

CHAPTER 7, SESSION 18: LEARNING TO BLESS THOSE WHO CURSE US

CHAPTER CHALLENGE

This chapter continues to move us deeper into the reality of the kingdom. This is especially poignant through the stories of the chapter. First and last are the stories of Jane who suffered public criticism but was ultimately set free from those who would hurt her by focusing on her place in the kingdom. This chapter also features three very brief stories of extraordinary lives. These stories and the power of Jesus' words put the reader in a challenging place to continue exploring places where they are not yet open to the power and presence of the kingdom. Many of us have people that we struggle to love. This chapter moves us directly to that point and invites us to explore why the kingdom feels absent or insufficient in those relationships.

SUPPLIES

- ☞ Before class read through the instructions for the “Experiencing Transformation” exercise and set up the room as described
- ☞ Unlit candles on a table with one larger, lit candle in the center of the table
- ☞ A list of local churches plus any churches that have felt like “competition” to your own church
- ☞ Photocopies of the “Unison Prayer for Other Churches” for each participant
- ☞ Blank paper and pens for each participant to journal

WELCOME

At the beginning of this session discuss the details of the closing retreat with your group and begin listing those who will be able to participate.

5 MINUTES OF SILENCE

RECITE COLOSSIANS 3:1-17 TOGETHER

Then begin the silence.

PRAYER TO END THE SILENCE

You may offer a prayer of your own, chime a quiet bell, or simply say “Amen” to end the silence.

SOUL-TRAINING [15 minutes]

If you are in a group of six or more people, divide into small groups of three or four. Use the questions below to discuss your experience of praying for the success of your competitors.

1. What did you notice happening within you and around you as you prayed for the success of your competitors?
2. What did you learn about God or yourself from the exercise?

ENGAGING THE CHAPTER [30 minutes]

THE MAIN IDEA OF THIS CHAPTER is that in the kingdom of God we are able to reach for something higher than retaliation and justice, and actually bless people who would harm us—just as Jesus did.

Read through the following questions before you begin discussion. Note any questions you especially want to discuss. Depending on your group size and the conversation, you may not have time to discuss all of these questions.

1. When the author's friend lost her job as a basketball coach, he gave her these words of truth: "Just remember, Jane, the kingdom is not in trouble, and Jane is not in trouble" (p. 120). When your life has been thrown into turmoil, how would these words have helped you?
2. In the section titled "Kingdom Jujitsu," the author explores the four teachings of Matthew 5:38-42 (pp. 121-126). With this section in mind, discuss these questions.
 - a. How does understanding Jesus' cultural context change your understanding of Matthew 5:38-42?
 - b. The author discourages us from turning these teachings into law. Why is it tempting to make them into laws?
 - c. How does living in God's kingdom make it possible to follow this teaching?
3. What struck you when you read the section titled "Love Your Enemies"?
4. Miroslav Volf describes the person indwelt by Christ as "a rich self" and writes,

A rich self looks toward the future with trust. It gives rather than holding things back in fear of coming out too short, because it believes God's promise that God will take care of it. Finite and endangered, a rich self still gives, because its life is 'hidden with Christ' in the infinite, unassailable, and utterly generous God, the Lord of the present, the past, and the future (p. 129).

With a partner, describe in your own words why the one indwelt by Christ is a "rich self."

5. Return to the three stories of those who dared to be extraordinary (pp. 130-32). What wisdom do you gain from their stories? What situations in your own life need this type of daring?

BREAK [5 minutes]

ENGAGING THE WORD [15 minutes]

Have one person in the group read aloud Matthew 5:38-48. Jesus gives specific situations as well as ways kingdom-dwellers would respond. The author notes, "Kingdom identity (I am one in whom Christ dwells) and kingdom awareness (I am in the strong and secure kingdom of God) are the keys to doing what Jesus calls us to do. With these we can learn how to become radically generous and to live extraordinary lives" (p. 130).

As a group, create three or four modern examples of the situations Jesus describes and how the follower of Christ might respond.

EXPERIENCING TRANSFORMATION [20 minutes]

For this activity, you will need to set up a separate room with a table and candles. The table will serve as an altar space. On the table there should be one larger, lit candle, which represents Christ's presence in the world. Scattered across the table should be smaller, unlit candles that represent churches near you or perhaps churches that have felt like "competition" to your own congregation. Have one or two additional candles for each member of your group. Decide how you and the participants will light the candles and give each member a copy of the "Unison Prayer for Other Churches."

After completing the "Engaging the Word" segment, move to the room where you have set up the candles on the table. Once everyone is seated read the following:

The act of blessing those who curse us and praying for our enemies is very near to forgiving those who have hurt us and opening ourselves to receive healing. With this in mind, during our remaining time we will be praying for other churches, as well as our enemies and those who have hurt us. Our hope is to discover Christ's power within us to be healed and transformed when we pray for these groups.

If we consider our memorized passage from Colossians, when we engage in prayer for our "enemies" or competitors, we are actively taking off our "old self with its practices," and we are putting on "the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all."

As we discover who we truly are in God, boundaries and definitions for separation begin to melt away, leaving us in union with Christ and at peace with others.

One of the most painful divisions to witness is the division and competition that exists between churches. To help heal this division, I have created a list of churches near us. I will say the name of a church and then together we will say the Unison Prayer for that congregation: God of Grace, may they come to know your kingdom of Love more fully, and may their ministries grow strong as they serve you and our neighbors. Then we will light a candle for that church.

After we have prayed for all of the churches, we will turn our attention to our enemies and those who have hurt us. During this time we will be in silent prayer together. Remember you should only pray for your enemies and those who have hurt you as you are able. Allow yourself to be in dialogue with the Spirit about such relationships. When we pray for those who have hurt us, our hope is to find freedom, healing and wholeness. However, we may still have to hold the person accountable for their actions. As you offer these prayers, you are invited to light one or two candles for those you lift up in prayer.

To begin, have a moment of silence, then lift up the first church on your list and lead the group in the Unison Prayer. After the prayer is spoken, light a candle to represent that congregation.

Once you have named all the churches, invite the group into a time of silence to pray for their own enemies, competitors, and perhaps those who annoy them. Remind them that they can light a candle for these persons as they desire.

After the candles have been lit, allow a few minutes of silence, then offer this prayer or one of your own:

*Lord Christ, you see us
sometimes strangers on the earth,
taken aback by the violence,
by the harshness of oppositions.
And you come to send out a gentle breeze
on the dry ground of our doubts,
and so prepare us to be bearers
of peace and reconciliation.* — Brother Roger of Taizé from *Songs and Prayers from Taizé* (p. 25)

FOR FURTHER READING

An excellent example of reconciliation can be found in the Taizé community in France. The entire focus of the community is bringing about peace and reconciliation in the world through coming into deeper knowledge of the love of God. The community was born out of the violence of World War II. For an excellent book exploring their vision and vocation check out *A Community Called Taizé* by Jason Brian Santos.

GO IN PEACE [5 minutes]

Conclude by having one person in your group read aloud this quote by Dallas Willard from *The Divine Conspiracy*, p. 181:

We know that we will be taken care of, no matter what. We can be vulnerable because we are, in the end, simply invulnerable. And once we have broken the power of anger and desire over our lives, we know that the way of Christ in response to personal injury and imposition is always the easier way. It is the only way that allows us to move serenely in the midst of the harm and beyond it.

FOR THE COMING WEEK

- ☞ Read chapter 8, “Learning to Live Without Vainglory.”
- ☞ The soul-training practice for the week will be five acts of serving in secret. You will want to read the chapter early so you have plenty of opportunities to serve.