

BAPTISTWAY ADULT BIBLE TEACHING GUIDE®

14 Habits of Highly Effective Disciples

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14 Habits of Highly Effective Disciples—Adult Bible Teaching Guide

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How to Make the Best Use of This Teaching Guide

Leading a class in studying the Bible is a sacred trust. This *Teaching Guide* has been prepared to help you as you give your best to this important task.

In each lesson, you will find first “Bible Comments” for teachers, to aid you in your study and preparation. The three sections of “Bible Comments” are “Understanding the Context,” “Interpreting the Scriptures,” and “Focusing on the Meaning.” “Understanding the Context” provides a summary overview of the entire background passage that also sets the passage in the context of the Bible book being studied. “Interpreting the Scriptures” provides verse-by-verse comments on the focal passage. “Focusing on the Meaning” offers help with the meaning and application of the focal text.

The second main part of each lesson is “Teaching Plans.” You’ll find two complete teaching plans in this section. The first is called “Teaching Plan—Varied Learning Activities,” and the second is called “Teaching Plan—Lecture and Questions.” Choose the plan that best fits your class and your style of teaching. You may also use and adapt ideas from both. Each plan is intended to be practical, helpful, and immediately useful as you prepare to teach.

The major headings in each teaching plan are intended to help you sequence how you teach so as to follow the flow of how people tend to learn. The first major heading, “Connect with Life,” provides ideas that will help you begin the class session where your class is and draw your class into the study. The second major heading, “Guide Bible Study,” offers suggestions for helping your class engage the Scriptures actively and develop a greater understanding of this portion of the Bible’s message. The third major heading, “Encourage Application,” is meant to help participants focus on how to respond with their lives to this message.

As you begin the study with your class, be sure to find a way to help your class know the date on which each lesson will be studied. You might use one or more of the following methods:

1. In the first session of the study, briefly overview the study by identifying for your class the date on which each lesson will be studied. Lead your class to write the date in the table of contents in their *Study Guides* and on the first page of each lesson.
2. Make and post a chart that indicates the date on which each lesson will be studied.
 - If all of your class has e-mail, send them an e-mail with the dates the lessons will be studied.
 - Provide a bookmark with the lesson dates. You may want to include information about your church and then use the bookmark as an outreach tool, too. A model for a bookmark can be downloaded from www.baptistwaypress.org on the Resources for Adults page.
 - Develop a sticker with the lesson dates, and place it on the table of contents or on the back cover.

Here are some steps you can take to help you prepare well to teach each lesson and save time in doing so:

1. Start early in the week before your class meets.
2. If your church's adult Bible study teachers meet for lesson overview and preparation, plan to participate. If your church's adult Bible study teachers don't have this planning time now, look for ways to begin. You, your fellow teachers, and your church will benefit from this mutual encouragement and preparation.
3. Overview the study in the *Study Guide*. Look at the table of contents, and see where this lesson fits in the overall study. Then read or review the study introduction to the book that is being studied.
4. Consider carefully the suggested Main Idea, Question to Explore, and Teaching Aim. These can help you discover the main thrust of this particular lesson.

5. Use your Bible to read and consider prayerfully the Scripture passages for the lesson. Using your Bible in your study and in the class session can provide a positive model to class members to use their own Bibles and give more attention to Bible study themselves. (Each writer of the Bible comments in both the *Teaching Guide* and the *Study Guide* has chosen a favorite translation. You're free to use the Bible translation you prefer and compare it with the translations chosen, of course.)
6. After reading all the Scripture passages in your Bible, then read the Bible comments in the *Study Guide*. The Bible comments are intended to be an aid to your study of the Bible. Read also the small articles—"sidebars"—in each lesson. They are intended to provide additional, enrichment information and inspiration and to encourage thought and application. Try to answer for yourself the questions included in each lesson. They're intended to encourage further thought and application, and you can also use them in the class session itself. Continue your Bible study with the aid of the Bible comments included in this *Teaching Guide*.
7. Review the "Teaching Plans" in this *Teaching Guide*. Consider how these suggestions would help you teach this Bible passage in your class to accomplish the teaching aim.
8. Consider prayerfully the needs of your class, and think about how to teach so you can help your class learn best.
9. Develop and follow a lesson plan based on the suggestions in this *Teaching Guide*, with alterations as needed for your class.
10. Enjoy leading your class in discovering the meaning of the Scripture passages and in applying these passages to their lives.

Premium Adult Online Bible Commentary. Plan to get the additional adult Bible study comments available online. Call 1-866-249-1799 or e-mail baptistway@texasbaptists.org to order *Premium Adult Online Bible Commentary*. It is available only in electronic format (PDF) from our website. The price of these comments is \$6 for individuals and \$25 for a group of five. A church or class that participates in our advance order program for free shipping can receive *Premium Adult Online Bible*

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FREE! Downloadable teaching resource items for use in your class are available at www.baptistwaypress.org! Watch for them in “Teaching Plans” for each lesson. Then go online to www.baptistwaypress.org and click on “Teaching Resource Items” for this study. These items are selected from “Teaching Plans.” They are provided online to make lesson preparation easier for hand-outs and similar items. Permission is granted to download these teaching resource items, print them out, copy them as needed, and use them in your class.

IN ADDITION: Enrichment teaching help is provided in the online *Baptist Standard*, which is available at www.baptiststandard.com. The *Baptist Standard* is available online for an annual subscription rate of \$10. Subscribe online at www.baptiststandard.com or call 214-630-4571. A free thirty-day trial subscription is currently available.

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DATE OF STUDY

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LESSON ONE
Bible Study

FOCAL TEXTS

Psalm 119:9–16, Acts 17:10–12; 2 Timothy 3:14–17

BACKGROUND

Psalm 119:9–16; Acts 17:10–12; 2 Timothy 3:14–17

MAIN IDEA

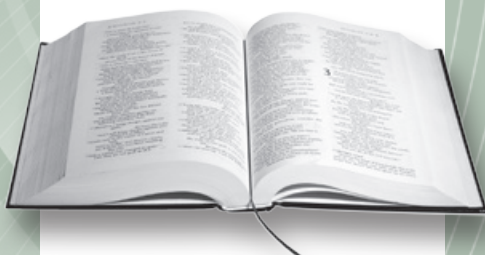
Disciples read, study, memorize, and live out God’s word.

QUESTION TO EXPLORE

How can I grow in my knowledge and application of God’s magnificent word?

TEACHING AIM

To lead adults to develop a plan to increase the depth, quality, and consistency of their study and application of biblical truth



BIBLE COMMENTS

Understanding the Context

The Bible bears within itself teachings that point to a calling and stewardship for studying Scripture. The three passages in this lesson form wonderful starting places for understanding the what, why, and how of Bible study.

Psalm 119 is the longest chapter in the Bible but falls only one chapter away from the shortest chapter, Psalm 117. Psalm 119's content is outlined by the Hebrew alphabet, and is an example of an acrostic. Each letter of the Hebrew alphabet is given an eight-line stanza. Every stanza line opens with a word beginning with the respective Hebrew alphabet letter. For example, each line in the first stanza in the psalm (119:1–8) begins with *aleph*, the letter “a” in the Hebrew alphabet. Undoubtedly, the structure was used as a teaching tool with Hebrew children.

The psalm becomes an expanded meditation upon the substance and significance of the Law of God. Synonyms for the “Law of God” appear throughout the psalm: decrees, ways, precepts, statutes, commandments, word, and ordinances, for example. This pattern, arranged in a creative fashion, becomes the most extensive discussion of the *word* of God in Christian Scripture. Psalm 119:9–16, with eight lines beginning with *bet*, “b,” is an excellent microcosm for discovering the riches of Psalm 119.

Acts 17:1–15 provides the larger context for Acts 17:10–12. Luke (who also wrote the Gospel bearing his name) compiled a series of short stories commonly called the “Acts of the Apostles.” Acts 17:1–15 forms one of the narratives, or acts, of the book. These narratives have all the elements of a well-written story: characters, setting, mood, action—rise, fall, anticlimax, climax, and resolution (a problem solved with rationale for others to model.) This particular story describes Paul and Silas' encounter with the Bereans and highlights their diligent study of the Scriptures. Our study of the characters found in Scripture can provide help for us in facing similar contemporary events.

2 Timothy 3:14–17 speaks of the inspiration of the Scriptures and offers practical information on the benefits of Bible study. Scripture joins with the experience of Christians who have taught us spiritual

truth and leads us to discovering and utilizing its wisdom for living the Christian life.

Interpreting the Scriptures

Innocence Maintained (Psalm 119:9–10)

Psalm 119 fits the genre of wisdom literature. In poetic form, the Psalms may mask the “wisdom” aspect of their content. But, metaphors, similes, and other literary constructions expand the possibilities of personal application.

The writer of Psalm 119 perhaps remembered more innocently lived years. Or, the writer may have discovered character flaws erupting with new power because consistent study of Scripture had been avoided. Either interpretation can find resonance with us.

119:9. The psalmist prompts an additional question: “How can a person of any age keep her or his way pure?” The question of “How can my life be better?” can come any time. The psalmist’s solution is to maintain a guarded, disciplined adherence to God’s word.

119:10. An intriguing consistency resides in the psalmist’s comment with the Apostle Paul’s statement in Philippians 2:12–13. One is to cultivate a pure lifestyle as if that cultivation all depends on one’s self, while recognizing the reality that all depends on God’s grace working in us. It is God working in us that provides both our motivation and strength to serve him.

Taking Scripture to Heart (Psalm 119:11–12)

119:11. Perhaps you have heard this directive: “Learn your part by heart”; or, “Memorize the lines until you can recite them without thinking.” Memorization in and of itself, though, is one of the lowest levels of learning. The psalmist continued beyond memorization, however. “Treasure” speaks of holding God’s truths in highest esteem, while the words “so that I may not sin” portray a sense of actively living out Scripture’s teachings.

119:12. The statement “Blessed are you” can be puzzling. We think of God blessing us. This verse is one of many in the Psalms, however, where a person extends blessing to God. See Psalm 16:7, Psalm 103:1, and Psalm 104:1, for example. Read these verses with “thanksgiving,” “praise,” or “worship” in the place of blessing. Indeed, a person can “bless” God.

Profession of the Value of Scripture (Psalm 119:13–14)

119:13. Generally, our actions carry more weight than our words. Saying what we believe, professing our commitment to God, ranks highly among things we can do. People judge us on our body language, our involvements, our investments of energy, and where we put our money. People do listen to what we say, and trust may or may not follow based on those words.

The psalmist testifies to the transforming power of God’s word. This transformation can be perceived by our hearers. People are persuaded and transformed by the passion and conviction they hear from us, implicit and explicit in the word.

119:14. What can be the source of delight for us? What gives us “the peace that passes understanding” no matter what is happening in life? Satisfaction, fulfillment, gratification, and delight, came for the psalmist through God’s word.

In our culture, significance is often sought by purchasing the next new item. Quantity is the ruling dynamic. The psalmist’s delight comes not from a quantifiable source necessarily; but rather from the “quality” of God’s decrees—the power of ideas shaping how we remember and how we hope. This comes as we engage God’s word, and it answers the questions we raise about living this life.

Shaping Attitudes to Shape Actions (Psalm 119:15–16)

119:15. Most of us join the frenetic pace our culture imposes on us. Thus, we have to begin at square one to practice the discipline of being still and quiet. The ancient wisdom of “meditating and fixing one’s eyes on God’s ways, or paths” combats freneticism and fastens us to a more solid foundation for living.

The psalmist's guidance predates *lectio divina* (divine reading). This practice began in Western culture in the 3rd Century A.D. For those Christians, *lectio divina* meant reading, meditating on, praying over, and contemplating Scripture. A friend related to me years ago: "Reading Scripture meditatively asks not how much of the Scripture you go through, but how much of the Scripture gets through to you."

119:16. Hebrew parallelism, another literary device, appears here. The construction is that of similar ideas appearing repetitively. Parallelism appears throughout Psalm 119.

Word repetition strikes the ears of those in Western culture strangely. Parallelism was a method for the Hebrews to amplify an idea with repetition. With amplification in mind, a contemporary reader should pause with verses 14 and 16 and consider the delight the Hebrew writer had in mind whenever thinking on God's word. With such an intentional consideration the writer did not, and would not, forget God's word.

Reception and Examination of Scripture (Acts 17:10–12)

17:10. Paul and Silas had encountered trouble with the people in Philippi and Thessalonica. Luke is careful to identify the troublesome personalities. Jealousy was at work against Paul's and Silas's message and prevented it from receiving a positive response. The Thessalonians who became Christians demonstrated a wonderful contrast of behavior, though.

17:11. The Thessalonian friends protected Paul and Silas for further missionary work. The mutual caring between Paul and the Thessalonian believers finds further expression in the two epistles that Paul wrote to them (1 & 2 Thessalonians.)

No epistle to or from the Bereans exists. We might be able to construct one, however, around these few lines from Luke. The Bereans' sense of hospitality is exemplary for 21st Century Christians. The Bereans were not tainted by xenophobia (fear of the different) related to Paul's teaching and preaching. Their daily examination of Scripture contributed to their implementation of the directive to "love your neighbor."

17:12. “Many of” the Bereans found Christ through their study of Scripture. How much more could we benefit from a daily study of Scripture to guide our learning and living of the Christian life?

Remember Your Teachers and the Source of Their Information (2 Timothy 3:14–15)

3:14. Maybe Timothy voiced concern to Paul about his ability to steward and implement the gospel. Perhaps Paul understood Timothy so well he knew encouragement was needed. Paul alluded to those he had named in 2 Timothy 1:5—Timothy’s grandmother, Lois, and his mother, Eunice. These nurturers not only reared Timothy well, but had cultivated in him a passion for practicing the gospel. Many of us have parents, grandparents, siblings, other family members, and friends who have taught us and shaped our faith. Remembering their influence can encourage and sustain us.

3:15. Timothy’s good family tradition urged him, at an early age, to read and understand Scripture. The Hebrew Scriptures had pointed Timothy in the direction of seeing Christ as the fulfillment of those Scriptures. Paul’s intent, of course, was to assist Timothy in seeing not only the past value of Scripture study in his life, but also the continuing value as he matured in his faith.

A Divinely Inspired Reference Point for Life (2 Timothy 3:16–17)

3:16. What are the purposes of the Scriptures? They educate us about God’s desires for humanity, they provide a means for teaching others in the ways of God, they establish boundaries for behavior, and they embody what it means to be a master teacher—one who not only points out students’ mistakes, but also demonstrates ways those mistakes can be corrected into right actions. All of these purposes are present in Scripture because all of Scripture is inspired by God (“God-breathed.”)

3:17. The thought concludes (from verse 16’s phrase “is useful”) with. . . “so that everyone”. . . can become more proficient, efficient, effective, and shaped so as to live fully for God. Disciples bear witness as they demonstrate the gospel with lips and lives guided by God’s word.

Focusing on the Meaning

Surveys over the last few years have indicated a decline in the reading and study of the Bible by those involved in congregational life. Before we cast blame on “cultural dynamics opposing Scripture” as the cause for this decline, we need to look at our own congregational practices related to Scripture. How is Bible study integrated into your congregation’s life? Are you involved in a Bible study group? Do you have a personal plan of action for Bible study? Have you ever engaged in a “Reading the Bible Through in a Year” plan? Or, reading through the New Testament in a month?

Such exercises certainly can increase our information about the Bible. They can also be the spark which ignites a lifelong love affair with Scripture. To honestly call ourselves a student of Scripture, we should be moving beyond the mere identification and description of facts, ideas, principles, and themes to being able to analyze the depths of Scripture. In addition, we should be able to interpret the Scripture beyond its original historical-cultural context into our own time. Finally, the real mark of being a student of Scripture is that we apply whatever we discover in the riches of Scripture to our own lives.

We have Scripture not as an end in itself, which can lead to a bibliolatry. Rather, we discover early on that God’s living word can inform and form each one of us, and that it carries expectations for information and formation beyond each of us to everyone in the world.

TEACHING PLANS

Teaching Plan—Varied Learning Activities

Connect with Life

1. Before the session enlist two or three members to be on an interview panel to answer questions about their profession. Alert each one to the questions you will ask: *What is your profession? Why did*

you choose this type of work? How did you prepare for your specific role in this profession? What does it take to be highly effective in this line of work? Interview the panel in front of the class. Probe for answers to the last question for training, habits, networking, and disciplines that lead to improved performance. Briefly review the introduction to the unit in the *Study Guide* and remind members that the spiritual habits to be discussed in the coming sessions are essential to becoming highly effective disciples.

2. Make the transition to today's subject by indicating the importance of developing a plan to increase the depth, quality, and consistency of our Bible study and our application of biblical truth.

Guide Bible Study

3. Read Psalm 119:9. Invite members to individually select three characteristics from verses 10–16 that give practical application to the psalmist's answer, "By living according to your word." After a couple of minutes, go around the group and invite each member to share one of their responses. Summarize the truth of this passage by encouraging members to know God's word in order to apply it to life.
4. Read Acts 17:10–12. Ask members to identify the attitude the Bereans had toward the message from the Scriptures Paul and Silas taught them. Discuss the significance of verse 12 as a record of the results of their passion and commitment to increasing the depth, quality, and consistency of their Bible study and then living it out.
5. Ask volunteers to briefly share about someone who has been an encourager or mentor in their lives. Mention that Paul was that kind of person in Timothy's life. Read 2 Timothy 3:14–17. Emphasize the richness of these verses in describing the nature and role of Scripture in a believer's spiritual growth. Assign each member one of the four words/phrases in verse 16 that lists the practical nature of Scripture: "teaching," "rebuking," "correcting," and "training in righteousness." Invite members to give a contemporary example of each one of these functions and benefits of the Bible.

Encourage Application

6. Instruct members to share with one other person what they enjoy doing in their leisure time. Allow enough time for each person to talk. Then invite members to describe the level of passion with which their partner shared about their activities. Ask, *What seemed to be their motivation and attitude for being involved in what they shared?* Suggest to the class that if we can get so passionate about hobbies and leisure-time activities, how much more should we be passionate about Bible study? Review the sidebar in the *Study Guide* on “Helpful Attitudes for Bible Study.” Invite volunteers to share which attitude best describes their approach to Bible study. Discuss ways to improve a believer’s attitude in regards to their study and application of the Scriptures.
7. Invite members to create a list of practical things a believer can do to increase the depth, quality, and consistency of their personal Bible study. Challenge members to think beyond traditional personal elements such as establishing a regular time and place, memorization, and meditation. While these are important, today’s technology offers ready access to various avenues of study in commentaries, blogs, training, and networking with other believers. Also discuss the importance of being an active member of a church and the resources provided through pastoral teaching, printed resources, and classes such as this one.
8. In closing, invite members to quietly reflect on their attitude and practice of Bible study and how it impacts the way they live as disciples of Christ. Close with prayer.

Teaching Plan—Lecture and Questions

Connect with Life

1. Greet members and ask if they enjoy regular physical check-ups. Remind them that these check-ups may not always be enjoyable but are necessary to ensure a healthy life. The same can be said about a person’s spiritual life. Review the information in “Studying

These Lessons” in the introduction of the unit in the *Study Guide*. Challenge members to take this study as serious as they do when they receive a physical check-up and to be prepared to adjust their lives according to any instructions received from God, the Great Physician.

2. Transition to the subject of this session by displaying a poster containing the question, *How can I grow in my knowledge and application of God’s magnificent word?* Remind the class of the story of the pastor and deacon-farmer (from the introduction to this lesson in the *Study Guide*) and the point that if we are to grow in our knowledge and application of God’s word we must “meet him halfway.”

Guide Bible Study

3. Ask a volunteer to read Psalm 119:9–16. Ask the class, *What do we learn from Psalm 119 about the role God’s word can play in our lives?* Highlight the joy the psalmist finds in following God’s commands.
4. Lecture briefly on Paul and Silas and their visit to Berea using information from the *Study Guide*. Read Acts 17:10–12. Explain the significance and evidence of Luke saying the Bereans were “of more noble character” than the Thessalonians. Ask, *How can we demonstrate openness to God’s truth today as the Bereans did in Paul’s day?*
5. Briefly lecture on Paul’s relationship with Timothy using information from the *Study Guide*. Create four small posters with one of the following words/phrases on each.
 - a. Teaching
 - b. Rebuking
 - c. Correcting
 - d. Training in righteousness

Ask a volunteer to read 2 Timothy 3:14–17. Explain the significance of Scripture being “God-breathed.” Then display each poster and define each term or phrase using information from the *Study Guide*.

After each is presented, ask members to explain why that element is useful “so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

Encourage Application

6. Refer members to application questions 3–5 in the *Study Guide*. Encourage members to respond to each question in light of the Scriptures studied in this lesson.
7. Refer to the sidebar in the *Study Guide* on “Helpful Habits for Good Bible Students.” Invite members to select one or two of the ideas they can implement.
8. Close the session by inviting members to evaluate their practice of this habit of highly effective disciples. As a part of their spiritual check-up, challenge members to commit to practical steps to increase the depth, quality, and consistency of their personal Bible study. End with prayer.

FOCAL TEXTS

Psalm 51; 1 John 1:9

BACKGROUND

Psalm 51; 1 John 1:9

MAIN IDEA

Disciples confess their sins to God in order to receive forgiveness and restoration.

QUESTION TO EXPLORE

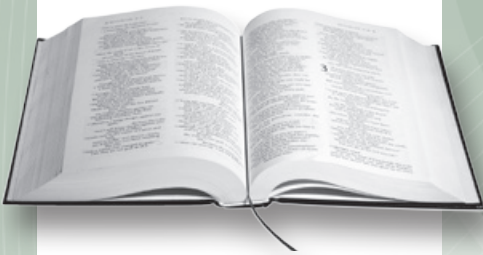
How current and comprehensive is the confession of my sin?

TEACHING AIM

To lead adults to ask God to conduct a spiritual check-up of their lives and to honestly confess their sin

LESSON TWO

Confession



BIBLE COMMENTS

Understanding the Context

Television crime series are often saturated with the following lines: “He confessed when we arrested him.” Or, “If only we can get a confession from her we can wrap up this case.”

Maybe you have heard someone say, “Confession is good for the soul.” But, what does confession *do for the soul*?

We might think we have this confession thing down pat, but there is still much to learn and experience as we deepen our understanding of the discipline of confession. The passages in this study can lead us to fertile ground for new thinking and application.

Psalms 51 is one of several psalms representing lament or penitential themes. See Psalms 6, 13, 22, 30, 31, 32, 35, 39, 51, 69, 71, 91, 102, 103, and 130, for example. These psalms have several characteristics in common: a problem raised; a complaint toward God or self; a complaint about adversaries; trust; petition; a vow to praise and service; and an appeal to God’s power. These psalms of lament were models used by individuals and those in corporate worship settings. Both uses provide contemporary believers with resources for confession and experiencing forgiveness.

“Confession” comes to us in the New Testament with some alternative applications. One is that of actions and statements communicating one’s passion for the gospel. Another is that which is the proper response to the first—confession of one’s sin and sins. The first application—proclaiming one’s passion for the gospel’s power—resides throughout the New Testament. Read any of Paul’s letters and notice his consistent advice to believers to confess (or profess) the work of God in the world and in their individual lives.

Few directives come for believers to confess their sin, though 1 John 1:9 is a prime example. More often there are examples of confession presented. See Luke 15, the story of the prodigal son, or the tax collector in Luke 18. 1 John 1:9 directs us to confess, but also demonstrates the connection between confession and forgiveness. For those who understand the imperative, this verse provides sustenance for those who hunger and

thirst for forgiveness and a healthy soul. Confession is an essential habit for highly effective disciples.

Interpreting the Scriptures

A Model Prayer (Psalm 51)

Many scholars consider this psalm to be the prayer of David after being confronted by his prophet, Nathan (See 2 Samuel 11–12). In this psalm, David’s prayer contains the distinct facets of a confession. These facets are not necessarily lockstep in movement; nor is confession a simple “I apologize” thrown at someone in passing, but rather a serious, specific, and sober acknowledgement of sin.

Stating the Obvious, and the Not So Obvious (Psalm 51:1–5)

51:1–2. Psalm 51’s Latin title is *Miserere mei, Deus*, or “Have mercy on me, O God.” The plea illustrates the beginning point for anyone’s prayer of confession.

The implicitly stated problem comes early in Psalm 51. The individual recognizes being out of relationship with God and other persons. “Transgressions,” (vile acts) are marring the person’s thought processes. They are stalling his eager engagement of life, neutralizing any sense of enjoyment, and have resulted in a sense of impurity.

51:3–5. One can see wrongdoing, but shift blame to others without taking personal responsibility. All humanity feels the gravitational pull towards repeating Adam’s statement to God: “I’m not at fault here. The other one is.” Blame shifting neutralizes the confession process.

Rather than shifting blame, the psalmist takes the blame: “*my* transgressions”; “*my* sin.” Note the singular form—*sin*—the psalmist identifies his mortality, his human nature.

The process of confession becomes visible: identifying sinfulness; taking responsibility for one’s wrongdoing; and recognizing the layers of sinfulness lying beneath the more apparent transgression. A downward spiral of one’s emotions can often accompany these identifications.

The psalmist does not blame God for his tendency toward sinfulness. The tone of the prayer turns upward as an appeal is made to the appropriate One who can make life right. The psalmist directs our attention to the One of final appeal, judgment, and redemption—God: “Against you, and you alone, have I sinned.”

Making Things Right, Good, and Joyful (Psalm 51:6–12)

51:6. The values we hold shape our attitudes, and attitudes shape our actions. The psalmist appeals to the Creator, whose character is the ultimate benchmark when it comes to values. “Integrity” is the holistic term used to describe all those values of the right, good, and joyful. God, the epitome of integrity, calls for truth from our inner being—honesty, authenticity, courage, congruency, and simplicity are a few synonyms for integrity. The psalmist articulates humility—submission to God’s ways and means—in asking for God to teach him wisdom.

51:7. Hyssop is still used today in herbal pharmaceuticals. It is antiseptic in nature and promotes the healing of external and internal tissues. Hyssop is also a metaphor for the psalmist who appeals for God’s redemptive, cleansing action in his life.

51:8. The Scriptures promote hearing as an active rather than a passive practice. The prayer for hearing joy and gladness is one of asking for selective hearing! We must be deliberate in picking out from our daily cacophony those sounds that give rise to or are products of joy and gladness.

The gospel has been announced as “Good News.” Good news encourages us, stiffens our resolve to do good and be well, and presses us to be involved in actions which proclaim peace and joy.

51:9. The psalmist’s prayer has pleaded for God’s attention. But now comes “Turn your face away and by doing so demonstrate that my sin no longer requires your attention; you have removed the effects of my sin.”

Ongoing Conversation and Relationship (Psalm 51:10–12)

51:10. Verse 10 parallels verse 7 and expands the description of God’s cleansing action. Another way to communicate this would be: “Take me back to what I was intended to be. Use your cleansing power to clean away the dirt, malevolence, and the ill will in my life.”

51:11. God is not capricious. Requesting that God not cast him away is the psalmist’s recognition of the need for a continuing relationship with God. “Stay close. Remind me of the daily, and at times, the moment-to-moment need to confess to you and realize the forgiveness you offer.”

51:12. “Restore” implies that something remains worth repairing and then is renovated to its original luster and beauty. A re-elevated state of being occurs. “Sustain” expresses the desire for an ongoing preservation process.

The Results of Being Forgiven (Psalm 51:13–15)

51:13–14. The psalmist articulates the thoughts of Peter to the beggar—“. . .but what I have I give to you.”— a quality of life (Acts 3:1–11). The psalmist promises a “God-quality” of life will be delivered—good news, a new, re-created life, forgiveness, and a new start. What the psalmist has learned, he will teach to others and they will return to God. What the psalmist knows and feels will be turned into lyrics—forming a song of deliverance, redemption, and abundant life—sung everywhere he goes.

Living My Faith in Public (Psalm 51:16–19)

51:16–17. Years of ritual practice without understanding and a focus on merely completing sacrifices, had produced a culture that was religious but not dedicated to Jehovah God. The psalmist provides a mirror for us to use as we consider the religious rituals in our contemporary society and church culture. Often these practices lack substance and fail to draw us to God. A truly sacrificial and humble heart before God provides the opportunity for authentic worship and a life that loves God and neighbor.

