
Study Guide for *The Gospel according to Oprah*

By Marcia Z. Nelson

Study Guide by Joyce MacKichan Walker

Introduction

This study guide explores two chapters of the book at each session, over five sessions, and it assumes participants have read the chapters for each session. It intends to engage them in analysis, reflection, and application of the principles and insights to their own lives as individuals and as part of a faith community. Oprah's explicit goal is to help people think about things differently. Strive to lead discussions and explorations that intentionally invite participants to do just that. If at all possible, arrange your chairs in a circle so you can see one another as you speak.

The suggestions will work best when accompanied by silence for thinking, encouragement of lots of ways of responding to and talking about ideas, and attentive, open listening to one another. A study like this is not the time to criticize others' beliefs and ideas. It is a time to try to better understand the different ways we live out our faith, and the variety of ways we express it.

Every session plan focuses more on one of the two chapters. However, there are usually questions for exploring the second chapter, especially if it was not emphasized in the session plan. Choose which chapter will result in the most fruitful discussion for your group.

Many questions are offered for your use. In a small group they can be asked of the whole group. In a larger group you will help more people participate, and even improve the quality of responses, by dividing into smaller groups to answer questions, and by inviting different small groups to respond to fewer questions in more depth and then offer their best thoughts to the whole group. Small group time need not be long, but small groups provide opportunities for more people to express their ideas, and for insights to build upon one another.

The questions offered are a guide. If you want to direct the conversation toward these explicit ends, follow them closely and keep participants on track. If you know participants well, select the questions that will be most fruitful for them. If the conversation goes off on a

tangent, decide whether it is a useful tangent to follow or whether you want to bring it back to the train of thought developed here. There are many more questions here than you can use in a fifty-minute session. As you prepare, select the ones that will be most useful to your group in your context. Write down your own questions as you read. You may find you have questions more suited to your group, more in touch with your community, more fruitful for going in directions that will be useful for your context.

Organization of the session plans

Each session has a stated *Theme*, an activity for *Engaging* interest and to get people involved in the topic quickly, *Questions for reflection*, *Insights from Scripture* on the topic, and a *Responding* activity to help participants explore in some way one of the questions, “What do I want to change? What about this matters to me?” Often this activity includes a *Closing prayer*. If not, one is suggested.

All quotes from the Bible are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

Oprah’s theme for all she does is being our best selves through transformation. She wants all of us to improve ourselves, make a difference, and learn from life’s lessons. I pray this guide will help you as leader to enable meaningful and creative conversation that will help participants embody that transformation in ways that are faithful to the gospel we live and the faith that claims us as God’s own.

The book’s introduction, “Oprah on a Mission,” provides a useful background on Oprah, the influence of her African American spiritual roots, and the way story shapes her theology (her ideas about God) and therefore what she values. Consider summarizing the introduction for the group at the first meeting, after the people have introduced themselves, and then use “A Little List,” pages xv to xvii, as a way to generate interest in the “ten reasons why Oprah is a compelling and successful spiritual teacher,” which the study will examine.

At the end of the introduction to the book, Oprah is quoted, claiming God’s hand in the direction and purpose for her life. “The voices of the world told me I was poor, colored and female, but God had another vision for me” (page xix). Point this out to participants as they begin. It is helpful to enter the study knowing that Oprah knows *whose* she is.

Chapters 1 and 2

Theme

We are all, like Oprah in the chapter 1 title, “very human.” What does it mean to be human? How can we help ourselves and others cope with “being human,” or rejoice in our humanity?

Engaging

Invite participants to introduce themselves by telling their name and what they hope to gain from this book study. After everyone has spoken, ask them to think of someone they know whose tenaciousness in the face of failure or hardship inspires them. Give them a minute to think of someone. If you have a small group (fewer than eight people), take a couple of minutes for each person to name someone and say what about that person inspires them. Rather than going around the circle, invite participants to speak when they are ready so as not to force everyone to have a person to name. If you have a large group, put participants in groups of three or four to do this activity; otherwise, it will take too much time.

