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WHAT'S IN YOUR TEACHING GUIDE

This Teaching Guide has three purposes:

- to give the teacher tools for focusing on the content of the session in the Study Guide.
- to give the teacher additional Bible background information.
- to give the teacher variety and choice in preparation.

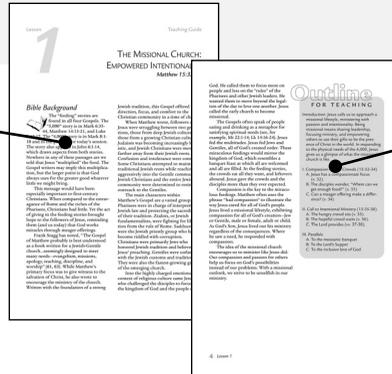
The Teaching Guide includes two major components: Teacher Helps and Teacher Options.

Teacher Helps

Bible Background

The Study Guide is your main source of Bible study material.

This section helps you more fully understand and interpret the Scripture text.



Teaching Outline

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

Teacher Options

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

Focus Paragraphs

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

You Can Choose!

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

Prepare Before the Session

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

A CHRISTMAS STORY

Mark 1:1-20

Bible Background



Mark insists that the good news concerning Jesus Christ began in the wilderness. While other Gospel writers include some aspect of wilderness in their recount of Jesus' early life, none do so as poignantly as Mark. Matthew's wilderness includes the slaughter of the innocents after Jesus' birth. Luke's wilderness is a government-mandated journey to Bethlehem during the final days of a pregnancy. John's Gospel paints his wilderness in rejection: "He came unto his own and his own received him not." In each of these Gospels, wilderness is, at best, a small part of the story or a result of the story. For Mark, wilderness permeates every angle of the Christ event.

In Mark's Gospel, the wilderness connects the person and purpose of Jesus with God's prior work. The wilderness idea bridges Old and New Testament reality and experience. Other Gospel writers also construct bridges and connections. Matthew uses prophetic texts as proof texts for the messianic mission of Jesus. Frequently, the phrase "as it was written by the prophet" links Matthew's interpretation of the Old Testament with his perspective of Jesus. Luke connects his Gospel to the Old Testament through genealogy and John with a literary link—"In the beginning" is

the opening phrase of Genesis and John. However, for Mark, it's wilderness.

Mark invites us into the wilderness because this is a natural part of faith experience. It was certainly a part of the cycle of Israel's experience with God. Israel's history moved from Egypt to wilderness wanderings to promised land to the wilderness of exile to Persian liberation to the wilderness of Roman occupation. Mark continues the ride. The appearance of John the Baptizer occurred after a period in Israel's history often referred to as the silent years. There had been a wilderness of prophetic voice for about 400 years. The Roman occupation of Palestine had been oppressive. The early Christians lived in fear. John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness.

Mark's record of Jesus' baptism follows this same cycle of understanding. At Jesus' baptism, the heavens were torn apart, the Spirit descended like a dove upon him, and God's voice affirmed his beloved status. After this moment of blessing, however, he was immediately driven into the wilderness—wild beasts replaced the dove, and the heavenly voice gave way to the tempter. For Mark, this is the cycle of our faith as well. The blessing of baptism naturally leads to the struggle of wilderness.

In Jesus' baptism, however, is an unexpected glimmer of hope. In Mark 1:4, John proclaims a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And in a rare

instance, God's voice is heard. Add to that Jesus' vision of the heavens and the dove and we realize that this is indeed a defining moment.

Some view this event as similar to proselyte baptism. As in the Christian faith, baptism was a part of the process of Jewish conversion. Gentiles who wished to unite with the Jewish faith moved through a prescribed process: inquiring, learning the law, practicing the traditions, receiving the sign of the covenant, and finally, baptism. It has been suggested that those who wished to follow in the tradition of John the Baptist were being baptized—it was a way of showing their support for his particular ministry and message. While Jesus, to some extent, followed in the tradition of John, this explanation hardly seems to capture the height of the moment. In this event, Jesus is being defined as something more than a follower of John.

In verse 11, the heavenly voice affirms that Jesus is, in fact, the beloved Son of God. God's pleasure in Jesus, however, may be a result of the baptismal event. Jesus, in his first appearance in Mark's Gospel, identifies with humanity. God's Son? Yes. Jesus standing in line to enter the waters of baptism with persons feeling the pain of guilt and in need of repentance? Yes. Matthew and Luke present incarnation in the form of a child. John presents the gift and miracle of incarnation in the theological concept of word made flesh. Mark presents the miracle of incarnation by having the Son of God stand in line and step into baptismal water with sinners. He is God, but he is also one of us.

We will see Jesus standing with us throughout Mark's Gospel. In following chapters, he will engage fishermen on the seashore, feed crowds on the plain, sit with sinners at the dinner table, and touch the untouchables who gather around him. He will retreat to the mountains for restful prayer, go to a garden for restless prayer, and speak from the cross in desperate prayer. Jesus will feel life as

we feel life, pray as we pray, and struggle through the wildernesses that we do. In this incarnational identification, we receive the Christmas gift of hope. Mark's Christmas story begins in the wilderness because that's where Christ and Christmas come to meet us.

Outline

FOR TEACHING

Introduction: The wilderness has often been symbolic of new beginnings in the life of faithful people. Adam and Eve were driven east of Eden. Moses fled into the wilderness of Midian to transition from the privilege of Egypt's court to his role as Israel's deliverer. The Israelites traveled through the wilderness to Mt. Sinai—moving from a population of slaves to a chosen covenant people. After the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC, Israel endured the wilderness of Babylonian exile to emerge with a new understanding of faith and identity. While wilderness is often difficult, it is necessary for new identity.

- I. The Announcement of a New Beginning (1:1)
- II. The Wilderness of Isaiah (1:2-3)
 - A. Preaching that occurred during Israel's exile in Babylon
 - B. Preaching that continues God's work in history
- III. The Wilderness of John the Baptist (1:4-8)
 - A. Preaching to the barrenness of people's lives
 - B. Preaching that will be continued by One who is to come
- IV. The Wilderness of Jesus (1:9-13)
 - A. Preceded by the blessing of baptism
 - B. A product of the Spirit's guidance

A Way to Begin

*This session will guide your listeners to acknowledge and embrace a different viewpoint of the Christmas season. While carolers, retailers, and even ministers encourage us to feel good during this season, that is not always the emotional wave we experience. It is early in the season, and plenty of time remains for us to be dazzled by lights and tinsel and gifts. It will eventually feel like Christmas. Today, **allow this session to encourage your class to confront the chaos they see and feel during this season.** This is the angle for the beginning of Mark's story. He does not introduce us to angels, managers, or wise men. He takes us to the wilderness, and this is where we must begin.*

○ A Quick Illustration

Runners are encouraged to refuse aspirin and other pain-reducing medications before a training run or race. While it may stand to reason that these chemicals would inhibit discomfort during a run, it ignores the fact that pain is necessary and beneficial. If runners mask pain, and thus ignore it, one might continue to exert force on a minor energy and create a major problem. Being unaware of the pain or running through the pain can often lead to greater injury.