51:18–19. In these verses, does the psalmist foresee the destruction of the culture because of its lack of true worship? Or, in the manner that some contemporary music writers rearrange old tunes, has someone added material from exilic or post-exilic times to the earlier lines? With either interpretation, verses 18–19 reflect the tone and worshipful attitude of one who has confessed and found forgiveness. This person prays for others to do the same. The results can produce culture-wide impact.

The Need for Confession (1 John 1:9)

Reading all of 1 John can be of immeasurable help in understanding the larger context of 1 John 1:9. John the Apostle moved among the people of Ephesus, one of the prominent commercial and religious centers of the Hellenistic world. Some of the people reflected a syncretistic, or blended approach to religious life. Their beliefs included elements of Christianity, but also of Gnosticism. John found it necessary to devote some of his attention to these syncretists, particularly as they sowed seeds of discord among the Christians. Some of this discord stemmed from those who considered themselves sinless. Our contemporary experience tells us that such personalities also exude a self-righteous attitude.

1:9a. Verses 6–9 each begin with “If.” John makes a statement of assumption, sets up an illustration, and arouses the readers’ and hearers’ imaginations. The word “if” can quickly move us from the abstract to the concrete, which was John’s intent. He used this device to counter the Gnostics whose influence majored on the ethereal.

1:9b. “If we confess our sins.” John uses irony to make his point. He could have advised more directly, “Some of you maintain you don’t need to confess your sins, because you believe you have no sin.” His point was this: you have such a narrow view of human behavior and such an ego-centric view of yourselves you think you are sinless.

1:9c. John provides a reality check. If we compare ourselves to other persons we may actually believe we are sinless. If we compare ourselves to the character of God; the flaws, the twists and turns of human pervertedness, and the quantifiable misdeeds, show forth in stark relief. Seek this One, John advises, for from God comes the liberation from sin and sins.

Focusing on the Meaning

These passages reveal our need to take more seriously our sinful natures and acts of sin. A paradox of confession is that it may involve a series of painful experiences as we identify our sin. Yet, the results of confession bring emotional and even physical healing. The concepts of peace, stability, contentment, and an overall sense of integrity become reality. These are qualities we can experience when we are forgiven.

These passages not only convey the importance of confession, they also provide models for how we confess. God is the one to whom we must ultimately confess. In addition, we must also confess to others we have wronged.

We should learn, too, how to hear confession. For Baptists, this is practicing the role of the priesthood of the believer. The person who hears a confession must handle the confessor's information as caringly as possible. Trust for further interchange can build, but could be stalemated with inappropriate behavior on the part of the one who hears the confession. Using another's private information as the source of gossip, tattling, and backbiting is clearly off limits—even thinly disguised as a “prayer request.” The New Testament contains numerous principles addressing these dynamics.

Few guidelines emit from Scripture on how widely and publically we should confess. Matthew 18:15–19 is of some help. These guidelines are for the one offended, interestingly. An essential ground rule appears to be: confess only as widely as the sin has involved; or, confess one-to-one about private sin and publically as more people know of the sin.

Some congregations practice confession by having a specific part of each Sunday's worship service given to a litany, responsive reading, or prayer by an individual on behalf of all those in the congregation about sins committed. Many of us perhaps were reared hearing the words “forgive us of our sins of omission and commission.” Though general and broad, these actions can be the starting points for individuals to understand their need for regular, authentic confession to God. Such confession is the first step towards forgiveness and restoration.

TEACHING PLANS

Teaching Plan—Varied Learning Activities

Connect with Life

1. Ask members to individually make a list of things they own that require regular check-ups or inspections. After a few minutes, invite each one to share one of the things on his or her list. Ask, *Why is it important to perform check-ups and inspections? What tends to happen if we fail to do so regularly? What are we to do with the reports and recommendations we receive when there is a problem?*
2. Explain that this session's habit of confession will guide members to see the importance of conducting regular spiritual check-ups of their lives and to honestly confess their sins. This is critical for disciples in maintaining effective service for God.

Guide Bible Study

3. Divide the class into two groups and give each group one of the following assignments. (A copy of these assignments is available in "Teaching Resource Items" for this study at www.baptistwaypress.org)
 - *Group One:* Read Psalm 51:1–6. Identify phrases David used to acknowledge his disobedience to God. Identify phrases that illustrate his honesty in seeking restoration. Be prepared to share your group's thoughts with the class.
 - *Group Two:* Read Psalm 51:7–12. Identify actions David requested of God to restore their relationship. Identify the outcomes related to each action. Be prepared to share your group's thoughts with the class.

After groups have completed their work, call for reports.

4. As you read Psalm 51:13–19, ask members to listen for what can take place in a disciple’s life as a result of honest confession (teach others; testimony that leads to changed lives; praise God; heart sacrifice versus ritualistic sacrifice; experience true worship). Share a personal testimony of a time you experienced any of these following a time of confession, and then invite others to share their examples.
5. Remind members that confession is not just an Old Testament practice that ceased when Jesus appeared. Confession remains an important habit for disciples as explained throughout the New Testament. Use the final paragraph in “Walking in the Light” from the *Study Guide* to introduce 1 John 1:9. As you read the verse, invite members to identify and define the four responses of God to a believer’s confession (faithful, just, forgive, purify).

Encourage Application

6. Lead members to ask God to conduct a spiritual check-up of their lives and to honestly confess their sin. Instruct members to move their chairs apart to create a private space away from other members. Use the following instructions as you guide the class through this time of prayer and meditation. Give ample time for each step as you read the following instructions.
 - *Close your eyes, bow your head, and focus on being in the presence of God. This is your time to restore and renew your relationship with God. Clear your mind of all distractions.*
 - *In your own words, express to God the plea of David to “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love” (Ps. 51:1).*
 - *Romans 3:23 says that we all have sinned and fall short of God’s expectations. Ask the Holy Spirit to show you the sin in your life. Be careful not to disregard or excuse any sin the Holy Spirit might call to your attention.*
 - *Confess your sin and honestly own your disobedience to God. Name each sin and repent of each one. Ask for God’s*

forgiveness. Pause after each sin and experience the restored “joy of your salvation” (Ps. 51:12).

- *Commit to altering your behavior to reflect the renewed and restored relationship you have with God. Focus on one thing you will do to be a useful servant of God.*
7. Challenge members to make this exercise a regular part of their spiritual disciplines. Say, *Confession of sin is a habit that will improve the effectiveness of every disciple.* Close the session with prayer.

Teaching Plan—Lecture and Questions

Connect with Life

1. Ask, *When you were growing up, did you ever have to confess for something you had done? Did you confess before or after you got caught? Was it easy to admit that you had broken a family treasure or your dad’s favorite tool, or maybe that you hurt someone at school by something you said? Anyone willing to share an experience?*
Say, *Confession is hard. Why?* After several responses, introduce today’s study by saying, *Disciples confess their sins to God in order to receive forgiveness and restoration.*

Guide Bible Study

2. Display a poster or write on a marker board the outline from the *Study Guide* for Psalm 51. Highlight each point as you work through the following instructions in steps 3–6.
 - A Cry for Mercy (1–2)
 - Honesty is the Best Policy (3–6)
 - Life on the Other Side of Guilt (7–12)
 - Restored and Useful (13–19)
3. Set up the study of Psalm 51 by sharing the historical events leading up to David composing the psalm (see 2 Samuel 11–12). Refer to the

first point on the outline and read Psalm 51:1–2. Note the tone and different expressions of David’s actions.

4. Read Psalm 51:3–6 and refer to the second outline point. David does not hold back and offers no excuses for his behavior. He lays the blame squarely on his own shoulders. Ask, *Based on these verses, what guarantees restoration and healing related to our confession of sin?*
5. Refer to the third outline point. Read Psalm 51:7–12. Share the information in the *Study Guide* about the hyssop plant. Ask members to highlight phrases in these verses that explain what a complete purification process looks like.
6. Read Psalm 51:13–19 and refer to the final outline point. Remind members that confessing sin leads to a change in behavior and results in benefits to the disciple and to God’s work. Ask, *What happens when we honestly confess and repent?*
7. Close the Bible study by reading 1 John 1:9 to present a clear statement of the purpose of confession. Use the information in the *Study Guide* to explain the process and the time frame. Make sure members leave with the understanding that John is talking about a disciple’s *fellowship* with God (the quality of the relationship) and not his *relationship* with God (conversion). Explain that this is one of the reasons confession should be a regular part of a person’s spiritual disciplines.

Encourage Application

8. Ask, *Based on today’s Scripture, how should the habit of confession play out in the life of a disciple?* Allow several members to respond. Challenge the class to continue considering the necessity and benefit of including confession as a regular habit in their personal times with God. Close with prayer.

LESSON THREE

Faith

FOCAL TEXTS

Proverbs 3:5–6; Galatians 2:15–21; Ephesians 2:8–10

BACKGROUND

Proverbs 3:5–6; Galatians 2:15–21; Ephesians 2:8–10

MAIN IDEA

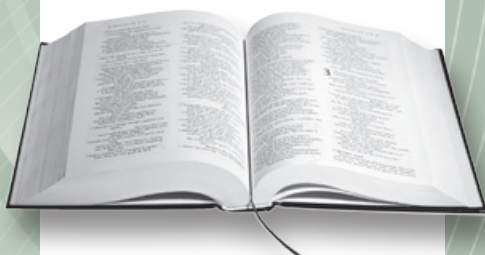
Disciples come to Jesus through faith and live by faith.

QUESTION TO EXPLORE

Have I come to Jesus through faith and am I living by faith?

TEACHING AIM

To lead adults to take a step of faith towards Jesus for salvation; or to take the next step of faith in their journey of surrender to his will



BIBLE COMMENTS

Understanding the Context

The word “faith” (or a form of the word faith) appears in Scripture more than 500 times. Faith is to spiritual life what breath is to physical life. Without the sort of faith taught in Scripture we cannot know God or please him (Hebrews 11:6). This lesson examines three different Bible passages that can deepen our understanding of faith.

Job, Ecclesiastes, and Proverbs comprise the “Wisdom Literature” of the Old Testament. The book of Proverbs was written to convey God’s wisdom for successful living through a format of short sayings and illustrations. Proverbs 3:5–6 are the words of wisdom speaking as a person (God). The message is clear: Faith is essential for success in life.

Paul’s letter to the Galatians challenged false teachers (Judaizers) who came to Galatia declaring everyone must follow Jewish law to be saved. Faith, they taught, was not enough. Paul boldly proclaimed that the law (Judaism) could never justify anyone. Faith alone, in Jesus alone, was Paul’s message of justification (to be made right with God in every way).

The letter to the Ephesians was written by Paul to contrast the world of idolatry and false religion with salvation by grace through faith in Christ. The Ephesians believed they were a chosen city and were protected by the temple of the goddess Diana (also called Artemis) as well as the temples in honor of three Roman emperors built there. Paul reminded the believers they were God’s “workmanship” as compared to the tradesmen who could only make lifeless statues; and that God had chosen them long before Rome existed (Eph.1:4–5). (For additional help read Acts 19:1–41.)

Learning to fully trust God in all things is essential as a Christian disciple. We must depend on his wisdom, his provision of salvation, and his gift of grace. Complete faith in him blesses our lives now and for eternity.

Interpreting the Scriptures

Trusting God's Wisdom by Faith (Proverbs 3:5–6)

3:5. The Old Testament books of Job, Ecclesiastes, and Proverbs are referred to as the “Wisdom Literature” of the Bible. Proverbs was written to teach and encourage wise personal behaviors. The truths come from God and the results of obedience or disobedience can be measured. “This will bring health to your body and nourishment to your bones” (3:8) is the reward for trusting God.

Wisdom instructs us to “trust in the Lord.” Faith begins with belief and then leads to a trusting and confident relationship with God. Used here, “trust” means to fully and completely put our whole weight on God’s wisdom, care, and compassion. Trust requires “all your heart” (with nothing held back.) God’s wisdom is more than a body of truth. God’s wisdom is his loving application of truth to our individual lives. Faith is learning to put our full weight on God’s superior wisdom and unlimited love.

3:6. To “acknowledge” God means to give him the respect, reverence, and love due him. Our acknowledgement of God produces “straight paths” as God removes the obstacles which harm our relationship with him and adds those things which bless us. This is not a promise of an easy life, but a blessed life. Faith such as this comes from a trust relationship with God built over time and experience. Faith in God brings specific blessings (3:1–4). Crooked paths are evil and harmful.

Receiving God's Salvation by Faith (Galatians 2:15–21)

2:15–16. Earlier in this chapter Paul challenged Simon Peter because of Peter’s behavior at Antioch that caused confusion regarding the requirements of salvation. Peter had been openly associating with Gentile Christians (a violation of his Jewish beliefs) until a group of Jewish church leaders arrived from Jerusalem. He then “withdrew” himself from the Gentiles and began behaving as a Jew again. His hypocrisy was obvious and confusing to the churches of Galatia. Was something other than faith necessary for salvation? How can someone be saved?

Paul challenged Peter's behavior when he declared we are "not justified by observing the law." He quickly added the positive, "but by faith in Jesus Christ". Paul insisted no one would or could ever be justified (to be made right with holy God in every way) by observing ritualistic religious rules or by their own merits. Paul's commitment was more than theological or philosophical. He declared he had placed his own personal faith in Christ in order to be completely and eternally justified through his faith alone, not by observing the law as a means of salvation (Roman 8:1-4). Only then are we free to live in a right relationship with one another (Galatians 5:13-14).

2:17. Paul's detractors argued that if we are justified by faith alone, then why should anyone attempt to live a holy life? Paul denied that Christ "promotes sin" and pointed out the law had served its purpose by revealing the need for salvation. The doctrine of salvation by faith alone puts both Jew and Gentile on the same level before God. "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23).

2:18. Adding human effort only rebuilds what we had previously torn down when we came to Christ by faith instead of by works (Galatians 3:1-3). Vacillating between observing the law as a means of salvation, and faith alone as the path to salvation; only proves how hopelessly lost human kind has become. We are "lawbreakers" in need of the salvation that can only come through simple faith in Christ.

2:19. The law could only bring death (spiritual darkness and condemnation), as it had no power to save. In fact, Paul declared the law itself was instrumental in his spiritual death. How shocking it must have been for Paul, who as Saul had been a hero of law-keeping Judaism, to first come to this conclusion. The law could never bring eternal salvation, but by simple faith in Christ anyone could be justified before God. One path brings life, the other brings death. As life and death are not compatible, so too are faith and law. We cannot have both as a means of salvation, for one eliminates the other.

2:20-21. In the original language of the Bible, verse twenty begins, "With Christ I have been crucified." These words were personal and powerful to Paul. The work of faith destroyed the old way of life for Paul

because the old Paul (Saul) was dead (Acts 9, 22, 26). The new Paul was alive only by the power of God through faith “in the Son of God” who gave himself as a sin offering (Hebrews 9:11–28) for humankind in love and power.

Paul declared that his personal faith in Christ had ended his dependence upon the law for salvation, and had imbued him with life. By “life” Paul meant more than biological or even eternal existence. He meant that by faith in Christ he was completely and permanently transformed by the presence of the living God in the depth of his being. Everything he now valued and sought was due to the transforming life of Christ that was his by simple, sincere faith and nothing more (Philippians 3:7–11).

In verse 21 Paul uses the word grace to describe the “undeserved favor” God gives to everyone who seeks him by faith in Jesus. Paul had been responsible for harming many followers of Christ before he, himself, became a believer. He recognized he was given the opportunity to have faith in Christ only because of God’s grace.

Celebrating God’s Grace by Faith (Ephesians 2:8–10)

2:8. Ephesus was a center of pagan deities and emperor worship in the Roman controlled province of Asia Minor. Paul’s teaching in Ephesus challenged the superficial sophistication of Roman power and commercialism. The great goddess Diana (Artemis) “ruled” the region, at least in commercial ventures, and was known throughout the world. In shops around her temple (one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World) were icons representing her beauty, fertility, and influence. The sale of these lifeless figures brought revenue to many craftsmen who made Ephesus their home (Acts 19:24).

Paul reminded the Ephesian Christians that they once participated in the evils of this city. The result was their spiritual death (2:1–3). However, because of God’s choice, they were given grace and faith as gifts. These gifts were required because without them they could not know God or experience salvation. The source of our salvation is God alone (“by grace through faith”) and never produced by human effort (“not from yourselves”). Both grace and faith are gifts from God. “Grace” is God’s free favor given to unworthy humankind.

2:9. The residents of Ephesus were known for their boasting, especially as caretakers of the temple of Diana and the three temples built to encourage the worship of Roman emperors. Because salvation is a gift and not earned, no believer should boast, except in Christ (2 Corinthians 11:30, 12:9). God cares for us (1 Peter 5:7), not we for him.

2:10. “Workmanship” means that believers are a product of God’s creative activity. Just as God created the universe through Christ (Hebrews 1:2), he created (“produced”) believers through Christ. We are given faith and grace to “produce” (the root word of “workmanship”) good things in the kingdom of God. God creates people, by grace through faith, who are alive and purposeful in his kingdom.

Focusing on the Meaning

Faith can be defined as a belief that leads to complete trust. For Christians, the object of our faith is God as he is revealed in Jesus Christ, his Son.

Highly effective disciples learn to use their faith in at least three ways. First, we trust (have faith) in God’s wisdom and direction. Proverbs 3:5–6 is a practical and poetic expression of our faith as we learn to trust God for the provisions and blessings of life. Jesus also taught his disciples to have this sort of faith (Matthew 6:25–34).

Second, effective disciples have faith in Christ alone for salvation, and we are completely secure in this trust in Christ. Followers of Christ recognize his uniqueness and lordship (Colossians 1:15–23) and gladly put their whole faith in him, alone (John 6:67–69). Along with the Apostle Paul all believers can say, “I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20b).

Third, effective disciples celebrate God’s gifts of grace and faith. “Grace” is God’s extraordinary favor to humankind, a merciful love we cannot fully understand. God’s gift of grace makes faith in him possible for fallen, sinful humanity. God seeks us. We do not seek him, except as he allows by grace, through faith. Effective disciples celebrate God’s gifts of grace and faith, for without them no one could be saved (Ephesians 2:18).

I once asked a young Navy pilot in my church if he wondered how a jet could fly. He said, “I don’t wonder why they fly. I wonder why they sometimes lose power and crash.” Faith is the “power” of the Christian life. By grace, faith makes possible complete trust in God for daily living and eternal salvation.

Effective disciples depend on the power of faith as they live in full obedience to Christ.

TEACHING PLANS

Teaching Plan—Varied Learning Activities

Connect with Life

1. Divide the class into groups of two or three members each. Instruct each group to role play a real-life, everyday situation where faith is demonstrated. Try not to give an example, but if you are pressed to do so, use one of the situations given in “He Can Be Trusted” in the *Study Guide*. Give groups time to complete the assignment and then ask each one to role play their example for the class. After groups have shared, say, *Today we are going to take a step of faith toward Jesus or, for those of us who have taken that first step; take the next step of faith in our journey of surrender to God’s will.*
2. Invite members to give a textbook definition of “faith”—both as a verb and as a noun. Write elements of their definitions on a marker board. Say, *Faith is an essential habit of a highly effective disciple. Disciples come to Jesus through faith and they live by faith.*

Guide Bible Study

3. Ask someone to read Proverbs 3:5–6. Invite members to select what they consider to be the two most important words in these verses. Write the words on a marker board and note with a check mark

each time a word is repeated. As each word is shared, ask, *Why did you select that word?* After everyone has spoken, highlight the word “all” in the verses and remind members of the depth of commitment required to attain God’s wisdom and direction.

4. Define the doctrine of justification as being made right with God by faith in Christ. As you read Galatians 2:15–21, invite members to count the number of times the word “justified” appears. Ask, *Based on these verses, what is salvation and what does it take to be saved?* Close the discussion by saying, *There is nothing we can do to achieve salvation. Only by placing faith in Jesus Christ can we experience a full and eternal relationship with God.*
5. Say, *Paul continues this subject in his letter to the Ephesians.* Read Ephesians 2:8–9. Ask members to define and describe “grace” (unearned and undeserved favor with God). Divide the class into two groups. One group represents *grace* and the other *faith*. Give each group a few minutes to determine what role their word plays in salvation. In round-robin style, instruct each group to share one idea until all ideas from both groups have been presented.
6. Read Ephesians 2:10. Say, *Paul clearly explains that our salvation is through faith in Christ, and he continues in this verse to explain how we are to respond to God’s gift of salvation.* Write the following on a marker board or poster: *We are not saved ____ works; we are saved _____ works.* Invite members to fill in the blanks: *We are not saved by works, we are saved for works.* Say, *For the believer totally committed to Jesus Christ, life has meaning every day in fulfilling God’s purpose on earth through service to others.*

Encourage Application

7. Be sensitive to those in the class who may not have taken the first step of faith in Christ. Offer to meet with them personally to answer questions they may have and to share how becoming a Christ-follower will change their lives.
8. Challenge class members who have committed to walk with Christ to evaluate where they are in their journey. Encourage them to set

aside a block of time in the next two days to spend evaluating their spiritual lives and committing to one practical next step of faith in their journey of surrender to God's will.

9. Close with prayer for those who need to take the first step of faith and for those who need to take their next step of faith.

Teaching Plan—Lecture and Questions

Connect with Life

1. Begin by sharing a story about a time in your life when you chose to trust your instincts rather than God's direction. Share how your lack of faith in God and your attempt at working on your own proved to be the wrong approach. Include how you came to realize how turning to God and trusting his plans was the only way to resolve the situation. Conclude by saying, *Today we are going to look at maybe the most important habit of a highly effective disciple, faith in Jesus Christ.*

Guide Bible Study

2. Read Proverbs 3:5–6. Ask, *How difficult is it to refrain from leaning on your own understanding?* After the class has responded to this question, ask, *What does it take to become a disciple that seeks God's will and direction at all times and in every situation?* Probe for practical ideas that members have implemented in their faith journey.
3. Ask, *What is your understanding of salvation? What does it mean to be saved?* After several members have responded, introduce Galatians 2:15–21 by telling of Paul's encounter with Peter in Galatians 2:11–14. Read Galatians 2:15–21. Using the information in the *Study Guide*, explain why Paul was intent on clarifying salvation. Center your explanation around his use of the word "justified."
4. Read Ephesians 2:8–9. Ask, *How would you define grace?* Allow several members to respond and then explain how salvation is received

as a gift and not a reward or payment for doing good work. Say, *Accepting God's gift of salvation is the first step and the beginning of our journey of faith.* Read Ephesians 2:10. Say, *God has designed us and saved us through Jesus to do good works on earth.*

Encourage Application

5. Say, *From these selected passages of Scripture, we can see the importance of faith in the life of a highly effective disciple. The first step is to commit to being a disciple of Christ by accepting God's gift of salvation. Have you taken that step?* Invite members who are at this stage in their spiritual walk to meet you after class to ask questions and learn more about becoming a Christ-follower.
6. Ask, *For those who are disciples of Christ, what are some evidences of living by faith in your life today? How are you following God's will for your life?* Allow several members to respond and then close with prayer asking God to direct each class member to take the appropriate next step in their journey of faith.

LESSON FOUR

Fasting

FOCAL TEXTS

2 Chronicles 20:1–4, 13–15;
Matthew 6:16–18; Acts 13:1–3

BACKGROUND

2 Chronicles 20:1–17;
Matthew 6:16–18; Acts 13:1–3

MAIN IDEA

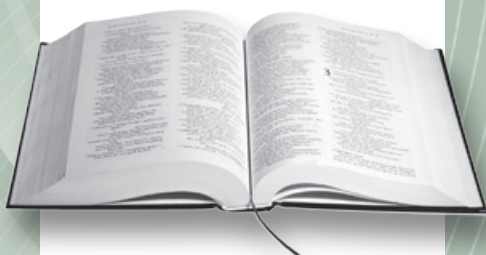
Disciples fast to seek God
and his purposes.

QUESTION TO EXPLORE

Is God leading me to fast (from
food or anything else) in order
to seek him and his purposes?

TEACHING AIM

To encourage adults to
practice fasting (from food
or anything else) in order to
seek God and his purposes



BIBLE COMMENTS

Understanding the Context

My oldest granddaughter, Taylor, and I were in a well-known fast food restaurant, looking intently at the “McMenu” before we ordered. When I asked her if she knew what she wanted, she replied, “Yes, I want *everything*”.

Fasting may not be a popular topic in a world where we want it all, but effective disciples have learned the benefits and blessings of fasting.

Christian fasting is the temporary and voluntary limitation of food, or anything else, in order to seek God. Jesus clearly expected his disciples would fast. However, fasting can be done in the wrong way for the wrong reasons (Matthew 23:1–7, 25–27).

In 2 Chronicles 20 King Jehoshaphat called for a national fast when a great army of foreign invaders threatened to destroy Jerusalem and Judah. Everyone prayed and fasted for divine intervention. The fast was an indication of their humility and their total dependence upon God during a time of great anxiety.

Jesus taught his disciples how to fast in Matthew 6. He wanted his followers to avoid the hypocrisy of the Pharisees in the practice of their “acts of righteousness” (6:1). Almsgiving, prayer, and fasting were parts of regular worship and should have never been done as a show of righteousness.

Acts 13 contains the account of a congregation fasting as they sought spiritual discernment. Barnabas and Saul (Paul) were “called out” by the Holy Spirit to serve as traveling missionaries while the church they led at Antioch was worshiping and fasting. God was able to use the believers in Antioch to begin a new direction in the spread of the gospel to the Gentiles. Soon, all of Europe would hear about Jesus because a church was praying and fasting.

Fasting is effective during times of crisis, as part of regular worship, and in special times of discerning God’s will. Effective disciples learn to seek God through fasting (Matthew 6:31–33).

Interpreting the Scriptures

Fasting During Times of Crisis (2 Chronicles 20:1–4, 13–15)

20:1. In Judah, Jehoshaphat was a good king who made an unwise alliance with the evil leader of Israel, King Ahab. He agreed to send his army to help Ahab recapture an Israelite city (Ramoth-Gilead) which had been taken by Syria. King Ahab was killed in the battle. Jehoshaphat returned safely to Judah, but he was confronted about his lack of wisdom (19:1–3). He immediately began a campaign to rid Judah of idols and pagan worship. During this time, combined armies from Moab and Ammon, along with a smaller group of Meunites (a trades-people from modern day Yemen), came to capture Jerusalem.

20:2–3. The huge enemy force was only about twenty miles away (at the spring of En-Gedi on the west side of the Dead Sea) when Jehoshaphat heard of the planned surprise attack. He was overwhelmed by the news of imminent destruction and realized he had no time to prepare to fight an enemy already at his doorstep. His response was “to inquire of the Lord” through a fast by the entire nation. All regular activity stopped. This was a time to seek God.

20:4. The citizens of Judah had great respect for King Jehoshaphat who had personally led them back to the Lord as he traveled among them (19:4–10). The gathering in Jerusalem was for the purpose of seeking God together as one people. This sincere effort required a cessation of preparing and eating meals, as well as ceasing all other normal activities, until God answered their prayers.

Jehoshaphat’s prayer (20:5–12) was similar to Solomon’s prayer at the dedication of the new temple (6:12–42). Jehoshaphat, whose name meant “God has judged”, was acting as both king and priest as he led God’s people to the temple to face the crisis together.

20:13. Families fasted and sought God together, their eyes fixed upon God and his earthly representations (their king and God’s holy temple.) Even the children were involved.

20:14. Jahaziel, whose name meant “God sees” or “reveals”, was a Levite, familiar with temple worship. His lineage was traced through Asaph, King David’s leader of choral worship (1 Chronicles 16:4–5). He was chosen to “reveal” God’s answers to the pleadings of God’s people as they fasted.

20:15. In his prayer, Jehoshaphat declared that in time of calamity Judah would stand before God’s temple and, “you will hear us and save us” (20:9). Jahaziel heard from God and quoted God directly. The fasting and worship had humbled God’s people and had sensitized them to the miraculous presence, power, and provision of God. In whatever way God chose to respond to the crisis, his people would now willingly commit themselves to him.

Fasting During Regular Worship (Matthew 6:16–18)

6:16. Jewish law required only one day of fasting each year (the Day of Atonement), but Jesus expected his disciples to fast regularly. Notice he said “when”, not “if” in verses 2, 5, and 16. Fasting was included in the “acts of righteousness” of Judaism (6:1). Jesus condemned the false piety and ostentation of the Pharisees, calling them hypocrites. Fasting is a way to seek God, not a proof of piety.

