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1

what is so special about the bible?

openers: There are hundreds of books on the market today that claim to be important—books that are written by “experts” who insist they have all the answers—books that promise to make our lives better. What makes the bible so special? Why is it more valuable than some of these other books?

The bible is a totally unique book, different from every other book that was ever written. It is a book that is actually a collection of books, written by various people but *inspired of God*. The word “inspired” literally means “God-breathed.” This makes the bible a human book of divine origin. When you read the bible, you are reading communication from the Creator of the Universe delivered to you through the writings of men.¹ It shouldn’t surprise you that God has a book out. After all, it’s His ability to speak that distinguishes Him from false gods and idols (see Ps.115:2-8; Is.46:5-7; Jer.10:5; Hab.2:18). The phrase “Thus saith the Lord” is found 359 times in the bible and could rightly be inserted in almost every verse.

In this study you will be learning about the bible itself and the role it should play in your life now that you are a Christian.

aim of the study: To help people understand what the bible is, why it is important to them now that they are Christians and that it must be given ultimate authority in their lives because it is the Word of God.

¹ For a thorough presentation of reasons why you can believe the bible is inspired by God, refer to Section I: The Bible—I Trust It, pages 13-74 of Evidence that Demands a Verdict by Josh McDowell (Thomas Nelson Publishers).

(Go through the following material with the group and make sure they understand each of the points. Allow for questions, since the bible may be completely new to many of them. Because of the amount of material, this study can be divided into two parts.)

facts about the bible

The bible was written over a span of almost 1600 years. The first books (Genesis through Deuteronomy) were written around 1450 BC. The Old Testament books were formally compiled into a collection (or “canonized”) more than 400 years before the birth of Christ. The New Testament books were written from about 50 AD to 90 AD and were circulated throughout the Christian churches. They were soon accepted as authoritative but were not officially collected (or “canonized”) until the year 393 AD.

Over 40 authors from different walks of life wrote the 66 books that make up our bible. Many books in the bible are named after their authors. A few of the books have unknown authors, such as Joshua and Judges in the Old Testament and Hebrews in the New Testament. Some well-known authors of bible books are Moses (who wrote the first five), King David (who wrote most of the psalms), King Solomon (who wrote most of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs), the apostle Paul (who wrote 13 letters or epistles in the New Testament) and the apostle John (who wrote the gospel of John, the three letters of John and Revelation).

The bible is divided into two parts, the Old and the New Testaments. Testament is another word for covenant, which is like a contract or an agreement between two people. In both the Old and New Testaments, God’s covenant with people was based on grace. In the Old Testament, God chose to show His grace to a particular people—the Jews. In the New Testament, God expanded His grace to include everyone. This “new” covenant requires a human response of faith in Jesus Christ and His death on the cross for sin.

Contrary to popular belief, the bible is not organized chronologically. Instead, the different books of the bible are grouped by genre (type of writing):

- **Historical Books.** These books contain the history of God’s dealings with the Jewish people and the lives of Jesus and the apostles. They include Genesis through Esther in the Old Testament and Matthew through Acts in the New Testament.
- **Writings.** These books are a variety of stories (which are not necessarily historical), songs, poetry and wise sayings. They include Job through Song of Songs in the Old Testament.
- **Prophetic Books.** The prophets were people who were called by God to declare His eternal truth and His message concerning the future. These books include Isaiah through Malachi in the Old Testament and Revelation in the New Testament.

- **Epistles.** These books are letters by apostles that were written to individuals or churches. Together they form the foundation for Christian doctrine (what to believe) and Christian practices (how to live). They include Romans through Jude in the New Testament.

All of the books of the bible are divided into chapters and verses to make it easier to read and to find references. These divisions and references were completed around the 13th century AD. Sections of the bible are identified first by book title, then by chapter and last by verse. So for example, Romans 3:22 refers to the book of Romans, the third chapter and the twenty-second verse. In your bible, the chapter number is larger and bolder than the text, and is found at the beginning of each chapter and perhaps on the top of each page. The verse numbers are placed throughout the text and are much smaller. There are common abbreviations for all of the books in the bible. It would be helpful for you to learn these. Until you become familiar with your bible, use the table of contents to locate the different books.

what christians believe about the bible

Christians believe the bible is inspired by God. The origin of the bible is divine. The word “inspired” literally means “out-breathed” or “God-breathed.” Interestingly, both the Hebrew and the Greek words for “breath” can also mean “spirit.” Christians understand this to mean the Holy Spirit influenced the biblical writers to produce authoritative scriptures.

Christians believe the bible was written by men. Unlike the writers of other religious “scriptures” (angels or heavenly beings), the writers of the bible are real, historical people. This makes the bible a historical document that can be authenticated through archaeology, ancient writings and other disciplines. It is apparent that God did not just dictate His Word mechanically to the biblical authors, but that His Word was expressed through each of their unique personalities.

Christians believe the bible is revelation. This means that we could not have discovered many of the truths found in the bible on our own, through natural means, such as study, research or contemplation. Some things in the bible can be found out through natural means like historical research. For example, Jesus’ death on a cross is a fact of history that we can learn apart from the bible. But the meaning of His death—that it was for our sins—requires the revelation found in the bible. We need God to *reveal* these truths to us because they are *hidden* truths that would have remained hidden if God had not chosen to uncover them for us.

Christians believe the bible is authoritative. The bible is *the* standard for the doctrine (what to believe) and the practice (how to live) of every believer individually and the church corporately. It is *the* rule by which we distinguish truth from error regarding matters of the faith. During His earthly ministry, Jesus regularly appealed to the authority of the Old Testament scriptures. The bible has the right to claim this absolute authority in a Christian’s life because of its divine authorship. This means that over against other possible “authorities,” such as the Pope, pastors, prophetic words, Christian books, what is popular, etc., the bible should have the final say in your life as a Christian.

Christians believe the bible is infallible. Infallibility means to be without error and entirely truthful. This includes the very words of the bible and not merely the ideas or principles they communicate. The bible is infallible in its entirety *so long as we correctly understand the intent of*

the original author. This will at times require careful study in order to arrive at the right interpretation. Things like cultural contexts, figures of speech or symbolism must be taken into account. For example, when the bible says that God hides us in the shadow of His wings (Ps.17:8) we must not conclude that God has wings like a chicken.

1. Consider some of the books you have read. **In what ways does the Bible seem different from some of these other books?**

(This might be a natural place to stop and pick up the bible study portion of this chapter next time.)

read 2 peter 1:16-21

2. **How did Peter respond to the charge that the message he and the other apostles were preaching about Jesus (or what we know today as the four gospels) was just a made-up myth?**

Peter draws a sharp contrast between his message (along with the message of the other apostles) and false teachers trying to discredit the gospel. Many first century Greek and Roman religions were based on fables and myths about so-called gods with miraculous powers. In contrast, Christianity was based on facts—what really happened, as told by eyewitnesses who were there. The accounts of Jesus' life that we have in the four gospels are not embellishments on the truth—they are the truth. The writers were particularly careful about being accurate and truthful, although they do not include all the facts about Jesus. They include only those facts that they feel are pertinent (see John 20:30-31 & 21:24-25). This may be frustrating for us because we are used to news reporting—all the facts and details of an event, start to finish.

Imagine you were there, listening to Peter relate his personal experiences with Jesus. **How do you think you would have reacted?**

The specific experience that Peter is referring to in verses 16-18 is the transfiguration where Jesus' appearance was transformed (Mark 9:2-13). What this experience communicates about Jesus' identity is very significant. God the Father publicly acknowledged Jesus as His Son, making Jesus God in the flesh. The disciples got a "preview" of the glory that Jesus would one day have as King reigning triumphantly in heaven. The reaction of the average person to such a story might be, "Yeah, right!" except for the fact that Peter is relating what he saw with his own eyes.

How can you respond to people who insist that the bible accounts of Jesus' life are just myths and legends?

Our bibles are the written records of first century eyewitnesses who saw what Jesus said and did (e.g. 1 John 1:1-4). Like witnesses in a court of law, their testimonies are made more credible because there is corroborating evidence. There is archaeological evidence as well as non-biblical writings from the same time period that support the claims of the New Testament writers.² This should give us confidence in the trustworthiness of the bible for ourselves personally—that what it says is absolutely true. And we can have confidence to speak to others about the truth of the gospel—that what we are sharing is not just our personal beliefs but is universal truth for everyone.

3. Peter first argued that his message is supported by real flesh-and-blood eyewitnesses. **What else did he appeal to as a “witness” to the truth of his message about Jesus?**

The Old Testament scriptures or “the word of the prophet.” The Old Testament serves as a corroborating witness to what Peter testified about. The Old Testament and the apostles were in essence saying the same thing about Jesus. He is God come in the flesh and He is the one who will one day reign in the Kingdom of Heaven. Throughout the gospels, both the authors and Jesus Himself referred often to the Old Testament scriptures and how they were being fulfilled in Christ (e.g. Mt. 1:22; 26:55; John 5:39-40).

What was special about the origin of the Old Testament scriptures?

Here Peter clearly explained the divine origin of the bible. It did not come about because of “the will of man but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Spirit.” David put it this way: “The Spirit of the Lord spoke through me; his word was on my tongue.” (2 Sam. 23:2) Jeremiah was told, “...say whatever I command you,” and “Now, I have put my words in your mouth.” (Jer. 1:7,9) Because of the bible’s unique origin, it is not open to any old interpretation or subject to anyone’s private ideas. Twisting and misinterpreting the bible has led many people astray (see 3:16) which is why there are certain “rules” that govern how bible passages are to be interpreted (e.g., always consider a verse in its context; try to discover what the verse meant to its original readers or hearers; take into account the historical and cultural background).

What are some examples of Old Testament prophecies that bear witness to Jesus Christ?

There are over 300 prophecies concerning the coming Messiah in the Old Testament. Some of these prophecies contain specific details such as where and when the Messiah is to be born. The mathematical probability of just 50 of these being fulfilled by Jesus of Nazareth just by chance is less than one in 1,125,000,000,000,000. Here are a few examples: descended from a woman (Gen. 3:15), descended from Abraham (Gen. 22:18); descended from David (Ps. 132:11); from the tribe of Judah (Gen. 49:10); when he will come (Dan. 9:24-25); will be

² More Evidence that Demands a Verdict by Josh McDowell is an excellent resource for information on the historical accuracy of the bible.

born of a virgin (Is.7:14); will be born in Bethlehem (Mic.5:2); will be preceded by a forerunner (Ma.3:1); will be like Moses (Deut.18:18); will be anointed with the Holy Spirit (Is.61:1); will begin His ministry in Galilee (Is.9:1,2); will enter Jerusalem (Zech.9:9); will enter the Temple in Jerusalem (Hag.2:7-9; Mal.3:1); will teach in parables (Ps.78:2); will perform miracles (Is.35:5-6); will be rejected by His own people (Ps.69:8; Is.53:3); will be hated without a cause (Ps.69:4; Is.49:7); betrayed by a friend (Ps.41:9; 55:12,14); abandoned by His disciples (Zech.11:12); sold for 30 pieces of silver (Zech.11:13); the details and meaning of His crucifixion (Ps.22; Is.53).

read luke 1:1-4

4. Why did Luke say he wrote his two-volume work, the gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles?

So that Theophilus, the man Luke was writing to, would have certainty in the things he had been taught about Christ. Luke wanted Theophilus (and the rest of his readers) convinced that the events he wrote about were true. He wanted people's faith grounded on fact, not myth. This is similar to the reason John wrote his gospel: "so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ."

Luke was not an eyewitness to the events of Jesus' life. **What was he instead?**

Luke was a physician, a traveling companion of Paul and the only non-Jewish writer in the New Testament. Although he wasn't an eyewitness himself, he was closely related to an apostle who had seen the risen Christ and from his writing, it is clear that he had interviewed eyewitnesses in order to write his story. Luke was acting like a modern-day reporter, gathering information and corroborating his story.

What made Luke's account different from others?

He "carefully investigated" and wrote an "orderly account." This is not to suggest that the other gospel writers were careless, but it is apparent from Luke's style that he was very concerned about the accuracy of his details. His geography and historical facts have proved to be impeccable. Also, his account is more chronological than the others are. Ancient writers were not as concerned with chronology as we are. They tended to focus on the important events in a person's life rather than telling their story from start to finish. Luke, however, does include information about Jesus' birth and a little about his childhood.

Why do you think it is important to "know the certainty of the things you have been taught?"