Every good running coach implores their athletes to “listen to their body” and “appropriately respond to pain.” Addressing the pain with reduced stress, rest, or treatment keeps the athlete healthy and active in the long run. The same is true for the pain, chaos, and confusion of our spiritual and emotional lives.



○ Truthful Tunes

Humor often helps us deal with the wilderness times of our lives. Your class can have fun surveying some popular Christmas carols and assessing how they present the season. In fact, music can serve as a thread to connect all segments of this session. Provide hymnals for each participant. Have them scan the Christmas carols and locate phrases that might indicate the hymn writers have painted a picture a little outside the chaotic bounds of the first Christmas. For example: “the little Lord Jesus no crying he makes,” or “all is calm, all is bright,” or “O little town of Bethlehem how still we see thee lie.”

In contrast, point out other carols that acknowledge the chaos of life: “I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day” or “It Came Upon a Midnight Clear.” Of course, many of these carols will combine the chaos with the peace. This reality can lead to good discussion concerning the mixed emotion of the season.

Invite the class to recall other Christmas songs that support either the peaceful or the chaotic characteristics of the holiday season.

B A Way to Explore Scripture

Having set the stage by revealing the reality of Christmas chaos, guide the learners to identify the chaos present in today's text. Move through the teaching outline, presenting information about the wilderness from which Isaiah preached (Babylonian exile), the wilderness from which John preached (Roman occupation and the absence of prophetic voices), and the wilderness into which Jesus walked (his own and ours). Remind learners that no generation or individual is void of wilderness—not even Jesus. Today's session reminds us that no one is immune to the barren moments of life. The wilderness punctuated Jesus' baptism.

Our hope rests in Jesus' presence with us. Jesus' presence in the baptismal line was certainly an act of identification with humanity. However, his entrance into personal wilderness further certified his understanding of and identification with us.

It has been easy to acknowledge the presence of chaos as well as peace in our Christmas carols.

Having looked at the influence of wilderness in the text, let's take the harder step of acknowledging wilderness and chaos in our own lives.

○ I Never Promised a Rose Garden

The record of Jesus' baptism is glorious. We can only imagine the splendor of parting skies, descending doves, and a thunderously gentle heavenly voice. There is no doubt Jesus felt affirmed in that moment. Yet wilderness and a life of ministry followed that moment.

The chorus of Lynn Anderson's hit "I Never Promised You a Rose Garden" says, "I beg your pardon. I never promised you a rose garden. Along with the sunshine, there has to be a little rain sometimes." If possible, obtain a recorded copy of the song and play it for the class. If no recording is available, share the above words. Encourage the class to reflect upon the height of their baptismal experience and the depths of life's realities that followed.

Questions

- What is your most favorable memory of baptism?
- What were your positive perceptions about the Christian life and experience?
- What wilderness experiences have helped define your life?
- What wilderness experiences are you enduring this season?
- How have you reconciled these experiences with your baptismal identity?

○ Multiple Meanings

Baptism is a very rich and powerful symbol for Christians. Beyond our own memories and experiences, the Scriptures provide multiple meanings for this practice. With the use of a concordance, guide the learners to survey biblical passages about baptism. You may wish to pre-select some passages and assign them to learners. After a moment of reading and reflecting, ask the following questions.

Questions

- What are the meanings of baptism conveyed in Scripture?
- What meaning or meanings do you most associate with baptism?
- What meanings do you feel were most prevalent among first-century baptismal candidates?
- What was the purpose of Jesus' baptism?
- How did Jesus view his baptism? How did others?
- How did Jesus' baptism prepare him for life's chapters to follow?
- How does Jesus' baptism inform your faith?

C A Way to End

The process of applying what we have learned to who we are becoming is not always easy. Moving from what we know intellectually to what we act out in our lives is often a haphazard journey. For the baptized, this text is a well-worn path. Yet finding it in this place, during this season, is a bit of a surprise. As we journey through the Advent season, reflecting not merely on what we learn but on who we are becoming is vastly important. Baptism, according to this text, focuses our lives on God's purposes for the world and for us and in that order.

As you reflect on the meaning of baptism in your own life, focus especially on how your own baptism has meaning for the world around you during this season of remembering and anticipation.

○ Inconvenient Christmas

Continuing the musical thread, secure a copy of Kyle Matthews' Christmas album *Timeless Christmas Child*. Play track 3, "Inconvenient Christmas," for your class. The song is lighthearted, yet profound. The verses reflect upon the contemporary hustle of the season. The chorus affirms the distress of the first Christmas in Bethlehem. When the song concludes, have class members stand in a circle, hold hands, and each share one struggle they (or a friend) are facing this season. Close in prayer.

○ Remembering

Ask the group to join in the following litany, based on the text for today, as a means to remember their baptism and anticipate what God will do in their lives during this holy season.

Leader: The Lord has said, "I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way, a voice of one calling in the desert."

Group: We watch for that one, all the while preparing the way for the Lord, attempting to make straight paths into our sometimes crooked lives.

Leader: We look for One more powerful than we are, the thongs of whose sandals we are not worthy to stoop down and untie.

Group: The One we follow through the waters of baptism

Leader: The One to whom God said, "This is my beloved Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased";

Group: The One who will baptize us with the Holy Spirit.

Leader: This Advent season, "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!"

Group: Jesus calls us to "Come, follow"; he wants to make us fishers of people.

Leader: What will we leave behind to follow him?

Group: Lord, grant us the Spirit—that we too may follow you. Amen.

2

A CHRISTMAS
CARD*Mark 1:21-39**Bible Background*

Movement is a primary characteristic of Mark's Gospel. Whereas other gospels provide intermissions between Jesus' actions so that they can record blocks of teaching, Mark's Gospel moves at a much quicker pace. Jesus teaches, but Mark rarely records that content. Jesus stops, but only long enough to perform a miracle and move on.

In the first twenty verses of chapter 1, Mark quickly moves us through a series of wilderness experiences—from the exilic wilderness of Israel to Jesus' desert of temptation. The movement continues. Mark follows Jesus from the very public seashore of Galilee to the very private solace of a prayerful mountain with stops at synagogue and home in between. This pattern is reflected in later portions of Mark's Gospel as Jesus ultimately moves toward the cross.

Jesus' first stop in Mark 1:21-39 is the busy shore of the Sea of Galilee. The Old Testament refers to the Sea of Galilee as the Sea of Chinnereth and in the New Testament it is called by several other names: Sea of Galilee, Sea of Tiberius, and once, the Sea of Gennesaret. While each of these names emerged during particular historic periods, they tended to be regional in their usage.

The twelve-by-seven-mile lake, unlike the Dead Sea to its south, was the center

for a thriving first-century fishing industry. The biblically referenced towns of Tiberius, on the western shore; Capernaum, on the northern shore; and Bethsaida, on the northeastern shore, all benefited from this commercial business. So did families, like those of some of Jesus' earliest disciples: Peter, Andrew, James, and John.