The concept of “reward” was also a part of the teachings of rabbinic Judaism. The “acts of righteousness” were those which “merited” salvation. (Christians are saved by grace through faith, alone.) Human rewards are fleeting. God’s “rewards” are perfect and eternal. Christians do not fast in order to be rewarded, but because we are already rewarded in our Lord (Matt. 19:27–29).

6:17–18. Jesus instructed his followers to look their best while fasting. The use of olive oil to heal dry skin, for example, should be continued. “Dress well, comb your hair, and put a smile on your face,” is a fair paraphrase of Jesus’ teaching. None of the acts of righteousness should call attention to the individual performing them. The Pharisees did not understand this concept (6:16). Their reward was superficial.

The idea of “reward” was mentioned seven or eight times in this chapter, likely because the concept of rewards was featured in rabbinic teachings and familiar to the crowd. The concept of grace was not yet

understood (Ephesians 2:8–9). Revelation 22:12 reminds us that Jesus distributes “rewards” as he, alone, determines.

Fasting was practiced by the Pharisees (Luke 18:12), by the disciples of John the Baptist (Matt. 9:14), by Jesus (Matt. 4:1–2), and by his followers after his ascension (Matt. 9:15). Today, believers fast in order to feast on God’s word (John 4:32). When Jesus hungered in the wilderness, he reminded Satan that life was sustained by more than physical food (Matt. 4:4).

Scriptural fasting is not the same as dieting or purging for physical results. The benefits of Christian fasting are primarily spiritual. Fasting can help believers repent of sin, acknowledge dependency upon God, and have a private devotional life that encourages a deeper fellowship with Christ and other Christians.

Fasting to Discern the Will of God (Acts 13:1–3)

13:1. Antioch was the Roman headquarters of Syria and Cilicia (See maps of Paul’s journeys.) The city was also the location of an Imperial mint. The beginnings of the Gentile church and the first missionary efforts occurred in Antioch, one of the great cities of that day.

Barnabas was instrumental in bringing Saul (Paul) to Antioch (Acts 11:25–26), perhaps because he recognized God had ordained Saul to reach the Gentiles for Christ (9:15, 13:46, 15:12). Their work in Antioch was productive and the church grew in numbers and in maturity. The leadership of the church was strong, though we know little of the three additional leaders named here. Manaen may have been the half-brother of Herod Antipas or simply one of many young men brought up with the royal prince. Simeon may have been the “Simon” who carried the cross of Jesus (Matthew 27:32), but this is only conjecture. The point is that these were all solid leaders.

13:2. Fasting was part of their regular worship, but a need to discern God’s will for an unusual matter seems to be implied in this verse. Perhaps the church was seeking God’s direction in their next step of evangelism and ministry, recognizing the consequences of an unwise decision. We are not told how the Holy Spirit “spoke”, only that his message was authoritative and well-received by the entire congregation. When we worship and fast together, the Holy Spirit energizes the

congregation and brings unity of heart and purpose. “Worshiping the Lord and fasting” breaks down barriers that separate us from God and one another.

The “sending out” of Barnabas and Saul occurred after they returned from a trip to Jerusalem with an offering for famine relief (Acts 11:27–30). Perhaps because the Christians in Antioch practiced fasting they were able to give what was not spent on themselves to help others in a time of need.

13:3. The church continued to fast and pray after the Holy Spirit had spoken, for Barnabas and Saul would need strength and wisdom beyond themselves. The church prayed and fasted on their behalf. The laying on of hands was not an ordination to the gospel, but a prayerful blessing upon the missionaries. The entire church was involved in their “calling” as well as their “sending.” Barnabas and Saul reported to the entire congregation upon the completion of their missionary journey (14:26–28).

The early chapters of Acts focus on the ministry of Simon Peter. However, beginning with Chapter 13, the emphasis is on the ministry of Paul (Saul) and his missionary efforts to bring the gospel to the Gentiles of Asia Minor and Europe. This new direction from the Holy Spirit is illustrated in Paul’s vision of a man from Macedonia (16:6–10). On Paul’s second missionary journey the gospel was preached in Europe, which changed the course of history. The church in Antioch became an international mission sending agency and changed the world because her members knew to pray and fast.

Focusing on the Meaning

Highly effective disciples practice the Christian discipline of fasting. How should we fast?

Christian fasting can follow the Jewish model of abstaining from food and liquids from sunrise to sunset as we seek God. We can choose to follow the less restrictive fast of drinking juice, only, for twelve hours or less. In a time of great difficulty or temptation our fast may be prolonged (with a doctor’s permission.) Our “fast” could be giving up television time or hobbies in order to worship, pray, or meditate. However, the *manner* of fasting is not as significant as the *motive* for fasting.

Christians cease regular schedules of daily living in order to seek God, to worship and honor him, and to acknowledge our dependence upon him in all things. We fast in times of fear and anxiety, to aid our personal and corporate worship, and when we need direction for new challenges or circumstances.

The benefits of fasting include:

- Strengthening self-discipline for God's service
- Growing in faith as we grow deeper in Christ
- Gaining spiritual insight for the challenge at hand
- Maturing as a believer
- Deepening Christian fellowship and unity in the church
- Arming ourselves for spiritual battles
- Breaking bad habits or patterns of behavior
- Discerning the leadership of the Holy Spirit

Fasting strengthens believers by allowing us to feast on God and his word instead of on earthly food or entertainment.

What needs do you have in your life or in your church right now? Would a time of fasting, personally and corporately, be beneficial? Fasting means we are ready to be serious with God.

In a world where we want it all, highly effective disciples want God first (Matthew 6:33).

TEACHING PLANS

Teaching Plan—Varied Learning Activities

Connect with Life

1. Ask, *As a follower of Jesus Christ, what are your greatest fears and challenges?* Allow several members to respond. As members respond, ask them to share how they make decisions during those significant times. Ask, *What spiritual disciplines do you utilize on*

a regular basis? Write responses on a marker board or poster. Say, Today we are going to focus our attention on the spiritual discipline of fasting. This habit of highly effective disciples is often overlooked when making significant life decisions.

2. Call attention to the sidebar in the *Study Guide* on fasting. Ask a member to define fasting. If not included in the definition, ask another member to explain the purpose of fasting. Invite members to look at the list in the *Study Guide* of the different types of fasting in the Bible. Say, *In the Scripture passages we will be studying today, we have the opportunity to look at three types of fasting and make application to our personal lives and to the corporate body of Christ.*

Guide Bible Study

3. Create two posters. On one poster write *Corporate Fasting* and on the second poster write *Personal Fasting*. Place the posters in two different locations at the front of the room. (A copy of these assignments is available in “Teaching Resource Items” for this study at www.baptistwaypress.org)
4. Call attention to the *Corporate Fasting* poster. Divide the class into two discovery groups. Give each group one of the following assignments. (A copy of these assignments is available in “Teaching Resource Items” for this study at www.baptistwaypress.org)
 - *Group One:* Read 2 Chronicles 20:1–4, 13–15. Discuss how God used the practice of fasting in the life of the nation Judah to guide them during a time of national threat. Be prepared to share with the other group what you discover.
 - *Group Two:* Read Acts 13:1–3. Discuss how God used the practice of fasting in the life of the church at Antioch to reveal his plan for missionary action. Be prepared to share with the other group what you discover.

After the groups have had time to complete their assignments, call for reports and compile a list of truths on corporate fasting that can be applied to the church today.

5. Call attention to the *Personal Fasting* poster. Ask, *Why is it difficult for believers today to practice fasting?* Read Jesus’ words on fasting

in Matthew 6:16–18. Note that Jesus begins with “When” and not “If” you fast. Ask, *What does this say about Jesus’ expectations?* After several have responded, ask, *What were the instructions of Jesus about the practice of fasting?* Compile a list of truths on personal fasting that can be applied to believers today.

Encourage Application

6. Ask, *Has anyone in our group ever fasted? If so, how did God use it in your life to accomplish his purposes?* Hopefully several members will respond. Affirm their experiences and encourage the practice of fasting at appropriate times on their spiritual journey.
7. Ask, *If you have never practiced the discipline of fasting, what are your concerns?* Encourage honest and open responses. Ask, *After discovering today’s truths from God’s word about fasting, how do you think God might be able to use it in your life?*
8. Close the session by reviewing the sections from the sidebars “Guidelines for Fasting” and “Suggestions for Fasting” in the *Study Guide*. Without comment after each point, invite a member to begin by reading point #1 under “Guidelines for Fasting.” Go around the group until all points have been read in each section. Challenge members by paraphrasing the “Implications and Actions” section in the *Study Guide*. Close with prayer.

Teaching Plan—Lecture and Questions

Connect with Life

1. Ask the class to respond with “I agree” or “I disagree” with the following statement: *Fasting is both biblical and practical and should be practiced by disciples today.* Probe member’s responses to determine the reasons behind their replies. Say, *Today we are going to discover God’s intent for the practice of fasting as a habit for highly effective disciples.*

Guide Bible Study

2. Explain how today's study is organized. The first biblical text is from the Old Testament and illustrates fasting as a nation to discover God's plan for protecting Judah. The second text is from the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus explained how personal fasting works in the life of a believer. The third passage tells how fasting was used by the early church in Antioch to discover God's plan for carrying the gospel to the nations.
3. Briefly share the background of Jehoshaphat's successful reign as king of Judah. Tell the class about his greatest challenge toward the end of his reign as he faced a surprise invasion from a powerful coalition of forces. Read 2 Chronicles 20:1–4. Discuss Jehoshaphat's reaction and his plan for leading his people to seek the Lord's guidance through prayer and fasting.
4. Read 2 Chronicles 20:13–15. Notice God's response to Judah's fasting. God spoke through Jahaziel to assure the king and his people that the battle was not theirs to fight, but God's. Say, *God responded because the nation of Judah was faithful in practicing fasting to seek his plan.*
5. Place the next Scripture in context by explaining the occasion in Jesus' early ministry for the Sermon on the Mount, as found in Matthew 5–7. Explain that three acts of personal worship are addressed in Matthew 6: almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. Read Matthew 6:16–18. Invite members to identify and discuss Jesus' instructions about how to fast.
6. Read Acts 13:1–3 and identify this as a turning point in the spread of the church around the world. Explain that the church at Antioch became an international missions sending agency. Note that the call came to Barnabas and Silas while they were worshipping and fasting, and the church set them apart for service after praying and fasting. Highlight the role fasting played in believers responding to God's will.

Encourage Application

7. Say, *We have learned today of the importance of fasting as a habit of highly effective disciples. Fasting for a specific period of time for the purpose of focusing on God can occur in the midst of a difficult situation (2 Chronicles 20), when we are seeking God’s direction about a pending decision (Matthew 6), or any time we feel led by the Holy Spirit to pursue God in a more intentional manner (Acts 13).*
8. Wrap up the session with a challenge to class members to incorporate fasting as a spiritual discipline. Refer to the “Suggestions for Fasting” from the sidebar in the *Study Guide* for practical help. Close with prayer.

FOCAL TEXTS

Acts 2:42–47; Romans 12:3–13

BACKGROUND

Acts 2:42–47; Romans 12:3–13

MAIN IDEA

Disciples experience the benefits and responsibilities of Christian fellowship.

QUESTION TO EXPLORE

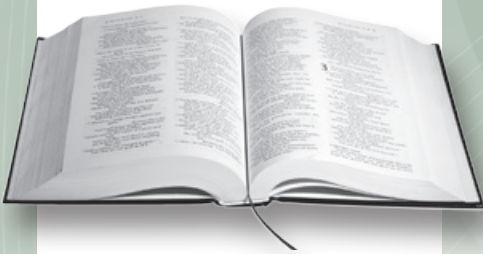
Am I experiencing the full benefits and responsibilities of Christian fellowship?

TEACHING AIM

To lead adults to identify and embrace the full benefits and responsibilities of Christian fellowship

LESSON FIVE

Fellowship



BIBLE COMMENTS

Understanding the Context

These pivotal passages in Acts and Romans supply helpful insights about fellowship within early Christian communities. Acts 2:42–47 offers a snapshot of the church when it was only a few days old, providing a type of thesis paragraph on the state of the early church. These verses form the first long summary in Acts with verse 42 serving as an initial outline, and the following verses (43–47) filling in the details about life in the early Christian community. At this point in the church's life, it was composed of residents of Jerusalem as well as many others who had journeyed to Jerusalem from various parts of the world for the festival of Pentecost. These visitors became followers of Jesus and then prolonged their stay in Jerusalem.

The second passage (Romans 12:3–13), comes at a critical shift in Paul's letter to the church at Rome. The first eleven chapters focus on Christian doctrine while the latter five chapters emphasize faith in action, a shift from the right way of thinking about God (orthodoxy) to the right way of practicing our faith (orthopraxy). For Paul, what we believe should have a direct impact on what we do. Romans 12:1–2 serve as the transition from doctrine to practice. These two verses explain that because God has been so merciful to us, we ought to respond by devoting our lives to him as we are transformed through the renewing of our minds. The following verses (12:3–13) clarify how followers of God, in their various stages of transformation, should relate to one another within the local body of believers.

Interpreting the Scriptures

Community Life within the Early Church (Acts 2:42–47)

2:42. The early followers of Jesus devoted themselves to four central activities: 1) learning the apostles' teaching, 2) deepening the fellowship among the believers, 3) breaking bread together, and 4) praying. Because these early Jewish Christians were experiencing a dramatic shift in their beliefs, they needed to understand clearly that Jesus was indeed the expected Messiah. The basic message of the apostles' preaching was that Jesus was the long-awaited king, but one who suffered, died, and was resurrected from the dead. This new community of believers was connected to one another through their relationship with this crucified-and-risen Messiah.

The Greek term for fellowship, *koinonia*, is only used once in Acts and refers to close, mutual relations among believers. The breaking of bread likely referred to both sacred and common meals (that is, sharing together in the Lord's Supper and simply sharing meals together). This table fellowship undoubtedly provided opportunities for worship, sharing, and learning. They also devoted themselves to prayer, which may have included times of formal prayer associated with Judaism, in addition to more intimate times of prayer as they shared with one another and worshiped together in their new community of faith.

2:43. Those within the community and those in contact with the believers were both filled with a sense of awe, or reverent fear, as they observed the "wonders and signs" enacted by the apostles. Jesus performed miracles; now his followers were doing the same. The healing of the paralytic described in the following chapter became a striking example of one of these wonders which pointed to the new life found through Jesus.

2:44–45. The *fellowship* mentioned in verse 42 goes beyond the deep friendships idealized by a number of Greco-Roman philosophers. This community of believers demonstrated their unselfish love for one another by selling property and other belongings in order to meet the needs of those within the group. This act of hospitality was especially important for those who had traveled to Jerusalem for Pentecost. They needed financial assistance as they remained in Jerusalem to learn more

about their new faith. In so doing, the early church became a living example of the ideal community God intended for his covenant people (Deuteronomy 15:7–8). These verses describe communal sharing, not communal property; that is, the members of this fellowship shared their resources as needs arose within the community (cf. Acts 4:32–35).

2:46–47. While these early Christians were still following Jewish practices, they saw Jesus as the fulfillment of their traditions. Their fervent hope that Jesus would soon return provided additional motivation for them to live sacrificially. At this early stage, the Christian community was marked by unity, generosity, and worship. Others in Jerusalem admired their behavior to the point that this new fellowship of believers was “having favor with all the people” (2:47, *NASB*) much as the young Jesus grew in favor with God and people (cf. Luke 2:52).

Humble Service as a Member of the Body of Christ (Romans 12:3–8)

12:3. In order for a local body of believers to function properly, its members must have the proper attitude. Because God is the source of our gifts and abilities, there is no room for pride or self-denigration. Instead, we should think sensibly about ourselves and how we can use our God-given abilities to minister to others.

12:4–5. Just as the human body has many parts with different functions, so also the body of Christ has many members who function in various ways for the benefit of the body as a whole. The desire to use our gifts for the common good will stand in stark contrast to the selfish ambitions to exalt ourselves or rank one gift above another. Paul’s use of the body as an analogy for the church established a new corporate identity for God’s people. This new identity was not based on nationality or ethnic unity, but rather on the diverse (but mutually interdependent) parts of the body which are united in Christ (cf. 1 Corinthians 12:12–27).

12:6–8. Though not a comprehensive list, Paul highlighted some of the gifts with which God blesses individual members to use for the benefit of the larger faith community. Those who prophesy must share their insights from God in proportion to their faith, being careful not to go beyond what God has revealed. Serving may refer to specific services

provided by appointed ones in the church such as deacons, but also refers to service in general. Christians should use their gifts—whether teaching, encouraging, giving, leading, or showing mercy—with sincerity and a proper attitude.

Essentials for the Body of Christ to Work Together (Romans 12:9–13)

12:9a. For the diverse members of the body to work together, love (*agape*)—without hypocrisy—must be central. Jesus identified our love for God and neighbor as the core of following God. He illustrated the depth of this love through the story of the Good Samaritan. Such love pushes us beyond cultural barriers (Luke 10:25–37). Paul likewise emphasized to the Christians in Rome that only a deep love for God and others would enable the body of Christ to function properly. A superficial love would quickly break under the stresses of community life, especially when that community is composed of individuals from different cultures, as was the case in Rome with both Jewish and Gentile Christians.

12:9b–10. A Christ-like love will drive us away from evil and cause us to cling with all of our might to what is good. As brothers and sisters within the body of Christ, we are to be devoted to one another with familial love (*philadelphia*). One of the concrete expressions of love within the Christian community is to put others above ourselves (cf. Philippians 2:3).

12:11. The three exhortations in this verse focus on ways to harness our spiritual zeal. We must not waste our energy by refusing to use it due to laziness or fear. Our zeal, which fuels the use of our talents, is meant to be exhausted, not buried under the ground (cf. Matt. 25:14–30). Rather than hoarding our energy, we must be “burning in s/Spirit.” This could be a reference to our human spirit, just as Apollos was fervent in spirit (Acts 18:25), but more likely it refers to the Holy Spirit who provides direction to our efforts, just as Priscilla and Aquila gave direction to Apollos (Acts 18:26). The final exhortation commands us to submit all of our zeal in service to the Lord. Spiritual enthusiasm is essential to

serve others, but we must avoid misdirecting our energy to ensure that we are helping, (not hurting), those we intend to serve.

12:12. The next three exhortations provide encouragement to persevere through difficult times. We rejoice in the hope that we have in Christ. Our hope brings joy despite challenging circumstances and setbacks. We must be patient and persevere through times of trouble. Prayer is essential to the Christian life, especially when facing afflictions. Therefore, we must put forth the effort to devote ourselves to prayer.

12:13. Paul used the verbal form of the word for fellowship (*koinonia*) to show the deep level at which we should meet the needs of the “saints,” (NASB) the term used to describe fellow believers. We are to share, or fellowship, with Christians who are suffering from a lack of basic needs. We are to join together with them to care for their physical well-being. Moreover, we are to “pursue” hospitality. Christian hospitality implies much more than social entertaining, which often focuses on the host. Hospitality within the Christian community focuses on the guests, caring for those within the local body of believers and others that we encounter as we go about our daily lives.

Focusing on the Meaning

In both of these passages, we see how the local body of believers ought to function and how church members should relate to one another. In Acts 2:42–47, the Church was in its infancy, and the believers who gathered together in Jerusalem displayed an incredible love for one another as they grew in their knowledge of what it meant to be followers of Jesus. This young church would soon face harsh challenges from within and outside of their community of faith, but their deep support of one another garnered the admiration of those who observed the way they related to and cared for each other.

In the Romans passage, we see a reflection of another church in the mirror of Paul’s words of advice. Having both Jewish and Gentile Christians, the church in Rome was more culturally diverse than the one in Jerusalem. Such diversity tested the depth of the members’ love for one another and revealed the quality of their fellowship.

Superficial love and surface-level fellowship are never able to sustain unity among a church’s diverse members when internal and external pressures arise. Such pressure can cause the community to fracture. A deep, self-giving love and care for others is needed. When combined with a deep devotion to God, these qualities act as strong cords (the sinews and muscles) that bind the body of believers together as they serve one another and reach out to those beyond their community. Through strong devotion to one another—this habit of fellowship—the local church enjoys unity, not uniformity, among its members.

TEACHING PLANS

Teaching Plan—Varied Learning Activities

Connect with Life

1. Ask if anyone in your group has ever heard the following, “*We’re having a fellowship after church on Sunday night.*” Ask, *What did you expect would happen at the event?* If your church has a room called the “Fellowship Hall”, ask about how it is typically used.

Discuss how the word “fellowship”, as used in those contexts, has influenced how Christians understand its meaning. Explain that in the New Testament the word for “fellowship” carried a much deeper meaning. Challenge class members to examine carefully how the word is used in the Bible passages they will read, and to discover the benefits and responsibilities of Christian fellowship.

Guide Bible Study

2. Invite class members to open their Bibles to Acts 2:42. As they read this verse, encourage them to look for how the earliest Christ-followers spent their time. Ask members to call out their activities and record the answers on a marker board (The first

Christ-followers were devoted to: 1) the apostles' teaching, 2) the fellowship, 3) the breaking of bread, and 4) prayer.) Each of these activities will be discussed in the following steps.

3. Ask, *Why would these new believers devote themselves to “the apostle’s teaching?”* Explain that the only source of information about Jesus for these new believers was the teaching of the apostles, since the Gospels had not yet been written. Learning about Jesus and his new way of life required face-to-face interaction.
4. Skip the discussion of “fellowship” until Step 7.
5. If possible, display a small communion cup and a piece of bread. Ask, *What do these items remind you of?* (The observance of Lord’s Supper.) Explain that “the breaking of bread” may suggest that these new believers celebrated the Lord’s Supper together regularly. Ask, *What else may Luke have meant by “the breaking of bread?”* Discuss the role that enjoying meals together has in building relationships between friends.
6. Point out that prayer was a vital element of the new believers’ lives. Ask a class member to read aloud Luke 19:45–46. Explain that Jesus considered the temple to be a place where people should come to pray. Note that these early Jewish Christ-followers would have likely continued to gather at the temple for prayer, in addition to praying in home gatherings and privately.
7. Ask, *Which item from the list of activities in Acts 2:42 has not yet been discussed?* Comment that “fellowship” described the quality of relationship the believers shared because of their common commitment to Jesus (and to the apostles’ teaching, the breaking of bread, and prayer.) This connection among the first believers was made even stronger because of the experiences they shared.
8. Ask members to read Acts 2:43–47 silently, looking for ways that “fellowship” was exhibited in the lives of these new believers. Call on class members to share one of the illustrations of fellowship that is described in these verses and list these on a marker board. Allow time for discussion.
9. Direct members to turn to Romans 12:3 in their Bibles. Divide the class into two groups. Ask one group to read Romans 12:3–8.

Instruct them to make a list of the grace gifts that Paul lists in these verses. Direct the other group to read Romans 12:9–13 and to list ways that believers are to interact with each other.

Give the groups 2–3 minutes to complete their assignments. Call for reports from each group. Discuss how unity in the body of Christ (amidst a diversity of grace gifts) and love-motivated behavior towards others, promote a healthy spirit of fellowship among believers.

Encourage Application

10. Tell the following story of fellowship in action. (A copy of this story is available in “Teaching Resource Items” for this study at www.baptistwaypress.org)

A pastor challenged his members to join him on a Saturday morning for a service project. The task was to build a wheelchair ramp for a house in their neighborhood. Six members of the church met him on Saturday and spent the morning building the ramp. Although they were acquainted with one another from attending worship together, they had never spent significant time in conversation. After the work project was completed, the group began looking for other ways they could serve their community. They began to meet regularly on Saturdays and helped a number of families who would not otherwise have received assistance.

Ask, *What about this experience demonstrates authentic Christian fellowship?* Discuss the groups’ answers. Ask, *What will you do this week to better experience the full benefits and responsibilities of Christian fellowship?* Close with prayer.

Teaching Plan—Lecture and Questions

Connect with Life

1. Ask, *What comes to mind when you hear the word “fellowship?”* Discuss how the popular concept of “fellowship” as an informal gathering after worship, differs from the New Testament teachings about the shared experiences of believers that bind the body of Christ together. Say, *Today we will define and consider the benefits and responsibilities of Christian fellowship.*

Guide Bible Study

2. Read Acts 2:42–47. Explain that the events described in these verses took place shortly after Peter’s sermon following the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.
3. Write the following on a marker board:

- The Apostles’ Teaching
- The Fellowship
- The Breaking of Bread
- Prayer

Explain that these were the four things to which the new believers committed themselves. Refer to “The Life of the Church” section in the *Study Guide* as you discuss these four activities in greater detail.

4. Explain that most who heard and responded to Peter’s sermon had not known Jesus nor his teachings. Ask, *Why was it important for the new believers to learn from the apostles?* (The apostles were eye-witnesses of the life and ministry of Jesus.)
5. Note that the second activity to which the new believers committed themselves was described as “the fellowship.” Remind class members of your earlier discussion about how these first believers had a different understanding of the word “fellowship” from its current

connotation. Explain that the other two things on the list—“the breaking of bread” and “prayer” were shared activities that served to strengthen the bond among believers and enhanced the spirit of “fellowship” among them. Refer to the sidebar “Koinonia” in the *Study Guide* and explain the meaning of this Greek word for “fellowship.”

6. Direct attention to verses 43–47. Ask, *How might you explain the reason for the actions of the believers as described in these verses?* Ask, *How are these four activities from the early church carried out in our church today?*
7. Call on a class member to read Romans 12:3–8 aloud. Ask, *What illustration did Paul use in these verses to describe the diversity of the church?* Ask, *What particular point was Paul making in verses 4 and 5?* (The body of Christ is both diverse and unified). Explain that this (the body analogy) was one of Paul’s favorite ways of describing the church and its working toward a common outcome while utilizing a variety of people in various roles.
8. As you read aloud verses 9–13, instruct members to listen for the list of activities that Paul expects from a properly functioning church. Ask members to list the actions Paul describes and write them on a marker board. Discuss how relationships within the church would be affected if all members carried out the actions Paul mentioned. Ask, *How might our church be different if these actions described how our members treated one another?*

Encourage Application

9. Discuss the questions listed in the *Study Guide*.
10. Ask members to suggest activities that might enhance the fellowship within your church. Encourage them to move toward things that require members to become involved with one another in actions that further the kingdom of God and care for others. Decide together on one action your class will take outside of class time to strengthen the fellowship within your class. Close with a prayer of commitment.

LESSON SIX
Love

FOCAL TEXTS

Proverbs 17:17; 1 John 4:7–21

BACKGROUND

Proverbs 17:17; 1 John 4:7–21

MAIN IDEA

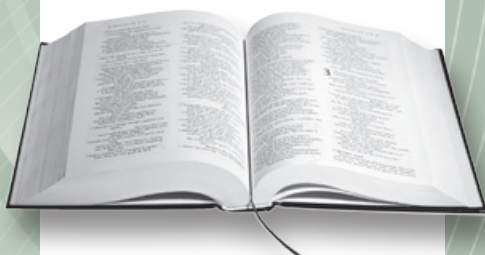
Disciples love others
because of God's example
and his command.

QUESTION TO EXPLORE

What keeps me from following
God's command to love others?

TEACHING AIM

To lead adults to decide
how they will express love
to someone in the coming
week as a reflection of
their love for God



BIBLE COMMENTS

Understanding the Context

Proverbs is the Old Testament's practical book of wisdom, containing memorable sayings to instruct its readers on how to live a godly life within a covenant community. Chapter 17 seems to be a random collection of sayings, but a number of verses focus on the importance of friends and family. The types of actions and attitudes that contribute to or detract from healthy relationships within the family and community are addressed.

The letters of John reflect a struggle within the early Christian community, likely among those groups of Christians living in the large metropolitan city of Ephesus. Certain leaders were distorting the gospel by making false claims about Jesus. Some were saying that Jesus did not actually become flesh and blood. Others were separating the human Jesus from the spiritual Christ. John referred to these opponents of the true gospel as "antichrists" (1 John 2:18; 2:22; 4:3; and, 2 John 7). They may have been comprised of Gnostics or at least a group related to Gnosticism which claimed to have special knowledge not available to others outside their group.

