



Knowing
The Good and Beautiful
G O D

L E A D E R G U I D E

by Matthew Johnson

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THE APPRENTICE SERIES SMALL GROUP LEADER GUIDES & SUPPORTING MATERIALS.

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INSTRUCTIONS

This guide is the first installment of the Apprentice study. It begins with an opening retreat to prepare the group for its study of the book, *The Good and Beautiful God*.

HOW TO USE THIS LEADER GUIDE

This Guide combines the Small Group guide Appendix in the book with additional questions and activities for leading the group through each session. Some questions and suggested activities from the Small Group Guide have been omitted or expanded to enhance the experience when the group has a leader—like you!

You will need only one copy of this Leader Guide to use in class. Occasionally you will have to make copies of handouts for the class. They immediately follow the session or are part of the supporting materials listed on the home page or on the Table of Contents. To help make each Guide more useful and readable, headings are printed in CAPS/SMALL CAPS, instructions are in a regular font, and any part that should be read to the group is in *italics*.

STUDY SCHEDULE

Week	Session	Chapter	Length of Session
1	Opening Retreat	Getting Started	Friday evening to Saturday evening
2	Session 1	Chapter 1: <i>The Good and Beautiful God</i>	90 minutes
3	Session 2	Chapter 2: <i>The Good and Beautiful God</i>	90 minutes
4	Session 3	Chapter 3: <i>The Good and Beautiful God</i>	90 minutes
5	Session 4	Chapter 4: <i>The Good and Beautiful God</i>	90 minutes
6	Session 5	Chapter 5: <i>The Good and Beautiful God</i>	90 minutes
7	Session 6	Chapter 6: <i>The Good and Beautiful God</i>	90 minutes
8	Session 7	Chapter 7: <i>The Good and Beautiful God</i>	90 minutes
9	Session 8	Chapter 8: <i>The Good and Beautiful God</i>	90 minutes
10	Session 9	Chapter 9: <i>The Good and Beautiful God</i>	2 hours
11	Session 10	Two Hour Celebration	2 hours
12	Session 11	Special Session—Watch <i>Nativity</i>	2 1/2 hours

PLEASE NOTE: Please be aware of conflicts such as holidays. See “Becoming a Group Spiritual Director” for a schedule that includes suggested dates.

OPENING RETREAT

PURPOSE

The goal of the Opening Retreat is to help build friendships among those who will be going through Apprenticeship together.

You will need to find a retreat center that can accommodate your group. Considerations would include lodging for overnight, as well as appropriate gathering spaces. Will meals be prepared by the retreat center or by your group? Are there other activities that the group can enjoy during their times together—hiking, prayer paths, Stations of the Cross and so on? Ideally, all three retreats should be held at the same center.

SUPPLIES

- ☞ Bible for the worship time
- ☞ Name tags if necessary
- ☞ Worship supplies (could include songbooks, instruments, a few candles and cross for the altar)
- ☞ Handouts, one for each participant: “Weekly Session Outline,” “Suggested Weekly Schedule for Participants,” and “First Spiritual Practice”
- ☞ Blank paper and pens for the “Mapping Our Spiritual Journey” activity on Friday night
- ☞ *Be Still* DVD for the clip entitled “Small Group,” which introduces *lectio divina* (available for purchase at amazon.com or www.renovare.us)
- ☞ Nooma video *Dust* (available for purchase at store.flannel.org)
- ☞ DVD player and television or computer and video projector
- ☞ Props for name learning game such as beach balls, softball, rubber chicken, bean bag, etc.
- ☞ Twice as many small rocks (about the size of a quarter) as there are group members

SCHEDULE

The retreat begins Friday evening and finishes Saturday afternoon.

FRIDAY

- 6:30 p.m. Dinner together at the retreat center or on the way to it
- 7:30 p.m. Introductions
- 7:45 p.m. Brief time of simple worship
- 8:00 p.m. Ground rules for healthy interaction in a group
- 8:30 p.m. “Mapping Our Spiritual Journey”
- 10:00 p.m. Call it a night and get some good rest

SATURDAY

- 8:00 a.m. Breakfast
- 9:00 a.m. *Lectio Divina*
- 10:00 a.m. Name learning game
- 10:20 a.m. Pass out the participant handouts “Weekly Session Outline,” “Suggested Weekly Schedule for Participants,” and “First Spiritual Practice”
- 11:30 a.m. Free time/rest
- Noon Lunch
- 2:00 p.m. Centering worship
- 2:15 p.m. Share objects collected during the break
- 2:50 p.m. Break
- 3:00 p.m. Watch the Nooma video *Dust*
- 4:00 p.m. Closing worship

DETAILED SCHEDULE

FRIDAY

- 6:30 p.m. Dinner together at the retreat center or on the way to it.
- 7:30 p.m. Begin with introductions. Ask people to share basic information about themselves: name, family, occupation, connection to the church.
- 7:45 p.m. Brief time of simple worship. If you have musically talented folks in your group, perhaps they could lead some singing. If not, use one or two recorded songs to help everyone focus on God's presence as you begin and perhaps one song at the end of the worship time.

Read Luke 5: 1-11 aloud to the group. Read the following observations or lift up a few of your own thoughts. Limit your time to about 5 minutes.

Early in the Gospel of Luke we have this description of an encounter between Jesus and Simon who would later be called Peter. First, we are told that the crowds are pressing in on Jesus to hear his preaching better. This is a stark difference from most churches where the largest crowd is at the back of the sanctuary ready to leave, or at least remain unnoticed. Out of practicality it would seem, Jesus climbs into a boat so he can preach to the crowd. When Jesus has finished teaching, he tells Simon to head back out and try to get another catch. Simon seems conflicted in his answer—perhaps he had already heard something in Jesus' words that gave him hope—but the reality of a "fruitless" night of fishing has left him reluctant to launch out again. But Jesus does not withdraw the request, and so they head out. The catch of fish was immense! But Simon Peter wasn't really looking at the fish. He seems to be looking at Jesus and considering the condition of his own soul. His conclusion: "I don't belong in Jesus' presence." Because Simon sees himself as a sinful man, he gets on his knees and asks Jesus to go away. But Jesus has other plans for him. He tells him, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people" (NRSV).

We come together from very different places in our life journeys, but many of us can probably relate to Simon Peter. We might be worn out from much work with little evidence of it. We might be intrigued by this man, Jesus, but we aren't ready to jump in and do everything he tells his followers to do. Or we might be a little embarrassed at the state of our souls, thinking that Jesus would be better off to leave us behind.

*To all of us, in our different places, Jesus says, "Do not be afraid." It would seem that Jesus has bigger plans for all of us than we could ever have for ourselves. As we begin this adventure together called *The Apprentice Series*, we are opening ourselves up to learn a little more about the dream that Jesus has for our lives, and the good and beautiful God who created those dreams.*

Let us pray. Good and beautiful God, we welcome your presence here as we begin this journey together. We celebrate all you have done in our lives to bring us to this moment. We humbly ask for the grace to fall more deeply in love with you as we discover who you are and how you are at work in our lives and our world. Grant us the courage to share openly with one another and the wisdom to respect the gifts we each bring to this group. We ask this in the name of your Son, our Master Teacher, Jesus. Amen.

Offer one or two songs to close the time of worship.

- 8:00 p.m. Ground rules for healthy interaction in a group. Following worship, spend about 20 minutes discussing healthy ways to interact as a group. Because the group is small, relationships will play an essential role in the experience. In order for relationships to remain healthy, it is good to consider expectations for the interaction that will take place within the group. Create a list as a group of how you will listen and speak to one another. You may even want to keep the list as a covenant among the group. While this may seem obvious, it can be helpful in building trust. Your list should include these points:
- 🌿 CONFIDENTIALITY. What someone says must remain in the room.
 - 🌿 SPEAK FROM YOUR OWN PERSPECTIVE. Avoid speaking on behalf of others or telling people what they should think or feel.

- 🌿 AGREE TO DISAGREE. Great insights come from opposing viewpoints, so welcome conversations that do not see things the same way. However, it is important for all parties involved to have respect for others. And perhaps most importantly, rather than speaking from an authoritative position, ask from an inquiring position. Instead of saying, “You’re wrong because I’ve done [whatever it is], and I know,” you would say, “What you are saying is different than my own experience. Please tell me about your experience and how you’ve come to that conclusion.” When we approach each other with open questions, we can all grow—even if our viewpoints do not change.
- 🌿 ENCOURAGE EACH OTHER. This study is a major commitment, and it will often touch many areas and many levels of our lives. As you share your struggles and discoveries, take time to celebrate the ways you enrich each other’s lives.
- 🌿 AS THE LEADER OF THE GROUP, COMMIT TO BEING HONEST WITH THE GROUP MEMBERS. If the actions of someone in the group are unhealthy, you will speak individually with that person in a loving way to make the situation right.

Take a short break. Maybe eat some snacks!

8:30 p.m. “Mapping Our Spiritual Journey.” Invite folks to draw a map depicting their spiritual journey up to this point. Small symbols can mark major events in their lives; they can indicate points when they have changed paths and perhaps where they hope to be headed. Give folks 15 minutes to create their map. Have everyone regroup and share a little about their map. Encourage everyone to ask questions and learn more about each other through this little activity.

10:00 p.m. Call it a night and get some good rest.

SATURDAY

8:00 a.m. Breakfast.

9:00 a.m. *Lectio Divina*. One spiritual practice that will be used both individually and as a group throughout this study is an ancient practice called *lectio divina*. It is a very simple practice, however it might seem unusual to any groups that have not prayed with Scripture before. It is important for people to understand that it is not Bible study, but instead it is reflectively listening to a Bible passage with a desire to hear what God is saying to us through this passage. For an excellent introduction to the practice of *lectio divina*, watch the DVD *Be Still* available at www.renovare.us.

Below are instructions for *lectio divina* with the suggested passage for this activity.

Watch the segment titled “Small Groups” from the DVD *Be Still*. Say:

Just as the video pointed out, lectio divina is an ancient way of praying with Scripture that can be done alone or in groups. We will be using this prayer form this morning, and we will use it at various other times during the sessions. It is also one of the soul-shaping exercises we will do in one of the chapters. It is very simple and involves just a few steps.

The steps are: Read, Reflect, Respond, Rest, Share and Pray.

STEP ONE is simply listening to a short passage of Scripture and allowing the words of that passage to soak into your mind. With this step you are becoming aware of what has been spoken. After the passage is read, there will be a few minutes of silence.

STEP TWO, the Scripture passage will be read again, but this time, listen for a word or phrase out of that passage that stands out to you. Don’t worry about what the word is or why it has stood out to you. After this second reading there will be about 5 minutes of silence. During this silence simply repeat to yourself the word or phrase that you noticed. By doing this you are “chewing” on the word.

STEP THREE will be reading of the Scripture a third time followed by another block of silence. During this time of

silence enter into a conversation with God. Begin by asking God why this word or phrase was drawn to your attention, and how God wants you to respond. God may be calling you to change some habit in your life, or God may simply be inviting you to rest in his loving presence.

STEP FOUR is to rest in God's loving presence. This step will begin with another reading of the Scripture passage followed by several minutes of silence to simply enjoy God's presence with us. I will end this time with a brief prayer.

Then we will share with each other anything we would like to lift up from our conversation with God. And we will end by praying for the person on our right, either silently or aloud.

