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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.

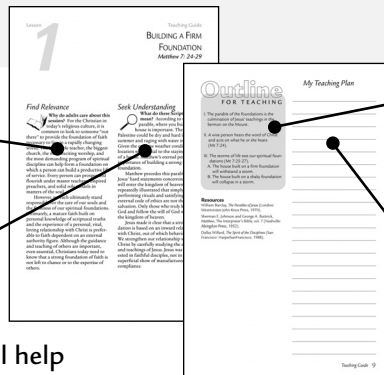
Teacher Helps

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.

PUTTING FIRST THINGS FIRST

John 15:1-17

Find Relevance



Why do adults care about this session? Even in a world that values preparation and excellence, one's spiritual life is often left to chance, put off, or ignored. Sometimes, individuals know that they "should" practice spiritual disciplines, yet they resist. Others follow rigid patterns and become legalistic in their practice. Now and then, there is that rare person who finds the healthy balance in nurturing the soul and giving to others in the name of Christ. The care of one's soul is the most important challenge of the Christian, and that care requires attention and intention. Neglecting the care of the soul is costly beyond measure.

This session encourages spiritual practice based on nurturing a relationship with Christ as the way to live an abundant life. It focuses on the opportunity and privilege of a relationship with God, from which all else flows, instead of obligation and duty.

Seek Understanding



What do these Scriptures mean? The writer of this Gospel, "the one whom Jesus loved," not only recorded the events of Jesus' life and work, but also tried to interpret their deepest meanings. The teachings in John 13–17, and especially in John 15, are worthy of a lifetime of exploration.

"Abiding in Christ," or living in union with Christ, is the key to the abundant life that Jesus promised (see Jn 15:4). It is also the key to effective discipleship. Learning to abide in Christ is the next step after our choice to follow him, and it leads naturally to obeying his command to "go and make disciples." Abiding in Christ is the practice that anchors us so that we can receive what we need to live as Jesus did. It is the practice that makes it possible for disciples to love each other as Christ has loved.

Outline

FOR TEACHING

My Teaching Plan

I. Abiding in Christ, as the branches abide in the vine, describes the disciple's life with Christ (15:1-8).

- A. Abiding in Christ assures fruitfulness and productivity.
- B. God prunes and cares for the vine.
- C. Apart from the vine, there is no fruit.

II. Abiding in Christ extends Christ's love into the world (15:9-17).

- A. Love begins with God and comes to the believer through Christ, who is the vine.
- B. Remaining in God's love is a commandment.
- C. Loving each other is the essential task of the believer.

III. Abiding in Christ is living a radical citizenship that often creates tension with other priorities.

Resources

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Touchstone, 1995).

Richard Foster and James Bryan Smith, eds., *Devotional Classics* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990).

Wilbert F. Howard and Arthur John Gossip, *John*, The Interpreter's Bible, vol. 8 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1952).

Andrew Murray, *Abide in Christ* (Westwood NJ: Barbour and Company, 1985).

Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1988).

Offer Illustrations

How can I help learners think about the issues?

○ Abiding in Christ

In *Abide in Christ*, Andrew Murray suggested that followers of Jesus may not truly know what it means to live in relationship with him. He wrote,

While trusting in their Savior for pardon and for help, and seeking to some extent to obey Him, they have hardly realized to what closeness of union, to what intimacy of fellowship, to what wondrous oneness of life and interest He invited them when he said, “Abide in me.” This is not only an unspeakable loss to themselves, but the Church and the world suffer in what they lose. (5)

Questions

- How much of Christ do you think contemporary church members want?
- How much does the average church member know about the facts of Jesus’ life?
- What would be the evidence that contemporary church members have a vital personal relationship with Christ?
- What kind of process or program would help disciples learn how to abide in Christ?
- Why do people resist abiding in Christ?

○ The Cost of Nondiscipleship

The challenge and obligation of every Christian is to reassess his or her level of commitment to discipleship. In the assessment, it is important to consider the cost of “nondiscipleship” to the individual, the church, and the world. We must also consider how the tendency to seek easy answers, quick fixes, and feel-good solutions prevents and inhibits the hard work of honest evaluation, long-term solutions, and rigorous truth-telling about the state of discipleship.

Dallas Willard wrote,

Nondiscipleship costs abiding peace, a life penetrated throughout by love, faith that sees everything in the light of God’s overriding governance for good, hopefulness that stands firm in the most discouraging of circumstances, power to do what is right and withstand the forces of evil. In short, it costs exactly that abundance of life Jesus said he came to bring (Jn 10:10). (16)

Questions

- What is the evidence of nondiscipleship in the church?
- What is the cost, over time, of continued nondiscipleship?
- What keeps people from true discipleship?
- How do people collude to perpetuate “cheap grace” (see Bonhoeffer)? How does “cheap grace” block the richness of real grace?

Discussion

How do I lead learners to dialogue about the session?

○ As a Vine Is to a Branch

In John 15, Jesus uses a familiar image, the vine and the branch, to illustrate the closeness between the individual and him, closeness made possible by the Holy Spirit.

