

THE AUTHOR'S INTENT

As a teacher and author, I prefer to leave students/readers feeling uneasy. I rarely want to wrap up everything neatly. I hope to create some discomfort and tension. I want to prompt questions, even if I cannot answer them. I like to stop short of reaching a final conclusion.

We also must ensure that we are one of the resources students will trust as they try to “connect the dots.” It’s irresponsible for a teacher to “open a can of worms” if they’re unwilling to help their students resolve those issues.

Towards this end, I like to assign homework to be done outside of our group study. I want to equip students to find answers. I want to point them in the right direction. I want to help them reach sound, valid conclusions without doing the hard work for them.

With this book’s subject matter, it is vital that they do the work. I want to inspire them to adopt a lifelong mindset of helping and serving others. A conclusion that someone earns is much more likely to “stick” than a conclusion that is handed to them.

Our job as teachers and leaders is to present the truth and allow the Holy Spirit to do His job. When we’re manipulative, we get in His way. The most effective form of persuasion does not employ questionable tactics, such as coercion, arm-twisting, guilt-tripping, etc. Such tactics do more harm than good.

SUGGESTED FORMAT

This guide is structured around eight sessions (one for each chapter of the book). Feel free to amend the plan as it suits your schedule.

Begin each session by reading “In this chapter ...” for a brief overview of the whole chapter.

Then do the “Exercise” section, which can be done as one large group, in breakout groups, or as individuals. The goal is to break the ice, get into a proper mindset and be prepared to engage the material. It should be a fun, light-hearted discussion lasting about ten minutes.

Discuss the chapter in general.

When it’s time to finish the session, look at the “Thoughts” for a suggested “takeaway” application. There are many in each chapter. Pick one. Look at the last page of each chapter for some suggestions (i.e., “In light of ... let us therefore ...”).

After the chapter discussion, ask everyone to interact with the “Personal Reflection” prompt. This could be done before dismissing the session (setting aside a few moments for personal, quiet reflection) or everyone could do it at their discretion outside of the session. Nobody is expected to publicly share anything from this private time.

IN THIS CHAPTER ...

We find that the Bible uses several words to describe the principle of helping those in need. Some of these terms are:

- | | | |
|---|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ mercy ▪ pity ▪ compassion | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ favor ▪ goodness ▪ justice | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ kindness ▪ grace ▪ righteousness |
|---|--|--|

These terms can be grouped together based on their Hebrew/Greek equivalents:

- mercy (*chêshêd/éleos*): unearned kindness motivated by love.
- compassion (*racham/splánchnon, oiktirmós*): tender love and empathy.
- grace (*chânan/cháris*): a kind response to a cry for help.
- justice (*tsedâqâh/dikaiosýnē*): a God-approved effort to make something right.

KEY TEXT

Deuteronomy 15:7-11

EXERCISE

Read the descriptions of scenes from the following films/books.

Try to determine which of the above terms most accurately describes each act of kindness.

| <i>(1) Erin Brockovich</i> | <i>(2) Pay It Forward</i> | <i>(3) Les Misérables</i> | <i>(4) The Hiding Place</i> |
|--|--|--|---|
| A legal secretary stumbles across oddities in a case. Upon further investigation she discovers that a big company has polluted a small town's water supply. She leads efforts to help the townspeople address their medical issues. After a long legal battle, the big company is forced to pay a settlement. | A middle school social studies teacher instructs his students to come up with ideas that would make the world a better place. One student's proposal is that everyone should do a favor for three people who can't pay it back, each of whom would do favors for three other people, etc. | A man is released from prison and is given shelter by an elderly clergyman. He tries to steal some valuables from his host, but he gets caught. Knowing his guest would go back to prison, the bishop claimed that he gave those items as a gift and that no robbery was committed. | During WWII, a Dutch family in Nazi-occupied Holland helped Jews avoid persecution by providing shelter and smuggling them to safety. It is estimated they saved over 800 lives before they were caught. They were sent to a prison camp, where some of them died. |

THOUGHTS

It's hard to say that any one of these examples is exclusively grace, while another is compassion, etc. While precise definitions are great, they're not easy here. These terms are functionally similar. What they all have in common is that we need to help people.

