

INTRODUCTION

We all put on acts.

We try to convince everyone that we have it all together:

- successful careers;
- strong, satisfying marriages;
- well-behaved children;
- crystal-clear consciences.

We go to extremes to create and protect the fake versions of ourselves that we present to the world. We buy cars and houses we can't afford. We suffer unsatisfying careers that happen to pay the bills. We hide our marital struggles instead of seeking help.

We keep secrets.

Have you ever had a raging argument in the car on the way to church with your spouse, children, boyfriend, or girlfriend, only to force smiles as you step into the building and make your way through the crowd? Most of us have.

BUT ISN'T THERE SOMETHING IN YOU—SOMETHING IN EACH OF US—THAT MAKES YOU WANT TO BE KNOWN FOR WHO YOU REALLY ARE?

When we present false images to the people around us, we feel **TENSION**. We feel like phonies, hypocrites. And at the deepest level, we know that's no way to live. We long for who we are in public to be the same as who we are behind closed doors.

A life in which there's only one version of us, no matter who we're around, sounds simple, pure, and magnetically attractive.

But it also feels unattainable. Even if we want to shed our false selves, there's a sense that a certain level of hypocrisy is part of being polite. We're not just fake because we want to look good. We're fake because we believe that no one really wants to hear our problems or deal with the ugly parts of our lives.

But what if there was a way to put aside the false images and just be you?

WEEKLY READING: COMMUNITY WITH INSIDERS

Jesus designed Christian community to be the place we find wholeness, a congruency between who we are in public and who we are in private. He wants us to live together honestly and transparently. Not so we can be resigned to our brokenness, but so that we can begin to grow out of it, becoming more and more like him.

Jesus wants us to live abundantly. In **John 10:10**, he says, *“The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.”* He didn’t come to take from us or to harm us. He came to release us from sin so we could connect with God and to show us how to live meaningfully in community with one another. A full, free life begins with a trusting relationship with God and expands outward into trusting relationships with other people.

Scripture describes the kind of community Jesus wants us to build with one another:

Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.

Romans 15:7

Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters.

Romans 14:1

Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. If anyone thinks they are something when they are not, they deceive themselves.

Galatians 6:2–3

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.

Hebrews 10:24

Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.

James 5:16

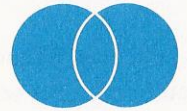
These passages describe a community that is inclusive, accepting those who are exploring faith, not treating them as though they have to figure everything out and clean up their lives before they’re invited inside. It’s a community in which people can be themselves and depend on one another. It’s a community in which we don’t stand in judgment of one another’s flaws, but call one another to become our better selves—people who love and give to others.

Just like our relationship with God, our relationships with one another must be built on trust. And the ingredients for that trust are time and transparency.



TIME

To build the kind of community we desire for you, you’ll need to spend time together—some of it structured around growing in your relationship with God and some of it casual and unstructured. Sometimes you need to just hang out with no agenda other than enjoying the company.



TRANSPARENCY

In Christian community, we share ourselves. Maybe not all the time and maybe not all at once, but this is the goal: to be real in every relationship and to actively build a few relationships in which nothing is held back.

We all struggle with sin and its effects. Bringing our struggles out into the light is the only way we become free from them. We do that by allowing ourselves to truly know and be known by others.

The idea of trusting other people with our true selves is scary because they might reject or condemn us. But think about it: if someone in this room opened up to you, would you reject or condemn him or her or would you offer support and be more inclined to be honest about who you are in return? If you’d respond with compassion, why assume the worst about others?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Who was your best friend in childhood? What was it about that person that caused you to connect with him or her?
2. In what ways do people present exaggerated images of themselves to the world? What harm can these exaggerations cause?
3. Have you ever judged someone based on a first impression only to change your mind when you heard more of that person's story? What was it about hearing his or her story that changed your mind?

4. How do you feel about telling your story in this group?
5. If you were open and transparent in telling your story, how do you think it might change your relationships with the people in this group?
6. What are some things that could make this group safe enough for you to be open and transparent?

MOVING FORWARD

Trusting other people requires us to be honest with ourselves about who we are and to be bold enough to talk about it. That's not easy. But the goal of this community you're beginning to form is to grow to trust one another in ways outside your normal comfort zones. That won't happen overnight. It won't even happen by the time you're finished with this eight-week study. But it *can* happen and it begins with getting to know one another.

Over the next few sessions, you'll tell your stories. Before you end this session, spend some time setting up a schedule so everyone knows during which session he or she will be sharing. Depending on the size and makeup of your group, arrange for two or three individuals or couples to tell their stories each week (if you're a group of married couples, spouses should tell their stories together). Your leader or leaders will go first next session. One or two others should share as well.

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.
Hebrews 10:24



It is God's love for us that He not only gives us His Word but lends us His ear.
So it is His work that we do for our brother when we learn to listen to him.

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