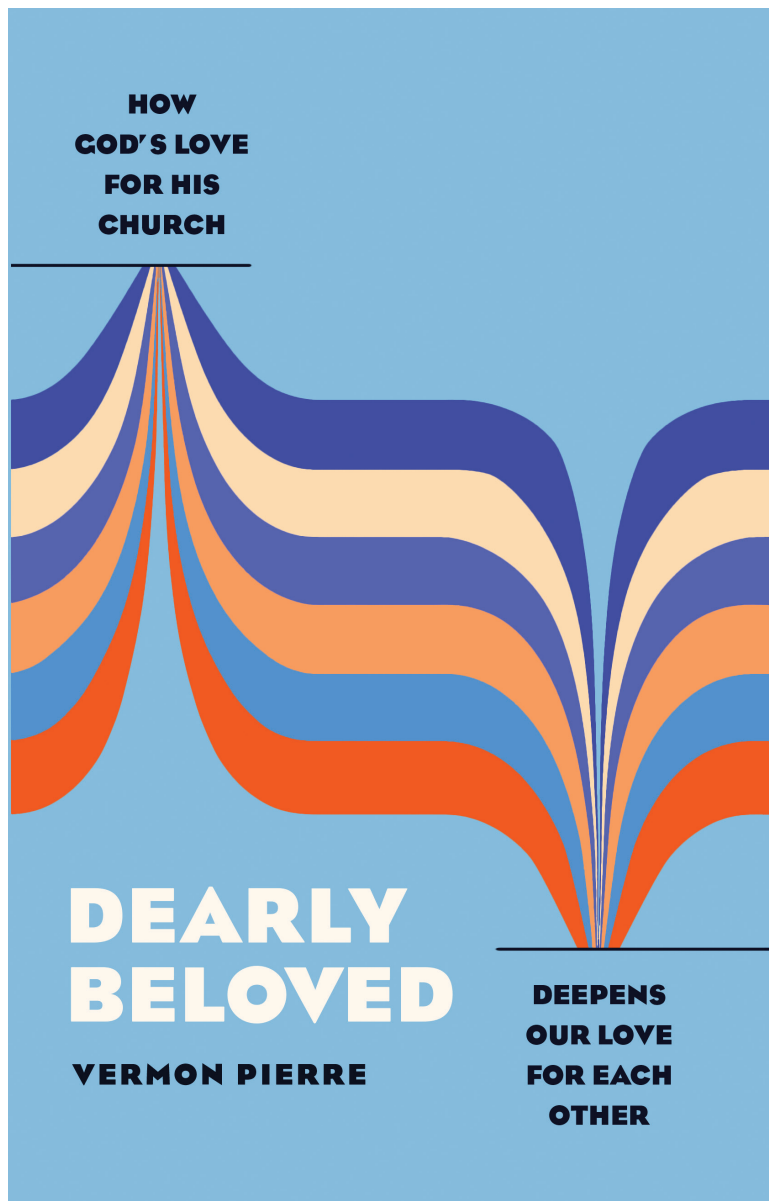


SMALL GROUP GUIDE

to be used with



DEARLY BELOVED CHAPTER I: How We Are Beloved/Beloved to the Lord

At a time when marriages often fail and when the concept of marriage seems to be losing both its meaning and its place of respect in society, it can be difficult to view the relationship between God and us as a marriage. It can also feel awkward. The love between a husband and wife may not be what we think of when we say or hear “God loves you!”

But from the earliest Old Testament passages about God’s covenant with Abraham, to God’s provision for His people through their exodus from Egypt, to His unwavering faithfulness through their idolatry, the threads of God’s committed, fierce love for His people weave a story of a unique kind of relationship with His people: a marriage.

We are known and loved by God, and He is the perfect husband—faithful and unchanging. He loves us like a dearly loved spouse. We are His beloved. It’s that depth of love that binds us to Him when we believe and trust Him for our salvation.

That God comes to us in Jesus emphasizes like nothing else the strength and fervor of God’s love for us. It says that we are dearly loved by Him, that we are beloved to Him. (p. 26)

THINK ABOUT IT

Have you ever seriously considered that the relationship between God and you is **best** described as a marriage? How does this description affect your perspective on your relationship with Him?



Why do you think marriage has become less important in many societies? How does marriage differ from living together?

Scripture sometimes uses other analogies to describe God's relationship to us. How does being a husband differ from being a shepherd, king, or father?

