

Just before I start today's message, I'm excited to announce that next Sunday, we'll be launching a new 10-week sermon series on the Old Testament book of Nehemiah. We're calling the series *Re-Visioning: Pursuing God's Purpose Through Fresh Eyes*.

In the book of Nehemiah, we witness a remarkable story of restoration and resilience as Nehemiah leads the people of Israel in rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. Here at Cornerstone, we're about to enter into a season of discerning God's longer-term vision for the church, and this upcoming series in Nehemiah will help get us ready for that. Each message will unpack key principles for overcoming obstacles and uniting together as we pursue God's purposes through fresh eyes.

Again, that starts next Sunday. Anybody excited?

We've also heard from a number of you who have expressed excitement about our current series, *Relational Spaces*, which we'll be wrapping up today. This series connects very closely with:

Cornerstone's Mission Statement

Making space for Jesus to shape people together in God's love.

This is a way of saying that Cornerstone exists to make disciples—followers or apprentices—of Jesus Christ. Discipleship is about *being with Jesus to learn from Jesus how to become like Jesus*, and helping others to do the same.

In shaping us to become like him, Jesus shapes us in *God's love*, which is fully and perfectly revealed in the person of Jesus, especially in his cross. Indeed, being shaped in Christ-like, self-sacrificial love for the sake of others is at the very centre of God's purposes for you and me.

And you can't have love without relationships. Love is relational through and through, and therefore our main job as a church is to create *relational spaces* where people can be shaped together in God's love as they encounter Jesus and one another.

This series has to do with how Jesus works across four different *relational spaces* to shape us as his disciples.¹ Let's take a moment to review them.

The Four Relational Spaces

1. **Public spaces** – gatherings of 100+ people focused around a shared event or experience.
2. **Social spaces** – gatherings of 20-70 people, where we build affinity with others.
3. **Personal spaces** – groups of 4-12 people, where we reveal ourselves more openly.

¹ See Joseph R. Myers, *The Search to Belong: Rethinking Intimacy, Community, and Small Groups*, p. 7, 20, 36-37; see also Bobby Harrington and Alex Absalom, *Discipleship that Fits: Five Kinds of Relationships God Uses to Help Us Grow*, p. 51.

4. **Transparent spaces** – micro groups of 2-4 people, where true vulnerability is shared.

Public spaces are gatherings of 100 or more people around a shared event or experience. The focus is primarily on the event or experience itself, rather than building relational depth with others who are present.

Social spaces are gatherings of 20-70 or so people, where we can share snapshots of who we are and build affinity with others.

Personal spaces consist of small groups of 4-12 people where we reveal ourselves on a more personal level.

And then there are *transparent spaces*, micro groups of 2-3 people (4 at the most), where true vulnerability, openness and candor are shared.

As you can see in this next chart, the biblical gospels make it clear that Jesus worked across all four relational spaces in his disciple-making ministry, and he continues to do so today by his Spirit, through his church.

Jesus and the Four Relational Spaces

1. **Public (100's to 1000's)— Jesus & Crowds**
(Matt. 5:1-12; Mk. 6:34; Jn. 6:1-2)
2. **Social (20-70)— Jesus & the Seventy; Parties**
(Lk. 10:1; Matt. 9:9-13; Lk. 19)
3. **Personal (4-12)—Jesus & the Twelve**
(Matt. 8:23-27; Mk. 8:27-33; Jn. 13)
4. **Transparent (2-4)—Jesus & the Three**
(Matt. 26:36-38; Mk. 10:35-45; Lk. 9:28-36)

Our mission as a church is to make such relational spaces available, as well as to point people to where such spaces can be found.

Three weeks ago, we looked at Sunday worship services as the primary public space that we offer here at Cornerstone. We learned that worship services are especially effective at delivering two vital discipleship outcomes—*recalibration & renewal in Jesus* as well as *biblical teaching*.

