Small Group Guide

Christian Discernment: Thanksgiving and True North

Hear. O Israel: The Greatest Commandment

Overview

This guide is designed to help your group move beyond simply hearing information about God to actively practicing the kind of presence and attentiveness that forms us into his image and likeness. The sermon challenged us to reconsider what it truly means to love God, beginning not with doing but with hearing..

Key Takeaways

- The greatest commandment begins with "Hear" before it calls us to love. Listening, contemplating, and embracing God's word comes before action.
- We are wired toward a works-oriented faith, asking "What must I do?" rather than "Who must I become?"
- The greatest gift we can give to God and to one another is our full, undivided presence.
- Gratitude is the doorway into God's presence. It creates safety, vulnerability, and trust.
- Loving God with heart, soul, mind, and strength is not a checklist. It is a response to who God has already revealed himself to be.
- God's self-revelation to Moses in Exodus 34:5-8 is the foundation of the Shema. We love a God who is compassionate, gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in loving kindness.
- Consequences of sin can affect future generations, but God's loving kindness extends to a thousand generations for those who love him.

Opening Activity

Before jumping into discussion, take two to three minutes of silence as a group. No phones, no conversation. Simply sit and practice being present. Afterward, briefly share: What did you notice about your own mind during those two minutes? What made it easy or difficult to simply be still?

Discussion Questions

Section 1: Starting With "Hear"

1. The sermon used the story of the elementary school worksheet to illustrate how we rush past instructions to get to the work. Where do you see this pattern in your own spiritual life? What do you tend to "skip past" in your relationship with God?
2. The pastor described spending two months sitting with just the word "Hear" from Deuteronomy 6:4. What is your honest reaction to that kind of slow, patient engagement with Scripture? Does it feel meaningful, frustrating, or something else entirely?
3. In what ways does our culture make it difficult to practice the kind of attentive listening the Shema calls us to? What specific habits or rhythms tend to pull you away from being fully present with God?

Section 2: Presence as the Greatest Gift

4. The sermon argued that the greatest gift we can give to another person, and to God, is our full presence. Think of a time when someone gave you their full, undivided attention. What did that feel like? How did it affect your relationship with them?
5. The pastor drew a parallel between knowing his wife's voice above all others and knowing God's voice intimately. What does it look like practically to develop that kind of familiarity with God's voice? What has helped you grow in this area?
6. The sermon stated that God demonstrates love by connecting his presence to what he loves, pointing to the Incarnation and to the breath of life in Genesis. How does understanding love as presence change the way you think about your relationship with God?

Section 3: Gratitude as the Starting Point

7. The pastor described gratitude as the practical starting point for being fully present with God. He said it creates an atmosphere of vulnerability, safety, trust, and belonging. Do you agree? Have you experienced gratitude functioning that way in your own prayer life?
8. He also said, "Gratitude empowers us to trust God" and "Gratitude empowers us to feel safe in his presence." Can you think of a specific season of difficulty in your life where returning to gratitude helped you trust God? What did that look like?
9. The sermon described a progression: we can lament, grieve, and even complain, and then return to gratitude and surrender. How do you feel about

the idea that lament and gratitude are not opposites? How might this reframe the way you approach prayer during hard seasons?

Section 4: Loving God With Heart, Soul, Mind, and Strength

10. The sermon described loving God with your heart as surrender to his goodness no matter what circumstances look like. Is there an area of your life right now where surrender feels especially difficult? What would it look like to bring gratitude into that specific place?
11. Loving God with your mind was described as being willing to ask hard questions, reason through apparent contradictions in Scripture, and allow your worldview to be corrected. Is there a passage or teaching in Scripture that has challenged or confused you? How have you handled that tension?
12. The sermon addressed the difficult phrase in Exodus 34:6-7 about God visiting the iniquity of fathers on children to the third and fourth generation. How does understanding the difference between guilt being transferred and consequences being experienced change how you read that passage? Does it change how you feel about God?
13. Loving God with your strength was described as offering the abundance of who you are, physically, spiritually, financially, and emotionally, in service to God and others. In which of these areas do you find it easiest to give? In which do you hold back, and why?

Reflection Questions
For Personal Use Between Meetings

- Set aside ten minutes this week to simply sit before God and begin with gratitude. Write down five to ten specific things you are grateful for. Notice how your posture toward God shifts as you do this.
- Read Exodus 34:5-8 slowly. Sit with the characteristics God reveals about himself to Moses. Which of these attributes do you find easiest to believe? Which is hardest to receive personally?
- Read Ezekiel 18 in its entirety. How does it expand or clarify your understanding of God's justice and mercy across generations?
- Ask yourself the question the pastor asked himself: "Do I really know what it means to love God the way he wants to be loved?" Journal your honest answer.

Practical Applications

This Week:

- Practice beginning your daily prayer time with gratitude before making any requests. Give thanks for specific, concrete things God has done, not just general blessings.
- Identify one relationship, with a spouse, child, friend, or coworker, where you can practice being more fully present. Put away distractions and give that person your full attention in at least one conversation this week.

This Month:

- Choose one attribute from God's self-revelation in Exodus 34:5-8, such as compassion, grace, or slow to anger, and spend a week meditating specifically on that characteristic. Look for evidence of it in Scripture and in your own life.
- Consider starting or returning to a journaling practice focused not on requests but on listening. Write down what you sense God may be saying as you sit quietly before him.

As a Group:

- Open your next group meeting with five minutes of shared gratitude before any discussion or prayer requests. Let each person name one specific thing God has done that they are thankful for.
- Consider reading through Deuteronomy 6 together as a group over the coming weeks, discussing what it meant to Israel in its original context and what it means for your community today.

Closing Prayer Guide

Close your group time by praying through the characteristics God revealed to Moses in Exodus 34:6-7. Let one person lead, pausing after each attribute to allow the group to respond with brief, specific thanksgiving.

- Lord, you are compassionate. We thank you for...
- Lord, you are gracious. We thank you for...
- Lord, you are slow to anger. We thank you for...
- Lord, you abound in loving kindness and truth. We thank you for...
- Lord, you forgive iniquity, transgression, and sin. We thank you for...

Close with a moment of silence, offering your full presence to God before going out into the week.

Memory Verse
Deuteronomy 6:4-5 — The command to hear that the Lord your God is one, and to love him with all your heart, soul, and strength.