Is there anything that feels uncomfortable to you about describing your relationship to God as that of a husband to his wife? If you were sharing your faith with someone for the first time, would you use that analogy? Why or why not?



DEARLY BELOVED CHAPTER 2: How We Are Beloved/Beloved to One Another

“Comfort” is very important to us. Not just a physical kind of comfort like a comfortable chair or pillow, but a social, philosophical, and even political comfort where we’re not challenged to connect with, rationally dialogue with, or even associate with people who have differing views and experiences from our own. Discomfort easily becomes judgment, and judgment separates us.

Love can’t manifest itself in an environment of judgment and separation. When people interact with each other in ways that bond them together and willingly choose to be in relationship with each other, we begin to practice a *beloved love*. This kind of love is unique to the body of Christ. It’s a love that steers us toward seeing others as Jesus sees them and loving others the way Jesus loves us—not just loved but beloved.

That same marital kind of love that binds us deeply to the Lord also binds us to other believers and fuels our ability to be united together as one people, as His beloved bride.

The early Christians use the term “beloved” in referring to one another because believers have been made beloved to one another by faith in Jesus. And believers remain “beloved” to one another because we all now abide in God and His love, and that love is the beloved love of the Lord God in Jesus Christ. (p. 42)

THINK ABOUT IT

Think about two people that you would call your closest friends. On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 meaning that you have almost nothing in common and 10 meaning you have almost everything in common, how would you rank your two closest friends?



Is this the first time you have ever heard the love between Christians compared to a kind of marital or spousal love? Do you agree with the comparison? Why or why not?

How would you define the difference between being “loved” and being “beloved”?

How might you move from interacting with your fellow believers in a way that communicates they are “loved by you” to a way that communicates they are “beloved to you”?



DEARLY BELOVED CHAPTER 3: How We Live Beloved/Initiative

All relationships start with some kind of initiative. A girl texts a new boy in school. One neighbor invites another neighbor to lunch. A man asks a woman to marry him. A couple contacts an adoption agency.

God is the Great Initiator. He initiated a calling to Israel. He initiated a plan to rescue them and lead them out of bondage. God took the initiative to restore and keep a relationship with Israel, rekindling a broken romance with them.

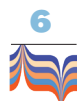
God's love eagerly seeks out His people. God is the one who is willing to make the first move, even when we move away from Him. The same initiating love that draws us to Him can draw us to each other.

As self-centered people, we tend to move away from others easily, protecting our privacy, our space, and our plans. Initiative is not about putting ourselves first. It's about moving toward others even if they move away. Divine love gives us the power to do that.

And so [that initiating quality of divine love] is what we draw from to help us overcome passiveness and isolating habits. It empowers us to show attention and sympathy and forgiveness, and to be willing to be the first to do that in our relationships. It gives us the eyes to see everyone, especially the marginalized and overlooked. It fills us with the affection and passion to start new relationships and keep investing in existing relationships. (p. 54)

THINK ABOUT IT

When was your last lunch or dinner date, movie or event, or any recent get-together with your spouse or with a friend? Who initiated that? Are you usually the person who initiates connections with others, or are you usually the person accepting someone else's invitation?



How do you feel when someone initiates spending time with you? When you think about God initiating a relationship with mankind in general and with you in particular, what feelings come to mind?

Is there someone in your life who may need your initiative? Perhaps it's a friend that you've lost touch with or a family member that you haven't connected with for years. Or maybe you recently heard about a single adult or a family at your church who needs help? Think of one person or family that you can connect or reconnect with in the next week or two. What is your plan to take the initiative?



DEARLY BELOVED CHAPTER 4: How We Live Beloved/Words

Words. They can lift us up or tear us down. Chapter 3 of the book of James compares the tongue (the words we say) to a powerful fire. Hurtful, hate-filled, false, and even thoughtless words can deeply injure and damage a person like a fire destroys and scars a forest. Words can batter our self-worth, ruin relationships, and erode our foundational trust in people and in God.

As believers, our Father God is the ultimate example of words being used for truth and for good. His words build our relationship to Him and teach us how to speak and to show love to one another.

The Song of Songs (Song of Solomon) in the Bible reflects not only the intimate love expressed in human marriage but the divine love of our spiritual marriage to our Savior. These emotion-filled passages give us a window into the “beloved” love with which the Lord loves us, enabling us to reflect an other-centered rather than a self-centered love with the words we use.

