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What’s in Your Teaching Guide

This Teaching Guide has three purposes:
▷ to give the teacher tools for focusing on the content of the session in the Study Guide.
▷ to give the teacher additional Bible background information.
▷ to give the teacher variety and choice in preparation.

The Teaching Guide includes two major components: Teacher Helps and Teacher Options.

Teacher Helps

Bible Background
The Study Guide is your main source of Bible study material. This section helps you more fully understand and interpret the Scripture text.

Teaching Outline
provides you with an outline of the main themes in the Study Guide.

Teacher Options

The next three sections provide a beginning, middle, and end for the session, with focus paragraphs in between.

Focus Paragraphs
are printed in italics at the top of the page because they are the most important part of the Teaching Guide. These paragraphs will help you move your class from “what the text meant” to “what the text means.”

You Can Choose!
There is more material in each session than you can use, so choose the options from each section to tailor the session to the needs of your group.

Prepare Before the Session
Read the session for today in the Study Guide. Then read the options in this Teaching Guide, placing checkmarks beside the activities you plan to include. After you have decided which options to use, gather the appropriate materials.
Discernment: Applying Reason

1 Kings 3:3-9; Hebrews 5:11-14

Bible Background

Solomon's Need and Request

As the book of 1 Kings begins, readers are confronted with the reality of David's looming death and Solomon's rapid rise to be king of Israel. In chapters 1–2, Solomon seizes the throne in a violent challenge to his elder brother Adonijah, who was the presumptive heir of David.

In 1 Kings 3:1 we learn that Solomon has married Pharaoh's daughter in a political marriage. This seems to run counter to the numerous teachings in the book of Numbers, and elsewhere in the Hebrew Scriptures, forbidding the people of Israel from intermarrying with other nations.

In spite of this questionable behavior, and the text's insistence that idolatry was widespread in Israel at the time of Solomon's accession to the throne, verse 3 speaks of Solomon's strengths. The biblical writer describes Solomon as one who “loved the LORD, walking in the statutes of his father David.”

By telling us this, the author points to Solomon's good qualities as ruler of Israel. He loves the God of Israel and follows in the footsteps of his father, the much-loved King David. But the author can't avoid pointing out one significant failure on Solomon's part: he is complicit in the widespread idolatry of the people of Israel. “He sacrificed and offered incense at the high places” (v. 3). Nevertheless, Solomon also makes a sacrifice to God.

The reference to the “principal high place” (v. 4) so close to the reference to “high places” (v. 3) can be a source of confusion. One might suspect that Solomon went to Gibeon in order to make sacrifices to foreign gods, as is strongly implied through the mention of multiple “high places” in verse 3. This is not the case, however. In 1 Chronicles 16:39 and 21:2, the Chronicler indicates that the tabernacle—the tent of meeting that once housed the Ark of the Covenant—was located at Gibeon. It is possible, therefore, that Solomon went to Gibeon to worship the God of Israel. The two references to high places have different connotations, and it is simply unfortunate that they occur so close together.

While Solomon is at Gibeon, God visits him in a dream. God invites him to ask for whatever he thinks God should give him (v. 5). Solomon does not simply tell God what he wants. Rather, he explains the situation in which he finds himself and then makes his request based on that situation.

Solomon begins by praising God's faithfulness and loyalty to David. He then inserts himself into this tradition of faithfulness by saying that God has “given him [David] a son [Solomon] to sit on his throne today” (v. 6). In verses 7-8,
Solomon expresses great humility, claiming he is merely a child who is overwhelmed by the incredible responsibilities of ruling God’s people, who are “so numerous they cannot be numbered or counted” (v. 8).

Solomon knows what challenges he faces. He also knows his limitations. Consequently, he asks God for an understanding mind to govern your people (v. 9). In the face of challenges he feels unequipped to handle, Solomon’s greatest desire is for understanding and discernment. He even describes the understanding mind he seeks as “able to discern between good and evil” (v. 9), as if the link between his request and his need for reasoned understanding and discernment is not already clear enough.

**Milk and Solid Food**

The story of Solomon’s vision at Gibeon reminds us to consider our need for discernment to face our own challenges. Similarly, the writer of Hebrews urges us to contemplate the interplay between discernment and maturity. Discernment is a mark of maturity. Maturity is something we need in order to discern correctly.

Before we come to our selected passage, the biblical writer explores the subtle mysteries of the high priesthood of Jesus (Heb 5:1-10). Then, as if the writer was struck by the depth of the mystery he has just proclaimed, he begins our passage by commenting, in an almost offhanded manner,

About this we have much to say that is hard to explain, since you have become dull in understanding. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic elements of the oracles of God. (vv. 11-12a)

It would seem the intended audience of Hebrews is somehow less mature than the writer had hoped or expected! On the contrary, they lack sufficient spiritual maturity and discernment for the writer to continue his exposition into the deeper mysteries of their common faith.

In the first half of verse 12, the writer states that the audience needs to be taught the basics of the faith. In the second half the writer restates it as their
need for “milk, not solid food.” Here the writer compares his readers’ need for greater spiritual growth, maturity, and discernment to a baby being weaned from his mother’s milk (v. 12). They are spiritually immature. Analogies using “milk” and “solid food” to identify different points in a Christian’s spiritual development are not unique to the book of Hebrews. Paul also chastises the Corinthians for their immaturity by comparing them to babies who can only drink milk in 1 Corinthians 3:2. In a more positive tone, 1 Peter 2:2 (apparently written for newer believers) encourages readers to “long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation.”

