

Good & Beautiful & Kind

Introduction & Chapter 1: A Failure To Love

A quick note before we begin...in the back of the book there is a guide for reflection and discussion. Please feel free to utilize that as you see fit. That, along with this study guide, will provide you with way more questions than you could possibly use in a given session. Simply choose the few questions that you think will provoke the best discussion for your group. (And always feel free to come up with your own questions.)

We have chosen this book to be the capstone to our year of Joy & Justice because it speaks to the journey toward joy and justice, which is both an individual and a communal journey. And it speaks to the wholeness we desire, and that we're called to contribute to. We hope you enjoy this book as much as we do.

Introduction

"The fractures within and around us don't feel right because our souls desire bonds of belonging and belovedness." (page xvi)

"To understand and respond to the moment we are in requires us to ask ourselves a few questions:

- *How do we find wholeness?*
- *How do we love well?*
- *What are the forces behind the fractures?*
- *What kind of spiritual formation do we need to embody?*
- *In sum, what does it mean to have our lives formed by God's love?"* (page xvi)

These aren't theoretical questions. These are deeply practical, but will also need to be deeply personal, in order for us to make any progress. To find suitable answers we're going to need to *"...rediscover the ancient path of Jesus."* (page xvii)

I appreciate Rich's realism as he wraps up the introduction that change, transformation, and specifically growth in love/Christlikeness is a slow process, *"There are no shortcuts to love."* (page xix) Thus, we need to be patient and gracious with ourselves and others in this process of becoming whole.

"The best kind of transformation happens in community." (page xix) Oh, Rich, you're speaking my language!

- *How have you, or how are you, experiencing some of the fracturedness of the world? Or, what is fractured in your little piece of the world, your life?*
- *In this book Rich presumes that we all have a longing for goodness, beauty, and kindness (all manifestations/expressions of love). How have you, or how are you, experiencing that longing?*

- *Who are your “companions on the journey”? Or, who are your “spiritual friends”? (i.e. who are you intentionally pursuing, training in, Christlikeness with?*

Chapter 1 ~ A Failure To Love

“At its core, sin is a failure to love. It’s a power that ‘curves us inward’...humanity is incurvatus in se, curved in on itself.” (page 3)

The logic is pretty simple. The greatest command is to Love (God & others...notice the outward orientation). To not keep that command—to not love—is sin...to turn in on ourselves.

Unfortunately, it’s easy for love to get sidelined. So much so, that generally speaking, Love, in light of Christ, is the theme/point of all the New Testament epistles...though, as Rich points out, First Corinthians is especially pointed toward Love (of God and others). Love is our proper response to who Christ is and what He has done. Paul needed to correct/rebuke the Corinthians for having sidelined love.

“If love is the greatest good, sin must be the antithesis of it. Sin is not just a violation of a law, it’s the disruption of love.” (page 5)

Losing, or discarding, the concept and language of sin doesn’t make sin go away. It’s still present, and still needs to be accounted for, and ideally repented from. Or to think of it another way, as much as we tout love, we have to be able to explain why we fall short so often.

- *What keeps you from loving well? How do you feel about calling that “sin”?*
- *Rich makes the case that we need to have an intimate, accurate understanding of both love and sin. Are you convinced? Elaborate*
- *How have you seen sin (or the concept of sin) used to control and coerce, or as a prop/tool for the powerful and privileged?*
- *How does understanding sin as the negation of love affect your understanding of it?*

Spiritual vitality, spiritual maturity, isn’t measured by sin-avoidance, nor by religious performance...but measured by love, *“...love for God expressed in love for neighbor.”* (page 8) Just as a reminder, love is not primarily a feeling, but a commitment, a decision of the will, to do what is in the best interest of another.

Rich rightly warns against reducing the Christian life to moralism (sin-avoidance) because it *“...robs us from enjoying God and self-righteously places us above others.”* (page 9) I can relate to this. My parents and I all became Christians at the same time (late 1970’s...I was about 8). In their new-found faith, they became highly moralistic, and that was how they expressed their faith...and how they raised me. While my parents had many great qualities, the way they

represented their faith was insufferable. It was something I had to deconstruct and untangle myself from over the years.

- *What place has sin-avoidance played in your life? What has been the result?*

Rich draws the distinction between turning inward for examination in tandem with God's grace, "...for the sake of self-awareness, confession, and ultimately love" versus curving in on ourselves with the result of making ourselves the central reference point that focuses on "...our comfort, security, fear, desire, and personal perspective...leaving little room for God or anyone else." (page 11)

Perhaps an easy and helpful way to think about all this is...

- Love = Kenosis (Greek for self-emptying)
- Sin = Incurvatus in se (Latin for curving in on ourselves)

Rich offers some key examples of turning in on ourselves/sin from the early chapters of Genesis...

- Turning inward through grasping-taking what is wanted (Adam & Eve)
 - Turning inward through envy, jealousy, comparison, coveting (Cain & Abel)
 - Turning inward through exclusionism-uniformity enforced by systems, structures, hierarchies that privilege some and oppress others. (The Tower of Babel)
- *Trusting God and giving thanks for what we have quickly came to mind as what is needed to help us from turning in on ourselves. How might we cultivate trust and thanks in our lives? What else can you think of that might help us not turn in on ourselves? What other factors, beyond what Rich has described, can you think of that cause us to turn in on ourselves?*

The zero-sum game that Rich describes—for me to win, you must lose, or for you to win, I must lose—is sadly a false narrative our world falls for all the time. It undercuts the way of love. Conversely, love will help us see through the lie.

- *How do you see the Zero-sum game playing out in our world?*

"The gospel is the good news that God's kingdom has come near in Jesus Christ, and through His life, death, resurrection, and enthronement, the powers of sin and death no longer have the last word." (page 20) Friends, please memorize this and meditate upon this. The whole paragraph that this begins is a sound succinct summary of bedrock theology to build upon. We need to know and understand this!

- *Who do you have in your life with whom you can confess?*
- *Do you feel drawn to, or resistant to, the practice of confession? Why is that?*
- *What do you think/feel about confession being a regular part of a worship service?*

Soul Training Exercise ~ Confession

“Followers of Christ establish our moral credibility in the world by routinely and fearlessly confessing and repenting of sin. And we lose our credibility by refusing to name our sins. This is the paradox of faith. To confess our sins doesn’t mean obsessing over our mistakes. To confess our sins—especially together in community—is an act of solidarity. It’s a practice reminding us that we are all on equal footing, all in need of grace; that we all have sinned and have been sinned against; that we are in the same broken family.” (page 21)

Confession cultivates humility which is absolutely necessary to keep us from turning in on ourselves. There’s a couple of different ways we can practice this.

We can regularly (daily) say a prayer of confession, such as...

“Most merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against You in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone. We have not loved You with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We are truly sorry and we humbly repent. For the sake of Your Son Jesus Christ, have mercy on us and forgive us; that we may delight in Your will, and walk in Your ways, to the glory of Your name. Amen”

(Of course, I would recommend not just saying that rotely but also to reflect on and name specific ways in which we have sinned...or not loved. If you prefer, you can change “we” to “I”)

Or, we can regularly meet with a trusted friend or two and make it a habit of confessing to one another. Personally, I have found this to be a particularly powerful and formative practice. It breaks down the temptation to hide, to manage our image, and allows us to be truly known...and truly accepted.

****Note to Table Group Leaders: I’d recommend giving a little time in your group meetings to debrief on the previous week’s Soul Training Exercise, allowing anyone who would like to share what their experience of the exercise was like.****