

Session 1 – Introduction

The **primary purpose** of the *Transforming Small Groups* is to lead participants on a journey of **awakening to Christ’s presence, power, and love in daily life**.

“Jesus is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ.” Colossians 1:28

This course is about Jesus Christ!

The *Transforming Small Groups Course* is about life with Christ and life with each other. We seek to follow Christ with integrity and perseverance, bound together in mission around Christ.

This is best described as a journey, a walk with others on the journey of life. *Transforming Small Groups* is not so much a classroom but a community of grace learning to keep company with Christ and each other. Central to the journey is the emphasis that will be placed on opening our lives to Christ and each other in love and grace. We want to grow to be more **responsive to the loving initiative of Christ** in our lives. In doing so, we will discover that Christ’s presence, power and guidance becomes the primary focus of life rather than our effort to live the Christian life.

The Christian life is first and foremost a way of life; a way of daily living that is patterned on the life of Jesus Christ. Jesus invites us to follow him in close proximity and by doing so learn from him the way of living a life with God for the benefit of God’s world. The *Transforming Small Groups Course* will explore five themes or habits of the life of discipleship.

- One: **Look** to God (Practicing the Presence of the Lord through Prayer)
- Two: **Listen** to God (Learning the Art of Hearing the Spirit through Scripture Reading)
- Three: **Lean** on Others (Practicing Gracious Community)
- Four: **Surrender** to God (Growing in Self-Understanding and Christian Identity)
- Five: **Serve** God (Discovering our Vocations in the Kingdom)

Format: Review one habit each month. Watch the video the beginning of the month, interact with the content, talk about the spiritual discipline. In between meetings, each person should seek to put the habit into practice a few times a week. When the group gathers next, the time will be spent reading Scripture, reflecting on the experience of the habit, and praying for one another. The goal of these conversations are to “*watch over each other in love*” so that together we come into a more vibrant and interactive encounter with Jesus and his kingdom each day.

Homework: Spend time with God in ways you have found helpful. Pay attention to the regular rhythms of spiritual disciplines you put into practice.

- 1) What do you?
- 2) How often do you practice each discipline?
- 3) What helps you connect with Jesus most clearly, most closely?
- 4) How have you experienced the grace of Jesus since we last met?

Final Blessing

As we go from this place know that Jesus is always with us. He who is life and love itself embraces us in love, empowers us to overcome, fills us with hope and peace, and sends us into the world to live as ambassadors of the kingdom of God. Amen.

Session 2 – Habit 1: Look to God in Prayer, part 1

Prayer of Discipleship

Gracious and loving God we offer praise to you because of your unfailing faithfulness and saving grace in Christ. We have gathered together to turn our hearts and minds toward Jesus longing that we may know him more intimately, love him more intensely, and follow him more closely. We hope by our time together and your transforming Spirit to become true disciples of Jesus who offer their whole lives in willing service to Jesus and his kingdom. Amen.

FOCUS - The primary purpose of the *Transforming Small Groups Course* is to lead us on a journey of awakening to Christ presence, power, and love in daily life. It's about Jesus! Knowing Jesus, keeping company with him, learning from him, hearing him, becoming like him, and being in mission with him.

SCRIPTURE MEDITATION - John 5:1-8

“As you entered in and listened to the story what spoke to you?”

Distractions and Prayer

Acknowledge the reality of the chatter and noise in our minds. Every person of prayer experiences distractions. (Ask, What distracts you most in your prayer life? How does it make you feel?)

Attitude of Non-judgment. Rather than blocking them out, which we can't, we simply let them be. Random thoughts, weird ideas, or reruns of the latest conversations are all normal and natural. God gave us a brain that thankfully cannot be shut off at will! (What does an attitude of non-judgment look like for you?)

Our anxiety about distractions are more detrimental to our prayer than the distractions themselves (Mark Thibodeaux).

No time with God is wasted even the times of distractions during prayer. Maybe God is humored or at ease with the interesting weather in our brains!

Acknowledge the distractions and then let them pass by or leave. Sometimes we are so distracted that prayer seems impossible. When this happens offer a prayer to Jesus, something like, “Jesus everything seems like a fog today. It is the best I can do just to be here. Please take this time and make of it what you will.”

Pray your distractions. Turn them into brief prayers for people, issues, or concerns.