Jesus' second stop in Mark's Gospel is the synagogue at Capernaum. The word synagogue comes from a Greek word meaning "gather together." The synagogue, created in the absence of the temple, was a gathering place for Jewish worship and learning. With each destruction of the temple, the synagogue became the sole gathering place for Sabbath and festival worship. Prayers were offered in the synagogue as a substitute for the sacrifices offered in the temple.

The synagogue also gained importance during times when the absence of the temple was because of distance rather than destruction. With the dispersion following the Babylonian exile (586–539 BC), many Jews lived a great distance from Jerusalem. Even after the rebuilding of the temple, it was extremely difficult to make the journey to Jerusalem even for the annual festival, much less weekly or daily worship. The synagogue became an important place of worship and education in local communities. In Mark 1, the community gathered to welcome the Sabbath. They also inadvertently

welcomed a man possessed by an unclean spirit. Jesus' teachings and subsequent healing of the man amazed the crowd.

After leaving the synagogue in Mark 1:29, Jesus makes a third stop in the home of Simon and Andrew. While we have little domestic information in biblical literature concerning the disciples, here Mark mentions the home of Simon and his mother-in-law. It may serve as an indicator of the breadth of Jesus' influence in the lives of those in his world. For, in just a few short verses, Jesus has entered the marketplace, the worship place, and the home. In each arena he has called and cured.

After an evening of ministry, referenced in verses 32-34, Jesus sought a place of solitude the next morning. In this place, Jesus prayed and prepared himself for another day of journey and ministry throughout the region of Galilee. These early verses have set Jesus' agenda for much of the Gospel—calling persons to purpose, addressing the suffering who surround him, and dealing with solitude—the necessary solitude of rest and the imposed solitude of the cross.

Outline

FOR TEACHING

Introduction: Movement characterizes the Gospel of Mark. Unlike the other Gospels, large blocks of teaching material do not intrude upon the transient nature of Jesus' life and story. Jesus immediately goes from place to place—ministering in various venues of life. In this particular text, the movement is from an extremely public setting to an extremely private setting.

I. Jesus in Public (1:16-20)

- A. The Sea of Galilee (v. 16a)
- B. Humanity encountered (vv. 16b-19)
- C. Transformation witnessed (v. 20)

II. Jesus in a Less Public Setting (1:21-28)

- A. The synagogue (v. 21)
- B. Humanity encountered (vv. 22-25)
- C. Transformation witnessed (vv. 26-28)

III. Jesus in a Private Home (1:29-34)

- A. The home of Simon and Andrew (v. 29)
- B. Humanity encountered (v. 30)
- C. Transformation witnessed (vv. 31-34)

IV. Jesus in Private (1:35-39)

- A. A Deserted Place (v. 35)
- B. Humanity encountered (vv. 36-38)
- C. Transformation Witnessed (v. 39)

A Way to Begin

We all experience the spirit of Christmas in different ways. Coming home is the essence of Christmas for many. Travel is the Christmas tradition for others. For some, the cold concrete of the city stimulates the seasonal senses. Others are moved by the snow-bent boughs of mountain cedars.

In today's session, Jesus enters four different and equally challenging venues of human existence. Each provided opportunity for human encounter and transformation. We each probably resonate with one more than the others. Use one of the following activities to illustrate our different "tastes" when it comes to experiencing the delights of the season.

○ The Perfect Christmas Card

Provide each learner with white or Christmas-colored construction paper. Bring an adequate supply of crayons, markers, and colored pencils to class. Distribute one blank card to each learner. Instruct them to draw (to the best of their ability) their idea of the perfect Christmas on the front of each card. After a few minutes, have several of the learners share their cards and the stories behind each picture. You will likely have an array of scenes represented.

○ A Musical Setting

Secure a copy of Amy Grant's recording of "Tennessee Christmas." (The country group Alabama and several other artists have recorded this song. Feel free to choose any rendition available.) Play the song for the class, and ask the following questions.

Questions

- What "Christmas places" were mentioned in the song?
- How did the song describe Christmas in each of these settings?
- How do you imagine Christmas in each of these settings?
- When you think of Christmas, what particular setting comes to mind? Why?

○ Backward Movement

In today's session, Jesus moves from an extremely public setting to an extremely private one. Compared to many of our experiences of the Christmas season, this movement is backward. It seems that as the holiday moves along we are pushed more into public arenas. Our presence is expected at parties, shopping centers, and family gatherings. Private moments are few during the holiday season. In fact, our culture struggles to equate privacy or being alone with the Christmas experience.

The movie *Home Alone* chronicles the tragicomic story of a child whose family accidentally leaves him at home when they depart for a holiday vacation. He struggles with fear, doubts, and even some bungling burglars. The movie climactically ends with the reunion of family, extended family, neighbors—the crowd. Ironically, how many of us wouldn't enjoy a little time alone at Christmas?

Questions

- How would you feel about some time alone during the season?
- What would you do with a day to yourself?
- How could you schedule such a time during the season?

B A Way to Explore Scripture

Mark 1:21-39 chronicles the movement of Jesus from marketplace to synagogue to home to private retreat. Mark skillfully introduces the Messiah to every facet of life.

Too often, in our own faith experience, we try to separate the sacred and the secular.

We compartmentalize the practice of faith, allowing Christ access only to what we think is appropriate. We expect to see Christ at church, but are less likely to expect and experience Christ at the mall. We search for Christ in our private meditations, but may overlook his presence in the context of family and home.

Mark does not allow us to neatly package the presence of Jesus. Every context is a Christmas context. Every area of life is open to the presence of Christ. Every place is a sacred place when Jesus arrives. Every conversation and occupation becomes sacred speech and activity when touched by Jesus. Even fishermen become fishers of men.

The following activities will guide learners to see Christ and Christmas in every aspect of life.

○ Traditional Inventory

Give each learner a piece of paper. Provide pencils or pens as well. Ask the students to record one or two meaningful holiday traditions in which they annually participate under each of these categories: community, church, home, and private. Encourage learners to respond to the following questions.

Questions

- Why do you enjoy this particular tradition?
- How did the tradition originate?
- How does it enhance your faith?
- Within each category, how do these traditions meet the needs of other people within the category?

○ Masterful Transitions

Jesus was the master of transitional thoughts and statements. In Mark 1, he called fishermen to become fishers of men. He could turn seeds, pearls, coins, or salt into memorable kingdom messages. Jesus' eyes were wide open to the elements of his existence and how those elements bore witness to heavenly truths.

No part of Christmas should go unnoticed—from the nativity scene to the cookies and fruitcake. In fact, with open eyes and a little creativity, we should be able to see a hint of the kingdom of God in every element of the holiday.

Bring several traditionally secular holiday items to class: an ornament, Santa figurine, stocking, lights, tinsel, gift wrap. Encourage the learners to tell how they might use that item to explain a kingdom truth to a searching neighbor, friend, foreign exchange student, child, or fellow shopper.

