

# **A Lenten Parish Group Study**

## **The Brothers Karamazov**

This booklet provides weekly reading assignments from Fyodor Dostoevsky's novel with Scripture and discussion questions for parish small groups during Great Lent.

### **Opening and Closing Prayer of St. Ephraim**

O Lord and Master of my life, take from me the spirit of sloth, despair, lust of power, and idle talk.

But give rather the spirit of chastity, humility, patience, and love to Thy servant.

Yes, O Lord and King, grant me to see my own sins and not to judge my brother, for Thou art blessed unto ages of ages. Amen.

# Major Themes

- Faith vs. Doubt
- Free Will and moral responsibility
- Suffering and redemption
- Family conflict and forgiveness

# Character Guide

## MEN

Fyodor Pavlovich Karamazov – crude, selfish and immoral father whose murder drives the story

Dmitri (Mitya) Karamazov – **Passionate**, impulsive eldest son in conflict with his father over money and love

Ivan Karamazov – **Intellectual**, skeptical middle son who struggles with faith, doubt, morality, and responsibility

Alexi (Alyosha) Karamazov – **Compassionate, spiritual** youngest son. Moral center of the novel and follower of Elder Zosima

Grigory and Marfa – husband and wife and longtime servants of Fyodor

Pavel Smerdyakov – cook in Fyodor's house, raised by Grigory and Marfa. Believed to be Fyodor's illegitimate son. Quiet, resentful, philosophical and central to the mystery

Pytor Alexandrovitch (Miusov) Cousin of Mitya. spent time in Europe gaining enlightened ideas

## WOMEN

Grushenka Svetlova – Loved by Dmitri and desired by Fyodor. Charming and unpredictable

Katerina Ivanovna (Katya) – Proud and intense. Engaged to Dmitri but emotionally tied to Ivan

Madame Khokhlakov - a wealthy, widowed socialite and friend of Katerina Ivanovna and mother to the wheelchair-bound Lise.

Lise Khokhlova - – Young girl of little faith and devoted to Alyosha – innocence mixed with emotional turmoil

Lizaveta Smerdyashchaya – Homeless woman and mother of Pavel Smerdyakov

Agafya Ivanovna - the elder half-sister of Katerina Ivanovna and the eldest daughter of the old colonel from his first marriage

## RELIGIOUS FIGURES

Elder Zosima – Wise and compassionate monk and Alyosha’s spiritual guide

Fr. Païssy - learned hieromonk and a devoted, senior follower of the elder Zosima. Following the death of Father Zosima, Father Païssy becomes a spiritual guide to Alyosha Karamazov

Fr. Ferapont – Strict ascetic monk who distrusts Zosima’s teachings.

Rakitin - son of a priest and a seminary student and deeply cynical. Supposed friend of Alyosha.

### Week 1: Broken Families and the Search for God

- Book I: Chapters 1–5 (The Karamazov Family, first gathering)
- Book II: Chapters 1–6 (The monastery and Elder Zosima)

#### Group Discussion Questions

**1. What forms of disorder do we see in the Karamazov family and how does this echo modern life?**

Emotional instability, immorality, spendthrift (Dimitri) and grand idealism (Ivan). The father, Fyodor Pavlovich, is selfish, sensual, irresponsible and perpetual liar. Self-described buffoon. Abandons his eldest son. Alyosha is sensitive, contemplative and desirous to be obedient.

**2. Many saints refer to themselves as “Fools for Christ.” How does this compare to Fyodor’s buffoonery?**

Although some of the foolish things Fyodor did were similar (but not as extreme as some of the saints) the reason was opposite. Fyodor did them to point to himself and gain attention (chapter 2) whereas the saints did it to radically bring attention to the immoral and vain behavior of the people around them and they were careful that their actions were never arbitrary or without purpose.

