

FAMILY CHURCH - Life Group Bible Study
“How Not To Be A Pharisee”
November 8, 2009

Hospitality Tip:

Too often birthdays are just one more item to squeeze into our already overflowing bag of to-dos and things to remember. I have several friends who make a vow each year to get better at celebrating others, but unless we have a plan our intentions will fall by the wayside as the year goes on. So here are a few simple tactics to help you communicate love and importance to the members of your small group—at least once a year.

First, it's crucial that you find out the dates of your members' birthdays. That may be obvious, but how often do we forget? The simplest way to do this is to send around a birthday sheet for everyone to fill out. If your group members are older, be sensitive to the fact that they might not want to include the year. If someone is uncomfortable with their birthday altogether, just pick a random day on which to surprise and celebrate them.

Then, get those dates on your calendar. The best method I've found is to use a computer calendar and set a reminder for one week in advance. That way, when I check my e-mail, a reminder pops up that I can send out to the rest of the group. You can also photocopy a paper calendar for everyone, or have the members bring in their datebooks and enter them all in. The key, though, is to write in a reminder at least one week in advance so you're not caught off guard and unprepared on the actual day.

One fabulous way to stay prepared is to take care of all your group's birthdays at once. Hallmark's website lets you send an e-card with a pre-programmed date. You can choose an e-card for each person, write a short note, and set them to be sent out on the correct birthdays. Using this method, you can have the whole thing done in less than an hour! Or you can buy birthday cards in bulk and do the same thing physically. Get them written and addressed all at once, and just pop them in the mail when your reminder comes up.

Celebration within your small-group meeting doesn't have to be expensive to be special. Most dollar stores sell balloons, and one or two of these tied onto a chair clearly send the message, "You are special." A delicious Ghirardelli brownie mix can be bought in bulk from Costco, and for less than two dollars a pan you've got a fudgy, sweet birthday treat.

No matter what your celebration looks like, the best way to show you care is simply to take some time to clap the person on the back and wish them "Happy Birthday." Then pray for their life and the year ahead and thank God for enriching your group members' lives by bringing that person into the world.

“How Not To Be A Pharisee”

Main Scripture: Luke 15:11-32

ICE BREAKER

[Q] *What is one of the most expensive things you have lost? How did you feel when you discovered it was lost?*

[Q] *What is one of the best things you have ever found?*

LESSON OVERVIEW

The “Parable of the Prodigal Son” is one of the most familiar of Jesus’ stories. The word prodigal means “wasteful” and refers to the way the younger son wasted his inheritance. In this story, we usually identify with the younger brother being welcomed back into the family, but this study will examine the reaction of the older brother.

A pastor shares this account:

I will never forget a meeting I had with unhappy church members a few years ago. We had made deliberate changes in our church to better focus on evangelism. As a result, God was doing an amazing thing. But some folks were really struggling with the changes, so we got together to talk it through. They were unhappy because they couldn’t find a parking space. People were sitting where they had sat for years. The pastors were giving the new members all the attention and weren’t paying enough attention to the ones who paid the bills around there.

The music was too loud. The air conditioner was too cold. The sermons were too soft. The toilet paper in the bathroom wasn’t soft enough. Pretty soon it escalated into the biggest gripe session you’ve ever heard.

In an effort to turn away from the negativism, the staff went back to the reason for change. We brought up the fact that our church was seeing an unusual number of people come to faith in Christ. I told the story of two adult sisters I had recently seen come to faith, and what a radical change God was bringing about in their lives. Surely, I said, we could put aside our own preferences and rejoice over lost brothers and sisters being embraced by a loving Father.

One guy got to his feet and, with his face burning bright red with anger, shouted at me: “See, that’s the whole problem right there. I am sick and tired of these lost people coming in here and messing up the way we like church.”

It was as if all the oxygen was suddenly sucked out of the room. I thought to myself: I cannot believe he just said that. Surely someone will speak up about how selfish he was, how that remark was so unlike the spirit of Christ. But that’s not what happened. Instead the room broke out in applause. Talk about a low point in life.

When I tell that story, I know that many of you will think, Well, that’s just awful. But if God chose to use your church as a rescue operation for the lost and broken, what would your real reaction be?

Discussion Questions:

- [Q] Why is it so hard to reach out to the lost?
- [Q] What does it often cost us to reach out to others?
- [Q] What must we remember about ourselves to have a right attitude as we reach out to others?

MAIN POINT 1: In the “Parable of the Prodigal Son,” Jesus focused on the older brother.

Read Luke 15:11–32. When we read this account, we focus on how wonderful it is that God welcomes us back into the fold after we have failed. In other words, we identify with the prodigal son. But that prodigal son is actually not the son Jesus is highlighting in this story. If we look at verses 1 and 2, we see why Jesus told this story: “Now the tax collectors and ‘sinners’ were all gathering around to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, ‘This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.’”