Two weeks ago, Pastor Andrew discussed how Cornerstone's social spaces— such as Open Table Thursday dinners, Young Adult gatherings, and serving together on ministry teams— are especially effective in helping us *make connections and build affinities* with each other, as well as enabling us to *join together in a common mission*.

Last Sunday, Pastor Jeremy talked about small groups— the primary ministry Cornerstone offers in the personal context— where we share our lives with each other and learn to follow Jesus in *supportive community through presence, prayer and practical support*.

Today, we're going to wrap up the series by looking at the fourth relational space— the transparent space.

Before we do, let me remind you that each of four these relational spaces is uniquely set up to deliver a particular set of discipleship outcomes that the other spaces are not so effective at delivering. Could this be why the biblical gospels show Jesus making good use of all four relational spaces in his own disciple-making ministry?

As author Joseph Myers suggests, healthy discipleship is the result of holding “harmonious connections across all four spaces.”²

Put another way, don't put all your eggs into any one relational space basket. No single relational space can deliver everything you're going to need to become a healthy, growing disciple of Jesus. While a certain space or spaces may be a special focal point in your life for a season, each of the four relational spaces needs to play a vital part in your overall discipleship journey.

With that bit of review in mind, let's go ahead and unpack the last of the four relational spaces— *transparent space*. Not always, but quite often, the relationships we have in the transparent space will emerge from existing relationships that have been developed in the personal, social or public contexts.³

Today, we're going to consider the *characteristics* and *impact* of discipleship in the transparent space. We begin with its characteristics.

1. The characteristics of discipleship in the transparent space.

In the transparent context, two or three people— perhaps as many as four— share a close bond, and discipleship is marked by relational intimacy. To borrow language from the book of Genesis, these are those rare high-trust relationships where I allow one or two others know the “naked truth” about me, and yet we “not ashamed” by this.⁴

In transparent spaces, pretense falls away, and I share my truest self. There is no hiding here.

Jesus is our ultimate model in this. The Bible makes it clear that was tempted in every way, just as we are, and yet without sin.⁵ This means that Jesus was in no way immune to the disappointments, hurts, weariness and weakness that we all experience. In addition to constantly bringing his vulnerabilities and burdens to God the Father in prayer, there were also times when Jesus shared them transparently with his three closest disciples— Peter, James and John. We see a prime example of this in Matthew 26, which says:

Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, “Sit here while I go over there and pray.” He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and

² Myers, *The Search to Belong*, p. 51.

³ See *Harrington and Absalom, Discipleship that Fits*, p. 160.

⁴ See Genesis 2:25

⁵ See Hebrews 4:14-16

he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.”⁶

Out of his twelve disciples, Jesus allowed Peter, James and John to get especially up close and personal in his life and ministry. He revealed himself to them not only in terms of his vulnerabilities, but in a number of other ways as well.

For example, upon learning of the death of Jairus’ daughter, Jesus went to the man’s home and raised the little girl from the dead. In doing so, Mark tells us that:

He did not let anyone follow him except Peter, James and John the brother of James.⁷

The same three were with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration, where Jesus’ clothes became dazzling white, and the Old Testament figures Moses and Elijah appeared and spoke with him. Suddenly, the voice of God the Father came from a cloud above, saying of Jesus, “This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!”⁸

How would you like to have been there to witness this divine revelation of Jesus’ identity? Jesus didn’t let all his disciples in on that sacred moment, but Peter, James and John he did.

The apostle Paul had a transparent space relationship with his young pastoral protégé, Timothy. Like Jesus did with his own disciples, Paul mentored Timothy in leadership by giving him up close and personal access to his own life and ministry, including the good, the bad and the ugly. The transparent, life-on-life nature their relationship is made clear in these words from Paul to Timothy:

You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, persecutions, sufferings— what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured. Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them. In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted...⁹

Later, we’ll look at another biblical example of discipleship in the transparent space. But at this time, I think it would be helpful to take a moment to compare and contrast what self-disclosure looks like in personal spaces vs. transparent spaces.

