

THE GOSPEL-CENTERED COMMUNITY

LESSON 7 — AN HONEST COMMUNITY

BIG IDEA

Real, authentic community means being known “as we really are.” But most of us are worried that others would not accept us or like us if they really knew us. So instead of letting our true selves be known, we hide behind a false self. We put forward a good image. We pretend. This sort of “image management,” though it seems innocuous, is actually deeply wicked. It’s a subtle form of dishonesty, manipulation, and lying. The apostle John urges us to turn from this darkness, this denial of truth, and “walk in the light” instead. To do that, we need to turn again to what the gospel has to say about who we are. The gospel assures us that God fully approves of us and accepts us in Christ, despite our weaknesses and sins. The more we truly believe this, the more we are freed from slavery to the approval or disapproval of others. We can walk in the light, confident in our identity in Christ, free to be known as we really are and to love others as they really are.

NOTES:



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LESSON 7 ARTICLE — AN HONEST COMMUNITY

What is the single most important component of any healthy relationship?

Maybe your initial answer to this question is something like love, trust, or selflessness. But let us suggest an answer that is even deeper and more foundational than any of those: truth.

Relationships simply cannot exist without honesty. As soon as I'm dishonest—untruthful—with you, I begin to unravel the sacred bonds of relationship. The starkest examples of this are painfully clear to us: a cheating spouse, an embezzling CEO, a friend who betrays a confidence.

In comparison to these dire examples, we often convince ourselves that we're pretty truthful. But in reality, the fall has made us all liars. We don't want people to know us as we really are. We want to appear a certain way—to be known as a certain kind of person. So we put forth an "image," a public face. Author Brennan Manning refers to this as "the Impostor:"

The impostor is the classic codependent. To gain acceptance and approval, the false self suppresses or camouflages feelings, making emotional honesty impossible. [We] present a perfect image to the public so that everybody will admire us and nobody will know us. . . . The impostor prompts us to attach importance to what has no importance, clothing with a false glitter what is least substantial and turning us away from what is real. The false self causes us to live in a world of delusion. The impostor is a liar.¹

Christians are skilled at playing the impostor. It's exactly what Adam and Eve did in the garden of Eden. When God created them, they were "naked and were not ashamed" (Genesis 2:25). But once they sinned, they began to hide. They became aware of their nakedness and "sewed fig leaves together" (Genesis 3:7). Rather than being fully transparent, they were ashamed and began to withhold things from each other and from God. And we've been doing the same thing ever since.

This is the reason Christian community is often shallow and stagnant. The apostle John calls it "walking in darkness." And his remedy is truth— or, as he puts it, "walking in the light":

God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:5–9)

¹ Brennan Manning, *Abba's Child* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2002), 31.



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If we walk in the light, as God is in the light, we have fellowship with one another. We have true community. We have real relationship. We're finished pretending, hiding, covering up. You know the real me and I know the real you. And that's a good recipe for true friendship.

But *how* can we consistently walk in the light? What gives us the freedom to live in honesty and truth with one another? It's the gospel. It's faith working through love. It's "the blood of Jesus cleansing us from all sin." Only when we've really come to Jesus in repentance and faith will we experience the kind of honest community we long for. Because only in Jesus is our struggle for righteousness and identity resolved.

Pause and ask yourself another question: What's the worst thing someone could possibly know about you?

Now, what if everyone in your church community knew that? What would you stand to lose? What you'd probably lose is (1) their approval and (2) your sense of righteousness. They would know the real truth about you (and perhaps not approve of you)! And you would have to admit the truth about yourself (you couldn't pretend to be "righteous" anymore)! In other words, walking in the light would directly confront your thirst for approval and your unwarranted self-righteousness. The reason you avoid honesty is because you're still striving to maintain your own identity and construct your own righteousness.

Here's another way to say the same thing: Dishonesty is rooted in unbelief. It's a gospel issue. When I'm not resting in the identity and righteousness I have in Christ, I'll be tempted to "save face" or keep up appearances. I'll want to make sure people have a certain impression of me.

But the gospel frees us from this! The good news of the gospel is that your identity is in Christ, not in what people think of you. And your righteousness comes from Christ, not your good behavior (or good reputation). You don't have to keep up appearances. You don't have to manage your image. You don't have to save face. Jesus gives you a new identity and a righteousness you did not possess or earn on your own. They are yours by grace. You can rest in the identity and righteousness that Jesus provides. And so you can freely walk in the light with the people around you. You no longer need to sew together fig leaves; God himself has clothed you in the righteousness of his Son. "I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my soul shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness" (Isaiah 61:10).

A community where the truth of the gospel is deeply believed, reflected on, and talked about will be a community of healthy, transformative honesty. It will be a community where people increasingly find their identity in Christ and not in the approval of others; a community where self-righteousness gives way to faith-righteousness; a community where people are loved as they really are but loved too much to let them stay that way. It will be a community of radical grace, generous hospitality, and joyful humility. It will be a community of light, truth, goodness and beauty, where the glory of God is on display to the world.

Isn't that the kind of community you want? It all starts with you and me walking in the light.



