

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Facing Life's Challenges

Lesson 1

The Challenge of New Light3

Luke 5:33-39

Lesson 2

The Challenge of Time's Limits8

Psalm 39:4-6; Mark 13:32-37

Lesson 3

The Challenge of Living with Mystery13

Job 42:1-9

Lesson 4

The Challenge of Authentic Spirituality18

Romans 14:1-15

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.

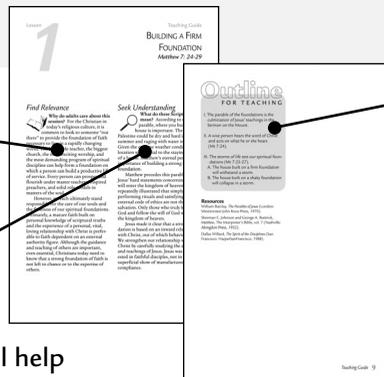
Teacher Helps

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.

Teacher Options

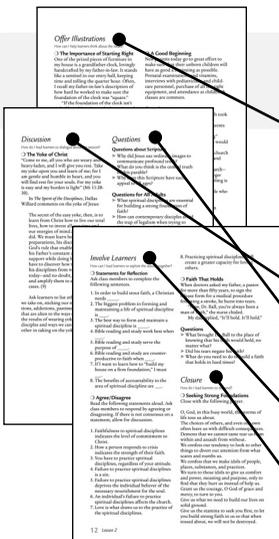
Offer Illustrations presents material that will help you paint a picture of the session. This section often presents items from church history, current events, or interesting anecdotes that help introduce the session.

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.

THE CHALLENGE OF NEW LIGHT

Luke 5:33-39

Find Relevance



Why do adults care about this session? Fasting was a required religious practice among the Jews in Jesus' day. But today most Protestants do not concern themselves with fasting. The practice is not encouraged as an act of piety in our local congregations. Although fasting may not be a religious tradition near and dear to our hearts, more than likely we cling to other religious traditions with zeal and unbending loyalty. How many times have we heard of congregations arguing, much as the scribes and Pharisees did, about which hymnal must be used in worship or whether open or closed communion is more biblical? Too often, our religious traditions create divisions among us and prevent us from being open in new and creative ways to the movement of God's Spirit.

This session can challenge adults to look at God's revelation in a new light. Is it possible that God's revelation is not static and "set in stone," but fluid and creative? With each unveiling of God's revelation, we can see something old and familiar, but might we not also behold something new and peculiar with each disclosure? Can God not fashion God's Word to a particular age and place?

Seek Understanding



What do these Scriptures mean? In this text, Jesus seeks to answer a question about fasting posed to him by the scribes and Pharisees. They want to know why his disciples don't fast or pray frequently like the disciples of John and the Pharisees (5:33). Jesus first responds with a rhetorical question, suggesting that it would be equally unthinkable for the guests at a wedding to fast during the festivities (5:34). Joy, not the grief and sadness associated with mourning, is the appropriate attitude for the followers of Jesus (Marshall, 222). But Jesus quickly adds that the day will come when the bridegroom will be taken away, and then fasting will be an appropriate expression of grief (5:35). Jesus then begins teaching in parables. He says that one cannot patch an old garment with a piece from a new one, for the new garment will be ruined and the new patch will not fit properly on the old garment (5:36). Similarly, one cannot put new wine in old wine skins, for they will burst and both the wine and the skins will be lost (5:37). These passages suggest that old and new cloth are incompatible, as are old skins and new wine. Any attempt to combine them leads to the destruction of both (Marshall, 227). Thus, could it be that Jesus is talking about the radical new nature of the gospel, even suggesting that

attempting to contain the gospel within the bounds of Judaism would only destroy them both? Like the scribes and Pharisees, most of us have trouble letting go of the “old” and taking up the “new.” Our Christian rituals and traditions must always be appropriate to the liveliness of the new age and allow God’s revelation to shed new light on old truth.

Resources

William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1956).

Fred Craddock, *Luke, Interpretation* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990).

Bill J. Leonard, *Word of God Across the Ages* (Greenville: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 1991).

I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke, The New International Greek Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978).

Outline

FOR TEACHING

Introduction: Many people who heard the teachings of Jesus found it very difficult to abandon the old ways of Judaism—respected, traditional, confirmed with Scripture—and accept the new ideas of a movement that was still finding its way, its voice, its shape, and its own identity (Craddock, 81).

I. Setting the Stage for Conflict

A. The Background (Lk 5:17-32)—Jesus’ words and works angered the scribes and Pharisees.

B. Who are the scribes and Pharisees?

II. Coloring Outside the Lines of the Law

A. The “big” question (5:33)—Why do Jesus’ disciples not obey the religious laws concerning fasting?

B. The appropriateness of fasting (5:34-35)—When should one celebrate and when should one fast?

III. Shedding New Light on Old Truth

A. We can’t patch old clothes with new cloth (5:36).

B. We can’t put new wine in old wine skins (5:37-38).

C. Change is difficult when we can’t see beyond tradition (5:39).

Offer Illustrations

How can I help learners think about the issues?

