



GOING DEEPER

DISCUSSION GUIDE

January 29, 2017

Discussion Guide

THE GIFT OF BEING ORDINARY

CONNECTING:

45 MINUTES

(THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS ARE INTENDED TO PROVIDE YOUR GROUP WITH A WAY OF CONNECTING WITH ONE ANOTHER SO THAT YOU MIGHT PARTNER IN THE WORK GOD IS DOING IN YOUR LIVES.)

- IN WHAT WAYS DID GOD MOVE IN YOUR LIFE THIS WEEK? IN WHAT WAYS DID YOU RESPOND TO HIM?
- WHAT WAS YOUR BIGGEST CHALLENGE THIS WEEK? IN WHAT WAYS, IF ANY, DID YOU INVITE GOD INTO THIS CHALLENGE?
- HOW HONEST HAVE YOU BEEN WITH US? (GRACIOUSLY THANK GROUP MEMBERS FOR THEIR HONESTY IF THEY STATE THEY HAVE HELD BACK.)

GETTING STARTED:

10 MINUTES

- DO EVER FEEL THAT YOU NEED TO BE THE BEST AT SOMETHING OR ON SOME SCALE? WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU ARE NOT THE BEST? COULD YOU ELABORATE?

DIVING INTO THE TEXT:

60 MINUTES

(THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS ARE INTENDED TO PROVIDE YOUR GROUP WITH A SIMPLE ROAD MAP THROUGH THE TEXT. FEEL FREE TO USE THESE QUESTIONS IN WAYS THAT BEST FIT YOUR GROUP AND THE DYNAMICS OF YOUR OWN MEETING.)

- USING THE NOTES, DISCUSS AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM AND HOW THIS ETHOS HAS BEEN PERSONALIZED CULTURALLY.
- READ PHILIPPIANS 2.1-11 ALOUD. PAUSE. READ THE TEXT ONCE MORE. SEEK TO HEAR THE TEXT AS SOMEONE IN A CONGREGATION IN WHICH THERE ARE ONGOING STRUGGLES AMONG PEOPLE TO BE ON THE TOP.
- AS YOU READ THE TEXT, IN WHAT WAYS DOES PAUL STATE THAT MOVING DOWNWARD IS PART OF THE LIFE GOD'S PEOPLE ARE MEANT TO LIVE?
- DO YOU THINK THAT MOST PEOPLE SEEK TO MOVE DOWNWARD IN RELATION TO OTHERS? COULD YOU EXPLAIN? WHAT ROLE, IF ANY, MIGHT SHAME HAVE IN THIS RESPONSE?
- READ PHILIPPIANS 2.5-8. IN THESE VERSES, PAUL DESCRIBES THE LIFE OF JESUS WHICH HIS FOLLOWERS ARE TO IMITATE. WHAT MIGHT IT LOOK LIKE TO LIVE LIKE THIS TODAY? WHAT, IF ANYTHING, MIGHT MAKE THIS MANNER OF LIFE DIFFICULT?
- IT HAS BEEN ARGUED THAT LIVING THE UPWARD NARRATIVE OF OUR PERSONALIZED ETHOS OF AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM NOT ONLY DEPRIVES US OF THE COMMUNITY FOR WHICH WE WERE MADE BUT ALSO OF THE PURPOSE FOR WHICH WE WERE CREATED. HOW MIGHT THIS BE THE CASE?
- WHAT MIGHT IT TAKE TO LIVE DOWNWARDLY AS PAUL DESCRIBES? WHAT MIGHT BE THE ROLE OF SCRIPTURAL

CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM

The concept of American exceptionalism is the idea that America is an exceptional nation, and that it must maintain this exceptional status within the larger global community. This broad concept itself consists of three interrelated ideas. First, by its history, the United States is inherently different from all other nations in its revolutionary roots and the Protestant religious culture which influenced its founding. Second, because America is different, it has the unique mission to transform the world, sharing its uniqueness with the global community. Third, because of its unique history and special mission, the United States has inherent superiority over other nations.

The concept of American exceptionalism can be traced back to the French political scientist Alexis de Tocqueville, who was the first to describe America as an exceptional nation. Most American historians have followed his lead noting that America is different from the rest of the world for numerous reasons such as history, culture, political institutions, and geographical scope. This same reasoning also appears in the rhetoric American political leadership. For instance, in his 2015 book entitled, *Exceptional: Why the World Needs a Powerful America*, former Vice President Dick Cheney argues strongly for American exceptionalism and its constant pursuit, and in his Sept 10, 2013 speech, Former President Barak Obama used the concept of American exceptionalism to support American military involvement in the Syrian crisis. In recent years, as America has been involved in costly military conflicts and the rapid evolution of the global landscape with the rise of China, the concept of American exceptionalism has been challenged globally, and America has struggled to define its exceptional place once more on the world stage. One might hear echoes of American exceptionalism in now President Donald Trump's "Make America Great Again" rally cry, though a new form of this concept seems to be emerging, one which seems to involve an isolationist approach to global engagement rather than an assumption that

America must share its exceptionalism.