Some persistent distractions are worthy of greater attention and prayer. These distractions may be a way the Lord is speaking to us. Discernment is required here.

HOMEWORK for the coming week:

- 1) Set aside specific time to pray and pay attention to what happens.
- 2) If distractions come up, put into practice one (or more) of the responses outlined in today's lesson.
- 3) Journal about your experience of prayer. Is Jesus speaking to you through a distraction that may need greater attention?

Final Blessing

As we go from this place know that Jesus is always with us. He who is life and love itself embraces us in love, empowers us to overcome, fills us with hope and peace, and sends us into the world to live as ambassadors of the kingdom of God. Amen.

Session 3 – Habit 1: Look to God in Prayer, part 2

Prayer of Discipleship

Gracious and loving God we offer praise to you because of your unfailing faithfulness and saving grace in Christ. We have gathered together to turn our hearts and minds toward Jesus longing that we may know him more intimately, love him more intensely, and follow him more closely. We hope by our time together and your transforming Spirit to become true disciples of Jesus who offer their whole lives in willing service to Jesus and his kingdom. Amen.

Centering Prayer Exercise

My soul finds rest in God alone. Psalm 62:1

At its core, Christian prayer is about relationship, a growing, ever-deepening interaction with our triune God. The act of prayer can take many forms but what holds all forms of prayer together is that prayer is a way to connect with God. Centering prayer has a long history in the church and is best described as a form of resting in God's embrace. Centering prayer, as the name implies, suggests an activity that attempts to center or focus on God.

This form of prayer might seem foreign to many, especially leaders, who are used to using lots of words to communicate or motivate. In centering prayer we are not giving God information about our family life or work situation for example, but rather we sit quietly, lovingly giving ourselves to God. Generally, the only words that are used are a brief phrase of Scripture or a word that helps refocus our prayer on God when distracting thoughts enter our mind (i.e., Be still, You are my Shepherd, Lord, Jesus, Spirit, Father).

The goal of centering prayer is to so rest in Christ that his gift of peace spills into the rest of our lives. It's important to note, particularly for individuals who like to evaluate and assess the effectiveness of spiritual practices, that centering prayer should not be judged as worthwhile if it doesn't seem to do anything. Over time those who practice centering prayer as a regular spiritual activity note how their lives seemed to be centered in Christ as they go about their daily activities.

“In prayer we seek God. We do not seek peace, quiet, tranquility, enlightenment; we do not seek anything for ourselves. We seek to give ourselves...to God. He is the all of our prayer.” M. Basil Pennington

Sample Method of Centering Prayer

1. Find a quiet place to sit. A place where you'll have at least 20 minutes of uninterrupted quiet. Set a timer if it helps you forget about when to stop.

2. Get comfortable. Silently recite a brief prayer giving yourself to God asking that you might be attentive to his presence. With faith, in Christ, place yourself in God's loving presence.

3. Be quiet, be still. It's not unusual during the first several minutes for your mind to be filled with an assortment of thoughts. Do not worry about these thoughts. Acknowledge them and give them to God. Use your centering word or phrase (**Jesus, Lord, You are my Shepherd**) to center yourself on God. Remember the goal is to be attentive to God's presence. If distractions persist be gentle on yourself. Adele Calhoun suggests that when distractions persist, imagine that you are visiting a friend who lives on a busy city street. Because it is a warm day, the windows are opened and all the noise and bustle of life flow into the room through the window. At times you are conscious of sirens or people talking or children laughing, but your attention is devoted to your friend and you do not let your mind follow the sounds outside. As you meet with Jesus, acknowledge the noisy distractions that pull your attention, but continually return to the moment with Jesus through your prayer word or phrase. (See Adele Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, Downers Grove: IVP, 2005, 209).

4. Rest in God's embrace. Trust that something good is taking place even if you're not aware of it.

5. When 20 minutes have passed end your prayer time with a short prayer of thanks to God asking that God may help you stay rooted in his presence for the remainder of the day.

Remain in me and I will remain in you. John 15

HOMEWORK for the coming week:

- 1) Practice Centering Prayer - 3 times in the coming weeks. Start with 10 minutes/time and work your way up to 20 minutes.
- 2) Pay attention to the experience - remembering the challenge of distractions in prayer.
- 3) What do you notice about yourself, your spirit? What do you learn about God - Father, Son, Holy Spirit? What is this exercise like for you? How do you deal with distractions?