C A Way to End

*The need for more time in our culture is epidemic. Our schedules overflow with places to be, things to do, and people to see. In the process, we have given up important time for reflection on who we are and who we are becoming. Jesus' experiences can inform our lives in at least two ways. First, if we are to model our lives in any way after Jesus, then we must learn to allow ourselves Sabbath. Second, for all of his love for others, Jesus rested to maintain his own relationship with God. **As you study this session and reflect on its meaning, do not neglect the need to care for yourself and your own spiritual life.***

○ A Responsive Prayer

To close your meeting time, ask your group to stand and share the following responsive prayer:

Leader: Almighty God, your Son was born in busy-ness and called his first disciples from business.

Group: Be with me and all humanity in the marketplace this week.

Leader: It was your Son's custom to teach and heal and worship in the synagogue.

Group: Be with me and all people of faith as we gather for worship.

Leader: Your Son frequented the home of Lazarus, Mary, Martha, Levi, Simon, and others.

Group: Be with me and all families as we provide homes for our loved ones.

Leader: Your Son spent time alone with you.

Group: When I am alone—in my thoughts, in my prayers, in my sorrows, and in my joys—be with me.

All: Wherever this season might find me, may it find you there as well, dear Father. Amen.

○ A Solitary Place

Ask your group if they have a solitary place—a quiet place in their homes (library, reading chair, window seat) or outside (swing, porch, garden bench)—to which they retreat. For those who have such a place, ask why it has become their solitary place. For those who don't, ask them to consider what it might take to find or create one. Encourage everyone to seek out some time and space for solitude this week.

In addition, consider scheduling with your group a "silent retreat" during which talking is not allowed. Set aside a time for this reflective experience. The goal of the retreat is to reclaim your own sense of the divine in your life and to rest. Even if your group can only retreat for an evening, gather and eat in silence. Take time at the end of the experience to debrief your experiences.

A CHRISTMAS WISH

Mark 2:1-12

Bible Background



Having made his way through the region of Galilee healing and heralding the good news (Mk 1:39), Mark 2 begins with Jesus' return home. While we typically think of Nazareth as Jesus' home, Mark refers once again to the home of Simon, since verse 1 identifies Capernaum as Jesus' destination.

Picturing the scene presented in verses 2-4 is much easier with some knowledge of first-century Palestinian homes. Families often lived communally, which explains the presence of Simon's mother-in-law in Simon's home in chapter 1. The homes were usually mud-bricked homes of varying sizes—one or more small rooms—built on the perimeter of a shared courtyard. Roofs were typically mud and thatch. The crowds that gathered in verse 2 were probably in one of the dwellings as well as in the courtyard area outside the home. With no way to approach the main entrance, friends lowered a paralytic to Jesus through the roof of the home. Breaking up the mud thatch would have been messy, but not difficult.

As the story begins, Mark craftily places next to each other two groups of people: those who knew Jesus and (apparently unaware) kept a paralytic from him and those who knew Jesus and ensured a paralytic's access to him. The crowd's

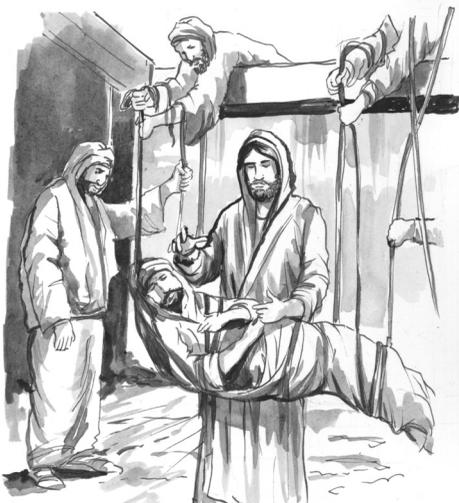
desire to be close to Jesus and have their particular needs met inhibited the access of others. There is no doubt that the care, effort, and ingenuity of the paralytic's friends is praiseworthy. In verse 5, Mark makes it clear that Jesus recognized their faith. We are prone, and rightly so, to give attention to the precedent of these friends' active concern. Their gift, however, only paved the way for greater gifts to be given through the words and actions of Jesus.

Jesus' first gift was one of forgiveness. Jesus' words of forgiveness are quite unexpected (v. 5). Mark gives no literary clue that the man needed forgiveness. This wonderful twist catches us off guard. From our vantage point, we watch the friends carry the paralytic, tear through the roof, and lower him down. We lean in to hear Jesus tell the man to walk. Instead, we hear words of forgiveness! Our only sense of his spiritual need is the condition we privately hold in common with him. We certainly did not expect such pain to be so quickly resolved. To this point, Mark has recorded Jesus' authority over illness and demons. With this statement, Jesus exercises authority over the pain and guilt, conditions we are unable to observe.

Jesus' critics did not expect to hear these words from Jesus either. However, they were not impressed with this new arena of authority. The response of the Jewish authorities to Jesus' pronounce-

ment marks the first of a series of controversies Jesus will face in Mark's Gospel. We have already heard, in Mark 1:27, that Jesus' teaching differed from that of the scribes. We witnessed in Mark 1:40-41 Jesus touching a leper—an act a scribe would never have performed. Here, Jesus performs a ritual act considered outside the power and authority of a scribe. While one could argue the theological integrity of Jesus' teaching or the wisdom of his ministry to lepers, his claim to have the authority to forgive sin went beyond the boundaries of scribal tolerance. They viewed this as blasphemy, that Jesus was assuming the place and role of God.

Jesus' second gift to the paralytic verifies Jesus' authority. In verses 10-11, Jesus instructs the paralytic to walk so that the forgiveness may be seen as valid. Within the text, this is the only reference to the relationship between the gift of forgiveness and mobility. Historically, theologians have asserted that Jesus was countering a first-century belief in the connection between physical illness and sin. Some modern scholars have suggested a psychosomatic relationship between the paralysis and guilt. While each of these suppositions is interesting, the text addresses neither. The paralytic's mobility is a gift that validates the power of Christ to give other gifts—in particular, the gift of forgiveness.



Outline

FOR TEACHING

Introduction: Every act of kindness has a rippling effect of influence. In Mark 2, crowds gather to hear Jesus teach. No doubt, each individual is seeking some blessing from Christ's presence and words. Ironically, the crowd's amazement (v. 12) is because of the effort of one paralytic's friends. They probably thought they were simply doing a favor for a friend. Instead, they provided an opportunity for a lesson in forgiveness, the restoration of their friend's health, and the glorification of God by a blessed crowd.

