

Group Leader Podcast: Episode 3

The Most Important Thing You Can Do for Your Group Members

Because I'm a pastor, a husband, and a father, I spend a lot of time trying to help the people I love. I want them to grow stronger in their faith, start to make wiser decisions, and feel closer to Jesus. I want to see hearts renewed, families strengthened, and relationships forged.

So I try all sorts of stuff to make that happen. I listen to people, give suggestions, recommend books, point out errors in thinking, or help them strategize. And I think if they'll just get what I'm saying or if they'll just take my advice, then things will go so much better. Then they'll get it. Then they'll be closer to God and everything will be great.

Sometimes they do take my advice and things do get better, which is great. But other times they either take the advice or they don't and things just stay the same or get even worse.

You probably experience the same thing with your group members or other people in your life. You feel like you listen to the same problems over and over again each time you talk, you give what seems like good counsel at the time, but week after week it's like nothing is changing.

I don't know about you, but that is so frustrating to me. I get so annoyed with God or with the people I want to help because I followed what I thought was the right formula and it didn't work.

God has been showing me over the last couple years why I get so frustrated. It's because I can't change people.

I can't *make* someone love God more. I can't *make* someone love their spouse more. I can't even make myself do those things. Not really.

Because that power belongs to God and God alone.

I. Only God has the power to change the human heart

The Bible tells us that God's Word is the only thing powerful enough to transform the human heart. Nowhere is this seen in more vivid detail than the prophet Ezekiel's vision from God of the valley of bones in Ezekiel chapter 37:

"The hand of the LORD was upon me, and he brought me out in the Spirit of the LORD

and set me down in the middle of the valley; it was full of bones. And he led me around among them, and behold, there were very many on the surface of the valley, and behold, they were very dry. And he said to me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" And I answered, "O Lord GOD, you know." Then he said to me, "Prophesy over these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, **hear the word of the LORD.**" (Ezekiel 37:1-4 ESV)

Ezekiel looks out at this valley and knows he's helpless to bring these skeletons to life. He wisely says to God, "I don't know how to bring them to life, but you do."

So God tells Ezekiel what it takes to bring the bones to life — His own words. Ezekiel then speaks God's Words over those dry bones and the unthinkable happens:

"And I looked, and behold, there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them. But there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, "Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live." So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army." (Ezekiel 37:8-10 ESV)

God spoke and enlivened these piles of bones and breathed into them the breath of life. All through the power of His Word.

That's a power I don't have. It's a power you don't have.

So what do you do? If you're powerless to actually change the people in your group, what can you do?

Well, lots of things. Most of the stuff I mentioned earlier - listening to them, giving them advice and feedback, recommending resources - all of those are good things, and things you should be doing as leaders.

But they're not the most *important* thing you can do.

The most important thing you can do for your group members is pray for them.

That probably sounds obvious or even cliché, but it really is true. You might even tell me, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, I get that, but let's get on to the more practical stuff." And that may be true. You might truly get that.

But are you doing it? Are you actually praying for the people in your group by name? Actually begging God each day to change them?

For a long time, I wasn't. And it wasn't because I didn't care, it was because I didn't really know how. And my guess is that's where many of you are.

You love the people in your group. You genuinely want them to change. And you'd like you be praying for them, but every time you do it just seems like you're bringing up the same minor details about their lives and asking God to change them.

That's what it felt like for me for a while.

But then God, in His grace, brought me to the book of Ephesians and, through the example of the Apostle Paul, showed me what it looks like to pray for the people I love.

II. Paul's prayer for the Ephesian church

Let me read you this prayer from Paul to the church in Ephesus:

¹⁵ For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, ¹⁶ I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, ¹⁷ that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, ¹⁸ having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, ¹⁹ and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe..." (Ephesians 1:15-19a ESV)

The first thing to notice here is the audience. Paul was praying these words for the members of the church in Ephesus, which means he was praying them for Christians. But why is Paul praying for *Christians* to have the Spirit of wisdom, revelation in the knowledge of Him, and to have the eyes of their hearts enlightened? If they're Christians, haven't those things already happened?

Well, yes and no. Yes, if Paul's audience were truly Christians, then they would have already received the Holy Spirit. But just because they were Christians didn't mean they had had the eyes of their hearts enlightened to all the other things Paul was praying for, which I'll get to in a minute.

1. Difference between knowing and tasting

Paul is saying that there's some progressive nature to the knowledge of Christ and understanding the gospel, meaning the reality of what Paul is praying is current, but the understanding of those he's praying for might not be.

Think of this as the difference between knowing and tasting. Jonathan Edwards, America's greatest theologian to date, said to think of this as the difference between *knowing* that honey is sweet, and *tasting* that honey is sweet.

You can read about honey in a book and know that it's a sweet substance. But you can't know that honey is sweet if you haven't actually tasted it for yourself. And you certainly can't explain to others the sensation of tasting honey if you've never experienced it.