This morning we will be using 1 Samuel 3:10 as our Scripture passage for lectio divina. We will begin by hearing the full story of Samuel's call, which is contained in 1 Samuel 3:1-10. Then for each step of the lectio divina process we will read just 1 Samuel 3:10.

Begin with just a few moments of silence to allow everyone to relax and prepare their hearts. Read 1 Samuel 3:1-10 in a slow steady pace. Allow a few minutes of silence.

Then read 1 Samuel 3:10 followed by two minutes of silence.

*The LORD came and stood there, calling as at the other times, "Samuel! Samuel!"
Then Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."*

Before reading verse 10 again, remind everyone to listen for a word or phrase that catches their attention. Read the passage again, slowly.

Before the next reading, remind everyone that following this reading they will be invited into a time of silent conversation with God to consider why God has brought this word to their attention. Read the passage a third time.

You can end the silence by simply saying "Amen" or by gently ringing a chime. Invite everyone to find a partner they do not know well, introduce themselves, and share briefly what the prayer experience was like for them and what they gained from the practice.

After about 10 minutes of conversation, invite everyone to regroup and discuss their experience for a few minutes. Take a brief break and regroup at 10:00 for another activity.

10:00 a.m. Name Learning Game.

Begin by sharing in a name learning game like this:

- 1) Arrange the group in a circle.
- 2) One person starts off by saying the name of someone else in the circle and tossing the beach ball to them.
- 3) That person then in turn says the name of a different person and tosses the beach ball to someone else who has not yet received it.
- 4) That continues until everyone in the circle has received the ball once.
- 5) Generally, the objective is to pass the ball around the circle without dropping it. If the ball is dropped, the group restarts until everyone has received the ball without it being dropped.
- 6) Once the group has accomplished the task described above, add a second item such as a smaller ball, rubber chicken, bean bag or such and instruct the group that it, too, must travel in the same pattern.
- 7) Add as many items as possible, particularly goofy props, and you will see the group get sillier and sillier. You can slowly take props out after a few minutes and end on one last round of the name toss.

- 10:20 a.m. Pass out the participant handouts “Weekly Session Outline,” “Suggested Weekly Schedule for Participants,” and “First Spiritual Practice.” Talk through these handouts and discuss any questions the group might have.
- Explain that by Session 1, participants need to have read chapter 1 of *The Good and Beautiful God* as well as having done the soul-training exercise.
- Introduce the first spiritual practice: memorizing Colossians 3:1-17 during the course of the next nine weeks. As the leader you will need to select the Scripture translation the group will be memorizing. Consider the translation that your group will be most familiar with, however we discourage using *The Message* simply because of the increased length of the passage. We recommend New International Version, New Revised Standard Version, New American Standard Version and so on with everyone using the same translation so that the group can recite the memorization aloud together. Two verses will be added each week.
- 11:30 a.m. Free time/rest.
- During the lunch break, encourage folks to rest, enjoy the retreat center and find an object they can bring with them to the afternoon session that symbolizes what they are seeking from this experience.
- Noon Lunch.
- 2:00 p.m. Centering worship.
- Sing or listen to one or two songs to bring people back together. Offer a simple prayer such as this:
- Loving God, we give you thanks for this day, and for the chance to rest, enjoy creation and get to know each other better. Bless our remaining time with your presence as we seek to live as your apprentices. Amen.*
- 2:15 p.m. Share object collected during the break.
- Have everyone show the objects they found during the rest time. As they show the objects, have them explain how the object symbolizes what they are seeking from this study. Encourage everyone to do the best they can—points could be given for creativity and originality but not for professional showmanship!
- 2:50 p.m. Break.
- 3:00 p.m. Watch the Nooma video *Dust*.
- This excellent short film outlines many important points that will be covered in greater depth throughout The Apprentice Series. Begin by using the discussion questions that come with the DVD. However, you will also want to point out a few key words and ideas for further conversation. Notice that Rob Bell also uses the word “apprentice.” What does this word really mean? Also notice the difference in expectation between our culture and the culture of Jesus’ time regarding the word “disciple.” Invite people to describe the differences they see. Ask, “*What does Bell have to say about change and how people are transformed? How does that relate to your own experience of changing behavior?*”
- 4:00p.m. Closing worship.
- For the closing worship space set a lit candle and a cross in the center of a table. Around the candle and the cross scatter small rocks—twice as many rocks as people. These rocks will be picked up as part of the closing activity.
- Begin the worship with one or two songs that your group would know. Read aloud Genesis 28:10-18:
- Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Haran. When he reached a certain place, he stopped for the night because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones there, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep. He had a dream in which he saw a*

stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. There above it stood the LORD, and he said: "I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."

When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it." He was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven."

Early the next morning Jacob took the stone he had placed under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on top of it (NIV).

We have here one of the great stories of our faith, a story of God meeting someone in a totally unexpected place. In this passage Jacob is on his way to find a wife when he stops for the night. Being the outdoorsman that he is, he grabs a rock for a pillow and lays down to sleep.

In that unexpected place, God speaks to Jacob and reminds him of the promise that had been made so long ago, which would be fulfilled through Jacob. Jacob was so amazed by the experience that he turned his pillow into a pillar to mark the place and to remind him always of his experience there.

As we begin this journey together, I invite you to come forward to take a small rock as a reminder of this turning point in your journey. May it serve as a reminder of the wonderful good news that God is in our midst, that God has come in the person of Jesus to invite people like us—people who aren't the religious elite—to join him, to follow him, to study his life and his words and to begin to live life the way he did!

Before you come, I invite you to simply offer a prayer of invitation to God, asking God to reveal the promise and power of the with-God life to you as we go along this path.

Play simple instrumental music while folks pray and begin picking up their rocks. After everyone has come forward, close with this prayer:

Almighty God, surely you are in this place and we did not even realize it! Thank you for opening our eyes to your Spirit's work within us. Thank you for bringing us together for this adventure. May none of us remain unchanged by this experience, but instead may we all be deeply transformed into the people you have called us to be. Amen!

OPENING RETREAT ALTERNATIVE

If you don't have an opening retreat, we recommend this introductory session.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this session is to help form relationships within the group and become familiar with the format of the Apprentice study.

SUPPLIES

- ☞ Candle on table in the center of the room with chairs circled around it
- ☞ Copies of *The Good and Beautiful God* if you as the leader are responsible for getting them
- ☞ Nametags—I'm not sure there is anything as uncool as a nametag, but to be honest, learning names is difficult for some folks, and if they are visual learners, they really need to see the person's name as well as hear it
- ☞ Enough photocopies of "Suggested Weekly Schedule for Participants," "Apprentice Group Schedule," and "First Spiritual Practice" handouts from "Becoming a Group Spiritual Director" for each participant (see pp. 10-12)

MEETING

1. Welcome everyone.
2. Open with a prayer such as this:

Good and beautiful God, we welcome your presence here as we begin this journey together. We celebrate all you have done in our lives to bring us to this moment. We humbly ask for the grace to fall more deeply in love with you as we discover who you are and how you are at work in our lives and our world. Grant us the courage to share openly with one another and the wisdom to respect what is shared. We ask this in the name of your Son, our Master Teacher, Jesus. Amen.
3. Have everyone introduce themselves one at a time, and share an overview of their faith journey such as:
 - ☞ What religious background did you experience growing up?
 - ☞ Are you connected with a church? If so how long have you been connected there? If not, where do you go to find spiritual nourishment?
 - ☞ If your group is new—don't assume that everyone knows everything about everyone else.

When everyone has had an opportunity to speak, reflect with the group anything you noticed. For example, members of the group may come from very different backgrounds and yet you have come together for this experience, etc.
4. Watch the Nooma DVD titled *Dust* and use the discussion questions with the DVD to explore what it means to follow Jesus.
5. Pass out the Participant Handouts covering the "Suggested Weekly Schedule for Participants," "Apprentice Group Schedule," and "First Spiritual Practice." Talk through these handouts discussing any questions the group might have.
 - ☞ Introduce the first spiritual practice: memorizing Colossians 3:1-17 during the course of the next nine weeks. As the leader you will need to select the translation the group will be memorizing. Consider the translation that your group will be most familiar with, however we discourage using *The Message* simply because of

the increased length of the passage. We recommend New International Version, New Revised Standard Version, New American Standard Version, and so on. We recommend using the same translation so that when people gather together, they can recite it aloud as a group. Each week two more verses will be added.

6. What to read for this week:
 - ☞ Introduction to the Series.
 - ☞ Chapter I: “What Are You Seeking?”
7. Turn to the end of Chapter I where the author explains the soul-training exercise of sleep. Explain that in the midst of reading the chapter this week, they will also need to engage in this practice, as well as memorizing Colossians 3:1-2 in the translation you will be using as a group.
8. Because the group is small, relationships will play an essential role in the experience. In order for relationships to remain healthy, it is good to consider expectations for the interaction that will take place within the group. Create a list as a group of how you will listen and speak to one another. You may even want to keep the list as a covenant among the group. While this may seem obvious, it can be helpful in building trust. After the retreat, recruit a volunteer to print out the covenant and post it in your meeting space as a reminder to the entire group. Your list should include these points:
 - ☞ **CONFIDENTIALITY.** What someone else says must remain in the room.
 - ☞ **SPEAK FROM YOUR OWN PERSPECTIVE.** Avoid speaking on behalf of others or telling people what they should think or feel.
 - ☞ **AGREE TO DISAGREE.** Great insights come from opposing viewpoints, so welcome conversations that don’t see things the same way. However, it is important for all parties involved to have respect for others. And perhaps most importantly, rather than speaking from an authoritative position, ask from an inquiring position. Instead of saying, “You’re wrong because I’ve done [whatever it is] and I know,” you would say, “What you are saying is different than my own experience. Please tell me about your experience and how you’ve come to that conclusion.” When we approach each other with open questions, we can all grow—even if our viewpoints don’t change.
 - ☞ **ENCOURAGE EACH OTHER.** This study is a major commitment, and it will often touch many areas and many levels of our lives. As you share your struggles and discoveries, take time to celebrate the ways you enrich each other’s lives.
 - ☞ **AS THE LEADER OF THE GROUP, COMMIT TO BEING HONEST WITH THE GROUP MEMBERS.** If the actions of someone in the group are unhealthy, you will speak individually with that person in a loving way to make the situation right.
9. Ask for any questions people may have.
10. Closing prayer: Stand in a circle and join hands with a lit candle in the center of the room. Offer a prayer such as this:

Jesus, throughout your life you called others to drop what they were doing and come study your life and teachings. Those who accepted that invitation discovered a life more rich and powerful than anything they had known before. Today we enlist, in a new way, in a chance to study with you what you taught, what you believed, and how you lived. Wherever we are in our relationship with you, we know that you are able to meet us and guide us into the way of truth, life and love. Reveal to us the God you loved, and the Kingdom you proclaimed. Amen.

CHAPTER I, SESSION I: WHAT ARE YOU SEEKING?

CHAPTER CHALLENGE

Perhaps the greatest challenge of this first chapter is simply processing all the information it contains. In particular, the four components of transformation may be overwhelming. Some readers may be familiar with “narrative” language, others may be familiar with soul-shaping exercises, some may be familiar with small group experience, and most will be familiar with the Holy Spirit. Few people will be familiar with all four of these areas, and certainly some people will be unfamiliar with all four of these areas. For this reason, as a leader you will need to be thorough in helping people to understand what they have read. Be prepared to draw illustrations from the chapter itself as well as from others in the group so they can more fully understand what they have read. Have a clear image in your own mind of these three areas—and especially how the Spirit works in and through them to bring us to fullness of life.