From verse 13, we can infer that the spiritually mature Christian is skilled “in the word of righteousness” because the opposite—that is, that the spiritually immature individual is unskilled—is explicitly stated. Additionally, in verse 14 the writer insists that spiritual maturity is demonstrated in a person “whose faculties have been trained by practice to distinguish good from evil.” That is to say, such a person develops discernment by applying reason to moral and spiritual questions.

A Way to Begin

Applying one’s intellect and reason to moral and spiritual questions is something very familiar to your class. Connecting that common experience with an important-sounding word like “discernment,” however, may be less common. Discernment is essential for a balanced and maturing spiritual life. Therefore, discernment must be not only something we practice, but also something for which we earnestly seek and pray.

Discerning the Path

Begin by sharing a decision over which you struggled or deliberated. Ideally, this won’t be a “heroic” story of your perfect choices, but rather a story of struggle to discern the path upon which God was guiding you. Personal moral decisions or times of increased fear or anxiety make good examples of how important discernment is in our lives.

After telling your story, reflect on how you used—or failed to use—discernment in these circumstances.

Invite participants to comment not only on your experience, but also on their own personal struggles to discern the path upon which God is guiding them.

Which Way to Go?

To encourage discussion about discernment, ask the following questions.

Questions

➤ Do you think we live in a black-and-white world, or do we live in a world with “shades of gray”?
➤ If you could always know what is right and what is wrong, how would your life be different? How would it be easier? Would it be more or less stressful?
➤ Is it possible always to know what is right and what is wrong? Explain.
B

A Way to Explore Scripture

First Kings 3:3-9 and Hebrews 5:11-14 both deal with how we make decisions. Solomon admits his need for greater discernment and confesses his inability to discern right and wrong adequately. The author of Hebrews encourages readers to think of discernment—the spiritual application of reason to moral questions—as a sign of maturity. As we work to make disciples of Jesus, we must remember the importance of nurturing discernment in ourselves and others.

○ Milk and Solid Food

Read Hebrews 5:11-14. Draw a line down the middle of the board to make two columns. Label the first column “Milk” and the second column “Solid Food.”

Discuss the imagery of “milk” and “solid food” that the author of Hebrews uses to talk about discernment. Propose a few spiritual questions and teachings, and ask the class whether the concepts fall into the “milk” or “solid food” categories. If there is disagreement, encourage discussion. (An example of a “milk” question might be, “Is it okay for me to cheat on my taxes?” An example of a “solid food” question might be, “What is the best course of action for my comatose, terminally ill loved one?”) Expand the list to include relevant topics for your own congregation and class.

Discuss what makes one spiritual matter “milk” and another “solid food.” Be careful not to suggest that “solid food” matters are unanswerable or that “milk” matters are the only really important ones.

Read 1 Kings 3:3-9. Discuss Solomon’s struggle to find discernment. How is his situation like or unlike that of ordinary Christians today? How can we learn from his example?

○ Solomon’s Rocky Start

Read 1 Kings 3:3-9. Draw on information from the Bible Background section to describe the tenuous nature of Solomon’s reign and his prior involvement with pagan worship.

Questions

➢ How is Solomon’s situation similar to our own situations? How is it different?
➢ Why might Solomon have considered discernment his most pressing need?
➢ What other things might Solomon have asked for?
➢ Read Hebrews 5:11-14. What are the benefits of discernment according to this passage? How is spiritual discernment achieved?

○ Common Sense

What is the relationship between spiritual discernment and ordinary common sense? Can we know right from wrong purely by applying human reason?

○ 20/20 Hindsight

Distribute copies of the resource page “20/20 Hindsight” (page 23). Answer the discussion questions provided.
A Way to End

Discernment seems simple because we are forced to do it regularly. But when we stop to think about it, we realize how complicated it is to walk the narrow way to which we are called. Proper spiritual discernment is a virtue that is easily overlooked. We think we know how to do it, so we don’t bother to learn how to do it better. Close the session by exploring not only what discernment is, but how we can develop greater discernment.

○ In Solomon’s Shoes
Distribute paper and pens to participants. Invite them to write a prayer to God asking for the power of spiritual discernment. It doesn’t need to be a long prayer or beautiful prose, and they will not have to read it aloud. Even so, it should be heartfelt and sincere. Ask them to pattern their prayer after Solomon’s words to God in 1 Kings 3:6-9.

Encourage them to pray this prayer every morning during the month of August. Eventually they’ll memorize the prayer and be able to pray it whenever they have a spare moment or whenever they feel a particular need of discernment concerning how to follow God’s will.

○ Trained by Practice
Remind participants that Hebrews 5:14 states that those who are rich in discernment “have been trained by practice to distinguish good from evil.”

Questions
➤ What does it mean in the context of this passage to be “trained by practice”?
➤ How can we be intentional about developing our powers of discernment?

Challenge participants to make a mental note of every opportunity they receive in the next week to practice discernment. Invite them to reflect on these experiences at the end of the week so they can know how to develop greater discernment.

Resources

2

JUSTICE: SHOWING RESPECT

Leviticus 19:11-18; 1 Peter 2:13-17

Bible Background

Commandments for Holy Living

Reading Leviticus can be a daunting task. After all, many Christians consider it the most avoided and least interesting book in the Old Testament. Perhaps we fear that we will stumble upon an obscure set of laws about seeds and garments and become lost in a maze of legalistic minutiae.

In all honesty, in Leviticus there are indeed a number of obscure laws about seeds, garments, and other details of everyday life. But there are also powerful lessons about what it means to lead holy lives before God. If Jesus himself quotes Leviticus (and he does when he gives us the “Great Commandments,” Mk 12:29-31), then we cannot simply avoid the book and assume that it is nothing but a laundry list of “thou shalt nots.”