Much argument has been made about the ethos of American exceptionalism. Some rally behind it as inherently good while others decry it as a philosophy that harms both America and the world. The outcome of this debate is yet to be seen. However, what can be seen is the impact of this American ethos upon the lives of ordinary Americans. Everyday people within America have soaked in this culture of exceptionalism, and the outcome has been that the concept of American exceptionalism has been personalized to one of personal exceptionalism. On the individual level, there exists a consciousness which believes in inherent chosenness to succeed and excel. It is our "birthright" to have more than others and to excel where all others fail. While one might argue for or against whether having a national consciousness of exceptionalism is good, it is difficult to see how a personal consciousness of exceptionalism can be anything but harmful to a person. A personal view of exceptionalism sets one up for failure, for no one can excel in all things, nor can a person have more than all others. This creates a systemic flaw in how one approaches life, making all relationships inherently competitive and creating an environment where one will experience much shame because they can never meet the high expectation of being exceptional.

THE TEXT

PHILIPPIANS 2.1-8:

MOVING DOWNWARD NOT UPWARD

In Philippians, Paul is writing to the church in Philippi to thank them for their financial support of his ministry and to inform them of his well-being (Philippians 1.12-14; 4.10-20). However, he uses the occasion to speak about the need for steadfastness among the Philippians, most likely in light of some opposition from outside the church which is bringing about some form of suffering (Philippians 1.27-30). Somehow, the experience of this opposition has led to division within the church itself (Philippians 4.2-3). Therefore, Paul writes to unite the Philippians, a unity apart from which they might not stand fast against the external opposition.

The second chapter in Philippians is where Paul begins to urge the Philippians toward unity, a unity which is necessary to maintain steadfastness

against external opposition (Philippians 2.1). Paul's writing is dense at this point, and difficult to understand because the first four verses are actually one long sentence. The verb of this sentence is an exhortation for the Philippians to make Paul's joy complete (Philippians 2.2), but the supporting phrases bear incredible weight as admonitions. Paul begins with several "if" clauses. These clauses should probably be interpreted contextually as "since" rather than contingent clauses. Thus, Paul begins with statements about the experience of the Philippian Christians. They have received encouragement (emboldenment) through their relationship with Jesus. They have been comforted by his (either the Father's or Jesus') love. They have been drawn together by the presence of the Holy Spirit, which has led to the experience of tenderness and compassion between members of the Philippian congregation. It is probably best to see here some reference to the experience and work of the Trinity among the Philippian believers, a work which leads to unity and tenderness.

Because this is the work of God among them, Paul encourages them to act in the everyday life of the faith-community in keeping with this work of God. Because God is loving and uniting them, they are to act in loving, uniting ways. They are to be of the same mind; that is, they are not to think the same thoughts but they are to be about the same purposes and agenda as God's people. In light of the love they have received, they are to have mutual love for one another. In light of the unity of the Spirit, they are to maintain this unity.

While these statements are true, they need to be fleshed out and applied to the life of the Philippians, something Paul does next. To live as a loving, united people, the Philippians would avoid selfish pursuits of ambition and glory. Here we might imagine attempts within the congregation to elevate oneself above others, perhaps as one who might lead the congregation through the time of crisis. Instead, the believers were to humble themselves by seeking the interests and well-being of the other Philippian believers first.

In living in this way, the Philippians would be living as Jesus lived. There is much debate as to the meaning of this verse. The traditional reading

is an ethical reading, the Philippians must think and act like Jesus. More recently, New Testament scholars have argued for a theological reading. The believers must act as those who find themselves "in Christ." While the latter reading is probably more fitting with the syntax and flow of the letter, it does not remove the ethical exhortation, for Jesus is the example held forth in the following verses. In other words, the proper behavior for those who are "in Christ" is to behave "like Christ."