SUPPLIES

- ☞ Mustard seeds
- ☞ Small pots
- ☞ Potting soil
- ☞ Water for watering the seeds
- ☞ Name tags
- ☞ DVD *Be Still* cued to “Being Still” segment
- ☞ DVD player and television or computer and video projector

WELCOME

If your group members do not know each other well, spend a few minutes having everyone tell their name again, share a blessing they received this week and one experience that was difficult this week. Their sharing can be simple. Following this conversation, have the class recite Colossians 3:1-2. Go directly from the Colossians passage into 5 minutes of silence.

5 MINUTES OF SILENCE

[Near the beginning of each class there will be 5 minutes of silence. Why 5 minutes of silence? We live in a world that is filled with noise and distractions. It is easy to enter one conversation still processing the last conversation. In the midst of all this busyness it is also difficult to hear the whispering voice of God. When we gather with friends to share our spiritual journey, what we want is to hear God’s voice in the lives of those around us. With a little silence we will be prepared to listen. Initially, 5 minutes of silence will seem like a very long time, but trust the value of this practice. Before long the group will crave this time rather than dreading it.]

PRAYER TO END THE SILENCE

At the end of the silence you could offer this prayer or a prayer of your own:

*God of power,
God of love,
God of transformation.*

You are present here, and you are inviting us to find our deepest questions answered in you.

We long to be the people you have created us to be.

By your Spirit, guide our time together so that we might live as your Apprentices.

Amen.

SOUL-TRAINING [10-15 minutes]

If you are in a group of seven or more people, divide into small groups of three or four. Spend 10 minutes discussing what you learned from the soul-training experience of sleep. To help everyone get started, share your thoughts on these questions.

1. Were you able to practice the discipline of sleep 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?

ENGAGING THE CHAPTER [30-45 minutes]

THE BIG IDEA IN THIS CHAPTER: Most people want to change, but fail—not because they are not trying but because they are not training properly.

MAIN POINTS

These points are here to serve you as the leader. They can help refresh your memory on the content of the chapter and specific points you may want to discuss with the group.

- ☞ The first component of change is to adopt the narratives of Jesus regarding God—to come to know the God Jesus knows.
- ☞ The second component of change, the spiritual disciplines, should be seen as wisdom, not righteousness. They do not earn us favor with God; rather, they are means of training and shaping our souls.
- ☞ The third component of change is participation in community. We need the help and support of others in our journey toward Christlikeness.
- ☞ Transformation requires the action of the Holy Spirit in our lives, working through the three components of change and other means.
- ☞ Jesus has called you to be his disciple.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

[Note: Each week read through the 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 these questions.]

1. Have you ever tried to change something about yourself? What process did you use? How successful were you in changing?
2. The author gives us a diagram for transformation (p. 24). It is made up of personal narratives, soul-training exercises, community and the Holy Spirit. Have any of these been a part of how you have changed in the past? Explain.
3. Our narratives are stories that shape the way we live. To help you understand the concept of narratives better, think of a story from your life that defines success for you. Talk about that with the group.
4. Many people are tempted and have been taught to practice spiritual disciplines to please God when, in fact, they are a means of transforming the soul. How does that alter your approach to the practices you already do?
5. When has a small group of people spurred you on and encouraged you on your journey?
6. From the section on the work of the Holy Spirit (pp. 28-31), what insights did you gain about the Holy Spirit and how it impacts our narratives, Soul-Training or sense of community?

BREAK [5 minutes]

ENGAGING THE WORD [10-15 minutes]

[Note: Take the time to have someone read the Scripture text aloud each week. It's good to hear it read even if it is also in front of you in a written format.]

Read John 1:38-39 aloud.

1. Listen to Jesus' words; imagine you are the disciple asking the question. What are you looking for?
2. When Jesus tells you to "come and see," what emotion do you feel?

EXPERIENCING TRANSFORMATION [15-20 minutes]

[The purpose of this activity is to help participants ponder the slow mysterious process of change.]

Begin by having everyone in the group tell what they are hoping to get from this study. This may resemble the essays they wrote to be a part of the class.

Give each person a seed—preferably a mustard seed. Say:

In many ways, the reason for being in this study can be symbolized in the seed. When a seed germinates it begins to grow. The word “germinate” means to “develop” or “come into being” (see Merriam-Webster.com). From our seed of desire which was planted by the Holy Spirit, new life will “come into being.” Consider how God might use this study to do even more in your life than you can imagine. What might that new life look like? Give thanks to God for this “seed” and this chance now to have the seed nurtured and cared for so it can come to new life.

Read Luke 13:18-19 aloud to the group:

Then Jesus asked, “What is the kingdom of God like? What shall I compare it to? It is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his garden. It grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air perched in its branches” (NIV).

Give the group a few minutes to reflect on these thoughts, and then invite them to plant their seeds in the small pots and add some water. When everyone has finished planting the seeds, offer this prayer, or one of your own:

We offer these seeds to you, O God, as a symbol of the desire within us that has brought us here. For some of us, that desire is very clear, for others it is difficult to put into words. There are some of us in this room who have a deep love for you that has brought us here while others of us are troubled more by our inability to live faithfully to your teaching. We believe that in the darkness of the earth your Son sprang forth to new life, and we hope that in the darkness of our lives, in the nurture of this class, these seeds of longing will spring forth to new life in you. We offer this prayer to you because you are the Creator of all things and the Giver of Life. Amen.

Encourage everyone to take their seeds home and care for them over the coming weeks. The plant may serve as a focal point for meditation as they continue over these next several weeks.

During the last 5 minutes have group members discuss their previous experiences of being silent, which is one of the spiritual exercises for the coming week. Some people are completely comfortable with silence and cannot get enough while others struggle with silence, even 5 minutes of silence. To help those who are less comfortable with silence, show the segment “Being Still” from the DVD *Be Still*, which gives helpful tips on being quiet with God.

GO IN PEACE [5 minutes]

Conclude by having one person in your group read these words from the first chapter of *The Good and Beautiful God* aloud.

When the Spirit has changed our narratives sufficiently, we begin to think differently. As a result we begin to believe in and trust a good and loving God who is strong and powerful. We begin to see how Jesus lived a perfect life that we cannot live and offered that life to the Father on our behalf, setting us free from having to earn God’s love and favor. And as we engage in soul-training exercises—especially in the context of community—our confidence that God is at work in and among us increases. This creates an inward change that manifests itself in outward behavior.

Now, when faced with an airport delay, we can take a deep breath and remember who we are. . . . we can endure these trials with love, joy, peace, patience and kindness (p. 31).

Go from this place, savoring the good news that God is at work in and among you. Amen.

FOR THE COMING WEEK

- ☞ Read Chapter 2, “God is Good.”
- ☞ Do the soul-training exercises of having 5 minutes of silence each day and observing creation.
- ☞ Memorize Colossians 3:3-4.

CHAPTER 2, SESSION 2: GOD IS GOOD

CHAPTER CHALLENGE

This chapter could raise many questions for your group. First, there could be questions surrounding the idea of God's goodness and that God does not punish sinners. Specifically, questions may surface from the Luke 13:1-5 passage, which is used to illustrate Jesus' narrative about God. Be sure to check out the footnote on that passage for further clarity. There may also be questions about the consequences of sin. Some of these questions are addressed specifically in the section "The Good only the Good Know." Here we start to see the reward for goodness and how that is lost through sin. Further questions should be welcomed. It may be tempting to resolve all of these questions, but often that is not possible. Invite the group to stay with their questions and even keep bringing them up in the coming weeks. As the book unfolds they may find answers, or they may find answers in other sources as they proceed.

SUPPLIES

- ☞ Recording of the song "Last Kiss" by Pearl Jam
- ☞ CD player
- ☞ 1 copy of the lyrics to "Last Kiss" for each member of the group (see the handout at the end of this chapter)
- ☞ 1 blank index card and pen for each participant for the 1-minute essay
- ☞ 1 sheet of blank paper and 1 marker for each person for the "Letting Go" exercise
- ☞ A trash can for the "Letting Go" exercise

WELCOME

"God is Good" is an intense chapter. At the very beginning of class, even before the silence, a little levity can be introduced by playing the song, "Last Kiss." It is a classic packed with narratives about God, punishment, suffering and heaven! It was covered very well by Pearl Jam—available on iTunes.

Lyrics:

Oh where, oh where, can my baby be
The Lord took her away from me
She's gone to heaven so I've got to be good
So I can see my baby when I leave this world
We were out on a date in my daddy's car
We hadn't driven very far
There in the road straight ahead
A car was stalled - the engine was dead
I couldn't stop so I swerved to the right
I'll never forget the sound that night
The screamin' tires, the bustin' glass
The painful scream that I heard last
Oh where, oh where, can my baby be
The Lord took her away from me
She's gone to heaven so I've got to be good
So I can see my baby when I leave this world
When I woke up the rain was pourin' down
There were people standin' all around
Something warm flowing through my eyes
But somehow I found my baby that night
I lifted her head, she looked at me and said
"Hold me darling just a little while"
I held her close, I kissed her our last kiss
I found the love that I knew I had missed
Well now she's gone Even though I held her tight
I lost my love, my life, that night

Give the class a chance to make observations regarding the lyrics and message of the song. What narratives are revealed about God and heaven? Encourage your group to notice narratives about God, heaven, and self that they receive from society—such stories show up in surprising places.

Recite Colossians 3:1-4 together, then enter into the silence.

5 MINUTES OF SILENCE

PRAYER TO END THE SILENCE

God of goodness, we often take your goodness for granted. In our minds we separate your goodness from the pain and difficulty of our everyday lives. Set us free, O Lord, to enter this time with honesty, trust and compassion to explore your goodness and what it means for us in every moment of life. Amen.

SOUL-TRAINING [10-15 minutes]

Divide into small groups of three or four and spend time discussing what you learned from the two soul-training experiences. To help you begin, you might use these three questions:

1. What, if anything, did you learn about God or yourself through the exercises?
2. Was it hard for you to find 5 minutes for silence each day?
3. What stood out for you as you paid closer attention to the created world around you?

1-MINUTE ESSAY

Before diving into the questions for “Engaging the Chapter,” use this simple exercise to get your group reflecting on the chapter. Pass out index cards and pens to your group. Say:

Take one minute, and no more, to write a two- or three-sentence essay that answers the following: “What was the most important teaching you found in this chapter?”

After the minute is up, split into different groups of three or four. For 5 minutes have participants share their discoveries. Then regroup and have the sub-groups share a theme that surfaced from their conversation.

ENGAGING THE CHAPTER [20-30 minutes]

THE BIG IDEA IN THIS CHAPTER: The dominant narrative about God for many Christians is that God is angry and punishes us for our sins. Jesus rejected this idea.

