



SMALL GROUP STUDIES

JULY 2010 | VOL: 3 | NO: 7



WEEK ONE::JULY 4

JUST SAY IT :: ACTS 2:42-47

A young man getting married in a month's time has surely shared all of himself with his fiancée, opened up boldly, showcasing the deepest parts of him.

His secrets.

His shame.

His shadows.

Maybe not. Why? Because we're terrified to admit to ourselves and to others that these deep and dark parts of ourselves exist. We don't like to let others know that we have doubts, question our faith, or that we fall short of perfect more often than not.

The other night, I opened up to my fiancée much in this way, detailing a life lived in psychological struggle. Not the simple blues or Seasonal Affective Disorder. Not the tame stuff. More like clinical depression, obsessive compulsive disorder, panic disorder and generalized anxiety disorder. I shed tears of pain and tears of relief as I undammed a torrent of emotional struggle. On the other side I found acceptance and empathy from a lover who has never walked the road I have walked, but understands all the same. I found God's love and comfort in her embrace.

We know a lot *about* being vulnerable and making our needs known to important people in our lives, but we're not very good at practicing vulnerability, turning our head knowledge into live action. Why?

Because it's hard. We're terrified of rejection and we're terrified of abandonment.

This is a pattern that spans the human species. But as holistic beings, we have been created with intricate needs. We were created for intimate relationships; yet intimacy is impossible without vulnerability, vulnerability impossible without intimacy. We must make our needs known so that they can be nurtured, not locked away in a prison cell of denial. If we aren't willing to risk pain as we reveal our true selves to those we love, we preclude ourselves from living out the essence of our humanity. The only option then becomes putting up steel girders around our heart as it turns into stone.

No real love given or received. A life less than human.

The amorphous concept of vulnerability was made flesh in the person of Jesus. His choice to suffer on a cross was the ultimate act of suffering, love, and forgiveness. It was an act made possible because he first chose vulnerability, abandoning himself to his Father's plan. We know from Scripture that vulnerability is indeed God's will for us, revealed clearly in Ezekiel 36:26; "I



will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.” Down the road of openness, exposure, and the revelation of our true selves awaits an existence marked by experience, fullness, pain, suffering, joy and redemption.

Unconditional love let into our hearts and given away freely.

A life that is fully human.

A life that glorifies God.

RELATED VERSES

Ezekiel 36:26

Acts 2:42-47

Matthew 26:36-44

DISCUSSION STARTERS

Why is it hard to be vulnerable with others in our community?

QUESTIONS

A look at Acts 2:42-47 reveals a snapshot of the communal life of the first followers of Jesus. What did vulnerability mean to them in those first days after the resurrection? How is this similar and different to our own lives today, 2,000 years later?

What is the difference between true vulnerability in the midst of a community and someone who lives “wearing their heart on their sleeve”?

What is really real in each of our lives today? What aspects of how we live our lives come from the ego that resides in each of us? What parts of our ego do we have to overcome to be vulnerable with our community?

In what ways do we fear becoming vulnerable with God? How does the belief that we are loved unconditionally help us reveal the parts of us that we even try to hide from ourselves?

ACTION STEP

Determine to open up with someone in your community this week. Ask to meet for coffee, and make one of those dark corners known to them. Request that they hold you accountable in this area, and listen for ways that you can encourage their reciprocated vulnerability.



SMALL GROUP STUDIES

JULY 2010 | VOL:3 | NO:7

WEEK ONE NOTES



WEEK 2::JULY 11

WHO SAID ANYTHING ABOUT MONEY? :: ACTS 2:42-47

Reading a passage like Acts 2:42-47 is somewhat daunting. The new Christians seemed to have a perfect community characterized by constant fellowship, sharing everything, and even selling their possessions to give to the poor. Everything they did seemed to flow out of love granted them by the Holy Spirit. To look to the early church as an ideal of what we should become seems impossibly radical. Are we really willing to do things like move in with each other or sell things so we can give to each other and the poor? Are we willing to give up our lives and our money in exchange for community with other believers?

Given our current culture in America and the way that we inherently value our individuality and our possessions, we will probably never end up being in a community as intense or selfless as the early Christians. Remember too that they were facing persecution and the potential for death because of their beliefs. There is nothing like the threat of death to bring people together. And, given the powerful outpouring of the spirit after Pentecost, it seems that they *could* live in this way—in genuine harmony with one another, as loving brothers and sisters who would willingly give up their lives to be caught up in the body of Christ. At that moment in history, this new thing that God was bringing into the world, salvation, was going to be shown by a brotherhood that, for an instant, really reflected what heaven was like: living with one another in perfect love.