The word translated "certainty" in the Greek is "asphaleia" and it means to be firm, not liable to fall, steadfast. It includes the notion of safety. Luke wrote so that Theophilus would know that the account of Jesus' life, upon which he was basing his faith, was solid and secure—it wasn't shaky. It wouldn't be proven false next week or next month or next year. Many cults are founded upon shaky stories that are later proved to be hoaxes (e.g. Mormons). Christianity is

founded upon historical facts about historical people written down in the pages of the bible. That is a certain, secure foundation.

read 2 timothy 3:10-17

5. Paul had just warned Timothy about false teachers with “depraved minds” who “oppose the truth” (3:1-9). **How was Paul different from these men?**

In this letter, Paul was concerned about the threat of false teachers to his gospel and to the church in Ephesus where Timothy was. Paul was different from these false teachers not just in the content of his message, but also the content of his character. Timothy was familiar with Paul’s “way of life” (how he lived under pressure, in adverse situations, what his true motivations were, etc.). What Timothy knew about Paul was to help him discern false teachers and to serve as a model for his own life.

Paul called these men “evil,” “imposters” and “deceivers.” **Why do you think it is important to not just know whether a message is true but also the integrity of the messenger? (see Matthew 7:15-20)**

There is a spiritual link between a person’s character and their message. There are examples from history of men who perpetuated false and dangerous ideas who were, upon closer examination, corrupt and immoral individuals.(e.g. Nietzsche, influential atheist and philosopher died after spending 12 years in an insane asylum; British atheist and philosopher Huxley argued fervently against God because he wanted to live a promiscuous life style; Joseph Smith, founder of the Mormon church, was sexually immoral and a gambler.) Jesus taught that there is a connection between a person’s character and his message. We ought to always consider both!

6. According to Paul, Timothy had some “safeguards” to help him deal with evil imposters and their deceptive messages. **What were they?**

Paul is referring here to just the Old Testament part of the Bible, since the New Testament was not officially put together (canonized) until 393 AD. The New Testament writings, however, were read and circulated throughout Christian churches from the first century on. We know from parts of Acts and from some of Paul’s other letters that Timothy was descended from a Jewish mother and a Greek father. He was probably taught the Old Testament scriptures at a very early age, as was customary for Jewish boys.

The Word of God is the standard we are to use when evaluating a person and their message. If we are familiar with the criteria God has established in the bible, we can protect ourselves from being deceived and led astray. A good illustration is one told by Billy Graham’s wife. She was at an important Washington D.C. dinner and was seated next to a man who worked for the U.S. Treasury in the counterfeit division. She remarked, “You must spend a lot of time studying

counterfeit bills!” “Oh no!” he replied. “I only study the real thing. Then I can spot a counterfeit in a second.” If we devote ourselves to the study of God’s Word, we will be able to spot a counterfeit message or messenger immediately.

How did Paul view the scripture?

Translations of the Bible differ here. Some say all scripture is “inspired by God” while others say “God-breathed.” The idea, though, is clear. God didn’t just breathe upon the scriptures after they were written, but He actually breathed *out* the scriptures. The word literally is “exhaled.” And He didn’t merely give inspiration to the writers of the scriptures but He inspired the writings themselves. The Bible is a book of divine origin. How exactly God inspired the scripture, using human authors, is not clearly revealed to us.

Paul viewed all of scripture as having a divine origin, which is the basis for its ultimate authority.

What did he think scripture was good for?

The list of terms Paul uses here overlap each other a little. Teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness all involve informing people of what is right and wrong, scolding them when they fall short and getting them to conform to the standard (straighten-up). The goal is completeness—lacking nothing. Christians have always held that the bible is all they need for faith (what to believe or “orthodoxy”—ortho meaning straighten and doxy meaning belief) and practice (how to live or “ortho-pracy”).

What role should the bible play in your life now that you are a Christian? What role does it play?

It is important for new Christians to grasp the importance of the bible. It is to have the final word in their lives! It is their new authority. It is to be over their parents, their friends, their spouses, their bosses³ and especially themselves because it is not just the words of men but the Word of God. The bible’s authority is a good thing and should not be viewed as restrictive. God’s will for us (which is revealed in the bible) is good and it brings blessing into our lives. By coming under the bible’s authority we will not be ripped off or short-changed—we will experience abundant life or “life to the fullest.” (John 10:10)

³ This does not mean we can misuse the bible for our own ends. For example, an employee should not use Mt.28 (great commission) as an excuse for “witnessing” with co-workers rather than doing their job. The bible speaks to these various relationships—parent/child, husband/wife, employer/employee. As Christians, we must make sure we apply what we read in the bible correctly.

read hebrews 4:11-13

7. What does the writer of Hebrews exhort us to do? What should we not do?

The idea of “making every effort to enter that rest” conveys much the same idea as Paul did in Phil.2:12, where he wrote, “work out your salvation...” “Rest” is a picture of our salvation. It is a gift—not something we can earn. We cannot, however, just sit back and hope to gain it either. It should not be taken for granted. We are to cooperate with God who is at work in us, as Paul went on to say in Philippians. The way we can blow it is to disobey God or as the writer of Hebrew puts it, follow the example of the children of Israel.

What do you think “rest” is referring to?

The ultimate rest that we as Christians are looking forward to (rest in heaven—our inheritance as God’s children) is illustrated by the Sabbath rest and by the children of Israel resting in the Promised Land. The Sabbath and the Promised Land are merely pictures of our salvation.

8. If we follow the example of the people of Israel, what are we disobeying?

Basically, God’s voice (v.7) or His Word. The children of Israel disobeyed God’s commandments that were communicated to them through His voice to Moses and His written word on the stone tablets. This was no small matter. They were disobeying divine revelation and there were severe consequences. We too must see the bible as divine revelation and that to disobey it is to disobey the God who is behind the words.

How did the writer of Hebrews describe God’s Word?

The writer uses metaphors to “personify” God’s Word. Although “word” does at times refer to Jesus, the incarnate Word of God (John 1:1,14; Heb.1:1-2), most feel that this passage is about God’s general revelation which comes to us primarily through the bible. The fact that the author writes that the Word of God is “living and active” gets at the very heart of the nature of God. He is living and the author of life. Jesus said that His words were “spirit and life.” (John 6:63) Therefore, we can expect God’s Word, the bible, to impart life to us—nourish us spiritually and to be active, not dormant. Although these words are ancient they are still alive and kicking. They are always relevant to us and to our situation. Not only is God’s word alive, it is penetrating. It can get into the very core of our beings, discerning our most secret thoughts and feelings. The sword is a frequently used picture for God’s word throughout the scripture. We see it in Eph.6:17 and Rev.1:16. The sharpness of a two-edged sword underlines the bible’s ability to penetrate deeply into our souls. The combination of God’s word being alive and penetrating should strike fear into us. Because of His word, we cannot hide who we really are. New Christians should expect that as they read their bibles, God will speak to them right

off the pages and cut through all their defenses to get at their real problems and their true needs.

Have you ever felt like the bible was *alive*? Has God ever spoken right to you and right through you as you read the bible? Discuss.

wrapping it up: As a Christian, the most important book you will ever read is your bible. It is by reading your bible on a regular basis that you will grow in your relationship with God. The bible will show you how God wants you to live. It is also the primary way He will speak to you personally—words of encouragement, comfort, hope or direction for your life. But the statement of Jesus in Matthew 4:4 (see also Deuteronomy 8:3) sums up everything: “Man shall not live by bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.” According to Jesus, this book, the Bible, should be as important to you as the most basic necessities of life. In order for you to be healthy and to grow as a Christian, you must regularly “take in” the scripture by reading it, meditating upon it and believing it for yourself. Before long, you will discover, like many other Christians have before you, that the Bible is something that you cannot live without.

2

what is a christian?

john 2:23-3:15

openers: To be a Christian means a lot of different things to different people. For many, being a Christian means you believe in God, attend a church, go through the rite of baptism and try to be a “good” person. But the Bible defines a Christian much differently. According to the Bible, a Christian is someone who has had a very significant, life-changing experience. The apostle John describes this dramatic experience as “passing from death to life.” (See 1 John 3:14). The apostle Paul says that we were once actually dead and that by becoming a Christian, we have been made alive. (See Eph. 2:1-5) Jesus refers to it as being “born-again” or “born from above.” It is like being born all over again! In chapter 3 of the gospel of John, Jesus had a very interesting conversation with a religious leader about what it means to be a Christian.

aim of study: To make sure people understand that being a Christian is more than just mental assent to a set of doctrines. To be a Christian is to be regenerated by the Holy Spirit, and this is an experience.

1. Think of some things that are true about birth and newborn babies. If becoming a Christian is to be “born again,” **what are some things you can learn from natural birth about being a Christian?** (For example, birth is how we enter this world. Being born-again is how we enter the spiritual world and a relationship with God.)

read john 2:23-3:2

2. Crowds of people were in Jerusalem to celebrate Passover, an annual feast remembering the deliverance of the Jews from slavery in Egypt. (See Exodus 12) **How did these people in Jerusalem feel about Jesus? Why?**

John writes that people believed because they saw miracles. Although it is always good that people believe, this is not the kind of faith that God is looking for. Throughout this gospel, John contrasts the shallow, fickle faith of the crowds with the real faith of a true disciple. Real faith is deeper. Real faith is trust in the person of Jesus, miracles or not!

3. **How did Jesus feel about them? Why?**

The reason we know their faith was not up to “disciple” standards is that Jesus would not entrust Himself to them. He knew what kind of faith they really had—they were enamored with the miracles, but they were not captured by the person of Jesus. The fact that Jesus was able to know what was in a man’s heart is testimony to His deity. The bible teaches that only God knows the heart of man (see Jer. 17:9-10 & 1 Kings 8:39).

How does it make you feel knowing that Jesus knows everything about you?

It ought to sober us to realize that God sees into our private moments and the secret thoughts of our hearts. It’s important for young Christians to understand that Jesus’ Lordship is over every aspect of their lives—thoughts and deeds. It is completely unbiblical to compartmentalize our lives and assume that certain areas are off-limits to Jesus.

4. **What are some things you can learn about this man Nicodemus from verses 1-2?**

The Pharisees were a Jewish sect who rigorously and meticulously followed Old Testament laws. They tried to remain separate (hence the meaning of their name: “separate ones”) from the common people (who did not obey all these laws) so as not to become ritually “unclean.” The Pharisees were regularly having conflicts with Jesus, who abhorred their behavior as hypocritical (see Matthew 23).

Nicodemus was not only a Pharisee. He was a member of the Sanhedrin (Jewish Ruling Council), the high court of the Jews, made up of Pharisees, Sadduces, high priests, elders and teachers of the law. Sadduces and Pharisees differed in their doctrine and in their social class. Sadduces accepted only the five books of Moses as scripture, they didn’t believe in the resurrection, angels, demons or a spiritual world. They were upper class and their focus was on the priesthood and the temple. The Pharisees were more orthodox in their beliefs (Jesus never conflicted with them over doctrine, just their behavior). Nicodemus was a high-ranking Pharisee with status and reputation, which explains why he came to Jesus at night when no

one would see. At this point, he was still very concerned with other people's opinion of him and being associated in any way with Jesus was not popular.

What do you think he thought of Jesus?

It appears that he thought highly of Jesus, because he referred to Him as "rabbi," he recognized that His authority was not from any earthly religious body but from God Himself, and that God was actively with Jesus, enabling Him to perform miracles. While all this was a good beginning to faith in Christ, it was not enough to get Nicodemus into heaven. Again, emphasize that mental assertion to certain facts about Jesus is not biblical faith.

read john 3:3-9

5. How did Jesus reply to Nicodemus' comment? (V. 3)

His reply appears to have nothing at all to do with what Nicodemus had just said. Keeping in mind that Jesus knows all men (John 2:24-25), **what do you think He knew about Nicodemus?**

Nicodemus may have been waiting for Jesus to affirm his beliefs, commend him for being correct and to further elaborate on who He was and the nature of His mission. However, Jesus zeros in on Nicodemus' basic need. We should not be surprised if God doesn't respond to our questions directly. He rarely did with people in the bible.

Do you think Jesus was impressed by all of Nicodemus' credentials? Why or why not?

If there was anyone who should have been qualified for heaven, it would have been a Pharisee, especially one who was investigating Jesus. Nicodemus was probably old and learned, but knowledge could not save him.

6. Nicodemus was puzzled by Jesus' response and said that what Jesus was saying was impossible. It was impossible to enter again your mother's womb. **But what did Jesus say was impossible in verse 5?**

Jesus was saying that a person cannot enter heaven without the Spirit, and there is only one way of getting the Spirit—new birth or spiritual birth.

Think of some ways you may have thought you could enter the Kingdom of God. (For example, helping people, being good enough, going to church, etc.)

7. Jesus told Nicodemus in verse 6 that "Flesh gives birth to flesh but the Spirit gives birth to spirit." **What do you think this means?**

Human beings give birth to other human beings, but spiritual life comes only from the Holy Spirit. The water He refers to is most likely the water of birth (amniotic fluid) and not the water

of baptism. Without the Spirit, our spirits lay dead and dormant (see Eph. 2:1). We are like dead radios. Sound waves are all around us, but we cannot pick them up. God is all around us, but we are totally unaware of His Presence. Once we are made alive, we begin “picking-up” God’s signal.

