

Small Group Discussion Guide--Some questions may have come from "Change and Your Relationships: A Mess Worth Making"

Opening Question

Q: Have you experienced a time when someone showed you mercy? What was that like?

Book Discussion

Page 134. "The problem is that mercy is hard. That was my problem with our houseguest. I wanted to live with an open home and touch people's lives. I just didn't think it would be so hard!"

Q1: Whether it's your spouse, your children, or a friend, have you ever been hesitant to show mercy in fear that the other person would take advantage of you? What happened?

Page 134. "It's very humbling, but a commitment to mercy will reveal your own need for mercy. Unfortunately, that is something we often prefer not to see. We want to think of ourselves as fundamentally different from the people who need mercy when, in fact, we are the same. We too are flawed people; we too need mercy every day of our lives. But it is more comfortable to think of ourselves as righteous and strong while others are needy and weak."

Q2: How does seeing ourselves rightly (as people in need of mercy) or wrongly (as righteous and strong) impact our willingness to show mercy?

Page 135. "I want to give you two definitions of mercy: (1) Mercy is the kind, sympathetic, and forgiving treatment of others that works to relieve their distress and cancel their debt. Or (2) mercy is compassion combined with forbearance and action."

Q3: Are these definitions of mercy helpful? If so, why? What is it about mercy that you hadn't considered before?

Page 136. "What Makes Mercy So Essential? Like many other qualities of a good relationship, mercy is essential because our relationships take place in the middle of the great redemptive story. We live in a fallen world and face difficulty and distress while we simultaneously struggle with the sin that remains in us. Mercy is needed because neither the world we live in nor the people who inhabit it are perfect."

Q4: Do you find it difficult to show mercy to those closest to you? Why? or Why not?

Page 138. "Mercy rejects a "personal happiness" agenda. If I want my relationships to meet my needs or if I am living for comfort and ease, I will not extend mercy when the going gets tough. Mercy means living for an agenda higher than my present happiness. Mercy is willing to involve itself in things that are not happy or comfortable. It finds more joy in doing God's will than in a comfortable, predictable life. Mercy is willing to forsake comfort to bring God's comfort to someone else."

Q5: If "mercy means living for an agenda higher than my present happiness", does that mean I must forego all joy? Where should I find my joy/happiness?

Page 139. "It is tempting to focus on the irritating things another person does while excusing my own minor offenses. But mercy isn't hyper-vigilant, easily irritated, or quickly offended. Mercy is so engaged by the beauty of the big things God is doing that it doesn't have time to focus on things that are of no consequence."

Q6: Why do you think it is so hard for us to see the "big things God is doing" and so easy to be put off by the minor offenses of others?

Page 148. "The motivation that drove them was not a moral code and the guideline of the tithe. It was a desire to show their gratitude for the immense treasures that were theirs because of Jesus' willingness to give all he had to them." Page 149. "Our money is an intensely personal part of our lives, and only an intensely personal relationship with the Redeemer can loosen our grasp on other things."

Q7: What two possible motivations are highlighted here and how are they different?

Page 150. "Our tendency is to live with a "get through this season" mentality. We say to ourselves, If I can just get through this busy season of life, then I will be okay. This is an ungodly understanding of your current responsibilities and opportunities. I have a tendency to do this with parenting: If I can just get through the diaper phase. . . . Once my children were out of diapers, it became: If I can just get through these early years of elementary school, then I can minister to others. But if I am not careful, I will wish my life away and miss many opportunities to love and serve my children. These are missed opportunities to die to self and grow in grace. God wants us to see the daily struggles of life as critical moments of redemptive opportunity, rather than hindrances."

Q8: How does seeing these "phases" as "critical moments of redemptive opportunity, rather than hindrances" change the way you approach the situation?

Page 152. "When I got married, I did what every other groom does. I repeated vows to my wife that said I would love her sacrificially all the days of my life. Who was I kidding? I look back and see how little I understood what I promised. What I was really thinking, to a large degree, was, This is great! I love me and now you are going to love me! My love was very shallow. It only took a few days of marriage to figure that out! God had plans to use my wife and children to show me just how shallow my love was and to help it deepen as I saw how much I needed to grow. Seeing this caused me to depend on God and his grace all the more."

Q9: Can you identify with this experience? If so, How?

Bible Discussion (Mercy, Money & Time)

Read James 2:1-13.

Q1: Review the details of this passage.

Q2: Summarize the main idea of this passage.

Q3: What reasons are given for why we should not show favoritism?

Q4: How is mercy connected to not showing partiality?

Read Eph 4:28

Q5: What is one reason for working? How does this effect the way you view your money?

Read 2 Cor 8:1-15

Q6: What do you glean regarding the circumstances of the Macedonian churches? What was their response?

Q7: Why did they respond that way? How is that response the same or different from today's American culture?

Read Eph 5:15-21

Q8: What do you think Paul means when he writes, "making the most of every opportunity because the days are evil"?

Prayer Focus

Page 139. "Why do we struggle with offering mercy? We struggle because there are things we desire more than God and his glory. Our struggle reveals that our hearts are ruled more by comfort, appreciation, respect, love, success, control, achievement, possessions, position, power, and acceptance than we have been willing to admit. Here is the painful spiritual reality: our struggle with mercy is not just a second great command struggle; it is a first great command struggle as well. We struggle to respond rightly to one another because we don't have God in the right place."