

## **Everyday Pastoral Care**

*Making Disciples in the Everyday: Living the Great Commission, week #5*

### **Opening Exercise**

As we begin, I want you to take 5 minutes and jot down some areas of your life that...

*...cause you to be stressed.*

*...make you crave approval (or, whose approval do you most crave).*

*...you often complain about.*

*...you are overly sensitive about.*

### **Ephesians 4 and Everyday Pastoral Care**

Now let's turn together to Ephesians 4 and connect the dots between what you've written down and our subject today: everyday pastoral care.

1. The items that you've written down are a part of the "old self", which you're called to put off. You have a new self, but that new self is still being renewed into the image of Jesus (think of the orphan illustration from week 3).
2. What's going on in those areas of the old self is foolish, darkened understanding, believing lies, and the way to put them off is by engaging the truth, "as it is in Jesus".

3. The truth of Jesus comes to us through all the members of His Body. As everyone is speaking the truth (of Jesus) in love to everyone, we are empowered to put off the garments of our old self and are renewed to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.

4. To do this effectively, we need to experience life together in the everyday rhythms of life. That's what Paul modeled in Ephesus (cf. Acts 20). It's easy to look like an outstanding Christian for 90 minutes on Sunday morning, and we can even keep a super-spiritual facade for a weekly Life Group meeting. But the more and more time you spend with someone -- in your homes sharing meals, doing playdates with the kids, stuck in traffic or having picked the wrong line at the grocery store -- and those marks of the old self get revealed. We need daily intervention to grow up into Jesus (Hebrews 3:13), and only everyday church will give us the daily ministry we all need from one another.

My experience is that we struggle in this everyday ministry of the truth to one another. There may be many reasons for this, but it seems that when we identify an ungodly attitude or response in someone (a part of the "old self", in need of renewal), we prefer to tell our spouse, or another friend, rather than actually talk to the person who needs to hear the truth and be set free. Maybe we give someone a book, or point them to a pastor, but we really struggle to speak the truth in love! Maybe we just don't know what to say.

### **The 4 G's**

I want to give you a tool today that has been a great help to me, both in diagnosing my own struggles with sin and helping others to see what's at the heart of their sin, and to be set free by the truth. I want to share with you four precious truths about God. There's much more to say about God than just these four truths, but most of the remnants of the "old self" that we are called to put away arise from the failure, in the moment, to believe at least one of these truths as we ought.

This doesn't mean we're heretics or completely ignorant, but that we need truths we already know pushed down into the everyday realities of our lives. Discipleship is the process of closing the gap between what we know in our head and what we believe in our hearts. These four truths have been immensely helpful to me in narrowing that gap.

### **1. God is great, so I don't have to be in control**

Traveling at the speed of light (186,000 miles per second), you would circle the earth seven times in one second, and pass the moon in two seconds. At this speed, it would take you 4.3 years to reach our nearest star, and 100,000 years to cross our galaxy. There are around 100 billion galaxies in the universe, and it would take 2 million light-years to reach the next closest galaxy. And that's only the outskirts of the universe!

All this was created when God simply spoke a word. He marked off the heavens with the breadth of His hand (Isaiah 40:12). Hebrews 1:3 says that Jesus upholds all things by His powerful word. "His dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom endures from generation to generation; all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and he does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, "What have you done?" (Dan. 4:34).

God orders every event and determines every action: "The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will." The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord (Proverbs 16:33). Not even the most insignificant bird falls to the ground apart from the will of our Father (Matthew 10:29). From the movement of atoms to the complexities of human history, God sustains and rules all. Even the horrible death of Jesus, which came about through human sin, was wisely and sovereignly governed by God to accomplish His saving purpose (Acts 2:23, 4:28).

You all know this, and on a theology test you would pass with flying colors. But what happens when we get stuck in traffic, or the kids aren't listening, or there's too much month left at the end of the paycheck, or the doctor calls and says this scan looks abnormal and we need to do further testing. Do we really believe that God is great? Or do we functionally believe that He needs our help managing the universe? Do we believe that we must work to control certain people or situations in my life?

*What would be some indicators that a person is not truly believing that God is great?*

*What would be the positive effects of deeply believing that God is great, that He is large and in charge of EVERYTHING?*

## **2. God is glorious, so I don't have to fear others**

One common reason that we give into sin is that we crave the approval of other people, or we fear their rejection or disapproval. We feel we need the acceptance of a parent, a spouse, a boss, a friend, the church, and so we're controlled by their opinion of us. This happens in big ways and little ways (coming into Seek Him office for a meeting which I'd forgotten about). The Bible calls this the fear of man: peer pressure, needing something from a spouse, being over-committed because we can't say no, small lies to make yourself look good, self-esteem issues...

Underneath those sins is the lie that the opinions of others is weightier than God's. The word "glory" means weightiness. To say God is glorious means that He is of ultimate importance in the universe, His being is of the greatest weight. Whoever you deem most glorious, you will fear. And whoever you fear most, you'll most desire that person's pleasure and approval. But it's a treadmill, because you never know when you've done enough, and you'll never feel secure because people's opinions are always shifting.