MAIN POINTS

- ☞ It is somewhat easy to say “God is good!” when our lives are going well, but it becomes much more difficult when we are suffering.
- ☞ Beyond the negative impact that all sins cause in and of themselves, if we start with the notion that God punishes us for our sins when we experience trials, we automatically assume that God caused them.
- ☞ As we examine what we think about God, we must ask, “Is my understanding of God consistent with the God that Jesus revealed?”
- ☞ On two occasions Jesus was confronted with questions about human suffering. On both occasions he rejected the notion that suffering was caused by the sinfulness of those who suffered.
- ☞ God gets the last word; that is, all of our suffering will be transformed in the end.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The author shares a story of being confronted by a friend who says that either his sin or his wife’s sin had caused his daughter Madeline’s illness. What was your reaction to that story?
2. Have you ever had times when you felt that God was punishing you for a sin or perhaps had a friend tell you that was happening to you? If so, talk about that experience.
3. The author points out that many live by the narrative that says: “God is an angry judge. If you sin you will be punished.” Has this narrative ever affected you? If so, where did that narrative come from?

- Look back at the section called “The Good Only the Good Know” (pp. 46-47). St. Augustine had a brilliant insight when he shifted the discussion away from the “cause and effect” notion of sin and suffering and taught instead about the “peculiar good” belonging to those who do good and the evil that results from evil. For example, a person who goes about doing good will experience blessings unknown to those who do evil such as inner contentment, the good feeling of having helped another, trust and so on. If time allows, tell stories of people you have known who have received the “good” because of their goodness.

BREAK [5 minutes]

ENGAGING THE WORD [15-30 minutes]

Read John 9 aloud.

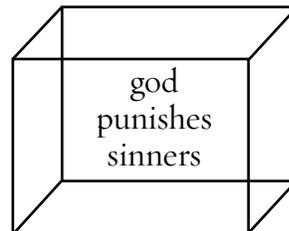
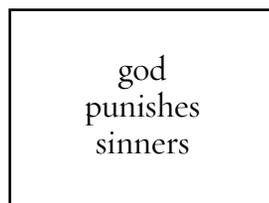
- As an onlooker, what do you see, hear and feel?
- Watching Jesus in action in John 9, what do you learn about him?
- What do you learn about human nature through the Pharisees, the disciples and the man who was born blind?
- Are there any areas of your life where you feel God has punished you? If so, imagine yourself in the place of the man born blind. Allow yourself to hear Jesus’ words as if they are spoken to you.

EXPERIENCING TRANSFORMATION [15 minutes]

The purpose of this activity is to help participants let go of the old narrative that God punishes sinners for misbehaving as well as letting go of the desire to be in control. Say:

We will now be participating in a simple activity to help tangibly understand that God is good, and that there is no logical system to explain what happens to us in this life.

Give everyone in the class a blank sheet of paper and a marker. Invite everyone to draw a square or a three-dimensional box on the paper with the phrase “god punishes sinners” inside it not capitalized on purpose, perhaps like the examples below.



Read the following:

The drawing on paper represents the way our false narratives keep God trapped and leave us with images of God that are not good or beautiful. The chapter examined the false narrative that God punishes those who sin and rewards those who are good. One root of this false narrative is a desire to be in control. If God punishes those who are bad, then we can avoid serious suffering by not being “bad.” As discussed, this equation doesn’t really add up. If life were as simple as this false narrative, then we could control our own destinies—and anyone who suffered would deserve it.

Instead, there is no system to explain suffering. We must trust Jesus when he tells us—and shows us—that God is good.

Tonight, we are invited to let go of our false narratives about God and allow Jesus to give us new narratives. Prayerfully consider your false narratives about God and how you use them to “keep control” of life. When you are ready, individually go to the trash can, wad up your piece of paper and throw it away.

After everyone has thrown away their paper, close with this prayer:

God of Goodness, we have come to this place with many narratives about you—some are helpful but some hurt us deeply and keep us from loving you. Tonight we ask that you would help us let go of these false narratives and embrace the stories about you that Jesus revealed so we can come to know you as a good and beautiful God. Amen!

GO IN PEACE [5-10 minutes]

Have a volunteer from the group read the quote below from the chapter. Then sit in silence and soak in these words to close your time together.

Jesus said his Father was good. Jesus also refused to affirm the idea that external rewards and punishments are given by God on the basis of our good or bad works. Rain falls on the good and the bad. Sometimes we pray for rain (for our crops), and sometimes we pray that it will not rain (for our picnics). Both good and bad people get rained on, whether they want it or not. Jesus faced suffering, rejection, and alienation and the people jeered at him as he hung on the cross, questioning whether his God was really with him. And Jesus believed. And he believes for me. He believes even when we cannot. He prays even when we cannot. We participate in his faith (p. 49).

If you are comfortable doing so, offer prayers of praise and thanksgiving for the God who is good.

FOR THE COMING WEEK

- ☞ Read Chapter 3, “God is Trustworthy.”
- ☞ Do the soul-training exercise of counting your blessings.
- ☞ As you are able, continue observing 5 minutes of silence each day.
- ☞ Memorize Colossians 3:5-6.

“LAST KISS” LYRICS

Oh where, oh where, can my baby be The Lord took her away from me
She's gone to heaven so I've got to be good So I can see my baby when I leave this world

We were out on a date in my daddy's car We hadn't driven very far
There in the road straight ahead A car was stalled - the engine was dead
I couldn't stop so I swerved to the right I'll never forget the sound that night
The screamin' tires, the bustin' glass The painful scream that I heard last

Oh where, oh where, can my baby be The Lord took her away from me
She's gone to heaven so I've got to be good So I can see my baby when I leave this world

When I woke up the rain was pourin' down There were people standin' all around
Something warm flowing through my eyes But somehow I found my baby that night
I lifted her head, she looked at me and said "Hold me darling just a little while"
I held her close, I kissed her our last kiss I found the love that I knew I had missed
Well now she's gone Even though I held her tight I lost my love, my life, that night

“LAST KISS” LYRICS

Oh where, oh where, can my baby be The Lord took her away from me
She's gone to heaven so I've got to be good So I can see my baby when I leave this world

We were out on a date in my daddy's car We hadn't driven very far
There in the road straight ahead A car was stalled - the engine was dead
I couldn't stop so I swerved to the right I'll never forget the sound that night
The screamin' tires, the bustin' glass The painful scream that I heard last

Oh where, oh where, can my baby be The Lord took her away from me
She's gone to heaven so I've got to be good So I can see my baby when I leave this world

When I woke up the rain was pourin' down There were people standin' all around
Something warm flowing through my eyes But somehow I found my baby that night
I lifted her head, she looked at me and said "Hold me darling just a little while"
I held her close, I kissed her our last kiss I found the love that I knew I had missed
Well now she's gone Even though I held her tight I lost my love, my life, that night

CHAPTER 3, SESSION 3: GOD IS TRUSTWORTHY

CHAPTER CHALLENGE

There are a few points within this chapter that could be difficult for people to process and accept. One such point which can be very painful for people is the idea of God as Father. The author does a very good job explaining why we should not let earthly fathers define the nature of God, but instead we should allow God to define the behavior of a good earthly father. However, as a leader you should be sensitive to those who continue to struggle with the image of God as Father. Like many things of an emotional and spiritual nature, it can be a slow process of healing. If there is anyone in your group who struggles with this, give them space to express their frustration and pain. Because of the limited amount of time and resources of the small group, it may be beneficial for such a person to meet with a spiritual director. This one-on-one setting allows for the time and attention needed to work through such wounds.

After reading through the third chapter and practicing the soul-training exercises up to this point, it is a good idea to remind folks that these practices are not meant to be done only once but instead should be on-going practices that continue to mold and shape us. With this in mind, spend a few minutes having the class discuss the practices they have continued to do and what they are learning as they continue. There is no need for them to be doing all of the practices all of the time; instead they should be discerning God's guidance into the practices that bring renewal and insight into their life.

SUPPLIES

- ☞ Prize for the welcoming activity if you do it

WELCOME

If you have a group that has just formed for this study, hopefully they are getting comfortable with each other's names. You could have a contest for anyone who could name everyone in the group and say something about the person. Depending on the size of your group, this might be worth a prize.

Recite Colossians 3:1-6 together then enter into the silence.

5 MINUTES OF SILENCE

PRAYER TO END THE SILENCE

*Christ Jesus, by your Spirit
you come and kindle a burning light in us.
We know well that it is not we
who create this source of light,
but you, the Risen Lord.
To all of us, you give the one thing that matters
and which is hidden from our own eyes:*

*a peaceful trust in God
and also poverty in spirit,
so that with a great thirst for the realities of God,
we may take the risk of letting you accompany us, O Christ,
and of accompanying, in our turn,
those whom you entrust to us.*

— Brother Roger, *Songs and Prayers of Taizé*

ENGAGING THE CHAPTER [25 minutes]

THE BIG IDEA IN THIS CHAPTER: We can trust God because Jesus trusted God. If Jesus, as Christians believe, is the second member of the Trinity who has known God the Father for all eternity, then Jesus knows the Father better than any theologian ever will. Therefore, if Jesus trusted his Father—even as he entered into his suffering—you and I can do the same.

MAIN POINTS

- ☞ Jesus addressed God as “Abba,” a term of endearment, somewhat similar to “Daddy” or “Papa.”
- ☞ Jesus revealed a lot about the character of God in the content of The Lord’s Prayer.
- ☞ The nature of what it means to be a father is defined by God, not earthly fathers.
- ☞ At the end of his earthly ministry Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, “Father, let this cup pass from me.” “Cup” refers to the suffering he was about to endure. All of us have, or will have, at least one “cup.” This can be a hindrance to trusting God.
- ☞ George Buttrick’s powerful illustration—a small blot on the large piece of paper—shows how we tend to focus on the negative and overlook “the widespread mercies.”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Have you ever done a team-building exercise? If so, tell your experience.
 - Did the exercise build trust? If so, what did it feel like to “trust your team”?
 - What does it feel like to be part of a team that you do not trust?
2. The author believes God is trustworthy because the God Jesus reveals would never do anything to harm us. God has no malice or evil intentions. How does this compare to your own definition of trustworthiness?
3. In The Lord’s Prayer we encounter a God who is Present, Pure, Powerful; who Provides, Pardon and Protects (pp. 60-61). Which of these aspects of God is most comforting for you? Which one is the most difficult to grasp?
4. If you are in a group of six or more, divide into groups of three or four to discuss the following questions. [Allow about 10-15 minutes for this conversation and prayer.] A “cup” is that aspect of our life that makes it difficult for us to trust God (see pp. 64-65 of *The Good and Beautiful God*). [Refer participants to the Small Group Appendix on pp. 200-201 for the following questions.]
 - Can you name a “cup” from your own life? What have you learned about God or yourself through that experience?
 - The author tells us, “Jesus trusted his Abba, and I will also trust in the God I know to be good.” How does it feel to know that you do not have to “force” yourself to say “all is well?”
 - Whether you are in the midst of tragedy or not, it is amazing to see our story joined with God’s story (pp. 65-67). How does this good news change your perspective and the way you spend your time and energy?
 - If you are comfortable, spend time in prayer for one another, inviting God to join his story with yours.

SOUL-TRAINING [10 minutes]

Near the end of the chapter the focus turns to the blessings we have received. If the group is large enough, divide into new groups of three to four and discuss what you learned from the soul-training practice of counting your blessings. It isn’t necessary to share your list. Use these questions to help you begin:

1. What, if anything, did you learn about God or yourself through the exercise?
2. What were some of the things that made your list that surprised you? Why?
3. What similarities do you notice between everyone’s lists?