According to Jesus, can you create spiritual life in yourself? Support your answer from the passage.

*No. Spiritual life comes only from the Holy Spirit. In order to have spiritual life in us, we need to have the Spirit. The only way to get the Spirit is through a “born-again” experience. This is what Paul refers to as “regeneration” (Titus 3:5; Greek word *palingenesia* which means “again,” *palin*, “birth,” *genesis*). You want to emphasize that being a Christian involves this experience, even though people’s individual “born-again” experiences will vary.*

8. In verse 8, Jesus compared spiritual birth with the wind. Jesus used a play on words here, because both the Greek and the Hebrew words for “wind” can also be translated “spirit.” Think of some characteristics of the wind. **How does the wind compare with your experience of spiritual birth?**

The wind is invisible, yet we can feel it and we can see its affect on other things. We cannot predict the wind nor can we control it. Get people to share about their experience of salvation. What did they feel? How were they changed? Share about your own experience.

read john 3:9-15

9. Nicodemus still did not understand what Jesus was talking about (verse 9). Jesus said that the reason he didn’t understand was that he has no personal experience of these things (verse 11). **What had Jesus experienced that made Him qualified to discuss spiritual truths (verse 13)?**

The reason Jesus could speak authoritatively on matters of spirituality was that He had been to heaven—He had first-hand knowledge of the things of God. He had gone beyond Nicodemus’ authority, which was rooted in learning and knowledge. Jesus’ authority was rooted in personal experience. Being a Pharisee, Nicodemus was concerned with authority, so Jesus laid out His credentials.

Since you have become a Christian, what things do you understand now that you did not before?

Share something personal if necessary to get the discussion going.

10. Jesus made reference in verse 14 to a story from the Old Testament that Nicodemus, “Israel’s teacher” (verse 10) should have been familiar with. Jesus drew a comparison between that story and His crucifixion. **Read Numbers 21:4-9 and then list any similarities you find there with the crucifixion of Christ. What do you think Jesus meant by “believe?”**

In the Numbers story, the people sinned against God by grumbling and complaining. The judgment was death, through the bite of venomous snakes that God sent among them. When the people realized their sin, they petitioned Moses, who petitioned God on their behalf. The Lord instructed Moses to make a snake and put it up on a pole. All the people had to do was look at the snake, and they would be spared and live. The bible teaches that we all sin and that the judgment for our sin is death (Romans 6:23). Jesus was made in the “likeness of sinful man” (Rom.8:3) and “lifted up on the cross” (John 12:32-33). If we “look to Him” and believe (John 6:40), we will be saved (have life—John 10:10;11:25).

For most people today, to believe means to accept something as true. It’s primarily a mental exercise. In the bible, to believe involved trust and commitment. It went beyond being persuaded of the truth to actually relying on it and then committing oneself to it. A good illustration is the story of the acrobat at Niagara Falls. An acrobat strings a wire across Niagara Falls and asks the crowd that has gathered whether they believe he can walk across that wire without falling. They claim to believe, and the acrobat walks across and back without falling. Next, the acrobat asks the crowd if they believe he can ride a bicycle across the wire without falling. They claim to believe, and the acrobat rides a bike across and back without falling. Then, the acrobat asks the crowd if they believe he can ride a bicycle across the wire while pushing a wheelbarrow without falling. They claim to believe, and he asks, “Which one of you will get in the wheelbarrow?” This is biblical faith—biblical belief. It goes beyond mental assent to trust and commitment.

wrapping things up: The late Paul Little described becoming a Christian this way: “There’s something to believe and Someone to receive.” What we are to believe as Christians is the message of the gospel (the “good news”). The good news is Christ paid the penalty for our sins with His death on the cross. We need to make sure, though, that we not only believe the message of salvation but that we also receive the Savior into our hearts. It is in the receiving of Christ that new life is injected into us by the Holy Spirit and we are “born-again”!

Birth is an incredible event and a new baby is a wonderful thing. Spiritual birth is also an incredible event, an event that changes a person’s life forever by bringing them into personal contact with the living God of the universe. But as incredible and wonderful as a new baby is, it doesn’t stay a baby. He or she begins a process of growing up and maturing. And so, as a “new-born” Christian, you will also not stay the same. You are beginning a life-long journey of growth, change and maturation as a child of God.

3

sin and forgiveness

1 john 1:5-2:2

openers: The moment you believed the gospel message and received Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord, you became a Christian. Your sins were forgiven and you were declared righteous (to be without sin) by God. You were also brought into a new relationship with Him as His child. All this is a gift and not something you can earn or merit. As we discussed in the previous study, the bible calls this being “born-again” through the Holy Spirit.

Although you are a Christian and God has declared you righteous, you may find that you do not always feel righteous. You still sin and do things that are wrong. Does this mean you are no longer righteous in God’s sight and therefore no longer a Christian? Do you need to be saved all over again so that your sins can be forgiven? Or is sin something you don’t have to think about anymore? Now that you’re a Christian, will God just overlook your sins?

It’s important to understand what the Bible actually teaches about sin. Back in the first century, the apostle John wrote a letter to some Christians addressing, among other things, the whole subject of sin and forgiveness. Let’s take a look at what his letter had to say.

aim of study: To make sure people understand that as Christians, they will continue to sin, even though they are justified and forgiven. Sinning will not “undo” their salvation, but neither will it be *automatically* taken care of. As Christians, they must learn to confess their sin to God. He then promises to forgive and cleanse them.

memory verse: “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” 1 John 1:9

read 1 john 1:5

1. In verse 5, how did John describe God?

As light—a favorite theme in John’s writings and found throughout the bible.

What are some characteristics of light and darkness?

Light and darkness cannot co-exist. Light dispels darkness. Light reveals, while darkness hides or covers up. An old basement is a good illustration. In the dark, you can’t really tell how dirty or how cluttered it might be. Turn on the light, and you can see all the junk and the garbage that’s there.

What do you think John might want us to learn about God from this metaphor?

Light is often linked to life and/or salvation which only God imparts (Ps.27:1; John 8:12). Light also implies spiritual illumination—God revealing Himself and His will—light helping us find the right way or path in which to walk. “We believe that the sun is in the sky at midday in summer not because we can clearly see the sun (in fact, we can’t) but because we can see everything else.” (C. S. Lewis, Miracles) For John, light has a moral quality. By saying God is light, John is describing His nature—that He is absolutely holy, righteous and true. In God there is no hidden agenda or deceptive character. When we come to Him, we are coming to a completely moral Being, which implies that we must be willing to face the truth... about ourselves. Read John 3:19-21 for further insight.

read 1 john 1:6-2:2

2. Three times in this passage John used the words, “If we claim.” Write down the three statements that begin with these words (v.6,8,10).

“If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in darkness...”

“If we claim to be without sin...”

“If we claim we have not sinned...”

These statements (or false claims) are three errors Christians often make about sin. Let’s look at each one separately.

3. What was the first false claim mentioned by John (v.6)?

That we enjoy fellowship with God while at the same time we are living an unrighteous life. There were strong Gnostic influences in the early church, which separated the body and the spirit. They insisted that what one does in the body has no affect on the spirit, or that one’s actions have no relevance to their spiritual life. This notion is totally unbiblical.

4. **What does the phrase, “walk in the darkness” describe? Why do you think John chose to use this phrase?**

The use of the word “walk” in the bible implies a habitual way of life or style of living. To walk in darkness implies that a person is living a life that is opposite to the light—it is immoral, unrighteous. It also implies that they do not want to be seen by others—they prefer the darkness. It’s important to note that we aren’t talking about a little slip up—we are talking about the whole way a person conducts their life and the path they are “walking” on.

In your own life, how is sinning like “walking in the darkness?”

5. **If we make this claim, what does that reveal about us? Why?** (refer to Is.59:2 to help you answer)

If we claim to enjoy fellowship with God while we are living a sinful life, we are lying because both things cannot be true at once. God and sin don’t mix. If we’re really in close fellowship with God, we would not be able to live a sinful lifestyle. Again, we’re not talking here about a slip-up or a mistake (got caught speeding, lost your temper and yelled at your boss, etc.). We are talking about a habitual way of living life that is sinful—a way that is in direct conflict with God’s commands (e.g. living with someone outside of marriage, embezzling money from a business partner, cheating on exams at school, etc.). And if we are living a sinful lifestyle, then we are not having fellowship with God because sin destroys our fellowship with God. According to Is.59:2, willful, unrepentant sin will separate us from God.

How close to God do you feel after you’ve sinned and disobeyed Him? Explain.

6. **What is an alternative to walking in the darkness (v.7)?**

Walking in the light, according to John, is living a life of truth and being honest about mistakes and sins. It is to be willing to live in the spotlight where flaws and inadequacies can be seen. Most of us have mastered the art of walking in the darkness—living in such a way as to keep all of our faults carefully hidden. Being a Christian involves coming into the light and coming to terms with the truth about ourselves—our sin. It doesn’t necessarily mean that we are to go public and broadcast our faults to the world. But it does mean that we are able to “come clean” with God and, when appropriate, with those who have significant relationship with us.

In your own words, what does it mean to “walk in the light?”

7. **What are the benefits of walking in the light?**

We would have expected to hear that one of the benefits would be restored fellowship with God, since that is what we have been hearing about, but instead we hear that it’s restored fellowship with each other. This is, of course, completely consistent with the biblical message—love God and love each other. The two relationships are inseparable. And Jesus Himself so identified with His people, that to be out of fellowship with Him would automatically

mean we were out of fellowship with each other. The most interesting benefit is the ongoing cleansing of the blood of Jesus. It's key to understand that as Christians, the need for forgiveness and cleansing from sin never ends.

Has “walking in the light” ever healed a broken relationship in your own life? Discuss.

8. Note that John said when we “walk in the light,” the blood of Jesus purifies us from all sin. **What do you think he was assuming is true about all Christians?**

John is assuming that Christians still sin and will keep on sinning. They will need to be forgiven and cleansed over and over and over. The emphasis is on being cleansed or purified. We won't merely be forgiven, the residue of sin will be washed away. That enables us to be in the light, in fellowship with God and each other.

9. **In your own words, re-state this first error about sin that John was warning Christians about. How do you think someone might act if they believed this error?**

If we insist that we are in close fellowship with God while we are living a life of habitual, unrepentant sin, then we are not telling the truth. It is impossible to be in fellowship with God and live in sin.

10. **What was the second false claim John mentioned (v.8)?**

That we claim to be completely without sin. Here the error involves the belief that we no longer have a sin nature—that corruption we inherited from Adam that makes all human beings prone to sin.

If we make this claim, what is wrong with us this time?

When John uses the phrase, “the truth is not in us,” he is using the exact words Jesus did when He referred to the devil. (John 8:44) Not only are we lying to others, we are lying to ourselves and have become self-deceived. We refuse to face to facts. John is speaking to some believers who were confused, misled and deceived about doctrine. First, they believed that sin didn't matter. Now they are saying they don't even have a sin nature—that having the Holy Spirit somehow does away with their sin nature.

11. **What alternative did John present us with in verse 9? In your own words, what does it mean to “confess?”**

The alternative is we confess—we acknowledge our wrongdoing. We tell God that we agree with what He says about us and our actions. We make our sins known to Him and if appropriate, to others (see James 5:16). It's clear that it's not enough to just think about our sin, or to feel bad and remorseful that we sinned. We must acknowledge our sin to God in words.

What has God promised to do for us if we confess our sins to Him?

God will forgive us (take the debt out of our account and declare us to be righteous) and cleanse us (wash the residual effects of sin out of our lives and make us clean and pure).

Why can we have confidence that God will do these things for us?

It's important for young Christians to grasp the absolute trustworthiness of God's Word and the absolute dependability of God. What God says He will do He does. This would be an important point to drive home.

The Bible teaches that God is faithful to do the things He promises. He can be trusted and depended upon because He does not lie. (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Hebrews 6:17-18) The Bible also teaches that God is just. His judgments and decisions are always right and perfectly fair. It is just for Him to forgive us our sins not because we deserve to be forgiven but because Christ has already paid the penalty for our sin. Nothing more is owed to God. Jesus paid it all! (Romans 6:23; 3:23-26)

12. Why do you think it is important to understand that our forgiveness depends not on how moving and heartfelt our confession might be, but rather on the faithfulness and justice of God?

Our salvation is totally God and what He has done. Nothing we have depends upon us. He moved upon us to even become interested in Christ in the first place. He drew us to Jesus through the Holy Spirit (John 6:44). The reason we are forgiven when we confess our sin is because of His character and not our sincerity. This is security! If any of this was left up to us, we would fail, and if we didn't fail, we would be perpetually insecure in our relationship with God, wondering if tomorrow we would fail. But God never fails.

13. In verse 8, John used the word "sin" but then in verse 9, he used the word "sins." Explain in your own words the distinction he wanted to make between "sin" and "sins."

