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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.

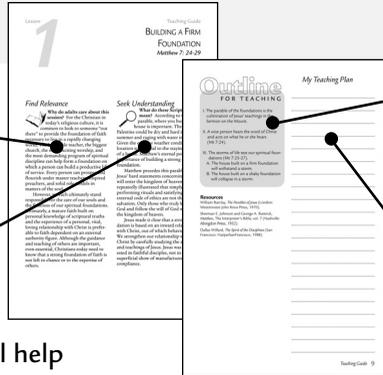
Teacher Helps

Find Relevance

helps you zero in on why each session is important for the adults you teach.

Seek Understanding

presents helpful Bible Background informations and insights that will help you better understand the Scripture.



Teaching Outline

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

My Teaching Plan is a convenient place for you to make notes for teaching the session.

Teacher Options

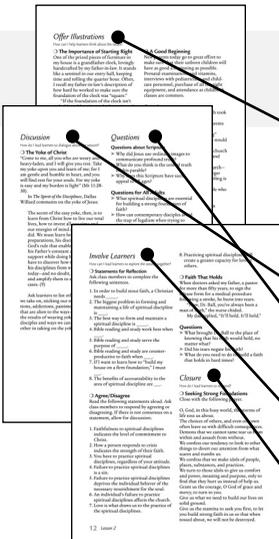
Offer Illustrations presents material that will help you paint a picture of the session. This section often presents items from church history, current events, or interesting anecdotes that help introduce the session.

Discussion provides teaching activities that will help learners discuss the Scripture text.

Questions presents multiple collections of questions for various kinds of adults.

Involve Learners helps learners become actively involved with the Scripture text for a particular session.

Closure gives you a means for wrapping up the session.



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.

EMBRACING THE STORY

1 John 1:1-10

Find Relevance



Why do adults care about this session? Many forms of spirituality are influencing our culture. For the first time in American religious history, this burgeoning spirituality is occurring outside the boundaries of the Christian faith. People are discovering spiritual meaning in self-help books, in seminars led by new age gurus, and within Eastern religious traditions.

Established and traditional Christians often believe that Christian spirituality is sufficient to bring people to faith in Jesus Christ and to launch them upon a meaningful and purposeful existence. But many church leaders have cultivated a careful and reasonable approach to spirituality, assuming that modern Americans need a scientifically verifiable faith that stands up to the test of human reason. Present-day culture, however, has tossed out the demand for scientific proof. This cultural transition allows the Christian faith an exciting opportunity to search out new ways for expressing a vital spirituality.

The message of 1 John 1:1-10 is that Jesus Christ brings ultimate meaning and purpose to life. Living out of this understanding is the key to spiritual renewal. For too long, many insisted that the start-

ing point for this renewal rested in scholarly and scientific proof that Christianity is the only way to God. In the process, the story has been intellectualized to such an extent that it has lost its ability to bring meaning into the lives of people. John helps us to see that our calling is to embrace the story in such a way that our lives become the best evidence of its truth.

Seek Understanding



What do these Scriptures mean? John's words call us back to an ancient understanding of the Christian life in a pre-rational and prescientific world. Such an understanding holds some keys for us about how our own spirituality might be enhanced. John's church has been torn apart by a bitter theological disagreement over the nature of Jesus Christ. Some people are denying the full humanity of Jesus and insisting that they, like Christ, are without sin. They are engaging in heady speculations about God without engaging in practical Christian living.

John wants his readers to understand that walking in the light of God is possible only when they recognize their sins and seek God's forgiveness through humility and brokenness.

Outline

FOR TEACHING

Introduction: Only by immersing ourselves in the story of God in Jesus Christ will we recognize our need for forgiveness and our calling to love and care for each other.

- I. The story of God’s love in Jesus gives life meaning.
 - A. This story is grounded in the purpose and intention of God (1:1).
 - B. It makes life intelligible and meaningful.
 - C. It brings joy and purpose to human existence.

- II. Through the story, God lights our way.
 - A. As the Light, God illuminates our way and exposes the darkness as evil.
 - B. To live in the light is to be true to God’s intentions.
 - C. God’s light illuminates our imperfections.

- III. The only way into God’s story is through the painful process of self-examination.
 - A. We fail to embrace God’s story in Jesus Christ when we deny our sins.
 - B. Confession of sins is the point of entry into the story and launches us upon a meaningful spiritual journey.

Conclusion: The truth of the story of God in Jesus Christ cannot be proven through science and scholarship. Its truth is revealed in the lives of Christian people and in the authentic spirituality it offers those who fully embrace it.

Resources

Walter Truett Anderson, *Reality Isn’t What It Used To Be: Theatrical Politics, Ready-to-Wear Religion, Global Myths, Primitive Chic, and Other Wonders of the Postmodern World* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1990).

R. Alan Culpepper, *1, 2, 3 John* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985).

R. Alan Culpepper, “John, Gospel of and Letters of,” *Mercer Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Watson E. Mills et al. (Macon GA: Mercer University Press, 1990).

Reginald Fuller, “Christology,” *Mercer Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Watson E. Mills et al. (Macon GA: Mercer University Press, 1990).

Charles W. Hedrick, “Gnosticism,” *Mercer Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Watson E. Mills et al. (Macon GA: Mercer University Press, 1990).

Stephen S. Smalley, *Word Biblical Commentary: 1, 2, 3 John* (Waco TX: Word, 1984).

Leonard Sweet, *FaithQuakes* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994).

My Teaching Plan

Offer Illustrations

How can I help learners think about the issues?