ENGAGING THE WORD [15 minutes]

Come back together as a group. Say:

For this session’s “Engaging The Word” we are going to hear the story of Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane. The passage will be read twice. The first time just listen to hear the details.

Have a volunteer read Matthew 26:36-44 aloud. Then say:

Now we will hear the passage again. This time, close your eyes and picture the story in your mind as if you were watching a movie, or better yet, as if you were one of the people in the story.

Have a second volunteer read Matthew 26:36-44 aloud. After the reading, leave a few moments of silence, then discuss the following questions:

1. *What did you notice as you observed and participated in the story?*
2. *What emotions did this scene stir within you?*
3. *How does this moment from Jesus' life impact your ability to trust God?*

BREAK [5 minutes]

EXPERIENCING TRANSFORMATION [15 minutes]

Say: *To help us savor and comprehend the wisdom of The Lord's Prayer, we are going to individually write a prayer using the six characteristics of God from The Lord's Prayer to help express our own understanding of God. The six characteristics are: God is present, pure, powerful, and he provides, pardons and protects.*

Begin the prayer with your favorite name for God: Abba, Spirit, Lord, etc. Next, although they may be very brief, write three sentences that proclaim:

1. *what it means to you that God is present,*
2. *praise of God's purity,*
3. *an aspect of God's power.*

Then write three sentences that petition God in these ways:

1. *by providing for a basic need that you have,*
2. *by pardoning you specifically or generally,*
3. *by protecting you in some way.*

Here is one example of the finished prayer:

Loving Creator,

You are as near to me as the very air that gives me life.

In you there is no darkness, only light!

Through you, all things have come into being and have life!

I am not worthy to approach you, yet you invite me to call upon you

To help me find the things I need, and set me free from the things I want

That you would reveal to me the times I operate against your will, forgive me and grant me wisdom to be transformed

That you would lead me into the reality of your Kingdom!

Amen.

If anyone in the group is comfortable, have them read their prayers aloud. If no one is comfortable doing so, that is all right as well.

GO IN PEACE [5 minutes]

Have two or three volunteers, one person at a time, slowly read all six descriptors of God—God is Present, God is Pure, God is Powerful, God Provides, God Pardons and God Protects—with a pause between each reader. Once all the volunteers have read, have a few minutes of silence.

End the silence with these words:

Go in the assurance of a God who can be trusted.

FOR THE COMING WEEK

- ☞ Read chapter 4, which explores God's generosity.
- ☞ The soul-training practice for the week will be living and breathing the 23rd Psalm—enjoy!
- ☞ Remember to memorize Colossians 3:7-8.

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.

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.

CHAPTER 6, SESSION 6: GOD IS HOLY

CHAPTER CHALLENGE

Our experience in working through this material with groups is that people are generally thankful to arrive at this chapter even though the focus is on God's holiness, which leads to wrath. This chapter addresses apparent conflicts between a God who is angry and a God whose love is radical.

Perhaps the greatest challenge of the chapter is grasping simultaneously God's wrath and God's love. While the author does an excellent job of connecting the two—"love loves unto purity"—it will be important to keep those two ideas present for people.

SUPPLIES

- ☞ Decide in advance how you will do the "confession." If you have individuals partner off and confess to one another, you will need only space for the pairs to converse privately. If you decide to have a silent time of confession, you will need paper and pens as well as an appropriate way to destroy the confessions in front of the group. The most powerful symbol for this would be throwing the papers into a fire, but if your space does not allow for this, simply throw them into a trashcan or even run them through a shredder; anything that helps everyone realize that God is no longer dealing with them on the basis of their sins.
- ☞ "Meditating on the Incarnation of Christ" handout.

WELCOME

Once everyone has arrived and been welcomed, remind them of your plans for reading the entire Gospel of John together (if applicable).

Recite Colossians 3:1-12 together, then enter into the silence.

5 MINUTES OF SILENCE

PRAYER TO END THE SILENCE

Holy and Just God, as we gather for this time of study, reflection and conversation, may your Spirit guide every word we speak and every silence we share. May we come to understand more fully your holiness and how your very wrath is an expression of love for us. As we surrender our wills to yours, may your love "love us unto purity." Amen.

SOUL-TRAINING [15 minutes]

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

1. Were you able to develop margin in any way this week? If so, describe what you did and how you felt about it.
2. As you tried to develop margin in your life, what did you notice was the most difficult? What was the most rewarding?
3. How do you plan to practice the discipline of margin in the future?
4. What, if anything, did you learn about God or yourself through the exercise?

ENGAGING THE CHAPTER [20 minutes]

THE BIG IDEA IN THIS CHAPTER: God is love and God is also holy. God's "wrath" toward sin is a reflection of that love and holiness.

MAIN POINTS

- ☞§ The notion of God as a kind of "teddy bear" is common and appealing in our culture and even in many churches.
- ☞§ Though we seldom reflect on it, Jesus spoke a great deal about judgment and wrath.
- ☞§ Passion refers to a kind of out-of-control human anger, whereas pathos refers to an act of care and intention. God's wrath is pathos, not passion.
- ☞§ God is essentially holy but not essentially wrathful. Holiness is an attribute of God; wrath is an action of God.
- ☞§ "Love loves unto purity," said George MacDonald, meaning that God's love is so strong that it will burn everything that is not pure out of his people.
- ☞§ We may think we want a more passive and condoning God, but in reality we do not.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Chapter six addresses two false narratives. The first is that God is always angry and wrathful toward us. The second false narrative is that God does not care about sin at all and is more of a "teddy bear." With which of these two narratives do you identify most? Why?
2. "To love is to will the good of another," according to Dallas Willard (p. 119). When this understanding of love comes into contact with our sin, the result is God's wrath because God is "fiercely and forcefully opposed to the things which destroy his people" (p. 121). What would you say to a friend who wanted to understand how a loving God could be wrathful?
3. We are given this wonderful quote from George MacDonald, "love loves unto purity" (p. 123). What thoughts and feelings do you have when you consider that God longs to remove everything from your life that would destroy you?
4. "God will not violate the choices we make. People may choose to bar God from their life. Thus the doors of hell are locked from the inside" (p. 125). How is this vision of hell similar or different from your own understanding?
5. The chapter concludes with the important point that we must first trust in God's love and forgiveness before we can begin to understand God's holiness. The first five chapters of this book unpack God's love and goodness. What impact have the previous five chapters had in preparing you to understand God's holiness?

BREAK [5 minutes]

EXPERIENCING TRANSFORMATION [40 minutes]

This week's experience is engaging in the practice of confession. To have a fully developed understanding of this discipline, read Richard Foster's chapter on the subject contained in his book, *Celebration of Discipline*. It is an inspiring chapter.

You will have two options for your group based upon the level of trust and intimacy that exists within your group.

OPTION I

The first option is for the members of your group to partner off and confess to one another. (You could set the partners yourself or have them find a partner.) There are two reasons you may choose not to do this form of confession with your group. The first is that your group may not be ready for this level of intimacy. It requires a lot of trust to open up and share our sins with someone else; however, if we are willing to take that risk, it leads to a tremendous sense of community and honesty. The second reason is that there may be folks in your group who are not spiritually mature enough to hear someone else's struggles or who might be led to a position of judging others.

If you have your group partner off and confess to each other, use the following words from James Bryan Smith regarding confession as well as some additional practical ideas to be read to the group.

Together we have explored the holiness of God, and how God loves us unto purity. We have been reminded that our God is a consuming fire that removes the dross from our lives. Throughout the history of the church one of the most powerful ways to bring our impurity to the light AND to experience God's healing forgiveness has been the practice of confession. Here are a few important and practical teachings on confession.

It is important to know how much to confess. The general rule of thumb is that we should only confess what the Spirit leads us to confess and no more. The goal is not to confess every sin from our childhood to today. We simply want to confess the sins that the Spirit brings to our minds. As we name each one, the power of that sin will be broken, as always happens when the sin is brought to the light.

When we confess we are not looking for advice, or even counsel. Avoid getting into lengthy discussion about it, and watch for any tendency to rationalize the thing confessed ("Well, I struck back in anger because I had been having a really bad day" or "Sure I have some lust in my heart, but it isn't enough to need to mention"). Just confess it. Say, "This is what I thought/said/did...I am ashamed of it, and I don't want to carry the shame for another day."

Your confession does not need to be some giant sin but it should also not be so trivial as to have no effect. Let the Spirit lead by asking, "What, if anything, would it be good for me to confess to someone else?" Remember James 5:16 which teaches, "Confess your sins one to another that you may be healed." Confession is the path to healing and wholeness.

The listener should listen closely and compassionately. Realize as you listen to the other person's sins that while the sins may not seem bad to you, they are a burden to this person. Do not judge the person who is confessing, but instead remember that we all stand in need of God's forgiveness. It is also important that absolute confidentiality be kept. At the end of their confession, prayerfully offer these words, "By the blood of Jesus, you are forgiven."

Spouses should not be partnered together. We will begin with 10 minutes of silent reflection to identify what sins you wish to confess. Then you will find (or be assigned) a partner. The first person will have 10 minutes to share their confession. Then the second person will be given 10 minutes to do the same. I will let you know when each of the 10 minute segments have passed.

OPTION 2

If your group is not ready for partner confession, you can do a silent confession. For this experience you will need paper and pens for everyone. Give them 15 minutes to allow the Spirit to bring any sins to mind. Then have them bring their papers forward and destroy them in some way. If it is safe, there could be a fire where the confessions are burned or you could have a paper shredder or just a trashcan.

Say to the group:

Together we have explored the holiness of God and how God loves us unto purity. We have been reminded that our God is a consuming fire that removes the dross from our lives. Throughout the history of the church one of the most powerful ways to bring our impurity to the light AND to experience God's healing forgiveness has been in the form of confession. Here are a few important and practical teachings on confession.

It is important to know how much to confess. The general rule of thumb is that we should only confess what the Spirit leads us to confess and no more. The goal is not to confess every sin from our childhood to today. We simply want to confess the sins that the Spirit brings to our minds.

In a moment I will give you a blank sheet of paper and a pen. We will then have about 15 minutes of silence for you to dialogue with the Holy Spirit and see what sins come to mind. As sins surface, simply write them down. This paper is for your eyes only. After 15 minutes I will invite one person at a time to come forward and destroy the paper as a symbol of God's forgiveness. May we find healing and freedom as we offer these confessions.

Give the group paper and pens. Let the group know when 15 minutes have passed. After everyone has brought their confession forward to have it destroyed, proclaim to the group: *By the blood of Jesus, you are forgiven.*

GO IN PEACE [5 minutes]

Have a volunteer from the group read the quote below from the chapter. Then sit in silence and soak in these words to close your time together.

God is against my sin because he is for me. And if I am for sin, God stands against those desires because they cause my destruction. I would not have it any other way. To be sure, I am prone to excusing my sin or rationalizing my weaknesses, but God is not in that business. Though we are now reconciled through Christ, God is not indifferent to my sin. It hurts me, and therefore it hurts God—because God loves me.

But even still, God has a better way to help me with the issue of sin. . . . God’s method of change is the highest of all. After all, MacDonald did not write, “wrath shames unto purity.” He said, “love loves unto purity.” God’s holy love burns the dross of sin out of our lives (pp. 123-24).

God’s love is loving you “unto purity.” Go in the assurance of God’s deep desire for your good.