Final Blessing

As we go from this place know that Jesus is always with us. He who is life and love itself embraces us in love, empowers us to overcome, fills us with hope and peace, and sends us into the world to live as ambassadors of the kingdom of God. Amen.

Session 4 – Habit 1: Look to God in Prayer, part 3

Prayer of Discipleship

Gracious and loving God we offer praise to you because of your unfailing faithfulness and saving grace in Christ. We have gathered together to turn our hearts and minds toward Jesus longing that we may know him more intimately, love him more intensely, and follow him more closely. We hope by our time together and your transforming Spirit to become true disciples of Jesus who offer their whole lives in willing service to Jesus and his kingdom. Amen.

SCRIPTURE MEDITATION: John 1:43-51

“As you entered in and listened to the story what spoke to you?”

The Jesus Prayer, also known as the “breath prayer”, is designed to help us focus on God. In seeking to quiet our hearts and mind, we pray in connection to the inhale and exhale of our breath. Inhale, pray “Lord Jesus Christ;” exhale, pray “have mercy on me.”

In sitting with this simple phrase over a period of 5, 10, 15 minutes, the goal is to focus on Jesus and release things that pull our attention or trust away from him.

“As you consider Looking to God in Prayer, how are attention to distractions, Centering Prayer or the Jesus Prayer helpful on your journey?”, “What difference might intentionality in ‘Looking to God’ make for you?”

HOMEWORK for the coming weeks:

- 1) Continue to practice Centering Prayer or the Jesus Prayer - 2-3 times a week.
- 2) Practice the exercise of Lectio Divina 1-2 times a week.
- 3) Journal about the experiences. What are you learning about God - Father, Son & Holy Spirit? What are you learning about yourself?

Final Blessing

As we go from this place know that Jesus is always with us. He who is life and love itself embraces us in love, empowers us to overcome, fills us with hope and peace, and sends us into the world to live as ambassadors of the kingdom of God. Amen.

Session 5 – Habit 2: Listen to God in Scripture

Prayer of Discipleship

Gracious and loving God we offer praise to you because of your unfailing faithfulness and saving grace in Christ. We have gathered together to turn our hearts and minds toward Jesus longing that we may know him more intimately, love him more intensely, and follow him more closely. We hope by our time together and your transforming Spirit to become true disciples of Jesus who offer their whole lives in willing service to Jesus and his kingdom. Amen.

SCRIPTURE MEDITATION - Luke 24:13-19a and 28-32.

“What stands out to you in this story? Describe a time when you felt your ‘heart burning within you’ because of the Lord’s presence or help.”

Lectio Divina overview

Lectio divina is a slower reading of Scripture, where we place our lives under the text.

Process: Choose a short passage – 6-8 verses. Then begin with silence to quiet your mind, inviting the Holy Spirit to speak. There are 4 movements to the interaction.

- 1) **To read** – read the passage through once, listening for a word or phrase that stands out to you. Then, take some time to silently reflect on the word.
- 2) **To reflect** - read passage again, and ask, “What is going on in my life that is touched by this word?” or “Where do I find myself in the story?” Silently reflect on your answer.
- 3) **To respond** – read the passage. Then, pray whatever comes to mind, “What is God saying to you about who he is, who you are?” Then, be silent.
- 4) **To rest** – read the passage one last time. Consider any invitation from Jesus and resolve to carry it out.

HOMEWORK for the coming weeks:

- 1) Continue to practice Centering Prayer or the Jesus Prayer at least 2-3 times a week.
- 2) Introduce the practice of Lectio Divina into your time with God, 1-2 times a week.
- 3) Journal about the experiences. What are you learning about God - Father, Son & Holy Spirit? What are you learning about yourself?

Final Blessing - As we go from this place know that Jesus is always with us. He who is life and love itself embraces us in love, empowers us to overcome, fills us with hope and peace, and sends us into the world to live as ambassadors of the kingdom of God. Amen.

Session 6 – Habit 3: Leaning on Others

Prayer of Discipleship

Gracious and loving God we offer praise to you because of your unfailing faithfulness and saving grace in Christ. We have gathered together to turn our hearts and minds toward Jesus longing that we may know him more intimately, love him more intensely, and follow him more closely. We hope by our time together and your transforming Spirit to become true disciples of Jesus who offer their whole lives in willing service to Jesus and his kingdom. Amen.