○ The Monastery

Several months ago I saw an advertisement for horseback riding at a monastery about fifty miles from my house. My wife and children agreed that a day of horseback riding might provide a needed break from our daily routine. Arriving on the monastery grounds, we were approached by a monk who identified himself as Brother Tim. I asked about the monastery church. To my surprise, Brother Tim said, “We have no building. The sky is our ceiling and the earth is our floor.” He identified the monastery as part of an ancient religion that he called Swaneté. As a part of their monastic calling, the monks cared for mistreated animals. They believe that God exists within all living things. Though they affirmed the existence of God, they denied the divinity of Jesus.

Questions

- What are the possible responses to the existence of such a religion?
- Although Swaneté has only a handful of followers, many other religions—both new and old—offer options for spiritual expression within our culture. Is the existence of these other religions good news or bad news for the Christian faith?
- What challenges do such religions pose for the proclamation of the Christian faith?

○ The Bookstore

Bookstores are prospering in late twentieth-century America. Some cities and towns have book superstores. As in other markets, many smaller locally owned stores can no longer compete with the megastore. Remind your class members that in the sixties and seventies, the religion section in most bookstores included works by popular evangelical authors like Billy Graham, Josh McDowell, and Hal Lindsay.

Ask the class to describe the religion section in a secular bookstore today. What are differences between a secular bookstore twenty years ago and one today? Ask the group to speculate on possible reasons for the changes.

Discussion

How do I lead learners to dialogue about the session?

○ The Cathedral and the Fair

Draw a picture of a church building on the chalkboard. Within the structure, draw several rooms. Write the names of prominent Christian denominations (for example, Baptist, Methodist, Episcopal, and Catholic) in each room. Explain that, until 1965 or so, most Americans could be described as either Christian, Jewish, or nonreligious. American religion could be understood as a huge cathedral containing many rooms. The Judeo-Christian heritage was the grand ceiling that covered our entire culture. This heritage conformed itself to human reason and logic. The only people who interacted with people of the other major religions—Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam—were foreign missionaries, sent abroad to share the Christian faith.

In the 1960s, the “cathedral” began to crumble. Increased immigration and a dissatisfaction with institutionalized religion weakened the walls. Walls between denominations also began to fade. American religion moved out of the “cathedral” and into individual tents. No single ceiling exists. People are free to choose from a variety of religious options.

Questions

- What challenge does this transition present to Christianity?
- Is your church’s approach to spirituality sufficient? Why or why not?
- Should Christian ministry change alongside the changes taking place in American religion?

Questions

Questions about Scripture

- What proof does John offer for the truth of the Christian story? What implication does embracing the story and affirming its truth have for Christians today?
- According to John, what is the beginning point of the journey toward a deeper spiritual relationship to God?
- How do we disregard and overlook our sin?

Questions for All Adults

- How does the Christian story provide meaning and purpose for your life?
- Does this meaning emerge from your assurance of an eternity with God in heaven or something else?
- What is sin?

Questions for Mature Adults

- Why is the confession of sin the first step toward a renewed spirituality?
- In the past thirty to fifty years, what changes in American culture most disturb you? How have these changes affected the church?
- What would you want to say to younger adults who believe that the Christian faith has lost its spiritual vitality in many traditional churches?

Questions for Younger Adults

- What most disturbs you about your Christian spirituality?
- What would you want to say to older adults who believe that your generation may not be nearly as committed to the Christian faith as the generation before you?
- How are your needs for spiritual expression met by your church?

Questions for Adults with Children

- What spiritual challenges do you face as you raise your children in a multicultural world?
- How are you seeking to enhance the spiritual lives of your children?

Involve Learners

How can I lead learners to explore the session together?

○ **A Different Perspective**

Give each class member copy of page 23, titled “A Different Perspective.” Ask them to read the following scenario: A family from another country has moved into your community. Several of your church members have befriended this family and have invited them to church. Friendship and a little curiosity bring them to your Bible study class. They are unfamiliar with Christianity. Your witness of love and caring encourages them to want to know more about your faith.

Ask the class members to form three groups. Give each group one of the following assignments.

1. Explain to these new friends the Christian perspective of God’s love.
2. Describe to this family the Christian concept of sin.
3. Help these friends understand God’s forgiveness.

Allow three to five minutes for each group to make its report.

Point out that American culture includes people with a variety of religious stories. How do we communicate our Christian story to people who accept a different story? Is it important to insist to people who accept a different religious story that the Christian story is the only true story? Should we rely upon the spiritual vitality of the Christian story to be its own best proof?

○ **Other Religions**

Ask class members who have attended a worship service or visited the worship center of another religion to share something of their experiences. Then ask class members who share a friendship with a person of another faith to talk about the effect of their faith on their friendship. Consider asking the following questions.

1. Describe your experience of a nonChristian worship service? What did you discover about the faith tradition? What disturbed you? What was familiar?
2. What was it like to talk with someone from another faith? Did they know much about Christianity? Did you know much about their faith tradition?
3. Why do you think it is important to know about the beliefs and traditions of other faiths?

Closure

How do I lead learners to respond?

○ **The Confession of Sin**

Remind learners that entry into the Christian story begins with the sincere confession of sin and the acceptance of God’s forgiveness in Jesus Christ. Provide time for quiet reflection as class members focus upon their sins and embrace anew the story of God in Jesus Christ. Remind them that our calling is to conform in every way to the example of Christ. The best evidence of the truth of Christianity rests in the meaning and purpose that it gives to our lives, and in our intentional decision to embrace the story of God in Jesus Christ and to live out of it.