**3. Why is the absence of a true father spiritually destructive?**

Proverbs 22:6 says, *“Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it.”*

Ephesians 6:1–4 St. Paul specifically encouraged fathers writing, *“Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.”*

Many of the Patristic Fathers taught on the role of parents specifically the father saying, *“The father should teach, and also be the first example in obedience to God’s will.”*

#### **4. How does Elder Zossima redefine authority and obedience?**

He confronts people with what they know about themselves (pg. 27), evident in how he deals with the woman whose son died and left her husband (pg. 30), Lise who loves only when loved back, (pg. 36) and the arguing between Fyodor and Miusov . Zossima exhibits patience and a degree of sternness (when required)

#### **5. What should we make of Ivan's speech on his article on the relationship between the Church and the State? And what does Fr. Paissy mean when he accuses Ivan of "ultramontanism."**

The Church should not seek to having the State set aside a corner for her to occupy, like every social organization, but that every earthly State should in the end be transformed into the Church thus rejecting every purpose incongruous with the aims of the Church. (pg. 40)

Zosima counters with the reality that *"Christian society itself is not yet ready . . . [but is] will continue unshaken in expectation of Her complete transfiguration from a society as still almost heathen, into one universal and sovereign Church. And so be it, so be it, if only at the end of time, for this alone is destined to be fulfilled! ...And there is no need to trouble oneself with time and seasons, for the mystery of times and seasons is in the wisdom of God, in his foresight, and in his love."* (pg. 42)

**Ultramontanism** - a 19<sup>th</sup> century term referring to the Catholic belief in the Pope's supreme authority. From *ultra montes*; beyond the Alps/mountains. Advanced by Gregory VII who asserted that the Pope was God's sole vicar on earth, with authority over all Christians.

However, Father Paissy clarifies that this is akin to Satan's 3<sup>rd</sup> temptation to Christ (Matt 4:8). Ivan was not saying that the Church becomes the State (Roman model), but that the State is transformed into the Church and will rise to the level of the Church (the Orthodox model).

#### **6. Do any of the characters thus far exhibit repentance for their behavior? What does real repentance require beyond confession and how does the Prayer of St. Ephraim guide us towards repentance?**

Thus far it seems that they outwardly display repentance but are truly not repentant which Fyodor brings out in his buffoonery. Their motive for repentance is justification for oneself, realizing some abstract idea of goodness, or of receiving a reward in some future life.

True repentance recognizes that just as the strength of God is revealed in the extreme vulnerability of His Son on the Cross, so also the greatest strength of man is to embrace his weakness: (2 Corinthians 12.9).

It involves not mere regret of past evil but a recognition of a darkened vision of a person's own condition, in which sin, by separating him from God, has reduced him to his natural existence, depriving him of both the glory of his God-given image and likeness. According to St. Basil, "Repentance is salvation, but lack of understanding is the death of repentance."

7. After the argument between Fyodor and Dimitri Fr. Zossima moved towards Dimitri and fell to his knees before him in a deliberate bow till his head touched the floor and then left saying "Good Bye, forgive me all of you." **What is the meaning of this?**

## Week 2: Freedom, Passion, and Responsibility

- Book III: Chapters 1–13 (Dmitri and the tyranny of passion)
- Book IV: Chapters 1–7 (Ivan’s reason and Alyosha’s listening heart)

### Group Discussion Questions

1. What do you think are the meaning of the following symbols
  - a) Dimitri’s description of the Karamazovs as “insects”
  - b) Katerina kissing Grushenka’s hand
  - c) Grushenka not kissing Katerina’s hand
  - d) Smerdyakov referred to as Balaam’s ass
  - e) Ivan referring to his father as Aesop
  - f) Ivan’s comment of “vipers eating their own”
2. How does Dostoevsky portray freedom as both gift and burden?
3. Which passions are most easily excused in our own lives?

### CHAPTER SUMMARIES

**Chapter 1** Opens with the background of Fyodor’s servants Grigory and Marfa whom, against the pleadings of his wife, Grigory was dedicated to Fyodor in spite of how Fyodor treated him. The servant couple had a child which was born with a deformity that the superstitious Grigory referred to as a “dragon.” Later Grigory, responding to a noise in their garden, he found the child of the wandering Lizaveta and took him from the dying Lizaveta.

**Chapter 2** Provides the background of Lizaveta including the night that Fyodor and his drunken companions encountered Lizaveta in a “backway.” When later Lizaveta became pregnant most of the town suspected Fyodor as the father. Lizaveta was cared for by a well-to-do merchant’s widow and when the child was born and Lizaveta died Grigory and Marfa took the child and raised him. He was named Smerdyakov by Fyodor and ended up becoming a servant to Fyodor.

