

CHAPTER 6, SESSION 6: GOD IS HOLY

CHAPTER CHALLENGE

Our experience in working through this material with groups is that people are generally thankful to arrive at this chapter even though the focus is on God's holiness, which leads to wrath. This chapter addresses apparent conflicts between a God who is angry and a God whose love is radical.

Perhaps the greatest challenge of the chapter is grasping simultaneously God's wrath and God's love. While the author does an excellent job of connecting the two—"love loves unto purity"—it will be important to keep those two ideas present for people.

SUPPLIES

- ☞ Decide in advance how you will do the "confession." If you have individuals partner off and confess to one another, you will need only space for the pairs to converse privately. If you decide to have a silent time of confession, you will need paper and pens as well as an appropriate way to destroy the confessions in front of the group. The most powerful symbol for this would be throwing the papers into a fire, but if your space does not allow for this, simply throw them into a trashcan or even run them through a shredder; anything that helps everyone realize that God is no longer dealing with them on the basis of their sins.
- ☞ "Meditating on the Incarnation of Christ" handout.

WELCOME

Once everyone has arrived and been welcomed, remind them of your plans for reading the entire Gospel of John together (if applicable).

Recite Colossians 3:1-12 together, then enter into the silence.

5 MINUTES OF SILENCE

PRAYER TO END THE SILENCE

Holy and Just God, as we gather for this time of study, reflection and conversation, may your Spirit guide every word we speak and every silence we share. May we come to understand more fully your holiness and how your very wrath is an expression of love for us. As we surrender our wills to yours, may your love "love us unto purity." Amen.

SOUL-TRAINING [15 minutes]

Divide into small groups of three or four and discuss what you learned from the soul-training practice of margin. Use these reflection questions to start your conversation.

1. Were you able to develop margin in any way this week? If so, describe what you did and how you felt about it.
2. As you tried to develop margin in your life, what did you notice was the most difficult? What was the most rewarding?
3. How do you plan to practice the discipline of margin in the future?
4. What, if anything, did you learn about God or yourself through the exercise?

ENGAGING THE CHAPTER [20 minutes]

THE BIG IDEA IN THIS CHAPTER: God is love and God is also holy. God's "wrath" toward sin is a reflection of that love and holiness.

MAIN POINTS

- ☞§ The notion of God as a kind of "teddy bear" is common and appealing in our culture and even in many churches.
- ☞§ Though we seldom reflect on it, Jesus spoke a great deal about judgment and wrath.
- ☞§ Passion refers to a kind of out-of-control human anger, whereas pathos refers to an act of care and intention. God's wrath is pathos, not passion.
- ☞§ God is essentially holy but not essentially wrathful. Holiness is an attribute of God; wrath is an action of God.
- ☞§ "Love loves unto purity," said George MacDonald, meaning that God's love is so strong that it will burn everything that is not pure out of his people.
- ☞§ We may think we want a more passive and condoning God, but in reality we do not.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Chapter six addresses two false narratives. The first is that God is always angry and wrathful toward us. The second false narrative is that God does not care about sin at all and is more of a "teddy bear." With which of these two narratives do you identify most? Why?
2. "To love is to will the good of another," according to Dallas Willard (p. 119). When this understanding of love comes into contact with our sin, the result is God's wrath because God is "fiercely and forcefully opposed to the things which destroy his people" (p. 121). What would you say to a friend who wanted to understand how a loving God could be wrathful?
3. We are given this wonderful quote from George MacDonald, "love loves unto purity" (p. 123). What thoughts and feelings do you have when you consider that God longs to remove everything from your life that would destroy you?
4. "God will not violate the choices we make. People may choose to bar God from their life. Thus the doors of hell are locked from the inside" (p. 125). How is this vision of hell similar or different from your own understanding?
5. The chapter concludes with the important point that we must first trust in God's love and forgiveness before we can begin to understand God's holiness. The first five chapters of this book unpack God's love and goodness. What impact have the previous five chapters had in preparing you to understand God's holiness?

BREAK [5 minutes]

EXPERIENCING TRANSFORMATION [40 minutes]

This week's experience is engaging in the practice of confession. To have a fully developed understanding of this discipline, read Richard Foster's chapter on the subject contained in his book, *Celebration of Discipline*. It is an inspiring chapter.