Close with a prayer, thanking God for the forgiveness of sins through Jesus Christ and for the new life to which Christ constantly calls us.

ENCOURAGEMENT IN CHRIST

1 John 2:1-17

Find Relevance



Why do adults care about this session? Spirituality can be defined as “the cultivation of an intimate relationship with God.”

Many Christians recognize the need for a renewed spirituality. Life moves at such a breakneck speed that most of us barely hang on. In the midst of our activities, we often neglect our inner selves. We feel far removed from the peace of God.

Many people are abandoning the church because they believe it fails to bring meaning and purpose into their lives. Christianity has always been marked by a deep and abiding spiritual relationship to God through Jesus Christ. For many years, however, our culture has favored activity over contemplation. Our spirituality can be renewed by rediscovering the quiet habits of the heart. A deep and abiding relationship with Christ brings meaning to all we do.

Spiritual renewal begins by embracing the story of God in Jesus Christ. First John 2:1-17 reminds us that within the community of faith we learn to abide in Christ and to reflect that abiding through daily through deeds of love and compassion.

John wants us to understand that religious expressions can be either good or bad. Good forms of expression are rela-

tional and empowering of other people. They seek the good of others. Bad forms of expression are exemplified by hate and legalism and destroy relationships. Bad forms seek the good of self often at the expense of others.

Seek Understanding



What do these Scriptures mean? John grounds the

Christian story in the person of Jesus Christ. Christians are called to abide in Jesus Christ. This abiding requires obedience to God. John was disturbed by a belief that had filtered into his church. Some members of his congregation thought that Jesus was fully divine and hardly human at all. These people were proclaiming their own perfection and disregarded the demands of the gospel.

John wants his church to understand that obedience and love rest at the heart of the Christian story. Christians are called to be obedient, but obedience apart from love is meaningless. John’s church is to abide in Christ through obedience to God and in daily loving and caring about each other. These things form the foundation for a meaningful spiritual relationship to Jesus Christ.

Offer Illustrations

How can I help learners think about the issues?

○ The Dance

Family systems therapists sometimes use the analogy of dance to describe the relationship between marriage partners. Spouses can become locked in “dances” of anger and of intimacy. Sometimes a dissatisfied partner can bring about change by simply refusing to “dance” the old way. This change can create anxiety in the other partner, who will often conform to the new pattern.

Our relationship with God in Jesus Christ can also be described as a dance. We, too, get into routines that inhibit rather than enhance our relationship to God. Old patterns are hard to break. Yet God calls us to new ways of relating. God leads us with new dance steps. God expects us to follow.

Ask learners to describe what new spiritual dance steps God might be leading us to embrace. Is it possible that “abiding in Christ” might mean that we take certain steps in one era that we do not take in another era? For example, revivals revitalized Christian spirituality in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but are not met with the same response today. What new dance patterns might God use to cultivate a deeper spirituality among Christians?

○ The Water Faucet

In *Miz Lil and the Chronicles of Grace*, Walter Wangerin recounts a story, about a Saturday night when he was in his office at Grace Lutheran Church in Evansville, Indiana, completing his Sunday morning sermon preparation. Suddenly he heard the whistling of a water pipe. Marie, a prostitute across the street, had been caught on previous nights stealing water from an outside church faucet.

Walter hurried down to the basement, looked out a window, and saw one of Marie’s customers filling up four buckets of water. With a sly grin, he reached up and turned off the water leading to the outside pipe. After a moment of self-congratulation, he returned to his study.

The next morning he shared the experience with his congregation so that they would be aware of the problem. Everyone congratulated him for his quick thinking—everyone that is except for Mrs. Lillian Lander, the church matriarch. As Miz Lil left the service, she took Walter’s hand in hers and said: “God was in your preaching....Did you hear him, pastor? You preach a mightier stroke than you know. Oh, God was bending his black brow down upon our little church today, and yesterday, and many a day before. Watching. Cause brother Jesus—he was in that child Marie, begging a drink of water from my pastor.” (Wangerin, 47–48)

Questions

- The Ten Commandments instruct us not to steal. Could Walter have been helping the woman understand the importance of obedience?
- Why should we obey the Ten Commandments?
- Does Miz Lil think these rules unimportant? By what rule is Miz Lil living?

Discussion

How do I lead learners to dialogue about the session?

○ The Offering Envelope

Some churches use a five-point response system on the offering envelope to remind church members to bring their Bibles to church, to read their Bibles daily, to study their Sunday school lesson, to attend worship, and to give an offering of money each week. Each category receives twenty points. For example, a score of 80 percent indicates that one is fulfilling at least four of these important activities. Church members can thus make a quick spiritual inventory.

Questions

- What are the advantages and disadvantages of such a system?
- How do you evaluate your spirituality?
- How can we gauge whether our spiritual lives are as they should be?

Questions

Questions about Scripture

- What is the difference between obedience to God and following in the way of Jesus?
- What are the pitfalls to following the letter of the law? What are the pitfalls when following only the spirit of the law?
- Is there too much leniency in the name of love in the Christian life?

Questions for All Adults

- What does it mean to “abide in Christ?” What are the warning signals that indicate we are no longer abiding in Christ?
- How does your life reflect the lifestyle of Jesus?
- What is the line between giving ourselves to other people and allowing them to run all over us?

Questions for Mature Adults

- How was your spiritual life enhanced when you were a teenager or young adult?
- Are those ways still effective for you? Why or why not?
- For what purpose does God give rules?

Questions for Younger Adults

- How does your church enhance your spirituality?
- How might you need to change your approach to spirituality?
- How might your church help?