Here you want to make sure people understand that we have a sin nature (referred to as "flesh" in some translations) that makes us commit sins (acts of wrongdoing). We cannot excuse our sins because of our sin nature because as Christians we have been filled with the Holy Spirit who gives us power to subdue our flesh and obey the Lord.

The Bible teaches that although Christians will always have a sin nature, they now have power over sin. This power is from the Holy Spirit who resides inside Christians and helps them change sinful behavior. For further reading, see Romans 8:1-17.

14. Re-state the second error about sin that John warned us about.

If we believe that because we are Christians, we no longer have a sin nature to deal with, we are deceiving ourselves.

Think of some negative ways this error might affect your life as a Christian.

A mature Christian is realistic about his or her weaknesses and tendency to sin. For example, a mature Christian would not carelessly get into a situation that could become a temptation for them. They would know that they are not “above” sin and that it is possible for them to fall into sin when put in the right circumstances. Someone who doesn’t believe this might unwisely get themselves into situations that they are not able to handle, resulting in them falling into sin.

15. What is the third false claim (v.10)?

This error is to deny that we’ve ever sinned or that we sin now.

How is it different from the false claim referred to in verse 8?

The distinction between this error and the previous one could be stated like this: In the previous error, the denial was the permanence of sin’s power or of the sin nature in a Christian’s life. In this error, it is the absolute denial of the practice of sin, past, present and future.

What does belief in this claim reveal about us?

That we are calling a God a liar, since He has clearly said that all men are sinners (Ps.14:3; Is.53:6; Rom.3:22-24). This is to challenge His verdict on our lives.

16. There seems to be a progression in these three claims. In the first claim, we are telling a lie. In the second, we are deluded or self-deceived. But in this last one, we are actually calling God a liar. **What do you think calling God a liar reveals about a person’s heart? (refer to Gen.3:1,4,5 to help you answer)**

The first claim reveals a person’s desire to deceive others—to put up a front and appear different than they really are (I have a good relationship with God even though I’m living a sinful life). The second claim reveals a person’s total lack of self-perception—they are deceived about their own sin. This third claim reveals a hardness and indifference towards

God's opinion—a willingness to hold on to a position even though it is in direct conflict with what God has said. There is a hardness here that may not be present in the other two cases.

17. What scene do you think John was imagining as he wrote 2:1-2?

John is using a courtroom as a backdrop for these verses. Jesus is our advocate (as some translations put it) speaking to the Father (our judge) on our behalf. We are the guilty defendants.

You may want to point out that John's motive for writing all of this about sin is not so we can feel comfortable with our sin but that we would know what to do when we do sin. His desire, as clearly stated in 2:1 is that no one would sin. He's not advocating sinlessness for the Christian, but he does believe that Christ changes a person, giving them power over sin.

Put yourself in this scene: You are on trial. Satan is the prosecuting attorney (Rev.12:10), accusing you of breaking God's laws. God is the judge and Jesus is your defense attorney. **What else, according to John, did Jesus do besides defend you before the Father?**

John describes Him as our "atoning sacrifice." To atone means to reconcile or to literally make as one. Jesus died (was sacrificed) so that we might be reconciled to God. We must realize that because of sin, we were at odds with God—actually the objects of His wrath (Rom.1:18). But when Jesus died in our place and took God's wrath for us, we can now be reconciled. In Romans 3:25, Jesus is referred to as a "sacrifice of atonement," which literally means a sacrifice that satisfied God's righteous anger against the sin of mankind. Jesus is the one who would turn aside God's wrath from us and take it on Himself. In keeping with the courtroom motif, Jesus is not just our defense attorney—He also serves our sentence.

18. In your own words, re-state the truths about sin you learned from this passage.

- *Sin in our lives negatively affects our relationship with God. It destroys our fellowship with Him.*
- *Even though we are Christians, we still have to deal with our sin nature—that tendency in us to sin.*
- *God has said that every man, woman and child on the face of the earth sins. So do we.*
- *If we do sin, there is a remedy. We should confess our sin (acknowledge it to God) and by faith, receive the forgiveness and cleansing that He promises.*

wrapping things up: Even though you are now a Christian, you will continue to sin. You still have a sin nature that makes you prone to disobey God. The way to deal with sin before God is to be honest about it (walk in the light), not try to hide it or lie about it (walk in the darkness) and to admit it (confession) to God. Then you must trust Him to keep His promise to forgive your sin and cleanse you from them.

It's important to realize that the goal God has for your life isn't simply to repeat this process of confession and forgiveness over and over again. His goal is to actually change you and make you

like Jesus (Rom.8:29). While you endeavor to obey Him, He is at work inside of you through the Holy Spirit, changing your desires and freeing you from sinful habits (Phil.2:13). Now, you are declared righteous. One day, you will actually be righteous in all of your thoughts and actions. Until then, you will have to deal with the inevitability of sin in your life.

4

am i *really* a christian?

1 john 3:11-24

openers: For one reason or another, some Christians doubt that they are really saved. They may question whether they “did it right” the first time—whether Jesus really did come into their heart—and so they repeat the sinner’s prayer and give their life to Christ over and over again. Maybe their experience didn’t match their expectations. Perhaps when they compare themselves with someone else, they conclude that they just don’t measure up to the standard and so must not be saved.

It is possible to be really saved yet not be certain that you are. But that is not the state the bible intends for Christians to be in. We are to be saved and to be assured of our salvation. We are to know without a doubt that we are God’s, that He has forgiven our sin, that He dwells in our heart by the Holy Spirit and that we are destined for heaven when we die.

In today’s study, we will be looking at some of the ways we can assure *ourselves* that we really truly are Christians. In 1 John, the apostle lays out “tests” that we can apply to ourselves to determine that we are really saved.

aim of study: To make sure people understand that Christians are not supposed to doubt their salvation—God wants us to be confident that we are born-again. And to teach them the biblical tests for assuring themselves that they are saved.

1. Have you ever wondered if you really are saved and if Christ is really living inside of you? If you have, what sorts of things make you doubt your salvation?

read 1 John 3:11-15

2. What did John tell us we should and shouldn't do in verses 11 and 12?

We should continue with the message we have been told from the start—love one another. This message John has reiterated throughout his letter and this message is the heart of soul of what Jesus taught. In contrast, we should not hate one another—we should not be like Cain. Here is a hint at how we can know who we belong to—God or the devil. Do we love or do we hate? Whichever we do is an indication of whose we are.

You can read the story of how Cain killed his brother Abel in Genesis 4:1-16. **According to John, why did Cain murder his brother?**

It's important to point out that Cain's hatred of his brother stemmed from the rejection he perceived from God (Gen.4:5). John further elaborated on this point, informing us that God didn't capriciously reject Cain's offering. Abel had given God his best and Cain had not. Cain's offering revealed the sin that was "crouching" in his heart. On the flip side, our love for one another must stem from God's unconditional acceptance of us. It is because He first loved us that we are able to turn and love each other (4:11).

3. Verse 13 states the first "test" that can help you determine that you are saved. **What is it?**

The first two tests follow from the Cain and Abel illustration. The first test is that the world hates us. We shouldn't be surprised by this, since the world is like Cain—its deeds are evil. We, on the other hand, are accepted and approved by God. We are therefore objects of contempt in the world's eyes.

The word "world" in verse 13 does not refer to the physical earth or all the people living on the earth. The New Testament writers used this term to refer to the "world system" whose values and priorities are opposed to the ways and the will of God. (see 1 John 2:15-17) They taught that the world was under the leadership of the devil (Eph.2:2; John 12:31). It could include the popular culture, politics and governments, the mass media, etc.

Read John 15:18-21. **Why did Jesus say Christians would be hated?**

We will be hated by the world because we are associated with Jesus and the world, headed by the devil, hates Jesus. We will be hated because we no longer "belong" to the world. We are no longer following the world or obeying the world. Our values, interests and priorities are "counter-cultural." It is as if we have come from another country and everything we do and say is completely foreign to the world around us. People don't like those who are different. In particular, they don't like those who, by their difference, point out sin and rebellion. Our very

existence, especially if we are not afraid to live publicly as Christians, is a stark contrast to the world's rebellion against God.

Why would this help assure you that you are God's child?

If the world hates us, this means that we are clearly identified as God's. If the world loved us and applauded us, we ought to be concerned that we are not following God as closely as we should.

Since you have become a Christian, do you feel "out of step" with the rest of the world? If so, explain.

It's important to distinguish between those people who have always "marched to the beat of a different drummer" so to speak and have never felt like they fit in anywhere and those who because they have taken a stand as a Christian have felt disconnected. We don't want to encourage rebellion for rebellion's sake. But we do want to support and encourage those who are seeking to obey Christ and as a result have been rejected. According to the bible, this is what is to be expected.

4. In verse 14 you will find a second "test" that can help you determine if you are really saved. **What is it?**

Here is the other side of the Cain and Abel story. On the one hand, if we are hated by the world, we will know that we are Christians. On the other hand, if we love other believers, we will also know that we are Christians.

What does "passing from death to life" refer to?

Life and death are key themes in John's writings and he uses them to communicate spiritual realities. Life always signifies the life of God in the believer through the Holy Spirit (John 1:4). The images of being born again (new life—John 3:3); living water (John 4:10), the bread of life that comes from heaven (John 6:33,48) and life to the full (John 10:10) all point to new life in Christ.

Since you gave your life to Christ, what changes have you noticed in your own thoughts and feelings about other Christians?

You may want to let people share also about how they are finding less and less in common with old friends who are not believers. The point is to get them to recognize changes in themselves that have happened spontaneously because of the Holy Spirit.

read 1 john 3:16-20

5. According to verse 16, how do we know what is and what isn't "love?"

Real love is best illustrated in the death of Christ. His death was motivated purely by love since there was nothing "lovable" in us that prompted Him to make that sacrifice (see Rom.5:6-8).

Why can we be confident that God loves us?

God's love is proven through actions and not just through words. He gave up that which was most precious to Him—Jesus—which also proves His love. He did this while we were His enemies and still sinners, which further proves His love. God couldn't have sacrificed more or done it at a point in time when we were any worse than we were. All of this taken together convinces us that God does indeed love us.

Our tendency is to look to things like our health, our financial situation, our family relationships or our job success for evidence of God's love for us. **Why shouldn't we do this? Why are these things not able to give us real assurance of God's love? Explain.**

There are many different factors affecting our situations (finances, health, job, family) other than God. We may be suffering financial problems because of our own sin. We may be struggling in a relationship because of another person's sin. The fact that these areas of our lives are in disarray says nothing about whether or not God loves us. Many people doubt God's love because He is not making them happy or giving them what they want. But like any good parent, God won't just give us what we want to make us happy because that might not be what we need or what would be best for us. In His love, He gives us what is best for us. As children, we might not understand why He is allowing certain things to happen in our lives, but because we know for certain that He loves us (by looking to the cross) we can trust His love for the rest (see Rom.8:32).

6. How did John say we are to love our Christian brothers and sisters?

He begins with the general principle, which sets the bar very high—we are to lay down our lives for each other. Then John explains in practical terms what this means. We are to share our material possessions with those in need. He is not, incidentally, speaking only to the wealthy who have enough to spare. He is speaking to the average person who has just what they need. We must be willing to give without counting the cost to us. The idea is if we "see" a need, God's love in our hearts ought to compel us to act and do what Christ would do. If we close our hearts to the need (NIV: "have no pity on him"), John asks rhetorically, "How can God's love even be in us?" Such behavior is completely incompatible with God's love.

What are some ways you can show this kind of love to the Christians you know?

7. John warned that sometimes our “hearts will condemn us” (v.19-20). To condemn means to declare wrong or pronounce guilty. **What do you think he meant by “whenever our hearts condemn us?” Have you ever experienced this? Explain.**

This is what happens when our internal conscience accuses us and reminds us of all the ways we’ve blown it. Most people from time to time feel condemned. The truth is, our consciences may make us feel bad about ourselves, but they cannot pronounce ultimate judgment. Only God can do that because “He is greater than our hearts.” The problem with our heart is it cannot be trusted. It does not always render an accurate assessment of our actions. Sometimes our heart or conscience excuses our wrong behavior. Other times it condemns our right behavior.

How can these “tests” help you deal with a condemning heart?

Again, note the theme of assurance in verse 19—“how we know that we belong to the truth.” We ought to be able to look at the deeds of love in our lives (as well as the hatred the world has for us) and silence our accusing consciences. We must remind ourselves that while we still sin and fall short, we are exhibiting love—the kind of love that only characterizes someone who belongs to God.

read 1 john 3:21-24

8. **What is the third “test” (verse 22) that can help us determine that we are really saved (see also 2:3-5; 3:6,9-10)?**

This third test is that we obey God’s command. People should begin to see a change in their behavior once they’re saved. They should begin to care about God’s commands and they should actually start walking in obedience to the commands. The point is not how perfectly they obey the commands but that they are now moving in the direction of obedience where before they didn’t care at all about obeying God.