**Chapter 3** Alyosha remains obedient to his father and stays with him rather than return to the monastery. He is anxious about going to visit Katerina Ivanovna after having received an invitation from her given to Alyosha by Madame Hohlakov. On the way to see her Alyosha encounters Dimitri who proceeds to confess to Alyosha, comparing his actions to Schiller’s poem *Hymn to Joy*.<sup>1</sup> He tells Alyosha his history of seducing women, spending money with

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<sup>1</sup> Written in 1775 by Friedrich Schiller's "Ode to Joy" (An die Freude) is a poem urging humanity to a universal brotherhood, joy, and a divine creator, famously set to music by Beethoven in the finale of his Ninth Symphony.

abandon. He refers to two ideals regarding man's actions, 1) acting with "sensual lust that God gave to insects," and the mind of man in tension with the Madonna ideal vs. the Sodom ideal.

**Chapter 4** While Dimitri continues to relate the details of his wild life, Alyosha shocks him by saying "...I am the same as you." Dimitri relates details of his exploits during his military service where he meets Katerina, his commander's second daughter. He tells of the new commander who asked Katerina's father for the Government money that he had spent. Katerina goes to plead with Dimitri (who had recently received the balance of his inheritance from his father) to loan her the money to save her father. Dimitri, after almost succumbing to "insect lust" gives her the money to which she offers the "low bow" to him.

**Chapter 5** The situation with Katerina's father is resolved without incident however her father dies shortly after but Katerina's fortune changes as she inherits 80,000 rubles from the nieces of a general's widow. Dimitri receive from Katerina a letter containing 4000 rubles and a proposal for marriage. Dimitri writes back to Katerina and also to his brother Ivan about Katerina with whom Ivan fell in love with. Dimitri then tells Alyosha that he loves Grushenka and that he wants Alyosha to take the message to Katerina that "he shall never come to see her again." Katerina gives Dimitri 3000 rubles to give to Agafya Ivanovna (older half-sister of Katerina) but he squanders it and plans to repay it by getting the money from his father, Fyodor from which Dimitri feels that his father has a moral obligation to give him the money. At the end of the chapter is the hint that if his father declines to give him the money Dimitri could be moved to murder his father.

**Chapter 6** Alyosha returns to his father's house to find his father (on the way to being drunk), Ivan, the servants and the child Smerdyakov, who Dimitri refers to as "Balaam's ass."<sup>2</sup> Fyodor sends Smerdyakov to Moscow to be trained as a cook and he returns to take over cooking duties in spite of his epileptic seizures.

**Chapter 7** Grigory related a story about a Russian soldier who as a prisoner in Asia was forced to renounce his faith with the threat of torture and death to which he refused and was martyred. Smerdyakov responds to all present the story with the philosophical notion that if the soldier had renounced his faith there would be no sin.

"For as soon as I say to those enemies, 'No, I'm not a Christian, and I curse my true God,' then at once, by God's high judgment, I become immediately and specially anathema accursed, and am cut off from the Holy Church, exactly as though I were

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<sup>2</sup> Balaam's ass refers to the story in Numbers 22 where the prophet Balaam was prevented from traveling with the Moabite officials when his donkey, avoiding an angel of the Lord refused to go further. After beating the donkey, the donkey spoke saying, "Am I not your own donkey, which you have always ridden, to this day? Have I been in the habit of doing this to you?" Here Smerdyakov as the lowly servant is typically silent, but when he does speaks philosophically.

a heathen, so that at that very instant, not only when I say it aloud, but when I think of saying it, before a quarter of a second has passed, I am cut off...“And if I’ve ceased to be a Christian, then I told no lie to the enemy when they asked whether I was a Christian or not a Christian, seeing I had already been relieved by God Himself of my Christianity by reason of the thought alone...If I’m no longer a Christian, then I can’t renounce Christ, for I’ve nothing then to renounce.”

To Grigory’s protest of the fallacy of Smerdyakov’s comment, Smerdyakov uses the argument of the “faith of the mustard seed” to show that Grigory’s faith is as weak as his and that “that though I may once have doubted I shall be forgiven if I shed tears of repentance,” meaning that a person who renounces his faith to save his life can repent for his sin later. Though he seems to be arguing with Grigory, this argument seems to be directed more to the atheist Ivan.

**Chapter 8** Fyodor moves the conversation from Smerdyakov’s ideas to Ivan’s with the question of God’s existence and immortality setting Ivan and Alyosha at odds. By this time Fyodor was drunk and began to speak ill of Alyosha’s mother (Fyodor’s second wife). This upset Alyosha terribly and Ivan angrily reminded Fyodor that she was also his mother which Fyodor seemed to forget. The chapter ends with Dimitri entering and Fyodor screaming, “He’ll kill me...Don’t let him get at me.”

