

CHAPTER 2, SESSION 26: THE HOPEFUL COMMUNITY

CHAPTER CHALLENGE

Within this chapter there are two ideas that the group needs to grasp. The first idea is that we are a people who have hope because we know the outcome of all things will be good. We have this hope because we believe God's will is going to prevail. The second idea is that we must be a people who witness to this hope and share it with others. Understanding how these two ideas are related may stretch your group based on their own understanding of witnessing. Certainly, most Christians would acknowledge that we are called to be people of hope. Likewise, most Christians recognize our call to be a witness to the world. However, witnessing is not always seen as related to hope. In fact, many times witnessing has more to do with avoidance of eternal damnation than hope in a good future. As you are able encourage the group to articulate in their own words how hope and witnessing are related, so they can connect these ideas to one another and live them in a healthy way.

SUPPLIES

If you do option 2 for “Experiencing Transformation”:

- ☞ A large flower box filled with soil with enough space for every participant to plant approximately 5 seeds
- ☞ A package of seeds (any variety you prefer) with enough seeds for each participant to have 5 or 6

OPENING TO GOD [5 minutes]

Have the person who volunteered last week offer their reading as a lead-in to 5 minutes of silence.

These 5 minutes of silence allow the members of the group to release the tension and busyness of their day and become fully present to the moment. At the conclusion of the silence someone in the group may offer a brief prayer, ring a meditation chime, or simply say “Amen.”

SOUL-TRAINING [10 minutes]

If you are in a group of six or more people, divide into groups of three or four. Use the questions below to discuss your experience of sharing your faith.

1. Have you been practicing any of the seven steps prior to reading this chapter? How does it encourage you to know that you are already playing a significant role in reaching others?
2. Which of the seven activities was most helpful to you? Why?
3. What difficulties did you discover as you worked through these steps? What might these difficulties teach you?
4. How will you apply these steps beyond this study?
5. What did you learn about God, yourself or others through this soul-training exercise?

ENGAGING THE CHAPTER [30-40 minutes]

If you divided into sub-groups for your discussion of the soul-training exercise, you may regroup for your discussion of the chapter. If time is limited, read through the following questions and note which ones you especially want to discuss, and then begin with those questions.

1. What have been your experiences with witnessing, evangelism or faith sharing?
2. Of the six excuses for not witnessing (p. 45), which one are you most inclined to use for not sharing your faith story? Why?
3. John Zizioulas writes that the Christian community “has its roots in the future and its branches in the present” (p. 48). How does this quote and the author's interpretation of it make you feel about the future? How do your feelings about the future impact your actions in the present?

4. Review “The Four-Part Story of Hope” section (pp. 48-51). What new or challenging ideas did you find in this section? As you place yourself in this meta-narrative, how do you feel?
5. As Christ’s story becomes our story, we receive a new identity that forms the foundation for our behavior, but this is not how we normally think. The author explains,

We almost always do the reverse: we define identity on the basis of behavior; we tell people what they must do (imperative) to find out who they are (indicative). Paul does the opposite: he tells them who they are and then tells them how they should then live. The more we grow into the story, the more the story grows into us (p. 52).

How has your identity in Christ led to changes in behavior?
6. The author points out that our lives are a witness:

When we tell the truth when it is hard, when we sit in the waiting room with a hurting and scared friend when we have pressing things to do, when we strive to stay in harmony with people who disagree with us, when we find a way to spend less so we can give more, when we offer a blessing to someone who curses at us, the essence of Jesus, who lives in and through us, is emerging (p. 55).

Spend a few minutes in silent reflection. Think over the last week and consider when the essence of Jesus was emerging in your life or in someone you know. If you are comfortable, share your insights with the group.
7. The author invites us to be prepared to give the reason for the hope we have, gently, respectfully, and when the person is ready to hear it. How does this approach affect your willingness to share your faith?

ENGAGING THE WORD [10-20 minutes]

Have a volunteer read the following Scripture aloud. Then discuss the questions.

We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints—the faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven and that you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel that has come to you (Col 1:3-6, NIV).

1. In your own life, when has hope produced faith and love?
2. If hope is confidence in a good future, how would you describe your level of hope?
3. What truths about God and God’s kingdom increase your hopefulness in a good future?

EXPERIENCING TRANSFORMATION—TWO OPTIONS

For this session’s experience you have two options. The first option is to make plans to travel to a soup kitchen and practice the seven steps of sharing your faith. The second option is a prayer experience that can be done during the class time.

OPTION 1: SOUP KITCHEN

This is not your normal soup kitchen experience. Normally, when we think of acts of service and soup kitchens we think of going to one, putting on our hair nets and serving the meal. Instead, the vision of this experience is to go to a soup kitchen and eat the meal with those who are being served; sitting with those who are in need. During this time you will have an opportunity to practice many of the seven steps of faith sharing such as watching for those who are hurting or hopeless, listening to someone’s story, offering them hope and perhaps even inviting them to be part of your faith community.

