

CHAPTER 4, SESSION 4: GOD IS GENEROUS

CHAPTER CHALLENGE

Theologically, this chapter may raise the most questions of any chapter thus far because most people are very comfortable with a God who rewards good behavior and punishes sin. Some folks may feel that the book is advocating a wishy-washy, “teddy bear” God. This is actually not the case, and this fact will become most clear in chapter 6, “God Is Holy.” Until you get to chapter 6, don’t hesitate to let people express any concerns they have about the God they are meeting in Chapter 4. Use exploratory questions such as: Why are we uncomfortable with a radically generous God? and How would our religious lives be different if we really believed God was as generous as the author proposes?

Also, give sufficient time for conversation and reflection regarding “The (Misunderstood) Biblical Narrative of Earning.” This brief section contains very important ideas about our interpretation of Scripture. Depending upon a person’s church background, this section may or may not raise serious questions about the author’s ideas. If such questions come up, do not worry about answering them or convincing anyone that the author is right. Give people space to clearly articulate their concerns and encourage them to stay with the material even if they disagree.

SUPPLIES

- ☞ One giant piece of butcher paper for graffiti wall (2 feet long for every participant)
- ☞ Markers, colored pencils and anything else to help create visual art

WELCOME

As folks enter, help them to feel welcome.

Recite Colossians 3:1-8 as a group. Move directly from reciting the passage into the silence.

5 MINUTES OF SILENCE

PRAYER TO END THE SILENCE

Generous and loving God, you have given us more than we could ask or imagine. Above all you have given us your love even before we loved you! Help us to grow in knowing who you truly are, for it is in this knowledge that we will come to have a perfect love for you. Amen.

SOUL-TRAINING [15 minutes]

In groups of three or four discuss the soul-shaping practice of living and breathing the 23rd Psalm. The first three questions will help this discussion. The fourth question examines previous soul-training exercises.

1. Were you able to practice the exercise this week? If so, describe what you did and how you felt about it.
2. What, if anything, did you learn about God or yourself through the exercise?
3. What was the most meaningful verse or phrase of the 23rd Psalm for you?
4. Which soul-training exercises are you still doing from previous chapters? So far, as a group you have covered: sleep, five minutes of silence, awareness of creation, counting blessings and memorizing Scripture. What gradual effects are these practices having on your life?

ENGAGING THE CHAPTER [20 minutes]

THE BIG IDEA IN THIS CHAPTER: We do not earn God’s love, favor, forgiveness or acceptance. God is generous and gives them to us freely.

MAIN POINTS

- ☞ This Dallas Willard quote perfectly describes how Christian spiritual formation works: “The process of spiritual formation in Christ is one of progressively replacing . . . destructive images and ideas with the images and ideas that filled the mind of Jesus himself” (p. 75).
- ☞ The false narrative of earning God’s favor is deeply rooted in our culture and in some churches. This narrative is usually based on a selection of stories or verses that seem to support this narrative.
- ☞ Most Christians live each day with the thought, What God wants most for me is to shape up. In reality, God wants more than behavior change; he wants us to love him with our whole heart, soul, mind and strength.
- ☞ Jesus’ narrative about God goes against the idea of earning; instead he speaks of a God who gives freely to all.
- ☞ God not only likes you or loves you, God delights in you.
- ☞ The most important thing about a person is what he or she believes about God.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The false narrative explored in this chapter is, “Love and forgiveness are commodities that are exchanged for performance. God’s love and acceptance and forgiveness must be merited by right living. What God most wants is for us not to sin, and to do good” (p. 77). What effect does this narrative have on your relationship with God?
2. The author points out that “To say that sin has consequences is different than saying that because of our sin God entirely rejects us” (p. 78). How would you put into your own words this idea that sin has consequences, but our sin does not lead God to reject us?
3. The overarching story of the Bible reveals a God of grace. Certain minor narratives may seem to contradict this major narrative, but the minor narratives must be interpreted only in terms of undeserved and unearned love (p. 79). How does this way of reading Scripture resonate with you? In what ways does it help your reading of the Bible? In what ways does it make you uncomfortable?
4. We are assured that God’s love is not earned, and that what God wants from us is simply to know his love, which will naturally lead us to love in return. If it is true that God’s love is not earned, what would you do differently tomorrow? Why?
5. A. W. Tozer writes, “What comes into our mind when we think about God is the most important thing about us” (p. 88). Divide into groups of three or four. Describe to your small group the first thing that comes into your mind when you think about God. In what ways does this thought shape your daily life?