○ New Light

In many stories throughout Scripture, persons responded to or followed a light, thus discovering new truths that changed their lives forever. For example, God provided a pillar of fire at night to guide the Hebrews on their exodus out of Egypt. The pillar of fire led the Hebrews from their old life in slavery to a new life of covenant with Yahweh in the Promised Land. Likewise, consider the wise men who followed a star in search of the baby Jesus, the King of the Jews. Scripture tells us that when the star stopped over the house where Jesus was born, the wise men “were overwhelmed with joy” (Lk 2:10). Upon entering the house, they knelt and paid homage to the child, offering gifts. Because of this encounter, the wise men did not return to Herod. They changed their direction and “left for their own country by another road” (2:12). Finally, reflect on the Pharisee, Saul, who was a persecutor of Christians. His encounter with a blinding light was a conversion experience that changed his life and name forever.

Repeatedly in Scripture, we find ways in which God has revealed truths to humankind. Can you think of other examples along with those mentioned above? God’s greatest revelation, Jesus Christ spent his life healing, ministering, and teaching. Can you think of examples in Scripture where Christ, the Light of the World, shed new light on old traditions, customs, or ways of living? Can you think of examples where Christ’s light was not easily understood or readily received?

○ The Light Within

Years ago in England, a man named George Fox believed that the truth of God was discovered in the heart. He taught that an “inner light” was present within every person, and that this light guided our understanding of our relationship with God and with each other. Baptists have a similar belief—the priesthood of the believer—in which the Holy Spirit works in the hearts of individuals to reveal God’s truths. The Holy Spirit, like an inner light or a “still small voice” (or “sound of sheer silence,” 1 Kgs 19:12) is working and moving in the hearts of persons to bring about change, truth, and hope.

What new truths have been revealed to you through the presence of the Holy Spirit? Is it difficult or easy for you to discern truth or guidance from the Holy Spirit? How do you make a distinction between the guidance of the Holy Spirit and your own personal convictions or desires?

Discussion

How do I lead learners to dialogue about the session?

○ As a Vine Is to a Branch

In response to the question posed to him, Jesus did not try to convince the Pharisees about the rightness or wrongness of fasting. Instead, Jesus was attempting to talk about the appropriateness of fasting (Craddock, 79). In Matthew 4:2, we are told that Jesus observed fasting, which suggests that Jesus was not opposed to the practice at all. Rather than opposing the practice, Jesus is suggesting that some occasions are appropriate for fasting and others are not. Jesus uses the analogy of the wedding feast in verse 34 to make this point. In the bigger picture of God's Kingdom, Jesus is saying that there are times not only for mourning and sorrow, but also for joy and thanksgiving.

○ Corporate Worship

Think about the worship service in your church. How does it effectively create a balance between petition and praise, repentance and thanksgiving, solemnity and joy? In what ways could the worship service be changed to demonstrate a better balance? Are new rituals and observances available that might be more appropriate and meaningful in the worship service? Are any old traditions or observances in need of change?

○ Personal Life

Think about your personal life. Are you appropriately sensitive to the pain and suffering in our world while, at the same time, able to find ways to celebrate the goodness of life? Becoming spiritually mature involves increasing one's awareness of the joy and sorrow in life and then finding ways to respond appropriately. What are some examples of pain in your life? What are some examples of joy in your life? How do you respond to such situations? In what new ways might you respond?

Questions

Questions about Scripture

- Do you think the scribes and Pharisees were satisfied with Jesus' response to their question about fasting? Do you think they understood his response? Why or why not?
- Jesus often taught by using parables. Why do you think Jesus taught this way? How is the use of parables an effective teaching tool?

Questions for All Adults

- How are you like the scribes and Pharisees? On what issues, traditions, or ways of thinking are you unwilling to change?
- How are you like Jesus and his disciples? On what issues, traditions, or ways of thinking have you changed?

Questions for Mature Adults

- You have heard the phrase, "You can't teach an old dog new tricks." Do you agree or disagree?
- In your lifetime, you have probably seen numerous changes in the world. Name some of the changes. Have any of the changes been for the better? Is change always for the better? How can we determine when a change is or will be beneficial?
- Is truth "set in stone," or can truth change with time?

Questions for Younger Adults

- What are some issues on which you think the "older generation" should change?
- What are some issues on which you think the church should change?
- What are some ways in which your generation has learned from the mistakes of the past?
- What are some ways in which your generation can learn from the traditions of the past?

Questions for Adults with Children

- How can you encourage your children to be open to new ways of thinking?

- What are some issues that your children will think about differently than you did as a child?

Involve Learners

How can I lead learners to explore the session together?

○ **Changing or Not**

On a marker board or chalkboard, write three headings: CHANGED, CHANGING, NO CHANGE. Ask the group to respond to the following issues by placing a check mark under the heading that most accurately reflects the attitudes of your denomination over the last twenty years.

Women in Ministry

Ecumenism

Racism

Separation of Church and State

For what reasons have changes been made?

○ **New Light**

Provide each learner with an 8 1/2 x 11 inch sheet of paper folded in half. Ask them to describe on one side of the paper one way in which new light has been shed for them on some old attitude or belief. Ask them to write on the other side of the paper one attitude or belief that still needs changing. Allow them to share their responses with the group. Ask the following questions:

- How did you feel when new light or truth dawned on you?
- Who helped influence your new change in attitude?
- Why is it hard to change a particular attitude or belief?
- What makes it easier for you to change an attitude or belief?

Closure

How do I lead learners to respond?