“One Another Passages” Key: Christian Community is called to reflect the Trinitarian reality of love.

Romans 12:10 Love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor.

Romans 12:16 Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are.

Romans 13:8 Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.

Romans 15:7 Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.

2 Cor. 13:11 Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you.

Galatians 5:13 For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another.

Galatians 6:2 Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.

Ephesians 4:32 Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

Ephesians 5:21 Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Colossians 3:13 Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.

1 Thessalonians 5:11 Therefore encourage one another and build up each other. 1

Thessalonians 5:15 See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all.

Hebrews 3:13 But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," so that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

Hebrews 10:24 And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds.

Hebrews 10:25 Not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching. James 4:11 Do not speak evil against one another, brothers and sisters.

James 5:9 Beloved, do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged.

James 5:16 Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed.

1 Peter 4:8 Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins.

1 John 3:16 We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us--and we ought to lay down our lives for one another

1 John 4:7 Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.

“What stands out to you from the list of verses?” “If you were to develop a description of a loving person from these verses what attributes and behaviors they exhibit?”

HOMEWORK:

- 1) Continue a rhythm of Centering Prayer and/or the Jesus Prayer, along with Lectio Divina (even if it's once/week).
- 2) Review “My Graced History” handout and take time to think through answers to the questions.
- 3) Pray about what pieces of your history you would like to share with the small group when it is your turn to talk.

Final Blessing - As we go from this place know that Jesus is always with us. He who is life and love itself embraces us in love, empowers us to overcome, fills us with hope and peace, and sends us into the world to live as ambassadors of the kingdom of God. Amen.

MY GRACED HISTORY (Soul Stream © 2011)

Context: The scriptures come to us as stories, stories of God's gracious involvement and redemption of his people. Over and over we read in the scriptures how God acted for the benefit of his people. Deuteronomy says, "I said to you: Do not take fright, do not be afraid...The Lord our God goes in front of you and will be fighting for you. In the wilderness, too, you saw how God carried you, as a person carries one's child, all along the road you traveled to this place." (Dt. 1:29ff) The purpose of this exercise to help God's people give voice to where and how God has graced their lives with his presence and care.

As you reflect on the three parts of "My Graced History" imagine that you are on a journey through your life with Jesus as your companion. Let Jesus show you your life and the deep love and grace with which he has held you through it all.

Most of all approach this exercise seeking to receive God's grace again as you review your story as it is lovingly told by God.

Step One: My Gifted History (what has come to me without my effort)

- I take time to pay attention to the many gifts God has given me in my background, relatives, childhood experiences, church, adult experiences and opportunities, experiences of loving and being loved. I let Jesus show me the many ways I have experienced the presence of God in a deeply personal way.
- I enter into one or two which stand out at this time and let Jesus show me more deeply how he has been with me and loved me. I take time to appreciate it and savor it.
- I talk to Jesus in gratitude and wonder for the many ways God has sustained and provided for me in love.
- With gratitude to God I write a one to one and a half-page (single space) summary of my gifted history.

Step Two: My Suffering History (hurts that have come to me)

- I take time to let Jesus talk to me about the times of suffering in my history: relatives, acquaintances, physical and social circumstances, romantic and sexual experiences, etc. I let Jesus reveal to me ways he was with me even though I did not know it.
- I enter into one or more of these experiences to re-experience the presence of Jesus in those times. I spend some time reflecting on what Jesus shows me, including things like:

Was there any pattern in my suffering history?
How was I held and cared for through these experiences?
How have I experienced grace in these experiences?
What else does Jesus want to say to me?

- I speak with Jesus as one friend with another and the hurts that have come to me.
- With trust in God's goodness and love write a one to one and a half-page summary of your reflections on your "Suffering History."

Step Three: My Shadow History (the brokenness of my own choices and patterns)

- Realizing that Jesus was lovingly present with me even in my sinful experiences, I begin to recall the disorders in my choices, failings to acknowledge my identity in God, fears that blocked me from life, the destructive habits and false self-images I developed, and the impact of all this brokenness on others.
- Accepting the fullness of God's forgiveness, I now allow Jesus to show me his tender love in the middle of these experiences, patterns, habits, and consequences. How does he want to be with me? Are there any places I still need to accept forgiveness for my choices and myself? In what broken and painful place does Jesus want to love me very tenderly and very particularly?
- I take time to linger with Jesus, letting him love me and desiring to offer my love in return.
- In light of God's acceptance of us in Christ honestly write a one to one and a half-page summary of "My Shadow History."