Questions for reflection

1. What are some of the things the author means when she claims Oprah is “very human”?
2. Why do you think this is appealing to her audiences? Name a variety of emotions and responses this might stir in them.
3. Oprah would say that God is using her humanness, weaknesses, failures, to help others. How does that work? In what ways does seeing the humanness of others help you personally? What experience do you have of others learning from or being encouraged by your humanness?

Insights from Scripture

In Paul's Letter to the Romans, he laments the fact that we cannot seem to do what the law intends to inspire us to do. Christians refer to that as sin. Read Romans 7:14–25a aloud.¹ Before you begin, ask participants to listen for how Paul describes his humanness.

¹⁴ For we know that the law is spiritual; but I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin. ¹⁵ I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. ¹⁶ Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. ¹⁷ But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. ¹⁸ For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. ¹⁹ For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. ²⁰ Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. ²¹ So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. ²² For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, ²³ but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. ²⁴ Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? ²⁵ Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

1. How does Paul describe his predicament?
2. What comparisons can we draw to Oprah's picture of flawed humanity, both in herself and her guests?
3. Chapter 2, "Oprah Acknowledges Suffering and Wants to Relieve It," presents Oprah's goal to make things better. She sees this as a part of our God-given humanity—that we do the good we, and God, want. What in this chapter inspires you to acknowledge suffering and make a difference?
4. What do you see differently because of today's reading and conversation?

1. The notes for this passage in the *HarperCollins Study Bible* are very helpful. Try not to get bogged down in the technicalities of interpreting all of Paul's discussion about the law and sin, but focus on verses 15 and 19, and Paul's own answer to who will rescue him from this predicament—Jesus Christ.

Responding

Tell participants you will sit in silence with them for a couple of minutes. Invite them to use this time to think about this aspect of their own humanness—the good they might want to do and do not do, the sin they do not want to commit, but do. Tell them they will have an opportunity to name silently or aloud things they would like to change, using the sentence beginning, “Great God, help me to . . .”

Closing prayer

After the time of silence, offer this prayer:

Loving God, we do not understand our own actions. For we do not do what we want, but we do the very thing we hate. Hear our prayers as we offer them silently or aloud . . .

Great God, help me to . . .

End the prayer with, “‘Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!’ Amen.”

Additional questions

Here are some additional questions to help you explore chapter 2 more thoroughly if you have time.

1. How does Oprah avoid the pitfall of thinking the problems are overwhelming and our personal resources and time too little?
2. Read aloud from the second full paragraph on page 9, beginning with the line, “One of the ways . . .” through the end of the paragraph. Ask, “In what ways do you see suffering as redemptive?”
3. Respond to the idea Nelson presents that suffering is a collective experience. (See the paragraph that begins at the bottom of page 9 and continues on page 10.) In what ways do you see your community of faith reaching out to help others because of suffering?
4. Do you agree that the contemporary women’s movement tries to “make the personal political” (page 16)? If so, give examples. What is good about that effort?

2

Chapters 3 and 4

Theme

“[I]t is just as impossible for anyone to be a Christian by himself or herself as it is for an arm or a leg to live and function apart from the body and the head. To be Christian is by definition to belong to the church. There is no such thing as a purely individualistic relationship to Christ.”² The church community is part of the world community and a composite of smaller communities that nurture and support the many aspects of ministry to which we are called.

Engaging

Place two pieces of newsprint on a table or on newsprint stands. Write “community” in the center of one and “self” in the center of the other, and draw short lines out from the words in all directions. As participants come in, invite them to build a “word web” around the words by writing definitions, things the words make them think of, things they value about the words, and so forth. Tell them they are welcome to write more than once on each page, and also to respond to things others write by adding additional ideas.

Questions for reflection

Read aloud the quote from Guthrie found in the theme statement, and also the quote from L. Gregory Jones at the end of paragraph 1 on page 17. Tell participants these two theologians clearly agree on the necessity of community for the practice of faith. Then ask:

1. What words from the word web on “community” support that belief?
2. What other things would you say about the value of the community to the faith and practice of an individual?

