaper and then a big sheet of butcher paper or poster board. At the top, write, "Kindness is ..." and have everyone in the family draw pictures or write notes about what kindness means to them. Put the results up on the wall.

WEDNESDAY

As a couple: Talk about the people who have mentored and shaped you as individuals. Each choose someone who helped your spouse become the person he or she is today, and send a handwritten note thanking him or her for influencing the life of the person you love most.

As a family: Get out some boxes of blank cards or card stock and the family art supplies. Talk together about people you know who don't get appreciated enough for what they do—such as the church janitor, the library lady, or a team coach. Make cards to let them know you notice and are thankful for them. How many people can you think of who need to hear a kind word?

THURSDAY

As a couple: On individual pieces of paper, write out something you have been holding against your spouse (and maybe bringing up in fights). Have your spouse do the same. Share the notes, asking forgiveness for holding a grudge and forgiving each other specifically for each item. If there's a place where you can safely do so, burn the papers, or put them in a shoebox and bury them as a sign you're finished with them.

As a family: Fill a backpack with heavy books. Have each family member think of a real grudge he or she is carrying against another family member. Let each person take turns wearing the "grudgepack." Talk about how heavy a grudge can be and how much lighter our hearts are when we forgive.

FRIDAY

As a couple: This is the bonus round. Each come up with one simple thing you do that makes your spouse crazy that you think is no big deal. Ask your spouse's forgiveness for not putting him or her first in that. Then make hand-decorated certificates promising to stop doing whatever it is. For good. Hang them up side by side.

As a family: Use some of the concepts from your "Kindness is ..." artwork on Tuesday to write a "Kindness Covenant" describing your family's commitment to being kind to one another. Hang it where you can refer to it when needed!

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— WEEK 3 —

GROWING TOGETHER

in Service

READ TOGETHER

Being kind is one way to, “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:39). Serving each other is another way to show love. Jesus set for us the greatest example of service through His ministry on earth and by laying down His life for us. But many other Bible characters also show us how much God values serving others.

For example, the apostles chose seven trustworthy men to make sure all the Christian widows were cared for (Acts 6:1–6). A slave named Onesimus was so useful to Paul that he wrote a whole book of the Bible to encourage his master, Philemon, to treat him as a brother instead of a slave. And in Acts 9:31–41 we meet a very special lady named Tabitha.

She was a widow, and the story doesn’t mention that she had any children. She could have been very

lonely and sad, but instead she was “full of good works and acts of charity” (v. 36). This made her so loved in her town that when she died, everyone was very upset. In fact, God honored Tabitha’s faithfulness by raising her from the dead. God values service!

Here are four biblical principles to encourage you to serve together:

1. Matthew 25:34–40: When you help someone in need because you love Jesus, it’s as if you were helping Jesus Himself!
2. Galatians 5:13–14, 1 Peter 4:10: You don’t always have to learn how to do something new to serve others. Sometimes the things you’re already good at can help someone in need.
3. Matthew 23:11–12: We’re all born selfish. We want other people to do things for us and to look up to us. But in God’s eyes, true greatness comes from being humble and serving others.

James says that if you read God’s Word but don’t act on it, you’re like a person who looks in a mirror but instantly forgets what he or she looks like (James 1:22–24). If we truly want to reflect God to the world, we need to serve others.

4. James 1:27, James 2:1–5: We're supposed to honor and respect everybody, not just the people our world tells us to honor. Serving others is one of the best ways to show respect.

PRAY TOGETHER

Father, help me be more like Jesus by showing me how I can serve others. Give me opportunities to use the things I'm good at for somebody else's benefit and open my eyes to see when someone else needs a helping hand. Help me to love and honor everybody the way You do, even people the rest of the world looks down on. Energize me to put my faith into action! Amen.

MEMORIZE TOGETHER

"Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth." —1 John 3:18, *ESV*

GROW TOGETHER

Handy Hint: Be sure to read through the week's activities in advance. Some of them might need a little advance preparation, and some days may need to be switched depending on your schedule.

SUNDAY

As a couple: Read John 13:1–17 together. Using a big plastic container and some towels, wash each other's feet. While you wash your spouse's feet, express your love and affirm your desire to serve him or her. (You'll want to start preparations for Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday now, too.)

As a family: Read John 13:1–17 together. Get everybody involved, and make sure everybody understands the story. Using a big plastic container or kiddie pool and some towels, have each family member wash



another's feet (giggles are okay—sometimes it tickles!). Don't worry about scrubbing; a quick dunk and dry is enough. Afterward, talk about how you felt while washing and having your feet washed. Shy? Awkward? Disgusted? There are no wrong answers. (You'll want to start preparations for Tuesday and Friday now, too.)