**Chapter 9** Dimitri runs into the room convinced that Grushenka is hiding somewhere in Fyodor’s house. Fyodor accuses Dimitri of stealing from him and Dimitri attacked his father being pulled off by Ivan and Alyosha. Ivan likens to his father to Aesop (a reference to the 5<sup>th</sup> BC Greek storyteller who was cunning, clever, and described as deformed). And hints at either Dimitri or Fyodor doing the other in, saying, ““One reptile will devour the other.”

Fyodor admits to Alyosha that he is also afraid of Ivan as well as Dimitri and that he wants Grushenka for himself sending Alyosha to find out “which she means to choose.” On the way Alyosha meets Ivan where he asks the question, “does any man a right to look at other men and decide which is worthy to live?”

**Chapter 10** Alyosha visits Katerina at Madame Khokhlakov’s house and is surprised to find that Grushenka is also there. After realizing Katerina’s beauty Alyosha recalls his words to Dimitri, “perhaps you will love her forever. But perhaps you won’t always be happy with her.” Alyosha discovers that Katerina already knew that Dimitri had spent the 3000 rubles she gave him and that she still wants Dimitri. Alyosha then relates the altercation between Dimitri and his father and that Dimitri was looking for Grushenka, which Katerina dismisses as “passion, not love.”

At this, Grushenka appears from behind a curtain after which Alyosha is unconsciously affected by her beauty. The complimentary conversation between the two women is clearly meant to hide their disdain for one another. Katerina states that Grushenka has just promised her that

she is going to leave Dmitri but Grushenka says that she made no such promise and even if she did she is “changeable.” Earlier Katerina kissed Grushenka’s hand and when it came time for the reverse, Grushenka did not reciprocate saying “do you know, after all, I think I won’t kiss your hand...So that you may be left to remember that you kissed my hand, but I didn’t kiss yours.” When Katerina tells Grushenka to leave calling her “A creature for sale,” Grushenka reminds Katerina that she also brought her beauty for sale (referring to the time she came to Dimitri for the loan to save her father). Alyosha leaves but on the way out is handed a pink envelope by Madame Hohlakov.

**Chapter 11** As he returns to the monastery, Alyosha is again stopped by Dmitri, who while shocked that both women were there laughs at Grushenka’s behavior and recognizes Katerina’s pride and recklessness at inviting Grushenka against the advice of her aunts. When Alyosha confronts Dmitri that he insulted Katerina by disclosing to Grushenka what happened when Katerina came to him about the loan he is suddenly remorseful and makes one more confession of his past to Alyosha.

At the monastery that night, Alyosha discovers that Zosimo’s health is rapidly deteriorating, and is near death. There is discussion about some of Zosimo’s questionable practices such as the “general confession” which some felt is profaning the sacrament of confession. Fr. Paissy reminds Alyosha of the “duty” that Fr. Zosimo placed on him and that Alyosha was to leave the monastery for a time but that he would return. Alyosha decides to disobey and remains with Zosima, whom he loves like a father, instead of returning to help with his family’s conflict.

As he prepares to go to sleep, he reads the letter in the pink envelope he discovers is from Lise and contains a confession of her love for him. She writes that she hopes to marry Alyosha one day. Alyosha laughs happily, says a prayer for all his troubled loved ones and falls into a peaceful sleep.

### **Week 3: Christ, Power, and the Cross**

- Book V: Chapters 1–7 (The Grand Inquisitor)

#### Group Discussion Questions

- 1 Why does Christ reject coercive power?
- 2 What modern temptations mirror the Grand Inquisitor's logic?
- 3 Why is Christ's silence more powerful than argument?
- 4 How does the Cross challenge our expectations of God?

### **Week 4: Repentance and Shared Guilt**

- Book VI: Chapters 1–3 (Teachings of Elder Zosima)
- Book VII: Chapters 1–4 (The death of Elder Zosima)

#### Group Discussion Questions

- 1 What does it mean to be responsible for everyone and everything?
- 2 How does Dostoevsky distinguish humility from self-hatred?
- 3 Why does scandal shake weak faith?
- 4 How can repentance heal community life?

### **Week 6: Hope, Memory, and Resurrection**

- Book X: Chapters 1–12 (The boys and the final exhortation)
- Epilogue

#### Group Discussion Questions

- 1 Why does Dostoevsky end with children rather than resolution?
- 2 How does memory become a path to salvation?
- 3 What hope does resurrection offer before death?
- 4 How does brotherhood become redeemed in love?