- I. Those Who Seek a Blessing for Themselves (2:1-2)
 - A. The people gather (vv. 1-2a).
 - B. Jesus teaches (v. 2b).
- II. Those Who Seek a Blessing for Others (2:3-5)
 - A. The friends' effort (vv. 3-4)
 - B. Jesus' blessing (v. 5)
- III. Those Who Are Critical (2:6-11)
 - A. The scribes criticize (vv. 6-7).
 - B. Jesus responds in word (vv. 8-9).
 - C. Jesus responds in deed (vv. 10-11).
- IV. The One Who Is Blessed (2:12)
 - A. One life restored (v. 12a)
 - B. Many lives affected (v. 12b)

A Way to Begin

*Christmas is truly “the most wonderful time of the year.” Although we are well past the time of lying awake listening for Santa’s reindeer, the days and nights are still filled with hopeful anticipation. This new post-adolescent excitement has as its source our children. Most of us are past making lists, for now we read lists. Most of us are past making wishes, because we fulfill wishes. Our happiness no longer revolves around what we receive, but what we are able to give. Our smiles are generated by the smiles of others. **The following options will help your learners remember the anticipation of Christmases past.***

○ Memorable Moments

Bring a Christmas “wishbook” to class. As class members arrive, have each quickly scan the catalogue and tear out one page that reminds them of a toy or item they wished for as a child and one page that pictures an item they will purchase for someone this year. Allow several persons to briefly share their pages and stories. Encourage the class to ponder these questions silently.

Questions

- How did you feel when you received the item you wished for?
- How did you feel when you did not receive items you wished for?
- How do you expect the person(s) to react for whom you are buying gifts this year?
- Is it truly more blessed to give than to receive? Why?

○ Grown-up Christmas Lists

Continue the use of Christmas music by securing a recording of the song “Grown-up Christmas List.” Amy Grant and others have recorded this song. Play it for your class, and after listening, ask the following questions.

Questions

- What kind of Christmas gifts did you ask for as a child?
- What kind of things do you hope for today?
- If you could receive one thing from one particular person this year, what would it be?
- If you could give one thing to one particular person this year, what would it be?
- At this point in life, do you find more pleasure in giving or receiving? Why?

B A Way to Explore Scripture

For many, Christmas is a season of self-centered wishing. The best of children have been trying to be good in order to receive the most coveted items on their list. The worst of children are hoping that grace, once again, prevails. After all, Santa Claus is coming to town and we all want to cash in.

*When Jesus comes to town in Mark's Gospel, the seasonal expectations are similar. Crowds gather to figuratively sit on his lap (literally stand outside the door) and let loose a litany of wishes. Already in Mark 1, lepers, the demon-possessed, and the sick have brought to Jesus their hopes for clear skin, clear minds, and a clean bill of health. As chapter 2 begins, we are tempted to assume it will be "same song, second verse." However, **as the typical crowd gathers to garner what good they can from Jesus, an atypical group of individuals has committed themselves to a selfless cause rather than a selfish ambition.***

○ The Greater Scheme of Things

Sara is training for her first marathon with the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society's Team in Training. This program encourages runners to run marathons and raise money in honor or memory of persons affected by blood-related cancers. Sara keeps her training journal online.

Like most runners who train for the 26.2-mile race, Sara has had a few discouraging days. On one such day, she wrote the following in her journal: "I'm not sure why I'm doing this. One person running a race is so insignificant in the greater scheme of things."

The next day, people inundated her with emails reminding her that she was providing much-needed funds for hopeful individuals. She was not only caring for herself—she was making it possible for many others to receive care. She's still training, and she's had better days.

Questions

- What do you think motivated the paralytic's friends in today's text?
- How far-reaching do you think they assumed their actions to be?
- How influential was the result of their actions?
- What unexpected results did their actions produce?

○ A Gift We All Desire

This story has found its way into many pulpits. If it is new to you, it may be new to your learners: A student at a local college was wandering past the campus bulletin board one Monday morning. Tacked to the brown corked backing was a simple note that read, "Dear Son, meet me at the fountain in the middle of campus at twelve noon. All will be forgiven. I love you. Dad." By noon, over fifty young men had made their way to the fountain.

We all carry a load of guilt. Whether or not we realize it, we are the source of someone else's guilt. While the paralytic was certainly happy to regain the use of his limbs, a greater elation was no doubt felt through the act of forgiveness. Ask the group to consider the following questions privately, but encourage them, before the season is over, to act upon their responses publicly. The giving and/or receiving of forgiveness will be the best gift exchange you experience this season.

Questions

- What guilt are you presently carrying in your life?
- Do you need God, someone, or both to forgive you? Would it be possible for you to seek forgiveness?
- Against whom are you holding a grudge or ill will? Would it be possible for you to forgive them?

C A Way to End

Sometimes the best gifts are the unexpected ones. *Someone who knows us well can share a gift we never thought to ask for, yet surpasses our seasonal expectations. These surprises, not necessarily expensive, are always memorable. Such was the case in Mark 2. The gift of friendship and healing were verbalized, desired, and appreciated by the paralytic. The gift of forgiveness, however, was a surprise that exceeded his expectations.*

○ Circle of Friendship

Summarize the session concerning the gifts of friendship and forgiveness. Have the learners sit or stand in a circle. Have each class member pray for the person to his or her right. If they do not wish to pray aloud, they may pray silently and squeeze the person's hand when finished. After each person in the circle has prayed, have the group pray the Lord's Prayer together (to emphasize forgiveness).

○ The Bond of Love

The old song "We Are One in the Bond of Love" embraces wonderful images of family and community. Gather the group together, ask them to hold hands, and sing this hymn:

We are one in the bond of love;
We are one in the bond of love;
We have joined our spirit with the spirit
of God;
We are one in the bond of love.

At the end of the song, offer a prayer thanking God for each person (if possible by name) in your group and the bond of love that your group shares.

A CHRISTMAS FEAST

Mark 2:13-20

Bible Background



In today's text, Jesus is again beside the sea. While wandering through this familiar marketplace, he invites a businessman to follow him. The text then carries us immediately to the home of the disciple. In form, the story is very similar to the call of Simon in Mark 1. In content (particularly the content of the chosen disciple's character), there is a significant difference. The text assumes that the fishermen of Galilee were persons of solid character. Tax collectors were a bit more questionable.

Levi's identity is a mystery for scholars. Many traditionally propose Levi as an alternate name of the disciple Matthew. Matthew is listed as one of the twelve disciples in the listings recorded in Matthew 10:3, Mark 3:18, and Luke 6:15. Mark 2 records the call of Levi, as does Luke 5. Also, Matthew 9 records a very similar call of a tax collector. In this account, the tax collector's name is Matthew. Based on these connections, most scholars equate Matthew and Levi.

Others have placed Levi in the larger circle of disciples and do not equate him with Matthew. Two major factors contribute to this view. First, the list of disciples consistently refers to James as the "son of Alphaeus." In today's text, Levi is identified as the son of Alphaeus. Yet the Gospel literature never refers to

James and Levi as brothers, as are Peter and Andrew or James and John. Also, other Gospels attest to named followers of Jesus outside the Twelve: Lazarus, Mary, Martha, Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea, Zacchaeus, just to name a few. It is possible that Jesus called more than one tax collector to follow him—particularly since we have a crowd of them present at the dinner in today's text. Matthew may have been a part of the inner circle, while Levi was a part of the broader circle.

