

TRUE DEPTH

GROUP LEADER'S GUIDE

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ABOUT THIS GUIDE

True Depth serves as the text for this interactive study. This resource is provided to help disciples experience true depth in their walk with Christ and service in his name. Swimming in the shallow end of the discipleship pool will cause the church to sink. As disciples move beyond shallow cultural “churchianity” and into the deep waters of biblical Christianity, their characters and witness to the world will be enhanced. May God empower you to join him and to invite others into the deep-end of the discipleship pool.

Cultural churchianity, built on personal preferences, narcissistic consumerism, rugged individualism, and safe status quo, absolutely cannot mix with biblical Christianity. Biblical Christianity involves cross bearing, self-denial, and costly sacrificial love.

A “churchian,” not to be mistaken for a Christian, swims in the shallows. A churchian attends church gatherings, serves others, and seems moral. He is a good person. He practices spiritual disciplines but only when he wants something from God. He tries to be generous. He looks a lot like a true disciple. However, *he* is the center of his religion. He keeps Christ at arm’s length. He follows what he perceives to be God’s will as long as it aligns with his conception of “the good life.” As soon as Christ makes demands, as he often does, problems arise. The churchian ignores any call to deny self and pick up the cross. The cross and cost do not figure into his religion of comfort and convenience.

Although we cannot assume that people become deep disciples simply because they attend church, disciples are not made without the church. Disciples will never learn to swim in the depths without the help of a local church community. God is the one who makes disciples, but he does so through the church. Disciples of depth cannot be made outside of the context of Christian community. And this is the basis for this group study.

CULTURAL CHURCHIANITY VERSUS BIBLICAL CHRISTIANITY

WEEK 1
MARK 8:31–38

SWIMMING PRINCIPLE

God makes disciples through the church, when they swim away from the shallows of cultural churchianity and toward the depths of biblical Christianity.

FOCUS ON GOD'S WORD

On page 16 of *True Depth*, we read, “The American dream has hijacked Christian discipleship. Simply put, the gospel of health, wealth, and happiness has produced a church . . . in which disciples are just treading shallow water” and “starving . . . for something more.” Jesus calls us into a “something more” kind of discipleship.

Jesus modeled true depth. In Mark 8, he described what it meant for him to follow the will of the Father. Jesus literally had to lay down his life in obedience to the Father’s will (8:31–32). Peter did not like the idea of Jesus suffering and dying (v. 32). Perhaps Peter thought that being faithful to God should lead to some level of health, wealth, and happiness. Peter, at that point in his life, might have been a good spokesperson for cultural churchianity. Jesus responded to Peter with, “Get behind me” (v. 33).

Jesus not only laid down his life, but also invited his followers to do the same in their own discipleship journeys. He said, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (v. 34). Jesus described true depth, and it’s a far cry from shallow cultural churchianity. According to Jesus, when we lay down our lives completely for God, something fascinating happens: “Whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it” (v. 35).

SWIMMING PRACTICE

1. What do you think are the differences between cultural churchianity and biblical Christianity?
2. How does your life and local church reflect the values of either shallow churchianity or deep Christianity?
3. Where are you swimming in the discipleship pool? Are you in the shallows, in the deep, or in the middle and deciding where to swim? Where would those who know you best plot your location in the discipleship pool?
4. What decisions will you make today in order to launch deeper into the discipleship pool?

WRAP UP

Have group members get in pairs and discuss one or two practical steps they will take to swim away from cultural churchianity and toward biblical Christianity. Then ask the pairs to pray for each other.

SWIMMER'S PRAYER

Lord, forgive us for swimming at times in the safe shallow pool, barely making a splash in our commitment to you. Thank you for empowering us with the spiritual arms and legs we need to thrive in the deep end with Christ. Give us the audacity to do whatever it takes to launch into the depths of discipleship. Amen.

REVELATION

WHAT GOD DOES AMONG US

WEEK 2

*MARK 1:9–11; 9:2–7;
14:61–65; 15:37–39*

SWIMMING PRINCIPLE

When we stop, look, and listen up for the God who shows up to speak up, we will receive identity-shaping and mission-directing revelation.

FOCUS ON GOD'S WORD

We often think of God as distant, far removed, and intentionally hidden from us. Yet Scripture paints a very different picture of God. God hates to be hidden and wants to be found. We get this glimpse of God especially in Mark's gospel.