Jesus used this image to create a picture in the imaginations of the disciples that connected them with something common in their lives. He wanted the disciples to understand that life with him could be as natural as what they saw in God's creation. He wanted to assure them that because of their relationship with him, all they needed would flow into them as surely as the life of the vine flows into the branches. They would produce fruit consistent with the vine.

Explain that synonyms for "abiding" are "dwelling," "living," and "resting," yet we are often known to live in fear, conflict, doubt, guilt, anxiety, anger, and shame. Ask learners to imagine themselves connected to Christ as a vine is to a branch. Then discuss how abiding in Christ could alleviate much of the conflict in our lives, replacing it with peace.

Questions

Questions about Scripture

- How are abiding in Christ and love related?
- What are the practical implications of this passage?
- What might be a more contemporary image for the vine and the branches?

Questions for All Adults

- What habits or practices would you have to adopt to live the kind of life Jesus described?
- What are the risks of taking this "abiding" seriously?
- What are the costs of not abiding in Christ?

Questions for Mature Adults

- What practices have helped you to abide in Christ?
- How has your life been more difficult when you did not abide in Christ, and easier when you did?
- What kind of mentor are you for younger disciples?

Questions for Younger Adults

- If you were seeking a mentor for your "abiding life," what qualities would you look for in that person?
- How can you avoid legalism in practicing the spiritual disciplines?
- Do you think it is worthwhile to live in a personal, vital love relationship with Jesus in today's world?

Questions for Adults with Children

- What children learn from adults is "caught" as much as "taught." How can your children learn to abide in Christ from your life and your words?
- How would you describe the abiding life to your child?

Involve Learners

How can I lead learners to explore the session together?

○ **Discerning Differences**

Form groups of four or five and ask learners to determine the difference between the words in the following list.

- religion and spirituality
- doctrine and relationship
- prayer and meditation
- spiritual discipline as a duty and spiritual discipline as an opportunity
- being a church member and being a follower of Christ
- being saved and abiding in Christ

Questions

- What are the benefits of abiding in Christ?
- What are your excuses for not practicing spiritual disciplines?
- Do you think you can love others if you aren't receiving the love of Christ? Explain.

○ **Practicing the Presence of Christ**

Ask class members to imagine themselves alone and secure someplace in nature. Then read aloud the following.

Imagine that as you sit in this peaceful place, you see a figure approaching. When you look closely, you realize it is Jesus, and then you hear him call your name.

As Jesus walks toward you, notice how you feel. Do you welcome him, or do you want to run away? Are you comfortable with him?

As he approaches you, notice the delight in his face at seeing you. He looks at you as he would look at an old, trusted friend, a friend with whom he has spent a lot of time.

Picture the two of you sitting down and talking over the events of your life. Notice how carefully and intently he listens to everything you say.

As the two of you come to the end of this visit, imagine that he says to you, "I will never leave you or forsake you."

As you ponder that truth, picture yourself going back to your home and workplace, with Jesus beside you. Does it make a difference in the way you relate to others, knowing he is with you?

When you go to worship, imagine that he is sitting beside you. How does that change your behavior or the depth of your worship?

Questions

- How did it feel for Jesus to be with you?
- How can you foster this sense of Jesus' presence?

Encourage your class members to journal about this experience. Ask them to imagine Jesus' presence with them each day in the coming week and to notice the difference that his presence makes.

Closure

How do I lead learners to respond?

○ **Presence in Everyday Living**

Brother Lawrence's assignment was the monastery kitchen. Instead of resenting that he was not assigned some more important work for God, he chose to practice the presence of Christ as he peeled potatoes and did other mundane tasks in the monastery kitchen. For centuries, his example has been a lesson for seekers of God. By the mysterious work of the Holy Spirit, Christ can become present to anyone who is willing to notice his presence in the ordinary and mundane tasks of life.

Remind class members that just as life from the vine flows silently into the branches, so the life of Christ flows into those who take seriously the disciplines of abiding in Christ. Invite class members to consider making abiding in Christ the foundation of their spiritual disciplines.

2

BUILDING A FIRM FOUNDATION

Matthew 7: 24-29

Find Relevance



Why do adults care about this session? For the Christian in today's religious culture, it is common to look to someone "out there" to provide the foundation of faith necessary to live in a rapidly changing world. The best Bible teacher, the biggest church, the most exciting worship, and the most demanding program of spiritual discipline can help form a foundation on which a person can build a productive life of service. Every person can prosper and flourish under master teachers, inspired preachers, and solid role models in matters of the soul.

However, we each ultimately stand responsible for the care of our souls and the firmness of our spiritual foundations. Ultimately, a mature faith built on personal knowledge of scriptural truths and the experience of a personal, vital, loving relationship with Christ is preferable to faith dependent on an external authority figure. Although the guidance and teaching of others are important, even essential, Christians today need to know that a strong foundation of faith is not left to chance or to the expertise of others.

Seek Understanding



What do these Scriptures mean? According to today's parable, where you build your house is important. The land in Palestine could be dry and hard in the summer and raging with water in the fall. Given the extreme weather conditions, location was crucial to the staying power of a house. Matthew's eternal point is the importance of building a strong spiritual foundation.

