

If Jesus Led Your Small Group

GroupWords

What would it be like to be a part of a small group meeting led by Jesus? Until recently, I never presumed that it would be possible to answer that question with any kind of authority. Then I realized the upper room discourse in John 13-17 might provide a clue. As I read through these chapters, it struck me that I was listening in on what in essence was a small group meeting, and the leader was none other than Jesus himself! Consider what we learn in the upper room from Jesus, the quintessential small-group leader.

PREPARATION

Jesus intentionally prepared for uninterrupted time with his small group. This meeting wasn't just thrown together; it wasn't a spontaneous affair. Sensing the need to be alone with the twelve, Jesus chose a special room in which they could meet. He gave careful instructions as to the preparation for their time together (Luke 22:10-12). Things like food and furnishings were important. Providing a place that was private and conducive to intimacy was important.

Jesus teaches us that small groups don't happen by accident; they require intentionality. Will the place we meet provide an atmosphere that is conducive to intimacy? How will phone calls be handled during the meeting? What about children? An effective leader will carefully think through these details.

MODELING

Jesus modeled what he taught. For example, he desired his disciples to be people who served one another in genuine humility, so he washed their feet in a display of divine meekness. He also desired that they be people of prayer, so he fervently prayed to the Father in dependence and gratitude. No doubt, these vivid messages left an indelible print on the disciples' minds. One authentic act of righteousness displayed before the group is worth a thousand lectures.

TIME FOR QUESTIONS

Jesus allowed room for questions. Most of what Jesus taught in the upper room was in response to questions that the disciples asked. The upper room discourse was, in fact, a dialogue. Jesus didn't rebuke his small group for asking what may have seemed to him to be "dumb questions." Though his answers were often very different from what his group expected to hear, he always responded patiently and thoughtfully. Successful small groups are ones in which many questions are asked by the group as well as the leader. Fielding questions is as much of an art as asking them.

A SAFE ATMOSPHERE

Jesus created an atmosphere in which his group was free to fail. On two occasions in the upper room, Jesus told his disciples that they would soon fail him (John 13:38, John 16:32). Though initially they protested these predictions, Jesus was in fact doing his disciples a great

favor. Later, they would remember he made these predictions right alongside promises of his continued presence and committed love. This combination of personal failure and committed love would come to be the raw material for an entirely new understanding of their self-worth and adequacy for ministry — one rooted not in their own performance but in God's love and sufficiency.

Effective small group leaders will prepare their groups to confront the reality of their own sin. They will provide a context within which people in their groups can fail in their spiritual journey and still survive emotionally because they know they are loved.

MUTUAL FRIENDSHIP

Jesus led from a position of mutual friendship rather than authority. While in the upper room, Jesus said to his disciples, "I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my father I have made known to you" (John 15:15). As a small group leader, Jesus treated the people in his group like friends by sharing all that he knew with them. Rather than give orders he expected them to obey without explanation, he chose to lead as a friend, through loving dialogue.

FLEXIBILITY

Jesus could change his agenda in order to meet the needs of his group. Jesus recognized the overwhelming grief that the disciples were feeling because of his announced departure: "I am going to him who sent me, yet none of you asks me, 'where are you going?' because I have said these things, you are filled with grief" (John 16:5). As a result of their emotional condition, Jesus recognized their inability to benefit from much of what he wanted to say: "I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear" (John 16:12). Jesus had a wonderful bible study planned. He knew that if only they could grasp the truth of what he had to say, much of their grief would be gone. But he held off. In essence, what he said was, "Let's hold off on the study right now. I can see that you are really hurting and won't get much out of it anyway. Let's deal with what you are feeling before we do anything else."

Effective small group leaders are aware of the emotional pulse of their group. They are willing to change their agenda in order to deal with pressing needs and feelings.

As leaders, we would do well to follow Jesus' example, with just one qualification: We must remember that we are not Jesus. There are certain things He did for His group that we can't do for ours. Jesus said to the disciples, "Where I am going, you cannot come" (John 13:33). Nobody could follow Jesus to that place, because no one else could be the world's Savior. While striving to follow His example in every other respect, in this we would do well to simply point our group to Him.

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