Throughout Mark God keeps showing up to speak up, offering identity-shaping and mission-directing revelation. God keeps trying to reveal the identity and mission of Jesus. God does this at the baptism of Jesus (Mark 1:9–11). He does it again at the transfiguration of Jesus (9:2–7). Jesus, God in the flesh, reveals his divine identity to the Jewish religious leaders (14:61–65). The high priest asked, "Are you the Messiah?" (14:61) to which Jesus responded plain as day, "I am" (14:62). Toward the very end of Mark, God is at it again. God tore the temple veil, and a Roman centurion, of all people, saw God's ultimate self-revelation in Christ, saying, "Surely this man was the son of God" (15:39).

The only ones who seem to receive revelation when God showed up to speak up were Jesus and the Roman centurion. The disciples, more often than not, missed the revelation. The religious leaders resisted the revelation of Jesus' identity and mission. If disciples who are in close proximity to Jesus can miss revelation and holy religious leaders who know a lot about God can resist revelation, then anyone can.

If we are not going to miss or resist a revelation from the God who shows up to speak up among us, we must develop the capacity to stop, look, and listen. This is no small task in a culture inundated with deism, diversions, and distractions.

SWIMMING PRACTICE

1. When was the last time God revealed something to you?
2. How do you or can you stop, look, and listen for God to show up to speak up?
3. What obstacles prevent you from stopping, looking, and listening for a revelation from God?
4. What changes can you make today to overcome diversion and distraction so you can develop the capacity to stop, look, and listen for revelation from God?

WRAP UP

Invite members of your group to discuss and choose one of the following exercises to cultivate the capacity to stop, look, and listen for revelation from God:

- Over the next seven days, practice journaling. Pick a time of day to write in your journal when you are most alert. Record what you observed and/or experienced that day. Reflect with your pen on how God has been showing up to speak up among you. What is God revealing to you that shapes your identity and guides your mission? Share these revelations with a friend in your small group.
- Plan a meeting with a spiritual mentor, someone who has learned to lean into the grace to stop, look, and listen for God. During the meeting, describe an issue, struggle, decision, or question that is most prevalent upon your heart and mind. Be honest. Trust your mentor. After you have released words to describe the situation, invite the mentor to speak insights and questions into your life. Stop, look, and listen for what God reveals to you through the words of your mentor and your own words.
- Take a monthly day alone with God over the next three months. The goal is to carve out six to eight hours to intensely stop, look, and listen for God to show up and speak up among you. Bring your Bible, journal, a few soul books, and some soothing music. Spend the day experiencing God through the rhythmic pattern of reading, meditating, and journaling. Read for fifteen minutes. Meditate for fifteen minutes on what you read. Journal for fifteen minutes on what God is revealing through your reading and meditation. Walk and stretch for fifteen minutes. Then repeat this pattern. You will be amazed by how time flies when you're stopping, looking, and listening for God.
- Go on an annual two- or three-day pilgrimage of silence and solitude to stop, look, and listen for God. Retreat to a location that is relatively free from the obstacles of diversion and

distraction. Perhaps you can take a few friends on the journey with you. You can debrief with these friends at the end of each day of your retreat. But be sure that your silence and solitude does not turn social.

SWIMMER'S PRAYER

Lord, we need a revelation from you that reminds us of who we are, whose we are, and what we are called to do. Forgive us for the deism, distraction, and diversion that block our eyes from seeing you and our ears from hearing you. Increase our capacity to stop, look, and listen for you to show up and speak up. It is impossible for us to become the people you call us to be and do the work you have called us to do without revelation from you that shapes our identity and guides our mission. Lord, reveal yourself to us. Amen.

RESTORATION

WHAT GOD DOES FOR US

WEEK 3

*MARK 8:27–33; 10:17–31;
14:27–31; 16:7*

SWIMMING PRINCIPLE

God provides restorative grace-filled mulligans for us when we slice the ball of our lives into the woods.

FOCUS ON GOD'S WORD

When a golfer hits a bad shot and needs a do-over, he or she will ask for a mulligan. A mulligan allows the golfer to hit another shot as if the errant shot never happened. As in golf, in the game of life, we often need mulligans. The apostle Peter needed mulligans too—and often.