God uses His words to initiate and establish, nurture and sustain the relationship. When God intentionally speaks to us, His people, His beloved bride, we see what it looks like to speak words of love to another person. (p. 63)

THINK ABOUT IT

What’s the first thing that comes to mind when you think of a time when someone’s words hurt you? How long ago did that happen?



When was the last time you used *your* words in a way that hurt another person? Why did you do it? Did you apologize?

On a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being “always aware” and 1 being “never aware,” how aware are you of how your words sound and feel to others?

If you begin to view your fellow believers as “beloved,” you can speak words that draw people together instead of pulling them apart. How can you use your words to show:

- that you really “see” someone?
- that you honor and appreciate someone?
- that you affirm someone?



DEARLY BELOVED CHAPTER 5: How We Live Beloved/Delight

To experience “delight” is to experience feelings like deep affection, fondness, joy, contentment, satisfaction, and thrill. When delight is shared in the context of a relationship, it’s experienced in the best, most vibrant context.

When we experience delight in a relationship, it’s fundamentally because we are finding joy, contentment, even a thrill in the connection with another person. On the deepest levels, delight flourishes uniquely in the context of marriage and in the love and intimacy between a husband and wife.

Our concept of delight deepens all the more when we consider that God delights in us the way a loving husband delights in his bride. God *wants* to be with us. He *enjoys* being with us.

As sinful humans, we are incapable of dwelling in the presence of a perfect, holy God. We’re incapable of closing the gap that separates us from His perfection. Jesus is God’s plan to reforge our broken relationship with Him. Jesus is the bridge between us and God.

This forged covenant relationship connects us to the affection, fondness, enjoyment, and satisfaction that God finds in us, enabling us to find this same kind of delight through the shared experiences we have with one another as believers.

Delight and joy are possible within the church, and it’s possible when we see the value of and invest in being with one another. Relationships of beloved love in the church prioritize interactions with one another in shared experiences. It is in those interactions and those shared experiences that delight in one another will begin to naturally grow because they will come out of the soil of our shared delight in the Lord. (p. 79)

THINK ABOUT IT

What gift did you receive as a child that stands out to you as the “best gift ever”? Why did you find so much delight in that gift?



Pleasure, affection, fondness, enjoyment, contentment, satisfaction, and thrill. These are all words that help define what God means when He says He delights in you. Which of these words is it easiest for you to envision God feeling toward you? Which is the most difficult to imagine? Why?

Think of one or more friendships that you could describe using the words in the previous question—a relationship that you feel a sense of delight in. Describe the relationship(s) and discuss why you have such a deep friendship with that person(s).



DEARLY BELOVED CHAPTER 6: How We Live Beloved/Intimacy

Intimacy is being able to be with someone, free of shame and guilt and regret. It's a uniquely close relationship where you experience safety and security and refreshment, where you can be open and vulnerable, where you have the joy of knowing and being known. (pp. 81-82)

Real intimacy takes time. While we might feel an “instant connection” to someone we just met because the other person is a fan of our favorite sports team or is also a quilter or also loves French food, these shared experiences are on the low end of the intimacy spectrum, and they’re easily subject to change. A sports team moves away. A new job means we don’t have time for quilting any more. Our digestion changes with age, and we can no longer tolerate typical ingredients in French food. Our “intimate” connection dissolves.

Biblical passages like John 17, 1 Corinthians 12, and Ephesians 4 call believers to unity and oneness with each other. This unique oneness is grounded in a spiritual intimacy fueled and sustained by the spiritual marriage we have with God. We don’t just associate with other believers; we have access to a spiritual oneness with each other because of the oneness we have with God through Jesus Christ.

Paul often refers to the deep connection he has with other believers and calls them “beloved.” This unique and special term highlights the intimate union we have with the Lord and therefore the intimate union we have with one another as believers.

The more we see ourselves in Christ, and the more we let the Spirit fill all the parts of our heart and soul, the more space is created for a powerful, holy intimacy among believers. The soil of intimacy is tilled by God's intimate union with us. His beloved love is planted within that soil. We have only to live there with one another, and the fruit of intimate love and unity will naturally be harvested. (p. 96)

THINK ABOUT IT

Have you ever had a friendship or romantic relationship that developed quickly and dissolved just as quickly? What was it that brought the relationship together? Why didn’t it last?



When you think of your relationships with other believers, would you describe any of them as “intimate”? Why or why not?

