



LEADING GRAY

Speaker Outline (draft)

I. Introduction

a. Setting the Tension:

There are some times in our life, in our ministry, when we're leading small groups that a problem will develop... and the answer is clear... it's black or white.

"Hey, our family could use another car... I'm thinking about stealing one. What do you think?"... or, "Adultery sounds like a lot of fun. What do you think?" In situations like these, the answers can be pretty black or white. Should I murder? Uh, no. Should I love God? Uh, yes.

But in most cases, we know that it's not so neat, not so easy, not so clean... in fact, with most situations that come up in our lives and in the lives of our small group members, things are a bit messier... a bit more gray... where there may not be a clear right/wrong or black/white answers.

b. Illustration: I've seen this in my life and in the groups that I've been in.

- a) in your life
- b) in group

c. You've also seen this in your life and in your community groups.

There are tough questions out there... and you don't have all the answers... nor are you supposed to have all the answers. That's okay. As a community group leader, you're not expected to know how to handle every situation that comes up. So then... how do you provide leadership or direction in those situations that have so many different factors influencing them? How do you navigate and lead wisely through situations where all you see are shades of gray?

II. Identifying Context



So imagine... you may be grabbing a cup of coffee with a group member and he raises a gray issue asking for your advice. Or it could be in the middle of a group meeting as someone shares or asks for some prayer regarding a particular issue in her life. Either way, a group member comes to you individually, or the group as a whole, with a problem. And they want an *answer*. "Make this decision." "Follow this path."

There may be some times when the answer is clear and the main thing that group member needs is a tough reminder or some encouragement to make the right decision. But most of the time it won't be that black and white. *And in those cases, they still want an answer. You need to begin a process. A process of discernment.*

And that process starts with identifying the context... asking the right questions, looking at all the different variables that are at play. And rather than wrestling them each to the ground, the most important part as a group leader is to help our group members engage in a process of discernment.

Again, they'll want an answer. But you'll want to help them engage in a process of discernment. In other words, we want to equip our group members to identify God's work in their own life and the wisest response for them in their particular situation. And in order to do that... you need context. So there are a couple of things that you want to keep in mind:

a. Know the issue.

When it comes to gray issues, there are so many different variables that you need to ask questions instead of immediately trying to give an answer. You want to seek to understand rather than being understood. Here are some helpful questions that you should be raising in your mind...

- **What exactly is going on?**
What variables are going on in the life of this group member? Is there something else that is going on in their life that is making this a gray issue for the group member? Again, ask lots of questions. And in doing so, you allow the group member the space to own their own process of discernment.
- **What is the best environment to address the issue?**
If someone raises an issue during the small group meeting, sometimes it may be appropriate to discuss the matter with the whole group... which can be a very helpful thing since God gives us our community groups to work things out. But often times, you know fully well (if you've been in some groups like mine), that the group meeting may not be the best place to address the issue... and talking about it with the group member outside of the meeting is the most appropriate place.



b. Know the other person.

- **Where are they in their walk with Christ?**

We may need to address believers and non-believers differently. If the group member is in a position of influence... that may be a factor to consider. If the group member has had bad experiences with judgment and legalism... that may be something to consider.

- **Keep the relationship a priority.**

We all know that we model/influence people through relational deposits over time. Do you have the relational capital to ask them the hard questions? Is there another member who has the relational capacity to address the member? Your community is designed to be a safe place. Sometimes that means finding *comfort* in the prayers and encouragement of the other group members. Sometimes that means being *uncomfortably* challenged to live or think differently. Either way, regardless of the decision that a group member makes in a gray situation, how can you keep the environment safe for this and future discussions?

c. Know yourself.

- **Where do you tend to be? Grace vs. truth.**

In a recent sermon series at North Point, we discussed the idea of judgment and how quick people are to judge without seeing if there is a plank in our own eye. Is there a plank in my own eye? Moreover, do I tend to be a person who is more grace-oriented or law-oriented?

When I look at situations, does everything easily boil down to a black and white decision? Sure we can speak from own experience, our own life... "This is what God has shown me"... but can we step away from simply providing an answer and instead, help the group member to own a process of discernment? Are we too ready to speak into people's lives? Remember, we want to help the group member identify God's work in their own life and the wisest response for them in their particular situation... not just provide the member with an answer.

- **"I don't know".**

Sometimes, you just won't know how to provide any direction, and that's okay. It may be that the issue is way over your head or out of your capacity. "Wow, that is a really heavy decision." Remember, you can always ask your Group Director for guidance. I know your directors are more than willing to talk with you about it and if we need to, we can point you or your group member to the right place for further counsel. That's what we're here to do.