One of these opponents may have been Diotrephes who refused to accept the true teachings about Jesus (3 John 9). This opponent also spread lies about authentic Christian leaders and refused to receive them into his community of believers. He also prevented others in his local gathering of believers from receiving the true Christian teachers and even put them out of the church (3 John 10). Such behavior demonstrated a lack of love, stemming from a lack of understanding about God's character and the love manifested by the Father in sending the Son to die for our sins.

Interpreting the Scriptures

Love that Binds a Community Together (Proverbs 17:17)

17:17. These two clauses may be interpreted as showing a contrast between a friend and a close relative, implying that “blood is thicker than water” or suggesting that a loyal friend is better than a brother (cf. Proverbs 18:24). More likely, the two clauses function in a synonymous manner; that is, a true friend demonstrates the same type of loyalty and support as a close family member. The word for “love” used here indicates the combination of tenderly affection paired with a strong focus of the mind. This love is loyal in adversity, a faithful kind of love that stands firm even when severely tested, such as the time when Jonathan’s devotion to David was tested. In this case, Jonathan remained loyal to David (1 Samuel 20:17) despite the fact that Jonathan’s father, Saul, was trying to kill David.

God’s Love—the Motivation for Our Love (1 John 4:7–10)

4:7–8. This treatise on Christian love appropriately begins with a term of endearment, addressing the readers as “Beloved” (NASB). The author exhorts his readers to love one another. They must make a conscious decision to demonstrate unselfish love and be willing to receive love from others within the Christian community. Such love does not come naturally to us. Rather, the source of this love is God.

Because love is inseparable from what it means to be a follower of God, its presence or absence provides a positive or negative indicator about our relationship with God. Those who love one another with this godly type of love show that they are children of God and truly know God. The one who does not love does not know God. He is not only the *source* of love, but God *is* love. Because the essence of God’s character is love, loving others becomes the mark of true Christianity.

4:9–10. Love is demonstrated through action. God took the initiative and showed his love for us by sending his “one and only” (*monogenēs*) Son to be an offering that pardons us from our sins. The term used to describe the Son, *monogenēs*, refers to the unique status of Jesus due

to his divinity. This verse closely echoes John 3:16 in its language and emphasis on the love that motivated God to send his Son. In the Gospel, however, the desired response is belief. Here the focus is on love as both the motivation for sending and the desired response from those who are the recipients of this sacrifice which atones for sin.

Evidence of Our Relationship with God (1 John 4:11–16)

4:11. The author again addressed his readers as “Beloved,” (NASB) the sixth and final time in this letter, as he exhorted them (and us) to love one another. God is the motivation for us to love others *because* God took the initiative and demonstrated his love for us by sending his Son to be the offering which cleanses us from our sin. Jesus therefore becomes the proof of God’s love and the reason we ought to love one another.

4:12. While no person has looked at God directly in all of the fullness of his divine glory, some have been able to catch glimpses of God, perhaps through a vision such as the one that Isaiah experienced (Isaiah 6:1–5). Moses also encountered temporary/muted manifestations of God (Exodus 3:4–6 and 33:19–23). By becoming God in flesh, Jesus became the most significant manifestation of God’s presence. If, however, we love with the same kind of unselfish, sacrificial love as God does, our loving actions become visible manifestations of our invisible God. Our love for one another provides evidence that God lives in us. His love has become complete or reached its goal when we take the initiative to love others.

4:13. Not only does our sacrificial love for one another provide evidence that we abide in God, the presence of God’s Spirit in our lives offers additional proof of our relationship with him. In 1 John 3:24, the presence of the Spirit is connected to obedience to God’s commands. In this context, God’s Spirit is closely associated with the love that flows from our lives to those around us. Undoubtedly, the presence of God’s Spirit in our lives creates the capacity for us to both obey God and demonstrate our love for one another.

4:14–15. Our testimony that Jesus is the Son of God also proves that we abide in relationship with God. Those who saw God’s Son in the

flesh testified that he was the One whom God sent to be the Savior of the world. The opening verse of the letter explains how the original followers of Jesus heard him with their ears, saw him with their eyes, and touched him with their hands (1 John 1:1). Later followers, based on this earlier eyewitness testimony, acknowledged that the Son of God came in the flesh in order to save us. This affirmation of faith provides additional evidence that God lives in us and that we live in God.

4:16. What we believe, the profession of our faith, impacts our actions. After we come to know what God has done for us and realize that God is love, we desire to live or remain in this love. As heart, mind, and actions unite, we abide in this love of God, and he abides in us. The Greek verb for abide (*meno*) occurs six times in verses 13–16, highlighting the importance of love as evidence that we have a genuine relationship with God.

No Fear in God's Love (1 John 4:17–18)

4:17–18. We should not have any fear about future judgment because of God's love for us. God has demonstrated his love for us by sending his Son. We have experienced his intention for us. We know his character and therefore should have no fear about the future. We can live life confidently, having the assurance that God abides in us and we in God. In this way, love reaches its completion, accomplishing its intended purpose in our lives.

No Boasting in Our Love (1 John 4:19–21)

4:19–21. We have no reason to boast about our love. We are able to love God and others because God took the initiative to love us first (cf. 1 John 4:10). Our love for God is revealed by the way we treat others. When Jesus commanded his disciples to love one another, he told them their love for one another would identify them as his disciples (John 13:34–35). Conversely, hatred toward other believers reveals that we do not truly love God (v. 20). Even if we say we love God, we are liars if we do not love other believers. In short, love exercised by, among, and between disciples proves our love for God, and that love originates with God. If

we are truly followers of Jesus, love for others is not optional; Jesus commands us to do so (v. 21).

Focusing on the Meaning

The Old Testament is not silent about God's love. One of the consistent descriptions of God reveals the heart of God's character: "a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity" (Jonah 4:2). With slight variations, this description occurs in Exodus 34:6-7, Numbers 14:18, Deuteronomy 4:31, Nehemiah 9:17, several Psalms (86:15, 103:8, and 145:8), and Joel 2:13. In fact, Jonah complained to God that the reason he had not wanted to go and preach to the people of Nineveh was that Jonah knew of God's great love, and Jonah did not want that wicked city to be spared. Proverbs 17:17 thus provides a glimpse of the way the people of this loving God should reflect his character by caring for one another at all times, whether they be a relative or simply a friend.

The New Testament has much to say about God's love and has two particularly eloquent treatises on love: 1 Corinthians 13 and our focal passage for this lesson. The 1 John passage provides the deepest reflection in the Bible about God's love and how that love should impact the way we live and love others. In these fifteen short verses, the Greek word for love (*agape*) occurs thirty-one times in various forms, emphasizing this trait as the key attribute for Christian disciples because "God is love" (1 John 4:8).

Nevertheless, we must be careful not to reduce God to a mere emotion or feeling by reversing this statement, saying that love is God. God is a personal being who demonstrated his love for us by sending his one and only Son to become the atonement for our sins. In response to God's deep love for us, we are able to respond to God in love and demonstrate our love for others through our actions. As we develop the habit of loving others, we will reflect through our lives that we truly love God and abide in him; and him in us.

TEACHING PLANS

Teaching Plan—Varied Learning Activities

Connect with Life

1. On a marker board write—*What is your favorite love song?* Ask class members to respond to the question by stating the song's title and saying or singing a line from their favorite tune. Ask, *What memories do these songs bring to mind?*

Comment that the world's understanding of love has been powerfully impacted by music as well as movies and television. Ask, *What misconceptions about love have been generated by these types of media?* Explain that today's lesson will examine some of what the Bible teaches about the true meaning of love. Say, *Love is the foundation for all of the spiritual disciplines. Highly effective disciples love others because of God's example and his command.*

Guide Bible Study

2. Before class, enlist a member to read Proverbs 17:17. Call on the person to read the verse aloud to the class. Instruct members to form pairs and to share with each other about their best friend from high school. Guide them to describe a time when they received special assistance or encouragement from their friend.

Point out that the end of the proverb says “. . . and a brother is born for adversity.” Explore what distinction, if any, the writer is making between a *friend* and a *brother*. Discuss how families are expected to care for one another in difficult circumstances.

3. Read aloud John 15:12–14. Ask, *What was new about Jesus' instructions found in John 15:12?* Discuss answers. (He had provided the example his disciples were to follow.) Refer to the sidebar “Agape” in the *Study Guide* for more information on this Christlike love. Suggest that John may have been remembering this conversation with Jesus as he wrote 1 John 4.

4. Comment that the Apostle John is often referred to as “the Apostle of Love.” Explain that the focal passage from 1 John 4 is one of the passages that demonstrate John’s continuing emphasis on love. Instruct the class to read 1 John 4:7–12 silently, counting the number of times John uses the word *love* or some form of it. When they have finished, ask for a count. (The number may vary slightly because members may be using different Bible translations. The NIV and ESV use *love* in some form thirteen times.)

Allow members to share their thoughts on why John used the word *love* so many times in just a few sentences. Point out how many times the word *love* is linked with God.

5. Read 1 John 4:8 aloud. Point out the phrase “God is love” at the end of the verse. Ask, *What does John mean here? If “God is love”, does that mean “love is God?”* Use content from the section “Love from God” found in the *Study Guide* to supplement this discussion.
6. Call for a volunteer to quote John 3:16. After the member quotes the verse, ask another member to read aloud 1 John 4:9. When both verses have been shared, lead the class to discover the similarities and differences between the verses. List these on a marker board. Be certain that members notice that love originates with God, and that his love is always accompanied by actions that benefit his followers.
7. Instruct members to read 1 John 4:13–21 while looking for the impact God’s love has on his people. Ask, *How are the lives of believers in God changed because they have experienced God’s love? What evidences reveal whether God’s love is active in a person’s life?*
Allow a few minutes for members to read, reflect, and respond to the questions. When most have completed the reading, guide the class in a discussion of what they have gleaned from the Scripture. Be sure to note the role that love has in driving fear from the lives of believers. Utilize the Bible comments in this *Teaching Guide* to undergird this discussion.

Encourage Application

8. Divide the class into three groups and assign each group one of the following questions to discuss:
 - Why is it sometimes hard to show love to others?

- Is it easier to show love when a fellow believer is experiencing success or failure? Why?
 - What are some signs that love is genuine? How can those characteristics be developed in your life?
9. Read aloud 1 John 4:21. Encourage group members to reflect on how effectively they have demonstrated God's love in their lives by their love for others. Suggest they make a list of persons to whom they will demonstrate love in the coming week as an expression of obedience to the command of God in this verse. Provide each member a copy of the handout "Demonstrations of Love." (A copy of this handout is available in "Teaching Resource Items" for this study at www.baptistwaypress.org) Close with a time of prayer.

Teaching Plan—Lecture and Questions

Connect with Life

1. Distribute index cards and pens to the class. Instruct class members to write their definition of love on a card. Ask members to read their definition to the class. Comment on similarities and differences found in the definitions.

Explain that today's Bible study will address the definition of love from a biblical perspective. Say, *As followers of Christ, we are to love others because of God's example and his command.*

Guide Bible Study

2. Direct class members to find Proverbs 17:17 in their Bible. Allow a moment for the class to find and read the verse. Ask, *How is love described or defined in this verse?* Help members recognize how love is linked to both friends and family. Point out also that there are no limits placed on *when* love can be demonstrated. "A friend loves *at all times* and a brother is born *for adversity*." Love does not stop when circumstances become difficult, but rather is even more important in such times. Ask class members to choose a partner and to describe to each other a situation when they were shown love in the midst of adversity.

3. Suggest that John has become known as the “Apostle of Love” for his frequent emphasis on love in his writings as well as his likely designation as “the disciple whom Jesus loved.” (See John 13:23, 20:2, 21:7, 20)

Direct class members to find 1 John 4 in their Bible. Tell them to read verses 7–12 and to look for whom John identified as the source of love. After they finish reading, guide them to identify how many times and how many different ways John points to God as the Source of love. Utilize the Bible comments in this *Teaching Guide* to help members understand that God is not the same thing as love, but rather the Source of love.

4. Instruct members re-read verses 11–12. Ask, *What does John say ought to be the outcome of God’s love for believers?* (Believers ought to demonstrate his love by loving one another). Suggest that when Christians act with love toward one another, unbelievers will take notice of their behavior and be drawn to God.
5. Call on a class member to read aloud 1 John 4:13–16. Before he or she begins to read, instruct the other members to listen for what John says is the evidence of a true relationship with God. Ask members to describe the nature of this evidence. Refer to the section “Love Because of God” in the *Study Guide* to supplement this discussion.

Encourage Application

6. Ask, *Why is there no fear in love?* (1 John 4:18). *What is the ultimate fear? How can we overcome fear with confidence?*
7. Read aloud 1 John 4:19–21. Ask members to identify the primary way believers can demonstrate their love for God. Help everyone understand that love for God must be lived out with love for others, especially our brothers and sisters in Christ. Suggest that class members make specific plans to do something to demonstrate their love for another person in the church before next Sunday.
8. Read and discuss the “Developing the Habit” sidebar in the *Study Guide*. Close with prayer.

LESSON SEVEN
Obedience

FOCAL TEXTS

1 Samuel 15:1–35

BACKGROUND

1 Samuel 15:1–35

MAIN IDEA

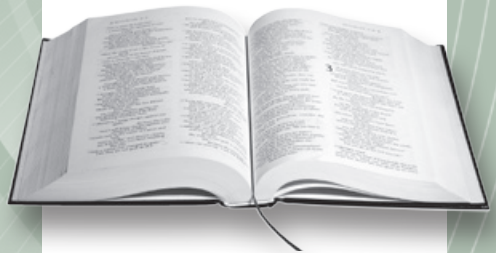
Disciples choose to obey
God completely.

QUESTION TO EXPLORE

Do I choose to obey
God completely?

TEACHING AIM

To lead adults to choose
to obey God completely in
every area of their lives



BIBLE COMMENTS

Understanding the Context

Samuel served the dual roles of judge and prophet for the emerging nation of Israel, becoming her central leader. As Samuel grew older and his sons proved themselves unworthy of leadership responsibilities, the people asked for a king to rule over them (1 Samuel 8:1–5). Chapters 8–12 of 1 Samuel describe this major transition from Samuel’s leadership to the rise of the monarchy in Israel. Samuel anointed Saul as king in a private ceremony (10:1), and later publicly confirmed him as king, an event accompanied by sacrificial offerings and much celebration, at the town of Gilgal (11:14–15).

Saul experienced some important successes as king, but also some devastating failures. At one point, he refused to follow Samuel’s instructions to wait for him to arrive and offer sacrifices. Rather than waiting, Saul took over Samuel’s role and offered the sacrifices himself (13:7–9). Because of Saul’s disobedience, Samuel explained to Saul that his kingdom would not last; in fact, God would appoint another to replace him (13:13–14).

Chapter 14 unveils a pattern of disobedience as Saul’s son, Jonathan, likewise refused to follow instructions. In our focal text, 1 Samuel 15, we have a detailed account of yet another serious act of disobedience on the part of Saul and its consequences for him and his descendants. The remaining chapters of 1 Samuel then detail the fulfillment of judgment on Saul with the demise of his kingship and the rise of David’s dynasty.

Interpreting the Scriptures

God’s Command to Saul through Samuel (15:1–3)

15:1. Samuel clearly explained to Saul that God was the source of his kingship and that Samuel himself was the instrument God had used to anoint him as king. As such, Saul’s commission was to serve as king

under God's authority and directives. Samuel was God's prophet, the one who voiced God's commands.

15:2. Samuel prefaced the command to Saul with the words, "Thus says the LORD of hosts" (NASB). This introductory formula, first used here, occurs seventy-six times in the Former and Latter Prophets to emphasize that the message which follows comes directly from God. The prophet merely served as God's mouthpiece. God's title, "LORD of hosts," refers to God's power as the commander of armies.

God was going to punish the Amalekites for their attack against the people of Israel as they were wandering in the wilderness. The attack came at a particularly weak point for the Israelites who had been suffering from widespread dissent due to a lack of water (cf. Exodus 17:8–13). Deuteronomy 25:18 describes the cowardly method of the Amalekite attack: "When you were weary and worn out, they met you on your journey and cut off all who were lagging behind; they had no fear of God."

15:3. At the end of the battle against the Amalekites, God revealed to Moses that he (God) would destroy the Amalekites (Exodus 17:14; cf. Numbers 24:20). Now that the people of Israel had established themselves within the Promised Land and had a noteworthy military leader-king; Samuel commanded Saul to serve as God's instrument in fulfilling the prophetic destruction of the Amalekites. The people of Amalek and all of their possessions were placed under a "holy ban," meaning that Saul and his soldiers must not take anything for themselves; rather, everyone and everything had to be destroyed. At times in the Old Testament, this type of severe judgment came through impersonal means such as the epic flood described in Genesis 6–8 or the earthquake in Numbers 16. At other times, God worked through a divine representative—in this case, Saul—to mete out punishment.

Saul's Disobedience and Its Consequences (15:4–11)

15:4–5. Saul initially responded in obedience to God's command to destroy the Amalekites and their possessions. He gathered an enormous army at Telaim which was probably located southwest of Judah. He then prepared to launch an attack on the city of Amalek to carry out God's

command. The valley or ravine mentioned likely refers to the Wadi el-Arish which formed the southwestern border between ancient Israel and Egypt.

15:6. Although Saul had been warned not to spare any of the Amalekites (15:3), he rightfully spared the Kenites, a semi-nomadic tribe who were living among the Amalekites. The Kenites, a group within or related to the Midianites, had a connection to the people of Israel because Moses had married into a Kenite family (Judges 1:16; cf. Exodus 2:15–21). Of even greater significance, the Kenites—in contrast to the Amalekites—had shown kindness to the Israelites as they were coming up out of Egypt. The Hebrew term for “kindness” in this verse is *chesed* which denotes covenant loyalty. Because of their strong support of the wandering Israelites, Saul and his army returned kindness to the Kenites, allowing them to leave the area before the Israelite army launched their attack.

15:7. Saul then attacked all the Amalekites living in the region. The expression, “from Havilah to Shur,” refers to the territory east of Egypt and south of Judah (cf. Genesis 25:18).

15:8–9. Saul did not hesitate to destroy the people of Amalek as directed by Samuel. Saul and his army, however, did find it difficult to destroy everything. They decided to spare Agag, the king, as well as the best of the livestock and anything else of value. In doing so, they revealed an entirely different motivation for their actions. God meant to punish the Amalekites for their lack of compassion; Saul and his army meant to plunder them for personal gain. Rather than a battle in which everything was devoted to God as an offering, Saul had turned their mission into a common act of war, motivated by pride and greed.

Saul’s actions were in direct disobedience to God’s command. The captured king became a trophy for Saul, and the best of the livestock and valuables became the spoils of war for his soldiers. They only devoted to God what they did not value: the lives of the common Amalekites, the weak and sick livestock, and any other worthless items.

15:10–11. The phrase, “the word of the Lord came to,” occurs eighty-three times in the Old Testament and indicates a divine revelation. God was grieved that he had made Saul king because of his disobedience (cf.

Genesis 6:6–7). God’s “grieving” or regret reflects the importance of people to God and his desire to be in relationship with us. Our God is not the “Unmoved Mover” theorized by the Greek philosopher Aristotle; rather, God is deeply invested in us and grieved by our disobedience. Samuel likewise was deeply upset and took no pleasure in having to be the bearer of bad news to Saul.

Confrontation Between Samuel and Saul (15:12–28)

15:12. Samuel rose early in the morning after a sleepless night. He went to meet Saul, only to discover that Saul had called for a victory celebration at Gilgal, the place where he was first publicly recognized as king. Saul revealed his selfish interest by setting up a monument to himself at Carmel, a small town in southern Judah about seven miles south of Hebron.

15:13–21. Samuel’s conversation with Saul (1 Sam. 15:13–21) was similar to his previous conversation with Eli (1 Sam. 3:11–18). In each case, the message from God was the removal of a leader and his family due to their disobedience. The difference was that Eli accepted his judgment willingly while Saul made excuses and blamed others in an attempt to cover up his disobedience. Saul may have rationalized his actions to the point that he believed he had “carried out the LORD’s instructions” (15:13).

When confronted about the livestock that had been taken (15:14), Saul had a two-fold excuse prepared to explain his disobedience: 1) the soldiers were the ones who took the livestock, and 2) they had spared the best of the livestock to offer as a sacrifice to God (15:15). When “Saul *and* the army” originally took the Amalekite valuables (15:9), offering a sacrifice to God was not mentioned as their motivation. Rather, they seemed to be motivated by the desire for personal gain, similar to Achan’s motivation when he took some of the spoils from Jericho (Joshua 7:21).

Samuel responded by clarifying precisely how Saul had not followed the Lord’s instructions (1 Sam. 15:16–19). In response, Saul pleaded his case once again by repeating his rationale (15:20–21). Perhaps Saul thought it was such a clever excuse that he could not believe Samuel would not accept it. Maybe Saul thought that Samuel had not fully heard his explanation and needed to hear it again.

15:22–23. Samuel pronounced judgment on Saul, using a poetic format of four couplets to deliver an emphatic condemnation and rejection of the king. The first two pairs of poetic verse emphasized God’s desire for our total obedience, even above the offerings we might bring to him. The latter two couplets described Saul’s disobedience as rebellion and arrogance, which are as equally serious as the sins of divination (seeking the guidance of other deities or spirits) and idolatry. By disobeying God and choosing to create his own path, Saul had elevated himself to God’s role. He had displaced God with an idol, himself. Because Saul had rejected God, God rejected him as king.

15:24–26. While Saul made an attempt at confession, he still refused to accept full responsibility. He again blamed the soldiers and added that he was afraid of them. Instead of fearing God and listening to God’s voice, Saul feared the people and listened to their voice. Samuel responded to Saul’s plea for restoration by repeating the judgment of rejection.

15:27–28. As Samuel turned to leave, Saul grabbed the hem of the prophet’s robe, a gesture that indicated submission and supplication. Unfortunately for Saul, he tore the robe, and Samuel used the torn robe as a prophetic metaphor for the way that God had torn away the kingship from Saul and his descendants (cf. 1 Samuel 13:14).

Case Closed (15:29–35)

15:29. The Hebrew verb, “to change one’s mind,” has different meanings depending on the context. Here the context reflects the firm finalization of God’s judgment on Saul. Samuel declared that the “Glory of Israel” (that is, God) would *not* change his mind about the decision to reject Saul as king. When the same verb is used in 15:11 and 15:35, the context points to an alternative meaning, indicating God’s “regret” over the decision to make Saul king.

15:30–31. Saul finally admitted that he had sinned without trying to justify his actions or blame anyone else. Perhaps for this reason, Samuel *did* change his mind and decided to go with Saul, despite the fact that Saul still seemed most concerned about how the people of Israel viewed him.

15:32–35. After worshiping the Lord with Saul, Samuel completed the punishment against the Amalekites by putting their king, Agag, to death (15:32–33). The prophet then left Saul never to see him again, demonstrating that God was no longer working through Saul. The final two verses echo the sentiments expressed by God and Samuel after Saul initially disobeyed God’s instructions (15:11). Samuel mourned the tragedy brought about by Saul’s refusal to obey, and God was grieved by this same disobedience.

Focusing on the Meaning

The key problem for Saul was his failure to follow God’s instructions. Saul thoroughly rationalized his actions to the point that he believed that both Samuel and God would be pleased. Despite his attempts at self-justification, Saul transformed a battle meant for punishment of sin into a slaughter for personal gain. When confronted about his disobedience, Saul was prepared with excuses and blame for others. Yet God always knows our true intentions, no matter how much we have rationalized our misdeeds. We, like Saul, tend to put ourselves in God’s place (15:23), believing that we know better than God and are justified in doing whatever works best for us in a given situation.

Disobedience, no matter how we rationalize it, often has irrevocable consequences. In this case, Saul’s rejection of God led to God’s rejection of Saul’s leadership of the people of Israel. Not only had Saul’s power as king come to an end, but his descendants would also be unable to reign after him. His continual disobedience had resulted in the discontinuation of his dynasty.

Forgiveness was still available for Saul (15:30–31), but the consequences remained. Similarly, God offers us forgiveness for our sins, but our disobedience often causes permanent damage to us personally and to those around us. We would do much better to learn from the tragedy caused by Saul’s poor decisions and practice the habit of obedience as we strive to follow God’s instructions for our lives.

TEACHING PLANS

Teaching Plan—Varied Learning Activities

Connect with Life

1. Ask the class if they are familiar with the term “Spin Doctor”. Say, *This person’s job is to recast an event that may be viewed as a negative reflection on a company, a business executive, an office holder, or a candidate for office into a positive light.* Ask the class for examples of people or events where this has been done. Say, *While this may appear to be a new tactic in media relations, it has been practiced since ancient times. The Bible study for this week reveals an example of how the Israelite King Saul, tried to “spin” his disobedience to God’s direct command into something less serious. Through this story we will be reminded that highly effective disciples choose to obey God completely.*

Guide Bible Study

2. Before class, enlist a person to read Exodus 17:14–16 to the class. Ask the person to read the verses and then explain that the Amalekites had been particularly vicious in their opposition to the people of Israel during their journey into the Promised Land. God had promised that he would punish them because of their resistance to his people and his plan.
3. Instruct class members to read 1 Samuel 15:1–3 and to look for God’s instruction to Saul given through the prophet Samuel. Ask, *What did God tell Saul to do to the Amalekites?* Discuss with the class how thoroughly Saul was to defeat them. Use content from “God’s Command to Saul through Samuel” in this *Teacher’s Guide* to supplement the discussion. Be sure the class understands that while the punishment required may seem severe to us, God’s plan and purpose is always to protect and care for those who are faithful to him. Say, *We may not understand how God goes about*

accomplishing his purposes, but we can be sure that his ways are right and in our best interest.

4. Direct the class to read 1 Samuel 15:4–7 and to evaluate Saul’s efforts to do what God had commanded. Allow a moment for members to read. Then ask, *What is your opinion of Saul at this point in the story? Why?* Discuss the answers.
5. Instruct the class to read verses 8–9 to discover the extent of Saul’s obedience. Spend a few minutes discussing why Saul did not completely destroy the Amalekites as God had commanded.
6. Read aloud verses 10–12. Point out that the only other time the Bible describes God as “grieved” or “regretting” was when he looked at the rebellious people before the flood recorded in Genesis 6. Refer to the sidebar “Naham” in the *Study Guide* as you discuss God’s regret. Ask, *What did Samuel find when he went looking for Saul?* (see verse 12).
7. Before class, make two copies of 1 Samuel 15:13–23. On one highlight the words spoken by Samuel (verses 14, 16a, 17–19, 22–23). On the other highlight the words spoken by Saul (verses 13, 15, 16b, 20–21). Enlist two members to read the dialog between Samuel and Saul (omitting the “Saul said” and “Samuel said” statements.) Ask the narrators to read their parts as if Samuel and Saul were in conversation. Encourage them to read their parts with feeling and emotion. (A copy of this text is available in “Teaching Resource Items” for this study at www.baptistwaypress.org)
8. After the dramatic dialog, discuss the different views that Saul and Samuel had toward what had happened. Ask, *Why did they have different views of the situation?* Allow time for response. Suggest that some who disobey God’s word today may not feel like they have done anything wrong either.
9. Direct members to read verses 24–35 and to look for Saul’s response to Samuel’s pronouncement. Ask, *Was Saul’s repentance genuine or driven by his desire to remain in power?* Discuss. Ask, *Is our repentance always genuine?*

Encourage Application

10. Write on a marker board: *Partial obedience is total disobedience.* Invite members to ask God to help them examine their actions over the last week, looking for times when they were only partially obedient to God. Distribute note cards and encourage them to write down specific areas of their lives where they are not totally obedient to God. Instruct them to place the card in their Bibles at this passage as a reminder of what can come from partial obedience to God. Close with a prayer of commitment.

Teaching Plan—Lecture and Questions

Connect with Life

1. Begin by reading the following story:

The city installed red-light cameras at intersections where drivers frequently crossed after the light had turned red. Over the course of the first few months after the cameras had been installed, several citations were issued and the number of wrecks at the intersections were reduced. However, a group of citizens lobbied the city council to remove the cameras. After a heated debate, the issue was put to the city for a vote. By a slim majority, the citizens voted to remove the cameras, so the cameras were taken down. Incidents of red-light running returned; accompanied by more wrecks.