2. Shirley C. Guthrie, Jr., *Christian Doctrine*, page 354.

3. According to chapter 3, what aspects of community does Oprah consciously try to develop for her TV, online, and magazine audiences? Which of these are very important to you personally and why?
4. What are some things the church community provides that Oprah cannot?
5. Name one thing you treasure about the community nature of your church, and tell why it matters so much to you. (This could be done in small groups of three or four to allow time for more lengthy reflections than a one-sentence response.)

Insights from Scripture

Tell participants: Oprah is intentionally building community with her book club—a sense of belonging and interaction with fellow readers. She intends to engage people in deep conversation, in listening to others, in reflection, in the possibility of broadening perspectives, and even in changing minds and shaping lives. Those who wrote and compiled the Gospels had some similar intentions: (Read these aloud or invite others to do so if they have Bibles.)

“The beginning of the *good news* of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”
Mark 1:1

“Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, *to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.*”
Luke 1:1–4

“Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written *so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.*” John 20:30–31

(All italics added.)

1. What purposes do you see highlighted here? What insights do you find behind the words in addition to the explicit purposes presented?

2. In what ways do the Gospels engage people in deep conversation, in listening to others, in reflection, in the possibility of broadening perspectives, in changing minds and shaping lives? Give an example of one way the Gospels have done any of these things for you.
3. What do you cherish about what you are doing right now (using a book to stimulate thinking about faith)?
4. In chapter 4 we are introduced to ways Oprah not only invites her audience to be self-reflective but provides tools for that process. What did you find here that might be useful to you?
5. What do you see differently because of today's reading and conversation?

Responding

Close your time together with use of the “Examen” that Nelson talks about on page 28. This is an abbreviated version that is very simple and can be used every evening for a five-minute reflection on one's day and for a time of drawing close to God.

Invite participants to sit quietly, close their eyes, and select one of these two sets of questions to answer for themselves:

When did I give love today? When did I receive love today?

OR

When did I feel most alive? When did I feel most drained of life?

After a time of silence, invite participants to reflect on their experience of the process. If they would like to know more about the *Examen of Consciousness*, they will find a description of a more complete process at <http://www.americancatholic.org/Newsletters/CU/ac0303.asp>.

Closing prayer

Close with the Lord's Prayer.

Chapters 5 and 6

Theme

When we think of gratitude as a practice, we are more likely to consciously express it, and then reap the benefits of our own gratefulness in ourselves and in others.

Engaging

Invite participants to name their favorite childhood graces, or one they enjoy using now, if indeed they use a blessing at mealtime. A few examples are offered. If you don't know your group and therefore don't know if they are likely to have some to share, have on hand the list of Table Graces that is found at the end of this section. Ask the group your choice of these questions:

1. What is the purpose of a mealtime grace?
2. Why is it called a "grace"? (From the Latin for "gratitude, thanks," *gratia*. Also *grazie* [Italian], *gracias* [Spanish], and so forth.)
3. "You don't have to pray, but it will help you celebrate. The grateful person knows that she lives well" (page 34). What do you think Nelson means? Do you agree? Why or why not?

Questions for reflection

1. Nelson focuses on thinking of gratitude as a practice and not simply a virtue. What distinction is she making between the two? What difference does it make in our practice of gratitude?
2. Oprah has quoted Meister Eckhart: "If the only prayer you ever say in your life is thank you, that will be enough" (page 31). In what ways is this statement true? In what ways might it oversimplify?
3. In the first paragraph of the section "Research on Gratitude" (pages 32–33), Nelson lists many benefits of recognizing one's

gratitude and expressing it. Ask participants to review that paragraph and name the benefits aloud as you list them on newsprint where all can see them. Then say, “If recognizing and expressing gratitude is a practice for you already, name something you find to be true for you.” Follow up with a question for the whole group, such as, “I wonder why all these benefits can be connected to gratitude. Name some of the connections you see between recognizing and expressing gratitude and these benefits.”