FOR THE COMING WEEK

- ☞ Chapter 7 of *The Good and Beautiful God* is a very important and powerful chapter. However, it explores an idea that many folks may be unfamiliar with: the incarnation of God in Christ. For this reason and because the chapter is so good, participants will want to give themselves plenty of time to read the chapter and even a chance to read it a second time thoroughly.
- ☞ If you have decided to read the Gospel of John as a group, everyone will need to be reminded of those arrangements.
- ☞ This week also features two soul-shaping exercises that are not included in the book. The first, as has been the case each week, is continuing to memorize Colossians 3:1-17. This week in particular, participants will be memorizing Colossians 3:13-14.
- ☞ The second soul-shaping exercise is a guided meditation on the incarnation of Christ. It is based on a meditation by Ignatius of Loyola and has been expanded upon by Maureen Conroy in her book, *Experiencing God’s Tremendous Love*.

MEDITATING ON THE INCARNATION OF CHRIST*

The idea of God becoming human in an effort to draw us closer to him is a powerful one. This meditation is meant to help us understand this idea cognitively as well as emotionally and spiritually.

If you have not done “meditation” before, do not worry! Think of meditation as simply a long, loving gaze at something of beauty. For example, when a person goes to a museum and spends an hour in front of one piece of art—savoring the technique involved in creating the masterpiece, noticing as many details as possible, pondering questions about the artwork—all of this is a form of meditation. In the same way, we can meditate on Scripture, using our imaginations to help us see a story take place and then savoring all the details of the story as well as voicing questions that surface in our hearts around the story. If this is done prayerfully, it is possible that Christ may indeed whisper an answer to us through his Spirit. And so it is with the following meditation. Set aside thirty minutes to an hour and simply follow the steps. Allow your mind and heart to move deeply into the images suggested by Ignatius and the story of Mary’s conversation with the angel Gabriel.

Before you begin, have your Bible ready by turning to Luke 1:26-38. You will read this passage near the end of the meditation.

Begin with 5 minutes of silence to allow yourself to become fully present to the exercise. Breathe deeply and slowly and allow any tension within your body to melt away. When you are centered, read the following paragraph.

God’s longing heart seeks after us when we flounder and get lost. Ignatius’ contemplation on the Incarnation in the Spiritual Exercises . . . tells the story of humanity being lost and God’s desire to find us. Ignatius imaginatively reconstructs the lostness of humanity.

With your imagination picture “*all nations in great blindness, going down to death, listen to . . . how persons on the earth . . . swear and blaspheme, consider how persons on the face of the earth wound and kill.*” Spend a few minutes considering these images. When you begin to feel the seriousness and pain of our world’s condition, continue.

The three persons of the Trinity, viewing the breadth and length and height and depth of humanity’s self-destruction, decide on a specific action: to send the Second Person in the flesh to manifest the breadth and length and height and depth of their love. As we contemplate this story let us enter into the desperation of the Trinity:

They will not listen to us; they ignore our love and desire to be close to them. Let one of us go to earth to see what we can do; possibly if we as human invite them in a human way, they will be able to listen and respond. They have not listened to us as we speak through the prophets; possibly they can respond to us if we speak person to person. Let us show them concretely the unfathomable depth of our love.

Again, spend a few minutes feeling God’s deep longing for all of creation. Imagine the above conversation among the Trinity.

Read Luke 1:26-38. Read it slowly and imagine the conversation between Mary and Gabriel. Ignatius points out, “In the womb of Mary the deep desires of the Trinity become enfleshed in the person of Jesus.” Linger over this idea, allowing yourself to feel the excitement of Jesus entering our world, and how his very being and his sacrifice are an expression of God’s nature.

Finish your meditation with a simple prayer of thanks to God for any insights you have gained during this time.

* Based on a meditation from Maureen Conroy’s book, *Experiencing God’s Tremendous Love*.

CHAPTER 7, SESSION 7: GOD IS SELF-SACRIFICING

CHAPTER CHALLENGE

The idea of a God who self-sacrifices is powerfully moving and beautiful. Unfortunately, to get to this idea there is a lot to be said about God theologically. For some people the theological work may be very challenging and even intimidating—especially the section titled, “A Dialogue with St. Athanasius.” Encourage your group in any way possible to stay with the chapter even if they aren’t getting every idea. They can come back to the book again and again and get more out of it each time including the important theology of this chapter. For now, they should joyfully receive what they are ready to receive.

SUPPLIES

- 📺 DVD—*The Passion of the Christ* directed by Mel Gibson
- 📺 DVD player/TV or computer and video projector

WELCOME

Recite Colossians 3:1-14 together, then enter into the silence.

5 MINUTES OF SILENCE

PRAYER TO END THE SILENCE

*O Risen Christ, you go down to the lowest depths
of our human condition,
and you burden yourself with what burdens us.
Still more, you even go to visit those who have died without being able to know you.
And even when within us we can hear no refrain of your presence, you are there.
Through your Holy Spirit you remain within us. Amen.* —Brother Roger, *Songs and Prayers from Taizé*

SOUL-TRAINING [15 minutes]

Divide into small groups of three or four and discuss your experience of reading the Gospel of John. To help you begin, you might use these questions:

1. What did you notice that you had not noticed in your previous readings of the Gospel of John?
2. How would you describe the effect this week’s reading had on you?
3. Reflect on the soul-shaping exercises you continue to practice. Exercises done so far include: sleep, awareness of creation, silence, counting your blessings, praying the 23rd Psalm, keeping margin in your life, *lectio divina* and memorizing Scripture. What are the gradual effects they are having on you, your narratives and your life? What practices have you not done since the week they were introduced? Why?

ENGAGING THE CHAPTER [25 minutes]

THE BIG IDEA IN THIS CHAPTER: Self-sacrifice is an essential part of the character of God.

MAIN POINTS

- ☞ For many, the need for God to become human and to die for us is difficult to understand and explain.
- ☞ Athanasius was the first person to give a clear explanation of the incarnation and resurrection by showing how these events are a part of a larger narrative of redemption.
- ☞ God takes the risk of experiencing unrequited love.
- ☞ The glory of God lies in self-sacrifice.
- ☞ In becoming one of us, Jesus has done everything he could for us—pointing us to the Father, teaching us about the kingdom, dying for our sins and giving us new life.
- ☞ The paradox of self-sacrifice is that in weakness there is strength, in forgiveness there is empowerment and in vulnerability we become invincible.
- ☞ We are made in God’s image, which means we have the capacity for self-sacrifice. The closer we are to God, the more often we see this capacity at work.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. This chapter begins with a story of the author’s sister being uncertain of the necessity of the cross. Before reading this chapter, how would you have explained Jesus’ need to die on the cross?
2. On page 135-38 the author gives us an imaginary conversation with Athanasius based on his book, *On the Incarnation*. Look back over this section and share parts that you really enjoyed and parts that raised questions for you.
3. The author introduces the idea that God feels both joy and pain. How do you feel about a God who feels pain? Why?
4. “Maybe vulnerability is true strength” (p. 140). This idea runs against cultural narratives that many of us hold. Who in your own life have you seen demonstrate strength through vulnerability?
5. “At the heart of the universe is this one principle: self-sacrifice is the highest act. The grain of wheat must die in order to give life. The cosmos reflects the nature of the God who created it” (p. 141). Can you name other examples of creation revealing this principle? Have you ever considered it a characteristic of God to be self-sacrificing? What impact does this statement have on your own feelings toward God?
6. What was your reaction to the Brennan Manning story, specifically, the understanding that Jesus could not have done any more for us (pp. 142-43)?

BREAK [5 minutes]

ENGAGING THE WORD [15 minutes]

The following Scripture study follows a *lectio divina* format. Use the Scripture below as your text (Philippians 2:6-11). 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.*

[Jesus], though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil 2:6-11).

EXPERIENCING TRANSFORMATION [20 minutes]

Few films have captured Jesus' sacrifice like Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*. While the brutality of the movie can be overwhelming for some people, it is helpful to use the following clip as a tool leading to deeper meditation on the self-sacrificing nature of God, as well as God's goodness and beauty. Say:

We are going to watch a clip from the movie The Passion of the Christ directed by Mel Gibson. While the movie itself is rightfully very, very graphic, the segment we will watch is less so. Nevertheless, it gives us a clear image of what it means to say that God is self-sacrificing. Following the scene, we will spend a few minutes in silence, contemplating God's love revealed for us through this story.

Scene begins as Jesus lifts up the bread during the last supper. If possible, pause the clip as the raindrop/teardrop is just about to hit the ground, giving us a chance to look up at the cross. Leave this image on the screen and give the group about 5 minutes to silently consider Christ's sacrifice.

End the silence with this brief prayer:

God of grace, we often think of your power, your goodness, your might and your rule, but often we overlook that at your very heart you are self-sacrificing. Draw us deeper into your heart that we might fall more deeply in love with you. And though it is frightening to us at times, we humbly ask that you would help us to grow as your children, that we would in our finite ways resemble you and display your characteristics with our very lives. Amen.

Use these questions to discuss the movie clip:

- ☞ What about that clip was the most powerful to you?
- ☞ How does the film speak to you?
- ☞ How would you like to respond to the sacrifice that Jesus makes for you?

GO IN PEACE [5 minutes]

Read the quote below to the group to close your time together.

Here is a key principle of the Kingdom of God: What we let go of will never be lost, but becomes a thing of beauty. No wonder the manger and the cross are the two most beautiful images this world has ever seen. In the incarnation God, who created millions of spinning galaxies, chose to become vulnerable, and in so doing, heaven came down and kissed the earth. In the crucifixion God, who could not die, subjected himself to death and in so doing lifted the whole world to himself (p. 145).

God loves you so much he became vulnerable for you. Go with that amazing good news.

FOR THE COMING WEEK

- ☞ Read chapter 8, "God Transforms."
- ☞ Early in the week schedule time for solitude, the soul-shaping exercise for the week. You will need to schedule time for this practice and let others in your life know who may be affected by it.
- ☞ Memorize Colossians 3:15-16.

CHAPTER 8, SESSION 8: GOD TRANSFORMS

CHAPTER CHALLENGE

“God Transforms” explains an aspect of Christianity that is often forgotten, overlooked or misunderstood. For this reason, many people may be challenged by the ideas in this chapter, but they will most likely understand the stories and the struggles. Allow the group to accept and understand what they can. Encourage the group to keep returning to this chapter as it will be very helpful as they begin working on book two of the series, *The Good and Beautiful Life*.

SUPPLIES

- 🕯️ Candles for each participant
- 🕯️ One Christ candle and a large box that is already torn, punctured and deformed
- 🎵 A CD player
- 🎵 Meditative music

In addition to the above supplies, this week it would be great to add a simple, framed document to your room. The document could say something along these lines:

Apprentices:

YOU ARE ONE IN WHOM CHRIST DWELLS.

Being “one in whom Christ dwells” is a sign of sacredness, a reminder of how special we are. It is not a threat to do better, or a heavy obligation. We can rest in this beautiful phrase because we did nothing to earn it and therefore we can’t lose it. We just receive it and rejoice in it! It is WHO we are and it tells us WHOSE we are!

If your space allows, you could leave this document up for the rest of the sessions. It is a very helpful reminder and word of encouragement.