Questions for Adults with Children

- How can you help your children understand that Christian spirituality is both a requirement and an opportunity of the Christian faith?
- How can you help cultivate the spirituality of your child?
- What does your child teach you about love and obedience?

Involve Learners

How can I lead learners to explore the session together?

○ Drawing God

Give each member of your group paper and crayons or markers. Ask them to draw a picture of God. Offer no other directions; simply let them begin to draw. Do not be surprised if some people leave the paper blank.

Allow about 10–12 minutes for group members to accomplish the task. Then ask them to share their pictures. You may want to post them on the walls of your classroom.

Questions

- What attributes of God do you see in this picture?
- What were your feelings as you drew God?
- Do the pictures reveal more about God or about ourselves? Why?
- What do you learn about the spirituality of an artist from his or her picture of God?
- What does your picture reveal about the divine-human relationship?
- What do you see in these pictures that stimulates your thinking about God?

○ Embracing the Story

Read aloud to your class the creation story in Genesis 1:1-2:3. Point out that too often the church has emphasized intellectual belief at the expense of embracing the story. Ask group members to keep in mind the following two statements as you read.

1. I believe this story.
2. I embrace this story.

After reading the story, ask your group members to describe the differences between believing the creation story and embracing the creation story.

Questions

- What do you think of when you focus on believing the story? (Seven literal days of creation, it happened in the exact order described in the Bible, etc.)
- What do you think of when you focus on embracing the story? (Care for creation, the goodness of the creation, God's love for creation).
- Does “believing” the story include “embracing” the story? Why or why not? Does “embracing” the story include the “believing” the story? Why or why not?

Remind the class that embracing the creation story in Genesis includes both believing and embracing.

Closure

How do I lead learners to respond?

○ Abiding in Christ

Challenge learners to describe the ruts of their spiritual lives. What routines have they established that have become little more than patterned responses to God? What have they learned from this session that has challenged them to consider new kinds of spiritual discipline? Remind them that “abiding in Christ” is rooted in daily submission to God's laws in Jesus Christ and in daily loving that is expressed in concrete action.

Close with a prayer, thanking God for the privilege of abiding in Christ. Ask for wisdom and courage that all people may discover what it means to abide in Christ and to follow in his way.

EMBODYING LOVE FOR EACH OTHER

1 John 3:11-24

Find Relevance



Why do adults care about this session? Love is at the core of the Christian story. Our submission to God's commandments indicates our decision to live as Jesus lived. Christian spirituality, however, is not solely a journey into our inward selves. The inward journey is only half "the story." God calls us to discover inner peace that comes from "abiding in Christ." We are also called to relationships characterized by God's love. Empowered by God's love for us, we have the courage to risk our lives loving other people. These words of Jesus are foundational for this journey: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself" (Lk 10:27).

Human beings were created for relationship. God fashioned both female and male in creation, providing the first clue that companionship, fellowship, and love for other human beings was God's intention from the beginning. Our need for relationship indicates that we have been created in the image of God, who is also fully relational. We are called to love each other as God loves us. God's love for us is most clearly expressed in Jesus. Such love gives regardless of the cost and leads to the most meaningful relationships that human beings can share.

Seeking Understanding



What do these Scriptures mean? First John 3:11-24 can be understood as a spiritual treatise on loving. John asserts that the absence of love indicates a significant spiritual problem. In fact, if one does not love, then one is not of God, for "*God is love.*" In order to underscore the importance of love, John recalls the example of Cain, an archetype of hate. Cain hated the righteous deeds of his brother, Abel. His hatred drove him to take his brother's life. Hate is the seed that sprouts murder: "All who hate a brother or sister are murderers, and you know that murderers do not have eternal life abiding in them" (3:15).

John contrasts Cain's hate with Jesus' self-giving love. Jesus is our model. We are to give ourselves away for each other: "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another" (3:16). John wants his church to cultivate relationships marked by mutual love and concern. The church is to put hands and feet to the work of love, giving itself away to those in need.

Hate leads to sin; love leads to righteousness. The central truth of this passage is: God loves us. Our faith in God's love and our desire to love as God loves empowers us to act in concrete and specific ways.

Offer Illustration

How can I help learners think about the issues?

○ Mr. Oberes

I met Mr. Casiano Oberes twenty-five years ago when I lived in the Philippines. Mr. Oberes served as pastor of a small chapel on a central Philippine island. Every day he ministered to his congregation, many of whom were poverty-stricken. His Christian commitment was certainly laudable, but my deepest respect for him came with the knowledge that his body was wracked by leprosy. His fingers and toes were gnarled by the effects of the disease. His face bore the telltale knots created by its ravaging influence.

As the result of medication, the leprosy was in remission. My parents, who were missionaries, had arranged for a church in the United States to provide the money to buy the medicine. One day, his doctor at the leprosarium called to say that the leprosy was no longer in remission and that he was concerned that Mr. Oberes might not be taking his medication. When confronted, Mr. Oberes admitted that he had not been using the money to buy the medicine. Rather, he had been giving the money to his congregation. His reason: "My needs are only physical," he said. "The needs of my people are spiritual."

Questions

- Is this story disturbing? Why?
- Does the Christian story call us to this kind of denial of self?
- Is this what John means when he calls us to "love a brother or sister?" Why or why not?

○ The Mosque

Recently, I took a group of students to visit an Islamic mosque. I did very little to prepare them for the visit because I wanted them to experience the worship with as few preconceptions as possible.