Some of these acts might be considered mercy, other acts might be grace, compassion, etc. Trying to determine if an act of kindness is grace, mercy, compassion, etc. isn't nearly as important as actually doing something helpful.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

Look at the Hebrew terms in Psalm 51:1 (*Open Hands*, p. 8) and Psalm 112:4-5 (*Open Hands*, p. 113). Compare with other translations (use BibleGateway, YouVersion, etc.)

IN THIS CHAPTER ...

We find the thesis statement of *Open Hands*:

"It is our absolute and inescapable duty to show mercy. We must willingly and bountifully give of ourselves to care for the unfortunate and needy."

The four key ideas are:

- duty: God He has assigned this task to us. Be faithful.
- willingly: this is the mindset/attitude we should adopt. Be cheerful.
- bountifully: this should describe the scope of our efforts. Be generous.
- care: this should describe our personal investment. It matters.

KEY TEXT

2 Corinthians 9. Focus on verses 6-8.

EXERCISE

Discuss these scenarios. How would you respond if you were the one receiving the exploit? What do you think of those who routinely exploit loopholes? Is it wrong to exploit loopholes?

| (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) |
|--|---|--|---|
| A certain airline's frequent flier program does not allow customers to sell their rewards; however, you can give them away. So, one customer sells a paperback novel for \$250, and includes a bookmark, which happens to be a voucher for a free flight. | A teacher makes the following assignment: "write an essay about early American settlements in the Cumberland Gap." One student turns in his assignment, which reads, in its entirety: "an essay about early American settlements in the Cumberland Gap." | A youth basketball team is losing often. Their coach finds a dog that can play basketball, so he puts the dog on the team and sends him in play in the big game. The other coach complains but is told "there's nothing in the rulebook against a dog playing on a team." | My brother asks me if I can repay the \$20 that I owe to him. I say, "Sorry, I'd pay it back if I could, but I don't have any cash on me." Even though I did have \$20 in my coat pocket, it's a good thing that I wasn't wearing my coat when he asked me if I would repay him. |

THOUGHTS

These are minor examples. It can be funny, clever, interesting, etc. when someone takes an advantage of a loophole. It can also be frustrating, infuriating, etc. when the loophole is exploited at your expense. When loopholes are exploited, the "spirit of the law" is usually circumvented in favor of the "letter of the law." While that might not be a big deal in many settings, it's dangerous to have this mentality in spiritual matters.

A loophole requires a deficiency on the part of authority. It implies a lack of wisdom and/or a failure to anticipate how others will act. It requires some form of ambiguity, inadequacy or defect. God is incapable of any of these things. God is not an author of loopholes.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

Read Galatians 6:1-10. Focus on verse 7. Reflect on the significance of the warning not to mock God in the middle of a passage about helping others.

IN THIS CHAPTER ...

We find some reasons *why* we should serve others. We're talking about motivation. This is not a comprehensive list. The seven motives listed in this chapter are:

- necessity
- empathy
- mercy
- justice
- gratitude
- love
- beauty

Note that this chapter is focused on *why*. Hopefully, this will prompt questions. Hopefully, you will find answers to those questions as we continue through *Open Hands*. For now, please try to keep the focus on *why*.

KEY TEXT

Matthew 14:13-21. Focus on verse 14.

EXERCISE

Grouping the following motives into the four categories below:

- a) they are hurting
- e) they were burgled
- i) they are in danger
- b) because I can help
- f) I've been there
- j) they received bad news
- c) to repay a kindness
- g) I should help
- k) no one else will help
- d) it happened to me
- h) there's a deadline
- l) I had to do something

| (1) Their Condition | (2) Circumstances | (3) Your Experience | (4) Altruism |
|---------------------|-------------------|---------------------|--------------|
| | | | |

What are some additional types of motivation? Can you think of reasons that do not fit neatly into this rubric?