Ask, *Why would the citizens vote to remove the cameras?* Allow time for discussion. Say, *While a number of issues may have been involved, one reason given was that people wanted to be able to run the red-lights without the fear of being caught. They wanted to disobey the law with impunity (freedom from punishment).* Say, *Today we will consider how highly effective disciples choose to obey God completely.*

Guide Bible Study

2. Briefly recount the events described in Exodus 17:14–16. Help members understand that the Amalekites had resisted the Israelites efforts to obey God’s instructions to go into the Promised Land. God had promised that the Amalekites would be punished for their disobedience.
3. Read 1 Samuel 15:1–3 to the class. Note that God was keeping the promise he had made to his people and was using Israel’s new king, Saul, to accomplish his purpose. Utilize the information in the Bible Comments of this *Teaching Guide* to help members understand God’s instructions to destroy the Amalekites.
4. Direct members to read 1 Samuel 15:7–9 to discover how Saul carried out God’s instructions. Ask, *Did Saul do what God had told him to do?* Point out that all was going well until verse 9. At that point, Saul decided he knew how to deal with the Amalekites better than God did, so he spared the spoils and the king.
5. Call on a member to read aloud verses 10–11. Ask, *How did God respond to Saul’s disobedience?* Discuss. *How does he respond to our disobedience?*
6. Instruct members to read verse 13 to discover how Saul greeted Samuel. Be sure to emphasize Saul’s claim to have “carried out the LORD’s instructions.” Ask, *Was this true? Why or why not?*
7. Refer to the section “The Futility of Disobedience” in the *Study Guide* to summarize the ensuing conversation between Samuel and Saul (verses 14–21). Help members understand that Saul’s protestations that he had brought the spoils of the Amalekites to offer as a sacrifice did not compensate for his disobedience. Read aloud verses 22–23.
8. Ask, *What was the result of Saul’s disobedience? Was the result immediate?* Help members understand that sin always has consequences, but sometimes those consequences are delayed. Refer to “The Consequences of Disobedience” in the *Study Guide* for additional information.

Encourage Application

9. Write on a marker board—*To obey is better than sacrifice*. Ask members to suggest a contemporary way of expressing this statement. Ask, *What are some “religious” things people do today to save their consciences?* Ask members to think of times they have been disobedient and how they tried to deal with their disobedience. Close with prayer, asking God for the courage and the will to be obedient to him in all things.

LESSON EIGHT

Prayer

FOCAL TEXTS

Luke 11:1–13; 18:1–8

BACKGROUND

Luke 11:1–13; 18:1–8

MAIN IDEA

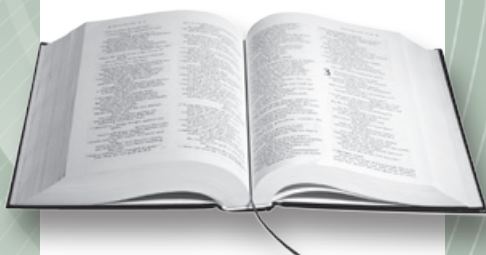
Disciples persistently offer faithful prayers to God.

QUESTION TO EXPLORE

Do I persistently offer faithful prayers to God?

TEACHING AIM

To lead adults to examine their time spent in prayer and to choose to persistently offer faithful prayers to God



BIBLE COMMENTS

Understanding the Context

The focal texts, Luke 11:1–13; 18:1–8, are situated in a broader section of the Gospel often entitled, “The Journey to Jerusalem.” As Jesus “resolutely” engages in this journey from Galilee to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51–19:28), this unique section contains the majority of the parables and teachings found in this Gospel and is best interpreted through a lens of discipleship development. Having established Jesus’ decisive authority, this section emphasizes a deliberative journey of deepening spiritual formation and an invitation to the followers of Jesus to embrace his training and live as his community. The focal texts specifically call for a maturing journey of intentionality in the area of persistent and faithful prayer.

Following the parable of the Good Samaritan and an exchange between Jesus, Martha, and Mary highlighting the necessity of setting aside distractions in order to purposefully sit at the feet of Jesus; Luke 11:1–13 encourages a rich prayer life. Prayer is the cultivation of God’s voice in the life of his follower. As these focal texts demonstrate, highly effective disciples seek a renewed journey of spiritual formation characterized by a habit of prayer that is consistent, God-centered, corporate, just, and persistently confident in the Holy Spirit.

Interpreting the Scriptures

A Habit of Prayer is Consistent (Luke 11:1)

11:1. Verse 1 reveals an established practice of personal prayer by Jesus. Luke utilized the Greek word *proseuchomai* which in the NIV appears in the New Testament on eighty-five different occasions. With nineteen references, this example of prayer is most common in the Gospel of Luke. When combined with the book of Acts, approximately forty-one percent of the biblical references to this New Testament word for prayer are found in the writings of Luke. There is a strong Lukan emphasis on the priority and power of prayer, and as an outgrowth of Jesus’ personal example, disciples are to develop a habit of consistent prayer.

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus withdrew and prayed privately as part of a cultivation of his relationship with God (Luke 5:16, 6:12, 9:18, 9:28, and 22:44–46). Jesus prayed during crises and at key decision points in his life (Luke 3:21, 6:12–16, 22:40–46 and 23:46). Jesus publically taught and prayed in the presence of others, modeling a spiritual discipline to be practiced not only privately but corporately as well (Luke 3:21, 6:28, 9:28–29, 11:1–4, 18:1–11). To be a follower of Jesus is to nurture prayer in personal and daily consistency, in the midst of difficult and heated situations, and in corporate gatherings in order to enhance the clarity of the voice of God.

A Habit of Prayer is God-centered, Kingdom-focused and Consciously-corporate (Luke 11:2–4)

11:2. Verses 2–4 parallel the better-known passage in Matthew 6:9–13. Perhaps Luke 11 was a similar teaching that occurred on a separate occasion. Regardless, verse 2 emphasized prayer firmly grounded in *God-centeredness*. This model prayer unmistakably opens with the submission of the petitioner to the Father and the holiness of his name. “Hallowed” is the Greek word *hagiazō* meaning to “make holy.”

Prior to submitting any requests, the petitioner(s) must first submit themselves, their agenda, their desires, and their hoped-for outcomes to the holiness and supremacy of God. Prayer (that is more than simply speech) is less about seeking to attune God to the plans and will of the petitioner(s), but is more fundamentally about an ongoing submission that allows the petitioner to be adjusted to God. Prayer begins with an adjustment rooted in a relationship. It is difficult to encounter God in authentic prayer when attitudes and actions are actively straining against the relationship. Prayer is thus a familial exercise of an ongoing relationship grounded in grace.

Prayer is also *kingdom-focused*. The call of verse 2 is for a reorientation around the certainty of the kingdom of God. Believers are challenged to consider the kingdom of God, a reality characterized by salvation and justice, and to orient their prayer lives in such a way that they labor to implement the fullness of that kingdom, imperfect though the effort may be, in the world as it exists today.

11:3–4. Petition, in conjunction with praise and submission, remains an integral component of prayer. These verses specifically encourage disciples to: appeal for the daily provision of legitimate needs, to seek forgiveness and to repent from sin, to reconcile broken relationships by extending forgiveness, and to seek deliverance from situations of sinful temptation. To ask an obvious but often neglected question: What are the personal pronouns used throughout this prayer?

As translated by the NIV, there are seven personal pronouns in these two verses—us (4), our (2), and we (1). Unfortunately, it seems when this model prayer is quoted by Christians today, many (at least subconsciously) substitute these collective references for the individual personal pronouns of I, me, and mine. While there is nothing inherently wrong with praying for “my daily bread” and forgiveness for “my sins,” this is not exactly the Lord’s teaching through this prayer. Rather this is a corporate prayer intended to help move the individual away from self-centeredness towards an implied personal responsibility to others. The Lord’s Prayer is intended to help individual disciples live in a redemptive community with others that is *consciously corporate*.

Though there may be a temptation for some to interpret “daily bread” as spiritual nourishment, Luke intended his readers to understand this teaching in the most fundamental and tangible manner possible. More than any other Gospel, Luke worked to demonstrate how Jesus intentionally engaged in boundary-breaking transformation among the poor, disadvantaged, and most marginalized of society.

One only need consider the story of the Rich Young Ruler in Luke 18:18–30, who chose to turn away rather than giving away his goods to the poor. In contrast, the next rich young ruler to encounter Jesus, Zacchaeus the tax collector (Luke 19:1–10), was welcomed into the kingdom as he demonstrated his absolute allegiance to Jesus and his willingness to surrender personal resources on behalf of the poor. Other verses in Luke related to a call to engage the most disadvantaged include: 3:10–14, 4:18–19, 6:20–26, and 14:13–14.

If the Gospel of Luke intentionally paints a picture of Jesus initiating boundary-breaking transformation among the marginalized of society, it should be anticipated that disciples would be taught to specifically pray towards this same end. In a world wracked by famines, drought, food insecurity, death by starvation, and poverty; perhaps there ought to be a renewed call for Christians to urgently pray for the physical provision of

those in need—a prayer grounded in corporate relationships. After all, as individuals pray and discover they have additional food while another does not; perhaps they will recognize that they are the answer to the prayer they have just prayed.

This model prayer began with submission in a vertical relationship with God, and was then extended through horizontal relationships with others and our submission to pray and labor with a conscientious corporate responsibility. This is perhaps most clearly expressed in the call for Christians to continue engaging in efforts to eradicate hunger.

A Habit of Prayer is Bold, Leads to Good Gifts, and is Rooted in the Holy Spirit (Luke 11:5–13)

11:5–8. Jesus’ annunciation of a model prayer involving vertical and horizontal submission is complemented by two quick parables. Notice verses 5–6 parallel verse 13 creating a unit bracketed by the theme of giving. At the center of the unit is a reflection on honor. The deliberative link is once again an illustration of corporate responsibility in the area of food provision.

The dictates of first century culture assured a petitioner that his friend would answer in the affirmative. Similarly, the disciple who approaches God with humility and bold specificity can anticipate a comparable response. Notice the petitioner asked not only for himself, but also for his guest. This perhaps prefigures the doctrine of the priesthood of the believer.

The expectation is that a disciple will live in a manner that welcomes unexpected sojourners who bring unforeseen, “midnight” needs that cannot be met solely by personal resources. Thus the petitioner approaches God, who desires to extend the hospitality of faith, and offers resources not only for the benefit of the petitioner but also through the petitioner for the sustenance and growth of others. Prayer, Jesus implied, can be both humble and bold, and allows the petitioner to receive God’s gracious gifts. These gifts are not only for personal benefit, but to also aid in the process of disciple-making where followers stand alongside others in their faith journeys.

11:9–10. These well-known verses build upon already developed themes: followers should approach the Father with prayers of boldness, certainty, and confidence.

11:11–13. Perhaps two thoughts most clearly reverberate in this brief subsection. First, the nature of God as a loving father is emphasized. Second, the “good gift” most assured to disciples is that of the Holy Spirit. The best gift, and the one his followers are to most fervently seek, according to verse 13, is to boldly and consistently ask for the Holy Spirit. Unfortunately, far too many Christians neglect asking for the only gift specifically named in this teaching.

A Habit of Prayer is Persistent and Justice-Oriented (Luke 18:1–10)

18:1–10. Following chapter 11, Luke 18 (The Parable of the Persistent Widow) is the next teaching on prayer. Verse 1 exhorts disciples to pray without giving up or more literally, without becoming discouraged. This is the only time the Greek word *enkakeō* (lose heart), appears in the Gospel of Luke. Even if the situation is desperate and seems impossible, the petitioner is to be persistent.

In the face of great injustice and seemingly intractable problems in the world, the disciple’s response is to be one of persistent prayer. Such persistence is characterized by the widow in this parable. Her humble attitude stands in stark contrast to the unjust judge who is self-confident and self-righteous. The kingdom of God is advanced through prayer, and when confronted with difficult situations, the follower is to persevere in prayer, trusting God to bring about justice.

Luke compared God to the unjust judge. The judge finally responded to the widow out of fear of being given a “black eye” (a blemish on his reputation), which is a more literal translation of verse 4. The Father instead values widows, orphans, and the marginalized of society (see Exodus 22:22–24; Deuteronomy 10:18, 24:17, 27:19; Job 22:9, 24:3; Psalm 68:5; Isaiah 1:17, 10:2; 1 Timothy 5:3; James 1:27).

In a world filled with injustice, God desires to “bring about justice for his chosen ones” (Luke 18:7). Thus the reader must ask two questions. First, do I respond more like the judge or the Father towards the outcasts of society? Second, if the Father values persistent prayers,

especially when applied to issues of justice, how consistent is my own prayer life in this area?

Focusing on the Meaning

It can be argued that the Gospel of Luke focuses more on prayer than any other Gospel. Luke 11:1–13 and 18:1–8 are central to Jesus' teaching on this essential habit for effective disciples. Taken together these two passages are an invitation for disciples to persistently offer faithful prayers to God. Prayer involves cultivating the voice of God in our lives and is an act of submission. As followers of Jesus, we are to examine our time spent in prayer and consider whether our approach is that of a self-righteous judge or of a humble, but persistent petitioner.

These passages also challenge us to lead persistent prayer lives that boldly seek God's resources, God's response, and God's just provision for others. Prayer should include a corporate consciousness that encourages disciples to develop corporate responsibility that aligns with God's kingdom orientation. This is possible because the character of God is good. Thus, as these focal texts demonstrate, highly effective disciples seek a renewed journey of spiritual formation characterized by the habit of prayer. These prayers are consistent, God-centered, corporate, grounded into the goodness of God, confident in the Holy Spirit, and oriented towards an ethic of kingdom justice.

TEACHING PLANS

Teaching Plan—Varied Learning Activities

Connect with Life

1. Before the session, tear pictures/articles out of magazines or newspapers of events, persons, or situations that Christians might pray for. Divide the class into groups of three to six members.

Distribute at least two pictures/articles to each group and ask members to discuss how they might pray for these events, persons, or situations and how long they would continue to pray for each one. Each group should be prepared to share with the entire class at least one of their pictures/articles and the results of their discussion. Say, *Today we will study two stories from the Bible about prayer. We will see that effective disciples persistently offer faithful prayers to God.*

Guide Bible Study

2. Read Luke 11:1–4 and mention the ways Jesus taught his disciples to pray. Give special attention to the following parts of these verses: (1) The focus on God and expressions of praise for who he is (2) Intercession for others, and (3) Petition for personal needs. Take note of the emphasis on daily nourishment (both physical and spiritual) and the need to avoid temptation.
3. Ask someone to read Matthew 6:9–13. Ask the class, *What are the similarities and differences between this passage and Luke 11:1–4?* Write the responses on a whiteboard under two columns (Luke 1:1–4; Matt. 6:9–13). Say, *Some have called this the “Model Prayer.” As you can see these two passages are very similar. Ask, Can you identify elements or categories we should include in our prayers?* (Thanksgiving, Praise, Petition, Confession, Forgiveness.) Guide the class in a brief discussion of the meaning of each element.
4. Divide the class into two groups and ask *Group 1* to read Luke 11:5–13 and *Group 2* to read Luke 18:1–8, each silently. Ask representatives from each group to express in their own words these two similar parables. You may want to write their responses on a whiteboard. Discuss the central idea that each story is seeking to express—the need for persistence in our prayers and that our loving Father not only hears our prayers but answers them.

Encourage Application

5. Revisit Luke 11:9–10 and ask, *Do these three steps always bring about the desired results that we want from our prayers? If not, why not? If so, why?* (1) Ask and it will be given to you. (2) Seek and you will find. (3) Knock and the door will be opened.

Say, *We can be confident that God consistently and patiently hears our prayers and acts at the proper time and in the proper way.*

6. Ask the class to react to the following case study. (A copy of this case study is available in “Teaching Resource Items” for this study at www.baptistwaypress.org)

Brenda is a single-adult with two children and she is a faithful member of your church. She serves on the missions committee and volunteers to serve meals at the Austin Street Shelter once a month. She is active in her Bible study class and volunteers to contact those who visit her class. She is a great example of a loving mother who wants the best for her children. Recently, she was diagnosed with a brain tumor, and surgery is not an option. How should you pray for Brenda? If she does not survive, what will that say (if anything) about your prayers? What will it say about God and his love for Brenda?

7. After a time of discussion, encourage class members to spend two or three minutes of silence to evaluate their own prayer habits, especially when it comes to persistence. Close with prayer.

Teaching Plan—Lecture and Questions

Connect with Life

1. Remind the class of the content of surgeon Atul Gawande’s book, *The Checklist Manifesto*, as given in the introduction to the lesson in the *Study Guide*. Transition into the Bible study by saying, *We often talk more about prayer than we actually practice it. But, if we can develop “pause points” throughout the day and use those*

moments to pray, it could produce change in our lives and in the lives of those we pray for. Prayer can give us confidence to face any difficulty and strength to be God's representatives in our world. Followers of Jesus persistently offer faithful prayers to God.

Guide Bible Study

2. Display a poster or write on a whiteboard the following outline of the lesson from the *Study Guide*:
 - (1) The Request of the Disciples (Luke 11:1)
 - (2) The Model Prayer (Luke 11:2–4)
 - (3) A Parable on Persistent Prayer (Luke 11:5–10)
 - (4) A Parable of a Loving God (Luke 11:11–13)
 - (5) The Persistent Widow (Luke 18:1–8)
3. Enlist a volunteer to read Luke 11:1–4. Present a brief lecture on the Model Prayer with special attention given to the fact that these are not magic words but guidelines for our prayers. Ask, *What do these verses reveal about the elements that should characterize our prayers?* List these elements on a whiteboard and discuss what each one means.
4. One week prior to the Bible study hour, enlist a class member who will come prepared to state in his/her own words the content of the Parable of the Persistent Prayer and the Parable of a Loving God (Luke 11:5–13). Lead a discussion about the meaning of these two parables. Explain to the class two of the most misunderstood verses in the Bible (Luke 11:9–10). See the *Study Guide* for information to inform your explanation.
5. Refer to the Parable of the Persistent Widow in Luke 18:1–8. Lecture briefly on the meaning of this parable and how it supports the other two parables that the class discussed earlier (see comments in the *Study Guide* for ideas). Conclude the Bible study by reading from the “Implications and Actions” section of the *Study Guide*.

Encourage Application

6. Ask members to reflect on the questions in the *Study Guide*. Choose 1 or 2 questions and ask the class for their brief responses to these questions.
7. Challenge the class with the suggestions from “Practicing Prayer” found in the *Study Guide*. Close with a time of prayer.

FOCAL TEXTS

Psalms 24:1–6;
Ephesians 5:1–16

BACKGROUND

Psalms 24:1–6;
Ephesians 5:1–16

MAIN IDEA

Disciples pursue a life of purity.

QUESTION TO EXPLORE

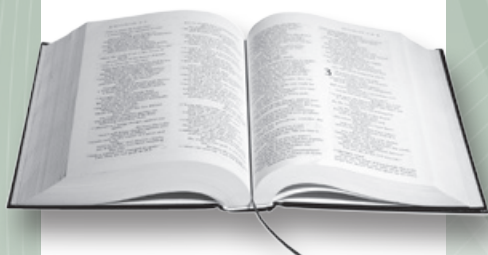
How can I pursue purity
in an impure world?

TEACHING AIM

To lead adults to choose to
pursue purity in their thoughts,
attitudes, words, and actions

LESSON NINE

Purity



BIBLE COMMENTS

Understanding the Context

At the heart of purity is the desire to praise God and to live as a God-centered disciple. This is the emphasis found in Psalms. The Hebrew title for this book is *Tehillim*, literally meaning “prayers,” and the English title is a derivative of a Greek word referring to a sacred song or poem used in worship. Somewhat analogous to a modern church hymnal, Psalms is organized into five distinct books. Psalm 24 is part of Book I (Psalms 1–41) which focuses on King David and on the royal, kingly traditions associated with his dynasty. Like many other Psalms, Psalm 24 expresses healthy spirituality in terms of fusing worship and obedience, both essential in the pursuit of purity.

The book of Ephesians (in particular the second half) builds upon the heart of worship established in the Psalms and provides application for disciples living in the midst of an impure world. Ephesians 1–3 emphasizes the incredible gift of transformative salvation offered to every Christ-follower. The transitional hinge verse is Ephesians 4:1, “As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.”

Chapters 4–6 concentrate on exhorting disciples to live according to God’s call on their lives. In other words, having received salvation, how then is the disciple to live a life ordered by that salvation? The opening pericope in Ephesians 5 falls within a broader set of instructions for Christian living that describe how disciples can effectively live “not as unwise but as wise” (5:15) in order to make “the most of every opportunity” (5:16) in an often impure world. Highly effective disciples pursue purity.

Interpreting the Scriptures

The Foundation for a Habit of Purity (Psalm 24:1–2)

24:1–2. It is possible the immediate context of this Psalm was either the capture of Jerusalem or the celebration surrounding the transportation

of the Ark of the Covenant from Kiriath Jearim to Jerusalem (see 2 Samuel 6). In any case, these verses are a strong affirmation of the sovereignty of God as king. Drawing upon the imagery of Genesis 1, the psalmist rightly recognizes God as the founder and establisher of the earth. Moreover, “the LORD”, the most personal name for God used throughout the Old Testament, is the sustainer of both the material world and all of its inhabitants.

A proper perspective of God is the foundation for purity. The sovereignty of God should lead the disciple to worship him as the One who is worthy. Worship then becomes the fuel enabling the disciple to consistently seek purity. The pursuit of purity without consistent heart-overflowing worship results in legalism. Purity after all is not the achievement of an externalized set of actions, but the wisdom to live in a God-honoring manner in the midst of ever-changing culture. Purity is a state of *being*, a condition of the heart firmly established by regular personal and corporate worship in light of a high view of the sovereignty and worthiness of God as Maker, Sustainer, and Redeemer.

The Conditions for a Habit of Purity (Psalm 24:3–4)

24:3–4. Psalm 24 is categorized as “antiphonic” meaning the questions found in verse 3 were likely chanted in worship by a Levitical choir with verse 4 as the intended response. This is underscored by the recognition that the original temple was built on Mount Zion and required a physical ascent. There is however a deeper spiritual reality. The discipline of purity begins with an inward recognition of the true condition of one’s hands and heart. It can be painful to honestly examine oneself. We must acknowledge not who we were at one time, nor who we wish we were or hope to become, but rather who we actually are. This inward examination is essential for purity.

Verse 4 offers four descriptive qualifiers for the disciple seeking purity. “Clean hands” refers to *right actions* and an *innocence of action*, in a society saturated with violence and wrongdoing. A “pure heart” extends purity to *right attitudes* and *innocence in thought and purpose* (see also Psalm 51:10, Matthew 5:8). The third qualifier, “does not lift up his soul to an idol,” signifies a refusal on the part of the disciple to place his/her trust in anything transitory. Disciples choose the one and only eternal God above any man-made impostor. To right actions, right

attitude, and right trust is added right words, words that do not misuse God's name or seek to deceive others. For additional insights compare Psalm 24 with the closely related Psalm 15.

The Reward of a Habit of Purity (Psalm 24:5–6)

24:5–6. Verses 5–6 remind the reader of the rewards for the disciple pursuing purity. Chiefly “He will receive blessing from the LORD” (24:5), the creator and sustainer of the world and all within it as affirmed in verses 1–2. Blessing is a powerful Old Testament concept inclusive of both spiritual and material well-being. The pure also experience vindication (the Hebrew word *s^edā·qā(h)*) which at its root means “righteousness, justice, innocence, and prosperity.” These are all powerful rewards. Verse 6 is both a reminder and an exhortation that purity is established in an intimate relationship, as one seeks the face of God. The reward and outgrowth of purity is an intimacy with God that is deeper than simple adherence to rules and regulations as an attempt to avoid punishment.

The Example of a Habit of Purity (Ephesians 5:1–2)

5:1–2. Out of gratitude for the astonishing gift of salvation, the second half of Ephesians appeals to believers to live according to the calling they have received. Purity for disciples stems from hearts of worship and their status as beloved children, children who live according to the example set before them. In verse 2 the model is that of the self-sacrificial love of Christ, as Paul beckons his followers to imitate his example.

The Application of a Habit of Purity (Ephesians 5:3–7)

5:3–7. With these verses Paul moves to specific examples, calling on Christians to make conscious choices regarding their attitudes and actions. For the disciple, knowing Jesus intimately in worship fuels a desire to live according to his pattern of God-honoring, sacrificial love in the midst of an impure world. In other words, when purity is the state of proper *being* (worship) it then results in proper *doing* (actions).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the first application is in the area of sexuality. Christians are urged to avoid any *porneia*, translated here as “sexual immorality.” Our culture is inundated with unhealthy sexual ideation

and explicit temptations. The widespread adoption of mobile technology and accelerated Internet connectivity among both adults and adolescents has led to a sexual crisis. Research demonstrates that even young Christian men and women are caught up in the addictive use of pornographic materials; and so are some older Christian men and women. Recognition of an addiction as well as a willingness or ability to address the addiction can be difficult for anyone.

Unfortunately, many who feel unable to find freedom from mobile and Internet pornography are hesitant to admit their struggles and questions within the church. Churches and individual Christians alike, particularly parents, need to proactively create safe venues where the issues of pornography and healthy sexuality can be discussed. Freedom from this sin is available but it often requires communities of faith that are open, transparent, and allow for confession. Such churches boldly stand alongside those journeying away from these destructive patterns.

In a world of pervasive sexual impurity, effective discipleship must be holistic. It must combine the preaching of the absolute avoidance of all sexually explicit material with the redemptive grace of walking alongside those trapped in the cyclical pattern of this sin. Such encouragement can lead people to find the freedom, health, and restoration that is available in Jesus alone.

A related, but too often neglected, subject is domestic physical and sexual violence. A key passage in this regard is Malachi 2:13–16 which according to the NASB reads in part, “For I hate divorce,’ says the Lord, the God of Israel, ‘and him who covers his garment with wrong.’” The Hebrew word for “wrong” is *hā-mās* and is far more frequently translated in the Old Testament as “violence.” In other words, in addition to despising divorce, the Lord also hates those who “cover their garments with violence” towards his loved ones. Domestic violence is sin, and when individuals engage in sexual or domestic violence they are breaking faith with their family and sacrificing personal purity.

If Christ’s love (Galatians 5:2) is characterized by sacrifice, then the areas of impurity identified in verses 3–5 are denoted as outgrowths of self-indulgence. Verses 5–6 describe the costs for non-discipleship: squandering kingdom inheritance, self-deception, emptiness, and ultimately securing God’s wrath.

Living in the Light: The Pathway to Habitual Purity (Ephesians 5:8–16)

5:8–16. These verses call for Christians to live in the light with purity. One key in this regard is to expose areas of sin in our life to the light. This is the Christian discipline of confession. Confession requires an inward movement of self-acknowledgement, an upward movement of agreeing with God about our sin and receiving his forgiveness, and an outward movement of walking wisely with our Lord. All three movements are required to live in the light.

Practicing purity is part of wise living (5:15) and helps disciples maximize their witness for Christ in the midst of an evil world.

Focusing on the Meaning

Highly effective disciples pursue a life of purity in their thoughts, attitudes, words, and actions. The challenge is that each disciple must continuously explore the question, “How can I pursue purity in an impure world?” The focal texts challenge us to ground purity in the pursuit of the worthiness and supremacy of God. Worship is the fuel for purity.

Purity, however, cannot remain solely an upward expression of spirituality to God. As Paul challenges us in Ephesians, purity is to be lived out in the practical areas of life, those that can be so quickly corrupted by sin: sexuality, money, and our speech. The effective disciple regularly asks, “Am I engaging these areas out of Christ’s sacrificial love or out of a place of self-indulgence?”

Purity is learning to live in the light of Christ and allowing his light to penetrate and transform our lives. It is a moment by moment choice. Each participant should be encouraged to examine his or her life in two key areas. First, purity can degenerate into legalism and empty external application unless the foundation for the disciple is *being* and *resting* in Jesus through regular worship and affirmation of his sovereignty. Second, in a world of impurity, purity also involves *doing*, that is applying in our thoughts, attitudes, words, and actions the transformative love of Jesus Christ.