At the beginning of this session, it was stated that fasting was a Jewish tradition that taught self-discipline and personal piety. Perhaps we who do not practice fasting as part of our religious tradition need to bring this discussion full circle to see the new truths we might glean if we did indeed practice some form of fasting. I am not suggesting fasting as some form of self-denial, but I am suggesting it as an opportunity to see what happens when we break familiar patterns. For when we fast, we disrupt the normal order of regular meals and the set routine. This imposition, in turn, has other, unexpected effects such as an awareness of hunger in our own neighborhoods, an awareness of ways we engage in unexamined self-abuse through food, an awareness of how we allow routine to control us, and an awareness of our relationship to time.

Set aside some time to engage in the ritual of fasting and be open to the new light that might be shed on old truth.

2

THE CHALLENGE OF TIME'S LIMITS

Psalm 39:4-6; Mark 13:32-37

Find Relevance



Why do adults care about this session? An old saying states: “There are only two things in life that are certain: paying taxes and dying.” While neither one is very appealing, we know for certain that taxes must be paid every year by April 15. Unfortunately, most—if not all—of us do not know the date we will die. Therefore, we live without knowing exactly how much time we have, and we wonder if we will be able to do everything we dream of doing in the time we have. Living with time’s limits and making decisions about ways we manage time is a challenge, particularly for adults. Some of life’s basic questions come to our minds when we adults sense time quickly getting away: What does it mean to be human? What does it mean to be born? To really live? To procreate? To be fulfilled? To age? To die? (Stokes, 58).

Although it is a challenge for most adults to deal with time’s limits, it is a bigger challenge for people of faith to remain faithful throughout the twists and turns and endings of life. This session can challenge adults to pay attention to the fleeting, limited time of their lives, and yet not become paralyzed by the limitations. As Jesus told his disciples in the text from Mark, “You don’t know when the end will come, but be alert.” In other

words, “You don’t know when your life will end, but be active, make intentional choices, remain faithful, and be alert to the unending presence of God.”

Seek Understanding



What do these Scriptures mean?

In the texts for this lesson, we find two accounts of people wanting to know when the end of time will come, when life will be over. In the Psalm, the writer is suffering from a severe illness and the weight of his pain has almost shaken his faith in God’s good will. The Psalmist has not publicly complained, because he does not wish to give encouragement to persons skeptical about God’s concern for justice and goodness. Beginning with verse 4, however, the Psalmist can no longer remain silent. He can contain himself no longer, and he must cry out to God. Recognizing that human life is brief, the Psalmist asks God to let him know when his life will be over.

In the passage in Mark, Jesus is with Peter, James, John, and Andrew on the Mount of Olives. They have recently left the Temple in Jerusalem, and Jesus makes a prediction about its destruction. The disciples question him about the time the destruction will occur and the signs that will indicate that the destruction is about to happen. Jesus embarks on a discourse

that begins with verse 5 and continues on through the remainder of chapter 13. The discourse falls into two major sections. The first (13:5-23) is a series of warnings against deceptive signs of the end of time. The second section includes apocalyptic images from the Old Testament, the coming of the Son of Man, and parables and sayings on watchfulness (Williamson, 237). The main point of this section is that the end of time is a sure event, but the time is unknown to anyone except God. So, we should have hope and yet be alert, cautious, and watchful.

Resources

A. A. Anderson, "The Book of Psalms," *The New Century Bible Commentary*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972).

Frederick Buechner, *A Room Called Remember* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992).

James L. Mays, *Psalms*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994).

Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News According to Mark* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1976).

Kenneth Stokes, *Faith Is a Verb: Dynamics of Adult Faith Development* (Mystic CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1989).

Artur Weiser, *The Psalms*, The Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1962).

John Westerhoff, *A Pilgrim People* (Minneapolis: The Seabury Press, 1984).

Lamar Williamson, Jr., *Mark*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1983).

Outline

FOR TEACHING

Introduction: All people face the challenge of time's limits, wondering when the end will come and how to live best within the limited time given. In today's Scripture passages, we find the Psalmist and Jesus' disciples dealing with the same concerns about the end of time. Jesus offers words of hope and advice for those looking toward the end times.

- I. Psalm 39: The Psalmist's Lament
 - A. The Psalmist struggles beneath a heavy weight of care (39:1-2).
 - B. The Psalmist cries out in distress to God (39:3).
 - C. The Psalmist wants to know how long he has to live (39:4).
 - D. The Psalmist laments the brevity and transience of human life (39:5-6).
- II. Mark 13: The Temple and the End of Time
 - A. As they leave the Temple in Jerusalem, Jesus predicts its destruction in response to his disciples' words of admiration (13:1-2).
 - B. Peter, James, John, and Andrew ask Jesus when the destruction will occur and what signs will announce such destruction (13:3-4).
 - C. The time is known only to God (13:32).
 - D. The disciples are urged to watch (13:33).
 - E. The coming of the Son of Man is likened to the parable of the Absent Master (13:34-36).
 - F. Certain servants have particular responsibility to be on watch (13:34), but Jesus' final words extend that responsibility to all disciples (13:37).

Offer Illustrations

How can I help learners think about the issues?

○ The Clock

In North America, a clock is a common gift and a watch an even more common one. In the People's Republic of China, however, one must never give another person a clock. It is a symbol of bad luck. Of course, the object cannot actually control bad or good luck. The clock is a powerful symbol in any culture, a symbol of the passing of time, a symbol of the certainty of death. In fact, one old song describes a grandfather clock that "stopped short, never to run again, when the old man died."