In Leviticus 19:11-18 we do read, “you shall not” quite a few times. But let us not assume that these commandments are boring or—worse—inconsequential. God did not inspire the biblical authors to write Leviticus as a list of pet peeves that God wanted to outlaw. Rather, this is a book that clearly shows us the kind of life that God calls good and holy.

We will find more inspiration in some parts of Leviticus than in others. Few, if any, modern Christians insist on keeping a kosher diet, for example. But there are eternal principles in this biblical document as well. Many of its commands, including those we consider today, are immediately applicable.

These eight verses fall into four categories of prohibitions. These four serve as the foundation for one overarching prohibition; namely, that we should not treat human beings as mere objects that only serve a function in “our” world. In verses 11-12, the author commands us not to steal or deceive others. Since the author prohibits stealing again in verse 13, it might be that the author is speaking of stealing as two separate offenses against our neighbor, with the stealing discussed in verse 11 representing deception and the stealing in verse 13 being simple theft. Regardless, justice demands that we treat others as persons who have a right to the truth. When we lie or steal, we treat our neighbors as if they are not people, as if they are somehow less worthy of our consideration.

In verses 13-14, the author prohibits taking advantage of others. Here it would seem that “you shall not steal” is more about using our power to defraud or abuse another. The writer uses images of a landowner or manager manipulating his workers by withholding their wages. George A. F. Knight remarks, “Today we think of robbery as a crime against the law. Leviticus regards it rather as a crime against love” (119). More poetically, the author of Leviticus indicates that we
should not take advantage of others by speaking ill of the deaf, who cannot hear such slander, or by setting an obstacle in the way of the blind, who cannot know to avoid it. This points strongly to an admonition against using our power to abuse or torment others.

In verses 15-16, we are commanded not to “be partial to the poor or defer to the great.” Furthermore, we must judge our neighbor “with justice.” These words challenge us to demonstrate justice and impartiality. When the text goes on to say “you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor” (v. 16) it is more accurately rendered from the Hebrew as “you shall not stand against the blood of your neighbor.” This expression means not seeking to have one’s neighbor put to death (Micklem, 96).

Verses 17-18 contain more prohibitions. Here, we are prohibited from hating or taking vengeance against a neighbor. Beyond this, though, we are given two commandments about what we should do. Specifically, we are told to correct our neighbor when he or she does something that will incur guilt. If we care for people as people and not as things, we will not let them walk ignorantly into destruction. Secondly, we are commanded to “love your neighbor as yourself” (v. 18). What a powerful inclusion in this passage mostly made up of prohibitions! This single positive command sums up all the previous prohibitions. It is what Jesus quotes as the the whole will of God (Mays, 60). Justice comes from treating others as we treat ourselves—as people whom God loves and values.

**For the Lord’s Sake**

When we turn to 1 Peter 2:13-17, we are immediately confronted with the concept of justice and questions about how we treat and interact with other people. In verses 13-14, we hear the command to “accept the authority of every human institution, whether of the emperor as

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**Outline**

**FOR TEACHING**

I. Treat People Like People, Not Things (Lev 19:11-18)
   A. You shall not deceive your neighbor. (vv. 11-12)
      1. Do not steal or lie. (v. 11)
      2. Do not use God’s name in your lies—it profanes God’s name! (v. 12)
   B. You shall not take advantage of your neighbor. (vv. 13-14)
      1. Don’t cheat your neighbor simply because you can. (v. 13)
      2. Don’t take advantage of another’s vulnerability. (v. 14)
   C. You shall not be partial about your neighbor. (vv. 15-16)
      1. Don’t pick sides to benefit yourself. (v. 15)
      2. Don’t play both sides against each other. (v. 16)
   D. You shall not hate your neighbor. (vv. 17-18)
      1. Don’t just stand by as somebody else is harmed. (v. 17)
      2. Don’t wish ill on another. (v. 18)

II. Show Respect for Everyone (1 Peter 2:13-17)
   A. Accept authority. (vv. 13-14)
      1. Accept the authority of others because of Jesus and what he has done. (v. 13a)
      2. This is so, even with respect to the authority of rulers—from emperors to governors. (vv. 13b-14)
   B. Why? Honoring others silences critique and overpowers resistance. (v. 15)
   C. You have not been set free for yourself but to love and honor others. (vv. 16-17)
      1. You have been set free, but not to do evil. (v. 16)
      2. You have been set free to love and honor others. (v. 17)
supreme, or of governors as sent by him....” Specifically, we are told to do this “for the Lord’s sake.”

It is significant that the writer does not command readers to submit themselves to human rule for their own sake, much less for the sake of the rulers! Rather, they are to behave this way for the sake of their Lord, who submitted himself to death on a Roman cross. In essence, the author insists that followers of Christ choose to submit themselves on behalf of other people so that they may know the way of love that Jesus proclaimed.

Must Christians obey even unjust commands from a human ruler? Surely not! Though we are told to submit ourselves to human institutions for our Lord’s sake, we are also told that the purpose of this is so that our critics and those who oppose Christ’s way of love might be proven foolish by our submission and our commitment to justice for all people (v. 15). Indeed, we are additionally commanded to “honor everyone” (v. 17). This command is perhaps better rendered, as John Wick Bowman did so, as “Begin to treat every [person] as though [he or she] were a king!” (137). What a commandment! What a display of God’s great thirst for justice and respect between all of God’s beloved people that we should be instructed to treat others not only as people, but as beloved and highly esteemed.