Describe how your behavior has changed since you gave your life to Christ.

How do you feel now when you’ve obeyed God? How do you feel when you’ve disobeyed God?

Here you want people to recognize that there has been a change in their conscience since they’ve come to Christ. Prior to being saved they had no concern about disobeying God and therefore no guilt when they did. Once they are re-born however, their consciences are sensitized to God’s will. Now when they obey they sense God’s approval and when they disobey they feel guilty because now they are in relationship with God. They begin to care about what He cares about. It is important for them to understand that their consciences need to be informed by the bible. People’s consciences can become over-sensitized if they add to

God's commands or it can be hardened if they ignore some of God's commands. The best way to have a healthy conscience as a Christian is to have it shaped by what the bible says.

When do you feel most like asking God for something and why?

There is a connection in John's writings between obedience to God and answered prayer. This connection is not a magic formula. It is being in such close communion with God that our prayers are in conformity to His will. (see John 15:7)

9. What is a fourth "test" that can help us determine that we are really saved (see also 4:2-3)?

The fourth test is the test of belief (v.23) or more precisely correct belief. It is not just that we choose to believe but that the content of our belief is correct. It's important that we believe the right things about Christ—that what we believe is true.

What exactly must we believe about Jesus in order to pass this test?

According to John, we must believe that Jesus is the Christ (2:2; 5:1), that Jesus is the Son (2:23), that Jesus is the Son of God (4:15, 5:5) and that Jesus was incarnate or come in the flesh (4:2). We pass this test when we are able to answer affirmatively that yes, we believe these things are true of Jesus. People's understanding of doctrinal truth becomes clearer as they mature in Christ, but there should be some evidence of this correct belief present even in a young believer.

What is the source of correct belief about Jesus?

The origin of correct belief can always be traced back to God. Here John writes that only through the Holy Spirit can a person arrive at correct belief about Jesus (4:2). The tell-tale sign of whether or not a person has the Holy Spirit is what they say about Jesus. In Matthew 16, when Peter made his great confession about Christ, Jesus told him that the reason he knew this was the Father in heaven had revealed it to him (see Mt.16:17). This ought to give us great confidence that when our belief about Christ is correct, it is because we are indeed saved and we do indeed have the Holy Spirit.

10. In your own words, state the difference between how you are saved and how you are assured that you're saved.

The late Paul Little explained being saved very simply—there is something to believe and someone to receive. We must believe that what God says about us is true. We are sinners and need a Savior. We must believe that Jesus is that Savior, who died for our sins so that we could be forgiven. We must then receive Christ, through the Holy Spirit, into our lives as both our Savior and our Lord.

We are assured that we are saved by seeing the evidence of certain things in our lives. We should see that we are now "out of step" with the rest of the world and that at times, the world actually hates us. We should see that we now love other believers and feel a sense of

community and family with them. We should see that more and more we are endeavoring to obey God's commandments. And, we should see that what we believe about Jesus is true and in line with what the bible teaches.

wrapping things up: In the book of 1 John, the apostle gave us tests that we can apply to our lives to assure us that we are saved—to assure us that we have been born-again and belong to God. Passing these tests won't save us. Salvation comes from placing our trust in Christ's death for our sin and by surrendering our lives to Him. But these tests can help us have confidence that we have done that.

God isn't looking for a "perfect score" on these tests (e.g., perfect love or perfect obedience). He is looking for a change in your life. He wants to see that you are moving in the direction of love for other Christians and obedience to Him. The devil will try to undermine your confidence and cast doubt on your relationship with God. Resist these attacks by using the truth of God's Word, particularly these simple tests from 1 John.

5

why is being a christian so *hard*?

openers: You don't have to be a Christian for long to discover that it is not easy to live as a Christian. Perhaps this came as a surprise to you. Maybe you were under the impression (like many people) that following Jesus would be a breeze. God would make all your troubles go away and He would see to it that life went smoothly, effortlessly and flawlessly for you.

Many people imagine the Christian life to be easy—to be like playing a Sunday afternoon game of football. All that needs to be done once they have the ball is to run down the open field to the end zone and score a touchdown. They take off running only to be hit from the side, tackled to the ground and smashed face first into the dirt. Their problem was they failed to take into account the opposing team on the field.

Many of us fail to take into account the forces opposing us as Christians. The bible tells us we have enemies who oppose our spiritual progress as believers and try to tempt us away from following the Lord. Everyone experiences temptation from time to time, but certain temptations intensify once we become Christians because we have changed our allegiance—we are God's, and this has made us some new enemies.

In this study, we will become familiar with our three primary enemies—the world⁴, our flesh (sin nature) and the devil. We will also learn how to become real conquerors in Christ.

aim of study: To help people understand that as Christians, they are now “at war” with the world, their flesh and the devil, and to give them some tools on how to do battle.

⁴ Refer to study 4 for a definition of the world.

1. Do you agree with the statement, “At times, being a Christian is very hard?” Why or why not?

Can you identify any experiences in your life since you’ve been a Christian in which you were tempted to do wrong? What happened?

Do you know whether the temptation was from the world, your own flesh (sinful nature) or the devil?

read 1 john 2:16

2. In your own words, what was John referring to when he used this word “world?”

John is referring to the culture around us that is opposed to God, His ways and His will. The “world” is controlled by Satan (1 John 5:19) and united in its rebellion to God. It is an organized, evil system that failed to recognize Jesus (John 1:10), hated Jesus (John 7:7; 15:18,23,24,25) and hates His followers (John 15:18; 17:14). We see the world most clearly today in things like the media, news reporting, movies, magazines, etc. According to Eph.2:1-3, everyone who is not in Christ is following “the ways of this world.” It’s as if they are being carried along in a strong current—to resist means swimming upstream.

What are some examples of “lust of the eyes?”

Anything that is published in magazines, that we look at and desire could be considered “lust of the eyes.” Material possessions like houses, boats, cars, clothes, etc. Sexual lust can also be considered “lust of the eyes,” as seen in the Old Testament story of David and Bathsheba (2 Sam.11:2—“From the roof he saw a woman bathing...”). Eve was also tempted with “lust of the eyes” in the Garden when she “saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye.” (Gen.3:6)

... “lust of the flesh?”

In this passage, “flesh” can mean our sin nature or carnality such as sexual immorality, drunkenness and gluttony. It is also an orientation of life that is around the self and not around God. In other words, it is life without God. It is this kind of self-indulgence, self-centeredness and self-worship that is at the root of such things as racism, sexism, neglect for the poor and needy, exploitation of the weak, etc. It is worth noting that there is nothing inherently evil about eyes or flesh. It is man’s “sinful cravings” that corrupt.

... “pride of life?”

The words in the Greek are used elsewhere in the New Testament to describe someone who boasts, glorying in himself and/or his possessions. Pride will be reflected in whatever is deemed a worthy status symbol—car, house, career, degrees, trophies, looks, etc. Some see John’s three-part summary of “all that is in the world” in Eve’s temptation in the Garden (“When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom...”) and in Jesus’ three temptations in the wilderness.

read 1 john 2:15; james 4:4; 2 timothy 4:10

3. What did John warn us not to do?

We are not to love the world. John was not talking about the kind of love with which we love our neighbor—a selfless love. The love he speaks of here is easily enticed by evil desires and appetites. We are not to desire (love) the world, want it or agree with it. We should not want to be anchored to a world that cares nothing for God and is temporary. If we do, love for God will not be in us. We cannot love both. As Jesus put it, we cannot serve two masters. We will hate the one and love the other, or vice versa (Mt.6:24).

Why do you think James said it’s impossible to be friends with both God and the world?

God demands complete allegiance. As Christians, we call Jesus Lord which means we wholeheartedly and totally surrender to His will. We cannot do that and care about the world—especially a world that totally opposes His will. When Jesus moves into our lives, He does not just want a corner of our already crowded “house.” He demands access to every room and to everything that goes on in every room. That leaves no room for the world!

What did loving the world do to Demas?

Loving the world caused Demas to desert Paul—or as one commentator put it, “he left Paul in the lurch.” We don’t know whether Demas was enticed by worldly pleasures in Thessalonica or whether that was his hometown and he wished to escape the stresses of missionary life with the apostle Paul. Either way, he abandoned the call of God and any loyalties he had to Paul. The clear implication is that his love for the world enticed him away from Christ.

Although you are a Christian, are there things about the world that are still attractive to you? What are they? How do you feel tempted to love the world and be its friend?

read romans 12:2.

4. What did Paul warn us about in this verse?

We should not conform to the world and its ways. The Phillips translation is the most descriptive: "Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its mold." This captures the idea that there is pressure being exerted on us to turn away from the Lord and to deviate from His will for our lives. We must work at not conforming. If we are too passive, we will be sucked along with the flow of everything and everyone around us. Especially for new believers, they must realize that effort needs to be exerted to come out of the world and to shake off its influence in our lives.

Find definitions for the words conform and transform in a dictionary. **How would you define "conformity to the world?" How would you define "transformation by God's renewing work?"**

To conform means to seek harmony with, to agree with, to be similar to or identical with, to obey or comply with, to act in accordance with prevailing standards or customs. Transform means to change in form—which could mean outward appearance or inward character. The word in the Greek is where we get our word for metamorphosis—the process through which larva change into butterflies. Our transformation as Christians is to be complete and total. The whole way we think about everything is to be new and changed. In fact, our thinking is key to the whole-life kind of transformation the New Testament talks about.

5. Describe what you think transformation should look like in the life of a Christian.

We should see outward changes in our lives. This is elementary and basic—we stop fornicating, we stop abusing drugs or alcohol, we stop cursing, we stop cheating in business, etc. We should also begin to see certain behaviors and activities that at one time were foreign to us, such as prayer, reading the bible, fellowship, giving financially and serving others. There is a taking off and a putting on, just like clothing. We get rid of our old ragged clothes and Jesus gives us new clothes (white garments or "acts of righteousness") to put on. God will continue to work on us, going deeper and dealing with attitudes and motives that are wrong. But we should see outward changes or transformations almost immediately after giving our lives to Christ as evidence that we truly are Christians. (refer to chapter 4 of this study guide)

What can we do to help this process along? What can we do to hinder this process?

People must understand that there is a cooperation between God and us in this process. We can't do this alone, we need God's help through the indwelling Holy Spirit. But at the same time, we should not just sit back and expect God to move our hands and feet for us. So for example, if we are having sex outside of marriage, we must stop. If we are cheating in business, we must stop. We must choose to act rightly. God will at the same time work in us to give us the power to follow through. A good picture of this process is the laying of a cement sidewalk. A wood frame is laid down in the shape of the sidewalk. Then wet cement is poured

in. In a day or two, the form can be removed because the cement has hardened into the desired shape. In our lives, we must do certain things—exert our effort to obey. That is like making the wood frame. Then God works inside of us to make this change we're implementing a part of us. That is like the wet cement being poured. Eventually we don't need to keep exerting effort because God has truly changed us—we can remove the wood frame!

In what ways have you been transformed since you've come to Christ?

read romans 7:18

6. Imagine you are a house. When you became a Christian, you invited the Holy Spirit to come live in you. But someone was already living there! **According to Paul, who is it?**

Like the word "world," "flesh" is used in a variety of ways in the bible. It can refer to the substance of a body (1 Cor. 15:39), all of humanity (Romans 3:20), the humanity of Jesus (John 1:14), to name just a few. Often it is used to refer to our sinful nature, which is how we are using it in this study.

What resides in all of us is our sinful nature or our "flesh." Some people refer to it as our "fallen" nature because it has its roots in the fall. God didn't create us with a sin nature. It entered the human race through the disobedience of Adam (Rom.5:12)

How would you describe this occupant living in your house?

It is corrupt and it corrupts us. It keeps us from doing what is right and keeps us doing what is wrong. The notion that people are basically good is not biblical. The bible asserts that we were born in sin—we've had this from the moment we entered the world (Ps.51:5). Sin is not the result of bad parenting or society or anything else external. Sin can be compared to an infection or a virus that permeates our bodies and makes us sick. We are sinners because of our sin nature. We are not sinners simply because we commit acts of sin (which we do, but that alone does not make us sinners).

Read galatians 5:17

7. **What happens inside us when the Holy Spirit moves in?**

When the Holy Spirit fills us, a civil war, so to speak, breaks out. We have two opposing forces inside of us. This is not to say that at every single point the Spirit and our sin nature are at war. But there is a considerable struggle. We will find that the Spirit is suddenly in conflict with some things that we have always done and always thought was OK.