BREAK [5 minutes]

ENGAGING THE WORD [10 minutes]

Call the group together, read Matthew 20:1-15 aloud and ask the following questions.

1. *What does this parable say to you about God’s generosity?*
2. *If this was the only story you knew about God, what would you conclude?*

Read Psalm 23 and ask:

1. *What does this psalm say about God’s generosity?*
2. *What symbols does the psalmist use to describe God’s generosity?*

EXPERIENCING TRANSFORMATION: GRAFFITI WALL [25 minutes]

With Matthew 20:1-15 and Psalm 23 as our background, it is time to identify our own experiences of God's generosity.

In a suitable room, create a graffiti wall by taping butcher paper to the wall. The paper should be 2 feet long for each member of the class, so if there are five people, cut the paper 10 feet long; if eight people, cut the paper 16 feet long. Provide markers, colored pencils, and anything else to help people create visual art/graffiti. Say:

For today's experience, on this sheet of paper we are going to creatively write words or draw images graffiti style of things God has generously given to us. Try to fill the paper. Feel free to move to various spots around the paper and to use any colors that seem appropriate to your message. Balloon letters, cartoon characters, shading, highlighting and shadowing are all helpful. You have 15 minutes to create!

As people create, play music such as Aaron Copland's *Rodeo* that encourages their imaginations.

When the 15 minutes have passed, spend 5 minutes discussing what everyone wrote and drew. (This is not a time to be critical of anyone's artistic ability—even our own.)

After everyone has had a chance to talk about their creation, invite the group to sit in chairs facing their graffiti wall. Say:

We are going to spend a few minutes just absorbing all these reminders of God's generosity. Allow the wonder of all these gifts to wash over you, and point your soul back toward the generous God we are coming to know and love! As you sit note anything that changes inside of you.

After 5 minutes of silence, say the following:

If you are comfortable, describe what happened inside you as you meditated on our creation.

GO IN PEACE [5 minutes]

Have a volunteer from your group read the following story out loud. Try to imagine this scene as the story is read:

One morning this past spring I noticed a young couple with an infant at an airport departure gate. The baby was staring intently at other people, and as soon as he connected with a human face, no matter whose it was, no matter if it was young or old, pretty or ugly, bored or happy or worried-looking, he would respond with absolute delight. It was beautiful to see. Our drab departure gate had become the gate of heaven. And as I watched that baby play with any adult who would allow it, I felt as awe-struck as Jacob, because I realized that this is how God looks at us, staring into our faces in order to be delighted, to see the creature he made and called good, along with the rest of creation. . . . I suspect that only God, and well-loved infants, can see this way (p. 87).

Go in peace and live gladly in the knowledge of God's generosity toward you.

FOR THE COMING WEEK

- ☞ Read chapter 5, "God is Love."
- ☞ The soul-training practice is *lectio divina*, which is explained at the end of the chapter. You will want to practice this form of prayer several times during the week.
- ☞ After reading chapter 5, "God Is Love," have each participant interview three people who are not in the class, with one question: "What do you think you have to do to get God to like you?" Explain there is no right or wrong answer; they are just taking a poll. Do not judge the answer, simply hear it, make notes and come to class ready to share your findings. The goal is to learn more about people's narratives regarding God's feelings for us.