A Way to Begin

Justice is fundamentally a matter of respect. More specifically, we do justice by placing the correct value on a person. Any time we choose how to interact with someone, we make an implicit assertion of that person’s value. Therefore, when we undervalue someone, we commit an injustice against them. This is almost always a matter of treating a person as a thing to be used for what he or she can do for us. To be just, we must first look at the value we place on others.

Shifting Values

Resource Kit

Discuss whether we rank people in real life based on some essential quality or based on whether they are “useful” to us. How does God assign value to human beings?

What is Respect?

Explore the following questions.

Questions

➤ What does it mean to respect another?
➤ Is respect something that must be earned? If so, what must someone have to do to be worthy of respect?
➤ Can you like someone without respecting them?
➤ Can you respect someone without liking them?
A Way to Explore Scripture

Scripture has much to say about how to live justly and value others rightly. Both of today’s passages speak about how we are to treat the people we encounter in our daily lives. They also have much to say about how we should understand ourselves in relation to others. As we take these scriptural teachings to heart, we will look at people in a different light. We will begin to find our viewpoint more closely aligned with the value God sees in others.

○ Honor Everyone
Read Leviticus 19:11-18 and 1 Peter 2:13-17. Draw attention to the command in 1 Peter 2:17 to “honor everyone.” Ask the following questions.

Questions
➢ What does it mean to give someone honor?
➢ Is honor different from respect or common courtesy? Why or why not?
➢ How does the Leviticus passage help us understand what it means to “honor everyone”?
➢ What is the relationship between “accepting human authority” and “honoring one’s neighbor”?
➢ The Leviticus passage ends with the command to “love your neighbor as yourself.” How do we show honor for the people whom we love?
➢ What seems to be the main thrust of the 1 Peter passage in terms of the behavior expected of God’s people?
➢ How does 1 Peter’s teaching intersect with what the Leviticus passage says about the behavior expected of God’s people?

○ Ends or Means?
Discuss what it means to treat someone like an end in him- or herself and what it means to treat someone like a means to an end. What does the way we treat people say about what we think of them?

Treating a person as a means to an end means treating them as less than human, not as someone made in the image of God and worthy of dignity and respect for no other reason than that.

○ Justice and Discernment
Respecting someone is not the same as indulging their destructive (including self-destructive) behavior. As an example from 1 Peter, we must honor the emperor, even if we oppose his policies. Scripture calls us to act justly, even toward people we don’t like or agree with.

Whom do we find it hardest to honor? Why?

○ Continue the Passage
Invite four volunteers to read Leviticus 19:11-12, 13-14, 15-16, and 17-18. After each section is read, guide participants to “continue the passage” by adding other examples of disrespectful behavior. For example, after verses 11-12, have participants suggest additional forms of lying or falsehood.
A Way to End

Simply knowing that we treat others unjustly is not sufficient to change how we act and think. When confronted with our personal unjust acts, we must strive to counteract not only our unjust actions but the attitudes and perspectives that make them possible. Help participants identify practical ways they can express justice toward others.

In Your Own Words
Provide paper and pens for each participant. Re-read 1 Peter 2:13-17. Invite participants to consider the words of this letter and rewrite them in their own words.

Questions
➤ Who are the “emperor” and “governors” who must be honored “for the Lord’s sake” today?
➤ How else can we keep the command to “honor everyone” and to treat others as if they were a king?

Challenge participants to meditate on their paraphrase of 1 Peter 2:13-17 over the coming week. Close with prayer.

Your Neighbor, Your King
John Wick Bowman paraphrases the command “honor everyone” as “begin to treat every [person] as though [he or she] were a king!” (137). Invite participants to imagine what your congregation would be like if every member treated every other member as if they were a king or queen.

Questions
➤ If you treat your neighbor as your better, how will it change the way you respond to his or her quirks and flaws?
➤ How might this change of attitude change your congregation?
➤ How might this change in your congregation spill over into neighborhood?
➤ What holds us back from behaving this way?

Challenge your class to identify one person they already know and to focus for an entire week on treating this person like a king or a queen.

Resources


Bible Background

Wait for the Lord

Psalm 27 is attributed to David in its superscription. Scholars have long noted that the Hebrew expression translated “of David” might also legitimately be translated “for David,” “about David,” etc. (Kugel, 461). We have no undeniable proof that David wrote this psalm, but we also have no compelling argument to dispute this notion.

Despite this uncertainty Psalm 27 can be an expression of personal prayer and adapted to fit our particular needs. Though most of us have never been besieged by an enemy army, we all have been buffeted by troubles and difficulties. Consequently, let us refer to the writer of this psalm anonymously as “he or she”—not to deny Davidic authorship but to remember that many of us can speak these words sincerely.

Verses 1-3 are a good example of parallelism as an important feature of Hebrew poetry. Rather than rhyming words, the psalms often “rhyme” concepts, rephrasing the same idea in different ways to move the audience to a deeper understanding. Here, the psalmist describes God as one’s “light” and “salvation”—the one who guides the way and the fortress in which to take refuge. “Light” and “salvation” refer to two different aspects of the same divine blessing.

Verses 2-3 expand upon the first and second lines of verse 1, respectively. Contrary to the psalmist’s experience of God being “light,” the psalmist’s enemies are said to “stumble and fall” (v. 2) as if in darkness. Likewise, in contrast to the psalmist’s proclamation that he or she takes refuge in God as a fortress and stronghold, the enemies of the psalmist are described in verse 3 as a besieging army. Though these enemies may seem frightening now, ultimately their efforts will prove fruitless at best and self-destructive at worst. Therefore, the psalmist remains confident (v. 3).