Throughout the gospel of Mark, Peter found himself in need of a mulligan. He would often hit a good shot only to follow it up with a bad one. That was his pattern. In Mark 8:27–33, we see Peter's pattern. Jesus asked the disciples, "Who do you say I am?" (v. 29). No one was really sure or at least had the moxie to speak up and respond. But Peter did. He confidently claimed, "You are the Messiah" (v. 29). Great shot, Peter!

Peter crushed the ball when it came to the identity of Jesus, but he whiffed on the mission of Jesus. Jesus began to describe his mission as the Messiah. He would go to Jerusalem where he would suffer and die. That was not the mission Peter had in mind for Jesus. He actually rebuked Jesus. That never turns out well for the disciple. Jesus rebuked Peter back, saying, "Get behind me, Satan! . . . You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns" (v. 33). Bad shot, Peter!

We see Peter's pattern again in Mark 10:17–31. Peter boasted about the sacrifices he made to follow Jesus, failing to realize that he could never out-give God. Bad shot, Peter! The pattern

surfaces again in Mark 14:27–31. Peter said he would rather die than disown Jesus. Great shot! But that solid shot is followed by failure. Peter fell asleep three times when Jesus asked him to keep watch. And even worse, Peter denied knowing Jesus three different times. Peter needed a mulligan.

Of course God gave him not just one mulligan, but one after another. While Peter was feeling like throwing in the towel on the hopes of becoming a disciple of true depth, God gave Peter a grace-filled mulligan. God sent an angel with a specific message to single out Peter. After Jesus' resurrection, the angel met the women at the tomb and said, "Go, tell his disciples *and Peter*, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you'" (Mark 16:7, emphasis added). God, through an angel, extended a mulligan to Peter.

Peter took the mulligan, and it restored him. Mulligans don't just leave people as they are. A grace-filled mulligan from God will change a person! The mulligan did something to Peter. He was never the same again. He wasn't perfect, but he moved closer to becoming the reliable, rocklike disciple God created him to be. The person who really receives the mulligan will be radically restored by it.

SWIMMING PRACTICE

1. What regrettable slices of your past are you tempted to replay?
2. What sinful slices in the present are you most prone to recommit?
3. Describe a gracious mulligan you have received from someone. What impact did it have on you?
4. Mulligan getters are mulligan givers. Describe a time when you extended a grace-filled mulligan to someone. What impact did it have on you and that person?
5. Do you know of someone who is currently stuck in the woods? How might God want to use you to extend a mulligan to that person?

WRAP UP

Invite your group to explore and implement the following exercise.

Every great golfer has a mentor, coach, or caddy who offers guidance. Do you have a discipleship coach? If not, why not? Is there a brother or sister in Christ who is swimming in the deep end and can help you do the same? Sketch out a plan to improve your discipleship game with the help of a coach. Who would make a good coach? When and where can you meet on a monthly basis? How will you utilize the time together? Will you read through a book? How about drawing up a list of three to five important "soul" questions that your coach can ask you at your monthly meeting? Go ahead and contact your discipleship coach right now to set up your first meeting.

SWIMMER'S PRAYER

Lord of the mulligan, too many of us have given up the hope of ever having a viable discipleship golf game. Too many of us have settled for mini-golf. We are tempted to replay the regrettable shots of the past or recommit the sinful shots in the present. Either one adversely impacts our walk with you. Today we will embrace the grace-filled mulligan you offer so that we are restored to the deep intimacy and discipleship vitality we crave in you. Amen.

TRANSFORMATION

WHAT GOD DOES TO US

WEEK 4

MARK 14:12-26

SWIMMING PRINCIPLE

God breaks ordinary people to transform them into something extraordinary.

FOCUS ON GOD'S WORD

God has the miraculous power of turning the ordinary into the extraordinary. In Mark 14, Jesus did this with bread. He took into his hands common ordinary bread and gave it to the disciples as his uncommon extraordinary body. “Take it; this is my body” (v. 22), Jesus said.

