

CHAPTER 7, SESSION 31: THE GENEROUS COMMUNITY

CHAPTER CHALLENGE

Whenever the issue of generosity and financial resources are discussed it is always possible that people will feel condemned. The thrust of this chapter is that those who have resources are invited into a kingdom dance of identifying needs and meeting those needs with our resources. If we do not engage in this dance we should not feel condemned, we just aren't experiencing the fullness of kingdom life. And while we are not meant to feel condemned, we also must realize there could be an invitation from the Spirit to live more simply and give more generously. One challenge you may face as a leader is helping your group to hear such an invitation.

SUPPLIES

- ☞ Tickets for dividing the group
- ☞ Candy bars to represent the food distribution (you will need twice as many candy bars as there are people in your group, so if you have 10 people in your group you will need 20 candy bars; if there are 5 people in your group you will need 10 candy bars—purchase full size candy bars, not the small ones)
- ☞ Extra full-size candy bars as prizes
- ☞ Bite-size candy bars as prizes
- ☞ Dictionaries
- ☞ Pens
- ☞ Paper

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. Use the questions below to discuss your experience of applying frugality to your time, talents and treasures so you could then be generous with those items.

1. What challenges did you experience in being frugal in these three areas?
2. Did you notice an increase in your margin? If so, how?
3. What new ways were you able to be generous as a result of your frugality and increased margin?
4. Does your faith community tend to emphasize stewardship of time, talents or treasures more? How does this emphasis affect your own practices?

ENGAGING THE CHAPTER [25-45 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 begins this chapter by telling the story of his mixed feelings about taking a homeless man to dinner. Discuss your experiences of helping those in need and the feelings these situations produced.

2. There are three false narratives that prevent generosity: “God helps those who help themselves” (p. 149). “If I give it away I have less” (p. 150). And “What I have is mine to use for my own pleasure” (p. 150). Which of these three false narratives is strongest in your life? How did you come to believe these narratives?
3. In explaining the third true narrative that everything is God’s and I am a steward of those resources, the author writes, “We are stewards of God’s gifts; everything belongs to God. That changes everything. . . . This fundamental shift affects all of our daily decisions” (p. 153). Spend a few minutes silently reflecting on the daily decisions you make that might be different if you believed everything belongs to God and you are a steward of God’s gifts. In a journal or in the margin of your book, write down these changes. If you are willing, share your notes with two or three others in your group as a way to hold each other accountable.
4. The author recounts several individuals who share their gifts with him, and through submission he receives those gifts. Name one or two people who are a profound blessing to you. How might you express your gratitude to these people?
5. The three ways to become a generous community are (1) learning the joy of giving, (2) practicing margin and (3) learning ways to give. Which of these is most lacking in your faith community? How could you increase your knowledge or skill in this area?
6. What is your reaction to the idea that we cannot give from beyond the grave but can give only now? If you agree with this statement, what changes might you make to your daily life?

ENGAGING THE WORD [10-20 minutes]

Have a volunteer read aloud 2 Corinthians 8:13-14.

I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance (NRSV).

1. When has someone else’s abundance and generosity supplied your need?
2. When has sharing your abundance helped someone else in their need and led to fair balance?

EXPERIENCING TRANSFORMATION WITH SOUL-TRAINING [35 minutes]

This session’s experience is a simulation in global distribution. Based on the size of your group you will have to adjust the quantities of your supplies to match the percentages given in the exercise. The exercise will divide your group in two with approximately 20% of the participants in a group representing the “rich” of the world and approximately 80% of your group representing the poor. Once your group is divided, they will be given candy bars that represent the distribution of food around the world. The “rich group” will receive approximately 86% of the candy bars and the “poor group” will receive 14% of the candy bars as a representation of the distribution of food in the world. The exercise concludes with a different look at resources as again the two groups are given a task, but the resources to complete the task are not equally distributed.

Here’s an example, if you have 10 people in your group, 2 would be randomly chosen to represent the rich of the world and 8 participants would represent the under-resourced of the world. You would have a total of 20 candy bars and the 2 people in the rich group would get 86% of those, which is 17. The 8 people who are in the poor group will get 3 candy bars.

The goal of this exercise is to give participants a visual grasp of the disparity of resources in our world and how that impacts life. It is *not* a goal of the experience for anyone to feel guilty or condemned. A person might feel deeply grieved by the experience, and they may desire to make changes in their life based on the experience, and these responses are fine, but if you sense that anyone feels overwhelmed with guilt, take additional time to move them to a positive place of action.

Some participants may find the exercise too contrived. If anyone feels this way, their feelings should be honored. Give them space to express their own thoughts on the matter. However, keep the overall focus of discussion on the true narratives from the chapter; otherwise the conversation could degenerate into fruitless diatribes.