It's likely we will never find such community this side of heaven. But that does not mean we can't search for it, strive for it, by degrees. That does not mean the drag and pull of our culture should weigh so heavily on us that we forget what heavenly community is really like or dismiss it as an ideal lost in biblical history. That does not mean we can't challenge our preconceptions of comfort, of "what is mine and what is yours," of sacrifice and really truly living together as a part of single body.

We should always examine our relationships and challenge the way we form friendships, the amount of intentionality we put into community. Are our friendships just self-serving? Or are they moving towards something bigger, towards a deeper love, towards a greater sense of purpose? Is our mindset intentional community? Does the ideal of the early church haunt us? Or are we drifting, in a sense, through relationships we take for granted?

In heaven, we will all one day live with each other, in close fellowship, sharing all joy and peace. It is part of the deepest longing in our hearts to be home with each other. We all want to walk through a door to find our best and most loving friends around a table, cheering and overjoyed at our arrival. They will surround and hug us, look into our inner hearts to find the true self waiting, and love it infinitely. And to invest in our church community today is to experience that piece of heaven on earth.



RELATED VERSES

Acts 2:42-47
Philippians 1:9
Ephesians 4:15-16

DISCUSSION STARTERS

What is one of the best moments you've known in community?

QUESTIONS

In what ways is American culture antithetical to the ideal of early church community?

What is one thing you personally struggle with when it comes to the ideal of community? What don't you like?

Do you think it's possible to give too much, or try too hard, in a community scenario? How are these people who "try too hard" perceived and accepted?

Read the Related Verses above. Based on these verses, it seems that there is a progression to love—that we learn to love more and more as we practice it. What does this progression say about building community?

How is sacrifice necessary for community? To what extent should we sacrifice for each other in today's communities? Should it look like the early church?

ACTION STEP

Today, ask God for one way you can progress in your friendships or in community. What is one thing you can do intentionally to be closer to your friends, and to move towards that goal in life?



SMALL GROUP STUDIES

JULY 2010 | VOL:3 | NO:7

WEEK TWO NOTES



WEEK THREE:: JULY 18
EVERYDAY MIRACLES :: ACTS 2:42-47

Indoor violent, rushing winds. People talking in languages they don't know. Angels opening gates and setting prisoners free. Lame people walking, healed by mere humans. Just another day in Acts. Nothing that drastically different than Jesus' ministry—except that He was God.

The Bible takes a radical turn somewhere between the end of the gospels and the beginning of Acts in that Christ's followers are now empowered to be his hands and feet on the earth. Part of this promise begins at the end of Mark, when Jesus tells his disciples "These signs will accompany those who have believed, in My name they will cast out demons, they will speak with new tongues; they will pick up serpents, and if they drink any deadly poison, it will not hurt them; they will lay hands on the sick and they will recover" (16:17). As a continuation of his ministry, believers would also be able to perform miracles.

Acts is the start of the New Testament church, a model of what life should look like for believers. Acts 2:42-47 serves as a model for many churches, a picture of what they hope to attain to in true, intimate community. Part of this ideal includes the supernatural, perhaps the part we are most uncomfortable with. Fellowship: great; breaking of bread: got it; prayer: could do more of it; selling property and possessions and sharing with all: working on it; miracles: ... Yet Acts 2:43 is clear, "Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles."

Soon after this verse Peter and John heal a lame man, commanding him like Jesus did to "Walk!" (Acts 3:6), a confirmation that the apostle's miracles would look very much like their Teacher's. Just before Acts 2:43, the author uses the same language to describe Jesus' ministry, writing, "Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst" (Acts 2:22). The writer of this book is making it clear that this is a key element of the new church. In fact, the Greek uses a tense that is difficult to portray in an English translation, meaning that these miracles and wonders were happening continuously, over and over, day by day.

And yet when was the last time you saw a miracle? How about one performed by a follower of Christ?

Is it because of our lack of faith? After all, we are told in Matthew 13:58 that Jesus did not do many miracles in his hometown "because of their lack of faith." In our modern society we can explain away water being turned into blood and the parting of the Red Sea. Yet, in the Old Testament miracles God's prophets often proved their false counterparts by exposing this type of trickery. Aaron turned his staff into a snake, which then ate the other magicians' fake serpents (Exodus 7: 8-13). Elijah pours water over his altar to prove that God alone could light it on fire (1 Kings 18). Perhaps, like the father of the dying child in Mark 9:23-29 who questioned Jesus' ability to perform miracles we should pray that God would help us with our unbelief.



CONNECTED TEXTS

Mark 9:23-29
Mark 16:17
Matthew 7:22
Acts 2:43

DISCUSSION STARTERS

How would you define miracles? Have you ever seen one? If so, share with your group.