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LESSON 7 EXERCISE — SPEAKING THE TRUTH IN LOVE

There are two aspects to being honest with people: Telling the truth about ourselves and telling the truth about others. Both are necessary if we want true relationship. But we all know that truth-telling, by itself, can be selfish and hurtful. That is why Paul says that “speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way . . .” (Ephesians 4:15). To love people is to will their good, so our truth-telling must have that aim. This verse holds together all the tension surrounding the issue of honesty. It doesn’t let us sweep things under the rug, but neither does it let us vent our thoughts and feelings on anyone and everyone around us. We must speak the truth and we must do it for the purpose of building others up in love.

This exercise is designed to help us grow in telling the truth about ourselves and others. We want to uncover the unbelief and idolatry underneath our dishonesty, consider how the truths of the gospel apply, and see how looking to Jesus frees us to walk in the light and be honest, both as individuals and as a community.

TELLING THE TRUTH ABOUT OURSELVES

1. Think of something you would not want people to know about you.

Just asking the question probably brings something to mind right away. If not, take a minute to ask God to bring something to mind.

We’re not going to ask you to tell the group what it is, but the rest of the exercise assumes you have something in mind.

2. Identify the idol: Now ask yourself: Why do you want to keep that hidden? Below are some possible answers to that question. Mark the one that most represents why you would not want to tell people the thing you have in mind:

- If people knew the whole truth about me, they probably wouldn’t like me (approval).
- If people knew the whole truth about me, who knows how they’d react? I wouldn’t be able to control their opinion of me (control/manipulation).
- If people knew the whole truth about me, I might lose standing or respect in their eyes (respect).
- If people knew the whole truth about me ,who knows what they’d do with that information? They could tell others (reputation).

3. Look to Jesus: How did Jesus triumph over this idol? How do we see, in his life, death, and resurrection, a refusal to live for these things? And how is what he gives us far better?

4. Believe the gospel: What truths about God or about your new identity in Christ aren't you believing? How does resting in the good news of the gospel free you to be honest about yourself?



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SPEAKING THE TRUTH TO OTHERS

There are certainly good reasons not to say everything we think about others. However, our failure to speak truth to others often reflects a lack of love. Rather than caring about the other person, we're more worried about how he or she might react.

1. Consider the following hypothetical scenarios:

- In your small group, someone shares a viewpoint that doesn't line up with what is really true or good. Instead of challenging the opinion or engaging the person in further conversation, you (and the rest of the group) "let it go."
- A single woman is asked on a date by a guy she's not really interested in. Instead of just telling him the truth, she finds some other reason to say no.
- Someone in your small group is sarcastic with everyone. His sarcasm keeps him from having any really meaningful conversations, and it often hurts or offends people. Instead of saying something, you (and the rest of the group) avoid confrontation, and the pattern continues.

2. Identify the idol: In facing these scenarios or others like them, what do you find yourself thinking?

- "They probably have enough to think about. I don't want to add more to their plate" (approval).
- "I'm not sure he can handle the truth. It's probably more loving to be polite or just let it go" (control/manipulation).
- "I don't want to have to explain myself, sort out misunderstandings, or get into a debate" (comfort).
- "I don't want to be the guy who's always creating conflict" (reputation).

3. Look to Jesus: Again, how did Jesus triumph over this idol? How do we see, in his life, death, and resurrection, a refusal to live for these things? And how is what he gives us far better?

4. Believe the gospel: What truths about God or about your new identity in Christ aren't you believing? How does resting in your identity in Christ confront your idolatry and free you to speak the truth in love to others?



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An example, using the surface sin of not speaking the truth about ourselves:

(1) Identify the idol (sin beneath the sin)	(2) Look to Jesus	(3) Believe the Gospel
I fear that people won't like me. I want their approval more than I want to be honest.	Jesus did not seek the approval of men but rested in the words of his Father: "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased."	God knows everything about me and still loves me. I have been justified by faith in Jesus. I can be honest about my sin because I do not need the approval of others to prove myself.
I don't know how people will react to the real me. I want to control/manipulate their view of me more than I want to be honest.	Jesus is the image of the invisible God. In his very existence, he is personal revelation. He did not manipulate or control public opinion. He spoke the truth concerning himself and was, in fact, killed for it.	God is in control. Even if people seek to harm me, God takes what others intend for harm and works it for my good. I am free to be honest about myself and to trust God no matter how people respond.
I want to be respected by others more than I want to be honest with them.	Jesus laid aside his right to be respected, humbling himself to the point of death.	I am not respectable in God's eyes, but God sent Jesus to die for the ungodly. My worth is not based on my performance, but on the fact that I am a son/daughter of God.
I fear that people will tell others about my sin and ruin my reputation. I want to protect my reputation more than I want to be honest.	Jesus was sinless and people still sought to ruin his reputation. He did not defend himself but rather entrusted himself to God. He was more concerned with God's glory than his reputation.	The gospel makes me an ambassador for God and his kingdom. My primary concern, therefore, is his reputation and not mine. When I am mistreated by others, my humility and forgiving spirit put the gospel on display to those around me.