The students witnessed at least two hundred Muslim men participating in the prayer service. They heard a homily by the imam, the spiritual leader of the mosque, and they watched as the men prostrated themselves toward the holy city of Mecca and recited from the Koran, the Muslim holy book. Several Muslims remained after the service to dialogue with the students. They extended a warm, hospitable welcome and invited us to return.

The students had expected to find hostility and hatred. Instead, they found hospitality and warmth.

Questions

- Why do we often expect hostility from people different from ourselves?
- How do we show God's love to people of different faith traditions?
- What are appropriate and loving ways to share Jesus Christ with others?

Discussion

How do I lead learners to dialogue about the session?

○ On Treating Others

Immanuel Kant once cautioned that we are not to treat others merely as means to an end, but also as ends in themselves. Encourage your group to think about the difference between treating people as means to an end and as ends in themselves. Ask learners to identify the ways in which we use people to various ends during a day. Think about people who provide services for us. How are we guilty of treating such persons merely as objects rather than regarding them as human beings whom God loves and for whom Christ died? In what other ways do we use people merely to get what we want?

Now ask learners to dialogue about the ways in which we might begin to treat persons as ends in themselves. How can we show the love we know in Christ to every person we meet? What is required of us? Are these requirements realistic? What might we have to change in order to treat all persons with respect and dignity?

Questions

Questions about Scripture

- What is the relationship between love and hate?
- Do you believe that hate is equivalent to murder (see Mt 5:21-22)? Why or why not? Is John's reference to hate simply a rhetorical device that John uses to make a point (see Mt. 14:26)? If so, what point?
- Is it possible for a Christian to love too much?

Questions for All Adults

- How do you interpret John's statement that God's love does not abide

in one who "has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help" (3:17)?

- How do we give of our material possessions? Are these ways adequate, considering Jesus' radical call for us to give our possessions when another has a need?
- To what kind of giving does God call us, especially when someone is in need?

Questions for Mature Adults

- How do we express love in word and speech, but not in truth and action.
- Is it possible to believe we are expressing love through our actions when in fact we are not? How do we know when our actions are for the right reasons?
- John writes, "If our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God..." (3:21). What limits us from receiving what we want from God?

Questions for Younger Adults

- What struggles with personal integrity do you face daily?
- What should be our response when we witness another person being treated in an undignified manner?
- John says that "if our hearts do not condemn us,...we receive from him whatever we ask" (3:21-22). In what ways do our hearts condemn us?

Questions for Adults with Children

- How can you teach your children to treat other people with respect and dignity?
- How can you teach your children to value human relationships over material possessions?

Involve Learners

How can I lead learners to explore the session together?

○ **Attitudes Toward Others**

Give writing materials to each person in your group. Ask individuals to list the people who meet needs for them each week. Then ask them to form groups of two or three and share their lists.

Encourage them to think about ways in which they can treat the people on their lists as full human persons rather than merely as objects who meet a need.

Ask learners to talk about the relationships between Christian people that occur in the context of the church as a faith community. Ask how we might even at church treat each other merely as objects rather than as persons. Encourage them to think about ministers, church leaders, and newcomers or visitors. How do we treat these people merely as objects rather than as persons? List responses so that everyone can see them.

○ **What is sin?**

Ask learners to divide into groups of four or five people in order to wrestle with this question. Ask each group to come up with a short definition of sin. After each group has shared, ask, “Is sin simply an action that we commit or is it a relationship that we break?” Lead the class in a time of dialogue about this question. Ask if it is possible that we might think that we are fulfilling God’s laws, when in reality we are leaving a string of broken relationships in our wake.

Closure

How do I lead learners to respond?

○ **Loving Human Relationships**

Close the session by asking your class members to close their eyes and quietly consider the broken relationships in their lives. Ask them to ponder some ways in which these broken relationships might be healed. Point out the importance of healing these relationships in order that our spiritual relationship to God might be enhanced.

Close with a prayer, asking God for sensitivity to the needs of other people. Confess the sins of broken relationships existing in the lives of all Christians and pray that God will grant healing and restoration for all people.

EMPOWERED
BY GOD'S LOVE*1 John 4:7-5:5**Find Relevance*

Why do adults care about this session? Few American Christians today are truly comfortable sharing their faith in Jesus with others. Two reasons have fostered this attitude of reluctance. First, in a world that has demanded scientific proof, Christians have found it difficult to convince people of the reality of God, much less the divinity of Jesus. The domination of the scientific world view has resulted in a kind of quiet and civil faith that views talking about one's religious commitments as unacceptable behavior: One's faith is one's own business and is certainly not something one should openly discuss.

Second, prior to the late 1960s, many people assumed that American culture was a kind of Christian parish. When one left church on Sunday, one walked out into a Christian world in which there was little reason to share one's faith in Jesus Christ. Nearly everyone professed the common faith, and those who didn't simply recognized that they were destined for eternal punishment.

Considerable change has swept across the American religious landscape. The scientific world view has been found lacking. People sense within themselves a deep spiritual need. They have begun to look to Eastern religions, self-help books, and

other sources for spiritual nourishment. Meanwhile, Christians are often inadequately prepared to share their story.

What can revitalize the Christian faith? Nothing less than the recovery of a vital Christian spirituality and a positive understanding of what it means to be "born again." For too long, American Christians have sought to compel people to faith by preaching the avoidance of hell. True spiritual rebirth emerges from the confession that Jesus is the Son of God. From this confession, a meaningful relationship with God and others develops. It is a relationship driven not by the negative consequences of hell but by the positive affirmation of God's love.