THOUGHTS

It's important to find sustainable motives. If you do something because you've been "guilt-tripped" into doing it, then your motivation is only as strong as your guilt. If you do something out of obligation, then your motivation is only as strong as your sense of duty.

This is a life-long endeavor and responsibility. As you cultivate empathy, gratitude, etc., you will find that acts of service consistently follow.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

The key text is one of four Gospel accounts of the Feeding of the 5,000. Look for insights into motive.

For further study, look at the parallel accounts in the other Gospels:
Mark 6:30-44; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:1-13.

IN THIS CHAPTER ...

We find that we are a key component in God's plan to mend this world.

As God's creatures, we have been designed, formed, instructed and entrusted with the responsibility to exercise mercy. This means He has a plan for us, He shapes/molds us, He communicates with us, and He entrusts us with a great responsibility. It's built-in to our DNA. He is heavily invested in us.

As God's children, we have been safeguarded, supplied, raised and permitted to imitate our Father in exercising mercy. This means He protects us (including salvation), He prepares and equips us to execute His plan, He cultivates the right mindset within us and He finds pleasure in us. It's built-in to our upbringing. He has high expectations for us.

KEY TEXT

God as Creator – Genesis 1:26-28, God as Father – Matthew 7:9-12

EXERCISE

This chapter is structured around the concepts of God as Creator Father. It could have also been organized by transcendence (the idea that God is beyond our ability to comprehend) and immanence (the idea that God is present in the world, and we can relate to Him). Identify which of the following attributes of God are transcendent or immanent:

- | | | |
|---------------|---------------|--------------------|
| a) omnipotent | e) omniscient | i) omnipresent |
| b) gracious | f) infinite | j) holy |
| c) just | g) good | k) self-sufficient |
| d) love | h) sovereign | l) merciful |

(1) *Transcendence*

(2) *Immanence*

Notes: this list of attributes is incomplete.

THOUGHTS

Each of us find a little more comfort in one of these two aspects than the other. For example, many Christians love the idea of God as Father, but they may struggle with the truths related to Creator. Others find more comfort in the idea that God is bigger than they can grasp. When one aspect is neglected, it's easy to fall into heresy.

Rather than segregate these things, try to see how they complement each other. God is a loving Creator and a creative Father.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

Do you find less comfort from the idea of God as Creator or God as Father? How can you increase your level of comfort in this area?

IN THIS CHAPTER ...

In the previous chapter, we saw that God equips us to pursue mercy. In this chapter, we find out how He does that. In this chapter we will examine some of the same truths, but now we'll look at them from our vantage point rather than God's.

We need Scripture to prepare us to do it right. We need Scripture to show us how to do it right. We need Scripture to help us avoid and to recover from doing it wrong.

The Word of God teaches us about the many tools that we will need to use in the practice of mercy, namely: prayer, faithfulness, endurance, hope, peace, consolation, perception, self-discipline and others.

KEY TEXT

2 Timothy 3:16-17

EXERCISE

The phrase “one another” appears about 100 times in the NT, and it is often used with a command. Read the verses are below and identify the accompanying command:

| | | | |
|--------------|---------------------|-----------------|---------------|
| John 15:12 | 1 Corinthians 1:10 | Ephesians 4:32 | Hebrews 10:24 |
| Romans 12:10 | 2 Corinthians 13:11 | Philippians 2:5 | James 5:9 |
| Romans 15:7 | Galatians 5:13 | Colossians 3:16 | 1 Peter 4:9 |

These are just a few of the “one another” verses that speak about community. You can't learn what the Bible says about community without learning about love, forgiveness, encouragement, etc. Community is one of the many “interconnected” truths of Scripture.

THOUGHTS

Mercy is perhaps the most interconnected truth in Scripture. It is connected to virtually everything. We are not complete without it.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

Read James 1:1-8. A big part of maturity is being complete (*i.e.*, not incomplete). This doesn't mean being perfect or mistake-free. It means “lacking nothing.” If you'd like to know where you need to grow, consider asking God for wisdom (verse 5).

IN THIS CHAPTER ...