You will have two options for your group based upon the level of trust and intimacy that exists within your group.

OPTION I

The first option is for the members of your group to partner off and confess to one another. (You could set the partners yourself or have them find a partner.) There are two reasons you may choose not to do this form of confession with your group. The first is that your group may not be ready for this level of intimacy. It requires a lot of trust to open up and share our sins with someone else; however, if we are willing to take that risk, it leads to a tremendous sense of community and honesty. The second reason is that there may be folks in your group who are not spiritually mature enough to hear someone else's struggles or who might be led to a position of judging others.

If you have your group partner off and confess to each other, use the following words from James Bryan Smith regarding confession as well as some additional practical ideas to be read to the group.

Together we have explored the holiness of God, and how God loves us unto purity. We have been reminded that our God is a consuming fire that removes the dross from our lives. Throughout the history of the church one of the most powerful ways to bring our impurity to the light AND to experience God's healing forgiveness has been the practice of confession. Here are a few important and practical teachings on confession.

It is important to know how much to confess. The general rule of thumb is that we should only confess what the Spirit leads us to confess and no more. The goal is not to confess every sin from our childhood to today. We simply want to confess the sins that the Spirit brings to our minds. As we name each one, the power of that sin will be broken, as always happens when the sin is brought to the light.

When we confess we are not looking for advice, or even counsel. Avoid getting into lengthy discussion about it, and watch for any tendency to rationalize the thing confessed ("Well, I struck back in anger because I had been having a really bad day" or "Sure I have some lust in my heart, but it isn't enough to need to mention"). Just confess it. Say, "This is what I thought/said/did...I am ashamed of it, and I don't want to carry the shame for another day."

Your confession does not need to be some giant sin but it should also not be so trivial as to have no effect. Let the Spirit lead by asking, "What, if anything, would it be good for me to confess to someone else?" Remember James 5:16 which teaches, "Confess your sins one to another that you may be healed." Confession is the path to healing and wholeness.

The listener should listen closely and compassionately. Realize as you listen to the other person's sins that while the sins may not seem bad to you, they are a burden to this person. Do not judge the person who is confessing, but instead remember that we all stand in need of God's forgiveness. It is also important that absolute confidentiality be kept. At the end of their confession, prayerfully offer these words, "By the blood of Jesus, you are forgiven."

Spouses should not be partnered together. We will begin with 10 minutes of silent reflection to identify what sins you wish to confess. Then you will find (or be assigned) a partner. The first person will have 10 minutes to share their confession. Then the second person will be given 10 minutes to do the same. I will let you know when each of the 10 minute segments have passed.

OPTION 2

If your group is not ready for partner confession, you can do a silent confession. For this experience you will need paper and pens for everyone. Give them 15 minutes to allow the Spirit to bring any sins to mind. Then have them bring their papers forward and destroy them in some way. If it is safe, there could be a fire where the confessions are burned or you could have a paper shredder or just a trashcan.

Say to the group:

Together we have explored the holiness of God and how God loves us unto purity. We have been reminded that our God is a consuming fire that removes the dross from our lives. Throughout the history of the church one of the most powerful ways to bring our impurity to the light AND to experience God's healing forgiveness has been in the form of confession. Here are a few important and practical teachings on confession.

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In a moment I will give you a blank sheet of paper and a pen. We will then have about 15 minutes of silence for you to dialogue with the Holy Spirit and see what sins come to mind. As sins surface, simply write them down. This paper is for your eyes only. After 15 minutes I will invite one person at a time to come forward and destroy the paper as a symbol of God's forgiveness. May we find healing and freedom as we offer these confessions.

Give the group paper and pens. Let the group know when 15 minutes have passed. After everyone has brought their confession forward to have it destroyed, proclaim to the group: *By the blood of Jesus, you are forgiven.*

GO IN PEACE [5 minutes]

Have a volunteer from the group read the quote below from the chapter. Then sit in silence and soak in these words to close your time together.

God is against my sin because he is for me. And if I am for sin, God stands against those desires because they cause my destruction. I would not have it any other way. To be sure, I am prone to excusing my sin or rationalizing my weaknesses, but God is not in that business. Though we are now reconciled through Christ, God is not indifferent to my sin. It hurts me, and therefore it hurts God—because God loves me.

