

Life Group Preparation Notes:
Emotionally Healthy Relationships
Session 4 - Pre-Session Reading
Explore the Iceberg

Jesus had a full sense of what he was about. On the evening before his arrest, he took the role of a slave and began washing the twelve disciples' feet, even Judas's. The apostle John notes, "Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God" (John 13:3). He was deeply aware of who he was and what he was doing. This enabled him to break from the expectations of his family, friends, disciples, and wider religious culture and to follow God's unique plan for his life. In the same way, a deep awareness of what we are feeling and doing gives us the courage to begin doing life differently (and hopefully more in line with God's will) and developing new, healthier relational patterns.

Scripture portrays Jesus as one who had intense, raw, emotional experiences and was able to express his emotions in unashamed, unembarrassed freedom to others. He did not repress or project his feelings onto others. Instead, we read of Jesus responsibly experiencing the full range of human emotion throughout his earthly ministry. In today's language, he would be considered *emotionally intelligent*, a term popularized by Daniel Goleman today.¹ . . .

Some of us feel that it's greedy and selfish to pay attention to what we are feeling and doing. In my early years as a Christian, I heard few, if any, discussions about the awareness of feelings as one key to discipleship. There are many other important issues related to maturing in Christ, but an honest examination of our emotions and feelings is central. This inward look is not to encourage a self-absorbed introspection that feeds narcissism. The ultimate purpose is to allow the gospel to transform all of you—both above and below the iceberg. The end result will be that you and I will be better lovers of God and other people.

Without doing the work of becoming aware of your feelings and actions, along with their impact on others, it is scarcely possible to enter deeply into the life experiences of other people. How can you enter someone else's world when you have not entered your own?

When I read the story of Job's ranting before God, Jeremiah's anguish about God's word burning in his heart "like a fire" (Jeremiah 20:9), Moses' struggles in the wilderness, or David's anguish of feeling abandoned by God, I observe leaders of God in the brutal, painful honesty of wrestling with emotions, feelings, and the realities going on around them. That's why their life stories speak to us so powerfully. . . .

In meeting the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4), Jesus consistently confronted her with the "why" question. He went below the surface of her actions to wrestle with bigger life-related questions: Why are you at the well in the middle of the day? Because you are ashamed? Why are you running from husband to husband? What void are you trying to fill?

She attempted to sidetrack the conversation, keeping it above the surface. So she asked Jesus about the best place to worship (John 4:20). Jesus, instead, called her to examine her life beneath the surface of the iceberg and consider her immoral lifestyle as an indication of her insatiable thirst for love.

Jesus also pointed others to "why" questions. He once corrected the Pharisees and teachers of the law, who were passionate about external behavior issues but were not doing the difficult work on their insides. "Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. Nothing outside you can defile you by going into you. Rather, it is what comes out of you that defiles you" (Mark 7:14–15). Jesus tried to reorient them to the "why's" of their behavior, to their motivations, and to their hearts (7:21).

Once I begin to be aware of what I am doing, how I am feeling, and how it is impacting others, I need to ask myself the difficult "why" question. For example:

- Why am I always in a hurry? Why am I so impatient?
- What am I so anxious? . . .
- Why do I dread this meeting today at 2:00 p.m.? Why am I so flooded with fear? . . .
- Why do I avoid certain people?
- Why do I have a need to immediately return all phone calls and emails? Or why do I avoid returning certain phone calls, emails, or text messages? Is it because I want to please people?

Wrestling with these types of probing questions about the depths of our hearts is, to say the least, an uncomfortable experience!

In the past I spent hours with God, beseeching him to accomplish my agenda and plans. However, now I spend much more time with God, praying for His will to be done, not my own. And I rest in his love, wrestling with the “why” questions in an open, receptive way before him.

It takes courage to ask myself: What am I really feeling in this situation? What might be going on here? King Saul was unaware of what was going on inside of him. His “doing” for God did not flow from his “being” with God. We see him repeatedly blind to his jealousy, fear, hatred and anger. Unlike David, we don’t observe Saul cultivating his relationship with God. Eventually, his life choices destroy him (see 1 Samuel 17–31).

Blaise Pascal wrote: “All men’s miseries derive from not being able to sit in a quiet room alone.”² This involves taking my feelings and thoughts about why I am feeling this way and bringing them honestly to God. I ask, “What does this represent? What might you, God, be saying to me? What do I learn about myself in this? About life? About other people?”

—*The Emotionally Healthy Church*, Updated and Expanded, pages 78, 81–83

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