WELCOME

As a group you are nearing the completion of book one of The Apprentice Series! Work out your plans for the celebration at the end of book one as well as your scheduled time to watch *The Nativity* as a group, and engage in conversation about the movie and how it reveals the good and beautiful God.

If participants are getting their own copies of the second book in The Apprentice Series, *The Good and Beautiful Life*, they should begin that process if they have not done so already.

Recite Colossians 3:1-16 together, then enter into 5 minutes of silence.

5 MINUTES OF SILENCE

PRAYER TO END THE SILENCE

An Invitation to Christ

Come, my Light, and illumine my darkness.

Come, my Life, and revive me from death.

Come, my Physician, and heal my wounds.

*Come, Flame of divine love, and burn up the thorns of my sins,
kindling my heart with the flame of your love.*

*Come, my King, sit upon the throne of my heart and reign there.
For you alone are my King and my Lord. Amen.*

—Dimitri of Rostov, Russia, Seventeenth century, *The United Methodist Hymnal*, No.466

SOUL-TRAINING [10-15 minutes]

Divide into small groups of three or four and spend 10 to 15 minutes discussing your experience of solitude. Use these reflection questions to get your conversation started.

1. Begin by sharing how your time of solitude went. Remember that for some people this discipline can be very difficult and even frustrating, while for others this exercise is very energizing.
2. One of the aims of the time of solitude is the ability to “take off your masks” and simply be who you truly are in the presence of God. This is a powerful and complex idea, so it may be helpful to refer to page 167. Would that describe your experience with this exercise? Explain.
3. What, if anything, did you learn about God or yourself through the exercise?
4. While participants are in groups of three to four, have them discuss these two questions:
 - ☞ How has this series been challenging you?
 - ☞ How do the teachings and practices in The Apprentice Series fit into your daily life?

ENGAGING THE CHAPTER [25-45 minutes]

THE BIG IDEA IN THIS CHAPTER: The resurrected Jesus indwells us and transforms us into new beings, which guides us and empowers us to live a good and beautiful life.

MAIN POINTS

- ☞ A dominant narrative, even among Christians, is “I am a sinner.”
- ☞ The New Testament narrative is that Christians are in Christ and are new creations.
- ☞ Many metaphors describe our relationship to Christ: vine and branches, temple the Spirit dwells in, butterflies and country dogs.
- ☞ Though Christ dwells in Christians, sin remains, but its power has been broken and it must not reign.
- ☞ The secret to living the Christian life is to “abide” in Christ.
- ☞ Our weakness and vulnerability allow Christ to shine most clearly through us.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The author opens the chapter with a story about a friend of his named Carey who continued to sin although he did not want to. Can you relate to Carey’s struggle to overcome sin? What have you done in the past to address areas of sin in your life? How effective were those efforts?
2. Read this out loud: “In Christ I am no longer to be defined by sin. I have been reconciled. Sin has been defeated” (p. 153). What is the implication of this statement in your daily life?
3. “Christians are people Christ dwells in” (p. 154). Spend a few minutes in silence and imagine Jesus “dwelling” within you. After the silence if you are comfortable, share what this reality means to you.
4. As ones “indwelt by Christ,” we are not under the law; however, not everything is “beneficial” for us. Our choices no longer define who we are, instead our choices are made in light of who we are. Reflect on the last twenty-four hours of your life. Call to mind the choices that you made. What choices did you make to “determine who you are”? What choices did you make “in light of who you are”? How would your day have been different if you made more decisions in light of who you are?

ENGAGING THE WORD [15-20 minutes]

Read John 15:1-5 aloud.

1. *The author gives us this definition for “abide”: “To abide means to rest in and rely on Jesus, who is not outside of us, judging us, but is inside of us, empowering us. The more deeply we are aware of our identity in Christ, and his presence and power with us, the more naturally we’ll do this. We must get our narratives right, and practice spiritual exercises to deepen our awareness of truth. In the end, Jesus’ way is easy. He said that his yoke was easy and his burden was light (Matthew 11:30). Typically, we try to do what we think Jesus wants us to do . . . by [our] own strength. We can’t do that. But we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us (Philippians 4:13)” (p. 159). Write your own definition for what it means to “abide” in Christ, based on the author’s definition. If you are comfortable, share your definition with the group.*
2. Read John 15:4-5 again. *What, if any, practices do you have in your life that help you “abide” in Christ?*

BREAK [5 minutes]

EXPERIENCING TRANSFORMATION [20 minutes]

Few messages are as powerful and liberating as this: “You are one in whom Christ dwells.” What good news! This week’s transforming experience is a chance to ponder and realize more deeply that Christ does indeed dwell within us.

Move to a quiet, relatively dark, worship space. At the front of the space on an altar, have an unlit candle inside a torn, punctured, and deformed box. (WARNING! The box should be open on top and the candle set inside with sufficient space for the box not to catch on fire.) Have enough chairs for everyone in a semi-circle facing the candle and box.

Read these instructions:

As we look at this broken box, consider your own “brokenness”; those ways you feel like a failure, a spiritual zero, or unworthy to receive God’s grace. If you are comfortable doing so, you may say a word or short phrase that describes that feeling of brokenness.

Give everyone about 5 minutes for this reflection.

After 5 minutes, go forward and light the candle inside the box. Then say:

My friends, we are no longer defined by our brokenness or our sinfulness. We were created to house the fullness of God, and Christ was born, lived, crucified and raised from the dead that he might live within us and bring us into fullness of life—not through our own strength, but by his divine mercy and grace.

Tonight I invite you to come forward one at a time, take a candle and light it from the Christ candle inside the box. After your candle is lit, I will pray over you the blessing, “You are one in whom Christ dwells.” As each person comes forward to receive the light, I invite the rest of you to pray for that person; that they would discover in a powerful way that they are one in whom Christ dwells.

If you are going to play soft meditative music, you could start it now. Once you are ready, say:

When you are ready, you may come forward.

As each person comes forward, say their name with the blessing, “[Insert name], you are one in whom Christ dwells. Amen.” If you are comfortable, place one hand on their shoulder as you say the blessing. Do not rush through this experience.

When everyone has received their light, you could sing the below chorus two or three times. If singing isn't an option, then read it to the group:

*Surely the presence of the Lord is in this place
I can feel his mighty power and grace
I can hear the brush of angel's wings, I see glory on each face
Surely the presence of the Lord is in this place*

GO IN PEACE [5 minutes]

Close with this amazing quote:

"We minister out of our brokenness. We heal others through our vulnerability because that is where Christ shines most brightly"
(p. 163).

May the light of Christ shine through our wounds.

FOR THE COMING WEEK

- ☞ Read chapter 9, "How to Make a Pickle."
- ☞ The soul-shaping practice for the week is slowing down.
- ☞ AND we complete our memorization project by memorizing Colossians 3:17!!!

CHAPTER 9, SESSION 9: HOW TO MAKE A PICKLE

CHAPTER CHALLENGE

The author points out that hurry sickness is the number one enemy of the spiritual life, and it is rampant in our culture. The challenge that many people face with this chapter is that there are no easy answers. As the author admits, we are choosing between good and better, not good and evil. Participants may raise questions about their own priorities and choices, to which there are no easy answers. As the leader, avoid trying to give answers, but instead guide participants deeper. Ask them to explore their priorities, their choices, their motivations and most importantly how the Spirit might be guiding them. In the midst of such questions we grow deeper in our relationship with God, which is what matters most.

SUPPLIES

🔔 A chime or bell for the “Experiencing Transformation” exercise.

WELCOME

Recite ALL of Colossians 3:1-17 together, then begin the silence.

5 MINUTES OF SILENCE

PRAYER TO END THE SILENCE

Patient and loving God, when you want to make a squash you take six months, when you want to make an oak tree you take one hundred years. You created us, O Lord, to be eternal spiritual beings, more immense than we could ever imagine. Stretch out our arms to embrace the rhythm and pace that you have created the universe to operate at. Through our reading and discussion today and through the on-going practices of our faith may we be healed of hurry sickness. Amen.

SOUL-TRAINING [15-20 minutes]

Divide into small groups of three or four and spend 10 to 15 minutes discussing your experience of slowing down. Use these reflection questions to help your conversation.

1. Slowing down is countercultural in our day. Describe the challenges you encountered. Will you keep trying to slow down in the future?
2. How would you describe the level of hurry in your life? What impact is the hurry in your life having on your relationship with God and others?
3. What, if anything, did you learn about God or yourself through the exercises?

ENGAGING THE CHAPTER [25-45 minutes]

THE BIG IDEA IN THIS CHAPTER: To live an authentic and effective Christian life, we must slow the pace of our lives and become aware of the present moment.

MAIN POINTS

- 🔔 Most of us live under the tyranny of the urgent; a constant sense that we must be doing more in order to be effective.
- 🔔 We equate effectiveness and productivity with personal worth and value, which is a great lie.
- 🔔 Thanks to clocks and other machines, we live as if time is running out, so we had better be as efficient as possible.
- 🔔 Humans are not machines, but unfortunately that is the dominant narrative in our culture.

- ☞ Technology was supposed to increase our leisure but has decreased it because we have added more to our schedules.
- ☞ We will not accomplish anything in our spiritual life by hurrying. Jesus lived a perfect life of balance between rest and action.
- ☞ We must ruthlessly eliminate hurry in our lives if we are to be effective apprentices of Jesus.
- ☞ If we stop, look and listen, we will find the provision of God in all kinds of unexpected places—even in our backyards.
- ☞ Not only must we slow down, we must also realize that growth is a slow process.
- ☞ Making an apprentice is like making a pickle—both have to soak a long time, one in brine, the other in the narratives and practices of Jesus.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The first part of the chapter (pp. 173-79) explores how our view of time evolved into the “tyranny of the urgent” and even regarding humanity as a machine designed to produce tasks with efficiency. Discuss your experiences of being in the workplace and the expectations placed on your performance.
2. The author reminds us that, “we cannot love, think, eat, laugh or pray in a hurry” (p. 180).
 - ☞ Looking back over the last week, what did you attempt to do in a hurry that can’t be done in a hurry?
 - ☞ When did you slow down and experience some of the blessings that come from slowing down?
3. “Too many of us are trying to serve God without listening to God. There will be time to serve, but listening to Jesus always takes precedence” (p. 181). Why do you think we are tempted to serve God without listening to God? What impact do your old narratives about God have on your need to be busy with God-work?
4. The author gives us this illustration from A. H. Strong: “A student asked the President of his school whether he could not take a shorter course than the one prescribed. ‘Oh yes,’ replied the President, ‘but then it depends on what you want to be. When God wants to make an oak, He takes a hundred years, but when He wants to make a squash, He takes six months.’ Strong goes on to explain that spiritual growth, in addition to being slow, is also not uniform. Some years we may experience tremendous growth, and some we see very little change. An oak tree has only a couple of months of actual growth each year in terms of measurable expansion, says Strong. The rest of the year, the other ten months, are spent solidifying that growth” (p. 186).
 - ☞ Reflecting on your spiritual journey over the last year, when have you experienced growth and when have you experienced solidifying?
 - ☞ How about the last five and/or ten years?

BREAK [5 minutes]

ENGAGING THE WORD [15-20 minutes]

Read aloud Luke 10:38-42.

We are often tempted to view Martha and Mary as having two personality types: Martha is the active busybody and Mary is the contemplative. But based on the author’s insights we can see that the issue is not their personalities, it is the choices they made at that particular moment: Martha chose to serve, while Mary chose to listen.