As you take time to do this exercise don't become overly analytical or worried about the parts where it is harder to write, rather, trust whatever comes to your attention. In other words, be gracious to yourself as you write your graced history. There are no instructions to be followed perfectly. You are simply being invited to take time with God and open your heart and then express what comes in the experience as a way to consolidate it and savor it. Be aware as well that we will read our graced histories to each other over the next several months. Lastly, do not write more than 5 pages for this paper.

Session 7 – Habit 4: Surrender to God’s Transformation

Prayer of Discipleship

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SCRIPTURE MEDITATION: Read Ephesians 3:14-24.

“As you heard this text read what was running through your mind?”

“Describe a time when Christ’s love became more than a concept to you.”

Transformation

Read Ephesians 4 and Colossians 3, creating 2 lists: “Life Rooted in Selfishness/Sin” and “Life Rooted in Christ”. How do each of these passages describe each way of life?

Life Rooted in Selfishness/Sin

Life Rooted in Christ

When you look at these two lists, what stands out to you? Describe changes in your life where you have experienced transformation - from being rooted in self/sin to being rooted in Christ. As we pay attention to Jesus, His Word, the Holy Spirit, we may find ourselves discerning “**one thing**” that God longs to change in us. Is there a character trait or issue that you sense Jesus is transforming in your life?

Spiritual Growth can develop in three ways.

1) Spiritual growth in Jesus begins with a **radical and daily abandonment to Jesus in love**, believing that acceptance of his love and obedience to him is the best way to live. *Why is knowing God's transforming love so important as the first step on the journey of change?*

2) Spiritual growth is **sustained by a prayerful intention to depend on Jesus**, who by his Spirit does the changing of our hearts and lives. We are not responsible for our own transformation. We have a part to play to be sure, but it's more making ourselves available to Jesus through spiritual practices that nurture connection to his transforming love than sheer effort on our part.

3) Spiritual growth **takes place most readily among a prayerful and supportive community of disciples**, who can help us discern the "one thing" that Jesus is working on in our lives. *How open are you to letting others support you on the journey of transformation?*

HOMEWORK:

- 1) Continue spiritual habits of prayer and Bible reading.
- 2) Spend time thinking about your spiritual growth, the transformation taking place in your life. As you look at the 3 ways growth takes place, *Which part of spiritual transformation do you feel you are making progress on? What part is a challenge? What may be missing from this list?*
- 3) Identify the "one thing" Jesus is working on in your life. *How are you experiencing a shift or change in thinking/perspective/actions? How can your small group support you in this area of growth?*

Final Blessing - As we go from this place know that Jesus is always with us. He who is life and love itself embraces us in love, empowers us to overcome, fills us with hope and peace, and sends us into the world to live as ambassadors of the kingdom of God. Amen.

Session 8 – Habit 5: Serving God

Prayer of Discipleship

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SCRIPTURE MEDITATION: Read Luke 10:1-24

“As you heard this text read what was running through your mind?”

There are several themes but two we want you to never forget - We are **sent**. We are to **announce to people that the Kingdom of God** has come near.

HOMEWORK:

In the rhythm of your life - of prayer, Scripture reading, leaning on others, allowing Jesus to transform your life, consider how you might BLESS the world in Jesus' name.

- 1) Begin with Prayer - who are you praying for? How can your small group also pray for them?
- 2) Listen with Care - what helpful ways can you enter into relationship with people who are lonely, hurting, marginalized?
- 3) Eat - is there someone you'd like to invite to your home to eat this week?
- 4) Serve - is there a specific way you might meet a need of someone you encounter on a regular basis? What might that look like?
- 5) Share your story - as you think about how Jesus is at work in your life, is there a way your story of transformation could encourage, bring hope, shed light in someone else's life?

Final Blessing - As we go from this place know that Jesus is always with us. He who is life and love itself embraces us in love, empowers us to overcome, fills us with hope and peace, and sends us into the world to live as ambassadors of the kingdom of God. Amen.