For us, the clock may serve as a symbol of passing opportunities that may be seized or ignored but will never come again. Think back over your life. Recall instances when you managed your time wisely, and recall others when you wish you had managed your time differently. How do you plan to manage your time in the future?

○ Time

In accordance with Catholic tradition, when a new pope is consecrated, flax is burned to symbolize the transient nature of earthly glory. While the flax burns, these words are spoken: *Sic transit gloria mundi* (Thus passes the glory of the world). We would all do well to remember that, whether we are powerful or powerless, famous or unknown, the glory of the world fades. When Peter wrote his first letter, he quoted the prophet Isaiah: "All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers, and flowers fall, but the word of the Lord stands forever."

Questions

- What do those words say to us about the way in which we manage the

limited time within our control, power, and influence?

- What do those words say to us about hope in this life and beyond?

Discussion

How do I lead learners to dialogue about the session?

Ask each person to read this excerpt from *A Room Called Remember* by Frederick Buechner:

"There has never been a time past when God wasn't with us as strength beyond our strength, the wisdom beyond our wisdom...To remember the past is to see that we are here today by grace, that we have survived as a gift.

"And what does that mean about the future? What do we have hope for, you and I? Humanly speaking, we have only the human best to hope for: that we will live out our days in something like peace and the ones we love with us; that if our best dreams are never to come true, neither at least will our worst fears; that something we find to do with our lives will make for some little good somewhere and that when our lives end we will be remembered a little while for the little good we did. That is our human hope. But in the room called Remember we find something beyond it.

"Remember the wonderful works that he has done,' goes David's song—remember what he has done in the lives of each of us, and beyond that remember what he has done in the life of the world...Because we remember, we have this high and holy hope: that what he has done, he will continue to do, that what he has begun in us and our world, he will in unimaginable ways bring to fullness and fruition."

After a few moments, say something like, "These words seem to summarize the questions, fears, and hopes of the

Psalmist and Jesus' disciples from today's texts." Then ask the following questions:

- What are your questions, fears, and hopes concerning the end of life?
- What has been God's role in strengthening your faith and giving you hope?
- How do those events give you confidence and peace as you deal with the brevity of life?

Questions

Questions about Scripture

- Why do you think the Psalmist is crying out to God?
- The thirteenth chapter of Mark is sometimes called the "Little Apocalypse." Countless books have been written on this text by doomsayers who are very interested in the next world. Others completely ignore the text. What does this text say to you personally?

Questions for All Adults

- Discuss some examples from your life that make you aware of the brevity of life.
- Discuss your views on the end of time. Do Scripture passages like Mark 13 and chapters in the Book of Revelation literally describe the specific events of the end times?

Questions for Mature Adults

- According to many adult educators, the ultimate faith task, begun in mid-life, is accepting one's mortality and the spiritual preparation for death. Some people claim that they are "ready and at peace." Others have questions and fears. Where are you in your personal preparation for the end of life?
- How is the way you now deal with time's limitations and challenges different from the way you dealt with it when you were younger?

Questions for Younger Adults

- What top three things occupy the majority of your time? If you were 75

years old, looking back on your life, would you say your time was well spent? Would you say your life was fulfilled? What changes should you make in your priorities?

- Henri Nouwen once said, "Prayer is not a preparation for work...Prayer is life." What percentage of your time is spent in prayer, meditation, and personal reflection?

Questions for Adults with Children

- How will you explain (or have you explained) the concept of death to your child?
- How do you balance your time between the needs of your children and the demands of your own schedule? What changes, if any, need to be made in your priorities?

Involve Learners

How can I lead learners to explore the session together?

○ **Setting Priorities**

Many of us grew up in churches where we were taught that Christians should set their priorities in the following order (or a similar order):

1. God
2. Family
3. Church
4. Work/School

Ask the group to discuss the list and to tell whether they agree or disagree with the order of priorities. Ask members to reflect on the amount of time each of the four priorities is given in their lives. Is too much time given to one or more areas? Is too little time given to one or more areas?

○ **Marking Time**

Read the following excerpt to the learners and ask them to discuss the questions at the end.

In *A Pilgrim People*, John Westerhoff writes:

“The church is a story-formed community, a people on pilgrimage through time, through seasons of profane time made holy by the eternal cycle of sacred time. The manner in which we order and use time is the best indicator of what is important to us. Time both expresses and shapes our lives. We live in time. We find time for what we consider important, and how we spend our time influences our understandings and ways of life. [Churches] recall and celebrate the occasions that are most significant to us, and the days we celebrate give meaning and purpose to our lives” (Westerhoff, 9).

Not only are our personal lives dictated by time, but the corporate life of our

churches is also dictated by time. Some congregations mark the time of their church year by the observance of various promotional days such as Stewardship Sunday, Children’s Day, Missions Sunday, and Evangelism Sunday. Other churches mark their church year by following the liturgical calendar and observing Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost. Any events marking a church’s calendar of observances indicate what is important in the life of that congregation. They also indicate how the congregation manages its time together.

How does your church mark the time of its church year? How are the promotional events and (or) liturgical observances important to you? Do such events help you to become aware of the presence of God moving and working through your church’s communal life? Do such events or observances help the biblical story illumine and transform your own personal story? How do the events or observances make you aware of holy time in your life? How much of your personal time is given to celebrating and reflecting on holy time?