Have you ever experienced a conflict like this? Explain what happened.

read galatians 5:19-23

8. Your two houseguests like very different things. What are some of them?

The two lists in these verses should not be considered comprehensive but rather representative of characteristics of “living in the flesh” and “living in the Spirit.” For comparison lists, refer to 2 Cor.6:1-10; 8:1-7; Eph.4:1-10; Phil.4:8-9; Col.3:12-17; 1 Tim.1:9; 6:4-6; 2 Tim.3:2-4; Tit.3:3. Many see four groups of “works of the flesh” (NIV—“acts of the sinful nature”): sexual sins (sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery); religious sins (idolatry and witchcraft⁵); social sins (hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy); drinking sins (drunkenness, orgies and the like). It’s worth pointing out that no matter what a person has “professed” about Christ, if they are living like this, there is no guarantee of heaven for them!

It’s also worth pointing out that Paul changes words when referring to the flesh and the Spirit. He calls them the works of the flesh and the fruit of the Spirit. The change is deliberate, because Paul probably wanted to draw a distinction between the works of the flesh, along with the works of the law (2:16; 3:2,5,10) which are the result of human effort, and the fruit of the Spirit, which is the result of God’s enabling, indwelling grace. In addition, fruit is singular, suggesting that the Spirit intends to produce all nine qualities in us.

After the Holy Spirit moved in, have you noticed any changes in the sort of activities taking place in your “house?” Discuss.

Hopefully people can attest to changes in their behaviors and activities since they’ve given their lives to Christ. It may be worth discussing a little here that the production of “fruit” in our lives is not a passive act on our part. While the fruit of the Spirit is the result of the Spirit being both present and active in our lives, we must cooperate with Him. It’s clear that in the least, Paul intends for us to stop doing the works of the flesh.

read galatians 5:24-25

9. What two things are we told to do in these verses to help diffuse the internal conflict that often rages inside us?

We are to “crucify the flesh,” which means we are to literally put it to death. Elsewhere, Paul wrote that as Christians, we have taken our old natures—our self-centered, sinful selves—and nailed them to the cross with Christ (Rom.6:6). This is something we are to do and something that was done the moment we surrendered to Christ. We must now live out this truth on a

⁵ The Greek word *pharmakeia*, which is translated “witchcraft,” can mean the use of drugs, potions or spells, whether medicinal or otherwise. It is where we get our word “pharmacy.”

daily basis, which means that we will often have to “re-crucify” fleshly desires that refuse to die quietly.

We are also to “keep in step with the Spirit.” Since we are living by the Spirit—since having the Spirit is the tell-tale mark of the Christian—we must stay in line with Him. We must keep beside Him, following Him with each step. Again, both of these images involve our participation and cooperation. We don’t just passively wait for our flesh to die and the Spirit to move us. We actively put to death in us the “works of the flesh” and actively pursue obedience to the Spirit.

Crucifixion is violent, painful and results in death. What does that say to you about how you ought to be treating your flesh?

It says that our flesh won’t go away easily or quietly and it says that we must put forth some effort at killing it. The picture could be that of a wrestler. The goal of the wrestler is to get on the top and thereby overpowering and mastering his opponent. As believers, we are to get on the top of our flesh, overpower it and master it, and not allow it to get on the top of us.

What are some practical things you can start doing now to both crucify your flesh and keep in step with the Spirit?

Avoid activities where your flesh can get the better of you. Avoid or end relationships with people who bring out the “flesh” in you. Stop feeding your flesh through TV, movies, magazines, etc. When you fall—when you catch yourself getting jealous or envious or hateful—confess your sin to God, repent and ask for His grace to change. Begin to feed the Spirit, through bible reading, prayer and fellowship. Make a commitment to a small group and keep it. Read the bible first thing in the morning and the last thing at night, in order to get God’s word—the thoughts of the Spirit—into your mind. Begin taking a stand publicly as a Christian at work or school.

(This is a particularly long study. Here is a good stopping point if you need to divide it into two parts.)

10. Look up the following scriptures and write down the fact/facts about Satan that each passage contains.

The devil goes by many different names in scripture (Satan, the enemy, the evil one, Lucifer, god of this world, god of this age). He is an angelic being, created by God. Because of evil ambition and bitter jealousy, the devil rebelled against God, desiring the place of supreme worship for himself (read Ezek. 28:11-19 and Is. 14:12-17). Once you come to Christ, the devil declares you his enemy because of his complete and total hatred for God. His goal is to disrupt and destroy your relationship with the Lord.

Rev. 12:10

Here the devil is called the “accuser of the brethren.” He charges God’s children with fault and wrongdoing, constantly blaming them before God. It is safe to say that believers “hear” and often feel those accusations in the form of spiritual attack (e.g. “you’re no good!” “what kind of a Christian are you!” “if you were a real Christian, you wouldn’t have done that,” etc). The accusations may be true, but as Christians, we must learn to take our failings and faults to the cross to receive forgiveness and cleansing.

Mark 4:15

Satan robs us of the word of God. We hear something or discover a truth from God but before it has a chance to really penetrate into our minds and hearts, the enemy will distract us and the truth is lost. In C.S. Lewis’ classic book Screwtape Letters, a senior devil explains how something as mundane as hunger pangs or a city bus can distract a person from God’s Word and His voice and “bring them back to reality.”

John 8:44

This one verse contains a wealth of information about the devil. First, Jesus called him a murderer. This means that his intentions and motivations toward humanity are to kill and destroy. There is nothing good in him. Like a cold-blooded killer, he cares nothing about his victim. Satan’s murderous bent ought to be considered literal—he wants humanity dead and apart from Christ, with him in hell. Jesus also called him a liar. He is no ordinary liar, however, lying to save his own skin. He is the origin of all lies and falsehoods. Slight twists on the truth, hidden meanings, deceptions of all kinds come from him. And he speaks nothing but lies. There is nothing truthful or honest coming from his mouth.

John 13:2

The devil can influence even those who are closest to Jesus. That the devil was able to get to Judas, a man who spent three years in close intimate relationship with Christ, and convince him somehow to betray the Son of God should be a warning to all of us.

John 13:27

There are ways that we open ourselves up to the devil, giving him access to our very beings. Here Judas is having an exchange with Jesus—perhaps a final appeal to turn back from his evil plan. He rejects Jesus’ offer and his fate is sealed. This should give us pause if we are under the delusion that if we sin today, there is always the opportunity for forgiveness tomorrow. Yes, God will forgive, but we may be unable to repent. We may be so hardened in sin that our fate is sealed and there is no turning back.

Acts 5:3

Here again we see the dominance of Satan in the life of a believer. If we willingly and knowingly and wantonly participate in sin, we are inviting the enemy into our lives. Then it is

no longer just our flesh—our fallen natures—that we are battling with. We must also deal with spiritual forces that energize our sin and increase its power to hold us captive.

2 Cor. 4:4

Here we are told that Satan can prevent people from understanding and therefore keep them from responding to the gospel. Perhaps people in the group can relate to being in church, for example, for years yet not “hearing” the gospel until a certain point, at which time they accepted Christ. That is the blinding work of the enemy. This will help people understand why a certain friend or family member just won’t respond to them sharing the gospel.

2 Cor. 11:14

To masquerade is to pretend to be something you’re not. Satan has deceived many people by pretending to be “of God” with a particular message or teaching when in fact he is the opposite. Our only safeguard against being deceived is to know the truth—be familiar with the bible and with Christian doctrines. Those who work for the Treasury Department in the area of counterfeiting do not spend their time studying the many various ways money can be counterfeited. They study the real thing and then can spot a phony in an instant.

Eph. 4:26-7

Any sin left unchecked in our lives can become spiritually “infected” by the enemy, creating spiritual bondage. One particular sin to be mindful of is unforgiveness. According to this verse, if we allow anger and unforgiveness towards another person to fester, demons can gain access and get a “foothold” in our lives. The picture is one of letting the enemy get his foot in the door of our lives. Keep that door locked by being careful to forgive and to not hold grudges. Many scholars believe that Jesus’ parable of the unmerciful servant addresses this very issue. In Mt.18:34, where we read, “In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed,” many believe the “torturers” are demons. Had the man in the parable been merciful, he would not have been tortured.

Eph. 6:11-12

There exists an evil hierarchy governing the wickedness that is rampant in the world. Paul seems to be suggesting that some demons or devils have more power and authority than others. By saying that these governing spirits exist, however, Paul is not saying we need to engage them in battle. Our job is to be protected with what God has provided for His people (full armor), to stand our ground as God’s people and to be armed with the truth of God’s word. We can expect to be attacked (“devil’s schemes” and “when the day of evil comes”) but we are not called to do the attacking—we are called to stand and resist.

1 Tim. 3:6-7

Here Paul warns us of two schemes of the devil to bring down Christian leaders. One is to make them leaders when they are not yet ready and thereby giving them an inflated view of themselves and producing pride. This would be like following in the devil’s footsteps, since he

became exceedingly conceited and proud to the point where he coveted God's position (Is.14:12-15). Another snare is to make an immature, inconsistent Christian with a questionable reputation a leader. Then when his or her sins come under public scrutiny, their reputation, along with the reputation of Christ would be sullied. Then the devil could be about his favorite activity—accusing the brethren of wrongdoing.

1 Peter 5:8-9

Spiritual attack will come when we least expect it and in ways we didn't anticipate. Therefore, we should always be on our guard, because Satan is constantly looking for opportunities to bring us down, and the element of surprise is one of his best weapons. "Like a lion" gives us the picture of quietly sneaking up on us from behind, not just to surprise us but to eat us alive.

1 John 3:8

Sin—rebellion against God—is the characteristic of the devil. When we continue in sin, we are walking or living like the devil. Jesus came to take away sin, both the penalty of sin which is death, and the power of sin, in our lives and through the law. Again, the warning for us is to repent of known sin and to invite the Holy Spirit to help us change so that by sinning we don't open ourselves up to further spiritual bondage.

From this information, answer the following questions about Satan:

11. Based on these verses, how would you describe Satan?

A totally malevolent being who is opposed to God and who despises and seeks to destroy what God loves—people.

12. What can Satan do to people?

He can deceive them, he can influence their behavior (with their cooperation), he can blind them to the truth, he can do them harm ("devour"). The more a person yields areas of their lives over to an evil spirit (in the form of sin, rebellion, agreement with lies) the greater the influence it can have in their life and the harder it is to be free. It is worth noting that much of Jesus' public ministry was casting demons out of people.

What do you think is his chief weapon?

Deceit and falsehood. In this way he is the total opposite of God, who is the truth and cannot lie. Satan's lies are not necessarily obvious—they can be subtle and can even appear to be coming from God ("an angel of light") Even when the lure of Satan is the temptation to sin, underneath it is a lie (e.g. sinning will make you happy, it's no big deal, God won't mind, there are no consequences to sin, etc.).

Where do you think many of your battles with the devil will take place?

In our minds. It is in our minds that God's truths will be challenged and we will be tempted to disobey the Lord. It is important for people to understand that although demons (few people actually have personal contact with the devil himself) can speak to us in our minds, they cannot read our thoughts. Only God "knows our thoughts from afar" and the things we need before we ask them. NOWHERE IN THE BIBLE DOES IT SUGGEST THAT AN EVIL SPIRIT CAN READ OUR MINDS OR KNOW THE SECRETS OF OUR HEARTS! Demons can of course observe our behavior and listen to what we say.

13. According to the following verses, what can we do as Christians to deal with Satan?

Matt. 6:13

We can (and should) pray. Satan is a spiritual being who attacks us spiritually. We must resist spiritually, through prayer. We should begin to anticipate possible areas of attack, know our own weaknesses (e.g., going home for the holidays, being with certain friends) and learn to listen to God's warnings through dreams or other people—all these are good ways to determine how to pray for God's protection. It is wise, for instance, to pray for God's protection over a son or daughter when they leave home for college, realizing that there are plenty of opportunities for Satan to attack them.

Eph. 4:26-7

Don't let Satan gain any advantage in your life through unforgiveness. Deal quickly and biblically with conflicts with other people. Practice forgiving others who have wronged you, abused you or mistreated you. Meditate on Mt.18:21-35 and on the example of Jesus who was abused and mistreated yet forgave.

Eph. 6:10-18

It is believed by some that Paul was actually chained to a Roman soldier as he wrote this letter. In the armor of the soldier, he saw spiritual significance for the "war" we are engaged in as Christians with Satan. First note that the bulk of what Paul wrote about is protective gear and not offensive weapons. He discussed things like "the belt of truth." We will be able to resist the devil a long way if we are firmly grounded in what is true—about God, about us, about life. Also, there is "the breastplate of righteousness." Here again, if we forsake sin, obey God and live righteously, Satan will have little access to our lives. Our minds are protected with "the helmet of salvation"—we must be firmly rooted in the fact that we are saved not by our own efforts but by grace through faith in Jesus. This should give us confidence so that we're not shaken by enemy accusations. Instead of army boots, our feet are to be fitted with "the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace." These shoes are not for running (or fleeing) but for marching in battle without slipping. Our message is one of peace with God, which implies war with Satan. In our hands is "the shield of faith" which protects us from "the flaming arrows of the evil one." There will be times when we must exert effort and trust God (raise this shield) while we are in the midst of battle. Our only offensive piece of equipment is "the sword of the Spirit" which is the bible. If we hope to stand a chance, we must read, study and memorize God's word so that we are prepared to fight Satan's lies.