In verses 4-5, the psalmist turns to the nature of his or her relationship with God, upon whom he or she depends. The psalmist asks one thing of God—but this “one thing” is expressed in terms of three things tied to the same common goal: to live in God’s house forever, to behold God’s beauty, and to “inquire in his temple.” The psalmist desires to experience an intimate relationship with God.

This intimacy with the God who protects and guides leads the psalmist to declare confidence in God’s protection. The psalmist speaks of being hidden “under the cover of [God’s] tent,” no doubt an allusion to the tabernacle in which God dwelled among the people in the wilderness (Taylor, 147).
In verses 13-14, the psalmist makes a stunning proclamation and a courageous exhortation. When the psalmist expresses confidence that he or she will see the goodness of God “in the land of the living,” it conveys the idea of waiting on God’s providence and care to be demonstrated in his or her lifetime. Rather than deferring hope to some sort of compensation in the afterlife, the psalmist expects God to intervene in the affairs of this world.

In this anticipatory moment, the psalmist exhorts others as well to wait confidently for God’s intervening grace. Waiting is essential, although it is often difficult. Blaiklock reminds us,

You are part of a wider pattern, and the synchronizing of all the parts demands time. Abraham hastened and became the father of Ishmael...Moses had to wait. God could not use the prince of Egypt. He had to wait for the shepherd of Midian to be born. And so it ever is. Wait for the Lord. (76)

**With Greater Boldness and Without Fear**

In Philippians 1, after greeting the church in Philippi and expressing his love and appreciation for them, Paul immediately speaks of his confinement in prison. Instead of bemoaning his captivity, however, he chooses instead to speak of how God has used the situation for good. Paul is excited to share that his arrest and confinement at the hands of the Romans has served to spread the gospel Rome had hoped to suppress.

In fact, in verse 13 Paul insists that the Romans’ plans have backfired. Despite their evil intentions, Paul’s imprisonment has led to an even greater spreading of the gospel than would have happened otherwise. Ironically, Rome has only ensured that its highly esteemed Praetorian guard is exposed to the same gospel they were sworn to resist and confront. By being forced to confine Paul, who will not stop preaching even to his captors and guards, they have heard that

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**Outline**

**FOR TEACHING**

I. Whom Shall I Fear? (Psalm 27:1-5, 13-14)

A. God is on the side of the psalmist. (v. 1)
   1. God is light and salvation—illuminating the path and rescuing from danger.
   2. God is a fortress in which the psalmist takes refuge.

B. The psalmist’s enemies actually struggle against God! (vv. 2-3)
   1. Those who oppose the psalmist stumble and fall. (v. 2)
   2. Those who are against the psalmist are like an army encamped against God’s fortress. (v. 3)

C. The psalmist’s confident request (v. 4-5)
   1. The psalmist asks to rest in the intimate presence of God. (v. 4)
   2. The psalmist is confident that there is no better place in time of trouble than near God. (v. 5)

D. Take courage! (vv. 13-14)
   1. The psalmist is confident of seeing God’s goodness “in the land of the living.” (v. 13)
   2. The psalmist encourages readers to wait confidently for God to defend them. (v. 14)

II. Preaching Without Fear (Phil 1:12-14)

A. Paul insists that his arrest and imprisonment have served the higher purpose of spreading the gospel. (v. 12)

B. By being imprisoned, Paul suggests he was able to reach many who otherwise would not have heard the gospel. (v. 13a)

C. His imprisonment serves Christ’s purposes, not his own or Rome’s. (v. 13b)

D. God’s use of Paul’s imprisonment has encouraged other Christians to be courageous. (v. 14)
Paul was imprisoned because of his commitment to Jesus Christ. The “everyone else” Paul mentions is likely the surrounding citizens and subjects who live near his place of imprisonment.

In verse 14, Paul speaks of Christian brothers and sisters who have been invigorated by the faith he has displayed in his confinement. Because of Paul’s confidence, they have been encouraged. Now they preach the same gospel that Paul does—and which Rome hopes to suppress—“with greater boldness and without fear.” The fourth-century interpreter of Paul known as Ambrosiaster comments, “[Paul’s] constancy inspires others to be fearless in preaching. They are learning by the apostle’s example that God is present to watch over those who love him” (Edwards, 213). It would seem that Paul’s courage is contagious. The effect of his imprisonment among his fellow believers proves to be completely contrary to Rome’s hopes and plans. Such dramatic reversals are a theme common in the lives of the martyrs and saints of the early church.

A Way to Begin

Courage is not foolhardiness, the ignorance of risk. At the same time, it is much more than mere determination in the face of fear. Genuine courage is a spiritual virtue. It is strengthened through struggle and nurtured by faith, hope, and love. As you explore this cardinal virtue, be careful not to make less of courage than you should. Courage is more than willpower; it’s a virtue acquired through many small steps.

○ Saint Laurence
Prior to the class, research the story of Saint Laurence. Laurence was a deacon in Rome during the third century. He was committed to caring for his congregation. After his mentor, Bishop Sixtus II, was martyred, Laurence was given the choice of either handing over the church’s wealth to the emperor or facing his own death. Laurence asked for a week to gather the wealth of the congregation—but rather than handing it over, he gave it away to the poor. Laurence was put to death because of his courageous resistance to Roman power.

Begin the session by relating the story of Saint Laurence. Ask the following questions.