The answer to fear of man is the fear of God. We need a bigger, better, more glorious vision of Him in all His majesty and splendor and beauty (cf. Revelation 1, 19, etc.). When you're thinking of someone who you fear, whose approval you crave, picture Jesus next to him or her. Has that person upheld the galaxies by his mere word? Has he calmed the seas, raised the dead, walked on water? Did she hang on the cross for you, has she ascended to the right hand of God? Can he destroy his enemies with the breath of his mouth? Do the demons shriek in terror before her?

Remember, the most glorious One in the universe loves you, laid down His life to have you in relationship with Him, and is crazy about you! How big and weighty does that other person seem in light of the glory and beauty of Jesus?

*When you truly embrace that God is glorious, how would that effect the way you live?*

### **3. God is good, so I don't have to look elsewhere (for satisfaction)**

*What would be some indicators that a person is not believing that God is good?*

Over and over and over again in the Bible, God makes clear that the call to Him is not a call to renounce satisfaction in order to live a life of dreary abstinence. It's easy to think that following Jesus and obeying His commands is somehow a lesser existence, that living for our own pleasure and fulfillment is truly the good life.

Throughout Scripture, God whets our appetite with pleasure-language which shows that the good life is found in Him (Psalm 16:11, John 6:35, Matthew 13:44, John 15:11, Isaiah 55:1ff, Jeremiah 2:12-13, John 4:13-14, Psalm 34:8). Every longing in us (food, drink, rest, sexual fulfillment) is at bottom a longing for God and His glory. And every joy we experience is a beam of light pointing to the source and fountain

of all joy, God Himself. The cross shows us the extent to which God was willing to go to give you what is truly good: Himself.

But when we turn away from God as the source of joy and pleasure, and look for ultimate fulfillment and satisfaction elsewhere in life, we end up becoming bitter and complaining and disillusioned, because people and things eventually let us down. God made the world with incredible pleasures and joys to show us what He's like, but He also designed those things to fail us, so you'd see that your ultimate and deepest need is for Him.

What are you looking to for satisfaction? Are the words, "If only..." a refrain? What comes after the "If only..."? Whatever it is, it's not as beautiful and satisfying and long-lasting as God Himself. God has given us Himself, so that we don't have to look elsewhere for satisfaction. And when we see that, we can enjoy the good things in His creation, because we won't be enslaved by them.

*What effects would you see in a person's life who was really believing that God is good?*

#### **4. God is gracious, so I don't have to prove myself**

*What characteristics would you expect to see in someone struggling to believe that God is gracious?*

This is about as fundamental a truth as you get in Christianity: we are saved by grace. Grace is favor, or kindness, given to an undeserving person by an unobligated giver. God is gracious. Because of our sin, the only thing we deserve from Him is death. But through the work of Jesus on our behalf, God offers us life, which we receive as a free gift by faith alone. When we trust Him, we're made right with Him, fully accepted and loved by God, even as He loves Jesus (John 17:23). There's nothing we've done to earn it, and there's nothing we could do to lose it. We have nothing left to prove.

But much of the time we live as though we do have something to prove. That's why we replay a conversation in our minds late at night. Why can't we just let it go? Because the desire to be vindicated, to be proven right, is consuming. We try to prove ourselves to ourselves, to others, and ultimately to God. When we feel we're doing well, we're filled with pride and self-righteousness towards people who don't measure up as we do, and we live with a sense of entitlement that God owes us something for all our hard work. When we fail, there's extreme guilt and despair and insecurity.

We're saying, by our lives, that we are not really defined by Jesus and His work for us, but rather we're defined by our own work, for better or worse. But when we believe that God is gracious, both our pride and our guilt-laden insecurity are put to death. We're so guilty and condemned that Jesus had to die on the cross for us (so there's no place for pride or a sense of entitlement), but we are so loved and delighted in that Jesus was glad to die for us (so there's no place for despair and insecurity). I don't have to prove myself!

*Which of the 4 G's immediately grabbed your attention? Why?*

Putting off the old self putting on the new self is about nurturing our confidence that God is great, our fear of God as the glorious One, our delight in God's goodness, and our rest in God's grace. And it's about helping others to do that as opportunity and need presents itself. This isn't about shoving truth down people's throats and cold and unfeeling ways. This about giving people good news! It's not, "I **should not** fear others," but "I don't **have to** fear others." To say to temptation, "I must not do this" is legalism. To say, "I need not do this, because God is bigger and better," is good news.

Remember, also, that these truths, and our hearts, don't follow a neat, tidy pattern, as if any time you see X you go to truth #2. People, and their issues, are complicated. Let's take anger. Awhile back a guy I

was discipling called me, and he was steamed that he had lent his car to someone, and when it came back there was a dent in it. But the person who borrowed the car insisted that it was there; my friend knew that was a lie, and he was steamed. Which truth do you think he need to hear? All four truths seem to apply.

