

# CHAPTER 5, SESSION 5: GOD IS LOVE

## ADDITIONAL PLANNING

During this week you will need to make arrangements for the Silent Retreat which takes place after Session 16. For a detailed explanation of the retreat and to learn what you need from a retreat center, see the section heading Retreat Outlines in “Living The Good and Beautiful Life.” Once this information is confirmed, give it to your class.

## CHAPTER CHALLENGE

There are two levels of potential challenge with this chapter. The first level is for those who are hearing this message for the first time. For these readers the idea that God is more focused on us than our sin can be both exciting and frightening. The excitement comes from that wonderful love. The fear comes from the realization that in some new way they are totally free. As we move from legalism to love, it is a frightening transition because our true motives, as ugly as they are, begin to be revealed. It is frightening to realize that we have been obeying God out of the fear of hell rather than the desire to be with God.

The second level of challenge comes for those who have grown numb to this message. Normally for these folks the real problem is not that they have heard the message too many times; the problem is that they have not experienced the message at deeper and deeper levels. The narrative of conditional love dwells deep within us and will require a lifetime of gracious God encounters to be healed.

## SUPPLIES

☞ Room with a candle in the center and chairs scattered around the room facing the candle

## WELCOME

Before you begin, take a few minutes to look ahead to the soul-shaping exercise for Chapter 7, which is to read the entire gospel of John. Some groups have found it very powerful to read the Gospel together, taking turns reading aloud. Depending upon the speed of your readers, this could take over two hours; however the time is certainly well spent as hearing the Gospel in different voices keeps it very engaging and offers different perspectives. Discuss this possibility with your group, and if they are interested in doing so, schedule a time in addition to your regular class time.

Recite Colossians 3:1-10 together, then enter into the silence.

## 5 MINUTES OF SILENCE

### PRAYER TO END THE SILENCE

End the silence with this meditation:

*The Lord God is present where the new day shines  
in the moisture on the young grasses.*

*The Lord God is present where the small wildflowers  
are known to Him alone.*

*The Lord God passes suddenly, in the wind,  
at the moment when night ebbs into the ground.*

*He Who is infinitely great has given to His children a share in His own innocence.*

*His alone is the gentlest of loves: whose pure flame respects all things.*

*God, Who owns all things, leaves them all to themselves.*

*He never takes them for His own,*

*the way we take them for our own and destroy them.*  
*He leaves them to themselves.*  
*He keeps giving to them, giving them all that they are,*  
*Asking no thanks of them save that they should receive from Him.*  
*And be loved and nurtured by Him,*  
*And that they should increase and multiply, and so praise Him.*  
*He saw that all things were good, and He did not enjoy them.*  
*He saw that all things were beautiful and He did not want them.*  
*His love is not like ours. His love is unpossessive.*  
*His love is pure because it needs nothing.* —Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*

### SOUL-TRAINING [10 minutes]

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

1. Were you able to do the *lectio divina* exercise? 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?

### ENGAGING THE CHAPTER [20 minutes]

THE BIG IDEA IN THIS CHAPTER: Most people believe that love is conditional, that it is based on their behavior. Thus, most people believe that God loves them only when they are good. Jesus told of a God who loves without condition—a God who even loves sinners.

#### MAIN POINTS

- ☞ The world we live in teaches us that love and acceptance are determined by our behavior; if we are good, get good grades, win the race, then we receive affirmation. If we fail, we experience rejection.
- ☞ We project this conditional kind of acceptance onto God, assuming God loves us when we are good and rejects us when we are bad.
- ☞ Jesus' behavior was shocking in his day—welcoming, spending time with, and dining with known sinners! His behavior reveals his dominant narrative about God's love for people.
- ☞ Jesus also told story after story of a God who loves even those who reject him. The most famous parable Jesus told is about a father who lavishes unconditional love on a wayward son.
- ☞ Jesus' primary intention in telling the parable of the prodigal son is not so much to teach about God's acceptance of sinners but to indict those who reject this idea.
- ☞ George Herbert wrote a poem that describes a person's hesitation to accept God's grace because he or she fears God's rejection due to sin and failure. In it Herbert offers a beautiful picture of the God Jesus knew.

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. "What do you have to do to get God to like you?"
2. By looking at various Scripture passages this chapter unpacks the reality that God loves sinners. How does it make you feel to know that God loves you just as you are?
3. John 3:16 tells us that God loves the world, meaning that God loves everyone including our enemies, those who have wounded us and those who just irritate us. How does it make you feel to know that God loves people you do not love? You might silently consider naming those you struggle to love including yourself.

If you are in a group of six or more, split into groups of three or four to share your thoughts on questions 4 and 5 below. If necessary, review "The Prodigal Father" (pp. 99-101) and "Me and the Elder Brother" (pp. 101-02).

4. From the Parable of the Prodigal Son, which of the sons can you relate to more? Can you relate to the father? If so, in what way(s)?
5. The author writes, “Our self-righteousness does not turn God from us, but us from God. It is not my sin that moves me away from God, it is my refusal of grace, both for myself and for others” (p. 102). What is your reaction to this statement? In what ways does your own self-righteousness hold you back from God? How can we recognize self-righteousness in our lives?

### ENGAGING THE WORD [15 minutes]

*Lectio divina* can be done as a group. Use the Scripture printed below as your text (Matt 9:12-13). Decide who will read the Scripture each time.