TEACHING PLANS

Teaching Plan—Varied Learning Activities

Connect with Life

1. Do a web search for *Hoarders Full Episodes* or go to www.aetv.com/hoarders/video/. Show (either on a laptop or on a projector/monitor) the brief introductory promo that takes place before each of the episodes. Say, *The cable television show, Hoarders, chronicles the trials and tribulations of people who can't throw anything away. The writer of our Study Guide tells of one apartment manager who had a couple whom she had to evict. They were living in total squalor. She had warned them in writing about their behavior. Finally, after months of pleading, she had to forcefully evict them. Why? During their entire time in the apartment, almost a year, they hadn't once taken out the trash. The property management company needed to bring in a forty-foot dumpster just to clean out the apartment!*
2. Say, *If we are not watchful, filth can fill our lives. In fact, slavery to sin doesn't occur overnight. It is a process of hoarding evil thoughts, attitudes, and actions over a long period of time. The Bible's call to purity is the antidote to a life of suffocating sin. Today we will consider how we can pursue purity in an impure world.*

Guide Bible Study

3. Read Psalm 24:1–6, a description of pure worship. Emphasize the major points as described in the *Study Guide*—(1) God as Creator, and (2) Requirements for Worship. Give special attention to two rhetorical questions from the Scripture: Who may ascend the hill for the Lord? Who may stand in his holy place? Lead the class in a discussion of these questions. Ask, *Why is the concept of purity important in our worship of God?*

4. Divide the class in two groups. Ask someone in *Group 1* to read Ephesians 5:1–7 and someone in *Group 2* to read Ephesians 5:8–16. Ask each group to enlist a note taker. Instruct each group to make a list of the descriptions of impure thoughts/actions found in their respective passage and discuss their meanings. Direct each group to answer the following questions based on their assigned Scriptures: What is the main theme and challenge of the passage? What kind of life is God calling his disciples to live? Ask each group to give a report on their findings/discussions to the whole class. (A copy of these group assignments is available in “Teaching Resource Items” for this study at www.baptistwaypress.org) You may want to be prepared to fill in the gaps if some important truths are overlooked. Refer to the *Study Guide* for additional information.

Encourage Application

5. Remind the class that anything that comes between us and our relationship with God could be a form of impurity—whether in our thoughts, attitudes, or actions. Challenge them to reflect daily on their commitment to God and to regularly ask this question: *What is it that is coming between me and my relationship with God?*
6. Guide the class in a time of silent reflection on their lives. Ask them to make a renewed commitment to the Lord, to their spouse, to their family, and to their employer to live a life of purity in their thoughts and actions. Ask them to allow God to change their heart and to remove any barriers between them and him. Play the song, “The Heart of Worship” by Matt Redman (conduct a Google search if needed). Close with prayer.

Teaching Plan—Lecture and Questions

Connect with Life

1. Ask if anyone in your class has seen the cable television show, *Hoarders*. Ask them to explain what the show is about. If not

enough explanation is given, be prepared to say, *The show chronicles the trials and tribulations of people who can't throw anything away.*

2. Say, *The writer of our Study Guide tells of one apartment manager in a Hoarders episode who had a couple whom she had to evict. They were living in total squalor. She had warned them in writing about their behavior. Finally, after months of pleading, she had to forcefully evict them. Why? During their entire time in the apartment, almost a year, they hadn't once taken out the trash. The property management company needed to bring in a forty-foot dumpster just to clean out the apartment! If we are not watchful, filth can fill our lives. In fact, slavery to sin doesn't occur overnight. It is a process of hoarding evil thoughts, attitudes, and actions over a long period of time. The Bible's call to purity can be the solution to a life of suffocating sin.*

Guide Bible Study

3. Ask someone to read Psalm 24:1–6 and then write the following bullet points on a whiteboard, chalk board, or art paper:
 - A description of God as creator (v. 1–2)
 - A description of the purity requirements for worship (v. 4–6)
 - Using content from the *Study Guide*, deliver a brief lecture on the meaning of these verses. Give special attention to the two questions (24:3) that cut to the heart of worship.
4. Direct the class to silently read Ephesians 5:1–16. Lead a discussion on this passage by asking the following questions based on content found in the *Study Guide*:
 - What is Paul calling the church to do? (maintain pure hearts and clean lives)
 - Paul lifted up Jesus at the supreme example of what? (sacrificial love)
 - What are some of the sins of self-indulgence that Paul mentions? (sexual immorality, greed, sins of speech—these are all considered forms of idolatry)
 - In your opinion, what are the definitions of these sins and why are they such a big deal to Paul?

5. Read 1 Timothy 1:3–4 and say, *As Paul attempted to strengthen the Christian church at Ephesus he was concerned about the strong pagan influence in Ephesian society, and the syncretism so common in the Greek world. He was afraid that some of the Christians were incorporating cultural traditions associated with the worship of Artemis into Christian worship. He called the Christians to set themselves apart from the pagan culture that surrounded them so they could approach God free from the idolatry that plagued so many other belief systems.* (Refer to 1 Tim. 4:1–5; Eph. 4:17)

Encourage Application

6. Say, *The psalmist calls us to worship a holy and majestic Creator. In order to do this we must have pure motives and attitudes (a pure heart), and practice right living (clean hands). Paul also called the Christians at Ephesus to live their lives with purity of thoughts, attitudes, and actions. This means that Christians should live in stark contrast to the culture around them. People should be able to see a difference in the way a Christian lives in comparison to the morals and values of the world. Christians should seek to love all people, but should not imitate the sinful lifestyle of others. Christians should also deal honestly with their own sin, bringing it into the light of Jesus where he can forgive and heal all things.*
7. Challenge the class with the following questions from the *Study Guide*:
- What are some things you can do to protect yourself from impure thoughts and actions?
 - What can you do to prepare yourself for worship?
 - What are some excuses we make for the impurity in our lives?
8. Discuss the “Pathways to Purity” listed in the *Study Guide*. Encourage class members to choose at least one of the suggestions they will commit to practicing in the coming week. Close with prayer.

FOCAL TEXTS

Mark 10:35–45; John 13:12–16; James 2:14–17

BACKGROUND

Mark 10:35–45; John 13:12–16; James 2:14–17

MAIN IDEA

Disciples follow Jesus' example of serving others.

QUESTION TO EXPLORE

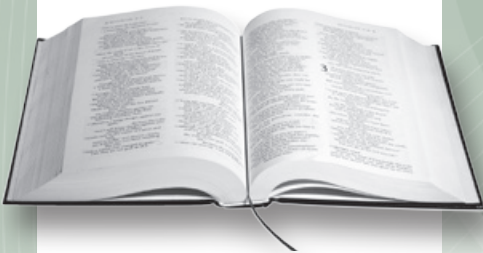
How am I following Jesus' example of serving others?

TEACHING AIM

To lead adults to decide how they will follow Jesus' example by serving someone in the coming week

LESSON TEN

Service



BIBLE COMMENTS

Understanding the Context

One of the unique themes in the Gospel of Mark is the ongoing confusion experienced by the apostles at the teachings of Jesus (see for example Mark 4:10–13, 40–41; 7:17–18; 9:30–32). This confusion is contrasted by Jesus' clear prediction of his impending death. Many scholars believe Mark authored his Gospel after visiting Peter in his imprisonment in Rome, and that this Gospel more than any other is shaped by the recollections of Peter.

It is unsurprising then that Peter's thrice denial of Jesus is intentionally juxtaposed in the Gospel of Mark with three predictions of Jesus' death (Mark 8:31–38; 9:30–37; 10:32–45). In each instance a specific literary pattern is followed: Jesus predicts his death, the disciples misunderstand or are confused, and Jesus then offers an unequivocal teaching about the true cost of discipleship. Mark 10:32–45 follows this pattern with Jesus concluding that discipleship involves costly service on behalf of others.

The Gospel of John extends this theme of self-emptying service through one of the most powerful images found in the Scriptures: Jesus washing the feet of his disciples. The Gospel of John is commonly divided into two sections, chapters 1–12, the Book of Signs, and chapters 13–21, the Book of Glory. Chapters 13–17 all relate to Jesus' teaching on the night of his arrest which occurred during the Passover Festival, a highly potent and symbolic time recalling the sacrifice of a lamb for the protection and redemption of the Hebrew slaves (see Exodus 12). Jesus' washing of the disciples' feet was a catalytic moment on the final night of his public teaching ministry.

Jesus teaches on service in the Gospel of Mark. In the Gospel of John, he models such service. Later in the New Testament, the Epistle of James cements an inseparable fusion of faith and service for every follower of Jesus. As the half-brother of Jesus and the leader of the early Jerusalem church, James was uniquely positioned to transition Jesus' teaching into applied theology. For James, to be a follower of Jesus is to combine orthodoxy (right theology) with orthopraxy (right actions). In

other words, highly effective disciples hear Jesus' teaching, follow Jesus' example, and live according to James' challenge that true faith is evidenced by service to others.

Interpreting the Scriptures

Misplaced Concepts of Identity, Power, and Service (Mark 10:35–40)

10:35–40. In Mark 10 Jesus predicted his impending suffering for a third and final time. Perhaps believing Jesus was continuing to speak in parables; the disciples misunderstood Jesus' teaching and missed his definition of the true mission of the Messiah. Rather, James and John, who along with Peter formed a unique inner circle with Jesus, approached the Lord with an outlandish request. The entreaty of James and John was for a guarantee to sit to the right and the left of Jesus in his forthcoming kingdom. These two brothers asked for the seats of highest honor and glory.

In verse 38 Jesus responded patiently but quite pointedly. The cup was a common Jewish metaphor for “divine judgment against human sin”, while baptism or “being under water was an Old Testament picture of being overwhelmed by calamity.”¹ Jesus therefore indicated that his disciples must join him in suffering for the advancement of the kingdom of God.

Redefining Identity, Power, and Service (Mark 10:41–45)

10:41–45. The other ten apostles immediately responded to this request with *aganakteō*, or “indignation”, a word appearing in the New Testament on only seven occasions. Jesus called the apostles together and redefined identity, power, and service. Rather than seeking positions of glory and authority, followers of Jesus were to live as “servants” (10:43) and “slaves” (10:44) of all.

Greatness is relocated into a paradigm of absolute service. After all Jesus himself “did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (10:45). The word “ransom” in this verse is *lytron* and is highly unique in the New Testament, only occurring here and in Matthew 20:28, a parallel passage to Mark 10. Jesus was focused

on current service rather than potential, future honor. He called for his disciples to embrace a mindset and practice of service to such an extent that those who were captive to the power and reality of sin and death could meet him and be set free.

In our contemporary context, it often seems many people echo the request of James and John. Many prefer to sit next to Jesus rather than at his feet. Rather than living as submissive disciples, there are those who frankly would prefer to exercise the power and authority of Jesus while receiving the honor, rewards, and benefits given to those near him. It can be difficult to admit to ourselves that we might prefer being near to Jesus and speaking in his name more than living as true Christ-followers. However, one cannot pick up the towel of the Master until he or she is first sitting at his feet. At the foot of the Master is where identity and power are transformed into a paradigm of service, service that often involves suffering for the advancement of the kingdom of God.

The Example of Service (John 13:12–16)

13:12–16. If Mark 10 issued a strong call for disciples to develop the habit of service; John 13 offers a potent example of service. Jesus taught and then demonstrated the model of service he expected from his followers. John 13 is the opening snapshot of one of the most important evenings in the life and ministry of Jesus. Jesus continued to redefine identity, power, and service. At communal meals the host would commonly assign a servant to wash the dusty feet of the guests.

Jesus inverted the normal procedure. Though identified as “Teacher” and “Lord” (13:13), he elected to take upon himself the dirtiest and most humble of tasks. In this action Jesus revealed that other-centered love was less about exercising positional authority and more about self-emptying service. Such service includes a willingness to suffer by standing in solidarity with areas and people the world labels as “dirty.” Regardless of age or positional authority, disciples are to lead past perceived barriers and join Jesus in “washing the feet of others.”

These verses make clear Jesus’ invitation for his followers to become like him. The goal of the servant is to become like his or her master. Moreover, the disciple who does so by embracing a habit of service “will be blessed” (13:17). Only on two occasions does the Gospel of John indicate a manner in which an individual may be “blessed” (the other is

John 20:29). If John 13:7–11 focuses on the theological meaning of Jesus' actions, verses 12–17 center on their practical significance. The practical significance is to positively respond to Jesus' invitation to live as a disciple who follows the path of blessing by expressing the fullness of his love through the most humble and self-emptying acts of service.

Bringing Together Orthodoxy and Orthopraxy (James 2:14–17)

2:14–17. The book of James, unlike the Gospels of Mark and John, belies easy structural analysis as it moves rapidly from one topic to the next. What is undeniable is James' admonition that true faith is expressed in action. James fuses orthodoxy (right theology) with orthopraxy (right actions). Right actions of service may not be necessary for salvation but they are the natural by-product and evidence of true, saving faith.

Notice the specificity of verses 15–16. James intentionally selects this example not as a casual rhetorical or hypothetical illustration, but as an expression of what ought to be the concrete reality of every Christ-follower. Unfortunately for some Christians, it is difficult to fully live out the specific teachings of these verses precisely because their lives are devoid of any brothers or sisters who are without clothes and daily food.

The Christian experience is to be grounded in service to the marginalized of society as can also be seen in Matthew 6:3–4, 11; Luke 3:11; James 1:27 and 1 John 3:16–18. Echoing the Lord's Prayer in Luke 11:2–4; it is the actions of the disciple (helping others secure daily provision) that reveal the veracity of the words of faith he or she speaks. To put it succinctly, "faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead" (James 2:17). James indicated that this was most clearly evident when disciples failed to help the brothers and sisters they encountered secure their most basic of needs.

Focusing on the Meaning

The highly effective disciple develops the discipline of service. To use a modern analogy, one does not purchase a vehicle simply to leave it parked in the driveway, only to discuss with others the theory of driving. In a similar way, one does not become a Christian to remain parked in idle but to join Jesus in the journey of a lifetime. Freedom, if you will, is

found in living out the teachings of Christianity as expressed in service to others.

In Mark 10 Jesus redefined identity and power by calling his followers to be discontent with sitting next to his throne. Rather, the disciple is to sit at the foot of the Master, hear his call to serve in a sacrificial manner, and help others connect with the ransom Jesus paid. Lead participants to consider whether they are positioning themselves as those sitting next to or at the feet of Jesus.

If in Mark 10 Jesus offered a strong teaching on the call to service, in John 13 he embraced and illustrated this very instruction in a most enduring and catalytic image. The discipline of service involves self-emptying and joining Jesus where he is: washing off the collected dirt and grime of our world. To wash another's feet requires a gentle awareness, a delicate touch, and an intimate proximity of relationship. Lead participants to consider how they might join Jesus in his endeavor to wash what the world labels as "dirty."

In James 2 the teaching and example of service offered by Jesus is wedded to the life of faith expressed by the disciple of Jesus. One cannot in good faith claim Christianity while simultaneously refusing to live a disciplined life of service. Though service can be manifested in a variety of venues, this passage speaks to one concrete and specific area. Lead participants to consider who in their community might regularly experience a lack of clothing and daily food. Encourage them to decide what Christ-followers can practically do to build relationships and help these brothers and sisters secure their most basic of needs.

TEACHING PLANS

Teaching Plan—Varied Learning Activities

Connect with Life

1. Provide a sheet of standard size construction paper (9"x11" in a variety of colors) for each class member. Write on a poster board

or large sheet of paper the following instructions and place on a focal wall: *SERVING OTHERS: Tear your piece of construction paper into the shape of something that symbolizes methods or ways of serving others. Be prepared to share your symbol and its meaning.* As the teacher, set the example by doing this exercise with the class. Some potential shapes might be—a hammer, saw, paint brush, or house (repairing a home after a storm); a cross (sharing Christ with others); a heart (showing love toward the unlovely); a banana, apple, or loaf of bread (sharing food with the homeless); \$ (giving money to missions so others can serve); the letter M (stands for missions) or a van or bus (going on a mission trip); a hand (reaching out to folks in prison with visits or Bible study); a musical note or musical instrument (providing music for worship); a truck (hauling supplies like food and water to a disaster area); etc.

2. Ask class members to attach their symbols to the focal wall with a piece of masking tape. As time allows, ask members to share their symbol and its meaning. Say, *Today we will consider three Bible passages that teach us that serving others is not an option, but a command for Jesus' disciples.*

Guide Bible Study

3. Ask someone to read Mark 10:35–45. Guide the class to help you list some of the key truths in this passage by asking the following questions. Enlist one of the members to record their answers on a white/chalk board.
 - Who are the main characters in this passage?
 - What did they want from Jesus and what did they ask of him?
 - What was Jesus' response? What does the "cup" symbolize?
 - When Jesus gathered his followers together, what did he say to them?
 - In your opinion, what is the central truth or teaching of this passage?
 - Why do you think the followers of Jesus did not understand this important teaching?

4. Divide the class into two groups. Ask *Group 1* to read John 13:12–17 (silently) and *Group 2* to read James 2:14–17 (silently). Ask a volunteer from *Group 1* to describe in his/her own words what took place in the John passage. Ask the group, *What do you think Jesus was trying to teach his disciples?* Ask a volunteer from *Group 2* to describe in his/her own words what is being said in the James passage. Ask the group, *What is the point that James is trying to make in this passage?* Using the *Teaching Guide*, be prepared to add any important information that might be overlooked. [Alternant Idea: Go to www.ignitermedia.com. For a modest fee, download and show the mini-movie, *You Do The Math*]

Encourage Application

5. Read the following Case Study and answer the questions below:

One of the members of our class shares that she knows of a family in her neighborhood whose father has lost his job and his wife does not work. His company provided three months of severance pay. They have two children: a 14-year-old boy and a 10-year-old girl. Their family has no connection to a local church. Some of you feel led to do something to help.

- What do we do?
 - How do we go about it?
 - What is the best way to serve this family?
6. Challenge the class to silently reflect on the following questions from the *Study Guide*. Choose one or two questions and ask for volunteers to share their answers.
 - What are some of the ways you can serve people outside of your immediate family?
 - What would be the equivalent of washing someone's feet in the 21st Century?
 - What are some ways you can put others first?
 - What are some things your church/class could do to serve its community?
 - What are some ways you could express your faith in action this week while at work?

7. Close in prayer.

Teaching Plan—Lecture and Questions

Connect with Life

1. Write this question on a white/chalk board, *What makes it hard for some Christians to serve other people?* Brainstorm and record the responses from the class underneath this question. Some possible responses might be:
 - I'm too busy—don't have any extra time for this.
 - People I have helped do not show appreciation or even say thank you.
 - Some folks lie about their needs to gain sympathy or money. I've been burned by people who have taken advantage of my good will.
 - Sometimes I don't know what to do to help or how to help others.
 - I don't have the resources to help others. I can barely take care of myself and my family.

Note: Be prepared to suggest some of these if they are not offered by the class.

2. Ask, *Are these valid reasons for not serving others? Why or why not?* Encourage responses from the class and then say, *It is easy to make excuses for failing to serve others. However, as the author of the Study Guide has stated, "According to the Bible, serving others is not an elective for the Christian. It is a required course."*

Guide Bible Study

3. Read Mark 10:35–45. Prepare and present a mini-lecture on the content and basic ideas presented in this passage. Use the *Study Guide* to construct your content. Be sure to answer the following questions:
 - Who are the main characters in this passage?

- What did they want from Jesus and what did they ask of him?
- What was Jesus' response?
- What does the "cup" symbolize?
- When Jesus gathered his followers together, what did he say to them?
- Why do you think the followers of Jesus did not understand this important teaching?

Conclude the lecture by saying, *The central truth of this passage is that Greatness = Service. God's kingdom is not about who will be the greatest, but who will be willing to serve others. Unless we are willing to serve others, we will never be the kind of disciples that Jesus intends for us to become.*

4. Ask a volunteer to read John 13:12–17. Pose the following questions to the class and then summarize this passage by writing their answers on a white/chalk board.
 - What special event did Jesus and his disciples celebrate? (Passover)
 - What took place during this event? (Jews in Egyptian bondage marked their doorposts with the blood of a lamb so they would be spared when the angel of death passed over their house. This event launched their journey to the Promised Land.)
 - What was included in this celebration? (eating bread and drinking wine)
 - What did the bread and wine symbolize? (Jesus' broken body and spilled blood)
 - After the meal, what did Jesus do to demonstrate what it means to be a disciple? (He used a basin and towel to wash his disciples' feet)
 - What was Jesus trying to demonstrate by this act? (that his disciples were to follow his example of serving others; there was no act of service that was "beneath them.")
5. Read James 2:14–17 and say, *Jesus' call for his disciples to live out their faith is affirmed in this passage. James drew a close connection between faith and action when he wrote, "What good is it, my*

brothers, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?” (James 2:14). The answer to James’ rhetorical question is “no.” Such faith is insufficient, not because works produce salvation, but because a proclamation of faith, without a demonstration of that faith is empty. “Walk the Talk” would be the essence of James’ point. James was not advocating for people to seek to earn their salvation by works, but rather that Christian action is the evidence of true faith. In fact, James believed that faith and works were two sides of the same coin. That coin was what Jesus called the summation of the law: Love God and love each other (Mark 12:28–31). Another passage that supports this truth is, “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:35).

Encourage Application

6. Say, *We are called to place the needs of others above our own. We are called to reach out to others and minister to their needs. Disciples of Jesus should always be aware of ways in which we can serve, no matter how simple or menial the task may be. In addition, James reminded the church that faith without works is useless. Therefore, we should develop the habit of serving others. This is not an option but a God-given obligation for all disciples.*
7. Suggest to the members of your class that they be on the lookout for people they could serve this week. Say, *If you are able to serve someone, be prepared to share with the class what you did and the response of those you served.* Close with prayer.

NOTES

1. John D. Grassmick, “Mark,” ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1985), 152.

LESSON ELEVEN
Stewardship

FOCAL TEXTS

Deuteronomy 8:10–18;
Matthew 25:14–30

BACKGROUND

Deuteronomy 8:1–20;
Matthew 25:1–46

MAIN IDEA

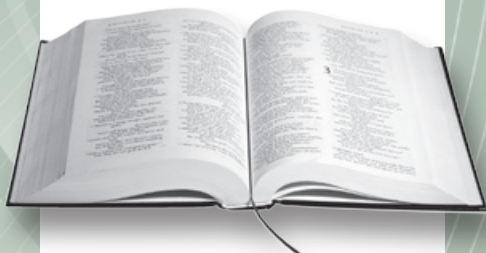
Disciples are faithful stewards of all God has entrusted to them.

QUESTION TO EXPLORE

Am I a faithful steward of all God has entrusted to me?

TEACHING AIM

To lead adults to evaluate and increase the faithfulness of their stewardship of all God has entrusted to them



BIBLE COMMENTS

Understanding the Context

Deuteronomy literally means “second law” and is thematically centered on “instruction to the nation.” Traditionally divided into five sections, Deuteronomy is presented as an extended sermon from Moses to the Hebrew people encamped on the plains of Moab poised to cross into the Promised Land. The third address, Deuteronomy 6–11, builds upon the first of the Ten Commandments, “you shall have no other gods before me,” (Deuteronomy 5:7, Exodus 20:3) and calls on people of faith to ground obedient actions into the centrality of worshiping God and God alone.

Deuteronomy 8 seeks specific application of this overarching emphasis by exhorting the people to acknowledge that their imminent success and garnering of resources in the new land will be a by-product of the Lord’s ongoing provision and the people’s careful observance of the laws of God. In other words, highly effective disciples develop a habit of gratitude in recognition of resources being a blessing from the Lord.

In Matthew 25 the Parable of the Talents challenges the disciple to transition this gratitude into a lifestyle of consistent stewardship. Having received an abundance of resources from the Lord, the disciple is to develop those assets in a way that advances the kingdom of God. Jesus, who was frequently credited as teaching with authority and skill, conveyed almost a third of his teaching in the form of parables.

This particular parable in Matthew 25:14–30 is the final parable in the Gospel of Matthew and is part of a broader discourse on judgment, Jesus’ return, and the coming kingdom of God (Matthew 23–25). Jesus understood that as he neared and entered Jerusalem (Matthew 26), the messianic expectations of his disciples would crescendo. This final parable is therefore laying the foundation for how Jesus anticipates his followers will approach this next phase of ministry. Like the man going on a journey, Jesus has entrusted valuable gifts to his servants. He will eventually return and expects his disciples to live in the interim with a habit of faithful stewardship.

Interpreting the Scriptures

The Risks of Financial Reward (Deuteronomy 8:10–14)

8:10–14. Moses prophesied that in the Promised Land the people would prosper. They would leave the wilderness wanderings and experience food security, construct desirable homes, and experience a multiplication of their herds and monetary resources. Though this financial well-being would be celebratory, it would not be inseparably linked to godliness and would generate new temptations: pride and forgetfulness. Twice in these verses (8:11,14), a phrase appears about forgetting “the LORD your God.” Stewardship involves a proper perspective on resources that includes acknowledging that financial reward carries its own risks. Such rewards can tempt disciples to substitute their own hard work for God; and forget, or *šā-kāh* (which means to ignore or to overlook) the Lord himself.

A Habit of Stewardship Rightly Remembers (Deuteronomy 8:15–18)

8:15–18. If there are potential perils to financial reward, these verses also point to healthy responses effective disciples can adopt. First, according to verse 10, disciples are to remember to praise or bless the Lord for all he has given. Regular praise is an integral component of stewardship, for praise acknowledges that God is the true owner and expects his followers to live with an attitude of gratitude and submission.

Second, verses 15–16 instructed each individual to remember how the Lord had consistently provided even in times of difficulty. In this instance, Moses recalled how the Lord safely delivered the people out of slavery, shepherded them through a “thirsty and waterless land, with its venomous snakes and scorpions” (8:15), and all along the way supplied them with manna to eat and water to drink. In a similar manner, believers can choose to remember how the Lord has consistently remained faithful to them, even in times of difficulty.

Third, according to verse 18, the disciple is to remember that underneath whatever wealth exists in his or her life is the foundation of God-given abilities. Stewardship is more than managing assets; it is the willingness of an individual to work hard according to the unique potential and capability given to that person. Stewardship emerges out

of a habit of submission—the submission of the disciple’s hard work, and the tangible rewards of that labor, to God for the advancement of his kingdom.

Fourth, the conclusion of verse 18 was a challenge for the disciple to remember that God has a desire to provide as part of his ongoing covenant with his people to never leave them, abandon them, or forsake them (Deuteronomy 31:6, Hebrews 13:5). Highly effective disciples therefore combine asset management with right remembrance and develop habits of gratitude and hard work grounded and submitted in the worship of God alone.

A Weighty Responsibility (Matthew 25:14–18)

25:14–18. As the final parable offered by Jesus in both the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Luke (see the parallel passage in Luke 19:12–27), this important teaching highlights Jesus’ perspective on his temporary absence but certain and eventual return. Though Jesus would no longer remain physically present, he has graciously entrusted gifts of great substance to his followers. At around eighty pounds, a talent was the heaviest biblical measure of weight. Interestingly, the Greek word for talent, *talanton*, appears only eleven times in the New Testament, all in the Gospel of Matthew.

This was a significant stewardship responsibility. Though no command is recorded, the parable is clear that the servants were to work to increase the master’s kingdom. This was not a gift or a loan, but a charge to work for the advancement of the assets utilizing the name of the master. After all, those living in primarily poor, agrarian, first-century Israel would implicitly understand that such a large amount of money could not be suddenly spent by a servant without suspicion. Thus the servants would be required to make investments in the name of the absent master and continue to work in a publically identifiable way for the advancement of the master’s enterprise.

The first two servants “at once” (25:16) put the master’s money to work, *ergazomai*, which means “to trade with the idea of gaining.”¹ The third servant approached the money with an intention to hide or *kryptō*, a word also meaning to “make invisible or keep secret.” The third servant refused to publically identify with the absent master and his kingdom.

While each servant was given an amount commensurate with his ability (25:15), all were commissioned with the same opportunity and responsibility. Today's disciples are to focus less on the exact amount of money and instead recognize that they too are graciously stewarded with incredible resources, abilities, giftedness, passions, experiences, and time to be utilized by publically identifying with the name of their Master and working to advance his kingdom. Though Jesus is physically absent, he has invested gifts into his disciples and anticipates that those disciples will utilize the gifts in his name for the advancement of his kingdom.

A Habit of Stewardship Advances the Kingdom (Matthew 25:19–30)

25:19–30. Disciples should realize and anticipate Jesus' accounting or "settling," a word only used in the Gospel of Matthew (25:19). The first two servants demonstrated the results of their investment and both were praised, not explicitly for their success, but for their faithfulness. The significance is not the amount with which we start, but the faithfulness with which we live according to what God has given us; and the extent to which we employ our resources for the advancement of his kingdom.