Matthew precedes this parable with Jesus' hard statements concerning who will enter the kingdom of heaven. Jesus repeatedly illustrated that simply performing rituals and satisfying an external code of ethics are not the way to salvation. Only those who truly know God and follow the will of God will enter the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus made it clear that a strong foundation is based on an inward relationship with Christ, out of which behavior flows. We strengthen our relationship with Christ by carefully studying the actions and teachings of Jesus. Jesus was interested in faithful disciples, not in a superficial show of manufactured compliance.

Outline

FOR TEACHING

My Teaching Plan

- I. The parable of the foundations is the culmination of Jesus' teachings in the Sermon on the Mount.
- II. A wise person hears the word of Christ and acts on what he or she hears (Mt 7:24).
- III. The storms of life test our spiritual foundations (Mt 7:25-27).
 - A. The house built on a firm foundation will withstand a storm.
 - B. The house built on a shaky foundation will collapse in a storm.

Resources

William Barclay, *The Parables of Jesus* (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 1970).

Sherman E. Johnson and George A. Buttrick, *Matthew*, The Interpreter's Bible, vol. 7 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1952).

Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1988).

Offer Illustrations

How can I help learners think about the issues?

○ The Importance of Starting Right

One of the prized pieces of furniture in my house is a grandfather clock, lovingly handcrafted by my father-in-law. It stands like a sentinel in our entry hall, keeping time and tolling the quarter hour. Often, I recall my father-in-law's description of how hard he worked to make sure the foundation of the clock was "square."

"If the foundation of the clock isn't right," he told us, "your clock won't work. It won't keep time right and it won't chime right. If it isn't square at the start, it won't be square all the way up the clock."

I related my father-in-law's words to a guest in our home, a man who had been through a painful divorce. Immediately, our guest made an association with his own life, saying, "Our marriage was wrong from the start. It was built on the wrong foundation. It didn't square up with anything of value from the beginning, and so it couldn't work, no matter how hard we tried."

Questions

- What other parts of life need a firm foundation in order to "chime"?
- Is it possible to repair the foundations of life—a marriage, a church, a business, a movement—if the basic, beginning premises are not "square"?
- What are the symptoms of a weak foundation in a person's life or in the life of an organization?

○ A Good Beginning

New parents today go to great effort to make sure that their unborn children will have as good a beginning as possible. Prenatal examinations and vitamins, interviews with pediatricians and child-care personnel, purchase of all the right equipment, and attendance at childbirth classes are common.

Questions

- What would happen if the church took the birthing and nurture of new Christians as seriously as new parents take the birthing of a baby?
- If you were designing a "birthing" process for new Christians, what would you include?
- What could be the benefits for a church that takes seriously the nurture and care of its new members?
- What is the cost to the whole church—both the local church and the larger church—when this kind of discipling is not taken seriously?
- How would you choose the people who would be the nurturers of new Christians?
- What characteristics reveal a firm spiritual foundation?

Discussion

How do I lead learners to dialogue about the session?

○ The Yoke of Christ

“Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Mt 11:28-30).

In *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, Dallas Willard comments on the yoke of Jesus:

The secret of the easy yoke, then, is to learn from Christ how to live our total lives, how to invest all our time and our energies of mind and body as he did. We must learn how to follow his preparations, his disciplines for life in God’s rule that enabled him to receive his Father’s constant and effective support while doing his will. We have to discover how to enter into his disciplines from where we stand today—and no doubt, how to extend and amplify them to suit our needy cases. (9)

Ask learners to list other “yokes” that we take on, sticking our necks in obligations, addictions, pastimes, and attitudes that are alien to the ways of Jesus. Discuss the results of wearing yokes that do not fit disciples and ways we can support each other in taking on the yoke of Christ.

Questions

Questions about Scripture

- Why did Jesus use ordinary images to communicate profound truth?
- What do you think is the central truth of this parable?
- Why does this Scripture have such appeal to all ages?

Questions for All Adults

- What spiritual disciplines are essential for building a strong foundation of faith?
- How can contemporary disciples avoid the trap of legalism when trying to follow the spiritual disciplines?
- What purpose does accountability to other Christians serve in the development of a mature faith? What are the dangers of accountability?

Questions for Mature Adults

- What benefits have you experienced from practicing spiritual disciplines?
- What areas of your spiritual life need strengthening?
- Whom could you help build a strong spiritual foundation?

Questions for Younger Adults

- What do you need from your church to help you develop spiritual discipline?
- What is your responsibility in building a firm faith foundation?
- What value do you see in developing strong disciplines? Is it worth the cost?

Questions for Adults with Children

- What spiritual disciplines are your children learning from you?
- When your children are grown, what do you want them to say about your life of faith?

Involve Learners

How can I lead learners to explore the session together?

○ Statements for Reflection

Ask class members to complete the following sentences.

1. In order to build stout faith, a Christian needs _____.
2. The biggest problem in forming and maintaining a life of spiritual discipline is _____.
3. The best way to form and maintain a spiritual discipline is _____.
4. Bible reading and study work best when _____.
5. Bible reading and study serve the purpose of _____.
6. Bible reading and study are counter-productive to faith when _____.
7. If I want to learn how to “build my house on a firm foundation,” I must _____.
8. The benefits of accountability in the area of spiritual discipline are _____.

○ Agree/Disagree

Read the following statements aloud. Ask class members to respond by agreeing or disagreeing. If there is not consensus on a statement, allow for discussion.

