

CHAPTER 3, SESSION 27: THE SERVING COMMUNITY

CHAPTER CHALLENGE

The largest challenge of this chapter is the radical shift many churches need to make from being *self-preserving* to being *self-sacrificing*. This is a tall order to fill and may be overwhelming for the members of your group. Nevertheless, it can be done and it must be done, and even a small group that is seeking to be a more self-sacrificing congregation will make a difference.

A secondary issue with this chapter surfaces as people consider their own practices of self-sacrifice. There are indeed some people who serve too much and do not properly care for themselves or their families. Be mindful of individuals in your group that may struggle with this balance. The words of this chapter could lead them in an unhealthy direction of guilt and condemnation. Ultimately our acts of service should flow from a heart of love, not a place of guilt or obligation. Whenever we become driven by a fear of making God or our neighbors happy, we need to evaluate our narratives.

SUPPLIES

- ☞ Altar
- ☞ A Christ candle that will be lit at the beginning of the “Experiencing Transformation” exercise
- ☞ Unlit candles set on the altar
- ☞ Journals with pens
- ☞ Index cards
- ☞ Photocopies of the prayer used during the “Experiencing Transformation” exercise (see page 20)

OPENING TO GOD [5 minutes]

Have the person who volunteered last week offer their reading as a lead-in to 5 minutes of silence. 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 [10-20 minutes]

If you are in a group of six or more people, divide into groups of three or four. This chapter’s soul-training exercise invites us to live unselfishly in multiple settings. Divide into groups of three or four to work through the following questions.

1. Select two of the following areas and describe what you learned about unselfish living:
 - ☞ family
 - ☞ work
 - ☞ church
 - ☞ daily life
2. What was the most difficult aspect of living unselfishly?
3. What did you learn about others as you lived unselfishly?
4. Did you grow in your ability to treasure others through this practice?

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. The author opens the chapter with the story of a committee meeting. How have you seen narratives of self-centeredness and self-sacrifice at work inside or outside the church? What has been the fruit of those meetings?
2. In exploring the false and true narratives, the author contrasts a self-focused church with an others-focused church (pp. 67-70). Consider your own faith community. With your group, list the ways your community is self-focused and others-focused. What do these lists tell you?
3. The author writes, “The value of a church is not in its longevity but in its love. The success of a church is not in its size but in its service to the people and the community” (p. 72-73). Do churches struggle to focus on love instead of longevity, and service over size? What factors contribute to this struggle?
4. What was your reaction to the author’s idea of “treasuring our treasure”? Why?
5. How do you feel about Dallas Willard’s comment: “The most important task we have, especially for those in church leadership, is to pray for the success of our neighboring churches” (p. 76)?
6. Can you think of a time you gave yourself the “space of grace” (p. 77)? If so, how did the space affect the situation?

ENGAGING THE WORD [10-20 minutes]

Have a volunteer read aloud Philippians 2:3-11, then discuss the following questions.

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.

who, though he was in the form of God,
 did not regard equality with God
 as something to be exploited,
 but emptied himself,
 taking the form of a slave,
 being born in human likeness.
 And being found in human form,
 he humbled himself
 and became obedient to the point of death—
 even death on a cross.
 Therefore God also highly exalted him
 and gave him the name
 that is above every name,
 so that at the name of Jesus
 every knee should bend,
 in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
 and every tongue should confess
 that Jesus Christ is Lord,
 to the glory of God the Father.

1. What does this passage tell us about the narratives of Jesus?
2. How would you describe the metanarrative of this text (the bigger story)?
3. As a group, create a list of tangible ways you can follow the example of Christ who humbled himself for the sake of others. Individually consider which items you could do this week.

EXPERIENCING TRANSFORMATION

The goal for this week’s “Experiencing Transformation” is two-fold. The first goal is to celebrate the ways your faith community is already “others-centered.” The second goal is to work together as a group to either support a current

“others-centered” practice within your congregation or to come up with a way that you as a group can treasure the unique treasures of your community. First, pass out to each person a copy of the prayer that you have photocopied.

Then begin by sharing this quote from the author:

Communities become others-centered when they are steeped in the narrative of the kingdom of God. They know that their community is an outpost of the kingdom of God, a place where grace is spoken and lived for as long as is needed. The value of a church is not in its longevity but in its love. The success of a church is not in its size but in its service to the people and the community. We are a people founded by a person who never established a church or built a building or led a finance campaign to build impressive buildings. Our leader just came and served and then died for the good of others. I suppose that would be a pretty good mission statement for a church, but one I am not likely to see: “We exist to serve others and then die, just like our Founder” (pp. 72-73).

In a worshipful space, with an altar in the middle with one lit candle on the table and several unlit candles spread around it, invite the group to identify ways your congregation is “others-centered.” We often overlook these gifts. With each practice that is named such as housing the community food bank, sponsoring after-school tutoring, providing daycare for single parents, light a candle. After each candle is lit offer the following prayer:

Leader: *We are an outpost of your kingdom, O God.*

All: **Help us to speak and live your grace to the treasures in our midst.**

After several practices have been named, invite the group to prayerfully consider if there are any “treasures” in your community that the congregation has failed to treasure. Are there college students in need like the people the author describes? Is there an overlooked homeless population? Are there single parents who could use some help? Are there minorities that need a hand up? As these groups are identified, light another candle for each one. Again offer this prayer:

Leader: *We are an outpost of your kingdom, O God.*

All: **Help us to speak and live your grace to the treasures in our midst.**

Once 3 or 4 “treasures” have been identified, move to a time of silence. In the silence invite everyone to individually write a conversation with God on a sheet of paper, asking God how the group could treasure these treasures in the next week or two. Give the group about 10 minutes for this time of discernment.

If anyone has an idea that comes from their conversation with God, have them write it down on an index card. Gather the index cards together and read the suggestions aloud to the group, allowing the group to decide if there was one they should pursue. As you are able, be open to the Spirit’s leading in what steps to take.

Develop a plan and schedule a time so the group will be able to follow through on whatever is decided.

GO IN PEACE [5 minutes]

Have a volunteer read aloud this quote:

Communities become others-centered when they are steeped in the narrative of the kingdom of God. They know that their community is an outpost of the kingdom of God, a place where grace is spoken and lived for as long as is needed (p. 72).

May our communities become such places.

FOR THE COMING WEEK

The next chapter considers what unites the Christian community. The soul-training exercise is expressing love toward those you disagree with. There are practical suggestions for this soul-training, but you will need the full week to be able to implement them.

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.

Leader: *We are an outpost of your kingdom, O God.*

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