Verse 12 tells us that the miraculous turning of ordinary bread into Jesus’ extraordinary body took place during the Jewish Passover. The Passover commemorated another miracle that sets the backdrop for the Old Testament. God took out of Egypt ordinary Hebrew slaves and gave them into Canaan as an extraordinary Holy nation. Jesus, during the Last Supper, was doing something similar with his followers. He took into his hands ordinary odorous fishermen and gave them to the world as extraordinary apostolic leaders. In the hands of God, the ordinary becomes extraordinary.

This begs the question, what happens between the taking of what is ordinary (Hebrew slaves/bread/fishermen) and the giving of what is extraordinary (Holy nation/body/leaders)? In between the taking and the giving is the breaking. The breaking is what transforms the ordinary into the extraordinary.

In between the taking of the bread and the giving of his body is Jesus breaking the bread. In between the taking of Hebrew slaves and the giving of a holy nation is the breaking that took place for forty years in the wilderness. In between the taking of ordinary Joes and the giving of apostolic

leaders is the breaking that took place for the disciples between crucifixion and Pentecost. The breaking can make us what God has created us to be.

Whether or not God causes seasons of brokenness is debatable. But Christians throughout the centuries have agreed that God uses brokenness to deepen us—not destroy us. He breaks us in a million places in a million ways. He puts us into relationships with people we don't like so we learn to love them. He throws us into the fire by giving us tasks to test our humility. He holds up the mirror that exposes our egotism and prejudices. God turns up the heat through brokenness to refine the silver of our lives, so we shine again with the image of God that marked us in the garden of Eden.

SWIMMING PRACTICE

1. When comparing the brokenness of biblical Christianity with the happiness of cultural churchianity, why do we have a hard time seeing the beauty and benefits of brokenness? What can the church do to confront these trends that challenge true depth discipleship?

2. Can you recall people from the Bible who went through a season of brokenness? Did they come through the process better or bitter? In what ways do you think God was trying to transform them?

3. Reflect on a period of brokenness you have experienced. How did God use it to transform you into something more extraordinary than you were before the season of brokenness?

WRAP UP

Invite your group to spend some time individually praying for someone in their lives who is going through a season of brokenness. Then have the people in your group pair up and pray for each other, asking God to use seasons of brokenness for holy transformation.

SWIMMER'S PRAYER

Lord, we yield to your strong and loving hands so that our ordinary is transformed into extraordinary. Help us not to run from but to the seasons of brokenness that ultimately make us what you have determined we can become. Expose our sin so that you skim it off the silver of our lives and make us shine. We recognize that the most beautiful work you do is not only for us in the taking or through us in the giving, but also to us in the breaking. Amen.

SANCTIFICATION

WHAT GOD DOES IN US

WEEK 5

MARK 3:13–19

SWIMMING PRINCIPLE

God uses the local church community that is frightening and frustrating but formative to perform a work of sanctification in us.

FOCUS ON GOD'S WORD

Jacob thought he was marrying one person but he got stuck with two (Gen. 29:14–30). He got the radiant Rachel he wanted and the lackluster Leah he didn't want. When Jacob said "I do," he got two.

When we say "I do" to God, we get two. We may think we are only getting the Christ we want, but we also get stuck with the church we may not want. Many Christians admit that the most challenging dynamic of following Christ is doing it within the context of community called church. It's natural for us to think, "Just give me Jesus, I can do without the church." This is a popular notion in our current culture.

But according to Mark's gospel, Jesus calls people not to follow him in isolation but in community with others. In Mark 3:13–19, Jesus called people to follow him in community, not just one person, but twelve people. Jesus called them so that they might be in community with him (v. 14). We, like those first disciples, are called to follow Jesus communally not individually. The assertion that Jesus calls us to follow him in community is further confirmed by Mark's recording of the details of the names and characteristics of the motley crew chosen. Jesus picked a zealot and a tax collector to follow him together. This community, then, would have a high amount of tension since zealots

hated tax collectors. Perhaps disciples back then wished, like we sometimes do today, that they could have the Jesus they wanted without the community they didn't want.

“Discipleship in the context of community is messy” (*True Depth*, p. 84). We are either tempted to quit or coexist with the church. We keep it at arm's length. Yet according to Ephesians 5:25–26, “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy.” There's no way around it. If we are going to become like Christ, we must aspire to not merely tolerate the church, but also love it, despite all of the reasons not to. When we love the church, we not only make it holy, we become holy with it. Loving the church, then, sanctifies us. Christian community is frightening and frustrating but formative.