MONDAY

As a couple: Tonight, it's all about the two of you. Give each other the gift of exclusive time and attention by getting away to a quiet, private spot where you can really catch up on your thoughts, feelings, and dreams. A delicious dessert and special gifts for each other can help set the mood, but the main thing is to serve each other by really paying attention. Ask questions such as, "Are we where you thought we'd be at this time in our life?" and "What can I do this week to be a better spouse to you?"

As a family: Today's exercise is called "Hop to It." We show respect when we listen and do what we're told, so all day long, any time you're asked to do a chore or help out, hop to it! Don't wait to be asked two or three times. (This would be a great day to get some extra chores done.) If your kids are young, make or get a set of silly bunny ears and wear them around the house as you hop around

Service

doing your tasks. Bonus round: See who can be best at anticipating what needs to get done without being asked!

TUESDAY

As a couple: This week, each of you should be thinking of a “honey-do” list for your spouse. Don’t share your list yet. Write each item on an individual slip of paper, fold it over, and put it into his and hers “honey-do” jars.

Handy Hint: Be sure to include some more romantic suggestions! On Tuesday, finish your lists and have a ceremony (silly or otherwise) to exchange jars and take ownership for emptying it within six months.

As a family: On Sunday, tell everyone to secretly think of two ways (in case one turns out to be impractical) they could serve another family member (do a chore for him or her, play a game with a younger sibling, give Mom a facial, etc.). Older children can help younger children come up with ideas. On Tuesday, everyone will share their ideas and pick one to do today. Bonus round: Do both!

WEDNESDAY

As a couple: Praying for others is a great way to serve them. Take a walk up and down your street or around your block. As you walk, pray for the people in each house, whether you know them or not.

As a family: Praying for others is a great way to serve them. Take a walk up and down your street or around your block. As you walk, pray for the people in each house, whether you know them or not. Make sure everybody in the family contributes (at least, those who are not pre-verbal). You can take turns so that one family member prays for each home.

THURSDAY

As a couple: Think of a person (or couple) in your church or workplace who seems lonely or is new in town. Invite him or her to a casual dinner at your home. If you have kids, tell them a little bit about your visitor before he or she arrives and help them think of ways to make your guest feel welcome and appreciated.

As a family: Go through the toy box or the children’s closets to find items in good condition that aren’t needed anymore. Make sure the children are involved in the choices.

Handy Hint: A photo is a great way to keep the memories of a treasured toy or outfit without keeping the item itself. As a family, take the items to a local service organization where they’ll go directly to people in need in your community. If possible, ask for a tour so the children can see how they’re helping.

FRIDAY

As a couple: Today or tomorrow, volunteer at a local charity, help out an elderly neighbor, or visit people in a nursing home, hospital, or prison. If one of you volunteers somewhere regularly, choose a different activity so that both of you are new to the experience. Afterward, talk about what you saw and felt.

As a family: Plan a family service project to do today or tomorrow. Be creative. You might volunteer at a homeless shelter or food bank, do house and yard cleanup for an elderly neighbor, babysit for a single mom, or visit a nursing home. Be sure to find a project everyone can contribute to. Afterward, talk about what you saw and felt.

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— WEEK 4 —

GROWING TOGETHER

in Gratitude

READ TOGETHER

Grumbling and complaining are natural. But they're also a sin! If you want to know how seriously God takes complaining, look at the Israelites wandering in the wilderness for 40 years because they forgot what God had done for them.

Gratitude is not natural. It goes against all of our natural, selfish thoughts. That's why we have to work so hard to make it a habit—because gratitude isn't an emotion, it's a choice.

"Give thanks in all circumstances," Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 5:18. That means no matter what happens to us, we can make the choice to thank God for always being there for us. Even when we are sad or angry, we know that we don't have to go through our problems alone, and that's something to be thankful for.

Gratitude comes from a heart that trusts God. It's one of the most important spiritual character qualities we can pursue because it affects every other part of our lives. A grateful heart is a happy heart!

Being grateful is also the best cure for days when the little things in life are getting us down. It's hard to feel grumpy or whiny when you're thinking about what you *do* have instead of what you *don't*.

Here are four biblical principles to help you grow in gratitude together:

1. Hebrews 4:14–16, 1 Peter 4:12–13: When something bad happens to you, remember that Jesus understands because He came down to earth and lived as one of us. When you suffer even though you didn't do anything wrong, you're sharing Jesus' suffering.
2. Philippians 2:14–15: God wants you to be a good example to the people around you and glorify Him. It's hard to do that if you're complaining and arguing all the time.
3. Genesis 50:20, Romans 5:3–5: Suffering can help us learn to depend on God more. When things go wrong, don't complain; get

Gratitude

excited about the good that God can bring out of the situation.