- ☞§ *The first time the Scripture is read, allow the word to soak into your mind. Allow a few minutes of silence.*
- ☞§ *The second time the Scripture is read, note any word that God seems to be emphasizing. After the reading, anyone can share the word or phrase that spoke to them, but do not elaborate.*
- ☞§ *Read the passage a third time allowing God to reveal to you the significance of this word. Spend three to five minutes in silence, conversing with God. After the silence, anyone who is willing can share what they felt God spoke to them through the passage. As we go along, I will remind you what we are to do after each reading.*

“Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners” (Matt 9:12-13).

### BREAK [5 minutes]

### FOR THE COMING WEEK

At the end of this session’s “Experiencing Transformation,” participants can remain in silence for as long as they like and leave when they are ready. For this reason before you begin the meditation, discuss what needs to be done this coming week:

- ☞§ Read chapter 6, “God Is Holy.”
- ☞§ The soul-shaping practice is “margin” which will be explained in depth at the end of the chapter. Margin is something you will want a full week to practice before you gather again to discuss, so plan on reading the chapter and soul-training section early.

### EXPERIENCING TRANSFORMATION [20 minutes]

In a spacious room set a lit pillar candle in the center with just enough chairs for your group. Spread the chairs randomly throughout the room, facing the candle. Have your group enter the room, find any chair, and sit in silence for a moment. Then begin this meditation based on the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

Say to the group:

*Today’s experience is a meditation which combines what we have learned so far in The Good and Beautiful God with the Parable of the Prodigal Son. I will read basic instructions that invite us to consider how we are like the prodigal son and how God journeys with us. If an instruction seems unclear, do not fret; simply relax and wait for the next instruction.*

Read this meditation slowly with generous pauses between sentences. When instructions are given, such as “through deep breathing allow that tension to melt away,” give ample time for participants to actually do what has been said. Read the following:

*Let us begin by relaxing and becoming fully present to this place. Breathe deeply and allow your body to relax. Become aware of any tension in your body—your shoulders, your feet, your hands, your jaw—and through deep breathing allow that tension to melt away.*

*In the center of our room we have a lit candle, which symbolizes God’s presence in our lives. Spend a moment, breathing deeply and becoming aware of God’s presence in this very room.*

*You were born a beloved child of God. Before you were knit together in your mother's womb, God knew you fully and loved you dearly. God delighted in you. Notice what it feels like to have God delight in you.*

*God loved you so much that God gave you freedom to choose your own path. Consciously and unconsciously you did choose your own path. You asked for your share of the inheritance and used it to pursue your own desires. Sometimes your pursuits were clearly against God's will, at other times they were more subtle. Sometimes your desires were hurtful and even violent, but other times your desires were simply driven by pride.*

*I invite you to turn your chair so your back is toward the candle and you are facing away. We will now spend a few minutes in silence to consider those times when you took your inheritance from God and used it in a way that was not best for you and not part of God's will for your life.*

Spend only a few minutes in this silence.

*The good news is that even while you were on this path, turned away from God, something was stirring inside of you that said you were made for something more. Something inside of you said that you were created for more than what you were currently living. Or maybe it was just desperation to survive. Whatever it was, something turned you back toward home, back toward God. Spend a moment thinking of those turning points in your life, when you decided to turn to God to find help and perhaps deeper purpose for your life. As you consider these turning points, I invite you to turn your chair again towards the candle.*

Give people a few minutes for this reflection. You can wait until everyone is facing the candle, however if people seem confused by this instruction, you may have to say, "I invite you now to turn your chair to face the candle."

*Something stirred inside of you, and you started your journey home. But while you were still far off, God saw you and was filled with compassion—even excitement at your return. God ran to you and embraced you, welcomed you home, celebrated your return and declared that his love for you would never end. Spend a moment savoring that embrace.*

*At the same moment that you are relieved and delighted to be receiving God's love, there is also a part of you that might be uncomfortable or scared. Perhaps you are uncomfortable at the gathering of sinners and ragamuffins that God has welcomed home just as enthusiastically as he welcomed you. Or perhaps you are uncomfortable and frightened by the loss of control. Or perhaps you are reluctant to believe that God could welcome YOU back this easily. Part of you suspects a trap and wonders what you really have to do to earn God's love. This part of you turns away from God in self-righteousness. I invite you now to turn your chair to your right so the candle is now to your left. We will now spend a few minutes reflecting on the part of you that is like the elder son—unwilling to enter the party. During the silence consider these questions. Why are you unwilling to enter the celebration? [Pause] How do you feel about the celebration of sinners? [Pause] Where in your body do you feel discomfort or tension?*

Again, give folks a few minutes of silence to explore these questions.

*God stands beside you and lovingly whispers, "All that is mine, is yours." You cannot earn your place at the table of God's love, but there is a place for you there, nonetheless. Whether you are caught in sin or caught in self-righteousness, God will always be inviting you to the celebration of your return.*

*I invite you to turn your chair one last time toward the candle.*

*Friends, hear this good news, "... God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him" (John 3:16-17).*

*Gracious God, we give you thanks for your steadfast love. At times we are reluctant to receive it, and at other times we are reluctant to see you share it—but we trust that your ways are not our ways, and that you in your infinite wisdom know what is best. Set us free to live in this good news, we pray! Amen.*

GO IN PEACE [5 minutes]

*You are welcome to stay here for as long as you like and leave when you are ready. Go in peace, and live gladly in the knowledge of God's love for you.*