Notice it was only the third servant who failed to use the word "entrusted", indicating he did not view the gift as an investment to be utilized. The third servant accused the master and in doing so attempted to shift blame and place responsibility for his failure on the absent master. This servant failed in several ways. Perhaps he did not move forward out of fear, laziness, or procrastination. Perhaps he misunderstood the true character of the master or preferred to live according to his own agenda rather than the priorities given by the master. Whatever the reasons, he failed to identify with the master and when given an opportunity to publically work on his behalf, the servant intentionally chose not to do so. In the end he was condemned.

Can we identify with the third servant? If Jesus, our master, asked us why we did not publicly identify with him and use our gifts to advance his kingdom, what would be our reply? Highly effective disciples understand they are gifted and are expected to develop the habit of stewardship in order to advance the kingdom of God.

Focusing on the Meaning

Highly effective disciples know they cannot ignore, abuse, or waste what they have been given from the Lord. To do so is rebellion. Though there is often a temptation toward passivity, God rewards faithfulness. Stewardship involves a biblical consideration of monetary valuation and expenditures, but even more it is a trustworthy willingness to work hard with whatever resources the Lord has given us in order to advance his kingdom. This could mean learning to be more intentional in the use of our business acumen, education capabilities, carpentry or nursing skills, hospitality, artistic abilities, or other unique vocational proficiencies in order to join Christ in lives of service in the midst of communities in need.

Disciples are able to do so when (as Deuteronomy challenges) they live ordered lives of worship, regularly remembering the blessings and provision of the Lord. There is not an inherent problem with the accumulation of resources except when it leads to trusting personal strength and forgetting how the Lord blesses with the capabilities underlying any success. Disciples should view all of their material possessions not as items they own, but as resources to be managed on behalf of the Lord's mission. Christians are called to be facilitators rather than owners.

Matthew 25 indicates this is the very anticipation of Jesus. All of his servants have been gifted and called to publicly identify with him and faithfully work towards enriching his kingdom. Unfortunately there will be some who will make excuses and try to live as private disciples, but in the end they will be condemned. The followers who are praised and given even more responsibility will be those who recognize they carry a trust given by the Lord himself. Highly effective disciples therefore develop the discipline of stewardship based upon submission, worship, hard work, faithfulness, and public identification with Jesus and the advancement of his kingdom.

TEACHING PLANS

Teaching Plan—Varied Learning Activities

Connect with Life

1. In advance, create three signs (use 8½ x 11 sheets of paper)—AGREE, DISAGREE, and UNDECIDED. Place the AGREE sign on one side of the room and the DISAGREE sign on the opposite side of the room. Place the UNDECIDED sign on a chair in the middle of the room. (Copies of these signs are available in “Teaching Resource Items” for this study at www.baptistwaypress.org)

Read the following statements and ask class members to move and stand by the sign that represents their response to each statement. Ask members to be prepared to share why they chose a certain response.

- God requires his followers to give ten percent of their resources to him.
- Everything we have and everything we are belongs to God.
- We give to the church because we know that we will receive ten times more in return.
- Christian stewardship involves more than just money.
- Wealth and well-being can cause us to become proud and less dependent on God.
- An intimate relationship with God can motivate us to share our resources with others.
- To whom much is given, much is required.
- Money can buy lots of happiness.

After all of the statements have been read and discussed, say, *One of the spiritual habits of highly effective disciples is stewardship. Today we will see that disciples are faithful stewards of all God has entrusted to them.*

Guide Bible Study

2. In advance, enlist a member who enjoys doing research to prepare a two-to-three-minute report on biblical stewardship as it relates to Deuteronomy 8:10–18. Ask the researcher to present a report that includes a definition of stewardship and explains why disciples should develop a habit of regular stewardship. Refer the member to the *Study Guide*, Bible dictionaries, and commentaries for assistance. Many of these resources are available on the Internet at no cost.

3. Enlist five people to stand and read Matthew 25:14–30, The Parable of the Talents, in this order: Reader 1 (v. 14–15), Reader 2 (v. 16–18), Reader 3 (v. 19–23), Reader 4 (v. 24–26), and Reader 5 (v. 27–30).

Before the readings, give the biblical definition of a *talent*. See the sidebar “A Biblical Talent” in the *Study Guide* for information. An alternative way of presenting this parable is for four people who enjoy drama to act out the parts of the three servants and the master as someone tells the story in everyday language.

4. Guide class members to discuss their understanding of the meaning of the Parable of the Talents. Following the discussion say, *The Parable of the Talents, coupled with Moses’ warnings in his farewell speech (Deut. 8:10–18), reveal important biblical foundations for the proper attitude towards material wealth. The Scripture reveals four theological truths (jot these on a piece of poster board for display): (1) Everything belongs to God; (2) God entrusts us with a certain amount of his resources; (3) We are responsible to use and develop the resources God gives us; and (4) God will hold us accountable for the wasteful management of his resources. These biblical concepts call us to take stock of the way we spend money, care for the environment, and use our time and natural talents.*

Encourage Application

5. Distribute an index card to each class member. Be prepared to provide pens/pencils, if needed. Ask each member to make a list of the ways God has blessed them. Next, ask them to flip the card over and to make a list of the ways they could bless God and others.

Allow volunteers to share some of their responses with the rest of the class.

6. Say, *We should carefully analyze how we are investing God's resources. We should make an effort to leverage everything we have to bring God glory and further his plan for our world. In the end, God will reward us for our faithful stewardship of his resources.* Close in prayer.

Teaching Plan—Lecture and Questions

Connect with Life

1. Begin by sharing the following content from the lesson introduction in the *Study Guide*: Studies by a generation of behavioral scientists show that material goods usually don't deliver lasting happiness. But there is one way that money can buy happiness—when you spend money with and for others. Researchers call this phenomenon a “buying experience.” Elizabeth Dunn and Michael Norton, a pair of researchers who authored the book *Happy Money*, reported on the following experiment:

We handed out Starbucks gift cards on a university campus . . . [and] told some people to head to Starbucks and buy something for themselves. We told others to pass their gift card along to someone else. And we told a third group of people to use the gift card to buy something for someone else—with the additional requirement that they actually hang out with that person at Starbucks.

Dunn and Norton concluded, “Who was happiest? Answer: Those who treated someone else and shared in the experience with them.” These results should not be shocking to followers of Jesus. This is because God gives us everything we have so that we can share it with others.

Say, Today we will examine the spiritual discipline of stewardship. Highly effective disciples of Jesus are faithful stewards of all God has entrusted to them.

Guide Bible Study

2. Ask for someone to read Deuteronomy 8:10–18 and then write the following bullet points on a whiteboard, chalk board, or art paper entitled *Preparing for Farewell*:
 - A Call to Remember God (8:10–11)
 - A Warning of How Easy it is to Forget God (8:12–14)
 - The Key to Remembering God (8:15–18)

Using content from the *Study Guide*, deliver a brief lecture on the meaning of these verses. Give special attention to the last paragraph of the *Study Guide* on this passage.

3. Ask a volunteer to read Matthew 25:14–30. Guide a discussion on this passage that includes the definition of a *talent*. Use the *Study Guide* to provide further information for the discussion. Some questions that might aid the discussion are:
 - What is the biblical definition of a talent?
 - What did the three servants do with the talents the master gave them?
 - Why was the master upset with the servant who did nothing with his one talent?
 - What does this passage teach us about stewardship?

Encourage Application

4. Ask a class member to record (on a white/chalk board) suggestions from the class concerning how we can become better stewards of what God has given us. Ask members to give specific examples. Some possible answers might include:
 - Move toward a tithe in my giving to the church.
 - Recycle our paper, plastic, and glass waste so that it might benefit others.
 - Discover my spiritual gifts and use them to serve the church.
 - Remind myself every day that everything I have and everything I am comes from God. I am not the owner, but a steward.
 - Ask God to help me recognize my wealth and to show me how I might share some of it with others.

5. Then say, *Silently reflect on this question—Which of these are you willing to do? Ask God to help you to become a better steward of what he has given you.* Close in a moment of silent prayer followed by this verbal prayer, *Lord remind us each day of your provision and guide us to become faithful stewards of our money, our time, and our talents.*

NOTES

1. Spiros Zodhiates and Warren Baker, *Hebrew-Greek Key Word Study Bible—NIV*, (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers), 1627.

FOCAL TEXTS

Psalm 103; Luke 17:11–19

BACKGROUND

Psalm 103; Luke 17:11–19

MAIN IDEA

Disciples regularly express their thankfulness to God and others.

QUESTION TO EXPLORE

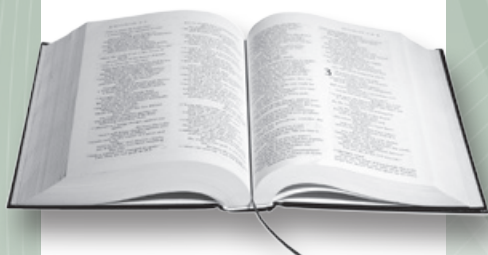
Do I regularly express thankfulness to God and others?

TEACHING AIM

To lead adults to decide how they will express thankfulness to God and to another person this week

LESSON TWELVE

Thankfulness



BIBLE COMMENTS

Understanding the Context

As we continue to study habits embraced and exhibited by faithful followers of Jesus, we turn to the topic of thankfulness. In this lesson we examine two biblical texts—Psalm 103 and Luke 17:11–19. Both passages iterate the import of being grateful. Taken together, they remind us “It is good to give thanks to the Lord” (Psalm 92:1) and to express thanks to others (Colossians 3:15).

Akin to the Torah or Pentateuch, five books comprise the Psalms.¹ Psalm 103 appears near the end of Book 4. As with Psalms 104–106, it is a hymn of praise. The psalmist blesses God for “all his benefits” (Ps. 103:2) and extols the Lord for his mercy, grace, and steadfast love (Ps. 103:8). Speaking of benefit, teachers of this lesson will discover that Bible readers and churchgoers will be familiar with and fond of the psalm (see especially vv. 1–5, 8–14, 17–18).

It is also probable that a number of class members will be knowledgeable of the story of the ten lepers recorded in Luke 17:11–19. This memorable narrative, found only in Luke, appears at the beginning of the third phase of Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem.² More than simply seeking to inculcate an “attitude of gratitude,” this programmatic passage in Luke underscores the radical inclusivity and mercy of Jesus’ ministry.

Interpreting the Scriptures

Blessing the Beneficent Lord (Psalm 103:1–5)

103:1–2. This song of thanksgiving begins with the psalmist’s self-exhortation to “Bless the Lord” and his “holy name” with his whole being, not forgetting any of his blessings (103:1–2). Similarly, Psalm 34:1–2a declares, “I will bless the Lord at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth. My soul makes its boast in the Lord.” It is fitting for those whom God has blessed to bless God (see Psalm 92:1);

it is both presumptuous and prideful to forget the Lord's goodness and mercy (note Psalm 23:6).

103:3–5. The poet proceeds to specify five divine blessings. The psalmist is mindful that it is the Lord who: 1. “*forgives* all your iniquity”; 2. “*heals* all your diseases”; 3. “*redeems* your life from the Pit (a synonym for *Sheol* and the grave)”; 4. “*crowns* you with steadfast love and mercy”; and 5. “*satisfies* you with good as long as you live,” which, in turn, allows “your youth [to be] renewed like the eagle’s” (compare Isaiah 40:31: “. . . those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles . . .”)

The singer extols God for the Lord's forgiveness, healing, redemption, love, mercy, and goodness. We, too, do well to count our blessings, naming them one by one. The decidedly personal and intimate relationship of the psalmist with the Lord is precious and no less available to us.

Praising a Gracious God (Psalm 103:6–18)

103:6–15. At this point in the psalm, the writer's focus grows increasingly communal. The psalmist recalls and celebrates the grace and guidance the Lord has given his people over the breadth of their history. When oppressed (for example, under the yoke of Egyptian slavery or exiled in Babylonian captivity), the Lord worked “vindication and justice” (103:6). To both Moses and Israel, God revealed himself through his ways and acts (103:7).

The psalmist is mindful of the Lord's unimpeachable, inimitable character and calls fellow worshippers to be no less aware. The poet knows the Lord to be “merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love” (103:8). What is more, the singer is sure that Yahweh will not persist in accusing, being angry with, or punishing his people (103:9–10). “For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear [that is, worship and obey] him. . .” (103:11).

So gracious and good is God, the psalmist exclaims, that the Lord “removes our transgressions from us” “as far as the east is from the west” (103:12). The Lord is like a compassionate father toward those who fear him, knowing that people are “frail children of dust and feeble as frail”³ (103:13–14).

103:15–18. Although mortals are but dust and their lives comparable to grass, to field-flowers that vanish in the wind (recall Matthew 6:28), “the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him” (103:15–17a; compare Lamentations 3:22–23). Furthermore, Yahweh’s righteousness remains with and rests upon those who “keep his covenant” and “remember to do his commandments” (103:17b–18).

Lauding an Enthroned Lord (Psalm 103:19–22)

The psalmist concludes this song of thanksgiving by declaring Yahweh’s reign over all (103:19). Given God’s sovereign, gracious rule, “all creatures of our God and King”⁴ should praise him. The heavenly assembly (“angels,” “mighty ones,” “hosts,” “ministers”) should join all God’s handiwork in extolling him (102:20–22a). Psalm 103, which concludes even as it began (“Bless the Lord, O my soul!” [103:22b]), declares that fragile people do well to lend their thankful voices to a cosmic chorus in praise of a compassionate, covenant-keeping God.

On the Way (Luke 17:11)

17:11. As Jesus continues his journey to Jerusalem, a trek that begins in Luke 9:51 and ends in 19:28, he passes through the region between Samaria and Galilee. Instead of avoiding Samaria and thereby Samaritans altogether, as not a few self-respecting Jews who in Jesus’ day were wont to do, Jesus was not opposed to entering Samaria or to coming into contact with Samaritans (compare Luke 9:52–53; John 4:1–42). Although relations between Jews and Samaritans had been marred by distrust and even disdain for centuries (seemingly from the time of the destruction of the Northern Kingdom by the Assyrians in 722 B.C.), Jesus, albeit a Jew, did not seek to categorically exclude Samaritans from his ministry. Refusing to be blinded by bigotry or controlled by prejudice, Jesus recognized that Samaritans (like Jews) possessed the potential for both good and bad actions and attitudes. Jesus’ memorable parable of the Good Samaritan, recorded only by Luke, reveals as much (Luke 10:25–37).

Ten Lepers Plead for Pity (Luke 17:12–14)

17:12. To add insult to injury, not only was Jesus willing to fraternize with Samaritans, he was willing to enter into conversation (and contact; note Luke 5:12–16) with lepers. We tend to equate leprosy with Hansen’s disease⁵, though in biblical times leprosy connoted all sorts and sundry of skin diseases (including the now known to be harmless “white leprosy”).⁶ Were we to think of leprosy in biblical antiquity along the lines of “scale disease” we would be closer to the reality of that age. Luke indicated that in keeping with Jewish law, the lepers (ten in number) kept their distance as they approached Jesus (note Leviticus 13:46; Numbers 5:2–3).

17:13–14. From afar these ten lepers, whom others kept at more than arm’s length, lifted up their voices and cried, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” The cacophonous, leprous chorus caused Jesus to notice them. Seeing them, he said, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” Although Jesus was more than able to heal them instantly (compare Luke 5:13), he instructed them to “Go and show [themselves] to the priests [for examination]” as prescribed by the law (note Leviticus 13:2–8; 14:2–3; compare Luke 5:14). En route, Luke reports, “they were made clean.” The English term *catharsis* comes from the Greek term that Luke employs here.

One Leper Offers Thanks (Luke 17:15–19)

17:15–16. Realizing that he had been healed by Jesus, one leper stopped dead in his tracks, did an about-face, and returned to the Source of his cleansing. As he made his way back to the Way, he glorified God with a loud voice. His cry for pity was transformed into a shout of praise. As this once leprous man came close to Jesus, he fell on his face at Jesus’ feet and repeatedly offered him thanks. What is more, Luke notes, the person who returned to offer Jesus his thankful praise was of all things a Samaritan. Even as the Israelite prophet Elijah cleansed Naaman, the Syrian commander, of leprosy in Samaria (see 2 Kings 5:1–27), the Galilean prophet Jesus cleansed an anonymous Samaritan of leprosy in a village on the border between Galilee and Samaria.

17:17–19. Far from regarding the Samaritan’s obeisance for his beneficence off-putting, annoying, or inappropriate, Jesus responds to his act

of humble gratitude with three questions and an admonition. To begin, Jesus observes, “There were ten who were cleansed by me, were there not?”⁷ (author’s translation) If ten were healed, Jesus continues, then “Where,” pray tell, “are the other nine?” (17:17). How can it be, Jesus wonders, that the only person to return to offer thankful praise to God is a foreigner (literally “one of another race”)? Stated otherwise, Jesus is surprised, perplexed, and disturbed that nine other persons, presumably Jews, failed to realize what even a Samaritan (!) could see.

Whereas ten lepers were cleansed, only one was made *well* (literally “saved”). Jesus tells this person whom we might think of as the “Faithful Samaritan” to rise up and be on his way for his “faith has made him whole,” not only in body but also in soul. As Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem, he helped a nameless Samaritan find his way.

Focusing on the Meaning

In the letter we know as 1 Corinthians, Paul asks the church in Corinth a couple of probing questions that are no less applicable to us, especially in light of today’s lesson. The apostle asks, “What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?” (1 Cor. 4:7). Although we sometimes aspire to be grateful like the writer of Psalm 103 and like the Faithful Samaritan, we are frequently presumptuous like the nine lepers and prideful like certain Corinthians.

Like the other habits of highly effective disciples that we are considering in this series, if we are going to be grateful, we must be intentional. While being thankful might come rather natural for some people, all Christ-followers must seek to cultivate a deep, abiding gratitude toward God and a sincere, profound appreciation for others.

How might we grow in gratitude to God and others? It begins with recognizing how gracious God has been toward us in Christ Jesus. Paul puts it this way in 2 Corinthians 8:9: “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.” Furthermore, what God has done for us and has been to us, he has done and can be for others. Jesus Christ “is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:2). God’s unfathomable love should spur us on to “love and good

deeds” (Hebrews 10:24), in addition to lips and lives that say “thank you” to God and to others, who being made in the likeness of God, bear his divine image.

TEACHING PLANS

Teaching Plan—Varied Learning Activities

Connect with Life

1. Ask a previously enlisted member to share one photo of himself or herself with this requirement: The photo should represent a happy time, such as a family memory or a first car or a favorite outfit worn long ago. The photograph may even elicit nostalgia or laughter.

Say, A treasured photograph may help us to remember with gratitude some of the good things of the past. The Bible is filled with examples of exhortations to remember God’s goodness and praise him. Thankfulness is due the Father and is also good for us.

Guide Bible Study

2. Hand members a pre-printed copy of Psalm 103. The verse numbers should be aligned against the left margin. Leave a space between verse 14 and verse 15. (A copy of this text is available in “Teaching Resource Items” for this study at www.baptistwaypress.org)

Read aloud verses 1–2. Note that these verses suggest the psalmist David is telling himself to remember. He repeatedly commands his very soul (“O my soul”) to praise the Lord and to “forget not.” Then he begins, in verse 3, to list the benefits that God has given him.

3. Supply members with pens or pencils. Invite members to respond silently to the printed version of verses 3–14 by underlining any phrases they have found to be especially true in their lives.

After allowing time for reflection, invite members, one by one, to randomly read aloud one phrase of their choice as an act of worship. When giving instructions, suggest that this is more than an activity; it is a time to praise God publically, using this sacred text. Yes, the verses will be read out of order, but this may make each verse stand out even more, serving as a testimony of thanksgiving.

4. Using the commentary in the *Teaching Guide* and the *Study Guide*, call attention to the following ideas:
 - David contrasted the images of a rescue from a pit with a crown of love and compassion (v. 4). In other words, God is present in both the low times and the glorious ones.
 - God can satisfy us, just as a banquet would fill us (v. 5).
 - God is a righteous judge, a watchful shepherd, and a loving father (v. 6–14). Write these three descriptive phrases on the board, and ask, *Which of these images of God most applies to your life?*
5. Ask someone to read aloud verses 15–18. Emphasize the contrast between the transience of humans and God’s everlasting love.
6. Invite members to read aloud verses 19–22 together, as a chorus. Note the repetition in these verses of what was written earlier in Psalm 103.
7. Ask someone to read aloud Luke 17:11–14. Using the commentary in the *Teaching Guide* and *Study Guide*, call attention to the following ideas:
 - How the lepers were isolated from society according to the law.
 - How Jesus responded to their cries for help. What were his instructions to them?
 - Ask, *At what point were they healed?* (“As they went”: as they followed Jesus’ commands.)
8. Invite the class to focus on the one leper who gave thanks. Say, *What were his actions? In response to his gratitude, how was he rewarded by Jesus? Ask, Is it possible that Almighty God himself is grateful for the gratitude of mere humans?*

Encourage Application

9. Divide the class into three groups. Assign the following questions:

Group 1: What do we learn from Jesus' response to the thankful leper? (Luke 17:15–19). How does our thankfulness affect our relationship with God?

Group 2: How does our thankfulness impact our relationships with others?

Group 3: How does our thankfulness touch our own souls?

Ask a spokesperson from each group to report their answers to the entire class.

10. Ask for volunteers to respond to today's lesson by stating some of the things they will strive to do in the coming week to remember God's benefits and to thank him for them. Ask them to explain how they plan to live out their thankfulness.

Teaching Plan—Lecture and Questions

Connect with Life

1. Read this illustration: Brent was seriously ill. His friends and family prayed for him often. He prayed for himself often. After a year of battling the illness, he received the good news that he had been cured.

Ask, Based on your knowledge of human behavior, do you think Brent and his friends and family spent more time petitioning God, or thanking God? When in prayer, do we usually spend more time in petition, or in praise and thanksgiving? What would happen to us and to others if we practiced thankfulness as habitually as we ask for the favor of God and others?

Guide Bible Study

2. Using commentary from the *Study Guide*, note the place of Psalm 103 in the section of hymns that comprise Psalms 90–106.
3. Ask someone to read Psalm 103:1–2. Suggest that David’s praise to God is personal—he is commanding his own soul to praise God. Write on the board, “Remember, _____, to praise God for _____.” Suggest that members fill in their own names and at least one reason for praise—either aloud or silently.
4. Read aloud verses 3–5. Ask members to list the benefits that David named. Record key phrases from members’ responses on the board. Provide commentary on key phrases, such as the meaning of *redeem* and *satisfies*, as well as explaining the symbol of the eagle.
5. Ask someone to read aloud verses 6–14. Comment on God’s being a righteous judge, a watchful shepherd, and a loving father. Lead members to consider which of these three descriptions of God makes them most thankful at this moment in their lives. Invite them to thank God silently.
6. Read verses 15–22. Ask for a show of hands in response to these questions:
 - Can you name all of your grandparents? (Do not name them aloud.)
 - Can you name all of your great-grandparents?
 - Can you name all of your great great-grandparents?Say, *The very fact that many of our descendants will not remember our names reminds us that we are transient.* Ask someone to read verses 15–19. Ask members to comment on what the psalmist says endures forever. Ask, *Is this a cause for thankfulness? If so, why?*
7. Ask the following, *In Psalm 103, how many petitions did David make to God? (None) Although God invites us to bring him our petitions, should some prayers consist entirely of praise and thankfulness? Why or why not?*
8. Say, *In Luke 17:11–19, we see one of Jesus’ miracles. However, it is also an example of the need to thank other people who bless us on our journey.* Ask someone to read the verses aloud.

Say, *Ten law-abiding and humble lepers asked for Jesus' mercy, and he went beyond their request; he healed them. Nine of them simply failed to thank Jesus afterwards. Why do we sometimes fail to give thanks to God and others who cross our path and bless us?*

9. Explain how Jesus blessed the Samaritan leper who remembered to thank him, including commentary on the words “your faith has made you *well*” that describe the healing of not only the body, but of the inner being of the soul.

Encourage Application

10. Refer to the sidebar “Growing in Thankfulness” in the *Study Guide*. Invite members to add their own suggestions for creating the habit of thankfulness. Encourage them to choose one of the suggestions to practice in the coming week.
11. Before closing in prayer, ask someone to read aloud 1 Thessalonians 5:18.

NOTES

1. Psalms 1—41 (Book 1); Psalms 42—72 (Book 2); Psalms 73—89 (Book 3); Psalms 90—106 (Book 4); and Psalms 107—150 (Book 5). Careful study reveals that much care was taken in assembling the Psalter, the hymnal of the Bible.
2. Luke’s account of Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem, found in 9:51—19:27, is typically divided into three phases: 9:51—13:21; 13:22—17:10; and 17:11—19:27.
3. Robert Grant, “O Worship the King” in *Christian Psalmody* by Edward H. Bickersteth, 1833. See <http://cyberhymnal.org/htm/o/w/owtking.htm>, accessed October 2013.
4. Francis of Assisi, *circa* 1225, “All Creatures of Our God and King.” Translated to English by William H. Draper for a children’s Whitsuntide festival in Leeds, England; first appeared as in the *Public School Hymn Book*, 1919. See <http://www.cyberhymnal.org/htm/a/c/acoogak.htm>, accessed October 2013.
5. See http://www.cdc.gov/nczved/divisions/dfbmd/diseases/hansens_disease/technical.html, accessed October 2013.
6. See more fully Leviticus 13—14.
7. The Greek particle *ouchi* signals that Jesus expected his question to be answered positively.

LESSON THIRTEEN
Witnessing

FOCAL TEXTS

Romans 10:8–15;
1 Corinthians 15:1–8

BACKGROUND

Romans 10:8–15;
1 Corinthians 15:1–8

MAIN IDEA

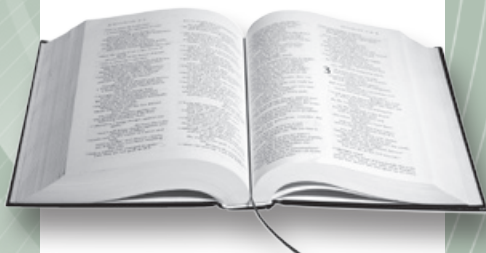
Disciples declare the
gospel of Jesus Christ.

QUESTION TO EXPLORE

Am I declaring the
gospel of Jesus Christ to
those who need him?

TEACHING AIM

To lead adults to commit
to declaring the gospel of
Jesus Christ to someone
who needs him this week



BIBLE COMMENTS

Understanding the Context

As we continue our fourteen-week study of core commitments and practices of Christ-followers, we come to a subject that a number of believers would rather avoid, if not in principle at least in practice—witnessing. Truth be told, the idea of (verbally) sharing their faith with unbelievers causes many erstwhile disciples to feel uncertainty, insecurity, and anxiety. At the same time, however, deep down inside, those who love and laud Jesus as Lord and Savior want to offer a winsome witness with their words and their ways, their lives and their lips.

How can we work our way through this spiritual nettle? One important piece to this sometimes-confounding puzzle is to continue to allow the Bible to shape our cognitions and affections. Today's lesson features two Pauline passages regarding the gospel. The first, Romans 10:8–15, focuses upon the necessity of both proclaiming and believing in the gospel. The second, 1 Corinthians 15:1–8, emphasizes the crux of the gospel message, namely, the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ.

Romans 10:8–15, a key component of the so-called “Roman Road to Salvation” (see Rom. 3:10–12, 23; 6:23; 5:8; 10:9–10, 13; 5:1; 8:1, 38–39), is a part of Paul's protracted, anguished reflection in Romans 9–11 upon the reluctance of so many of his fellow Jews to confess and embrace Jesus as Lord. Although Gentiles (that is, non-Jews) were more receptive to the gospel the Apostle Paul proclaimed, 1 Corinthians 15 indicates that the message he preached was not necessarily the word his primarily Gentile converts received. Indeed, Paul's rehearsal of the gospel he declared in Corinth in 1 Corinthians 15:1–8 was occasioned by the claim of certain persons within the church that there was no such thing as resurrection from the dead (see 1 Cor. 15:12). We now turn to treat these texts in turn.