Questions
➤ What might Laurence have thought or felt when he was commanded to turn over the wealth of the church?
➤ How might Sixtus’s death have influenced Laurence’s actions?
➤ Do you think Laurence suddenly developed this courage, or was it built in him?
➤ If courage had been built in him, how could this have happened?

○ Personal Stories
Tell a personal story about a time when you (or someone you know) were called upon to be courageous. What was it like? How did it feel? Was it an easy decision to act courageously? Were you (or they) afraid?

Invite the class to tell some of their own stories. Avoid bragging but be honest.

Questions
➤ What does “courage” mean to you?
➤ What sorts of courage most inspire you? Why?
➤ Where does courage come from?
A Way to Explore Scripture

If we’re honest, we must admit that God asks much of believers in Scripture. Faithfulness to God can be a stretching and challenging experience. It shouldn’t be undertaken lightly nor without considering what we are spiritually prepared to endure. Even so, Scripture is an inexhaustible source of encouragement and exhortation. It leads us time and time again toward more courage, greater faith, and deeper love. It is essential for any Christian hoping to understand the virtue of courage to dwell upon the Scripture and ponder what it has to say—no matter how uncomfortable it may make us.

Questions Worth Asking

Read Psalm 27:1-5, 13-14. Ask the following questions.

Questions

➢ Does the psalmist have legitimate reasons to be afraid?
➢ The psalmist says, “My heart shall not fear” (v. 3). Does this sound like the truth or what the psalmist hopes for?
➢ When the psalmist writes, “Yet I will be confident” (v. 3), does that mean the psalmist is currently confident?
➢ To whom is the psalmist talking when he or she writes, “Be strong, and let your heart take courage?” (v. 14).
➢ How do you think the psalmist would define courage? Do you agree? Why or why not?

Courage to Act

If discernment and justice are about knowing what is right, courage is about having the strength of conviction to do what is right—even in the face of daunting obstacles.

Questions

➢ What circumstances today require courage from believers?
➢ How difficult is it to summon courage in specific situations?
➢ What can we do when we feel more fearful than brave?
➢ If we stand courageously but are still defeated, was it worth it? Explain.

A Return Letter to Paul

Read Philippians 1:12-14. Have participants write a letter to Paul responding to what he writes in these verses. Encourage them to express gratitude to Paul for what he is undergoing while also encouraging him to continue to be bold in the face of danger. Invite two or three volunteers to share what they wrote. Ask the following questions.

Questions

➢ Could this letter be sent to anyone else if we changed the names? To whom?
➢ Are there people alive today who need this encouragement?
➢ How could we learn courage from these people?
A Way to End

Having explored the virtue of courage and consulted the deep resource of Scripture, it is appropriate to end with reflection and contemplation. Strive to challenge participants to be courageous without making them feel guilty for the courage they lack. Courage is not overcoming fear by willpower, and it is not something we can achieve through guilt. Courage is created when we experience the freedom to be what God has called us to be.

Small Steps
Remind participants of the stories of courage that have been shared in this session (for example, Laurence, personal stories, the psalmist, Paul, etc.). Observe that it is more likely that this kind of courage developed through a long process of many small steps rather than appearing suddenly at the time it was needed.

Ask participants to relate this observation to their own lives and experiences of courage and fear.

Brainstorm ways participants could take small steps toward being more courageous. Ask the following questions.

Questions
➤ How could we push ourselves out of our comfort zones to develop the virtue of courage?
➤ What do we fear in our own lives? How can we overcome this fear?

What Is There to Fear?
Courage is not the absence of fear but the ability to press on despite our fears. Distribute copies of the resource page “What Is There to Fear?” (page 25). Have participants complete the worksheet privately. No one need share their specific answers, but the following questions may lead to fruitful discussion.

Questions
➤ To what extent are our fears realistic?
➤ To what extent do we excuse disobedience by manufacturing “reasons” we should fear to act obediently?
➤ Which Scripture promises can help us manage our fears?
➤ How does being part of a community of faith help us manage our fears?

Resources


Bible Background

Don’t Get Ahead of Yourself

Ecclesiastes was written anonymously by an author known as “the Teacher” (Eccl 1:1). The Teacher is a jaded philosopher who claims familiarity with life in all its many forms and remains unimpressed. “In my vain life I have seen everything,” he says (Eccl 7:15). This is his evaluation of the human existence in which we all share.

Having expressed his frustration at the meaningless of life, the Teacher goes on to raise a classic theological question that remains essentially unanswered even today: why do the good sometimes suffer and why do the evil sometimes prosper? To this day, people from all across the religious spectrum observe that those who seem most righteous often suffer and die with no apparent earthly reward while notorious sinners may live long and seemingly happy lives. How can this be? Does it mean that God is unjust? Does it mean that there is no God at all? The question of how to reconcile belief in a powerful, loving God with the reality of suffering in the world is known by the technical term theodicy, from the Greek words for God (theos) and just or righteous (dikaios).

The Teacher describes the mystery of human suffering, but he does not offer an accompanying theological explanation. Since the writing of Ecclesiastes, whole libraries have been written about the problem of suffering and how to explain it. Humans have labored to find a satisfying way to address the issue, often resulting in attempts to explain away what we know to be true; that is, that life isn’t always fair, and goodness is no guarantee of health, happiness, and long life. This is the cold realization on which the Teacher insists in Ecclesiastes 7:15. Injustice simply seems to be a part of life—even if it doesn’t feel right.

The Teacher’s response to the injustice of human existence sounds curious to our twenty-first-century ears. He instructs his audience not to be “too righteous” or to “act too wise” (v. 16). He seems to say that too much righteousness can lead to self-destruction.

