

The Need For Grace

It's been said, "When dealing with human beings, what we see is not always what there is." This is important to realize as a small group leader. Therefore, when facilitating our groups, we need to foster a grace-filled atmosphere where vulnerability and openness are valued.

As human beings, God has created us with such complexities that we don't even understand about ourselves. Psalm 139 talks about how the Lord knows our every move, our words and thoughts, and that we cannot hide from Him. The Lord knows us inside and out from the very inception of our being. Pretty incredible when you really stop to think about it, isn't it?



Realizing how the Lord knows and understands us can give us freedom and comfort to know how high and wide His love is for each of us. And it's no surprise that the Lord desires for His church to share and experience this level of love, commitment, and understanding among its members.

Unfortunately, however, this doesn't come naturally. As a result of sin, we all have learned to hide and wear figurative fig leaves. But as believers in Christ, we have the hope and privilege of living in His redemption. And our small groups are the perfect place to practice this!

How then shall we start? Spend some time reading and reflecting on Psalm 139 with your small group. Revel in each person's uniqueness, and think about how much God loves each unique member of the group.

Removing Fig Leaves

If we think of our hearts as onions with different layers built upon one another, we can explore the depths of our heart and its feelings. In the outer layer, we all function within an **open, public area**. This is where we are willing to share events, feelings, and thoughts about our lives. Just below that layer, we have a **guarded, private area**. This area is difficult for us to share with others, especially those we deem as unsafe. Below this layer is our **hidden area**. Memories, events, and feelings that we desire to hide reside there. We are unwilling to share this layer with most people. Finally, we have an **unknown area**. This layer is host to things we haven't reflected on and may not even know are influencing us as a person.

Ask your small group members to reflect on two questions that can help remove emotional fig leaves. The first question is: "What do you have hidden?" The second is: "How can you let it go or help it heal?" By reflecting on these questions, we begin to deal with the hidden areas of our lives and eventually we will begin to share these areas of our lives.

The Blanket of Grace

Just as we all love the comforts and warmth of a cozy blanket on a cold winter day, sometimes we need the security of knowing there is a blanket of grace that covers our small group. This is especially true if we are going to open up, share our lives with one another, and begin removing fig leaves.

We can facilitate this blanket of grace by communicating:

- **Warmth** ...through caring acceptance of what people are going through
- **Empathy** ... striving for an accurate understanding of what is going on in thought, feeling, or action
- **Respect** ... seeing the worth of the person regardless of behavior

There are, however, some invisible communication barriers to be aware of — barriers that can discourage members from sharing and opening up in your group. Spend some time discussing these in your small group. You may find that different people experience different barriers or inhibitors.

Here are three tools that can help bring about more openness in your group:

- One practical application is to have each member in your group state one or two things that cause them not to share in a small group. Have each person write these down on an index card and encourage group members to review this card prior to small group.
- Discuss what each member might need in order to open up more to the group.
- Pray, ask for God's grace, presence, and peace to dwell in your group and infuse your relationships. Ask His Spirit to create an environment of safety and openness in your group. Ask Him for the courage for people to share, for the unconditional love to respond, and for transformational growth and community to happen in your group.

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