But the good news is that speaking truth about God to people will never do them harm! You may not precisely identify what's going on in their hearts, but if you remind them that God is gracious, when what they really "needed" to hear was that God is great, you may not have gotten it right, but you certainly didn't get it wrong! No one will be damaged by being reminded that God is gracious.

### **Putting the 4 G's into Practice**

Now, how do we actually put these truths to work in everyday pastoral care? First and foremost, it needs to be stressed that intentionality is crucial. That's where we left off last week: that everyday discipleship is about moving from an additional mindset to an intentional mindset. It's living ordinary life (the old self won't be revealed on a Sunday morning, when everyone is on their best behavior) with gospel intentionality. And sometimes we really lack intentionality. And if you take out the gospel intentionality, all you're left with is ordinary life, and everyone does that!

Everyday pastoral care requires that we saturate ordinary life with God talk. It's not relegated to only "ministry time", as if we can talk about complete nonsense for most of our lives, but when Bible study or "sharing time" starts, then we talk about God, and as soon as we close in prayer, it's back to talking about nonsense. Here are some simple ways that Tim Chester recommends we do that:

**A. Identify generative themes.** That is, look for topics that generate energy in people: what makes them excited, angry, agitated,



enthusiastic. These are windows into areas of life that they care about deeply.

**B. Reinsert God into the picture.** When people talk about their lives, they often leave God out of the picture. We can serve them by reinserting God into what they are saying. "I'm always uncomfortable around Sally, she seems like she's always got everything so together." Where does God, and His truth fit into such a statement?

**C. Ask questions.** As you do life and see what's agitating people, ask, "Why is that bothering you so much?" When I asked my friend about why he was so angry that his car was dented, his answer shocked me, and gave me an opportunity to gospel his heart that I never would have had if I hadn't asked him a simple question.

**D. Turn anecdotes into testimony.** We all tell stories, all the time: "Do you know what my boss said to me today? I was at the mall this morning and... You'll never guess who I bumped into last night... This basic mode of conversation is a great way to testify to God's work in our lives, sharing with others how these four truths are helping us in our lives. Speaking of God's work in our lives in everyday ways is a huge way of combating the "ministry-time" mindset. Let's strive to be a community where ordinary life is saturated with God-talk. We won't grow up into Jesus without this!

**E. Determine to embrace rebuke as normative.** If you do life with others, and you're authentic, there are parts of you that Jesus wants to change. He wants to use others to do that good work in you, but so often we chafe at the idea of rebuke or confrontation. If you rarely get rebuked, then a rebuke is a big deal. It creates a sense of crisis, but that need not be the case, if rebuke becomes a normal part of the way we disciple one another (which it is, if we're biblical in our thinking).

**Handle with Care**

There's one more important topic we need to cover as we think about everyday pastoral care. You've probably received a package in the mail which read, "Handle with care". It means something fragile and precious is in that box, so you need to be delicate and tender with it. These four eternal truths, and the hearts of other people, are precious realities. Gospel ministry is a fragile, precious gift, and it needs to be handled with care. So as we shepherd others, we need to apply the 4 G's to ourselves, before we can apply them to other people:

***God is great, so I don't have to be in control*** -- If you, as a truth-speaker, aren't grasping this, then you'll be over-controlling and oppressive in the way you shepherd others. You'll want to immediately correct even the smallest error, for fear that someone will go astray or that you might lose control. You won't give people time to grow, because you'll believe that their growth is dependent on you, not God. You'll be intense and over-bearing. On the other hand, if you believe that God is great, you'll be freed up to be relaxed and patient. You'll give people space to change and time to grow.

***God is glorious, so I don't have to fear others*** -- If you fear people more than you fear God, you'll be reluctant to speak the truth to them. You'll not confront people who need a hard word, because you'll be worried that they might be offended or reject you. You'll avoid difficult decisions that might upset people. Only when you are not controlled by other people will you be truly freed up to serve them in love, rather than use them and their love for you to serve yourself.

***God is good, so I don't have to look elsewhere*** -- You may feel that ministry and people are a burden, and people will find you unapproachable, and they'll pick up signals that you don't want to be bothered. We'll avoid tasks, and people, that are difficult, because we'll only want to do what's fun. But to the degree that we believe God is good, we'll be able to serve others with passion and enthusiasm.

*God is gracious, so I don't have to prove myself* -- You won't be able to gently, humbly confront someone if you think you aren't capable of a similar or equal sin to the one you're confronting. If you feel that you're above someone, your air of superiority will come through and you'll crush, rather than restore a person. Or you'll feel the need to impress people by how much you know. When we rest in God's grace, we'll be marked by humility, compassion and kindness, and we'll be concerned to bless rather than impress.

Most of us are probably given towards under-pastoring (failing to challenge when we should, or avoiding difficult people or situations) or over-pastoring (a tendency towards dominating or being over-bearing or too intense with others). So whether you're discipling others, or discerning your own heart, know the 4 G's, mediate on God's greatness, glory, goodness and grace, and may the truth set you free from your old self. God's good plan for us is to change us, and part of His grace to us is in giving us the church as a community of change.