1 Peter 5:8-9

We must resist the devil. This means we can take a stand and exert force to oppose him. We should not give up and cave in simply because we are suddenly “under siege.” We can resist negative thoughts, lies about ourselves, lies about God’s faithfulness, fears, etc.

1 John 5:18 with 1:9

We can stop sinning, which will give the devil no access to our lives. Because Jesus Christ dwells in our hearts through the Holy Spirit, we now have power to not sin. If we do sin, there is a remedy—confession, repentance, forgiveness. Getting sin out of our lives is like taking away the ground on which the devil stands. He will be forced to leave!

Rev. 12:11

Our victory over the devil was accomplished at the cross when Jesus shed His blood to cleanse us from sin. Satan loves sin in the same way flies like rotting meat. Jesus’ blood cleanses us from sin and so removes the attraction to the devil. We also defeat the devil by the “word of our testimony.” When we regularly confess with our own lips what Christ has done for us, the devil’s power over us is weakened and ultimately broken. If, on the other hand, we continually talk about our failures and problems, these things will gain strength in our lives. Proverbs teaches that “life and death is in the power of the tongue” (Prov.18:21). While we must not think that what we say has ultimate power over everything, what we say does have power. Finally, we defeat the devil by not fearing death (“they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death”). Hebrews 2:14-15 teaches that the devil held the world in bondage to the fear of death. Now, because of Christ, we are freed from that fear.

read genesis 3:1-13 (a fall to temptation by the devil)

14. In what form did Satan appear to Eve?

As a serpent. It is debated whether the account of Adam and Eve is literally true—whether it is a true story, or simply a story that conveys truth. Either way, Satan did not come up to Eve and plainly identify himself. Instead he was disguised as a harmless creature.

What does that tell you about how Satan may appear to you?

We cannot expect the devil to approach us, introduce himself and inform us that he has come to deceive us and to tempt us.

15. Note what Satan said to Eve in verses 1, 4 and 5. What was he trying to do?

He wanted Eve to doubt God, His word, His honesty, His intentions, His goodness.

What would Eve conclude about God if she believed what Satan was telling her?

That God did not have Eve's best interests in mind—that He wanted to somehow rip her off. He lied to Eve about the tree and what would happen if she ate from the tree. Therefore God could not be trusted.

Have you ever questioned God's goodness or His intentions towards you? Discuss.

What can you do to protect yourself from being deceived?

Things we already discussed, like knowing the bible, prayer, fellowship and resisting the lies.

16. How did Adam and Eve behave after their sin and why?

They were ashamed and they hid, from each other and from God. This is the affect of sin in our lives. It destroys fellowship with God and relationships with others. Sin produces shame and makes us want to hide or at least to cover up what we've done. It says that "their eyes were open." The devil had made this sound like a desirable thing, yet when it happened, they are ashamed. They are "seeing" things that God never intended for them to see—corruption, evil, etc.

In what ways had Satan accomplished his goal with Adam and Eve?

He had gotten them to rebel against God, just like he had done and was expelled from heaven. (In heaven, everything and everyone does the will of God.) Now that which God had created and had declared to be very good was no longer. It was marred by sin.

Have you ever had a similar experience with sin? Discuss.

It would be incorrect for us to conclude "the devil made them do it" and that Adam and Eve were innocent here in the Garden. Satan used deception and lies to excite Adam and Eve's own sinful nature, leading them to sin ("...the woman saw,pleasing to the eye, desirable..."). It is the combination of Satan's temptation and our own sinful nature that brings our downfall.

read matthew 4:1-11 (temptation resisted)

17. Whose idea was it for Jesus to be tempted?

It says that Jesus was "led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil." Jesus tells us to pray that we not be led into temptation, but here we read God leading Jesus into temptation.

According to Hebrews 4:15, why was He tempted?

Jesus is referred to in the bible in many ways (e.g., Lamb of God, Prince of Peace, Great Physician, etc.). Here in Hebrews He is referred to as our “great High Priest.” Priests in the Old Testament were go-betweens between God and man—they represented the people before God. The High Priest had the unique job of actually going into God’s holy presence once a year and secure forgiveness for all the sins of all the people. Jesus is our go-between with God. He represents us to God. He has secured our forgiveness. But since He did it once and for all, it was important for Him to be sinless. He did not go before God for any of His own sins—just our sins. And, He is not an indifferent High Priest. He actually understands our struggles since He Himself was tempted. We endure temptation until we give up and give in. He endured them and never gave up.

18. What was the first temptation Satan presented to Jesus?

The phrase, “if you are the Son of God” should be understood “since you are the Son of God.” Satan was not tempting Jesus to prove who He was. The devil was fully aware of Jesus’ identity and why He was on earth. Satan was trying to get Jesus to sin.

To use His supernatural power and authority to meet His physical needs.

Jesus had put Himself in a weakened and vulnerable state, yet He still managed to resist the devil. **How?**

By using the Word of God. Jesus is declaring His utter dependence on God to meet His every need. He would not use His own devices but trust Himself instead to His heavenly Father. When Adam and Eve were confronted with a similar test, they failed to trust God but took matters into their own hands, plunging the entire human race into sin. Jesus, by passing the test, is able to rescue those who are “in Him” (Rom.5:18-19).

19. How did the devil tempt Jesus the second time?

In perhaps the most public spot in the biggest city in Israel, the devil wanted Jesus to put God’s faithfulness to the test. Satan pulled some passages from scripture to bolster his case. “Here is your opportunity Jesus to declare what is true about God—He can be trusted! He won’t even let you injure yourself!”

Does it surprise you that the devil knows scripture? Why might this be important to know?

The devil probably knows more bible than we do, which should give us pause and make us more diligent to learn it and to learn it well, making sure we are interpreting it correctly.

Again, how did Jesus resist?

By using the Word of God. This time, Jesus “trumped” the devil’s scripture with an overarching biblical principle—do not put God to the test. God is not to be toyed with or manipulated. As the psalmist wrote, “Our God is in heaven, He does whatever He pleases.” (Ps.115:3)

20. What was the final temptation?

He was tempting Jesus to by-pass the cross in order to establish His Kingdom.

The New Testament teaches that the whole world (all the kingdoms of the world) are under the control of the devil (see 1 John 5:19). He, therefore, could legitimately offer them to Jesus. In the end, Jesus will get all of the kingdoms of the world back from the devil (see Rev. 11:15), but by way of the cross and not by bowing to Satan.

What did Jesus say to the devil this time?

What the devil was suggesting was a clear violation of scripture, which Jesus pointed out. But He also just commanded the devil to leave Him alone—to get out of there! Jesus made similar commands to demons throughout His ministry, telling them to get out of various individuals.

What can you learn from Jesus’ example?

Jesus did not engage the devil in debate—He simply declared the truth of God’s Word. This is not how Jesus handled His human opponents. He would often ask them questions or tell them a parable or in some way, try to challenge them. With the devil, He simply stood His ground and declared what was true. This was probably because people are redeemable, no matter how wicked they might be. The devil and his demons are not. We ought to follow Jesus’ example.

Why is it so important for you to know and understand the bible?

So that we can discern truth from falsehood and so that we can do battle with the devil.

wrapping it up: It is not possible for us to entirely escape warfare and avoid temptations from our three opponents while we are alive on this earth. But it is possible for us to resist temptations and not always cave in to them when they

come at us. A useful verse to meditate on when you are tempted is 1 Corinthians 10:13:

“No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.”

6

introducing the holy spirit

John 14:15-21

openers: If you have ever been to church, then you have probably heard the phrase, "...in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit." Most people can understand the Father and the Son. These are ideas and images we are familiar with. But the Holy Spirit is another matter. He is clearly the most confusing and mysterious person of the trinity. There is nothing or no one anywhere in human experience quite like Him. The closest thing we have to the Holy Spirit today is "the Force" from *Star Wars* (e.g. "May the Force be with you").

The problem many people have with the Holy Spirit is that He is intangible. We cannot touch Him with our hands, see Him with our eyes, hear Him with our ears or even picture what He looks like. Yet throughout the pages of the bible, He is said to "fill" people (Ex.31:3; Acts.2:4), "come on" people (Judges 3:10; Ezek.11:5), "speak" through people (2Sam.23:2), even "move" people (Is.34:16; Ezek.3:14). He is referred to as the breath of God, wind, fire, living water and a dove. Add to this all the many unusual and sometimes bizarre things that have been attributed to the Holy Spirit over the centuries, and it's no wonder some people would prefer that He was kept shut up in the pages of the bible and given lip service at the appropriate times.

The Holy Spirit, however, is essential to your life as a Christian and Jesus had a lot to say about Him. During His three years of ministry, Jesus spoke often of the Father. He said that if anyone had seen Him, they had also seen the Father (John 14:9). But as His earthly ministry drew to a close, He began to speak more and more about the Spirit. In the same way that Jesus revealed God the Father, He also revealed God the Holy Spirit. As one theologian said, "Christ has put a human face on the Spirit as well."⁶

On the last night He was together with His disciples, Jesus began to prepare them for what lie ahead. He would be leaving and the Spirit would be coming. Naturally the disciples were upset by this news, but Jesus had words of comfort for them. He began by telling them about the Spirit, someone they would soon be meeting in person!

⁶ Gordon D. Fee, *Paul, the Spirit and the People of God* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1996), p.25.

aim of study: To remove some of the mystery surrounding the Holy Spirit and help people understand some basic truths about His role in their lives as Christians.

1. **What comes to your mind when you read or hear about the Holy Spirit? How do you feel when someone “invites the Holy Spirit to be present” in a meeting or small group?**

read john 14:15-21

2. Notice that throughout this passage Jesus referred to the Holy Spirit as “He” or “Him” and not as “it.” **What does that tell you about the Holy Spirit?**

The Holy Spirit is not an energy force or an impersonal power. He is not simply the “power of God.” He is a person just like Jesus is a person and God the Father is a person.

What are some characteristics that are true of people that are not true of things?

Because the Holy Spirit is a person and because He is God, He cannot be manipulated or controlled by us. He is not like a machine that can be expected to do the same thing each time we push a button (e.g., if we pray this, the Spirit will do that). He is free to act and respond in the same way a person is free to act and respond. He has feelings just like a person. Throughout the bible, we read of instances where the Holy Spirit was grieved (Is.63:10; Eph.4:30). He can communicate with us, remind of us what God thinks or give us guidance. We can respond positively and be led by the Spirit (Rom.8:14) or we can respond negatively and, for example, lie to Him (Acts 5:3).

3. **According to Jesus, what should you do if you love Him (v.15 and v.21)? What will God do if you love Him (v.16 and v.21)?**

If we love God, then we obey Him, because real love is more than just words—it reveals itself in actions. In this way, real love is similar to real faith (James 2:14-26). Jesus is not suggesting here that what we receive from God is contingent upon our obedience and our ability to love Him. What He is saying is that love ought to be the motivation behind our obedience. We must always keep in mind that it’s not that we love Him but that He first loved us (1 John 4:10).

Why do you think loving God is an important “prerequisite” for receiving the Holy Spirit?

Jesus is not suggesting that obedience and loving God is the “price tag” for receiving the Spirit. This would be inconsistent with other passages (Gal.3:2). Rather, He is laying out the relational

contest for the giving of the Spirit. If a person doesn't first love and value Christ, how can they love and value His Spirit?

4. In verse 16, Jesus told the disciples He would send them “another Counselor.” **Explain in your own words the significance of this title.**

The word for “Counselor” in the Greek is “paraclete” and it means “someone who comes along side to help”. The word “another” implies “another of the same kind”.

Jesus wanted the disciples to understand that the Spirit is not someone new and different. They have had one counselor already (Jesus)—now they will have another (the Spirit). He wanted to draw a connection between the Spirit and Himself, in the same way He did between the Father and Himself. This is especially significant since the disciples are anticipating with grief His departure. God's presence will remain with them in the person of the Holy Spirit.

5. In verse 16, Jesus informed them that the Holy Spirit would “be with them forever.” **Why is this significant?**

This is quite different from anyone's previous experience of the Holy Spirit. In the Old Testament, the Spirit would “come on” someone to enable them to do a particular task, such as prophesying or performing a miracle (see 1 Samuel 10:10; 11:6; 19:23; 2 Chronicles 15:1) but would never remain permanently. Jesus is saying something completely new.

Jesus was not able to remain with them forever, which caused the disciples grief. They would no longer enjoy His close, intimate fellowship. But Jesus was attempting to comfort them here. The Holy Spirit, who was coming to replace Jesus' bodily presence with them, would never leave them. The Spirit's coming is in that sense better than Jesus since He was limited by human flesh and could only be in one place at one time. The Spirit, on the other hand, will be able to be with all believers simultaneously.