1. Faithfulness to spiritual disciplines indicates the level of commitment to Christ.
2. How a person responds to crisis indicates the strength of their faith.
3. You have to practice spiritual disciplines, regardless of your attitude.
4. Failure to practice spiritual disciplines is a sin.
5. Failure to practice spiritual disciplines deprives the individual believer of the necessary nourishment for the soul.
6. An individual’s failure to practice spiritual disciplines affects the church.
7. Love is what draws us to the practice of the spiritual disciplines.

8. Practicing spiritual disciplines will create a greater capacity for loving others.

○ Faith That Holds

When doctors asked my father, a pastor for more than fifty years, to sign the release form for a medical procedure following a stroke, he burst into tears.

“Now, Dr. Ball, you’ve always been a man of faith,” the nurse chided.

My dad replied, “It’ll hold. It’ll hold.”

Questions

- What brought Dr. Ball to the place of knowing that his faith would hold, no matter what?
- Did his tears negate his faith?
- What do you need to do to build a faith that holds in hard times?

Closure

How do I lead learners to respond?

○ Seeking Strong Foundations

Close with the following prayer.

O, God, in this busy world, the storms of life toss us about.

The choices of others, and even our own often leave us with difficult consequences. Demons that we cannot tame tear us from within and assault from without.

We confess our tendency to look to other things to divert our attention from what scares and numbs us.

We confess that we make idols of people, places, substances, and practices.

We turn to those idols to give us comfort and power, meaning and purpose, only to find that they hurt us instead of help us.

Grant us the courage, O God of grace and mercy, to turn to you.

Give us what we need to build our lives on solid ground.

Give us the stamina to seek you first, to let you build strong faith in us so that when tossed about, we will not be destroyed.

TAKING INVENTORY

Matthew 12:33-35; 7:1-5; 23:25-28

Find Relevance



Why do adults care about this session? We all make mistakes. Every day, Christians make choices that miss the mark of God's high calling. Therefore, it is crucial that we effectively manage our failures, character defects, and sins. It is important to have a process by which mercy, grace, forgiveness, and restoration can take place.

Socrates and Plato have been attributed with these words: "The unexamined life is not worth living." Regardless of their origin, these words make an important point: the more we know about ourselves, the better we are able to make choices for good. The more we know about our tendencies, the more we are able to prevent those tendencies from ruling our choices. Taking an inventory of our lives includes assessing strengths and assets, gifts and talents, as well as shortcomings and failures. Often when we can admit our weaknesses, we have more energy to express our strengths.

The serious practice of the spiritual disciplines calls for a serious commitment to knowing ourselves, for managing our emotions and behaviors, and for dealing with the sin in our lives.

Seeking Understanding



What do these Scriptures mean? When studying the Gospel of Matthew, it is important to remember that Matthew's audience was Jewish. Therefore, he emphasized the parts of Jesus' teaching most relevant to his audience. Ethical behavior was a high priority for a Jew.

In addition, keeping the law was extremely important, so it is not surprising that within that system evolved a concern for how all Jews kept the law. When we measure righteousness by the observance of laws and rituals, it is easy to fall prey to judging and comparing our spirituality with that of others. Jesus challenged this attitude and behavior.

For Jesus, the condition of the heart was and is the primary concern. Following laws or rules means little if our hearts are not right with God.

Outline FOR TEACHING

My Teaching Plan

- I. Jesus' counsel to "keep one's own heart" comes from an Old Testament understanding of the word "heart" (Mt 12:33-35).
 - A. The heart is the seat of emotion—the place where mind, emotion, and will come together (Prov 4:23-27).
 - B. Keeping one's heart is an individual responsibility.
 - C. Keeping one's heart is a moral obligation.
 - D. Behavior, attitude, and words suggest the condition of one's heart.
- II. Keeping your own heart requires dealing with flaws first (Mt 7:1-5).
- III. Keeping your own heart involves confessing sin and receiving God's forgiveness.

Resources

George Arthur Buttrick et al., eds., *Psalms and Proverbs*, The Interpreter's Bible, vol. 4 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1952).

Sherman E. Johnson and George A. Buttrick, *Matthew*, The Interpreter's Bible, vol. 7 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1952).

Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1988).

Offer Illustration

How can I help learners think about the issues?

○ Sin and Sin: Where Does It Start?

It is easy to name a multitude of sins that humans inflict on themselves and others: murder, rape, robbery, abuse, and addiction. It is also common for us to compare the horrible addictions and dysfunctions of other people to our “small” flaws and feel good about ourselves for not succumbing to such extremes. However, a review of Jesus’ teaching reminds us that the sin that motivates such behaviors starts within the human heart. Failing to focus on the cause of the behavior is like trying to blow away smoke without putting out the fire that threatens to destroy your home.

Ask class members to identify silently ways that the following sins or demons of the heart are manifested in their own behavior. Ask them to identify which one causes the most trouble for them.

- guilt/shame
- fear
- hate/anger
- inferiority

Questions

- What would Jesus say about dealing with these emotions?
- How can identifying your own most active “demon” help you guard your heart?
- How does knowing your own demons prevent you from judging others?

