

GROWING TOGETHER

“Widening Your Ring”



C. S.
Lewis

The Inner Ring

But you have met the phenomenon of an Inner Ring. ... perhaps you discovered that within the Ring there was a Ring yet more inner ... You were beginning, in fact, to pierce through the skins of the onion. ... one of the most dominant elements is the desire to be inside the local Ring and the terror of being left outside. ... Of all passions the passion for the Inner Ring is most skillful in



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making a man who is not yet a very bad man do very bad things. ... You yourself, once you are in, want to make it hard for the next entrant, just as those who are already in made it hard for you. ... There'd be no fun if there were no outsiders. The invisible line would have no meaning unless most people were on the wrong side of it. Exclusion is no accident; it is the essence.





John
Ortberg

*Everybody's
Normal Till You Get
to Know Them*

There are few joys in life like being wanted, chosen, embraced. There are few pains like being excluded, rejected, left out. ... It is a part of our fallenness that makes us want to be in not just any group but an exclusive group.

... In every society, in every school and church and workplace, there are little groups of people who are on the "inside." These groups are almost never formal; no one votes on who gets in. Yet whether or not you're a member



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will be reflected in subtle things—use of nicknames, inside jokes, invitations to certain events.

... the desire to gain status by being part of a high-status Inner Ring is a deeply dangerous one. This desire leads us to constantly compare ourselves with others, to feel anguish when we get left out and deeper anguish when someone close to us gets ushered in. We begin to compromise. We say something we don't



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really believe because we think it might make us look good to someone deeper in and higher up. We laugh at that person's jokes a little too eagerly, pretend to agree when we secretly differ, or give a compliment that is partly sincere but also partly self-serving. We get a little surge of pleasure when we think that we are in a more inner ring than somebody else. Seeing others excluded makes us feel more special.







Matthew 15:21-28

Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly."

Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, "Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us."



Matthew 15:21-28

He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel."

The woman came and knelt before him. "Lord, help me!" she said.

He replied, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs."

"Yes it is, Lord," she said. "Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table."



Then Jesus said to her, "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted." And her daughter was healed at that moment.

As Jesus' followers we're
called to have this same heart
of including others who we
normally would consider
"outsiders."

Hebrews
13:1-2

Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters. Do not forget to **show hospitality to strangers**, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.

Romans 12:13 Share **with the Lord's people** who are in need. Practice hospitality.

Even in the church, we need to make a special effort to include those who are most likely to feel marginalized or excluded into our circle of love and care.

LIFE GROUPS

- Look for opportunities to lean on one another for help.

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- Look for opportunities to lean on one another for help.
- Leave margin in your life to include and care for others.

A true gospel community is one
in which members are willing to
both **give and receive** love and
care from one another.

Philippians
4:10-19

I rejoiced greatly in the Lord that at last you renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you were concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all

this through him who gives me strength.

Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles.

Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid more than

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once when I was in need. Not that I desire your gifts; what I desire is that more be credited to your account. I have received full payment and have more than enough. I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God. And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus.

In the church, giving and receiving
love ought to be done with no
strings attached but with a genuine
heart of gratitude and celebration
for what God has done for us.



Jonathan Tjarks



“They all told me how sorry they were and asked whether there was anything they could do. All I could think was I don’t know any of you. I know of you. I’ve heard your names. But I don’t know you.”





I was nervous the first time I went to a life group. I'd joined a church the week before and one of the pastors, a guy a few years older than me, invited me. It was a smaller group of people who met at his house every week.

I remember walking up to the door and not knowing what to expect on the other side. There were about a dozen people in the living room talking to each other. I didn't know any of them besides the pastor—and I barely knew him. I didn't know what to do, so I did what most people would do: I headed over to the table with snacks.



Eventually the chatter died down and everyone sat in a circle in the living room. They all introduced themselves with an icebreaker. ... They sang a few songs and then talked about the Bible for a while. At the end of the meeting, everyone paired off to pray for each other and the pastor asked me what I thought of the group. Then he asked if I would come back. I said I guess, but I wasn't sure.

That was seven years ago. Some of those strangers from the house that first night are now some of my closest friends. It didn't happen overnight. It took me a long time to feel comfortable. I usually came



after the life group had already started and left as soon as it was over.

But I was seeing the same people every week and I was telling them about my problems and they were telling me about theirs. Do that for long enough and you become friends. You get to know enough people that way and life group goes from being an obligation to something you look forward to.

Making the commitment to come every week is still hard. There are always other things to do. Sometimes you are tired or you had a long day or you just don't feel like it. It gets even harder once you get married and have kids.



Nor are the people always easy to deal with. You may not have a lot in common. You have to search for things to talk about. You can be vulnerable with people and they don't always respond how you would expect. And you certainly won't always agree with them on how they see the world.

The past two years haven't been easy. Our life group met over Zoom for a while. People ask me whether I have to be more careful because of my condition and the pandemic. But it's really the opposite. I don't have the luxury of waiting for life to get back to normal. This might be the only time that I have.



I can't imagine not being in a life group at this point. Human beings aren't supposed to go through life as faces in a crowd. ... People talk a lot about medical insurance and life insurance when you get sick. But relational insurance is far more important. I didn't need my dad's money, but I could have used some of his friends.

... There are some things from the Bible that I have been leaning on over the past year:

"Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this. To look after orphans and widows in their distress." –James 1:27



“Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow.” –Isaiah 1:17

“You shall not mistreat any widow or fatherless child.” –Exodus 22:22

There are hundreds of verses like that. I have already told some of my friends: When I see you in heaven, there's only one thing I'm going to ask—Were you good to my son and my wife? Were you there for them? **Does my son know you?**



I don't want Jackson to have the same childhood that I did. I want him to wonder why his dad's friends always come over and shoot hoops with him. Why they always invite him to their houses. Why there are so many of them at his games. I hope that he gets sick of them.

One thing I have learned from this experience is that you can't worry about things that you can't control. I can't control what will happen to me. I don't know how long I will be there for my son. All I can do is make the most of the time that I have left. That means investing in other people so they can be there for him.