While there is some question concerning Levi's identity, there is little confusion about his occupation. Levi was a tax collector. The tax collector's primary duty was to collect monies from the local citizens and merchants carrying goods into provinces governed by Rome. The government mandated collection amounts; money charged in excess of the mandated amount provided the income of the tax collector. This system obviously left a lot of room for abuse. Tax collectors could charge excessive amounts to increase their share of the profit.

The Gospel literature includes tax collectors among the "sinners." This identification is certainly the case in today's session. Three times, we see the dual label "tax collectors and sinners" used. However, the story does not indicate that Levi lacked integrity in his business, something assumed but not stated. Regardless of Levi's level of integrity, the

religious authorities of his faith community would have viewed him as a sinner. They were shocked that Jesus would share table fellowship with him.

This story allows Mark to push us further along Jesus' path of ministry. His response to the inquisitive criticism of the scribes (v. 17) is both the climax of the stories that have preceded this text and a precursor for the activity that is to come. In our prior sessions, Jesus has entered the marketplace, synagogue, and home. He has called respectable fishermen, healed a sick mother-in-law, and touched a helpless leper. His most recent incident of ministry was the healing and absolution of a paralytic. In each of these cases, Jesus increasingly pushes against the boundaries of acceptable and safe religious expression. In each story, it gets a little harder to argue in favor of Jesus' behavior. In today's text, Jesus has certainly pushed the envelope too far for his critics. He sits and eats with those who have "chosen" their lot in life—chosen their reputations and sins. One might argue that in previous stories the persons were victims of fate, demonic powers, and disease. However, in the house of Levi, "intentional" sinners are gathered. These are the people Jesus indicates he has come to call. These are the people whose needs Jesus has come to address. Interestingly enough, these are the people who crowd around Jesus...and follow him.

Outline

FOR TEACHING

Introduction: In Mark 2:13-17, Jesus again makes his way to the seaside marketplace. He calls and beckons an individual from the marketplace to be his disciple. Again, this is not a novel act in Mark. Jesus makes his way to a private home and is surrounded by a crowd. So far, there is nothing new. A closer inspection of the crowd, however, causes some scribes, and maybe us, to raise an eyebrow.

- I. Jesus in the Public, Seaside Marketplace (2:13-14)
 - A. Teaching the crowd (v. 13)
 - B. Calling a disciple (v. 14)
- II. Jesus in a Private Home (2:15-17)
 - A. Embracing sinners (v. 15)
 - B. Encountering scribes (v. 16)
 - C. Educating listeners (v. 17)

A Way to Begin

Jesus seemed to enjoy the world. We have already watched him meander through the various arenas of daily human existence. His movements throughout the Gospel of Mark have not led to isolation or exclusion, but rather to public inclusion. Jesus did not make hard distinctions between the secular and the sacred. Jesus truly loved all people, in all places and in every predicament of life.

Our generation seems to have drawn harder lines. The term Christian has moved beyond its meaning as a noun and evolved into an adjective. Christian music is marketed as an alternative to secular music. We've become accustomed to Christian bookstores, Christian jewelry, Christian T-shirts, and Christian schools. Some craftsmen have even begun to bill themselves as Christian plumbers, carpenters, lawyers, to name a few. With regard to non-Christians, we've been admonished to love the sinner but hate the sin, but rarely do we see much love in that direction.

*Do such separations reflect the perspective and method of Jesus? Isn't there something within us—something good and pure—that enjoys the world and the people in it? **Use one or more of the following activities to reflect upon and discuss our positive attitudes concerning our world and the people in it.***

○ “In” but Not “Of” the World

In 1977, Billy Joel released an album titled *The Stranger*. One track on that album is “Only the Good Die Young.” The song recounts the struggle one “bad boy” endured in wooing a “good girl.” The girl has been reared and shaped by the church. The boy is “of the world.” While much of his argument against her upbringing might be discounted, one phrase is not easily ignored: “I’d rather laugh with the sinners than cry with the saints. The sinners are much more fun.”

Lead the class to share those moments when they have laughed hardest by asking questions such as the following.

Questions

- Who were you with?
- What were you doing?
- Would you consider your words or actions “worldly”? If yes, why?
- Is it possible to enjoy these activities without compromising Christian faith? Is it possible to enjoy these activities and actually share Christian faith?

○ Proverbial Wisdom?

Write the following phrases on slips of paper:

- Birds of a feather flock together.
- We all know what dancing leads to.
- Eternity—smoking or nonsmoking?
- We are judged by the company we keep.
- I don’t drink, cuss, or chew, and I don’t go with girls (or boys) who do.
- Cards are of the devil.
- Avoid the appearance of evil as well as the evil itself.
- Don’t be a stumbling block.

Depending on the number of persons in your class, give one slip to each individual or to evenly numbered groups. Have the individuals or groups share how these biblical and non-biblical adages have been used to limit or stifle behavior within the church.

Questions

- Are the limits valid?
- Have they been exaggerated?
- What positive or negative message has been sent to the world?

B A Way to Explore Scripture

Jesus' presence, method, and message were warmly accepted by the world in which he lived. Crowds pressed in against him. Tax collectors climbed trees to get a glimpse of him. Sinners invited him into their homes. He obviously did not convey an attitude that pushed the world away. He walked into the world, and the world gravitated toward him.

*Ironically, people of faith struggled most with Jesus. They defined themselves and their ministries based on well-kept boundaries. **Jesus defined his ministry by abolishing boundaries that separated people from people, as well as from God.***

○ A Difficult Embrace

St. Francis of Assisi exemplified Christian love for all creation. He cared for animals, and trees, and acknowledged and appreciated all humanity. However, this unfettered love was not always characteristic of his life. Early on, he feared and despised lepers. Realizing that he needed to overcome this fear to truly make himself available to God, Francis embraced a leper. His life was never the same. From then on, there was no creature Francis could not love and care for. He stepped across the boundary that separated him from those he despised and found they weren't that despicable after all.

Jesus' critics felt he "went too far" by enjoying the company of tax collectors. Today, tax collectors are not ranked among sinners. However, there are other groups and individuals within our society that we label as sinful. Although these people may find themselves targets of our mission and evangelistic efforts, rarely do they find themselves our friends.

Questions

- Who were the despised in Jesus' day?
- Why do you think tax collectors and sinners were "more despised" than the diseased or demon-possessed?
- How do you imagine the despised felt when Jesus invested his life in them?
- Who are the despised today? How does the church typically respond to them?
- How might the church better reflect the actions and attitude of Jesus today?

○ Talking "To" or Talking "About"?

David was a product of his religious and social culture. Following a news report of a new soup kitchen and food distribution center in our town, David came to see me, his pastor. He angrily related the news story and then demanded I respond with a powerful sermon. He was convinced the new center would bring in "the wrong kind of people" and the primary beachhead was the pulpit of our little town.

David did not think there were poor persons in our church nor did he realize there were poor families just outside of town. He thought that poor equaled lawless. He feared for his children and for the moral fabric of our town.