Distribute the tickets (see supply list with instructions) randomly to the group without them knowing their significance. Once everyone has received their ticket, divide the group into the “rich” and the “poor.” For added emphasis you could move to a different room where there are only enough chairs for those who are rich, while those who are poor must either stand or sit on the floor. Once the groups are divided, read the following:

Today’s exercise helps us explore the second true narrative that was discussed in the chapter: if we share, we all have enough (p. 151). This kingdom truth is even expressed in the world at large, where 1.2 billion people—one fifth of the world’s population—live on less than one dollar a day. 3 billion people—almost half of the world’s population—struggle to survive on less than two dollars a day. 815 million of these people suffer from chronic hunger. Every 3 seconds, a child dies from hunger or other preventable causes. That’s 29,000 children every day!

You may think hunger is about too many people and too little food, but surprisingly this is not true. This rich and bountiful planet produces enough to feed every woman, man, and child on earth. Instead, it is about those who have sharing with those who lack so that there will be enough.

Here is how things break down: 20% of the world’s population (facing the “rich” group)—that’s you—consumes 86% of the world’s goods, represented by these candy bars. So even though there are only (insert number of “rich” group) of you, you get (insert number of candy bars that would be 86%, give them the candy bars that represent 86% of the world’s resources). The rest of you (facing the “poor” group) get only 14%. (Give this group the amount of candy bars that is appropriate, and encourage both groups to start eating.)

The roots of hunger lie in inequalities in access to education, resources and power. The results are illiteracy, poverty, war and the inability of families to grow or buy food. This activity is a metaphor for how food and other resources are inequitably distributed in the world. As such, we can only touch upon the issues. We cannot recreate the many and complex ways in which poverty manifests itself. We will not have time to go into all the problems associated with lack of access to healthcare, education and employment opportunities, and the realities of the day-to-day struggle for survival.

The point of this activity is not to make us feel guilty. Whether we are born in the “rich” group or the “poor” group is beyond our control. The point of this exercise is to help us visualize the abundance and perhaps take a step further into kingdom generosity.

To help express a different disparity besides food, I am going to give you a task to perform within your group. I will give you the only supplies you will get to complete this task. Distribute paper, pens and dictionaries—once again, give 86% of the pens and paper to the rich plus one dictionary for each person in the “rich” group. Then give 14% of the paper and pens to the “poor” group along with 1 dictionary for every 10 (or less) people in that group.

I will give you two words. Each person must have their own, individual piece of paper with those two words, and the dictionary definitions of those two words written on it. Shared efforts or your own definitions are not good enough. The two words are ABUNDANCE and SCARCITY. You may begin. After a few minutes ask all who have completed the task to hold their definitions up. Presumably, all the “rich” will have completed the task while only a few of the “poor.” Praise the “rich” and give them more candy as a prize for accomplishing the task. For the poor who do complete the task, give them a “bite” size candy bar. For those who did not complete the task, tell them they must give whatever they do have to a person who completed the task, whether it is a piece of candy bar, a piece of paper, a pen or a dictionary.

Then say: This concludes our exercise, but we are going to spend a few minutes in silence so you can process what just happened. Consider questions such as these:

- 👉 How did you feel during the exercise?*
- 👉 What new thoughts did you have about the issue of global poverty?*

- ☞ What questions did the exercise raise for you?
- ☞ We will end the silence with a time of prayer. I will pray and then everyone will say aloud “Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” We will end the prayer time by saying aloud, “Amen.”

After the silence offer this prayer:

*Generous and loving God, we pray:
That no youngster will be denied an education,
That no worker will be cheated of justice,
That no child will die from a curable disease.
Together we pray,*

All: Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

*That no financial system will ever again burden the poorest,
That no trade will deny a fair wage,
That no debt will ever again trap nations in poverty.
We pray,*

All: Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

*Guide us, o Lord,
To do justice,
To love kindness,
To walk humbly with you.*

Amen.

DEBRIEFING

1. How did you feel during the exercise?
2. This activity aims to make us examine how we value people. Based on your experience, how can we value people in ways other than their productivity?
3. What practical steps could you take to address the unequal distribution of resources in the world?
4. What systems and institutions are in place in our world that keep resources from being distributed in a just way?
5. What sacrifices might the “rich” have to make in order to balance the resources of our world?

GO IN PEACE [15-20 minutes]

Have a volunteer read aloud this quote from the book:

A gospel of abundance is found only in the kingdom of God, where somehow we have what we need when we need it. The kingdom of God is not like an ATM where we can get an endless supply of resources to spend however we like. It is a dispenser of resources offered to those who understand the ways of the kingdom. Where there is a need and a person who can meet that need, the supply will never run out (p. 154).

Let us go out, seeking the kingdom!

FOR THE COMING WEEK

The next chapter looks at the role worship plays in the Christian community. The soul-training exercise gives us five steps to prepare for worship.

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.