When the Pharisees saw Jesus loving, receiving, and forgiving those they hated and deemed unworthy, they rebelled. Even worse, they failed to see their own need for grace and forgiveness. So, as he did so often, Jesus responded to their accusations not with a theological hammer, but with a story.

When Jesus introduced the older brother in this story, he pointed out some of his outstanding virtues. He was hard working, obedient, and had never brought disgrace on his family. But in Luke 10:26–28, Jesus told the Pharisees that the real test of virtue is how one relates to God and to other people. The older brother shows in both his words and his actions that he did not love his father or his brother.

His response to this beautiful family reunion? Jealousy and resentment. He can’t even bring himself to say “my brother.” He refers to his returning sibling as “that son of yours.” He is bitterly resentful of the attention his brother received, and jealous that the love of the father extended to one who had previously rejected him.

It’s important to note in this story that the father treated both sons with the same compassion. The father pleaded with the older son to join the feast. The father is too joyful to be angry about his son’s insult.

Listen to the older brother’s complaint: “All these years I’ve been slaving for you, I’ve never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!”

What the older brother said to the father revealed his expectation for justice, not mercy. He was saying that their relationship was one based on reciprocity: “I’ve done this, and you should have done that.” It was not based on love, but on work and reward.

- [Q] Why do you think Jesus told this story?
- [Q] How might this story apply to us today? Who would be the younger son? The older son?

OPTIONAL ACTIVITY:

Purpose: To help us identify when we have the older son's attitude.

Activity: Read each scenario and identify how we could exhibit the older son's attitude toward each person.

- *Nannette stole some money from an elderly man in the congregation whom she was helping by cleaning his house. She has since repented and asked this man to forgive her. She said she would repay him.*
- *Lance lied to his small group about his drug habit, telling them it was no longer a problem. Just last week he was arrested for possession. He's begging forgiveness.*
- *The new pastor has opened a coffee house in the church as an outreach. It's drawing rough-looking people who have done some damage to the building.*

MAIN POINT TWO: The older brother's character reveals characteristics of the Pharisees.

Remember that we are studying the Pharisees because we see ourselves in them. In their own adventures in missing the point, we see our own tendencies to miss the point of grace. Look at the evidence of the older brother's character that reveals characteristics of the Pharisees.

First, he had defined his own righteousness. In other words, he excelled at keeping the rules that he had defined as important. "I've never disobeyed you," he said. It was obviously an exaggeration. But it reveals a tendency. Pharisees are masters at recognizing the sins of others but blind to their own.

Second, he showed a total lack of concern for his brother. His attitude stands in stark contrast to the spirit of celebration he had walked into. He had obviously not missed his brother or worried about him. He also didn't care about his father's happiness. His only thought was for his own recognition.

Third, he was full of righteous anger. He refused to share in the celebration. In some ways, he was like the prophet Jonah. Jonah eventually did God's bidding, but he did it with resentment because he hated the Ninevites. The older brother had served his father, but obviously not from the heart.

Finally, he had an unforgiving heart. He wouldn't forgive his brother for his licentiousness, nor his father for his graciousness.

This story reveals the great sin of the Pharisees. They had a flawed sense of expectation. God owed them because they had been obedient and dutiful. And he owed judgment and condemnation to those who had not been obedient and dutiful. Theirs was a world of duty and justice. The older brother stands as a model of all those who have no room whatsoever in their lives for grace.

The father's response to this son reveals God's heart toward even those who miss the point. Read again verses 31–32.

[Q] What did Jesus have to say to those who resented the fact that he preferred the company of so-called sinners to that of religious leaders?

[Q] How can we avoid the same mistake?

[Q] What balance should there be between the time we spend with Christians and non-Christians?

[Q] In which of the following do you think we can make a valid judgment on others?

- Differences in music, movies, and books
- A Christian sinning without any willingness to repent
- Points of doctrinal differences
- Differences in worship practices
- Other

Why did you choose the one(s) you did?

APPLICATION

For many churches, the possibility of ever seeing lost brothers and sisters return is more theory than reality. Because we've been told that the church is supposed to proclaim the message of Christ, we sometimes pretend that we'd be glad, but we usually aren't. People who have been far from God are like that prodigal—messy and dirty, they still have the scent of their old lifestyle on their clothes, and we turn up our noses in disgust.

If asked, most people will say, "Oh yes, we should reach the lost." It's nice to acknowledge in theory, but when we deliberately begin to touch lives, people often feel inconvenienced and their true feelings come out.

Most of the time, we're like that older brother before the homecoming. We give no thought whatsoever to where our prodigal brothers and sisters are. We don't worry about them; we have no compassion for them; we have no thought whatsoever about them. We are home being good, dutiful, and nice—completely ignoring the Father who stands at the window looking longingly for the return of his children. We figure they are getting what they deserve, as will we if we just continue to work hard for the Father.

We should be losing sleep wondering how to build a church where followers of Jesus have the same concern for the lost that Jesus has.

Action Point: Discuss as a group the last time one of you reached out to someone who is not a Christian. Plan how you can reach out together and make it a regular part of your group.