Seek Understanding

What do these Scriptures mean? First



John 4:7-5:5 is written to encourage John's church to move beyond simple faith declarations about Jesus and toward a lifestyle grounded in love. John wants his church to understand that their lives must be transformed by their love for God and for one another. This love must be grounded in their embracing of Jesus Christ. Their confession of faith in Jesus is the beginning of a meaningful life. Faith leads to a union between the believer and God that is otherwise impossible.

This affirmation of faith in Christ is the seedbed for a lifestyle of love and care for each other and God. Faith brings a quiet confidence into our lives. We no longer have to be afraid of God’s judgment, nor do we have to fear life. Our love propels us toward a life of confidence, purpose,

and meaning. We have found the Truth—Jesus, the Son of God—and the Truth has set us free. We abide in him. Everything we do is done in the light of our affirmation of faith. We love, not because it is the moral thing to do, but because God loved us so much and showed us the depth of that love through Jesus Christ.

Outline

FOR TEACHING

Introduction: Faith and love rest at the heart of spiritual birth.

- I. Be loving and faithful (4:7-16).
 - A. Loving relationships are God’s intentions for humanity (4:7-12).
 - B. Our confession of faith in Jesus Christ is the beginning point for a life full of meaning (4:13-16).
- II. Love brings confidence (4:17-21).
 - A. A foundation of love, centered in experience and faith, gives believers confidence, both in this life and the next (4:17).
 - B. This love is mutual. Human beings and God form a loving partnership in which we gain courage (4:18).
 - C. God’s initiative of love rests behind every act of loving (4:19).
 - D. Our love for others provides the only evidence of our love for God (4:20-21).
- III. Faith brings confidence (5:1-5).
 - A. The faith assertion, “Jesus is the Christ...born of God,” is the centerpiece of the Christian life (5:1).
 - B. Our faith and love are expressed in obedience to God (5:2-3).
 - C. The faith assertion that Jesus is the Son of God launches the Christian upon the life of love and obedience (5:4-5).

Conclusion: Our confident assertion of faith in Jesus Christ, possible only by the power of God’s Spirit, ensures our spiritual birth and brings meaning to life. This faith commitment receives concrete expression in obedience and love.

Resources

R. Alan Culpepper, *1, 2, 3 John* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985).

Jack Canfield and Mark Victor Hansen, *A 2nd Helping of Chicken Soup for the Soul*, (Deerfield Beach FL: Health Communications, 1993).

Ronald W. Johnson, *How Will They Hear If We Don’t Listen? The Vital Role of Listening in Preaching and Personal Evangelism* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1994).

Henri J. M. Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership* (New York: Crossroad, 1989).

Stephen S. Smalley, *Word Biblical Commentary: 1, 2, 3 John* (Waco TX: Word, 1984).

My Teaching Plan

Offer Illustration

How can I help learners think about the issues?

Dee Dee Robinson tells this story about the conversation of little girl, Miss Lizzy, with an old man who says he's looking for God and has yet to see a sign. "Mr. Old Man, sir, God gives you a sign when you breathe your next breath. When you can smell fresh flowers. When you can hear the birds sing...All of the signs are there, but do you not believe in them? Mr. Old Man, sir, God is in you and God is in me. There is no searching because he, she or whatever may be is just here all of the time."

"Miss Lizzy, child, you are quite insightful in your knowledge of God, but this that you speak of is yet not quite enough."

Lizzy placed her hand over the old man's heart and said, "Sir, it comes from in here, not out there," pointing to the sky. "Find it in your heart, in your own mirror. Then, Mr. Old Man, sir, you will see the signs."

(Canfield and Hansen, 306)

Questions

- Why do we so often look for God to act in grand, impressive ways?
- How do you know that God is in you?
- How can you talk about your relationship with God with nonbelievers?

○ Born Again

The phrase "born again" was popularized in the media during Jimmy Carter's 1976 presidential campaign. Carter, who described himself as a born again Christian once taught a Sunday school class at the First Baptist Church of Washington, DC, in which he pointed out five standards for a Christian:

1. Obedience to God's commandments.
2. The presence of the Holy Spirit (in one's life).
3. A growing understanding, meaning that all through life there has to be searching for a deeper relationship with Christ and with other people.
4. A life consistent with Christ's life.
5. An inner peace.

Questions

- Do these standards adequately describe new life in Christ? Why or why not?
- If we exhibit these characteristics, will people be attracted to the Christian faith? Why?
- The five standards do not specifically include sharing one's faith with others. Why or why not?
- Which of the standards is most neglected?

Discussion

How do I lead learners to dialogue about the session?

○ Living out of the Christian Story

Read the following story to your group. Instructing a class of nine- and ten-year-old candidates for baptism, the pastor asked them a question. He wanted to see if they understood what it meant to live as a Christian. He asked, “What if you went with your mom or dad to a store and saw something you really wanted? You knew that you could take it, put it under your coat, and nobody would ever know what you had done. Would you do it?”

The children responded with a chorus of “no’s!”

“Why wouldn’t you?” asked the pastor.

“Because it would be wrong?” said one girl. “God doesn’t want me to,” said a boy. “It’s against the law,” said a third child.

And then one girl said, “Because Jesus loves the people in the store.”

Questions

- What is different about the last child’s response?
- Why would this child’s response please John?
- Can such an attitude be adapted to other areas of life? How?
- Is this what it means to live life out of the Christian story?

Questions

Questions about Scripture

- How do you interpret verse 17 when John says that God’s love is “perfected among us...that we may have boldness on the day of judgment?” To what is he referring? Why would we need boldness?
- What does John mean by perfection (verse 17)? How can love be perfected among us?