Again, last week Pastor Jeremy talked about personal spaces— small groups of 4-12 people. He explained that our small groups ministry is absolutely vital when it comes to providing the spaces people need to practice the New Testament “one another” commands. Small groups also go a long way to make a big church feel smaller, and can greatly enhance your sense of connection and belonging in a church of this size. Which is why we’re so blessed to have as many as 50 small groups at Cornerstone—can we give God praise for that? And can we express our thanks to Pastor Jeremy for his faithful, long-term ministry in that space?

⁶ Matthew 26:37-38 (NIV)

⁷ Mark 5:37 (NIV)

⁸ See Mark 9:2-13

⁹ 2 Timothy 3:10-12 (NIV)

Part of how we connect with others in small groups is by sharing our thoughts, feelings and experiences on a personal level— we open our lives and are real with each other— but *usually not on the level of “naked” vulnerability that is reserved for transparent spaces*. It’s important to appreciate this distinction.

Have any of you ever been a part of a small group where someone went too far in disclosing private information about themselves or others? I have, more than once. When this occurs, the group dynamic can get awkward and uncomfortable in a hurry! Healthy relational competency in small groups involves open, honest, vulnerable sharing *within appropriate boundaries*.

I love my small group, and we share openly with each other every time we meet. I’m just a participant in our group, not a leader, which is a real blessing for me as a pastor who so often has to lead in other contexts. I endeavour to share my life authentically with my fellow small group members, and that includes making myself appropriately vulnerable. But especially because I’m a pastor, sometimes there are church-related situations and dynamics I’m aware of, and ministry-related burdens and frustrations I carry, that I cannot appropriately disclose to the members of my small group, as much as I appreciate and trust each one of them. Sometimes, if I’m careful, I might be able to share my concerns along these lines in a very general way. But to share any specifics would be a poor stewardship of information on my part, a breach of confidentiality and trust. In fact, if I were to overshare along these lines in a small group meeting, my fellow group members would be right to take me aside to lovingly challenge and correct me.

Over the years, Christian authors, pastors and ministry practitioners have held up intimate vulnerability as if it’s some kind of holy pinnacle we should *always* strive for in *all* of our groups and relationships. It sounds inspiring, but can you see how misguided it is? Think about it: Would your relationships in any and every space be better if they were based on the “naked” truth? I don’t think so. Joseph Myers writes that:

We muddle things in [the] other spaces by building [inappropriate] expectations of intimacy. In fact, this is [often] what we hope, promote and plan for. It would be far healthier to promote social or personal connection[s] [for what they are], leaving intimacy to groups with an appropriate number of people. Two is a good number.¹⁰

We can be truthful, authentic and vulnerable in what we share without having to share *everything*. The public, social and personal spaces are not designed to deliver “naked truth” discipleship. That is reserved for the transparent space. As authors Bobby Harrington and Alex Absalom say in their book on the subject:

God calls us to this level with just a few people in a context of mutual love, respect and trust.¹¹

Even in the transparent space, we do not *indiscriminately* share the naked truth about ourselves. But more than in any other space, it is in the transparent space that we commit to revealing our deepest feelings, desires, struggles and joys; we don’t hide from being known.

It’s important to note that that **transparent space relationships can be either mutual or one-way in terms of self-disclosure**.

¹⁰ Myers, *The Search to Belong*, p. 70.

¹¹ Harrington and Absalom, *Discipleship that Fits*, p. 165.

For example, my marriage to Jan is a mutual relationship in the transparent space— a two-way street in which Jesus shapes both of us through the highs, lows and in-betweens of the life we share as husband and wife as we seek to follow him together.

My relationship with my spiritual director, however, is more of a one-way street when it comes to self-disclosure. A spiritual director is a specially trained companion who meets with you one on one to help you discern God's presence, voice and movement in your life. When I meet with my spiritual director, the focus of each session on my walk with Jesus, and that's by design. It's more one-sided in terms of self-disclosure, as are some other types of transparent space relationships, like pastoral counselling or Christian psychotherapy.