Closure

How do I lead learners to respond?

Ask the learners to close their eyes as you read the text of Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 aloud. Close with a prayer, asking God to help us make the best use of the time we have and to trust God with our future days.

3

THE CHALLENGE OF LIVING WITH MYSTERY

Job 42:1-9

Find Relevance



Why do adults care about this session? Why do/should adults care about this session?

All people experience suffering. No one is immune to pain, sickness, or tragedy. If we pick up the daily newspaper, we read about the enormous increase in hunger throughout the world and children so malnourished they never live past their seventh birthday. We read about floods and earthquakes that take the lives of thousands of innocent people and destroy millions of dollars worth of property. We don't have to read a newspaper, however, to learn of tragedy; pain and suffering exist in our own families and neighborhoods. We may personally know a seemingly "perfect" family torn apart by an unexplained divorce or a forty-year-old father of three who suffers from incurable bone cancer. We may be familiar with a random act of violence. Such tragedy, whether personal or societal, leaves us all wondering why bad things happen. We wonder where God is in the midst of it all. Living with such questions is a challenge to anyone's faith.

This session can lead adults to think about life's most troubling and unanswerable circumstances and how faithful Christians can best face such situations. By examining the story of Job, adults can understand that silence, in the face of

mystery, is sometimes better than pat, easy answers.

Seeking Understanding



What do these Scriptures mean?

Much has happened in Job's life prior to these verses in chapter 42. Job, a blameless and upright person, has been deprived of health, wealth, and posterity. He has suffered pain and tragedy and cannot understand why such bad things have happened to him. His wife encourages him to "curse God and die." His friends try to console him by giving him "pat" answers. Job complains of God's treatment of him, believing God must despise him. After Job's groaning, God finally answers him out of the whirlwind. It is in this meeting with God that Job finally finds reconciliation and restoration.

In verses 1-5, Job's silence gives way to confession and repentance. Ralph Smith offers some insight in *Job: A Study in Providence and Faith*. Job repents, not for any sin that might have caused his pain and suffering, but for the foolish things he had said about his own goodness and God's unfairness. Job recognizes God's omnipotence (42:2) and his own impulsiveness (42:3). Job describes his previous knowledge of God as hearsay, or second-hand information. Now God has spoken to him personally out of the whirlwind,

and Job “saw” God (42:5). Job despises himself and repents (42:6). It must be understood that Job does not repent of some gross wickedness in his life. Job was not guilty of immoral behavior. The sin in Job’s life was his own self-righteousness. Job received no vindication or public approval; instead, he gave himself completely to the will of God (42:2). He became aware of and confident of God’s care for him. Job’s peace came not from answers to difficult questions but from the realization and assurance that God was present through his trials and that God cared.

Resources

Samuel E. Balentine, “Job,” *Mercer Commentary on the Bible* (Macon GA: Mercer University Press, 1994).

George Buttrick, ed., *The Book of Job, The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989).

Morris Inch, *My Servant Job* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979).

J. Gerald Janzen, *Job, Interpretation* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985).

Harold S. Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York: Avon, 1983)

Ralph L. Smith, *Job: A Study in Providence and Faith* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1971).

Kenneth Stokes, *Faith Is a Verb: Dynamics of Adult Faith Development* (Mystic CT : Twenty-Third Publications, 1989).

Outline

FOR TEACHING

Introduction: Throughout the Book of Job, Job grappled with why bad things happen to good people. His friends had all the easy answers, but no satisfying explanations. When Job encountered God, Job still did not gain the answers he was looking for. Instead, he heard God saying to him, “It is not your part to know the why of all things. Yours is to realize who I am and to believe that you can trust me in all things” (Smith, 133).

I. Setting the Stage

A. Who is this man Job? (Job 1:1-8).

B. Job’s calamities begin to unfold (1:13-2:8).

II. Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People?

A. Job’s friends try to offer easy answers, and Job struggles with the mystery of his afflictions (Job 4-37).

III. Job’s Repentance and Reconciliation

A. God speaks to Job out of the whirlwind (Job 38-41).

B. Job submits to God and keeps silent (Job 40:3-5).

C. Job recognizes God’s omnipotence (42:2).

D. Job confesses his finitude and limitations (42:3).

E. Job no longer knows God through secondhand information, for Job has personally seen God (42:5).

F. Job repents (42:6).

IV. Job’s Restoration

A. God voices displeasure with the pat answers given by Job’s friends (42:7).

B. Job’s friends are told to offer burnt offerings as atonement for their false words (42:8-9).

C. Job’s fortunes are restored (42:10-17).

Offer Illustration

How can I help learners think about the issues?

○ Marie: A Case Study

Marie is a widow in her late 60s. She recently experienced the loss of loved ones, including the deaths of a son and a sister in an automobile accident and, even more recently, the death of her husband. As a child, and in her earlier adult years, she questioned little about her faith. She prayed regularly, trusted God to provide for her needs, and saw life as positive and hopeful. Now, after the deaths and other sorrows, her faith is less trusting and secure. She is actively questioning, even though her minister has urged her not to do so. She describes her faith:

“I don’t feel that it’s as strong. I pray that I can regain some of the faith I did have, but it’s really hard to be alone...maybe everything is just colored a little darker. But I do know I believe in God...All we have to do is believe...All we have to do is have faith...”
(Stokes, 95)

Questions

- What has happened to Marie’s faith as a result of the crises in her life?
- Is Marie right when she says that simply believing in God is enough to get her through her crises?
- How is Marie like Job?
- If you were Marie’s friend, what words of encouragement or insight would you offer her?

