

SESSION THREE

Knowing and Being Known

Reading adapted from a message by John Ortberg

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e want to be known, but we want to hide. A friend of mine wrote of a recent experience:

We shook hands warmly before leaving the restaurant. I had a great time meeting with this man. A true brotherhood was developing. That's why what he said was so shocking.

"I'm really enjoying getting to know you," he said. I smiled my approval. Then he added, "It's been especially good to see your human side."

My "human side"? Just what else was there to see?

He left before my bewilderment could blossom into more conversation. But for days to come, I kept returning to that phrase, "It's been especially good to see your human side."

His words stung. They made me face the truth about my "fence"—the impressions I hide behind. It's an internal electrified barrier energized by the 10,000-volt certainty that I need this protection.

If people see the untamed part of me, I'm sure I'll be rejected.

And yet my friend was glad to see the power turned off and the gate opened a bit. He actually preferred my rough-edged humanity. All that work to construct a secure enclosure, yet when I let him inside, he didn't reject me. With the barrier down, I moved toward the very friendship I thought only the barrier made possible.

Go figure.

Why We Hide

I'd like to say that I can't identify with my friend, but I can—more than I want to admit. We live in a world where image projection and impression management is the rule of thumb, and it gets inside everyone of us. I know that as a teacher I want to be honest and open, but there is such a strong tendency to hide and to want to look better than I am. This truth about me comes out in unguarded moments.

Several years ago I was with one of my kids in Wisconsin. We were at a store and this particular child kept pestering me for a toy. Finally, my anger boiled over. "No, I'm not going to get you that toy. I'm not going to get it for you today. I'm not going to get it for you tomorrow. I'm not going to get it next month or next year. I am *never* going to get it for you! Do you understand? *When you're seventy and I'm a hundred years old, I'm still*

not going to get it for you!"

Just that moment the clerk looked at me and said, "You look awfully familiar. Do you teach at Willow Creek Community Church?"

I said, "Yes, my name is Bill Hybels." I didn't really say that, but I wanted to. I wanted to hide. It was awful.

The High Cost of Hiding

We'll never fully experience community or significant transformation until we begin to acknowledge to others the truth about ourselves. Ironically, churches are often the last place this happens. Consider these words from Richard Foster's book *Celebration of Discipline*:

Confession is so difficult a Discipline for us partly because we view the believing community as a fellowship of saints before we see it as a fellowship of sinners. We come to feel that everyone else has advanced so far into holiness that we are isolated and alone in our sin. ... We imagine that we are the only ones who have not stepped onto the high road to heaven. Therefore we hide ourselves from one another and live in veiled lies and hypocrisy.

...

There is a high cost to hiding. If I hide, my relationships become stagnant. If I hide, others are likely to hide too. If I hide, I can never know I'm loved unconditionally. If I hide, sin wins. If I hide, I lose the help I might receive for secret struggles and hurts.

God's Plan for Community

God says an amazing thing: "In my community, there should be no more hiding, no more masks. My community is just people—every one of whom struggles with sin and does stupid things and says foolish things and then comes to me and confesses, gets back up, moves forward and then fouls up again. People don't have to pretend they're something they're not. I intend for people to live in the light."

James says it this way: "Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed" (James 5:16). James is talking about living in authentic, open community. Confession involves acknowledging the truth about my life—the negative as well as the positive—to God, to myself, and, in appropriate ways, to brothers and sisters in the body.

Humanity is no longer denied but transformed through community. That is God's plan. Every time there is a great movement of God throughout the history of the church, one of the things that happens is that people get serious about this business of confession and they acknowledge to God, to themselves, and to other people the truth about their lives. There is enormous power when we come into the light.

Step by Step

In true community, self-disclosure can't be forced. It can't and shouldn't be manipulated or

pressured so that people say things in inappropriate settings or ways. “Confess your sins to one another” does not mean you reveal all of your sins to everyone in the church—probably not even to everyone in your small group. A realistic goal would be to move progressively toward the establishment of one or two relationships in which you can talk about everything in your life.

In pursuit of that goal, there is a natural progression that healthy relationships tend to follow. At the first level, conversation remains pretty safe. It might include discussing ordinary events such as work and recreation, topics we tend to agree on.

At level two things begin to get deeper. We begin to express strong opinions and significant feelings. We risk disagreeing with each other.

The third level encompasses our deeper secrets, struggles, and temptations even though we have not overcome them yet. It is at this level we feel secure enough in the relationship to reveal shame and guilt from our past. We are open about dreams and failures.

Self-disclosure, especially at level three, must be done wisely and with discernment. It is generally not smart to plunge into it all at once. Trust must be established over time. Take a relatively small risk and see how the person responds. Gradually open the door. As a general rule, the deeper the level of brokenness that you intend to share, the more you need to be sure that the one you tell is a mature believer who you know and

trust deeply. This person should be a supportive person—someone who empathizes with your situation and who will appropriately honor confidentiality.

It's Up to You

It's possible for people to attend the same church—even the same small group—sit in the same chair, nod to the same people, talk about sports, the weather, or even the Bible month after month, year after year, without anyone ever knowing them. Nobody knows their hopes, their fears. Nobody knows their marriage is crumbling, their heart is breaking. Nobody knows they are involved in a secret pattern of sin that is destroying their soul. This is not God's plan. It's a mockery of community.

Ultimately, only you can decide if you are going to come out of hiding. You don't *have* to do it. Nobody will force you to do it. You can maintain your reputation. You can cultivate your impression management. You can protect your status. Or you can come into the light. You can know and be known. You can move toward healing and transformation. You can know the kind of community that can only happen among forgiven sinners.

It's up to you.