In our modern, highly sexualized culture, some people can feel uncomfortable with any form of physical affection no matter what the context is. Does physically demonstrative affection still have a place in the body of Christ? If so, how should it be practiced?

DEARLY BELOVED CHAPTER 7: How We Live Beloved/Presence

God lives in community. He lives in the fellowship of the Trinity: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Since His creation of man in the garden of Eden, He has shown His desire to live in community with us, to be present with us.

He walked with Adam and Eve, He led Israel through the desert wilderness, and He was present in the temple's Holy of Holies. His son Jesus lived, worked, ate, slept, and ministered alongside His disciples. The Bible shows us how He gave His people the blessing of His presence, and through the Holy Spirit, He gives every believer that same blessing.

His presence with us reinforces His love and care for us, and He calls us to show the same love and care for each other by being present with and for each other. Though modern technology can offer a semblance of connection, we connect with others most deeply when we give them our physical presence.

God is present among believers in a unique way when we are together at the same time. As we orient ourselves to God in worship each week, we orient ourselves to one another. As God unites us to Himself even more to shared life together through worship, so also we become united together, seeing how we in the Lord share life together. (p. 107)

THINK ABOUT IT

For those who are married: think back to the beginning of your married life together. How did you feel about committing to leaving singleness and being “present” with someone else for the rest of your life?

During the pandemic, what did you miss most about not being able to go to church and be physically present with your fellow believers? For those who attended virtual church, did your perspective change on the benefits of meeting together in person? How?

How often do you host other believers in your home for times of fellowship? When you are invited to fellowship in the home of a fellow believer, is your first inclination to accept happily or to find a way to decline? Why?

Can you think of a situation when you were in need of help and someone took the time to be personally present rather than calling, texting, or sending someone else? How did their determination to connect in person impact both you and the situation?

DEARLY BELOVED CHAPTER 8: How We Live Beloved/Commitment

The relationship that God has with His people is often described in very marriage-like terms in the Bible. Both the Old and New Testaments teach of marriage rested on the exclusivity of the commitment. As believers, we are in a unique, completely committed relationship with the Lord, as He is with us. This relationship carries the concept of belonging. We belong to God; He belongs to us.

God has entered into a covenant relationship with us. He is our husband, and we are His bride. Even when we are unfaithful to Him in our sin and doubt, He remains faithful to us. *Jesus is the definitive answer to how God can have and stay in a committed relationship with His people (p. 120).* And as believers, we have the presence of Jesus within us, living in our own hearts.

This bond to God through Jesus Christ gives us the strength we need to sustain deep relationships with each other in the church. Because of God's power working in us, we can be faithful to Him. That same power gives us the ability to have deeply committed relationships to one another in the church and to protect and maintain those relationships.

Some of the people you are in relationship with are a hot mess. Some have habits and preferences very different from yours. Some have thoughts on culture and politics that frustrate you. But in Christ, we can still be committed to one another, as long as what binds us together is not having the same opinions or liking the same hobbies, but instead, what binds us together is the love of God. This is a love-fueled commitment that is stronger than death, stronger than past hurts, stronger than present controversies. (pp. 125-126)

THINK ABOUT IT

Page 115 describes the Ten Commandments as being, in some aspects, like marriage vows. Had you ever thought of the Ten Commandments in that way before? What do you think of that comparison?



Are you a member of a church? Why or why not? Has this chapter informed or even changed your thinking about the meaning and value of church membership? In what ways?

Have you had a genuine friendship with another believer that is currently broken and seems unrestorable? Do you *want* to have the relationship restored? What would have to happen to begin that restoration process?

DEARLY BELOVED CHAPTER 9: How We Live Beloved/Passion

Passion is big. Passion feels all-encompassing. Passion is having more intense, more reactive feelings about something than about anything else.

God has this kind of “outsized emotion” toward His people. He loves us passionately. He is fully invested in His relationship with us. His love for us is vigorous and unrelenting. And His desire is for us to be as passionately committed to Him as He is to us.

When we connect with other believers, we connect to someone who is loved by God with the same intense love He has for us. As members of the body of Christ—His family—we should strive to care about other believers with that same intense love, that same passion.

Having a fervent, passionate love for our fellow believers means that we care enough to reach out to them when they walk through times of darkness, doubt, and even sin. This kind of love pursues others even when it is uncomfortable or they reject or dismiss our actions.