But whether more mutual or more one-way, discipleship in the transparent space tends to be especially impactful. In my own case, spiritual direction has had a disproportionate impact on my growth as a disciple of Jesus. Indeed, our next point about is about:

2. The impact of discipleship in transparent spaces.

Discipleship that happens in transparent spaces tends to have the greatest impact on our lives. Because it is so open and vulnerable, it is a space in which the Spirit of Jesus can work within us to bring about transformation at the deepest levels. To quote Bobby Harrington and Alex Absalom again:

Of all the contexts of discipleship, the transparent context is where the most transformation takes place. Yet that doesn't diminish the value of the other contexts; on the contrary, each supports the others. Taking away one of the contexts results in a lopsided community.¹²

Along with great potential for transformation, the transparent space includes added potential for us to experience hurt and disappointment, precisely because it involves such openness and vulnerability.¹³

Take Jesus' relationship with Peter as an example. It was an especially close and intimate friendship in which Peter learned that he could trust Jesus, and in which Jesus could speak directly into Peter's life about both the potential and the pitfalls of his character.

Their relationship included moments of considerable joy as well as deep pain. Not only did Jesus, as the disciple-maker, receive great love and faith from Peter, but he was also greatly hurt by Peter. You see, when it comes to disciple-making relationships in the transparent space, ups and downs are to be expected.

Which might lead you to wonder, "Are such relationships worth the risk?" How do you think Peter would respond to that question? He'd say, "Yes, yes— a thousand times, yes!" In fact, it was through a transparent space encounter with Jesus that the darkest night of Peter's life would be transformed into a bright morning of healing and redemption.

The night I'm referring to is the one in which Peter— the very same Peter who had sworn up and down that he would never deny Jesus— did just that. To save his own skin Peter vehemently denied that he

¹² Ibid, 174.

¹³ Ibid, p. 160.

had ever known Jesus. And he did so not once, not twice, but three times that night, as he stood warming himself over a charcoal fire. ¹⁴

A charcoal fire. That term, in its original Greek, appears only twice in the entire New Testament— in John 18, when Peter denies Jesus, and then again in John 21, when Peter, after a morning of fishing, has a face-to-face encounter with the risen Jesus on the beach. ¹⁵

Does anyone know what was Jesus doing during that beach encounter? He was cooking fish for breakfast— over a *charcoal fire*. Your sense of smell can trigger your memory and emotions in an especially powerful way. Jesus made that fire just for Peter so he could take him back to the scene of his three denials.

And there, on the shoreline, with the smell of charcoal in the air, Jesus asks Peter three times “Do you love me?”

And Peter responds three times, “Lord, you know I love you.”

And Jesus commissions him three times: “Feed my sheep.”

It is a powerful moment of redemption, not only for Peter, but also for the church, which Peter had just been reinstated to lead.

And so, in a transparent space encounter with Jesus, Peter’s darkest night became a bright morning of healing and redemption. It’s a powerful example of the transforming impact of discipleship in the transparent space.

Many pastors and church ministry practitioners will testify to the fact that they see the greatest levels of transformation in and through discipleship and leadership development efforts that take place in the transparent space. ¹⁶

In the case of my own pastoral ministry, I have the incredible privilege of witnessing such transformation in one-on-one spiritual direction sessions with individuals from this congregation. You see, ever since I started seeing a spiritual director over 10 years ago, I had a persistent sense that God was calling to one day become a spiritual director myself. In 2020, I started formal training, and for over three years now I’ve been practicing spiritual direction as one element of my pastoral ministry at Cornerstone.

To witness the God-encounters that take place in this transparent space is nothing short of breathtaking to me. It has virtually nothing to do with me or my ability. I just offer the space, and from there, it’s all about how the Spirit of Jesus works in the life of the individual. There have been times where I’ve felt like a fly on the wall of the holy-of-holies, that I get to witness the sacred work that Jesus does to disciple people in the transparent space of spiritual direction.