At first glance this comment suggests weak-kneed religious pluralism. Does the Teacher really mean we should give up on right behavior because it is hard and ultimately not worth the effort? And what about the teaching of Jesus? The Teacher seems to contradict what Jesus later taught in the Sermon on the Mount, specifically that those who “hunger and thirst for righteousness” are blessed (Mt 5:6) and that his disciples’ righteousness must exceed that of the Pharisees (Mt 5:20). In light of these words from Jesus, what shall we do with the Teacher’s startling comment?

Perhaps reading this verse in this way oversimplifies what the Teacher meant to
say. Rankin notes, “If the author’s righteousness is self-righteousness, the caution is defensible, or if it is the ritual righteousness which Jesus indicated” (66). In this perspective, the Teacher’s warning against being “too righteous” is really advice not to depend too heavily upon ritual observance. Given that the Teacher has previously argued that ritual observance does not protect the good from pain and suffering, this seems like an entirely plausible reading of the verse. In addition, Davis suggests that the Teacher is speaking against “overrighteous naïveté...and judgmentalism” while disregarding one’s own “capacity for evil” (203).

Likewise, the Teacher advises—much more to the liking of our spiritual palates—against being “too wicked” or being “a fool” while also suggesting that such people will “die before [their] time” (v. 17). Faced with the reality that life is often unjust, the Teacher is eager to suggest a response that lies somewhere between self-righteousness or “overrighteous naïveté” and complete disregard for the commands of God. In short, the Teacher says that the middle path, which neither underestimates nor overestimates our capacity for evil, is the safest. This is the path of moderation, where “you should take hold of the one, without letting go of the other” (v. 18).

**What the Disciplined Deserve**

When Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, a great athletic festival took place in the city every two years. This festival was called the Isthmian Games. Notable events included races of various types and a form of physical combat we might recognize as a type of “boxing.” The winning athletes were crowned in victory with a wreath of withered celery (Hays, 155–56). Paul might have been thinking about the Isthmian Games when he took up the image of disciplined athletes to exhort the Corinthian church to moderation and self-control.

In 1 Corinthians 9:24, Paul asks a rhetorical question. It isn’t meant to be answered, but rather to move his audience to recognize the essential nature of their spiritual formation. “You know those athletes at the Isthmian Games...
don’t win by accident,” Paul seems to say, “so what makes you think you can win in this life by accident?”

The athletes to which Paul refers train hard and make regular sacrifices of time and devotion so that they can develop their bodies to compete for the prize (v. 25). Paul denigrates the crown for which the athletes compete in order to inspire his readers to strive for even more. You can almost hear Paul saying, “If they go through all that for a crown of withered celery, then what is it worth enduring to gain God’s reward?” Finding a modern analogy is not a challenge when we consider that many athletes today, at least at the nonprofessional levels, play for a metallic bauble or something equally trivial.

The mature Christian life is a matter of self-control and moderation. It is bringing the body into God’s service. But this is not because the body is something base and evil that must be punished. After all, God took human form in the incarnation, and we should not forget this by denigrating the physical. Rather, believers work to bring the body under control in order to gain something imperishable. By refusing the extremes of immoderate behavior, we choose a life of discipline. In the end, we hope to receive the reward for such discipline: an imperishable crown.

A Way to Begin

**Moderation is a virtue we develop by practice. There are few, if any, “rules” about moderation. Rather, we must develop our intuition about how to apply it in our lives. In practical terms, we can grow in our moderation by asking ourselves how much is too much and how little is too little. When we do this consistently and intentionally, we will find that we become more moderate in our words, thoughts, and deeds, and that our spirits become more balanced and controlled.**

○ **A Balancing Act**

Provide a shopping bag filled with several books of varying sizes. The bag should be heavy, but not so heavy that it is hard to pick up. When class begins, ask for a volunteer to stand in front of the class. Give the volunteer the shopping bag full of the books and have him or her hold it in one hand while you ask the following questions.

**Questions**

➤ How easy would it be for our volunteer to walk a tightrope with that bag of books in one hand?
➤ What would make it easier?
➤ What if our volunteer could distribute the weight between two bags?
➤ How is life like this? How do we sometimes lean too heavily in one or another direction? How does this make life harder?

➤ What does “moderation” look like with these books? What does it look like in our lives?

○ **Goldilocks**

Read or tell the story “Goldilocks and the Three Bears.” Ask participants to identify what the story has to say about moderation. For example, Goldilocks rejects the porridge that is “too hot” and “too cold” in favor of the bowl that is “just right.”

The goal is not to lift up this story as a great example or as a “teachable moment,” but rather to get the class thinking about what moderation looks like in practice and in theory.
A Way to Explore Scripture

Moderation is about bringing our appetites and desires under the control of the Holy Spirit and submitting our will to God’s will. Unfortunately, there is a temptation to use Scripture to scold or shame people into practicing self-control. The guilt and shame these passages can be made to induce only work in the short-term, if ever. More likely, such an approach will alienate people. Rather than joyfully submitting to God’s will, they may decide moderation is yet another addition to the list of religious dos and don’ts. Help participants see moderation for what it is: a liberating approach to life in the Spirit.

Questions Worth Asking
Read Ecclesiastes 7:15-18. Ask the following questions.

Questions
➤ How would you respond to a friend who complains, “Life isn’t fair”?
➤ What answers have you heard to the question of why good people sometimes suffer and bad people sometimes prosper? Which answers seem most satisfactory? Why?
➤ What does it mean to be “too righteous” or “too wise”? What examples could you give of behavior that falls into these categories?
➤ How do self-righteous actions and attitudes reveal a lack of moderation?
➤ What does the practice of moderation look like in this passage?