If you decide to go to a soup kitchen, there are several details that will need to be organized, but with the help of the group these can be done without much trouble. Work through the list of considerations with your group, allowing them to take ownership of the experience. Below this list of considerations you will find the seven steps for witnessing. Because of the setting for this experience, a few of the steps have been modified slightly.

Considerations:

1. Is there a soup kitchen within a reasonable distance of your residence? If so, where is it located? Who is the contact person for this soup kitchen?
2. When is the meal served? When can the group attend the meal?
3. The purpose of this exercise is to build relationships, so you won't be going to the soup kitchen to help serve the meal. Someone in the group will need to contact the person responsible for the soup kitchen and explain the practice and its goal: to build a relationship with someone and possibly share some hope with them. If the coordinator of the kitchen is not comfortable with this, you may have to modify your plan.
4. Group considerations:
 - a. If your group is large (or if the soup kitchen is small), you may want to split your group in half and have each group go at a different time.
 - b. Have each person in your group partner with someone else, so they can sit together to help with the conversation (this is especially helpful for introverts).
 - c. You can carpool to the soup kitchen, but it may be best to enter the soup kitchen in pairs rather than as one large group. If you enter as a large group, it is hard to divide without being conspicuous.
 - d. Be prepared in advance to explain what you are doing. There is no reason to lie about your presence at the soup kitchen, however the way you explain your presence could be either very inviting or very insulting. So be prepared to say, "I'm from (blank) church, and we just wanted to come here and get acquainted." If you are prepared, you can avoid saying something like, "Yes, I'm here from (blank) church, and we're here as part of an experiment to witness to hopeless, poor people."
 - e. Also, be prepared with questions that are appropriate for the setting. Questions such as "Where do you work?" or "Where do you live?" could lead to awkward moments if the person is unemployed or homeless. Instead, think of questions that invite the person to tell their story. Questions like, "Have you always lived here?" could invite the person to share where they have lived. Or you could ask, "Do you have any family?" With these types of questions be prepared with follow-up questions that invite them to say more.
 - f. Finally, consider your attire before you go. If possible, wear old, comfortable clothes. Clothing that looks expensive or professional might make you feel "out of place" and could create an "us" and "them" image.
 - g. Please keep in mind that some of the people with whom you are speaking may already be Christians. They may be as much a blessing to you as you are to them.

On the day you are going to the soup kitchen, gather about thirty minutes before hand and spend time preparing your hearts and minds for this experience. This time of preparation will walk you through the seven steps of sharing your faith.

1. **PRAY**—Begin with a time of prayer together. Ask God to help each group of partners to connect with someone during the meal. Pray that your eyes and ears will be open to see those that God is bringing to you. Pray that, as conversations unfold, everyone will be able to follow one of the steps of witnessing, even the beautiful, simple gift of listening. Finally, pray that God will give everyone in your group patience, realizing that they may not connect with anyone during the meal.
2. **WATCH**—When you arrive at the soup kitchen you may be entering very unfamiliar territory. You may feel very self-conscious and out-of-place. Don't fight these feelings, simply welcome them and return your attention to your true purpose: building relationships with those in need. As time allows, whether it is standing in line or hanging up your coat, ask God for eyes of compassion. Look around the room and notice the body language of each person. Who is the Spirit drawing your attention to?
3. **REACH OUT**—Depending on the seating arrangement, you may have limited options on where to sit. Don't worry about this, God will lead you. Once you sit down you can begin with casual conversation,

getting to know the people around you. As you are getting acquainted you will need to be aware of what types of questions you will ask. Again, questions such as, “Where do you work?” or “Where do you live?” may lead to awkward moments if the person is unemployed or homeless. Instead, you can ask questions such as, “Where did you grow up?” and “Do you have any family?” If the conversation doesn’t open up, don’t push it, just enjoy your meal and pray for those at your table as well as the rest of your group.

If the conversation does open up, trust your intuitions and common sense in knowing what to ask. If it seems natural, reach out by asking nonthreatening yet searching questions, such as “How are you feeling about life right now? What is working? What is missing?” Throughout the conversation keep listening for clues to their heart.

4. **LISTEN**—Jim Smith says it best: “Listen well. This is so seldom done in our harried and hurried culture that it almost seems like a lost skill. Simply by listening you are demonstrating love. Listen for clues to the condition of the person’s heart. What is he or she longing for? Struggling with? The best thing to ask yourself privately is, ‘Where do I think God is working in this person’s life?’ It may be healing from a divorce, the joy of a new job or the grief of losing a loved one. Whatever it is, try to discover what the person cares about” (p. 60).
5. **CONNECT**—In the course of one conversation during one meal, it is unlikely you will have an opportunity to connect, but then again, anything is possible. Smith suggests, “Ask yourself, How does the gospel apply to [this person’s] situation?” (p. 61). Another way to understand this step is to call it the “learning” step. You may learn some beautiful and powerful truths from the people at your table if you ask a simple question such as, “What keeps you going?”
6. **SHARE**—At some point you might be asked to tell your story or share your thoughts. If that happens, do not be afraid. Trust the leading of the Spirit, and simply be honest. “Remember Peter’s advice. ‘Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence’ (1 Peter 3:15-16)” (p. 61).
7. **INVITE**—Because of the brevity of this experience, it is unlikely that the conversation will lead to a point of invitation. Nevertheless, it is possible and would be a wonderful gift to share. It is a wonderful expression of acceptance to invite someone to be part of your faith community. However, don’t extend the invitation unless you truly intend to follow through and make it possible. The person may need assistance with transportation or any number of things, and as the inviter you might need to provide them. If those provisions are not realistic, don’t extend the invitation.