QUESTIONS

Acts 2:43, seems to be two-pronged. First, it tells that everyone was in awe, and then it discusses the performing of miracles and wonders. How is being filled with awe (also translated “fear”) connected to miracles?

Is anyone capable of performing miracles? Or just apostles? What makes an apostle today? Read 1 Corinthians 12:28-29 and 2 Corinthians 12:12 as points of scriptural reference.

In Matthew 7:22 Jesus says, “Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’” How do you think it is possible that people perform miracles without knowing God?

Mark 13:22 prophesies that “false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform signs and miracles to deceive the elect—if that were possible.” How is it possible to know a miracle is being performed by a false prophet?

Galatians 3:5 asks a rhetorical question, “Does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law, or because you believe what you heard?” Which is the text suggesting is the right answer? What can this teach us about miracles (either observing or performing them)?

ACTION STEP

Pray that the Lord would give you vision to see what role miracles should play in the church today. Spend time considering the questions that have come up while studying this subject. They may lead to even more questions, but may it draw you closer to the great Miracle Worker.



SMALL GROUP STUDIES

JULY 2010 | VOL:3 | NO:7

WEEK THREE NOTES



WEEK FOUR::JULY 25

IT'S STILL MOVING :: ACTS 2:1-41

It must have been terribly disappointing.

For years they watched and listened as he taught. They questioned him and attempted to answer his questions. They had seen him do incredible, impossible things. Then they saw his enemies set a trap for him, a trap that worked to its inevitable end. They saw him killed and placed him in a grave.

Then they saw something they couldn't possibly believe: they saw him living again. He spoke to them and taught them just as before. They hadn't believed it was him, but he had settled any doubts. He was back. Surely this would be the moment when things changed. Surely this would be the time when they would throw off the chains of their oppressors and begin to restore their nation to its rightful place. The anticipation must have been palpable in their midst.

But then he left.

Again.

Before he left, he told them to wait. He would send them a helper that would signal the beginning of the restoration. As they met there in the room there must have been an air of expectancy and impatience.

And the Spirit came. With the sound of a mighty wind and visions of fire, the Spirit of a God with the power to raise the dead enveloped the room. And when it came it did not give them superhuman strength or political prowess or even a strategic plan.

It gave them words.

Words that their next door neighbors couldn't understand, but that travelers from a far off land would hear as a welcome invitation to hear about this man, the Christ. Words that made some laugh and others take heed. Words that extended the kingdom without lifting up arms against anyone.

How often do we assume to know God's plan for us, our family, our community and our country? When Jesus's followers met on Pentacost, many of them must have assumed they knew what the next step in "kingdom-building" was. Yet, when the Spirit of God descended on his people that day it did not wield a conquering sword, but connection. Those in Jerusalem from all over the Jewish world would have heard the God's praises being lifted up in their own language. How sweet this must have sounded to one far away from his home. How strange it would have looked for those who knew this uneducated, ragtag bunch, to see them speaking in languages they clearly did not know.



It is so often the way of the Lord to turn conventional wisdom on its head. How very much like Jesus to establish his church by extending out instead of marching forward. Perhaps the legacy of Pentecost is more than just spiritual gifts and impassioned speeches. Perhaps it is about a God who would rather have us engage in praise than in battle.

RELATED VERSES

- Acts 1:6-9
- Acts 2:1-41
- Ezekiel 3:2
- Ezekiel 13:21
- Deuteronomy 4:24

DISCUSSION STARTERS

Tell about a time in your life when God’s plan turned out to be drastically different from your own.

QUESTIONS

In verse 3 the descent of the Spirit is describe as “tongues of fire”. In the Hebrew Scriptures, God is often depicted as fire (Ex 3:2, 13:21, Deut 4:24). What do you think is the significance of this symbolism?

In verse 4, the Spirit descends and gives the followers of Jesus the ability to speak “in other tongues.” With what person or group of people do you need the Spirit’s help to dialogue with? What might that look like?

In the gospels, Peter is portrayed as confused, lost, and one who has trouble understanding Jesus’ mission. Yet on the day of Pentacost he delivers a sermon (verses 14- 40) that grows the church by three thousand people on a single day. Do you think the Spirit might be able to help you overcome areas of weakness in your own life? If so, how might that look?

Those who heard Peter’s message were very quick to respond to it. What do you think it was that attracted those gathered to the gospel so quickly?

ACTION STEP

Ask God in what areas of your life you need his Spirit to lead you. Pray for his Spirit to empower you. Share your impressions with the group.



WEEK FOUR NOTES