Insights from Scripture

So many places in the Bible call us to be thankful, highlight the importance of expressing thankfulness, or contain poignant expressions of thankfulness with which we can identify. The handout “Psalms That Express Gratitude” has a number of selections from the psalms. Depending on the size of your group and your time frame, use them to examine a faith perspective on gratitude in one of these ways:

1. Copy “Psalms That Express Gratitude,” the handout found at the end of this session, and provide one per person. Give them about five minutes to skim through them and look for one psalm that particularly speaks to them personally or to something about their own situation. Ask for volunteers to briefly tell the group what they chose and why. For a large group, invite them to form groups of three or four people and identify the passage they chose and why.
2. You as leader select one that seems particularly pertinent for your group and lead a discussion about gratitude using it.
3. Assign the psalms to the group, one per person. Give them a minute or two to skim them, then ask them to quickly name what the psalmist is grateful for in their psalm. List them on newsprint. Ask participants to select one from the list they are also grateful for, and to turn to a partner and tell that person what they selected and why.
4. Ask participants to skim the psalms provided, select one that expresses something for which they are grateful, and then finish this statement: “Thank you, God, for _____.”

5. Assign one psalm per small group of three or four people, and ask them to discuss this question: What does this psalm express gratitude for? If we were writing a psalm, what would we want to express our gratitude for?
6. After asking participants to skim the selections for one that expresses some of their own thoughts, tell them to pick a line from it, copy it onto a sheet of notepaper, and then keep writing their own prayer psalm. Allow those who would like to share their writing to do so.
7. What do you see differently because of today's reading and conversation?

Responding

Suggest that participants who are not already doing so begin to keep a gratitude journal, using it as a way to express their gratitude to God each day.

In a time of silence, ask participants to identify situations when they would like to express their gratitude to others. Invite them to begin doing so this week and to pay attention to what it means to them and to others.

Closing prayer

Lead the group in a responsive reading of Psalm 136, inviting participants to speak the response, "For God's steadfast love endures forever."

Additional questions

If you have time to focus on chapter 6 as well as chapter 5, or if you prefer to focus on it instead of chapter 5, here are some questions to help you explore it. Select the ones that engage you, or prepare your own questions.

1. What is Oprah's style of simplicity? What about it is a match for your idea of simplicity? What doesn't fit for you?

2. “Living simply does not mean living without stuff, but living wisely with it, unencumbered by it” (page 37). What does Nelson mean? What would this look like? What stuff are you encumbered by?
3. Look at the second paragraph on page 38 on “compulsive hoarding.” What do you hoard, and why do you think you do that?
4. Even though Oprah, as she explains, can buy “anything, *anything*,” she claims, “I still think twice before I buy anything” (page 39). How would this simplify one’s life? What are some guidelines you follow in order to live more simply?
5. Oprah clearly wants people to respond to her shows, magazine, and Web site with action that will help others: “. . . [S]he scales things down—to letter writing, to community volunteering—so they are doable. She is interested in providing women with a set of instructions, a ‘how-to.’ She would call it empowering” (page 41). Do you find her way of engaging people empowering? If so, in what ways? If not, why not, and what empowers you?
6. Jesus wanted people to “do”—“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19); “. . . let them take up their cross and follow me” (Matthew 16:24); “Go and do likewise” (Luke 10:37b); “. . . [J]ust as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Matthew 25:40). In what ways are these words of Jesus empowering for you?
7. Read aloud the last paragraph of the chapter on page 44. What might you be called to surrender, or what have you surrendered?

Table Graces

Bless us, O Lord, and these your gifts, which we are about to receive from your bounty. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

*God is great, and God is good,
And we thank God for our food;
By God’s hand we all are fed;
Give us, Lord, our daily bread. Amen.*

*God, we thank you for this food.
For rest and home and all things good.
For wind and rain and sun above.
But most of all for those we love. Amen.*

Lord, make us truly grateful for the blessings of this day. Amen.