- ☞ *What are the ways that you regularly listen to Jesus?*
- ☞ *What activities tempt you away from those times of listening?*
- ☞ *Name specific ways you as a group can support and encourage each other to continue listening to Jesus.*

EXPERIENCING TRANSFORMATION [15-20 minutes]

Slowing Down—Practicing the Presence—Observing the Features of the World

Begin by reading this quote from the chapter:

Why is eliminating hurry from our lives so crucial? When we eliminate hurry we become present, or more specifically, present to the present moment, in all of its glory. We become aware of our surroundings. We see colors, and smell smells; we hear hushed sounds and can actually feel the wind in our faces. In short, we “show up” and experience the fullness of life. And that includes, not least of all, being present to God. If I am to live well as a Christian, I need to be constantly connected to God. Hurry is not part of a well-lived life (p. 183).

The author points out that hurry is an “inner condition that is fear-based” (p. 183). Our fear is motivated by the belief that our happiness or success depends on our performance. As we speed up we become “blind” to the “sacred theater” of life. To help us taste what life could be like, we will spend 20 minutes combining three very simple spiritual practices: slowing down, practicing the presence of God, and observing the features of the world. In various ways we have engaged in all three of these practices during the course of the study. Now we will bring them together and experience them as a group. Here’s how it will work.

We will take 20 minutes to slow down and savor our surroundings, and, as we do so, we will occasionally remind ourselves that God is walking with us. To begin, spend one or two minutes being still and breathing deeply. Allow your body to relax. Then spend a few minutes remembering and feeling “Christ dwelling within you.” This is your touchstone. Return to this feeling whenever it crosses your mind or you begin to feel a sense of hurry.

Once you feel somewhat centered, begin to walk leisurely through your surroundings. Just as Jacob in the coffee shop noticed things he had never seen before, so, too, you are invited to simply notice things you have never seen before. With each feature you discover, savor it with Jesus, knowing that Jesus is with you, enjoying the very world he created!

When 20 minutes have passed, I will chime a bell to call you back together. That way you don’t even have to wear your watch! If any of you don’t come back, we’ll come looking for you.

Once everyone has regrouped, explore questions such as these:

- ☞ What new things did you discover?
- ☞ If you sensed Jesus’ presence during this time, what did you notice about Jesus?
- ☞ What inner struggles did you experience during the practice?
- ☞ Is this a practice you could engage in again?

GO IN PEACE [5 minutes]

Share this quote from the book to end your time together:

When hurried, we cannot experience life at its fullest; nor can we come into contact with our true selves, our real feelings. And even more important, we outrun God. When we slow down we allow ourselves to be found; found by life and found by God. When we practice slowing down, we are moving into the rhythm of God. When we eliminate hurry (our part, in response to God’s gracious call to the deeper life), the Spirit comes alongside us and strengthens us (pp. 183-184).

FOR THE COMING WEEK

- ☞ Remind the group that your next gathering will be two hours long and will be a celebration of completing the first book! Confirm the time and location and coordination if the group is going to bring snacks and beverages.

SESSION 10: TWO HOUR CELEBRATION

FOCUS

Celebrate the completion of book one and create space for a felt encounter with God's love.

SUPPLIES

- 🎧 CD player
- 🎧 Upbeat, uplifting music
- 🎨 Decorations
- 🎨 Art supplies: colored pencils, markers, watercolors, paper, chalk, children's modeling clay, and anything else you can think of for the creation time

WELCOME

As folks enter, welcome them and encourage them to enjoy refreshments and each other's company.

When everyone has arrived, stop the music and read the following paragraph:

In his book Celebration of Discipline, Richard Foster explains that joy is the engine that drives the spiritual life, and the way that we bring joy into our lives is by celebrating important milestones along the journey. Tonight we have reached an important milestone in the Apprentice class as we have completed the first book, The Good and Beautiful God. In a few weeks we will begin the second book in the series, The Good and Beautiful Life, but rather than hurrying on to that book, we are going to take tonight and savor the moment and what we have gained from the class so far.

We'll begin by reciting Colossians 3:1-17 together. The fact that we have memorized this lengthy passage is something to celebrate all by itself!

Recite Colossians 3:1-17, but at the end do not move into silence, instead, simply say "Amen" and continue.

REFLECTING ON THE JOURNEY [45 minutes]

Read these words from Psalm 78:1-4:

*Give ear, O my people, to my teaching;
incline your ears to the words of my mouth.
I will open my mouth in a parable;
I will utter dark sayings from of old,
things that we have heard and known,
that our ancestors have told us.
We will not hide them from their children;
we will tell to the coming generation
the glorious deeds of the Lord,
and his might,
and the wonders that he has done.*

The psalmist understood that it was important to recount the marvelous acts of God. While our journey over the last ten weeks has probably not looked as dramatic as the Israelite's exodus out of Egypt, it is still worth retelling. To help us we have questions to guide us along:

- 🎧 *What teaching from the book has impacted you the most so far?*
- 🎧 *What soul-shaping exercise has meant the most to you?*
- 🎧 *How has your learning affected your spiritual life?*

- ☞ What has been your favorite part of the class?
- ☞ How has this particular group blessed you during these last several weeks?

Thank everyone for their sharing and what they have brought to the group.

Take a break to get more refreshments.

After you regroup, say:

Hopefully during these last ten weeks you have discovered a God who is even more good and beautiful than you realized before. And hopefully in the midst of this discovery, you have fallen more deeply in love with God.

In Ephesians 3:16-21 the Apostle Paul wrote this beautiful prayer:

I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love, I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen. (NIV)

At the beginning of the class, everyone shared what they hoped to get from this study. We then passed out mustard seeds and planted them as a symbol of our desire for God to bring into being something “new” in our lives. Did anyone’s mustard plant live? If not, don’t worry. It is only a symbol, not a sign!

Then Jesus asked, “What is the kingdom of God like? What shall I compare it to? It is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his garden. It grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air perched in its branches.” (NIV)

Well, now it is time to joyously create! You can draw, write, sculpt, sing or dance—anything that will symbolize the new life that God has brought to you. Maybe you will just draw a picture of what that mustard plant would look like if it resembled you these days! Let your imagination run wild, and don’t worry about your skill—no one here will be graded. It is purely between you and God. You’ll have 20 minutes to create. After that if anyone wants to share, they can, but no one is required to.

When the 20 minutes have passed, invite everyone back together to show what they have created if they would like to. As the leader, you may have to lead off to help everyone be comfortable enough to share.

After everyone has presented their creation, thank everyone for what they have brought to this class. Before you close down this celebration, there are just a few business items to discuss.

LOOKING AHEAD

Review the schedule for the group. Session 11 will be 2½ hours long as you will be watching and then discussing *The Nativity* with its narratives about God and how God moves in human history.

We then recommend that groups take a break for a few weeks before they resume with book two, *The Good and Beautiful Life*, in early January, which will be Session 12.

Between now and Session 12 participants could benefit greatly by reviewing chapters of *The Good and Beautiful God* and also continuing to practice the soul-shaping exercises that were covered there. It is important to remember that these practices continue to work together to help change our narratives about God and ourselves and, therefore, influence the way we interact with the world.

GO IN PEACE

Hear these words of assurance from Philippians 1:6:

I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. (NIV)

SESSION II: SPECIAL 2½ HOUR SESSION WITH SNACKS OR POTLUCK DINNER

Watch *The Nativity* and discuss the movie afterwards.

Before the movie spend a few minutes in conversation.

Review when you will be meeting again as a group and beginning the second book in The Apprentice Series, *The Good and Beautiful Life*. Confirm that everyone has their copy of the book or has a way to acquire one. While you are looking at the calendar, remind everyone about the Silent Retreat, which will happen after session 16 in mid-February and the Closing Retreat which occurs after session 24. For complete outlines of these retreats, see the headings Silent Retreat and Closing Retreat in “Living The Good and Beautiful Life.” By this point, you should have the location confirmed as well as an estimate of the cost for the overnight experience for the Silent Retreat. During the break between the two books is also an excellent time to make arrangements for the Closing Retreat even though it is many weeks away.

Also, discuss as a group which practices you are continuing to do and how those soul-shaping exercises are going.

Watch the movie.

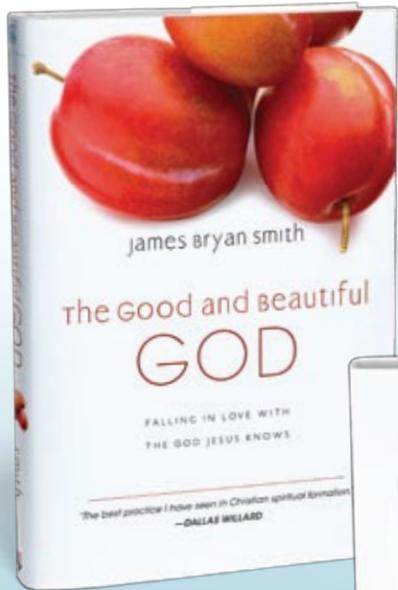
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What was most powerful to you about the movie?
2. What characteristics of God have you studied during the Apprentice class that you saw lifted up in the movie?
3. In the movie we see that Christ literally dwells within Mary. How is her journey similar to your own as you continue to discover that Christ dwells within you?

End with prayer together. Have each person in the group pray for the person on their left. They can pray aloud or silently. If there are not specific needs to pray for, it would be wonderful to pray that each person would have the courage and support they need to bring Christ into the world.

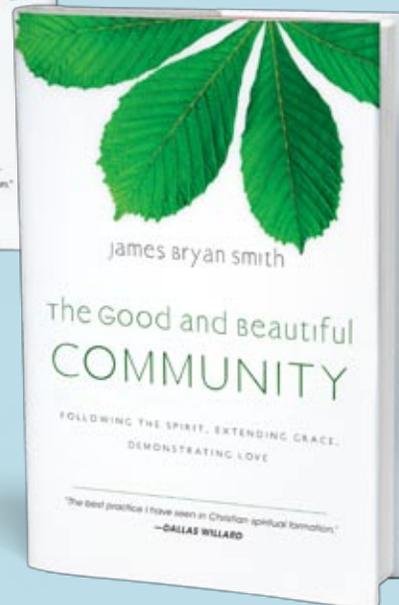
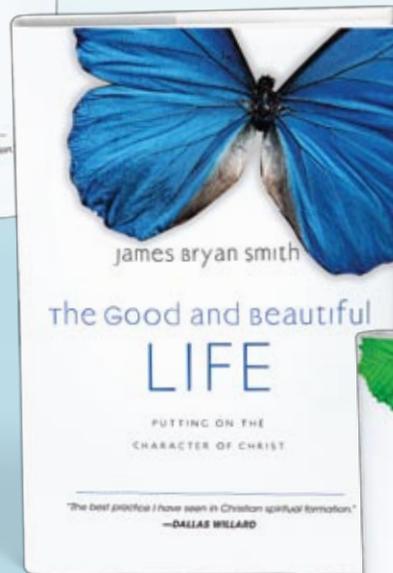
Once everyone has had a chance to pray, conclude with a prayer for the time until you meet again as a group.

THE LIFE OF AN APPRENTICE



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AUTHOR OF *THE DIVINE CONSPIRACY*



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