Questions for All Adults

- Why is it difficult to profess our faith in Jesus Christ?
- How might your life provide witness to others about your love for Christ?
- What does it mean to “confess that Jesus is the Son of God?”

Questions for Mature Adults

- Think about your experience of coming to faith in Jesus. What did it mean to you to be “born again?”
- What do you think John means when he says that we are to be “born of God?”
- What does it mean to follow Jesus?

Questions for Younger Adults

- Who do you consider a good example of a Christian?
- How is living out of the Christian story different from following rules?
- How would you talk to a friend about your relationship with God?

Questions for Adults with Children

- How do we help our children understand being “born of God?”
- What evidence might your children see in your life that would foster their desire to follow Jesus?

Involve Learners

How can I lead learners to explore the session together?

○ What did Jesus really teach?

Ask the class to form groups of four or five. Give each group pencil, paper, and a copy of page 24 of this teaching guide. In the first column on the page, ask them to identify the five most important teachings of Jesus. Ask them to support their choices with scriptural references and to give reasons they think these statements are of utmost importance. Then ask the groups to identify how these teachings are being practiced by Christians today. When the small groups have completed their work, ask the following questions of the large group.

Questions

- Where do you see evidence of Christians practicing the teachings of Jesus?
- In what areas are we failing to communicate the importance of these teachings?
- Why do we support some teachings and ignore others?
- How can we better practice the teachings of Jesus?
- What will you do this week to share the teachings of Jesus?

○ The “Dreaming” Session

Ask your group to imagine that they are participating in a church “Dreaming” session. Church members are sharing their hopes and dreams for the church’s future. Several people have expressed concern that the church’s missions and ministry efforts are reaching only other Christians. Others are concerned that many members are not comfortable sharing their faith in Jesus with others.

Have your class form at least two groups to *dream* of possible solutions to these concerns. Allow time for the small groups share their ideas with the larger group. Ask how these ideas could be carried out in your church.

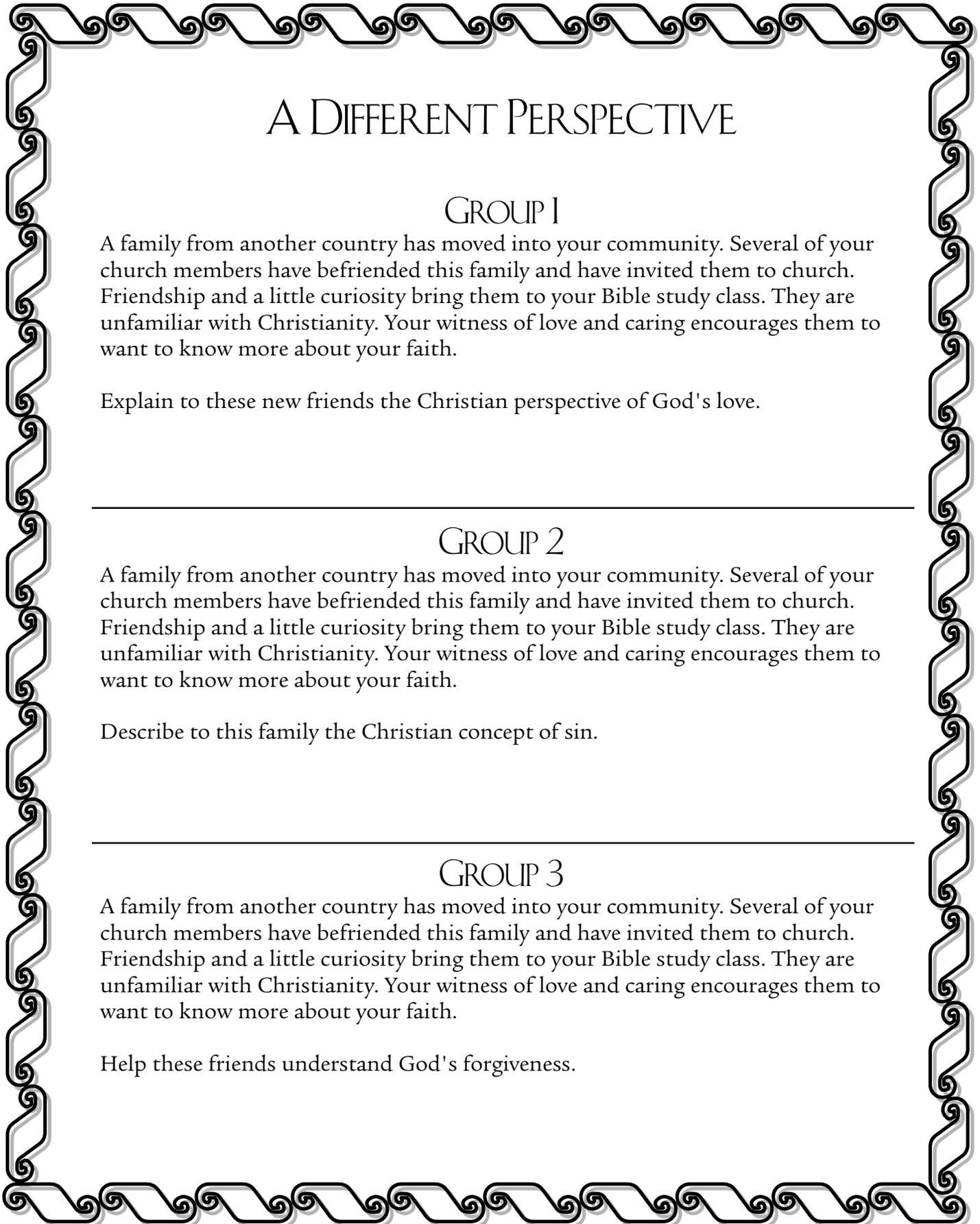
Closure

How do I lead learners to respond?