Lord God, we thank you for all the good things you provide, and we pray for the time when people everywhere shall have the abundance they need. Amen.

O Lord, we thank you for the gifts of your bounty which we enjoy at this table. As you have provided for us in the past, so may you sustain us throughout our lives. While we enjoy your gifts, may we never forget the needy and those in want. Amen.

For health and strength and daily food, we praise your name,
O Lord. Amen.

*Come, Lord Jesus, be our Guest,
And let your gifts to us be blessed. Amen.*

Psalms That Express Gratitude

Psalm 30: ¹I will extol you, O Lord, for you have drawn me up, and did not let my foes rejoice over me. ² O Lord my God, I cried to you for help, and you have healed me. ³ O Lord, you brought up my soul from Sheol, restored me to life from among those gone down to the Pit. ⁴ Sing praises to the Lord, O you his faithful ones, and give thanks to his holy name. ⁵ For his anger is but for a moment; his favor is for a lifetime. Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning. ⁶ As for me, I said in my prosperity, “I shall never be moved.” ⁷ By your favor, O Lord, you had established me as a strong mountain; you hid your face; I was dismayed. ⁸ To you, O Lord, I cried, and to the Lord I made supplication: ⁹ “What profit is there in my death, if I go down to the Pit? Will the dust praise you? Will it tell of your faithfulness?” ¹⁰ Hear, O Lord, and be gracious to me! O Lord, be my helper!” ¹¹ You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, ¹² so that my soul may praise you and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give thanks to you forever.

Psalm 57: ⁷My heart is steadfast, O God, my heart is steadfast. I will sing and make melody. ⁸ Awake, my soul! Awake, O harp and lyre! I will awake the dawn. ⁹ I will give thanks to you, O Lord, among the peoples; I will sing praises to you among the nations. ¹⁰ For your steadfast love is as high as the heavens; your faithfulness extends to the clouds. ¹¹ Be exalted, O God, above the heavens. Let your glory be over all the earth.

Psalm 86: ¹²I give thanks to you, O Lord my God, with my whole heart, and I will glorify your name forever. ¹³ For great is your steadfast love toward me; you have delivered my soul from the depths of Sheol.

Psalm 92: ¹It is good to give thanks to the Lord, to sing praises to your name, O Most High; ² to declare your steadfast love in the morning, and your faithfulness by night, ³ to the music of the lute and the harp, to the melody of the lyre. ⁴ For you, O Lord, have made me glad by your work; at the works of your hands I sing for joy.

Psalm 100: ¹Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth. ² Worship the Lord with gladness; come into his presence with singing. ³ Know that the Lord is God. It is he that made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture. ⁴ Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise. Give thanks to him, bless his name. ⁵ For the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.

Psalm 105: ¹O give thanks to the Lord, call on his name, make known his deeds among the peoples. ² Sing to him, sing praises to him; tell of all his wonderful works. ³ Glory in his holy name; let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice. ⁴ Seek the Lord and his strength; seek his presence con-

tinually. ⁵ Remember the wonderful works he has done, his miracles, and the judgments he uttered, ⁶ O offspring of his servant Abraham, children of Jacob, his chosen ones.

Psalm 106: ¹Praise the Lord! O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever. ²Who can utter the mighty doings of the Lord, or declare all his praise? ³Happy are those who observe justice, who do righteousness at all times. ⁴Remember me, O Lord, when you show favor to your people; help me when you deliver them; ⁵ that I may see the prosperity of your chosen ones, that I may rejoice in the gladness of your nation, that I may glory in your heritage.

Psalm 108: ¹My heart is steadfast, O God, my heart is steadfast; I will sing and make melody. Awake, my soul! ²Awake, O harp and lyre! I will awake the dawn. ³I will give thanks to you, O Lord, among the peoples, and I will sing praises to you among the nations. ⁴For your steadfast love is higher than the heavens, and your faithfulness reaches to the clouds.