But even still, God has a better way to help me with the issue of sin. . . . God’s method of change is the highest of all. After all, MacDonald did not write, “wrath shames unto purity.” He said, “love loves unto purity.” God’s holy love burns the dross of sin out of our lives (pp. 123-24).

God’s love is loving you “unto purity.” Go in the assurance of God’s deep desire for your good.

FOR THE COMING WEEK

- ☞ Chapter 7 of *The Good and Beautiful God* is a very important and powerful chapter. However, it explores an idea that many folks may be unfamiliar with: the incarnation of God in Christ. For this reason and because the chapter is so good, participants will want to give themselves plenty of time to read the chapter and even a chance to read it a second time thoroughly.
- ☞ If you have decided to read the Gospel of John as a group, everyone will need to be reminded of those arrangements.
- ☞ This week also features two soul-shaping exercises that are not included in the book. The first, as has been the case each week, is continuing to memorize Colossians 3:1-17. This week in particular, participants will be memorizing Colossians 3:13-14.
- ☞ The second soul-shaping exercise is a guided meditation on the incarnation of Christ. It is based on a meditation by Ignatius of Loyola and has been expanded upon by Maureen Conroy in her book, *Experiencing God’s Tremendous Love*.

MEDITATING ON THE INCARNATION OF CHRIST*

The idea of God becoming human in an effort to draw us closer to him is a powerful one. This meditation is meant to help us understand this idea cognitively as well as emotionally and spiritually.

If you have not done “meditation” before, do not worry! Think of meditation as simply a long, loving gaze at something of beauty. For example, when a person goes to a museum and spends an hour in front of one piece of art—savoring the technique involved in creating the masterpiece, noticing as many details as possible, pondering questions about the artwork—all of this is a form of meditation. In the same way, we can meditate on Scripture, using our imaginations to help us see a story take place and then savoring all the details of the story as well as voicing questions that surface in our hearts around the story. If this is done prayerfully, it is possible that Christ may indeed whisper an answer to us through his Spirit. And so it is with the following meditation. Set aside thirty minutes to an hour and simply follow the steps. Allow your mind and heart to move deeply into the images suggested by Ignatius and the story of Mary’s conversation with the angel Gabriel.

Before you begin, have your Bible ready by turning to Luke 1:26-38. You will read this passage near the end of the meditation.

Begin with 5 minutes of silence to allow yourself to become fully present to the exercise. Breathe deeply and slowly and allow any tension within your body to melt away. When you are centered, read the following paragraph.

God’s longing heart seeks after us when we flounder and get lost. Ignatius’ contemplation on the Incarnation in the Spiritual Exercises . . . tells the story of humanity being lost and God’s desire to find us. Ignatius imaginatively reconstructs the lostness of humanity.

With your imagination picture “*all nations in great blindness, going down to death, listen to . . . how persons on the earth . . . swear and blaspheme, consider how persons on the face of the earth wound and kill.*” Spend a few minutes considering these images. When you begin to feel the seriousness and pain of our world’s condition, continue.

The three persons of the Trinity, viewing the breadth and length and height and depth of humanity’s self-destruction, decide on a specific action: to send the Second Person in the flesh to manifest the breadth and length and height and depth of their love. As we contemplate this story let us enter into the desperation of the Trinity:

They will not listen to us; they ignore our love and desire to be close to them. Let one of us go to earth to see what we can do; possibly if we as human invite them in a human way, they will be able to listen and respond. They have not listened to us as we speak through the prophets; possibly they can respond to us if we speak person to person. Let us show them concretely the unfathomable depth of our love.

Again, spend a few minutes feeling God’s deep longing for all of creation. Imagine the above conversation among the Trinity.

Read Luke 1:26-38. Read it slowly and imagine the conversation between Mary and Gabriel. Ignatius points out, “In the womb of Mary the deep desires of the Trinity become enfleshed in the person of Jesus.” Linger over this idea, allowing yourself to feel the excitement of Jesus entering our world, and how his very being and his sacrifice are an expression of God’s nature.

Finish your meditation with a simple prayer of thanks to God for any insights you have gained during this time.

* Based on a meditation from Maureen Conroy’s book, *Experiencing God’s Tremendous Love*.