<https://www.tyndale.ca/tsfc/spiritual-directors>

¹⁴ See John 18:15-19; 25-27

¹⁵ See John 21:15-19

¹⁶ See Harrington and Absalom, *Discipleship that Fits*, 163-164.

Unfortunately, I cannot take on new people for spiritual direction at this time, as I'm currently at capacity in light of my other ministry responsibilities. But if you're interested in connecting with a spiritual director, there are many great ones throughout the GTA. On the screen, you'll see a QR code to the web page for the Tyndale Association of Spiritual Directors, where you can find someone to come alongside you as a companion to help you discern God's presence, voice and movement in your life.

Whether it's seeing a spiritual director, or something else, how might God be calling you to engage in transparent space discipleship? What next step is the Lord is leading you to take along these lines?

It might be seeing a pastor for counselling, or a Christian psychotherapist. Feel free to reach out to any of the pastors for an appointment or a referral.

It might be pursuing Jesus more intentionally together with your spouse. Jesus-centred marriage has rightly been referred to as a "crucible of discipleship" because of the unique and profound intimacy shared between husband and wife. A healthy married couple sees each other, flaws and all, and is called to love each other unconditionally and sacrificially, through it all. In the context of our marriages, Jesus confronts our self-lordship by training us to lay down our lives for the sake of another, and in so doing, he disciples us to become like himself.

A next step for you in the transparent space might be to more intentionally spend time discipling your children. In fact, the parent-child relationship can be said to be the first and most natural disciple-making relationship. In Deuteronomy, God instructs his people to:

Write these commandments that I've given you today on your hearts. Get them inside of you and then get them inside your children. Talk about them wherever you are, sitting at home or walking in the street; talk about them from the time you get up in the morning to when you fall into bed at night. Tie them on your hands and foreheads as a reminder; inscribe them on the doorposts of your homes and on your city gates.¹⁷

What if you developed a habit of reading and discussing the Bible with your child on a daily basis? A couple of recommended Children's Bibles for kids ages 5 and up are:

- *The Jesus Storybook Bible*
- *God's Big Picture Bible Storybook*

And what if you developed a habit of bedtime conversation with your kids? When our kids were young, at bedtime we would ask what their high, medium and low was for that day. This was something we learned from Pastor Andrew and Libby. Sometimes this routine would lead to our kids to open up about something we might not have known otherwise, and we were able to discuss what they were feeling and pray with them.

A next step for you might be to organically form a discipleship group consisting of 2-4 people where you mutually, intentionally and confidentially share your lives with each other— the good, bad, and the ugly—as you open the Bible and pray together. In the process, the Spirit of Jesus will shape you more fully in God's love. Pray for who might join you in this, and then invite them. It should be just one or two others you trust and with whom you have good rapport.

¹⁷ Deuteronomy 6:6-7 (MSG)

As the worship team makes their way back up, let me share a few more next step possibilities.

Maybe at this stage of your journey your next step does not involve the transparent space, but one of the other relational spaces we've talked about in this series.

Open Table Thursday

<https://cornerstonechurch.ca/event/open-table/>

Serving Opportunities

<https://cornerstonechurch.ca/serve/>

Group Launch

<https://cornerstonechurch.ca/smallgroups/>

For example, in terms of *public space discipleship*, perhaps God is calling you to be more consistent in your Sunday worship attendance.

In terms of *social space discipleship*, maybe God is calling you to connect and build affinity with others by attending Open Table Thursday dinners, or becoming part of a ministry team where you can join in God's mission with others.

In terms of *personal space discipleship*, maybe God is calling you to join a small group. You can do that by signing up to attend our next Group Launch event on Sunday, May 26.

Where applicable, you'll find QR codes for these spaces on the screen, which we'll leave up for a few moments so you can snap a photo of them if you like.

May God bless you all, as you live into the four relational spaces where Jesus shapes us together in God's love. Amen.