Psalm 109: ³⁰With my mouth I will give great thanks to the Lord; I will praise him in the midst of the throng. ³¹For he stands at the right hand of the needy, to save them from those who would condemn them to death.

Psalm 111: ¹Praise the Lord! I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart, in the company of the upright, in the congregation. ²Great are the works of the Lord, studied by all who delight in them. ³Full of honor and majesty is his work, and his righteousness endures forever. ⁴He has gained renown by his wonderful deeds; the Lord is gracious and merciful. ⁵He provides food for those who fear him; he is ever mindful of his covenant. ⁶He has shown his people the power of his works, in giving them the heritage of the nations. ⁷The works of his hands are faithful and just; all his precepts are trustworthy. ⁸They are established forever and ever, to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness. ⁹He sent redemption to his people; he has commanded his covenant forever. Holy and awesome is his name. ¹⁰The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding. His praise endures forever.

Psalm 118: ¹⁹Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the Lord. ²⁰This is the gate of the Lord; the righteous shall enter through it. ²¹I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation. ²²The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. ²³This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes. ²⁴This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Psalm 138: ¹I give you thanks, O Lord, with my whole heart; before the gods I sing your praise; ²I bow down toward your holy temple and give

thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithfulness; for you have exalted your name and your word above everything. ³ On the day I called, you answered me, you increased my strength of soul. ⁴ All the kings of the earth shall praise you, O Lord, for they have heard the words of your mouth. ⁵ They shall sing of the ways of the Lord, for great is the glory of the Lord. ⁶ For though the Lord is high, he regards the lowly; but the haughty he perceives from far away. ⁷ Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve me against the wrath of my enemies; you stretch out your hand, and your right hand delivers me. ⁸ The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me; your steadfast love, O Lord, endures forever. Do not forsake the work of your hands.

Psalm 140: ¹²I know that the Lord maintains the cause of the needy, and executes justice for the poor. ¹³ Surely the righteous shall give thanks to your name; the upright shall live in your presence.

Psalm 142: ¹With my voice I cry to the Lord; with my voice I make supplication to the Lord. ² I pour out my complaint before him; I tell my trouble before him. ³ When my spirit is faint, you know my way. In the path where I walk they have hidden a trap for me. ⁴ Look on my right hand and see—there is no one who takes notice of me; no refuge remains to me; no one cares for me. ⁵ I cry to you, O Lord; I say, “You are my refuge, my portion in the land of the living.” ⁶ Give heed to my cry, for I am brought very low. Save me from my persecutors, for they are too strong for me. ⁷ Bring me out of prison, so that I may give thanks to your name. The righteous will surround me, for you will deal bountifully with me.

Chapters 7 and 8

Theme

“Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work.” 2 Corinthians 9:7–8

Engaging

Invite participants to name someone they admire because of how much that person gives to others, not necessarily in terms of money but in time, care, commitment, volunteer hours, and so forth. If you have a large group, ask them to do this in groups of four or five.

Ask the group to quickly brainstorm the things they think the Bible says about generosity and giving. You may need to make the topic broad to get responses. If they have not touched on it in their list, ask specifically if the Bible says anything about the “benefits” for the giver and note their ideas.

Insights from Scripture

Tell participants: In writing to Christians in the church in Corinth about the contribution they have promised to make to the work of the church in Jerusalem, Paul encourages them with his belief that generosity results in blessings for the giver. Then read 2 Corinthians 9:6–15 aloud to the group, asking them to listen for what Paul believes is the benefit of giving for the giver. Tell them you will ask them to add their ideas to the brainstorming list they created at the beginning of the session, and do so after you read. It will be easier for them to do this if they have Bibles to follow along, or a copy of the passage.