○ Job’s Friends

During Job’s time of crisis and struggle, several of his friends came to him with the good intention of helping him in his pain. In *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*,

Harold Kushner states the following about Job’s friends:

“Job needed sympathy more than he needed advice, even good and correct advice. There would be a time and a place for that later. He needed compassion, the sense that others felt his pain with him, more than he needed learned theological explanations about God’s ways. He needed physical comforting, people sharing their strength with him, holding him rather than scolding him.

“He needed friends who would permit him to be angry, to cry and to scream, much more than he needed friends who would urge him to be an example of patience and piety to others. He needed people to say, ‘Yes, what happened to you is terrible and makes no sense,’ not people who would say, ‘Cheer up, Job, it’s not all that bad.’ And that was where his friends let him down.” (Kushner, 89-90)

Questions

- What can we learn from Job’s friends about offering pastoral care to those in crisis?
- What can we learn about trying to offer theological explanations to those in pain?

Discussion

How do I lead learners to dialogue about the session?

Guide the class to form four small groups. Give each group a copy of the below statement for this session. Tell the groups that the statements are some common positions or opinions about why people suffer. Read each statement and then wrestle with the questions that follow for each one.

- Bad things happen to people because God is the Righteous Judge who gives them exactly what they deserve.
- Bad things happen to people because suffering can cure them of their faults and make them better people.
- Bad things happen to people because God tests them in order to help them discover how strong and faithful they are.
- Bad things, such as unexpected deaths, occur in order to liberate people from this world of pain and lead them to a better place.
- Bad things happen to people for no explainable reason.
- Bad things happen to people because of the randomness and chaos of nature.

Questions for Discussion

- What could lead a person to claim this position?
- How might this position be helpful to a person in crisis?
- How might this position be harmful to a person in crisis?
- What does this position say about the nature of God?

Questions

Questions about Scripture

- In verse 5, we read that Job has “seen” God. Having seen God, Job understands God in a way he has never known before. What do you think was the nature of Job’s encounter with God?
- In chapter 42, the Scriptures talk of Job’s restoration. How would your understanding of the story be different if it had ended with verse 9 instead of verse 17?

Questions for All Adults

- Why do bad things happen to good people?
- Harold Kushner says that the main point of the story of Job is that God does not send us pain or suffering; God gives strength, patience, and hope to deal with the suffering when our spiritual resources run dry. Do you agree or disagree?

Questions for Mature Adults

- How has your understanding of why people suffer changed over the last 20 to 30 years? What has influenced or shaped your understanding?
- In what, if any, crisis in your own life was your faith challenged?
- What helped you to get through the crisis and remain a person of faith?

Questions for Younger Adults

- Consider the old cliché, “When life gives you lemons, make lemonade.” What are your feelings and thoughts about this statement?
- A recent national survey found that painful life experiences tend to lead to a sense of decreased faith. How can the church of today help people deal with their crises and use them toward positive spiritual growth?

Questions for Adults with Children

- It has been said that our relationship to God is more about trust and hope than about knowledge and answers. What are some ways that you can teach your children to trust in a God they cannot see?
- What role can prayer play in helping your child trust God?

Involve Learners

How can I lead learners to explore the session together?

○ Out of the Whirlwind

Today's text, Job 42:1-6, which picks up after all of his trials and sufferings, tells of Job's response to God after God speaks to him out of the whirlwind. Ask the class to form groups of three or four persons and ask the small groups to complete the following assignments.

1. Write, in your own words, the ideas and insights Job expressed in verses 1-6.
2. Put yourself in Job's shoes. Write your response to God concerning the events in your life.

After several minutes, ask each group to share their responses with the entire group.

○ God Is Always Involved

Job never really obtained an answer from God as to why a righteous person such as himself should suffer pain and tragedy. Yet Job learned that, in the midst of all his suffering, God was with him, longing to fill all the needs of his heart. Job realized that God required faith although Job would not be able to obtain answers to his questions. Other verses in the Bible, as these listed below, refer to God's involvement and our personal response in the midst of suffering.

Psalms 34	Galatians 6:7-9
Psalms 43	Philippians 4:10-13
Jeremiah 7:5-7	1 Peter 3:13-17

Guide the class to form six groups. Assign each group one of the texts listed above. Ask them to read the text and talk about God's involvement and the individual's response in the midst of suffering. Do you agree or disagree with the thinking in the text? Would you find this text helpful if you were in the midst of a crisis? Why or why not? After reuniting as a larger

group, ask each of the six groups to report on their discussion.

Closure

How do I lead learners to respond?

In closing, ask class members to recall the names of the persons in your church who are dealing with a crisis in their lives. List the names on the chalkboard. Then give the members a piece of paper and ask them to write down the struggles with which they are dealing in their personal lives. Ask everyone to close their eyes and pray silently for all those with needs, including themselves. After a few moments of silence, read aloud the following verses from the hymn "Dear Lord and Father of Mankind."

Drop Thy still dews of quietness,
Till all our strivings cease;
Take from our souls the strain and stress,
And let our ordered lives confess
The beauty of Thy peace.