And so a group member comes up to you and wants some help. They tell you about some gray situation and ask "Okay, what do I do?" And instead of immediately



answering “Oh you should choose this door or this door”, instead, you begin this process that identifies the context of what’s going on with the situation, what’s going on with the group member, and what’s going on in you with regards to providing leadership for this group member. So as you uncover all these variables, what next? What lens do they use to start shaping these variables towards a wise plan of action? In other words, what tools do you use to discern your next step?

III. Discernment

a. Prayer

- How often do you spend time trying to come up with a decision in life and yet you never take a moment to ask God? There is an aspect of group leadership that is really leaning into the Holy Spirit... a dependence on God that says, “If I’m going to provide any kind of decent leadership for this group, I need to consistently asking God for wisdom and discernment.”
- And here’s the great thing, the Bible actually invites us to do so... if you lack wisdom, ask God who gives generously. So... you and your group member could take a moment to pray together. If the issue comes up during the group time, you could pray as a group to seek God’s counsel. You could set aside a day or a week to pray on your own and then come back together to see if you have a clearer sense from God on how to respond. As basic as it sounds, God grants wisdom to those who seek it... so seek it.

b. Scripture

As we pray about gray situations, there are times when God will give your group member a sense of direction. However, there are times when God will speak through the pages of Scripture. If we believe the Bible is God’s Word, then it makes a lot of sense to see if there is anything that God has spoken to us about gray situations in the Bible.

- **Are there any principles in the Bible that speak to the gray issues of life?**
Sure there may be nothing in the Bible that specifically prohibits alcohol. Sure there may be no list of specific commandments that tell you what boundaries you can or cannot cross in a dating relationship. But does the Bible speak to any principles about influencing others and being a people set apart for God? Does the Bible speak to any principles about valuing and honoring others? Sure. I’m not trying to say that the Bible is some magical answer book. But it’s definitely one thing for your group member to make decisions about gray issues out of their own experience and wisdom... and it’s another thing to be



intentional about seeing if God's Word can give your group member a lens by which to come to a wise decision. How can you encourage your group member to spend time in Scripture?

- **Opinions, persuasions, conviction.**

One cautionary word as you encourage your group members to search through Scripture as a basis for discernment is to understand this difference between opinions, persuasions, and convictions.

There are some issues that the Bible is clear about and no matter how "gray" the situation may be, there may very well be a black/white answer. Oftentimes, it's a decision that a group member needs to make about living under Biblical authority or simply living under their own opinions. But in most cases, it really is about making a decision between possible

opinions, persuasions, convictions... and not everything necessarily goes into the conviction bucket. What decisions is the group member comfortable making according to their persuasions? What decisions is the group member comfortable making according to their convictions that are based on Biblical principles? (Principles don't equal absolute solutions.)

c. **Community**

- **God gave us community as a tool to work these things out.**

Community plays a role in the process of decision-making. In other words, *wisdom seeks counsel*. Sometimes a group member will share something during prayer time and asks the group for their thoughts. And someone from your group may have a pretty good handle on things to think about for another person... maybe from their own experience... maybe from their understanding of Scripture.

Regardless, the point is that decisions don't have to be made in a vacuum. Because God gave us community as a tool to work these things out, we don't have to make decisions in a vacuum.

- **Community outside your community group.**

While your community group can be a great place to bounce off ideas and opinions, sometimes they may not be the wisest people. If you've ever been in a community group before, you know that to be the case... sometimes you can get some not-so-helpful counsel. Here's where group members can ask you as a leader to provide some direction. But you can also encourage them to ask trusted mentors or peers that they trust aren't simply going to tell them what they want to hear... but will help them through a process of discernment.

d. **Best Question Ever**

- **"In light of your past experience, your current circumstances, your future hopes and dreams, what is the wise thing for you to do?"**



Several years ago, Andy Stanley wrote a book about making wise choices... and he says that in response to every decision we make in our life, we can ask this question as a filter in helping us come to a decision. For us as group leaders trying to lead through gray situations, what this question does is it takes into account all those issues of context that we talked about... and filters them through the tools of discernment that we talked about... prayer, Scripture, community... and hopefully through that process... where we've started with a gray situation... we've asked this question... and are now moving in a direction of wisdom.

IV. CONCLUSION

One of the things you may have noticed is that this process of decision-making is not just for gray situations. It's actually a process to follow for all kinds of issues... white, black, gray. Because before you or your group members make any decisions in life, you have to know the context. And then you have to be able to filter all those variables through a lens of discernment that's shaped by the way you understand life... and where do you develop that lens or that worldview? Through prayer. Through Scripture. Through community.

As group leaders we need to be consistently doing this. And as we lead our groups, the best thing we can do is walk with our group members in this direction and so giving them the capacity and space to own their own process of discernment.