Questions for reflection

1. Oprah's message is that giving brings joy (page 58) and that "You receive from the world what you give to the world. . . . [G]iving pays back the giver" (page 62). Is this message consistent with what Paul says about giving? Why or why not?
2. Christians make a distinction between giving in order to receive a reward from God, and giving out of gratitude for what one has already received from God. In what ways is this consistent with Paul's description?
3. What might the church learn from the way Oprah encourages and solicits both contributions to the causes she highlights and also personal involvement in responding to needs?
4. Referring to Oprah's show on South Africa, Nelson says, "The show's message is one of gratitude and optimism for the future in spite of formidable odds" (page 59). Name some situations of formidable odds of which you are aware, personally, in your community, and in the world. What aspects of the Christian hope encourage us in the face of these situations?
5. Oprah has asked the question, "What would you do for a friend?" (page 62). Invite participants to ponder instead, "What might you do for an enemy?"
6. Galatians 5:22 lists generosity as one of the gifts of the Spirit. What are some specific things people with the gift of generosity do?
7. What do you see differently because of today's reading and conversation?

Responding

Give everyone a three-by-five-inch card. Ask them to write down one way they practice their generosity and one way in which they would like to grow their generosity.

Closing prayer

Invite the group to participate in the litany below. Their response, "Thanks be to God for [God's] indescribable gift," is from 2 Corinthians 9:15.

Leader: For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. (2 Corinthians 8:9)

Group: Thanks be to God for God's indescribable gift!

Leader: For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. (Romans 10:12)

Group: Thanks be to God for God's indescribable gift!

Leader: If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you. (James 1:5)

Group: Thanks be to God for God's indescribable gift!

Leader: Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. (James 1:17)

Group: Thanks be to God for God's indescribable gift!

Leader: You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God. (2 Corinthians 9:11)

Group: Thanks be to God for God's indescribable gift!

Leader: The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. (Galatians 5:22–23a)

Group: Thanks be to God for God's indescribable gift!

Additional questions

If you have time to focus on chapter 7, or if you prefer to focus on it instead of chapter 6, here are some questions to help you explore it. Select the ones that engage you, or prepare your own questions.

1. What does Oprah intend to elicit from her guests by her “listening”? What are some of the things she believes about the importance of confession?
2. “The most important confession anyone can make is not on TV or in the limelight. It’s in those quiet, private moments when we all take on one of the most difficult challenges—confessing the truth to ourselves” (page 47). Why is this kind of confession the most difficult?
3. “Think of confession as life’s strategic opening move. It clears the air, draws you closer to others, frees up creative thinking, leads to inner peace” (page 48). In what ways is this true to your own experience?
4. How is confession redemptive?
5. After reading aloud the first paragraph on page 50 under “Not Judging,” read the story of the woman caught in adultery in John 8:2–11. What model of judgment does Jesus offer here? What response does the crowd adopt? Does this story illustrate the “God lite” Alan Wolfe presents in paragraph 3 on page 50? What does your faith community teach about judgment? What do they practice about judgment? What about you?
6. “[The value of being heard] is also religious, for religions teach the value of confessing sins, affirming beliefs, and being publicly accountable” (page 55). Reformed worship services provide opportunities for the first two of these on most Sundays. In what ways does your community of faith provide public accountability? How might it do this better?

Chapters 9 and 10

Theme

“. . . [T]he Christian practice of forgiveness involves us in a whole way of life, a way that is shaped by an ever-deepening friendship with God and with other people. The practice of forgiveness is not only, or even primarily, a way of dealing with guilt. Instead, its central goal is to reconcile, to restore communion—with God, with one another, and with the whole creation.”

“It may be easier to understand that forgiveness is the right response than to be able to give or receive forgiveness, or even to want to do so.”³

Engaging

Give each participant a copy of the handout “Statements from Chapter 9 about Forgiveness.” Ask them to follow the directions and mark each statement with an “A” for “Agree” or a “D” for “Disagree.” Allow time for a conversation with another person about one statement of their choice.

Ask, What new insights about forgiveness do you have from this chapter? What are some things you take exception to and why?