David did affirm his lack of understanding with regard to "those people." Then, with a smile, he insightfully responded: "They probably don't understand me either." I shared with David eight words once shared with me. These eight words have created some lifelong friendships, built strong bridges of trust, and opened opportunities for ministry that may have been missed. The eight words? Talk to people rather than talk about people.

Questions

- What present group of people or category of sinner "bothers" you? Why?
- With how many of these persons do you personally associate?
- If you are not friends, could you imagine yourself being close friends? Why or why not? How might this friendship change your life? How might it influence theirs?

C A Way to End

*If Jesus lived among us today, he would likely hang out with some unsavory folk. His willingness to embrace sinners has always caused the most religious to wince, at least a little. Even his disciples struggled to understand Jesus' willingness to extend the boundaries of friendship beyond respected and expected comfort zones. **When Jesus calls, he calls us to offer our lives for others.** The text for today points us in the direction Jesus intended, toward the love of neighbors no matter who those neighbors are. These final activities will help your group focus not just on the meaning of the text, but more importantly, its application.*

○ Plan a Party

Bring generic party invitations to class. Provide enough for each learner to have two or three. Ask them to invite persons to a class party. The people need to be individuals they think are “on the fringe” and are not a part of traditional faith.

Then, plan a date for the party.

Inform the invitees that it is simply an occasion for fun—an opportunity to spend time with people you enjoy but do not see often. Hold the party at a neutral location away from the church and just have a good time. Use the time for building relationships.

If your group is not comfortable with planning a party, use these cards as prayer reminders for the next week. Ask God to bless these persons' lives and give you the opportunity to talk “to” them and get to know them better.

○ A Christmas Commitment

The holidays are a time when human need rises dramatically. Research points to statistics about the rise in depression rates during and just following this time of year. With the permission of your group, enlist everyone (or as many as will) to serve in your local soup kitchen, food pantry, or other service agency. Service to others, especially those in need, will benefit both your neighbors in need and your group. Try to get everyone to serve at the same time as part of their holiday commitment to living out God's love in their lives.

5

A CHRISTMAS
FEAST*Mark 2:13-20**Bible Background*

Mark's Gospel does not include long blocks of Jesus' teaching material. As mentioned in prior sessions, Jesus is on the move—action is his primary language. Mark 4 begins with language and a setting with which we have become accustomed. Jesus is again beside the sea and surrounded by a crowd. Jesus again teaches. This time, however, we are privy to the content of his lesson.

Jesus couches his first lesson in a parable. We tend to think of a parable as merely a story. The word parable, however, comes from two Greek words: one a preposition meaning “beside” and the other a verb meaning “to throw.” A parable, then, contains a truth that is “thrown alongside” a seemingly simple story or occurrence. While the story may be simple, it contains within it a veiled lesson rather than a straightforward one.

Further mystifying the parable as a teaching tool is its roots in Old Testament language. The Hebrew word often translated as parable literally means “riddle” or “puzzling mystery.” It refers to obscure sayings with a meaning that is not obvious. Likely, Mark's interpretation of Jesus' usage of parables is similar to the puzzling mysteries of the Old Testament. Verses 3-9 tell the story of the sower and the seed. It seems straightforward enough. Following the parable, however, Jesus shares his motivation for using this parable (vv. 10-12). Parables are riddles

whose meanings or secrets are “given” to the disciples yet serve to hide the truth from the world. Jesus' reference to Isaiah 6:9-10 supports this usage. In this text, Isaiah is instructed to preach to those who would not comprehend. The key phrase is at the beginning of verse 12, which indicates parables are used “in order that” the world may look and listen but not see and hear. This wording differs slightly, but significantly, from Matthew's recollection and recording. Matthew 13 records that parables are told “because” the people do not see and hear. Matthew views the parable as an illustrative tool to help people understand. Mark views the parable as a riddle whose meaning is given to the faithful, by God, as a gift of grace.

Following the recounting of the parable and the statement of motivation comes its interpretation. Jesus recounts what seems obvious: the seed is the word; the soils represent the various receptivity levels of persons exposed to the word; birds, heat, and thorns represent the various distractions that inhibit the healthy growth of the word. What element of mystery does Mark find in this story? What does it “reveal” to disciples that the world would not understand or appreciate? The substitution of a verb in Jesus' interpretation may hold the clue.

In verses 3-9 (the telling of the parable), the sower sows, and the seed *fell* on different types of soil. The verb *fell* is used in each episodic moment regardless of the condition of the soil. The listener has the impression that the seed is randomly or accidentally making its way to these various soils. In Jesus' interpretation, however, Jesus replaces the verb *fell* by the word *sown*. With that shift, the action of the sower becomes much more intentional. What appeared at first to be the accidental loss or waste of three quarters of the seed now appears to be the deliberate dispensing of the word in seemingly wasteful places.

Mark's inclusion of this parable as Jesus' first parable seems deliberate. It verbally summarizes the first three chapters of Mark's Gospel and the first acts of Jesus' ministry. Anyone who had been listening would have gotten the connection. In the first three chapters of Mark, and during our four Sundays of Advent, we have watched Jesus scatter seed in places thought unfruitful. Jesus has been in the wilderness. He has called and communed with fishermen and tax collectors. He has given attention to a paralytic and a leper. The seed of the gospel has deliberately, yet indiscriminately, been sown in the world. This method defines Jesus' ministry and in turn must define the ministry of his disciples. This practice describes the breadth of Jesus' grace-full hope. Every soil, every person, deserves to receive the gift of the word. While the sower always desires the seed to produce a bountiful harvest, even if only for a moment, who can tell the influence it may have on the soils and souls it touches?

Outline

FOR TEACHING

Introduction: In the first three chapters, Mark identifies Jesus as a teacher numerous times. Crowds gather—he teaches. He enters the synagogue—he teaches. He graces a home—he teaches. He walks by the sea—he teaches. He moves from public to private arenas—teaching. Yet, after three chapters, we've still been denied the content of his teaching. Finally, in chapter 4, Jesus' words are recorded, even if they weren't understood.

- I. The Public Setting (4:1-2)
 - A. Jesus is beside the sea again (v. 1a).
 - B. Jesus is surrounded by a crowd again (v. 1b).
 - C. Jesus teaches in parables for the first time (v. 2).
- II. The Parable (4:3-9)
 - A. We encounter the sower (v. 3).
 - B. We encounter a bird-infested path (v. 4).
 - C. We encounter rocky, shallow, parched ground (vv. 5-6).
 - D. We encounter thorny soil (v. 7).
 - E. We encounter productive soil (vv. 8-9).
- III. The Private Setting (4:10-13)
 - A. The parable is questioned (v. 10).
 - B. The purpose of the parable is explained (vv. 11-12).
 - C. The parable presents a challenge (v. 13).
- IV. The Parable Explained
 - A. The sower's task is identified (v. 14).
 - B. The soil is identified (vv. 15-20).