Interpreting the Scriptures

The verses that we are studying in the lesson from Romans appear in the midst of a passage where Paul is contrasting the “righteousness that comes from the law” on the one hand and the “righteousness that comes from faith” on the other (10:5–6; note also 9:30–31). Taken together, the apostle indicates that Israel has zealously pursued the former and the Gentiles have recently embraced the latter (see 9:30–31; 10:2–3). With Christ, Paul maintains, the law has reached its *telos* (“end” and/or “aim”). What is more, through Christ, all who believe, whether Jew or Greek, are rendered righteous before God (10:4; cf. 1:16–17).

Calling Upon Jesus as Lord in Faith (Romans 10:8–13)

10:8–10. If the righteousness that comes from the law emphasized doing (note 10:5 citing Leviticus 18:5), that is patently not the case Paul proclaims, with the righteousness comes from faith. Paraphrasing and applying Deuteronomy 30:12–14, the apostle declares that even if one were able there would be no need to ascend to heaven nor to descend to the abyss in order to find Christ. Christ does not need to be brought down from heaven or raised from the dead, for the “word of faith” (that is, the message of righteousness from God based upon faith in Christ and his faithfulness), as stated in Scripture, “is near you, on your lips and in your heart.”

The gospel that Paul and his coworkers proclaimed was (in no small part) that “if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (10:9). It was the desire of Paul’s heart that all people, both Jew and Greek, be reconciled to God through Christ and thus be saved from the coming wrath of God (10:1).

Having moved from confessing lips to a believing heart in 10:9 (cf. 10:8), Paul speaks of a believing heart prior to a confessing mouth in 10:10. For Paul, believing and confessing were either side of the same coin, two aspects of one act. Entrusting oneself to Christ and declaring him to be Lord results, Paul instructs, in being justified (that is, vindicated or acquitted) from sin’s guilt and saved from God’s judgment.

10:11–13. Old Testament texts permeate Romans 9–11. The apostle cites two biblical passages in these three verses. Following on from his emphasis upon belief in 10:9–10, in v. 11 Paul returns to Isaiah 28:16 (cf. Rom 9:33) to declare, “No one who believes in him [for Paul, God in Christ] will be put to shame.” Stated otherwise, Paul asserts that God will vindicate those who place their trust in Christ and his lordship.

This is true, v. 12 continues, for both Jew and Gentile. With respect to salvation through the Person of Christ, there is no distinction between the two (cf. Romans 3:22; cf. also Galatians 3:28; 1 Corinthians 12:13; Colossians 3:11). Both are sinful; both can be saved. The ground is level at the foot of the cross. There is one Lord for all people, and the Lord “is generous to all who call on him.” The only limit to Christ’s unlimited atonement is the limit imposed by those who refuse to embrace his marvelous, matchless grace.

In v. 13 Paul supports his claim that “the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him” by citing Joel 2:32: “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” In contrast to the claims of some, all people can be saved. But how can what is true on a theological level come to pass on a practical plane? A Pauline response follows.

Beautiful Feet Bringing Glad Tidings (Romans 10:14–15)

10:14–15. In the last two verses from Romans 10 being considered in this lesson, Paul asks four questions before citing yet another Scripture. The apostle begins this chain of questions by asking how people will call upon one in whom they have not believed. Even as Paul picks up “call” from 10:13 in 10:14, he continues by using “believe” at the outset of his second question. (The same pattern emerges with the final two questions as well.)

How will people believe in one of whom they have not heard, Paul wonders? What is more, how will they hear without someone to proclaim Christ? And how will someone go about proclaiming Christ unless sent? Thankfully, God has grasped people to declare the gospel, and Paul regards Isaiah 52:7 to be especially apropos here: “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!” Note the progression in reverse—sending, proclaiming, hearing, believing, and calling. There are a number of vital links in the gospel chain.

If Romans 10:8–15 centers upon who may believe and thereby be saved, 1 Corinthians 15:1–8 identifies the center or core of the gospel the apostle proclaimed and the one the Corinthians (and by way of extension other believers, too) received. That is, the passage we are now studying focuses upon what one who embraces the gospel is to believe.

A Salutory Reminder (1 Corinthians 15:1–2)

15:1–2. At the outset of 1 Corinthians 15, Paul takes up yet another topic—the gospel in general and the resurrection of Christ and Christians in particular. The apostle is eager to rehearse the gospel that he preached to the Corinthians and that they received. It is this gospel in which they were meant to stand and through which they would be saved.

Of First Importance (1 Corinthians 15:3–8)

15:3–5. Even as the Corinthians received the gospel from the apostle, Paul received from the Lord and other believers what he had handed to them “as of first importance.” Relative to the transmission and proclamation of the gospel, pride of place is given to Christ’s death (in concert with the Scriptures), his burial, and his resurrection on the third day (according to the Scriptures). Would that we knew the precise Old Testament texts that Paul had in view here.

15:6–8. Following on from his resurrection, Paul notes that the risen Jesus appeared to Cephas (that is, Peter) and then to the (other members of the) Twelve (cf., e.g., Luke 24:34, 36). Thereafter, Paul notes, “he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters [that is, other believers] at one time,” presumably in Jerusalem, but precisely when and where Paul does not say. The apostle does go on to note in v. 6, however, that at the time he was writing (roughly mid–50s A.D.) most of those five hundred to whom Christ had appeared were still living, although some had died.

Regarding other people to whom Christ appeared, Paul mentions James (Jesus’ brother) and “all the apostles” (the composition of this group remains unclear). It was altogether clear to Paul, however, that the Lord in due time (albeit last of all) appeared to him as one “untimely born” (seemingly an allusion to Paul’s conversion/call).

Paul never got over the grace that God showered upon him. We would be better off if we would not either. The apostle is deeply concerned that certain Corinthians are losing their way spiritually by denying that resurrection can and will happen. This deviation spawns Paul's rehearsal of the gospel at the outset of the chapter and prompts him to devote the balance of this rather lengthy chapter to this essential aspect of the gospel.

Focusing on the Meaning

A friend of mine is wont to say, "It is the start that stops most people." I have found this to be true with studying, writing, paying bills, changing the air conditioner filters in our home, and exercising. I have also found this to be the case, I fear, with witnessing.

Recently, I learned that the gentleman who had treated our home for pests for some seven years had unexpectedly died. Over that course of time, I had a number of extended conversations with him about life and faith. It was clear to me that he was a person of integrity; it was not clear to me that he was a Christian. I should have taken the time and mustered the courage to ask. Now, regrettably, it is too late for me to know if he was or was not a follower of Jesus. As another friend of mine is inclined to say, "Sometimes silence is golden, and sometimes it is just plain yellow."

St. Francis of Assisi is frequently credited (though not verifiably) with saying, "Preach the gospel always, when necessary use words." This study reminds us that it is necessary, if not urgent, to use words, for ". . . faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ" (Rom. 10:17). May we become more faithful, intentional, winsome witnesses for God's glory and others' good, for the gospel (at its core Christ crucified, buried, and raised) is "the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (Rom. 1:16). Amen.

TEACHING PLANS

Teaching Plan—Varied Learning Activities

Connect with Life

1. Say, *Years ago there was a reality show on television called Fear Factor. It featured contestants doing things like lying in a box of snakes or swimming through a small tunnel underwater. The successful contestants won money. When faced with the opportunity to give a verbal witness for Christ and declare the gospel, Christians often experience a “fear factor.” We may believe in Jesus, but panic when it comes to making a clear proclamation of the gospel to others.*

Ask, *With such a wonderful opportunity, what are we afraid of?* List responses on the board. If someone says that fear is not a factor, list that response as well.

Say, *Our aim today is to review the basic truths of the gospel and to consider declaring it with confidence to someone this week.*

Guide Bible Study

2. Create three groups and assign the following case study/Scripture searches: (A copy of these group assignments is available in “Teaching Resource Items” for this study at www.baptistwaypress.org)

Group One: You have arranged to have a quiet lunch with a friend who does not know Christ. You want to share the basics of what is necessary to become a Christian. The friend believes that being a good person is enough to be saved. In your group, ask someone to read aloud Romans 10:8–11. What are the main truths that your friend needs to know?

Group Two: You have a friend to whom you need to witness, but his culture and lifestyle are entirely different from your own. In your group, ask someone to read aloud Romans 10:11–15. Whom does the Lord invite to be saved? What is the responsibility of Christians in reaching others?

Group Three: You have a friend to whom you need to witness; however, you say, “If only I had an outline to follow.” Paul has provided that! Ask someone in your group to read aloud 1 Corinthians 15:3–8. With your group, make an outline of Paul’s four basic facts of the gospel.

Call for the groups to report, allowing time for the reading of the Scriptures, group assignments, and responses. When needed, supply commentary from the *Teaching Guide* after each response.

Encourage Application

3. Distribute copies of the responsive reading below based on Romans 10:14–15. Lead the class to read it aloud. (A copy of this responsive reading is available in “Teaching Resource Items” for this study at www.baptistwaypress.org)

Leader: “How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in?”

Members: And who will show them the one to believe in?

Leader: “And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard?”

Members: And who will speak to them of that one?

Leader: “And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?”

Members: And how will we help them to hear clearly?

Leader: “And how can they preach unless they are sent?”

Members: And who will preach unless we go?

Leader: “As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news.’”

All: We can—and we should—take the good news to others. It is indeed a beautiful message.

Lead the class to read this material responsively.

4. Distribute copies of the checklist below to the class. Ask members to place a checkmark beside each statement that is true for them. Explain that they will not be required to share their responses with anyone else. (A copy of this checklist is available in “Teaching Resource Items” for this study at www.baptistwaypress.org)

_____ I regularly share the gospel verbally.

_____ I don’t know how to share the gospel.

_____ I know the basics of the gospel message, but I am not sure I believe it all myself. For example, did Jesus really rise from the dead?

_____ I have been reminded today that as a disciple, I should declare the gospel, and I am committing myself to doing so this week.

_____ I have never accepted Jesus as my Lord and Savior.

5. Before closing in prayer, tell members of your availability to discuss any of the responses privately—today or at any time they have questions about receiving the gospel or sharing the gospel. Close in prayer.

Teaching Plan—Lecture and Questions

Connect with Life

1. Read this case study: Marilyn was going to an important job interview. She found her way to the large corporate headquarters, but she became lost when searching for a particular office. She asked herself, “What do I do now?” In order for her to find her way, what does she need?

Listen for responses and then say, *When people are lost without Jesus, they need witnesses to point them in the right direction. They need people who can communicate the way to Jesus clearly.*

2. Continue the case study by saying: *What if Marilyn asked a long-time employee, Chris, the way to the office for the interview? Imagine*

that Chris knew how to get there himself, but didn't know how to explain to Marilyn how to get there. As a Christian, have you ever been in the Chris's predicament—knowing Christ yourself, but not feeling adequate to explain the path of salvation to others? Today's study gives us clear directions about the gospel that we can share with others.

Guide Bible Study

3. Using commentary from “Faith vs. the Law” in the *Study Guide*, talk with the class about the law given to Moses as a way to exercise righteousness.
4. Ask someone to read Romans 10:8–11 aloud. Ask, *What did Paul say about faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ? How does one obtain it? Can one's faith be kept personal, or are we required to confess it orally? Is faith in Christ something that one can rely upon? Why or why not?*
5. Ask members to read Deuteronomy 30:11–20. Explain that the “word” spoken in Deuteronomy 30 was fulfilled in Jesus, the word of faith.
6. Ask someone to read Romans 10:12–13 aloud. Ask, *To whom is the gospel available? In modern times, instead of saying “Jew and Gentile,” what phrases might we use to remind us that the gospel is available to all?* Possible answers include the rich and the poor, Americans and non-Americans, young and old, educated and illiterate, etc.
7. Ask members to consider silently the following question, *When was the last time you witnessed to someone about the gospel of Jesus Christ? When was the last time you sent someone to be a witness? Does God expect us to do both—go and send?* Ask someone to read aloud Romans 10:14–15.

Based on these verses, ask members to name what they consider the essential information to be communicated when they share the gospel with others. Write their responses on the board.

8. Invite the class to join you as you read aloud 1 Corinthians 15:1–8. Ask, *What essential information is contained in these verses about the gospel?* Be sure to include Christ’s death, burial, resurrection, and subsequent appearances. Also note the verification that witnesses gave of these events.

Encourage Application

9. Note that today’s Bible study can make us feel uncomfortable in a culture that discourages our verbal communication of the gospel. While it is acceptable to talk about other personal issues, some would say we should not discuss “religion.” Ask, *Why is this so? How should we respond?*
10. Repeat a section from the earlier case study: *The fact remains that when people are lost without Jesus, they need witnesses to point them in the right direction. They need people who can communicate the way to Jesus clearly. Will you be one of those people who point them to The Way this week?* Close in prayer asking God for his guidance and courage in recognizing opportunities to share a verbal witness with others in the coming week.

FOCAL TEXTS

Isaiah 6:1–8; Revelation 4:1–11

BACKGROUND

Isaiah 6:1–8; Revelation 4:1–11

MAIN IDEA

Disciples respond to God's revelation with a lifestyle of worship.

QUESTION TO EXPLORE

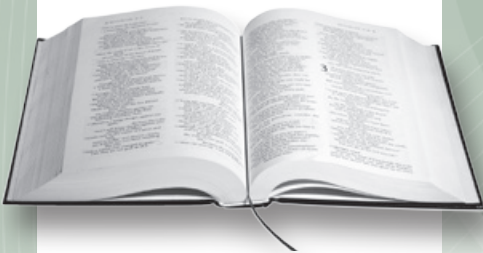
How can I respond to God's revelation with a lifestyle of worship?

TEACHING AIM

To lead adults to describe a lifestyle of worship and to choose to respond to God's revelation in this manner

LESSON FOURTEEN

Worship



BIBLE COMMENTS

Understanding the Context

All too frequently, it would seem, our frame of reference with respect to worship is our preferences. Do we or do we not like contemporary worship music? Do we or do we not like “PowerPoint® preaching”? Do we or do we not like suits and dresses? Do we or do we not like stained glass? While it would be both foolhardy and unnecessary to set aside entirely our druthers regarding various approaches to and accoutrements for worship, these illustrative questions signal a common mistaken notion among would-be worshippers, namely, that worship is primarily about our tastes and sensibilities.

The two texts being studied today can help rid us of this misunderstanding. Both Isaiah 6 and Revelation 4 make it clear that God is to be the focus of our worship. What is more, these well-known passages remind us that worshippers’ greatest need is to encounter God in his splendor and power and to allow transformative worship experiences to alter the course and patterns of our lives. After getting a glimpse of God and hearing from God, the prophet Isaiah and the prophet John were in no hurry to get home in time to catch the Sunday afternoon football game!

The passage we are considering from Isaiah recounts the prophet’s vision of and commission from God. It follows on after five chapters of judgment oracles. Isaiah’s prophetic task will be neither pleasant nor popular—he is to preach a message of repentance, one that will be met with resistance. As for Revelation 4, it is a throne-room scene. John the prophet, who has already reported his vision of Christ on Patmos in chapter 1 and delivered messages from Christ to seven congregations in ancient Asia Minor in chapters 2–3, recounts his initial vision in heaven. Both texts should fire our faith and inform our worship.

Interpreting the Scriptures

Isaiah's Vision (Isaiah 6:1–5)

6:1. Isaiah indicates that his divine vision and prophetic commission occurred in the year of King Uzziah's death. According to 2 Kings 15:2 and 2 Chronicles 26:3, Uzziah, the son of Amaziah who was also known as Azariah, began his reign as king of Judah at the tender age of sixteen and reigned for fifty-two years. It was Uzziah, you might recall, who although he "did what was right in the sight of the Lord" (2 Kings 15:3), failed to remove rival worship sites in the land (so-called "high places") and was punished by the Lord, becoming leprous (2 Kings 15:5). Uzziah, who merits mention in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus (Matt. 1:9), is thought to have died around 740 B.C.

What is it that Isaiah saw when he saw the Lord? Akin to the prophets Micaiah (1 Kings 22:19) and Ezekiel (Ezekiel 1:26), Isaiah sees the Lord enthroned "high and lofty." The throne in the inner sanctuary of Solomon's Temple was fifteen feet high and was formed by the outspread wings of two golden cherubim (see 1 Kings 6:22–28). No ordinary ancient dignitary was he, however. So great was the God whom Isaiah encountered that the "hem of his robe" (that is, the border on the bottom of the robe or the part of the robe that hung down below the knees) filled the temple. Indeed, Isaiah would come to recognize that no temple is sufficiently large to contain a Lord whose throne is heaven and whose footstool is earth (note Isaiah 66:1).

6:2–4. In addition to a Lord enthroned on high, Isaiah saw six-winged seraphs "in attendance above him." (This is the only biblical passage that mentions seraphs by name. Some scholars suggest that the seraphs Isaiah saw were the winged-cobras that frequently featured in Egyptian art and sometimes appeared on Judean seals.) The unnumbered seraphs put their six wings to good use. Two they used to shield their faces from God's glorious radiance; two they used to cover their unclean feet in God's holy presence; and two they used to fly about as they called out one to another: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory."

No temple can contain a thrice-holy God. Even as the seraphs' praise shakes the building, the temple fills with smoke. Holy smoke is right!

6:5. The temple was not the only thing shaken in Isaiah's vision. Isaiah himself was stunned and undone. He could but cry "Woe is me!" In the presence of God's holiness, the prophet and people's sinfulness was all the more acute. Because he had seen "the King, the Lord of hosts," he could better see sin, both his and theirs. He realized afresh that the whole lot of them had unclean lips. Although they had given God lip service, "their hearts were far from [him] and their worship of [God was a mere] human commandment learned by rote" (Isaiah 29:14). Isaiah's life-threatening, revelatory encounter with holy God ("no one shall see [God] and live" [Exodus 33:20]) would prove to be a life-altering event.

Isaiah's Commission (Isaiah 6:6–8)

6.6–7. Isaiah's commission is subsequent to his vision of God and confession of sin. In recounting the vision that both undid and remade him, Isaiah recalls that one of the six-winged seraphs approached him with a live coal that the seraph had taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The angelic being touched Isaiah's lips with the white-hot coal and declared, "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out."

6:8. The Judean prophet proceeds to report that after his lips (and life) had been cleansed from separating-sin and soul-destroying guilt, he heard the Lord's voice. Isaiah heard God asking, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" (Scholars sometimes describe the "us" in this verse as a "plural of majesty.") As with Samuel of old (cf. 1 Samuel 3), Isaiah responded, "Here am I." Furthermore, Isaiah exclaimed, "Send me!" It is as unfortunate as it is ironic that even though Isaiah repented of sin and turned toward worshipping and serving God, Israel would not (Isa. 6:9–13). There are none so blind as they who will not see.

The Throne of God (Revelation 4:1–6a)

4:1–2. After recounting his vision of Christ (Rev. 1:9–20) and recording Christ's messages to the seven churches (Rev. 2–3), John presents his vision of an open door in heaven and the exalted Christ's invitation for him to ascend so that he might receive additional revelatory instruction. Immediately, John indicates, he was swept up into heaven where he saw a

throne upon which someone was seated. Although some have suggested that these verses are best read as the “rapture of the church,” nothing in the text would signal as much. Rather, at the outset of Revelation 4, John the prophet is describing a revelatory encounter with God, a heavenly ascent (cf. 2 Corinthians 12:1–4).

4:3–6a. The “one seated on the throne” is none other than God. John likens his appearance to precious stones (jasper [in antiquity it was often translucent and green in hue (cf. Rev. 21:11, 18–19)] and carnelian [reddish-brown in color (cf. Rev. 21:20)]). Additionally, John saw an emerald-colored rainbow around the throne (4:3). Furthermore, the prophet reports that around God’s throne were twenty-four other thrones upon which white-robed, golden-crowned elders sat. (It is possible that the twenty-four elders represent the twelve tribes of Israel on the one hand and the twelve apostles on the other [cf. Rev. 21:12–14].) (4:4).

Meanwhile, emanating from the throne were “flashes of lightning” and “rumblings and peals of thunder.” Storm imagery sometimes accompanies divine revelation in the Old Testament, most famously at Sinai (Exodus 19:16–19), and appears at pivotal points in Revelation (see, e.g., 8:5; 11:19; 16:8). The prophet also indicates that in front of the throne were lights (“seven flaming torches”) for the One who is light (cf. Rev. 21:23–24; 22:5) as well as a celestial, crystal-like sea of glass (cf. Rev. 15:2).

The Worship of God (Revelation 4:6b–11)

4:6b–7. John continues to recount the heavenly vision to which he was privy by noting the “four living creatures” surrounding the throne. These creatures are akin to the ones described by the prophet Ezekiel in his inaugural vision (Ezek. 1:5–25). The first, John indicates, looked like a lion, the second an ox, the third a human face, and the fourth an eagle. The early church associated the four Gospels with these suggestive symbols (Mark = lion; Luke = ox; Matthew = human face; and John = eagle).¹

4:8–11. Verse 8 further describes the creatures’ appearance and tells of their praise. Both mobile (six-winged creatures [cf. Isa. 6:2]) and watchful (“full of eyes” [cf. Rev. 4:6]), they continuously laud the Lord God as holy, Almighty, and eternal. When they sing praise to the thrice-holy

God (cf. Isa. 6:3), the twenty-four elders (recall 4:4) prostrate themselves before God and worship him. Casting their crowns before the throne, they declare that Creator God is worthy of worship.

Focusing on the Meaning

Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) once likened the worship service to a drama. In so doing, he contended that God is the audience, the speaker (or worship leader) the prompter, and the worshippers the actors. Kierkegaard’s analogy, albeit incomplete and imprecise, helpfully calls into question the common perception of God as prompter, ministers as actors, and worshippers as audience.

Today’s texts remind us that the aim of worship is not entertainment, neither are worshippers meant to be “movie critics,” grading the singing, praying, reading, and preaching. Rather, worship is meant to be a transformative encounter with a holy, worthy God. While we may never experience God in precisely the same way as the prophets Isaiah and John did, we should regularly assemble in worship with other believers to offer God our praise and our lives; and to also receive instruction and encouragement from the Lord and the gathered assembly.

What is more, even as we enter church to worship and receive God, we should leave church prepared to serve the Lord with gladness. Were we to more regularly gain a glimpse of the Great I AM, then we would likely be more inclined to say, “Here am I.” May we replicate the pattern of Isaiah 6 in our churches and lives, with life-altering worship issuing forth in live-giving service. Amen.

TEACHING PLANS

Teaching Plan—Varied Learning Activities

Connect with Life

1. Before the class meeting, enlist a member who is well-respected for his or her walk with God to be interviewed. Inform him/her ahead of time of the questions you will ask:
 - Since we are going to begin our Bible study with a glimpse of how Isaiah worshipped God, please fill in the blank for us: In the year _____, I saw God in a wonderful way.
 - Where were you?
 - What was it like for you to find yourself in God's presence? How did it feel?
 - Did the nearness of God help you see yourself more clearly than normal? If so, how?
 - Did you feel that he wanted you to do anything?
 - Did the experience change your life in any way?
2. Begin the class session with the interview. After the interview say, *Today we will consider how disciples of Jesus can respond to God's revelation with a lifestyle of worship.*

Guide Bible Study

3. Remind the class that not everyone has had the same experience with God as this class member, though many of us can recall especially meaningful times when we have encountered God in worship. Two listening teams will examine significant worship experiences of two other individuals: Isaiah and John. *Team 1* will examine Isaiah 6:1–8, and *Team 2* will examine Revelation 4:1–11. (A copy of these team assignments is available in “Teaching Resource Items” for this study at www.baptistwaypress.org)

Each team will meet separately and discuss these questions:

- Describe what he (Isaiah or John) saw.

- Describe what he heard.
- How did the prophet react to what he saw and heard?
- Are there any words (such as “seraphs” in Isaiah, or eye-covered creatures in Revelation) that are confusing? If so, search the commentary in the *Study Guide*, or ask the teacher to search the *Teaching Guide* for help with these difficult concepts.
- What would you have done had you experienced what this prophet experienced?

When the teams report to the entire class, ask them to:

- Have one person read the focal Scriptures while everyone else follows along.
 - Have one or more other persons report on the group’s answers to the questions.
4. As each team reports, add comments from your own study, as needed, to guide the class. Include:
- In reference to the Isaiah passage, the contrast between an earthly king (Uzziah) and an everlasting king who would guide Israel perfectly.
 - In Isaiah 6:3–5, contrast the holiness of God with the sin of the prophet and the people.
 - Describe how Isaiah received God’s grace (verses 6–7).
 - Mention God’s invitation and Isaiah’s response
 - In Revelation 4:1–11, emphasize how God alone is worthy of praise.
 - Ask the members to name what this passage has in common with the Isaiah passage.

Encourage Application

5. Ask class members to identify one important concept about worship that they learned while studying these passages.
6. Give each member a pen and a “Review and Reflection” handout with these instructions (A copy of this handout is available in “Teaching Resource Items” for this study at www.baptistwaypress.org):
 - How do you define “habit”?

- Which of the spiritual habits we have studied over the past fourteen weeks (list them) is the easiest for you to practice?
- Which habit of highly effective disciples has been or will be the most difficult for you to practice in the days ahead?

Invite members to share with a classmate their answers to the first two questions, *but not question 3, which will be kept private.*

Then say, *On your sheet of paper, write down what you may need to do if you commit to regularly practicing the most difficult habit (number 3 on your paper).* (For example, a lifestyle of worship may require an individual to spend less time with the television or computer.)

7. In closing prayer, ask God to reveal himself as he truly is—a powerful God who can empower us to be more faithful disciples by integrating godly habits into our lives.

Teaching Plan—Lecture and Questions

Connect with Life

1. Give this illustration: Brady remembers the first time he went to see a live stage performance. He sat down in the third row and heard the musicians tuning up. He saw movement behind the closed stage curtain and heard noises from behind the curtain as well. When the lights dimmed and the spotlight hit the stage, he saw the curtains part. Nothing he had seen or heard before had prepared him for the excitement of the movement of the dancers, the sound of the music, and the bright colors on the stage.

Ask members to think about what they may see and hear when they first get a glimpse behind the curtain of heaven. Say, *Today's study will familiarize us with two great visions of God's presence as revealed in the Bible and encourage us to respond to God with worship throughout our lives.*

Guide Bible Study

2. Using commentary from the *Teaching Guide* and the *Study Guide*, provide background information on the setting of Isaiah 6, including the life and death of King Uzziah.
3. Ask someone to read verses 1–4. Ask members the following questions:
 - How are seraphs described? (This is the only mention of them in the Bible.)
 - Why is it significant that they covered their eyes?
 - In the vision of Isaiah, why is the word “holy” repeated?
4. Ask someone to read verses 5–7.
 - Note that seeing God’s holiness enabled Isaiah to recognize the truth about his own sinfulness and the sinfulness of his nation.
 - Ask, *Whose sinfulness did Isaiah confess, and in what order?*
 - How did God cleanse Isaiah of his sin?
5. Ask someone to read verse 8, and highlight the invitation of God and Isaiah’s response. Ask, *After meeting with God in worship, what has he invited you to do? How did you respond?*
6. On the board, write *Authentic worship will often include . . .* Record responses on the board. (They will probably include such ideas as focus on God, praise, confession of sin, and willingness to serve God.)
7. Ask someone to read Revelation 4:1–7. Using commentary from the *Teaching Guide* and *Study Guide*, explain the following:
 - The source of the voice John heard
 - What the twenty-four elders may represent, in numbers and other symbols
 - The four living creatures. Ask members to review what these angelic beings are like, and how God has authority over them.
8. Read aloud verses 8–11. Refer to the list previously made regarding authentic worship. Invite members to review these verses and add

examples to the list. (Responses might include recognition of who God is, humility, and adoration.)

9. Ask, *What do the two experiences of Isaiah and John have in common?* List responses on the board.

Encourage Application

10. Read this case study: *Remember Brady from our opening illustration—the guy who was dazzled when he first saw a live stage performance? After seeing the bright lights and hearing the great music, he had to step back into everyday life. Similarly, one would assume that even Isaiah and John did not have such visions every day of their lives—and few persons even have one experience like theirs.*

Ask, *Is it possible to integrate authentic worship into our daily lives? If worship is a habit of highly effective disciples, what can we do to experience it, based on these biblical texts?*

11. End class by reading aloud (or inviting the class to sing aloud) the hymn “Holy, Holy, Holy.”

NOTES

1. See further the valuable study by Richard A. Burridge, *Four Gospels, One Jesus? A Symbolic Reading* 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).

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