Insights from Scripture

Ask participants what messages they recall from the Bible about forgiveness. Note them on newsprint. Here are some passages and stories they may name. If necessary, suggest some of them to prompt recollection.

John 8:2–11: The woman caught in adultery.

Mark 2:1–12: Jesus equated forgiving sins with healing.

3. Both quotations are from Dorothy C. Bass, *Practicing Our Faith*, page 134.

Luke 6:37: “Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven.”

Matthew 5:23–24: Be reconciled before offering your gift at the altar.

Matthew 18:21–22: How many times should we forgive others?

Luke 23:33–34: Jesus forgiving those who crucified him.

Questions for reflection

1. Which of these sayings of Jesus do you see reflected in what this chapter says about forgiveness?
2. What are the challenges of following Jesus’ sayings on forgiveness?
3. Look at the questions in paragraph 2 on page 76. Select ones you believe will be useful for guiding discussion in your group.

Responding

Provide these questions to participants. Give them ten minutes of quiet to answer them for themselves. Tell them that at the end of the ten minutes they will have an opportunity to talk about the things they learned about themselves and what they think and feel about forgiveness. Be sure to tell them that they will not be sharing their specific answers to the questions, which are for their personal reflection only.

What is the hardest thing you have ever had to forgive?

What is the hardest thing you have ever had to be forgiven for?

What is the hardest thing you have ever had to forgive yourself for?

Who in your life do you need to forgive now?

Who in your life do you need to seek forgiveness from now?

After the ten minutes of time for thinking about the questions, invite participants to tell what they learned about themselves as they answered the questions.

What do you see differently because of today's reading and conversation?

Closing prayer

Invite participants to hear this charge from the Letter to the Ephesians:

“So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members one of another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger. . . . Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.” Ephesians 4:25–26, 31–32

Additional questions

If you have time to focus on chapter 10 as well as chapter 9, or if you prefer to focus only on chapter 10, here are some questions to help you explore it. Select the ones that engage you, or prepare your own questions.

1. Much of this chapter is about Oprah herself and what she intends to do—encourage people to live their best life. What have you gleaned from this book that might help you live your best life?
2. Nelson characterizes parts of Oprah's message as “success by excess.” After reviewing her description of this in the middle two paragraphs on page 88, why do you agree or disagree with her assessment? In what ways do we practice “success by excess”—individually, as a church, as Americans? What are some checks we can place on “success by excess”?
3. What distinction does Nelson make between “values” and “virtues”? Using her definitions, do you think of the practices we have been talking about—forgiveness, generosity, gratitude,

listening, community, etc.—as values or virtues? What difference might Nelson’s distinction make in the way we think about what Oprah “reminds us” of?

4. As a summary of this conversation with *The Gospel according to Oprah*, look at the table of contents on page v. Select one “message” that has had an impact on you in this study. Of what has Oprah “reminded you” that you do not want to forget? How might participants in this group serve as reminders for each other in ways that might help us all live our best lives?

Statements from Chapter 9 about Forgiveness

Mark each statement with an “A” if you “Agree” or a “D” if you “Disagree.” When you finish, turn to another person and talk with them about one statement you feel strongly about.

- ___ Through forgiveness, someone who has been wronged stops being a victim. (page 65)
- ___ Forgiveness can never be compelled. (page 65)
- ___ Hearing others’ stories of forgiveness makes us “better.” (page 67)
- ___ Understanding why something happened is not important to forgiveness. (page 67)
- ___ Justice and forgiveness can collide. (page 68)
- ___ You’ve gotta have something bigger than yourself going on . . . to be able to [forgive]. (page 72)
- ___ Forgiveness is God-driven. (page 73)
- ___ Morally [forgiving] is the right thing to do. (page 73)
- ___ Forgiveness reclaims the future by redeeming a past that has been determined by irreversible choices. (page 76)
- ___ [Forgiveness] is an act of faith that the wrongdoer can change. (page 77)