Read 1 Corinthians 9:24-27. Ask the following questions.

Questions
➤ How is Paul’s approach to moderation different than that described in Ecclesiastes?
➤ Would moderation mean the same thing to both biblical authors?
➤ Which author gives the most compelling motivation for practicing moderation? Why?
➤ In what sense does moderation involve sacrifice?
➤ How does bringing our appetites under God’s control promote spiritual freedom?

➤ What are the rewards of self-discipline, both now and in the future?

Running Aimlessly
In 1 Corinthians 9:26, Paul says, “I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air.” In saying this, he suggests that we should be intentional about the way we approach spiritual formation. Paul calls us to be self-controlled people, practicing moderation, who actively bring our bodies and minds under the will of God. In this context, our churches are something like gyms. They are places we go to be built into better “athletes” who are more capable of receiving “the prize.”

Questions
➤ With what spiritual “exercises” are we most familiar (worship, Bible study, social ministries, etc.)?
➤ What fruitless exercises seem to keep us “running aimlessly” (doctrinal nitpicking, self-righteousness, faith without works, etc.)? How can we address these unhealthy habits?
➤ What influence do these exercises—good or bad—have on your church? On the larger community?
A Way to End

The most important thing you can do as a teacher to help your class develop the virtue of moderation is to encourage them to practice it regularly. By this point, they’ve discussed its benefits and its intricacies. Now provide them concrete ways to continue in their spiritual development.

Finding the Middle

Like patience, practicing moderation is the most effective way of developing it. We are most likely to exhibit the virtue of moderation when we’ve thought meaningfully about what it means and what it looks like in practical terms.

Distribute copies of the resource page “Finding the Middle” (page 26). Lead the class in identifying the moderate choice between two extremes in the categories provided. Challenge participants to continue this practice in their everyday life to determine what path to follow.

(Note: It may be especially instructive to discuss as a group the participants’ reflections on “too little” anger and “too much” church involvement.)

Think about It

Invite participants to close their eyes and silently answer some questions that you’ll ask them. Reassure them that they won’t have to share their responses aloud. They should feel free to be honest, because God already knows their answers, and they are the ones to benefit from their honesty.

Questions

➢ Do you ever feel like part of your life isn’t balanced?
➢ What is one part of your life that feels out of balance with the rest?
➢ What would it feel like to be balanced in this part of your life? Good? Peaceful? Healthy?
➢ Could this lack of balance be the result of a lack of moderation?
➢ Are there any good reasons not to seek balance in this part of your life?
➢ What is the first step to practicing moderation and regaining balance in this part of your life?
➢ Would you commit to taking that step right now?

Resources


Richard B. Hays, First Corinthians, Interpretation (Louisville KY: John Knox, 1997).

20/20 HINDSIGHT

Evaluate Solomon’s discernment (on an A through F scale) in the following instances:

• His fight with, and execution of, his brother Adonijah (1 Kings 1:5-53, 2:13-25)

• The famous judgment between two prostitutes (1 Kings 3:16-28)

• Having many wives and concubines (1 Kings 11:1-3)

• Worshiping the gods of his wives and concubines (1 Kings 11:4-8)

Evaluate the benefits of greater discernment for the audience of Hebrews in the following circumstances:

• Evangelism to their community

• Their ability to resolve disputes

• Their ability to make disciples

Discussion Promters
• How is Solomon like the first readers of Hebrews? How are they different?

• What role does discernment play in their lives?

• Why is discernment important?
SHIFTING VALUES

Name: Joseph
   Age: 44
   Occupation: Small Business Owner
   Income: $46,000 per year
Joseph owns a local small business in the downtown of your city. The business is doing well, despite expectations. Joseph is a very hard worker and puts in a minimum of 60 hours each week growing his business. He prefers to work in the background and hates speaking in public.

Name: Angela
   Age: 33
   Occupation: Waitress
   Income: $25,000 per year
Angela is a single mother of three children (ages 9, 7, and 4) who must work very hard at the restaurant where she is a waitress to support her young children. She divorced her husband three years ago after he was unfaithful. Angela has a degree in culinary arts but hasn’t been able to reconcile a chef’s nontraditional work hours with those necessary for her role as a single mother.

Name: Laura
   Age: 38
   Occupation: Corporate Executive
   Income: $149,000 per year
Laura is an up-and-coming young executive for the big, local corporation. She is active in her local congregation but struggles to form new friendships because of her hectic schedule. She has a college degree in business and an MBA. Laura gives generously to any cause that helps or protects children but is less interested in helping adults to overcome poverty.

Name: Anthony
   Age: 25
   Occupation: Various Side Jobs
   Income: $14,000 per year
Anthony dropped out of high school at the age of 17 and immediately began working for his uncle’s construction business. When he isn’t working, Anthony is often homeless. He is willing to work but does not have much ambition or life skills. Anthony is occasionally in trouble with the law over various minor offenses but holds to a very strict code of personal behavior and honor.
WHAT IS THERE TO FEAR?

Make a list of things you fear might happen to you if you followed God’s will unconditionally.

What are the four most frightening possibilities from the above list?

What is your best estimate of the probability that these things could actually happen?

Which of these possibilities can you prevent from happening by not following God’s will—or doing so only selectively?

Is it worth it to follow God despite the risks?
FINDING THE MIDDLE

You probably already know how to identify the concept of moderation as it relates to various life applications. Stop for a moment and review the following topics, describing how each one appears when it's “too much,” “too little,” and “just right.”

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