○ A Way That Works

Twelve-step recovery programs around the world help people learn how to recover from their addictions.

Participants in these groups experience the benefits of honesty with self and others. They also take part in confession and forgiveness within a safe environment and with trustworthy people. Recovering people often express a desire for that same kind of community within the church.

All people need a way to deal with their own sins. Confession of sin is a biblical practice, but one that must be handled with great care and discernment. Since confession is such a delicate issue and often mishandled, churches often neglect it altogether out of fear.

Questions

- How can the church deal appropriately with confession of sin?
- How does dealing with your own sin increase your effectiveness as a disciple of Christ?
- How might your church set up ministries of reconciliation?

Discussion

How do I lead learners to dialogue about the session?

○ The Discipline of Confession

In *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, Dallas Willard says this about confession:

Confession is a discipline that functions within fellowship. In it we let trusted others know our deepest weaknesses and failures. This will nourish our faith in God's provision for our needs through his people, our sense of being loved and our humility before our brothers and sisters. Thus we let some friends in Christ know who we really are, not holding back anything important, but, ideally, allowing complete transparency. We lay down the burden of hiding and pretending, which normally takes up such a dreadful amount of human energy. We engage and are engaged by others in the most profound depths of the soul. (187-88)

Questions

- What safeguards are necessary to ensure that confession will function redemptively within a fellowship?
- What defines a “trusted other”?
- Why is humility before our brothers and sisters a desirable thing within a fellowship?
- What prevents people from forming these kinds of fellowships within the church?
- How do we nurture this kind of fellowship?
- What happens if we neglect the discipline of confession?

Questions

Questions about Scripture

- Do you think Jesus gave these instructions to serious followers or to all people? Explain.
- How does practicing the presence of Christ, as defined in John 15, make confession easier?
- What is the difference between judging and discerning?

Questions for All Adults

- What does it take to “keep your own heart”?
- Why is taking care of the log in your own eye a “moral obligation”?
- What are the dangers of judging others?

Questions for Mature Adults

- When you have followed the instructions of Jesus from these Scriptures, has your life improved? Describe.
- How do you guard your own heart?
- How can you encourage younger Christians to claim the forgiveness of God?

Questions for Younger Adults

- What might you learn from older, more mature Christians about following these difficult teachings of Jesus?
- How might your life improve if you practiced regular confession to God and, when appropriate, to another trusted person?
- In what ways might the fellowship of your church improve if you and others took these words of Jesus seriously?

Questions for Adults with Children

- How can you help your children become accountable for the things they do that hurt other people?
- How would you explain “guarding your own heart” to your children?
- How do you feel about asking for forgiveness when you hurt one of your children?

Involve Learners

How can I lead learners to explore the session together?

○ **The Masks We Wear**

The following list of characteristics can hide self-defeating behaviors as well as behaviors that hurt others. Read each behavior aloud, asking learners to state one of these four motivating “demons”: fear, guilt/shame, inferiority, or hate/anger. Remind the class that focusing only on the more violent sins, such as murder or rape, can prevent ordinary sinners from identifying and confessing their own “garden variety” sins.

- domineering attitude
- critical attitude
- saccharine sweetness
- nervous chatter
- excessive joking, making fun of others
- extreme shyness
- bossiness
- excessive talking about oneself
- withdrawing/hiding from others
- negative attitude/pessimism
- avoidance of closeness
- substance abuse
- excessive gambling/shopping
- gossiping
- putting others down
- perfectionism
- obsession with appearance

○ **A Treatment Plan That Works**

Becoming conscious of what you do to hurt yourself and others is important, but it is not enough only to identify the problem. We must identify the sin and make correction. The following steps comprise an active prayer. Encourage your group to use the steps in their prayer time in the coming week.

1. Awareness—Become conscious of what you do and how it affects other people, naming the problem precisely what it is.
2. Acceptance—Become willing to take full responsibility for your own behavior,

neither rationalizing, justifying, nor blaming other people for “making” you do it.

3. Abandonment—Abandon the precise problem and its motivating cause to God.
4. Practice—Practice new behavior consistent with God’s love.
5. Persistence—Continue practicing the new behavior, even when it scares you.
6. Patience—Be as patient with yourself as God is.

Closure

How do I lead learners to respond?

○ **Lord, Have Mercy**

Read Psalm 51 aloud. Then read the following, asking the group to respond after each petition by saying, “Lord, have mercy.”

Merciful and Gracious God, we join with believers from the beginning of time who have come to you to ask for forgiveness.

Lord, have mercy.

We ask forgiveness for the sin of not seeing our own darkness, for being blind to the things we do that hurt other people and ourselves. We pray for the ability to see ourselves clearly and know our own darkness.

Lord, have mercy.

We ask forgiveness for not being truthful about our own sin. We pray for the courage to know and speak the truth.

Lord, have mercy.

For not trusting you enough to confess our sins, we ask for forgiveness.

Lord, have mercy.

MOVING OUT IN THE NAME OF CHRIST

Matthew 25:14-30

Find Relevance



Why do adults care about this session? Just as exhaling naturally follows inhaling, serious followers of Christ must give of the nurture they have received. If a Christian is to mature in his or her faith, the inward spiritual journey must balance the outward journey.