Bring this back to our spiritual lives. You can read about the gospel in a book, and even know all the "right" answers. You can go through the motions without experiencing transformation. Knowledge simply isn't enough.

And you know this if you stop to think about it. This is why some of the people in your group, or maybe even you, deal with the same mistakes, sins, and problems over and over, even though they know the right answers and what to do.

It's because they know what a relationship with Jesus means, but they aren't tasting it for themselves.

Lives are not changed when people know about a relationship with Jesus. Lives are changed when people taste a relationship with Jesus.

Lives are changed, hearts are transformed, when a relationship with Jesus is so sweet in your heart and mind that you do whatever you can to return to that sensation over and over again.

And the only way people in your group will get to that point is if God enlightens the eyes of their hearts.

Paul, just like the prophet Ezekiel, knows only God has that power.

And that knowledge leads Paul to pray for three specific things that we can all pray for our group members, our family, or our friends who know Jesus.

Quick side note: The audience of Paul's prayer is Christians, like I said earlier, so his it assumes a relationship with Christ. If you're praying for people in your life or your group who don't yet have a relationship with Christ, your prayer for them needs to be that God would save them them. Their situation is more like the dry bones we talked about in Ezekiel where they're spiritually dead and don't know it, and it is only the power of God that can bring them back to life.

Okay, back to Paul's prayer. Paul wanted the believers in Ephesus who were the recipients of his prayer to taste the fullness of a relationship with Christ with all its benefits. That led him to

pray for their eyes to be enlightened to three different flavors of that relationship: hope, riches, and greatness.

2. Paul prays for the Ephesians to have the eyes of their hearts enlightened to the taste of three flavors of a relationship with Christ...

These are three things we should be praying for the people we love. Let's look at each of them a little more carefully. And just so you know, some of the explanations of these are found throughout chapter 1 of Ephesians, so it would really be worth your time to sit down and read through the entire chapter after listening to this.

The hope to which God has called them

The first thing we should be praying for them to know the hope to which they are called in Christ. That hope is eternal life in heaven and restoration here on earth. If people get that they will spend eternity with Jesus and that he came not only to redeem their future but to redeem their present, they will live differently. The greatest acts in the history of our faith have been carried out by men and women fueled whose hope was fixed on Jesus. If you want to see how someone lives in the present changes, pray for God to open their eyes to the hope to which they've already been called.

The riches of God's inheritance in the saints

The second thing we should pray for is that our group members or other loved ones would know, according to Paul, "the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints." The first few times I read this I totally missed whose inheritance he was talking about. I assumed it was referring to the believers' inheritance, but I was misreading the pronouns. Paul prayed that the believers would know the riches of *God's* glorious inheritance in the saints.

This is crazy to me! Who would think that God would get an inheritance? It's like the person you know that's so hard to buy a gift for because they have enough money to buy everything they want already. What do you get the guy that already has everything? Here's the even crazier part: the answer is you and me - "the saints." "Saints" refers to every believer in Christ. So we are God's glorious inheritance. That means God is expectantly waiting for the day when He gets to inherit you and the people in your groups. Did you know that God felt that way about you? Maybe your eyes are being opened to His love even now. Knowing that God is giddy to spend eternity with you changes how you live and think. Let's pray for the people in our group to truly know that love God has for them.

The immeasurable greatness of God's power towards those who believe

The third thing Paul models for us to pray is “the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe.” So many of us, myself included, feel so insignificant and powerless to do anything remarkable for God. We want to make a difference with our lives, but we don't see anything special about our skills or talents. But that couldn't be more wrong, and maybe it's because we don't really believe what God tells us about this. Right after Paul says he's praying for his friends' eyes to be opened to the immeasurable greatness of God's power, he reminds them that this power is the same power God, “worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 1:20). The power God gives to each believer is the same power that raised Christ from the dead, and the same power that ascended Christ into heaven and seated him at the right hand of God.

Do you believe that same power is in you? Do the people in your group think that power is in them? If we lived like that were true, can you imagine how it would change your group? How it would change lives? How it would change the world?

So these are the three flavors of a relationship with God that Paul prayed for the Ephesian church to know and that we can pray for our group members to know: the hope to which we have been called, the riches of God's inheritance in His people, and the greatness of God's power for those who believe.

Conclusion

The Holy Spirit who inspired Paul's words knows that tasting a relationship with Jesus is the only way people will ever give their lives to a relationship with Jesus.

Jesus asked us to follow him with our feet, not just our hearts. He told us that if we love him we will do what he says (John 14:15), not just hold up his banner. And he told us that we need to die to ourselves daily in order to really do that (Luke 9:23).

We don't get to that kind of relationship without a heart transformation. And we don't get to a transformed heart without a taste of the only thing which has the power to transform it.

So pray for your group members. And as you do, I'll be praying for you in the same way.

Take care.