A Way to Begin

A *The real miracle of Christmas is that anyone is actually teaching or reading this session! If you've gathered to study this text, you've gathered on Christmas morning. If you have children or grandchildren in your home, or if you're still a child at heart, you went to bed sometime past midnight and have been awake since 5:00 a.m.*

*Please don't be disappointed in today's text. No doubt, you will hear the traditional Christmas story—complete with holy family, manger, shepherds, angels, and lowing cattle during the worship hour. **For now, let's enjoy a Christmas story of a different kind**—one more akin to your early morning experience with Santa, presents, and stockings. And, interestingly enough, a story quite reflective of the heart and nature of God.*

○ Sing-a-long

Throughout this series of sessions, we have recalled and encountered lines from various Christmas songs. This morning, instead of listening to Christmas music, lead the class in singing a few songs—first verses only. Encourage your group to think of “fun” Christmas songs. After the class has chosen several songs, suggest singing “Santa Claus Is Coming to Town.” You may even wish to have a printed copy of the words for everyone. (If the song is suggested by the class, let that be the last song you sing.)

Spend a few minutes discussing the lyrics of this Christmas song. The words insinuate that Santa practices selectivity in the distribution of gifts. His knowledge of sleepers and wakers, the bad and good, seems to imply that while some will receive, others will not. Our experience of reality, however, is just the opposite...every child gets a visit.

○ Christmas Memories

Ask the group to recount some of their favorite Christmas memories with each of the following: family, friends, church. Offer a brief time for several people to share their memories. Ask the group to note the similarities and differences in each.

Questions

- What were the common themes?
- What made the memories special?
- Are any of the memories tied to the biblical Christmas story?

○ Story as Gift

Did anyone receive books for Christmas? Book-giving is a Christmas tradition in our home. I love to read, so I receive books. Likewise, I love to read, so I give books. Each year, I wrap a book to each of my children. They know it's what Dad is going to give them. Each year, I inscribe their name and the year in the front cover. In each of their rooms is a shelf that holds their “Christmas books.”

Each year, they wonder why I gave them “this particular book.” Sometimes the meaning and purpose is obvious; the book directly relates to some present aspect of their life. Other years, the purpose of the book is more obscure. In fact, sometimes I know when I give it that it may be years before they read the book or understand it.

Today, Jesus gives the gift of story. Depending on each reader's progress in their faith journey, the meaning and purpose may be obvious or obscure.

Take a moment to share a book that proved to be a meaningful gift for you. Did it affect your life and thought immediately...or did it take some time?

B A Way to Explore Scripture

*A challenge for the teacher is to instill a second naïveté into the mind of the learner. This parable is so familiar that we easily half-listen and assume we have grasped its meaning. Use the following activities to shift the perspective of the learner. Your class members will likely focus first on the soils. If Mark intended that understanding the soil was the primary focus of the parable, one would think the first-century listener would have easily understood the story. **The mystery and meaning might be found elsewhere—perhaps in the person of the sower.***

○ Can't See the Trees for the Forest

We usually hear the inversion of this phrase: Can't see the forest for the trees. In many of life's circumstances, we so focus on small things that we miss the big picture. In Jesus' parable of the sower, the reverse may be true. We are so accustomed to the big picture that we miss the significant detail. We analyze the soils, compare them, and identify persons whose lives reflect the nature of the soils. The miracle and mystery of the parable, however, has very little to do with the soil. In Mark's Gospel, the meaning of the parable is disclosed only to disciples because only disciples will employ its message and method. Mark wraps the meaning of the parable in the indiscriminate grace of the sower, not the condition of the soil. The challenge for every disciple is not to discern soils but to indiscriminately sow to all soils.

Questions

- In strict agricultural terms, how frugal is the sower in the parable?
- How might the sower produce a greater yield?
- How would you describe a farmer's reaction to the sower's method?
- What does this parable say about Jesus' method of ministry?
- What does it teach the disciple?

○ Maxing Out Our Limits

Hopefully it did not happen to you, but perhaps it did. As Christmas Day approached, you slid that credit card through the machine one more

time...and...the cashier informed you that you were maxed out. However, today you are receiving a Christmas bonus of \$1,000 to spend any way you wish. At this time, give each person the paper money facsimiles provided in the Resource Kit. The Resource Kit page has \$100, \$50, \$20, \$10, \$5, and \$1 bills. Reproduce enough to give each learner or group of learners \$1,000. After everyone has their \$1,000, tell them they have two minutes to decide how to spend the money.

We all have limited resources. Time, money, and energy are all precious and limited commodities. When making decisions about expending limited resources, we often try to get the most "bang for our buck." We want to ensure a good return—profit, pleasure, or positive feeling—for our disbursement.

Questions

- How did you spend your \$1,000?
- How much was for ministry, mission, or the benefit of others?
- Did your expenditures anonymously benefit anyone?
- How would you feel if you were never thanked for your charitable gifts?
- How would you feel if you found an individual wasted your gift?
- How can a "wasted" seed/expenditure possibly be beneficial?
- Have we faithfully and fully used every gift that has been given to us?

C A Way to End

Especially during this season, we focus on what there is to do, whom we have yet to buy gifts for, and what we have left to prepare. With this simple story, Jesus reminds us that the seeds of the kingdom are sown almost carelessly in all kinds of places and in all kinds of soil. As we prepare to live out this story of Jesus, help your group focus not just on the fertile fields, but also on the places where God's grace and love can work a miracle that might produce an unlikely harvest.

○ Illustrating Perspective

As a young seminary graduate, I walked through downtown Atlanta with our pastor. A homeless man approached us, requesting five dollars. Not knowing how he might use it, I immediately shook my head in a negative response. My pastor reached into his pocket, drew out his wallet, and gave the man ten dollars. Well out of earshot of the beggar, I commented, "You have no idea what he's going to do with that money." My pastor responded, "He will answer to God for what he does with it. I will answer to God for either giving or withholding."

Questions

- What do you think of the pastor's response?
- What do you often hear as the appropriate response for such a situation?
- What might you have done in response?

○ Sowing Wildly

You've been giving and receiving for days now. In fact, this has already been a messy morning of wrappings, ribbons, and bows. However, let's give one more time. This time, however, let's sow seed in a place where we cannot predict the response or outcome. Let's sow seed completely in hope.

Take up a spontaneous offering. It may total \$10 or \$1,000. Have an individual or a carload of individuals give the money to someone "on the street" as they travel home from church today. Leave the money and the recipient prayerfully in the hands of God.

As you go, pray for the person, whoever he or she may be, that will receive your gift.

○ Sending Forth

Use the following prayer for your group as a means to "send forth" each person into his or her own ministry during this season. Ask everyone to form a circle, hold hands, and receive this prayer as a gift: "As you have given, gracious God, let us also sow into the world love, forgiveness, hope, and challenge. Remove from us the desire to be selective so that we sow the seeds of your kingdom wherever we may pass and that the growth, nurture, and harvest are left to your desire and timing. In your name, let us go forth into this season. Amen."

MAXING OUT OUR LIMITS