One of the greatest challenges and opportunities of that outward journey is to express one's calling and gifts in service to the church and the world. Our moral obligation is to discover and express our gifts in ways that energize and fulfill us while blessing and nurturing others.

The church also has the opportunity and obligation to call out the unique gifts of its members, helping them to identify those gifts, affirming them, and equipping them to minister within the church and to the world. The calling forth of gifts within the church is one of the most serious areas of stewardship.

Seek Understanding



What do these Scriptures mean? Jesus was not interested in forming disciples who would sit in a holy huddle and admire him. He wasn't interested in gathering a group of people around him so they could protect him from those who disagreed with him. Instead, Jesus focused on equipping disciples to cooperate with the will of God. Jesus' disciples were to take what they had received from him and give it, lavishly and lovingly. Jesus' disciples then and now are invested with the responsibility to cooperate with God in God's work to redeem the people of the world.

In today's parable, Jesus emphasizes that the landowner, or God, gives the workers resources and then expects that they use those resources for the benefit of others. God expects individuals to invest responsibly what God has given. Ultimately, the landowner returns for an account.

While it seems evident that God does not give the same to everyone, God expects responsibility and accountability from each one. Indeed, when it comes to what God has invested in us, the saying "Use it or lose it" seems to apply.

Outline

FOR TEACHING

My Teaching Plan

- I. God is the giver of talents and resources (Mt 25:14-30).
 - A. God gives different resources to each person.
 - B. People respond differently to what God gives.
 - C. God requires an account of how resources are used.
 - D. Judgment is severe for those who are irresponsible with their God-given gifts.

- II. Service in the name of Christ can be as simple as giving a cup of cold water (Mt 10:42).

- III. Even the smallest effort offered in the name of Christ makes a difference (Mt 5:13).

Resources

George Arthur Buttrick et al., eds., *Psalms and Proverbs*, The Interpreter’s Bible, vol. 4 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1952).

Sherman E. Johnson and George A. Buttrick, *Matthew*, The Interpreter’s Bible, vol. 7 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1952).

Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1988).

Offer Illustration

How can I help learners think about the issues?

○ Bearing Fruit as a Spiritual Discipline

Using the biblical image of vine and branches, Andrew Murray said the following about the person who lives in an intimate relationship with Christ:

Beautiful image of the believer, abiding in Christ! He not only grows in strength, the union with the Vine becoming ever surer and firmer, he also bears fruit, yes, much fruit. He has the power to offer that to others, of which they can eat and live. Amid all who surround him he becomes like a tree of life, of which they can taste and be refreshed. (114)

Read the following statements, and ask the learners to respond. They may want to question or discuss the statement.

1. God designed every person to bear fruit.
2. An orange tree is not asked to bear roses, and individuals are not asked to express gifts that are not within them.
3. All gifts need nurturing, developing, and sustaining.
4. Often, people have difficulty identifying their calling or gifts, overlooking them because they feel so natural.
5. It is common for people to let others define who they are and tell them what to do with their lives.
6. It is costly to live out of your own giftedness; it is more costly not to do so.
7. If God places certain gifts within a person, it is God's desire that the individual express those gifts.
8. The world, the church, and one's family and friends all suffer when individuals do not bear the fruit within them.
9. It is the church's responsibility to help people bear the fruit that God has given.

○ The Discipline of Service

Read aloud the following quotation:

Service to others in the spirit of Jesus allows us the freedom of a humility that carries no burdens of "appearance." It lets us be what we are—simply a particularly lively piece of clay who, as servant of God, happens to be here now with the ability to do this good and needful thing for that other bit of clay there. The experience of active love freed up and flowing by faith through us on such occasions will safeguard us from innumerable pitfalls of the spiritual life. (Willard, 184)

Questions

- How can withholding one's gift from the church be considered arrogant and irresponsible?
- How is offering one's gift to the church an act of humility?
- How are the concepts of "bearing fruit" and "active love freed up and flowing" connected?

Discussion

How do I lead learners to dialogue about the session?

○ A Tale of Two Churches

Imagine two churches in your city. Both are about the same size, with approximately the same budget and volunteer resource base. One church uses the traditional nominating system. Each year, committees peruse the church roll to find willing workers for the various positions of responsibility within the church. Then, committee members divide the lists of names and make their calls, hoping to fill the vacant places before the new church year begins, often begging people to do a job “just this one year.”

The other church takes seriously the power of recognizing the call and gifts of each person. A process is in place whereby people can explore their calling and gifts within the safety of a caring and responsive small group. There is affirmation and validation of a person’s individual calling and help in finding a place to express that calling within the church. There is bold and loving feedback as people explore their calling, and support as they develop and nurture their calling through education and opportunity.

Questions

- What are the strengths and weaknesses of each approach?
- What might be the long-term results of either approach?

Questions

Questions about Scripture

- Why do you think Jesus emphasized accountability for God-given gifts?
- Why did Jesus emphasize the power of giving small things, such as a cup of cold water?
- Who loses when a person is not responsible with God’s investment?

Questions for All Adults

- Why do you think we more often live to please others rather than God?
- Are the injunctions of Jesus in these verses about obligation or opportunity? Explain.
- What is the cost of expressing your gifts? What is the cost of not doing so?