SWIMMING PRACTICE

1. How do you reconcile the conflicts between Christ and the church?
2. How has learning to love the church, despite all of the reasons not to love it, sanctified your soul?
3. What glimpses of beauty and radiance do you see in the church?
4. What are one or two ways that God can use you to make your local church less like lackluster Leah and more like radiant Rachel?

WRAP UP

Invite the group to offer prayers, thanking God for the beauty of the church and the many ways he uses the church to form us.

SWIMMER'S PRAYER

Lord, please cultivate in us a love for the church that matches your love for it. Even and especially when the church reveals its ugliness, help us to love it in a way that sanctifies it and us. Use the frightening and frustrating local church to form us. When we are tempted to quit or coexist with the church, remind us that “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.” Lord, if you, the perfect one, can love the imperfect church, who are we not to do the same? Amen.

MISSION

WHAT GOD DOES THROUGH US

WEEK 6

MARK 10:32–34

SWIMMING PRINCIPLE

God accomplishes his mission through us when we dare to join him in the space between the bullied and the bullies.

FOCUS ON GOD'S WORD

Capernaum was a small, rural fishing village was the headquarters for Jesus' ministry. Jesus was, for the most part, well-liked by the villagers. In Mark 10, Jesus made what looks like a bad decision. He told his disciples that he would leave the safe setting of Capernaum to go on a death mission to Jerusalem (Mark 10:32–34). Why would Jesus go to Jerusalem knowing full well he would suffer and die at the hands of the Jewish religious leaders? Because that's what Father God asked Jesus to do, and Jesus didn't want to disappoint his Dad.

Upon reaching Jerusalem, Jesus went into the temple to enter the space between the bullied and the bullies (11:12–19). "Jesus entered the temple courts and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves" (v. 15). The priests were taking financial advantage of Jews wanting to worship. They charged exorbitant exchange rates for people to obtain temple currency. And the priests marked up animal sacrifices sold in the temple. Worshipers had to purchase pre-approved, or more accurately priest-approved, sacrifices. Jesus wasn't mad simply because people were buying and selling in the temple. He was upset that the priests were bullying and oppressing people in the temple. Jesus entered the tight and terrifying space between the bullied and the bullies because that's what God asked him to do. And it cost Jesus his life.

God is always inviting his people on a bully-bashing mission. He has used the church to bash the bullies of slavery, sexism, poverty, greed, racism, and other forms of injustice. He rescues us from the bullies of loneliness, depression, sin, and shame, to name a few. Then, he invites us to help others. What God does for us, he wants to do through us. Jesus said, “I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you” (John 13:15). “In this world we are like Jesus” (1 John 4:17).

To what bully-bashing mission is God calling you? Someone somewhere is being bullied. Will you enter with Jesus the space between the bullied and the bullies with Jesus? It will take a willingness to give all you have to the mission (time, energy, finances). The good news is that when we go on mission, despite the costs, we will experience the presence and power of God in the most profound ways. Mark tells us that Jesus was “leading the way” to Jerusalem (10:32). Jesus always gets there first. He won’t ask us to go on mission where he is not already present and at work. God’s will takes us where his presence and power will sustain us.

SWIMMING PRACTICE

1. Jesus entered the space between you and your bullies. What or who are those bullies Jesus bashed on your behalf?
2. What are some of the most powerful bullies oppressing humanity today?
3. Once Jesus does some bully bashing for us, he wants to do some bully bashing through us. To what space between the bullied and the bullies is Jesus calling you? What kinds of sacrifices might your going involve?
4. What excuses for not going with Jesus on your bully-bashing mission do you need to overcome?

WRAP UP

Discuss and decide on something your group can do collectively in the coming week to step in the space between the bullied and the bully.

SWIMMER’S PRAYER

Lord, set us free from the shores of safe predictability we have built for ourselves. We want to join you in Jerusalem. Fill our hearts so deeply with compassion for the bullied that we are miserable until we act on their behalf. We will leave our fishing boats and nets, our North American dreams, or whatever else keeps us from going where you’re calling us to go and doing what you’re calling us to do. We pray on behalf of the bullied and in the name of Jesus Christ, the bully basher. Amen.