If you find that a relationship has formed in this brief time, the best way to invite the person into your life and faith journey might be simply to come back to this same soup kitchen and visit again. In my experience of leading individuals through this type of experience, I have found that deep and genuine relationships begin to blossom after several months and all parties involved are transformed by the relationships.

Following the meal your group should gather somewhere to reflect on their experience. Remember that it is not a competition; some pairs will have powerful experiences and others may not. The goal is to share our hope with someone who is struggling and perhaps develop a friendship along the way. If the group enters the experience with an experimental attitude, they will be more comfortable learning from each other and perhaps trying it again with a better understanding of what might happen.

Finally, there may be one or two people in the group who are uniquely gifted for this type of ministry. If you see someone really coming alive through this experience, encourage them to incorporate this practice into their personal rule. If possible, support and challenge them to make time for this spiritual practice.

OPTION 2: THE HIDDEN VICTORY OF CHRIST

In a different room than the one you meet in, set a flower box filled with soil on a table. The flower box should be large enough for everyone in the group to plant a few seeds. Divide a package of seeds into two small glasses or bowls. Place chairs in a circle around the soil if possible. You will need one chair for each participant.

At the completion of the “Engaging the Word” discussion, have the group move to the room where you have set up the seeds and soil. Invite everyone to have a seat, then read the following:

In Colossians 3:1 the Apostle Paul writes, “Set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.”

To help us understand the finished work of the risen Christ, Walter Brueggemann writes:

The victory of God in our time over this deathly idolatry is hidden from us, as God’s decisive victory is always hidden from us. We do not know exactly when and where the victory has been wrought. It is hidden in the weakness of neighbor love, in the foolishness of mercy, in the vulnerability of compassion, in the staggering alternatives of forgiveness and generosity which permit new life to emerge in situations of despair and brutality (p. 51).

Jim Smith continues by writing, “Jesus defeated the things that oppress us, which is the reason for our hope. It is not flashed by neon signs but is still all around us. We see it when a neighbor serves another and when people forgive or extend hospitality or generosity. When we do this we are participating in the victory of Jesus” (p. 51).

To help us experience the ascension of Christ I would like for you all to take a piece of paper and a pencil or pen and make a list of times this last week when you saw people “participating in the victory of Jesus” by serving others, forgiving, extending hospitality, practicing generosity, etc.

Give the group between 5 and 10 minutes to create their list. Then say:

Now that you have created a list that helps us see the places where Christ’s victory is being revealed, I would like us to have a visual reminder of that victory and how it is sometimes hidden from our sight. On the table I have set a flower box filled with soil. I ask each of you to come forward, two at a time, to plant seeds in the soil. Please plant one seed for each item on the list. Are there any questions?

After answering questions, have participants begin planting. Once everyone has finished planting their seeds, smooth the soil and say something like this:

Just as the seeds you planted are now hidden from our sight, so there are times when the victory of Christ is hidden from our eyes either because we are not looking for it or because it is not yet revealed. We’ll share a few moments of silence to reflect again on your list, the hidden seeds and power of knowing that Christ’s victory is accomplished.

After a few minutes of silence, offer a short prayer of your own or this one:

God of victory, we give you thanks that you have overcome all that would oppress us. We give you thanks that the work of Christ is finished even though we can’t always see where that victory has been wrought. By your Spirit open our eyes and tune our hearts to where your victory has been revealed so that we may be people of hope in a world of despair. Amen.

Following the prayer, the group may want to reflect on this exercise and the quotes used in it by discussing these questions:

1. As you wrote your list of people participating in the victory of Jesus, how did the list make you feel?
2. How can our awareness of the hidden victory of Christ make us a peculiar people?
3. How can we be more aware of the victory that Christ offers in our own world?

GO IN PEACE [5 minutes]

Have a volunteer read the following quote from the book to send you forth.

Roots in the future, roots in the resurrection, roots in the eternal victory of Jesus, roots that are firmly planted in eternal life, roots that nourish the trunk and the branches, and ultimately produce the fruit that draws others into the story. N.T. Wright concludes, “to be truly effective in this kind of mission, one must be genuinely and cheerfully rooted in God’s renewal.” Genuinely and cheerfully rooted. As I often say to fellow apprentices, “If you have been saved by grace, then please notify your face!” We have a real reason to cheer. The more we know the story, the more we rejoice (p. 48).

FOR THE COMING WEEK

The next chapter explores the role of self-sacrifice within the Christian community. The soul-training exercise involves self-sacrifice in various areas of our lives.

Finally, recruit a volunteer who will bring a Scripture, prayer, poem or song for the next class as a lead-in to the opening silence.