Questions for Mature Adults

- Who encouraged you to find and express your own gifts?
- Whose ministry to you has been like a cup of cold water?
- What gift in you still needs to be developed, expressed, and given? What is stopping you?

Questions for Younger Adults

- What are your unique gifts? If you do not know, how might you discover them?
- What do you need in order to nurture and develop your calling and gifts?

Questions for Adults with Children

- How can you support your child in discovering and developing his or her calling and gifts?
- How can you help your child learn the discipline of giving?

Involve Learners

How can I lead learners to explore the session together?

○ **Balancing Act**

Read the following to the class:

The Church of the Savior in Washington, DC, was built on the concept of balancing the spiritual disciplines of the *inward journey* (prayer, meditation, Bible study, and devotional reading) and the *outward journey* (missions, ministry, and service). Small-group participation and living out one's calling in missions are requirements of every member. The small groups provide a high level of accountability and support.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer described “cheap grace” within a system of “easy believism,” a system in which little is required of the individual. In *The Cost of Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer contrasts that cheap grace with the costly grace of Christ.

Although many churches try, perhaps all churches, like individuals, are out of balance when it comes to the inward and outward journey. However, those who do not attempt to keep the tension on the costly grace of Christ, albeit free, are destined to slip into promoting the cheap grace of the easy fix, the instant solution, and the “church of nothing required.”

Form small groups for the following questions:

- What needs shoring up in our church, the disciplines of the inward journey or the disciplines of the outward journey?
- What can we do to increase the possibility of a greater balance?
- How could we take seriously the blessing of living out our own calling and gifts?
- Does our church really believe that everyone is gifted and that everyone is called for ministry, or only the paid staff?

○ **Imagine This!**

Ask learners to close their eyes as you read:

The main character in the movie *Chariots of Fire* said that when he ran, “he felt the pleasure of God.”

Remember a time when you did something you felt profoundly good about. Perhaps it was something you created, a hard task that you accomplished over a long time, a deal negotiated, or a conflict resolved that required your best abilities. Remember a time when you might have heard God say to you, “This is my beloved child in whom I am well pleased.” In that memory, did you feel as if all your “parts” were working together—that what you were feeling, thinking, wanting, and doing was in harmony? How did that feel?

Closure

How do I lead learners to respond?

○ **My Little Light**

Read or sing the following, pausing at the appropriate places for questions.

This little light of mine. I'm going to let it shine.

Ask: What light within you needs to shine?

Hide it under a bushel, no! I'm going to let it shine.

Ask: How do you hide your light?

Won't let Satan blow it out! I'm going to let it shine!

Ask: What is the Satan or evil that you allow to blow out your light?

Let it shine till Jesus comes. I'm going to let it shine.

Ask: When are you finished giving in service?

LOVE ONE ANOTHER

1 John 4:7-21

Find Relevance



Why do adults care about this session? It seems that where love is lacking, power and control rush in. Perhaps it is also true that where there is a predominance of power and control, love cannot survive or thrive.

In our world, there is a superabundance of power and control. Sadly, even many of our religious systems are built upon power and control. Parents try to control their children, just as they see their parents trying to control each other. Teachers need to control their classrooms. Politicians try to control perceptions of themselves and their policies. We all try to control others' opinions of us. People try to control their weight, their anger, and their spending, often falling into the dilemma of Paul when he said that he did the very things he didn't want to! At the bottom of our need to control is fear.

God calls the church to live by love, not control, and certainly not fear. However, too often the church reflects more of the world's way of power and control than the way of Christ. The discipline of love is essential to kingdom living.

Seek Understanding



What do these Scriptures mean? Many students of the Bible note that the Gospel of John is deep enough that the most serious student can plumb its depths for a lifetime, but simple enough that the youngest child can wade in its waters. It is the same with the letters of John. In today's text are some of the most significant verses about the necessity and power of love. Written to no particular church, today's text has the tone of a pastoral letter, and its richness is relevant and challenging to contemporary followers of Christ.

In these verses, John counsels about the power of love. Indeed, in this passage it's not what we don't understand that is problematic. It's what is so crystal clear that disturbs and challenges us. "God is love," John says. All spiritual disciplines must begin and end with that definition of God.

Outline

FOR TEACHING

My Teaching Plan

- I. God's love and human love are inextricably intertwined (1 Jn 4:7-12).
 - A. We are commanded to love each other.
 - B. Love comes from God.
 - C. Those who do not love are not from God.

- II. God sent his son as evidence of God's love for us (1 Jn 4:13-16).
 - A. As God has loved us, we must love each other.
 - B. As we love each other, God is made known.

- III. The nature of God is love (1 Jn 4:17-21).
 - A. There is no fear in love; perfect love casts out fear.
 - B. We love because God has loved us first.
 - C. We cannot love God and hate our brother or sister.

Resources

George Arthur Buttrick et al., eds., *James-Revelation*, The Interpreter's Bible, vol. 12 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1952).

Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (San Francisco, HarperSanFrancisco, 1988).

Offer Illustrations

How can I help learners think about the issues?

○ Need Love vs. Real Love

Read the following statement to the class and ask the accompanying questions.

It is one thing to love someone because you need that person, but another thing to need that person because you love him or her.