Love that is passionate is a love that prioritizes relationship with others. This means effort is made to regularly spend time with people. It means intentional, deliberate, and regular investments of care and affection into relationships. Beloved love necessitates routine interactions with the same people in the same spaces. (p. 134)

THINK ABOUT IT

Complete this sentence: This first thing that comes to mind when I think of something I’m passionate about is _____ . Why are you so passionate about this?

Does the word “passion” have any negative connotations to you? If so, what are they?

The passionate love that this chapter focuses on challenges us to notice when others seem to be drifting away from Christian fellowship or have not been present at church for a while. Is anyone “missing” from your church or fellowship group? What steps could you take to reconnect with them?

Have you ever thought of church discipline as being an act of passionate love? How could Godly church discipline pursue and restore someone who has fallen into sin?

DEARLY BELOVED CHAPTER 10: How We Live Beloved/Conflict

Conflict is often the “final word” where a relationship is concerned. Conflict may come in the form of one major incident, or it could be an accumulation of behaviors and events. Ultimately, conflict not only defines the relationship, it *is* the relationship.

Marriage is an intimate union with another person. When conflict arises in marriage, its destructive power feels more potent and devouring because of that deep level of intimacy. In conflict, the practices that protect and strengthen a marriage get reversed. Kindness, connection, and acceptance disappear. Hostility, discord, and rejection take their places.

As sinful humans, we were born into conflict with a holy God. But through His love for us and His endless grace, He found us and restored us to Himself. He gives that same grace to us so that when there is conflict in our relationships and in our faith community, we can find and restore others.

As believers, we have the ability to navigate the differences and conflicts that will naturally happen in our relationships. God’s grace is the perfect tool to carry with us through conflicts because it allows us to put aside our own pride and make the difficult choice to show favor to someone else.

Being beloved to the Lord means God has made a way for the oppressed and the oppressor to leave behind their relational conflict and step into the loving embrace of God and, having experienced and known this embrace, step into the embrace of one another. They do this not by ignoring what brought conflict between them. They must directly address what has happened and do the work of repentance and repair in order to restore the relationship. (pp. 155-156)

THINK ABOUT IT

Fight, flight, and freeze are often mentioned as common responses to conflict. Do you default to one of these actions (or to another) when there is conflict? How do you typically react?

Is there a conflict in your church right now that you could help to resolve or help begin the process of resolving? Who should you go to for direction? How do you think you could help?

Chapter 10 mentions the ability that believers have to “look at relational conflicts with confident hope.” What does that mean to you? Have you ever looked at conflicts with a confident hope?

DEARLY BELOVED CHAPTER II: How We Live Beloved/Perseverance

Perseverance is a persistence that drives us to keep going in spite of challenges that might threaten our success or might make us feel like slowing down or even quitting. When we endure, when we continue on regardless of the difficulties or trials that arise, we persevere.

God shows us the perfect example of what it means to persevere. His love not only actively seeks us out, but once His love finds us, it stays. He stays. He never lets go of us. God's commitment of this "always and forever" love is rooted in His perseverance.

To persevere in our relationships with our "dearly beloved," we can't depend solely on our own abilities. We need to lean into the Lord's strength and into His example of persevering with us. The love that exists in the unique relationships of believers is God's beloved love for us.

So how do we endure and persist long enough that space can be created to heal and restore our relationships? It happens the more sure and clear you are about where the relationship is headed. As difficult and challenging and unsure relationships within the church can be, it's important that we keep in front of us this clear picture of where ultimately all such relationships are headed—united in joyful worship of God and enjoyment of Him and one another forever in His presence. (p. 163)

THINK ABOUT IT

Can you recall a time when someone stuck with you until "the end"—the end of a work project, the completion of home improvements, or maybe the completion of a move... someone who stayed with you until the last box was unpacked and put away (without complaining!)? How did their perseverance make you feel?

God calls us His “dearly beloved,” and He is committed to us even when we fail or turn away from Him. How does remembering His unfailing love toward you affect your motivation to persevere in your relationships with other believers?

Is there an issue or a relationship in your life right now that needs your perseverance? What have you been doing to stay engaged? Is it working?

Think back over the 11 chapters you’ve covered in this book. (Refer to the table of contents on page 7.) Which of the 11 chapters was “new” to you—inspiring you to think about its subject matter for the first time? Were any of the chapters hard for you to relate to? Which one(s) and why? Which chapter would you pick as your favorite? Why?