Breathe thro' the heats of our desire
Thy coolness and Thy balm;
Let sense be dumb, let flesh retire;
Speak thro' the earthquake, wind,
and fire,
O still small Voice of calm!

(Words written by John Greenleaf Whittier, 1872)

THE CHALLENGE OF AUTHENTIC SPIRITUALITY

Romans 14:1-15

Find Relevance



Why do adults care about this session? The world in which we live is so diverse. Our society is a melting pot of various cultures, religions, political parties, and ideologies. Much of our attention is given to learning how to live side-by-side with persons who might be different from ourselves. Words such as “respect,” “tolerance,” and “political correctness” occupy our vocabulary and conversations. Oddly enough, religious denominations—the very groups in which one might expect to find comfort and community—often have sufficient diversity in faith and practice to create stress, polarization, and factions among their participants. The challenge for Christians is two-fold: (1) How can we be tolerant and understanding of people who practice a different faith tradition? (2) How can we be tolerant and understanding of people in our own faith tradition who hold a different opinion concerning faith and conduct?

This session can lead adults to think about their spirituality and the ways in which their attitudes and behaviors are an encouragement or a hindrance to persons with differing opinions concerning faith and practice.

Seek Understanding



What do these Scriptures mean? In today’s text, Paul discusses the dangers that can threaten the unity within the Christian community. Specifically, he addresses the issue of differing opinions concerning proper Christian conduct. Paul identifies two divisions within the church at Rome, calling them the weak and the strong. He warns each group about using its opinions as the norm against which to judge the other group. According to Achtemeier, Paul believes “there is room within the Christian community for differing ways of responding to the gospel with respect to one’s everyday life and warns that any attempt to impose uniformity in those matters will rupture the very unity whose preservation is sought” (Achtemeier, 214). In this particular text, Paul addresses the question about the food and drink permissible for Christians. Ultimately, Paul is calling the Romans to a life of authentic spirituality, a life that is not consumed with less essential matters, such as the items we eat or drink, but one that is bighearted, gentle, and Christ-centered.

Outline

FOR TEACHING

Introduction: Paul is addressing a dispute among believers. On one side are believers who assign spiritual significance to abstaining from eating meat, observing holy days, and refraining from drinking wine. Paul called these believers weak. On the other side are believers for whom dietary restrictions and the observance of holy days hold no significance for true spirituality. Paul calls these believers strong.

I. The Weak and the Strong (14:1-12)

- A. Paul identifies the weak and the strong (14:1-2).
- B. God accepts the weak and the strong, and no one else is in the position to pass judgment (14:3-4).
- C. While people may practice their faith in different ways, all practices are done to honor God (14:5-6).
- D. The motivation for matters of faith in conduct and practice is not because Christians live for themselves, but because they live for the honor and glory of God (14:7-9).
- E. It is improper to judge those who differ in their understanding of Christian conduct, because God alone judges such matters (14:10-12).

II. The Responsibility of the Strong (14:13-23)

- A. The strong are encouraged not to let their conduct be a stumbling block or hindrance to the weak (14:13-16).
- B. The thing that matter most in the Kingdom of God is serving Christ with a spirit of righteousness, peace, and joy (14:19-21).
- C. The strong are called to the pursuit of peace and harmony (14:19-21).
- D. Christians must answer to God and their individual consciences as to what is the best expression of love in a given situation (14:22-23).

III. The Way of Christ (15:1-13)

- A. The strong are encouraged to edify the weak (15:1-3).
- B. Unity is called forth by the steadfast-

ness and encouragement that comes from studying Scripture (15:4).

- C. Paul's benediction encourages harmony (15:5-6).
- D. True Christian unity can only exist through following the example of Christ (15:7).
- E. Christ's coming to the Jews fulfills God's promise to Israel (15:8).
- F. Christ's coming to the Gentiles demonstrates that all people belong in God's Kingdom (15:9-12).
- G. Paul offers another benediction to the Romans, encouraging them to rely on the power of the Holy Spirit for unity and hope (15:13).

Resources

Paul Achtemeier, *Romans*, Interpretation (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985).

C. K. Barrett, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Harper's New Testament Commentaries (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1957).

George Buttrick, ed., "Letter to the Romans," *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989).

Dale Moody, "Romans," *The Broadman Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1970).

Henri Nouwen, *Making All Things New: An Invitation to the Spiritual Life* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981).

Kenneth Stokes, *Faith Is a Verb: Dynamics of Adult Faith Development* (Mystic CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1989).

Offer Illustrations

How can I help learners think about the issues?

○ The Church at Corinth

From members of the household of Chloe, Paul learned that there was dissension among the believers of the church at Corinth. Cliques had formed among the believers, and they often argued over matters of faith and practice. They argued about whether believers should marry, in view of the imminence of the end of the age; if women should appear in public worship without veils; and the proper procedure for celebrating the Lord's Supper. In 1 Corinthians 8, Paul refers to the Corinthian believers' dealings with a matter similar to the one found in the Romans text for today. The issue is whether a Christian can eat food consecrated to a pagan god, and the believers have turned to Paul for an answer to the question: "What is wrong with eating food that has been sacrificed to idols? It can't hurt us because we know that there is only one God and idols are no more than chiseled images!"

Paul agrees that, for Christians, there is but one God, but he rebukes them for their lack of love (14:1). Out of consideration for the persons who still believe in idols, and so as not to be a stumbling block to them, Paul urges the Corinthians to refrain from eating food that has been sacrificed to idols. Paul also says that, unless their actions are governed by the principle of consideration for others, their thoughtlessness will lead them to sin against Christ (14:12).