Questions

- What is the difference between the two parts of the statement?
- What kind of love does God give? What kind of love does God require of us?
- What is the most common kind of love among individuals?
- What does loving oneself have to do with loving others?

○ What the World Needs Now... Is Love

Read the following statements to the class, asking them to fill in the blank with the first thing that comes to their minds.

1. There isn't more love in the world because _____.
2. To offer more love in the world, the church needs to _____.
3. People resort to power and control instead of love because _____.
4. You know it's really love when _____.
5. The best way to receive the love of God is _____.
6. The best way to give love to another person is _____.
7. You know it isn't love when _____.
8. Love and fear cannot coexist because _____.
9. When love is part of a church family, you will see _____.
10. Love is more powerful than fear because _____.

○ How Hard Is It to Love?

On any given day in the United States, some parent is being asked to practice *tough love* with a child in order to help that child overcome an addiction or to protect the child from himself or herself. The qualities of tough love are different from what might be called "soft" love. Review the following comparisons with your class.

Tough love

tells the truth
sets appropriate boundaries
forgives but demands a change
stays strong in the midst of conflict
takes the initiative, when appropriate
backs off, when appropriate
does not do what the other must do
intervenes only when necessary
takes personal responsibility
won't take personal abuse or insult

Soft love

tells what the other wants to hear
lets others do whatever they want
excuses and looks the other way
avoids conflict or wimps out
is permissive
hovers and smothers
does what the other should do
lies or covers up for the other
takes responsibility for the other
lets the other run over him or her

Questions

- What kind of love do you think God extends toward us?
- What kind of love does your church practice?
- What are the apparent difficulties of practicing tough love within the church?

Discussion

How do I lead learners to dialogue about the session?

○ Receiving God's Love

Post the following quotations on the walls of your classroom. Ask your group to read each quote and then discuss the questions below.

“I do not trust people who don't love themselves and yet tell me, ‘I love you.’ ”
Maya Angelou

“Be careful when a naked person offers you a shirt.” African proverb

“Love your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus

Questions

- Since love originates in God, it is essential to practice the discipline of receiving love from God. Is it possible to give the love of God if you haven't received it yourself?
- How can the church give evidence of God's radical love?
- How are you doing with the discipline of love?

Questions

Questions about Scripture

- Why is the discipline of love so important to John?
- How is God's love revealed in the world?
- How does God's love affect our ability to love?

Questions for All Adults

- Can love be learned? Explain.
- In light of this Scripture, what responsibility do Christian disciples have in the workplace?
- What happens when Christians do not love each other?

Questions for Mature Adults

- When it comes to loving others, how do you think others perceive you?
- When it comes to loving God, how do you think God perceives you?
- When it comes to accepting God's love for you, how are you doing?

Questions for Younger Adults

- Is the call to radical love a challenge or a burden?
- Who do you most need to love more deeply?

Questions for Adults with Children

- What do children teach us about God's love?
- In what ways do you show your children that your relationship with God is based on love and not fear, love and not obligation?
- What do you most want your children to learn from you about loving and being loved?

Involve Learners

How can I lead learners to explore the session together?

○ God Loves Us

Read aloud the following quotation.

In *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, Dallas Willard writes:

The fire of God kindles higher as the brands are heaped together and each is warmed by the other's flame. The members of the body must be in contact if they are to sustain and be sustained by each other. Christian redemption is not devised to be a solitary thing, though each individual of course has a unique and direct relationship with God, and God alone is his or her Lord and Judge. But The Life is one that requires some regular and professional conjunction with others who share it. It is greatly diminished when that is lacking.
(186–87)

Questions

- The Scriptures often use the word *koinonia* to describe the “shared life” of Christ’s followers. What are the marks of true fellowship in a church? How could your church increase *koinonia*?
- How is fellowship different from partying or having fun?
- What is the responsibility of each member in promoting fellowship within the church?

○ Exploring Love

Form small groups and ask them to respond to the following questions.

1. Who gave you love between the ages of 7 and 12?
2. Who modeled the love of God for you between the ages of 7 and 12?
3. When did you first understand God as love?

Ask the following questions, but do not ask for a verbal response.

1. Who do you love the least?
2. What part of yourself do you love the least?

Some say that you love God as much as you love the person you love least. Ask learners to note their responses silently.

1. Is it possible that the person you love least is you?
2. Who needs your love most?
3. What keeps you from loving others and from receiving the love of God?

Closure

How do I lead learners to respond?

○ Loving God

Use this as your responsive closing prayer.

Leader: God, who is Love, we come to you because we need your love.

All: We acknowledge that we are beginners in the ways of love.

Leader: Give us the grace and the courage to accept your love for us.

All: Grant us the resolve to open ourselves to your love.

Leader: Give us an uncommon love for ourselves, a love based on your opinion of us—your children, created in your image.

All: Overcome our inability to receive your love. Work through our resistance to being your beloved.

Leader: Grant us, too, an uncommon love for each other.

All: Give us a delight in each other, just as you have for us.

Leader: Help us love the unlovely, beginning with that which we find unlovable within us.

All: Help us love those who have no one to love them.

Leader: We ask that our love for each other is evidence of our love for you.

All: Give us courage to love radically all our lives.