We find in Jesus a blueprint for the practice of mercy.

We should think like He thinks, serve like He serves, persevere like He perseveres, and aim to do what He aims to do.

There is a lot of material in this chapter, which is a condensed summary of another book (*He Was Moved*). There's no need to rush. Feel free to dig deeper in areas that pique your curiosity.

KEY TEXT

Matthew 9:35-38.

EXERCISE

Read the accounts of Jesus healing the blind men (Mt 20:29-34; Mk 10:46-52; Lk 18:35-43). Identify elements of the story that show Christ's predisposition, conduct, resolve and plan.

| <i>His Predisposition</i> | <i>His Conduct</i> | <i>His Resolve</i> | <i>His Plan</i> |
|---------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|-----------------|
| | | | |

You can choose to do this with any of the other passages listed on *Open Hands*, page 168.

THOUGHTS

This endeavor is transferable. Jesus talked about doing it, and He did it. Jesus trained His disciples to do it, and they did it.

We have everything we need, including the authority and power, to continue this mission. Let's follow His example and serve others with initiative, concentration and purpose.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

Read 2 Corinthians 5:17-21. We have been given a ministry of reconciliation. We are Christ's ambassadors. God is making an appeal to the world through us.

How should these principles influence our thoughts, decisions and actions?

IN THIS CHAPTER ...

We find practical suggestions and guidelines for “rolling up your sleeves and getting your hands dirty.”

Topics include how to find opportunities to serve, how to be effective in service, and who to work with in serving others.

KEY TEXT

Proverbs 1:1-7. We can be wise, insightful, prudent and understanding in the pursuit of what is right, just and fair.

EXERCISE

Look at “A Case Study” on *Open Hands*, page 250. If you would rather work on a different case study (perhaps one that is more relevant to your group’s environment), please do so.

On *Open Hands*, pages 232-234 (“With Initiative”), there are suggestions on starting a project. Use the grid below to create an initial list of resources you would attempt to assemble to meet a specific need. Keep in mind that this list can change as you work through the process.

| <i>Co-Laborers</i> | <i>Tangible Resources</i> | <i>Intangible Resources</i> | <i>Those Being Served</i> |
|--------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|
| | | | |

Note: You will use the same case study in the next chapter.

THOUGHTS

The pursuit of mercy is a difficult enough task that we should take care not to be one of the reasons that it is so difficult. We should act with intent and purpose. We should strive to improve our ability, knowledge, etc. We need to stay humble, admit when we’re stumped and continually lean on each other.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

Read 1 Corinthians 1:18-31. Leaning into your weaknesses can be scary and uncomfortable. Is there something you wish you could do to serve others, but you recognize you are ill-equipped to do so? What can you begin to do now that will eventually remedy this deficiency?

IN THIS CHAPTER ...

We find a reference tool to help you formulate a response to the most common objections raised against efforts to show mercy.

There are three broad categories of objection (based on what the objection is centered upon): the Giver (where the objection is based on feelings of inadequacy), the Endeavor (where the objection is based on the proposed course of action), the Receiver (where the objection is based on the worthiness of those intended to be served).

Note: This material isn't particularly useful for arguing with those who are openly hostile, but it is limited to situations where the person raising the objection is a potential ally.

KEY TEXT

1 Peter 3:13-17.

EXERCISE

Revisit the “A Case Study” on *Open Hands*, page 250 (or the study from the previous session).

Play “devil’s advocate” and object to the efforts to meet the need in the case study. Come up with one objection in each category and develop a response to that objection.

| <i>Giver</i> | <i>Transaction</i> | <i>Receiver</i> |
|--------------|--------------------|-----------------|
| Objection: | Objection: | Objection: |
| Response: | Response: | Response: |

THOUGHTS

The worst time to formulate a response to an objection is spur-of-the-moment. While you can’t anticipate every objection, it is wise to anticipate and prepare when possible.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

Read 1 Peter 3:8-22. This is a fuller context for this session’s key text.

Look for insight into how you should respond to those who oppose you for doing right. What truths are encouraging? What truths are challenging?