Read 1 Corinthians 8. How does the issue at hand and Paul's response compare to the situation in Romans 14:1-15:13? Whether a person could eat food sacrificed to idols seems to have been an issue in several early Christian churches. What are some issues that seem to create

tensions in the church today? How are these issues being dealt with or resolved?

○ A Priest, A Minister, and A Rabbi

A priest, a minister, and a rabbi were having a theological discussion. Predictably, they found they could not agree on all points of the conversation, but they thoroughly enjoyed the stimulating exchange of ideas. Finally, they had to adjourn and go their separate ways. As they were leaving, one of them said to the others, "Well, friends, it has been great. Isn't it wonderful that we are all doing God's work—you in your ways...and I in His!"

A funny story, yes. Yet it symbolizes a far deeper and more important point. We can respect and rejoice in the faith expression of others; we can learn from others who may believe differently from ourselves; and we can find community and relationship with those whom we may disagree. A mature spirituality is one that can hold a respect for differing beliefs and still own the conviction that "I believe that my faith expresses God's way *for me*."

Discussion

How do I lead learners to dialogue about the session?

Paul encourages the believers of the church at Rome to stop arguing over less important matters, such as whether a Christian should eat meat. He implores them to develop an authentic essential spirituality characterized by "righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (14:17) and to build up one's neighbor (15:2).

Another way of interpreting Paul's words is to understand the difference between being "religious" and "spiritual." In *Faith Is a Verb*, Kenneth Stokes says that being religious "is seen by many people to refer to the rituals and dogmas, structures and

programs of the institutional church. Generally, 'religious' persons are perceived as those actively identified with a synagogue, parish, or local church. They serve on boards and committees, are usually present not only for regular services but also for most special events. ...'Spiritual' is used as the metaphor for the personalization of religion. Spiritual persons...are those for whom faith is continually nurtured through prayer, meditation, challenging books, honest talks with friends, simple beauties of nature, art and music and the like" (Stokes, 69).

What do you think of Stokes's definitions of religious and spiritual? What can those who consider themselves "religious" (those who adhere to church rituals and structures) learn from those who call themselves "spiritual" (those who are nurtured only through prayer, Bible study, and personal relationships with others)? And vice versa?

Questions

Questions about Scripture

- In the text from Romans, the weak are identified as the ones who assign spiritual significance to abstaining from meat, observing holy days, and refusing to drink wine. The strong are those who are less meticulous about observing such practices. Why do you think Paul assigns them such names, and what are the implications of being called weak or strong?
- What is your understanding of Paul's expectations of authentic spirituality in a person's life? How does one achieve authentic spirituality?

Questions for All Adults

- How are you like the weak in today's text?
- How are you like the strong in today's text?
- Identify some areas in your spiritual life in which you need to grow and mature.

Questions for Mature Adults

- Does spiritual growth come with aging? Why or why not?
- Paul was encouraging the believers of the church at Rome to be more tolerant of one another's beliefs and practices. Have you become more or less tolerant with age?
- What are some issues of faith (doctrine or practice) of which you have become more accepting or accommodating? Why?
- What issues of faith can you simply not compromise? Why?

Questions for Younger Adults

- What does it mean to have "freedom in Christ?"
- Is "the sky is the limit" a part of acceptable Christian behavior, so long as no one else is harmed?

Questions for Adults with Children

- How will you teach your children to respect other's beliefs without compromising their own convictions?
- In today's text, Paul calls Christians to unity and servanthood. In what ways, if any, can your children see those characteristics modeled in your congregation?

Involve Learners

How can I lead learners to explore the session together?

○ The Most Important Thing in My Life...

Write these phrases on the chalkboard.

Living a moral life
Adhering to the Golden Rule
Believing in God
Daily Bible reading
Being a church member; participating in church
Having a personal relationship with Christ
Having an active prayer life
Helping people in need
Sharing your faith
Tithing

Ask class members to rank the ten phrases according to the importance of each in their individual lives. Suggest that individuals place the number 1 by the phrase most important to them, a number 2 by the next most important, and so on. After about five to seven minutes, ask members to evaluate their priorities by responding to the following questions.

What is most important in your faith life?
What needs working on in your faith life?
Would you consider yourself “religious,” “spiritual,” or both?

Closure

How do I lead learners to respond?

Ask the class members to form two groups to read responsively the following excerpts extracted from the book *Making All Things New* by Henri Nouwen. Close with a prayer for community among your class and church members.

Group 1: “Community is the effort to create a free and empty space among people where together we can practice true obedience. Through the discipline of community we prevent ourselves from clinging to each other in fear and loneliness, and clear free space to listen to the liberating voice of God...To create space for God among us requires the constant recognition of the Spirit of God in each other.”

Group 2: “Community has little to do with mutual compatibility. Similarities in educational background, psychological make-up, or social status can bring us together, but they can never be the basis for community...The mystery of community is precisely that it embraces *all* people, whatever their individual differences may be, and allows them to live together as brothers and sisters of Christ and sons and daughters of his heavenly Father...”

All: “In this way we come to know each other not as people who cling anxiously to our self-constructed identity, but as people who are loved by the same God in a very intimate and unique way.” (Nouwen, 56)