○ Being Born Again

Challenge learners to think again about the meaning of spiritual birth. Remind them that spiritual perfection is a continuing dynamic process of maturing and growing, not something we attain and then forget. The study of 1 John has taught us that our calling as Christians is to follow Jesus Christ and to live life out of his story. Challenge each other to live in a way that others will notice the path chosen.

Close with a prayer, asking God for strength and courage to live life out of the Christian story.



A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE

GROUP 1

A family from another country has moved into your community. Several of your church members have befriended this family and have invited them to church. Friendship and a little curiosity bring them to your Bible study class. They are unfamiliar with Christianity. Your witness of love and caring encourages them to want to know more about your faith.

Explain to these new friends the Christian perspective of God's love.

GROUP 2

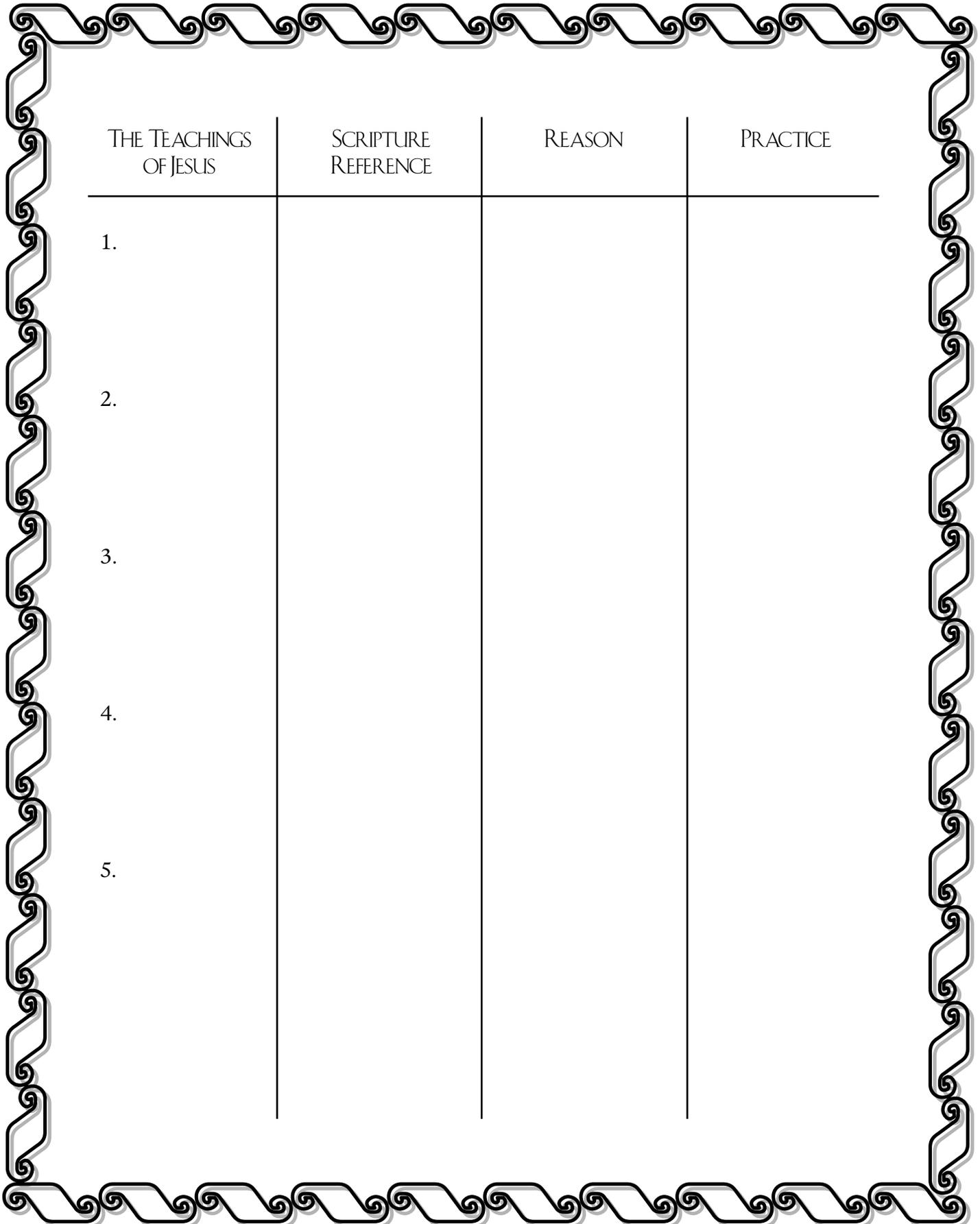
A family from another country has moved into your community. Several of your church members have befriended this family and have invited them to church. Friendship and a little curiosity bring them to your Bible study class. They are unfamiliar with Christianity. Your witness of love and caring encourages them to want to know more about your faith.

Describe to this family the Christian concept of sin.

GROUP 3

A family from another country has moved into your community. Several of your church members have befriended this family and have invited them to church. Friendship and a little curiosity bring them to your Bible study class. They are unfamiliar with Christianity. Your witness of love and caring encourages them to want to know more about your faith.

Help these friends understand God's forgiveness.



THE TEACHINGS OF JESUS	SCRIPTURE REFERENCE	REASON	PRACTICE
1.			
2.			
3.			
4.			
5.			