

Their Hearts Are Far From Me Small Group Guide

Warm-up Question: (Choose one, make up your own, or skip this part all together, depending upon the nature of your group.)

1. What was your favorite subject in school? What was your least favorite?
2. What's your ideal bedtime?

Read the following passages: Mark 7:1-8; Galatians 5:13-18.

The passage in Mark 7 is pretty jarring. It might not feel so jarring to us because the word "Pharisee" doesn't have a very positive connotation in our cultural context. But that was not the case in the first century. Pharisees were often among the most educated, devout, and respected people in the community. So it's something of a surprise when Jesus declares, using the words of Isaiah, "Their hearts are far from me."

How did that happen? How did they end up so far from God? Our life experiences, our historical circumstances, our family dynamics, and our own decisions sometimes take us to places we never intended to go.

So how do we keep that from happening? Paul recognized that the church in Galatia was beginning to move toward Phariseeism, and he responded strongly. His response highlights three big contrasts that can help us evaluate our own lives: Law and Grace, Flesh and Spirit, and Love and Hate.

Questions for Discussion (Choose several that are relevant for your group):

1. Jesus often preached about the kingdom of God. He directly mentions it in the first and last of the beatitudes (Matthew 5:3,10), and alludes to many of the hopes associated with God's kingdom throughout the remaining beatitudes. Describe what the typical Jewish person hoped for when waiting for the kingdom of God.
2. What did Pharisees like Paul think they needed to do in order to hasten the arrival of God's kingdom?
3. In what sense had many of the Pharisees drifted away from God? Have you ever had a season in your life when you felt like you had drifted away from God? Explain.
4. Generally speaking, the Jewish people had a very high view of the Law of Moses. (To get a feel for how they saw the Law, read Romans 2:17-20.) Why, then, did Paul react so strongly to the idea that Gentile Christians should be required to adhere to the Law of Moses? (See Romans 7:7-8:4; Galatians 3:10-14.) What's the difference between living under grace and living under the Law?

5. Read Galatians 5:16-26. What does Paul mean by the term “flesh”? How do we recognize when we’re living “in the flesh”?
6. Do you see the value of the fruit of the Spirit? Do you actively attempt to live a life characterized by the fruit of the Spirit? Explain. Which of the elements of the fruit of the Spirit are least represented in your life right now?
7. How might the Old Testament laws have led the Pharisees to their focus on purity and defilement? Are there other passages in the Old Testament that could have corrected their emphasis on ritual purity to the neglect of their own hearts? Explain.
8. How did Jesus integrate love into his understanding of holiness?
9. Are you living a loving life? Explain.

Pray