4. Psalm 103:2, Ephesians 5:20: When good things happen, thank God for them! When bad things happen, thank God for all the times He's taken care of you before and thank Him in advance for taking care of you this time, too.

PRAY TOGETHER

Father, help me to remember that You are with me whatever happens. When bad things happen, show me how You're going to use them to make me better and stronger. When little things go wrong and I feel grumbly, remind me of all the good things You've already given me and help me let the little things go. Let me show other people that I can be grateful all the time because my heart trusts in You. Amen.

MEMORIZE TOGETHER

"Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."
—1 Thessalonians 5:16–18, *ESV*

GROW TOGETHER

Handy Hint: Be sure to read through the week's activities in advance. Some of them might need a little advance preparation, and some days may need to be switched depending on your schedule.

SUNDAY

As a couple: Look back on your lives, both before you met and after. What were some of your toughest times? Now that some time has gone by, how can you see God working in each situation? What good things



did He bring out of it? Think of a key word or phrase from each experience and write it on something you can make into a display—such as ceramic tiles or semiprecious stone balls from the craft store, or around the edge of a frame to hold a favorite photo of the two of you. Let your "art project" be a reminder that God took care of you then and He will take care of you always (see Joshua 4:1–7).

As a family: Look back on tough times you've gone through as a family. Now that some time has gone by, how can you see God working in each situation? What good things did He bring out of it? Think of a key word or phrase from each experience. Have some clean stones ready to write your key words on in permanent marker. Put them into a bowl or keepsake frame as a reminder that God took care of you then and He will take care of you always (see Joshua 4:1–7).

MONDAY

As a couple: Take turns drawing the answers to the following five statements: The nicest thing you've ever done for me is ...; The thing I'm most grateful for about you is ...; I am most proud of you for ...; I married you because ...; I am glad God gave you to me because ... See how long it takes for the other person to guess each answer. Bonus round: Put your drawings into an "I'm Grateful for You" scrapbook.

Gratitude

As a family: It's time to get out the art supplies again! Have each family member make a thank-you card for every other family member, appreciating him or her for something specific. If you have a large family, spread out the card distributions over the rest of the week so it stays special. You might want to have a "seat of honor" where the person receiving his or her cards will sit.

TUESDAY

As a couple: Identify the top three things each of you complains about. Agree on a penalty you'll each pay if one of those complaints crosses your lips (or your fingers on Facebook) for the rest of the week. Bonus round: Agree on a reward if you can say something positive about the situation instead.

As a family: During the day, think of some of the situations that cause your family to complain—my sibling was mean to me, I don't like what's for dinner, my team lost, I stubbed my toe, and so on. Write them on individual slips of paper and put them into a bag. At dinner, play Pollyanna's "Glad Game." Pull out each slip, read what's on it, and ask, "Instead of complaining, what can you be glad about in that situation?" Don't be afraid to get silly!

WEDNESDAY

As a couple: Grab your cameras (or your phones) and go on separate scavenger hunts to take photos of things that remind you what you're thankful for. Give yourselves a time limit, and regroup to compare photos. Where did you overlap? Which of your spouse's photos surprised you?

As a family: Before dinner, go around the table and ask each family member to say one thing he or she is thankful for from that day. This activity is not just for Thanksgiving

anymore! Bonus round: Make this a habit at least once a week.

THURSDAY

As a couple: Read Psalm 148 together. Then go on a nature walk or just lie on a blanket in the backyard, on the balcony, or at a local park and watch the clouds—or the stars. Picture everything you see giving praise to God in its own way.

As a family: Give everybody a bag and half an hour to walk around the neighborhood collecting things from God's creation (warn smaller children that the neighbors' flowers belong to the neighbors, though). Dump out the bags in the backyard and go through them celebrating all the amazing things God has given us to enjoy.

FRIDAY

As a couple: On this last night of your *Growing Together* adventure, take some time to look back on your activities. Did you make any commitments you haven't followed through on? What were your favorite and least favorite activities? Are there any you'd like to make a regular part of your lives? What did you learn that surprised you? Pray together that God will use your adventure to help you keep on growing together.

As a family: It's the last night of your *Growing Together* adventure, and it's time to party! Read Psalm 98 together. Then make a joyful noise to the Lord! With younger children, this is a great time for a parade around the house singing "Jesus Loves Me" and other songs at the top of your lungs—playing any "musical instruments" you can find. With older children, this could be a time of singing and dancing along to worship music they love—you too! And remember, the psalm doesn't say "tuneful noise." It just says "joyful." So go for it!

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