Beginning with verse 6, Paul inserts an ancient hymn. Many have argued for and against Pauline authorship of this hymn, but the authorship does not provide any additional help understanding the present context. Its origin only provides insight into other Pauline letters should it be penned by Paul. The flow of the first part of this hymn provides important insight into the life and mind of Christ which the Philippians are to imitate. The hymn begins by noting that Jesus bears the very nature (form) of God. Here Jesus is noted to be of the same substance as God; that is, he is God. However, Jesus being divine, did not think that his divinity should be something to be clutched tightly and used as leverage to gain an advantage. Rather, Jesus emptied himself of his divine form (substance) and took on human form (substance) and that of the lowliest of humans, a servant. At this point, we need to hear a redemptive echo of Genesis 1-3 for the language here is precise intentionally. In Genesis 1.26, people are made in the image of God. Image and form are not the same. Image means to bear the reflection while form means to be of the same substance. So, in Genesis 1, the proper movement for people is to step down from God. They are not God, but they do reflect his nature. However, in Genesis 3, the man and woman make an attempt to step up toward God, to be like him (Genesis 3.5). They seek his form. This same movement is seen in Genesis 11 with the building of the Tower of Babel. Thus, what is wrong with mankind is that it seeks to move the wrong direction, from image toward form. Jesus, on the other hand, moved from form to image (Colossians 3.15). He started as one who bore the same substance as the divine but he gave it up and took on the true substance of people. Here the hymn picks up not just the humble movement of Jesus but also the redemptive recapitulation of Adam (Romans 5.12-21). While Adam broke from

God by moving upward, Jesus recapitulates the first man by moving in the proper direction, downward.

This downward movement continued in Jesus' obedience to the Father's redemptive plan which involved the cross. This downward movement is in direct opposition to any attempt to elevate oneself or seek one's glory (Philippians 2.3). In his incarnation, Jesus has demonstrated the way God intended people to live, to move downward. This downward movement is not to elevate God but to lead to the elevation of people, for it is Jesus' downward movement which led to his exaltation (Philippians 2.9-11).

REAL LIFE WITH BLAKE:

Shame. It tells me that I am not enough, that I am worthless. More and more, I know this to be a lie. I want to believe that I am a person of worth and value, but at times I need something tangible to remind me. It is here that culture offers a very tempting proposal. Culture, particularly American culture, tells me that I can know I am a person of worth and value by where I find myself in comparison to others. If I find myself at the top of the heap, I am a person of great worth and value because I am better than others. However, if I am at the bottom, or even in the middle, I have some work to do toward being a person of worth and value. This cultural narrative seems quite simple and its logic seems sound. I know how good I am by comparing myself to others. However, it creates a powerful competitive drive in me which will not let me stop. You see, so long as there is someone above me, so long as I am not sitting on top of the heap, I have little to no value. I am not enough. I must be the top, the best or I am nothing. Such a competitive spirit turns even the most intimate of friends into adversaries and every relationship becomes fraught with hidden motives and agendas, all because the cultural narrative says I must go up.

I am learning that culture's narrative is not the narrative God created me to live. God created me to go down, not up. Worth and value is not seen in what I can achieve or in where I am in comparison to others. My worth and value are inherent in how I am made, one who reflects the character of God. With this in mind, I can move down. I can seek to elevate and serve others, which interestingly, in

God's economy puts me at the top.

REAL LIFE WITH YOU:

Shame. It tells us we are not enough. Shame works its way into every crevice of our lives, putting on a thousand different masks and going by a thousand different names so it can elude being seen. Perhaps one of the most insidious of masks it wears is the personalization of the American ethos of exceptionalism. The personalization of this ethos says that we must be the best. . . always. We must be at the top of our class. We must have the biggest house. We must be the strongest and the prettiest and the smartest. We must be at the top, exceptional in every way, or we are worthless. This narrative says the point of life is to move up. However, the idea that we are somehow not enough as we are is nothing other than shame, and when it wears the mask of exceptionalism, shame leads us to live the wrong life-narrative. The narrative we were meant to live is one in which we go down, one in which we seek to elevate rather than being elevated. When we live in this way, in God's economy, we are truly exceptional because we bear his true character. However, when we live an upwardly mobile narrative we turn every relationship into a competition and we rob ourselves of living as God himself lives; in other words, we deny ourselves the community we were created to experience and the life we were meant to live. This is anything but loving, to intentionally keep ourselves from the life we were created to live. This week, consider your own sense of personal exceptionalism. Do you feel you need to be the best, or do you have feelings of unworthiness because you are not on the top of some standard? Speak truth to yourself that your worth comes from God and not your performance, and consider stepping into community that honors not those who succeed by triumphing but those who succeed by serving.



SENIOR
PASTOR
BLAKE
SHIPP

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