Why do you think the Holy Spirit can now remain with someone permanently?

The death of Jesus on the cross for sin is what makes the difference. Prior to this, there was no permanent remedy for sin, just the weekly, monthly and yearly animal sacrifices that God had instructed the people to do in order to obtain forgiveness. Now because of Jesus, the wall of separation between a Holy God and unholy people has been removed (Mt.27:51). Now God, through the presence of His Holy Spirit, can remain with unholy people permanently because Jesus' sacrifice covers all sin once and for all (Heb.10:1-4; 9:11-14).

How does it make you feel knowing the Holy Spirit will never leave you?

6. **What did Jesus call the Holy Spirit in verse 17?**

The Spirit of Truth.

What do you think this means? (see v. 26 for ideas)

Truth is associated with all members of the Trinity in the bible. Jesus had just referred to Himself as “the Truth” (v.6), truth is required when worshipping the Father (John 4:23-24) and now the Spirit is referred to as “the Spirit of Truth.” In contrast, Satan, God’s enemy, is completely devoid of truth. Lying, according to Jesus, is the devil’s “native language” (John 8:44). The Spirit’s being and His actions are characterized by truth. He will lead us into all things true—things about God, salvation, ourselves, life, etc.

*The issue might be raised that some things the Holy Spirit says do not seem to be true. For example, someone might share a word of prophecy in a small group meeting, claiming that the Holy Spirit is saying thus and so. It is important to distinguish between what the Holy Spirit says and does and what people **believe** the Holy Spirit says and does. The issue here is one of discernment. How well do we hear or perceive the Holy Spirit? According to the bible, people are not entirely dependable (Jer.17:9; Rom.3:4). So we use the objective standard of God’s written Word to measure and evaluate what people claim is the Holy Spirit. If something doesn’t measure up, we ought to discard it as not being from the Spirit (1 Thes.5:19-22).*

How has the Holy Spirit brought God’s truth into your life?

7. Jesus said that the world could not accept the Spirit. **Why do you think that is?**

The world cannot receive the Spirit because it does not even perceive Him (“neither sees Him”). The world is completely unaware of and unfamiliar with God, Jesus and the activity of the Holy Spirit (“..nor knows Him”). The world cannot receive Him because it does not love and obey Jesus—a prerequisite for receiving the Spirit. Finally, the world is under the influence of the “prince of this world”—the devil, who blinds people’s minds and keeps them enslaved to him (John 14:30; Eph.2:1-3; 2 Cor.4:4).

The disciples had never met the Holy Spirit. **How could Jesus say they “know Him, for He lives with” them (v.17)?**

Unlike the world, the disciples have a personal relationship with Jesus and they know Him. If they know Him, then they also know the Spirit.

8. In verse 18, Jesus told the disciples that He would not leave them as orphans. Orphans are abandoned children who have no parents. But Jesus was talking to a room full of grown men! In Matthew 18:3, Jesus had told the disciples that they needed to “change and become like little children” in order to enter the Kingdom of God. **Practically speaking, what does all this mean for your relationship with God?**

This suggests that Jesus wants all of His followers, grown men included, to be dependent upon and submissive to Him. As with a child, it is ok for believers to have needs, to be scared, to feel insecure or to need assurance. It is ok to be weak or to not have it “all together” so to speak. It also suggests humility. In contrast to our child-centered culture, children in most cultures (especially in Jesus’ day and age) had low status in society. Being a Christian requires that we “get low” and be humble.

9. What can you learn about God and about the relationships between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit from verse 20?

Once the Holy Spirit comes, the true nature of God is going to become clear to all believers. It’s going to be clear that Jesus is the incarnation of God—that He is the “visible image of the invisible God” (Col.1:15)—that in Him “God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell” (Col.1:19). It will also become clear the true nature of our relationship with God. We will understand that He actually indwells us by His Holy Spirit and that we are “in Christ” in that we enjoy all the benefits of salvation (forgiveness, freedom from the power of sin, access to God, etc.) because of our position “in Christ.” The Spirit will bring all these truths about God to light for us and enable us to understand them.

read john 16:5-16

10. As the disciples were trying to deal with their grief over Jesus’ departure, He told them that it is good for them that He leave. Why would He say that?

“Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you, but if I go, I will send Him to you.” The Greek translation literally means “It is expedient that I go away” which means it is to your advantage and benefit. But to the disciples, Jesus’ departure seems disastrous. How could it possibly be to their advantage? He had already told them how: He’d prepare a place for them (14:2); they’d be able to do greater works now (14:12); they’d gain greater knowledge (14:20); they’d actually be drawn closer to God (14:28). Also, because the presence of God could be with every believer at all times and never leave. (Jesus was limited by His flesh. The Spirit is not limited.) Jesus’ going away also alludes to the cross, His triumph over sin, death and Satan and His glorification in heaven. All that is accomplished through Christ’s work on the cross makes the coming of the Spirit possible. So if Christ never “leaves”—if He never goes to the cross—the Spirit will not come.

11. What did Jesus say the Spirit would be doing once He came into the world (v.8-11)? In your own words, explain what each of these activities means.

According to Jesus, the Spirit will do the unseen work of bringing conviction to a guilty world. The Greek word translated convict (elencho) seems to mean here 1) to prove guilty and 2) to awaken a consciousness of that guilt. According to Paul, the gospel itself proves that the entire world is guilty (see Romans 1-3) but the Holy Spirit makes that guilt real and personal (e.g. Acts 2:37). With believers, the Spirit is like a defense attorney (an advocate), but with the world he is like the prosecutor!

“In regard to sin because men do not believe in me.” The Holy Spirit could convict everyone, believers and unbelievers alike of sin, because all are sinners. The unique sin of the world, however, is that they do not believe in Christ and they reject Him (John 3:18;15:22). “In regard to righteousness because I am going to the Father.” The world has the wrong standards for righteousness. They in fact believed that they were righteous in killing Jesus, that He was the sinner and deserved to die (Is.53:4; Mt.27:39-44). By going to the Father and leaving behind an empty tomb, Jesus has proven His own righteousness and approval by the Father. Only the Spirit can convince the world (corporately and individually) of this truth. “In regard to judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned.” The cross brought about Satan’s defeat (see Col.2:13-15), which was a form of judgment against him. His final demise is yet to come, however, and he is still at work in those who do not believe (see Eph.2:1-2). As certain as his judgment was and ultimately will be, so is the judgment that awaits all those in the world who refuse to believe. The Holy Spirit alone is able to convince the unbeliever of the reality and certainty of this future judgment.

12. According to Jesus, where does the Spirit get His message? How would you describe His role in the trinity—Father, Son and Holy Spirit?

Jesus had emphasized throughout the gospel of John that He did and said only what the Father wanted Him to do and say (5:19; 7:16; 12:49). Likewise, the Spirit will never act independently of the Father or initiate a message or ministry of His own. He will, like Jesus, submit to the Father in word and deed. He will also take the very things Jesus did and said while He was on earth and “make them known” to us as believers. The Spirit enables us to comprehend truth about God and therefore to truly know God.

13. From what you learned today, list all the benefits of having the Holy Spirit.

In these passages, we saw Jesus preparing His disciples for His imminent departure. There were some rough times ahead for them, but they had a lot to be encouraged about from what He had told them. They could expect to receive “another Counselor”, someone who was just like Jesus. He would come along side each of them to help them, and He would never leave. This other Counselor would actually be their link with Jesus and with the Father. The things Jesus had taught them and done with them the past three years this other Counselor knew all about and would remind them of anything they may have forgotten.

As Christians, each of us was given the Holy Spirit when we were born-again. He is our link with Jesus and the Father. He will be with us always, in every situation we find ourselves in. And He should not be a mystery to us. We know that as we read the New Testament and learn about Jesus, we are also getting to know the Holy Spirit, because He is “another Counselor,” one just like Jesus.

7

prayer—talking to God

matthew 6:5-13

openers: Prayer is one of the most important things you do as a Christian. Prayer will bring you close to God and help you grow spiritually. Prayer will relieve the stress and anxiety that is so characteristic of modern life and fill your heart with peace. And it's so exciting to see God answer prayers! Prayer can change a tough situation into a positive experience.

Why is it, however, if prayer is so good and so rewarding, that it is also *so hard to do*? There seem to be so many other activities that compete for our time that prayer is often just crowded out of our lives. We resort to “shooting one up” as we race off to work and seriously pray only when there is a crisis—when there is “nothing else we can do.” How can we hope to develop the kind of prayer life that we should have as Christians?

Back in first century, the disciples knew where to go to find out about prayer. They went to the one person they had seen pray for hours, the one person who seemed to have all his prayers answered, the one person whose life was amazingly free from fear and anxiety. They went to Jesus of Nazareth.

Let's look at a section of the Sermon on the Mount in the gospel of Matthew and learn what Jesus had to say about prayer.

aim of study: To go over the basics about prayer and to help group members begin incorporating prayer into their daily lives.

1. **When you think about prayer, what comes to your mind? (e.g. folded hands, closed eyes, complete silence, somber mood, etc).**

You always want to try to determine people's preconceptions about a particular topic and then, where needed, bring correction that is in accordance with biblical teaching.

Write down some of your experiences with prayer, both positive and negative.

Be on the lookout for past experiences that have the potential of becoming major hindrances for spiritual growth (e.g., "I prayed as a child that my parents not get divorced but they did—now I'm not sure I really want to pray.) Sometimes people need help processing a disappointment before they can move on in their relationship with God.

Imagine Jesus is sitting here with you right now. **What would you want to ask Him about prayer?**

read matthew 6:5-8

This passage on prayer is part of a larger teaching that Jesus may have given on more than one occasion, commonly known as the Sermon on the Mount (5:1-7:29). It is directed exclusively to followers of Christ and therefore is not really relevant for non-Christians. The sermon consists of ethical teaching that sets the standard for how a Christian is to live. Much of it is practical and straightforward, but the demands are extremely high. Jesus never intended for us to meet these requirements on our own. We need His help! (see John 15:5)

2. Jesus began by telling his disciples what not to do in prayer. **What was the first thing He told them not to do in vs. 5?**

A hypocrite is someone who is pretending to be something he or she is not. It is derived from the Greek word for "actor." In Jesus' day, actors would literally wear masks on stage to hide their faces.

In Jesus' day, it was customary for Jews to pray at the temple three times a day. This presented many opportunities for a pray-er to be seen publicly praying. Jesus is not condemning public prayer, whether it is organized and scheduled or spontaneous. He is condemning prayer that is done as a show—praying that is only for making an impression. The Pharisees were in the habit of praying publicly so that they would be well thought of.

What was the hypocrite in vs. 5 interested in the most?

A hypocrite is always concerned with how he looks on the outside to others. A hypocrite wants to hide what he really is and pretend to be what he is not. Unfortunately, God sees past the outside directly into our hearts. All of our secret motives, our hidden desires and ambitions and our private thoughts are "laid bare" before His eyes (Heb.4:13).

Where might we "stand" today to be "seen by men"?

Today few Christians would want to be seen praying in public since being "religious" is not highly valued. Fellowship meetings, small groups, church, etc. are the kinds of places that Christians today would want to make an impression by praying. Prayer is seen by many as a badge of spirituality.

What things would we pretend? (Or what masks do we put on?)

We might pretend to be more committed to Christ than we really are or to know more than we really do. We might want to leave the impression that we pray all the time and are really close to God when we aren't. While it is always possible to fool the people around us, we can never fool God. He always knows what we really are and where we're at spiritually.

3. What did Jesus tell them to do instead (vs.6)?

He told them to go off alone and in secret to pray where no one knows what they are doing but God. The emphasis is not on the room itself. Here the Greek word suggests the room is a treasure room where valuables would have been kept. But it could be any room at all. The emphasis is rather on the sincerity of the one praying. If there is no audience watching and applauding, if the only one who even knows what you're doing is God, if you don't go around afterward boasting about how much time you spent praying "in your closet," then you are following Jesus' instructions about prayer.

Jesus was not so much interested in where they prayed as much as their motives for praying.
What are some of the things that motivate you to pray?

At some point in this study, you will want to emphasize that an appropriate motive for praying (in fact, one of the best motives for praying) is need. We need God. He does not need us, nor does He need our prayers. He is not lonely without us and we are not earning heavenly "brownie points" by praying. We do, however, need prayer because we need God. We need Him to live as much as we need food, water and shelter.

4. Think about how you pray when others are around (e.g. at church or small group fellowship) and how you pray when you are alone. Keeping in mind that Jesus was not condemning all public prayer, what are some of the benefits of praying alone?

Some prayers are not for others' ears. There are things that ought to be kept just between God and us. The only time to be able to discuss such things with the Lord and to unburden our hearts of our secret fears and anxieties or to confess personal sin is when we are completely

alone. Being alone, therefore, helps to remove the inhibitions that keep us from getting real with God.

5. What else did Jesus tell them not to do while praying (vs. 7)?

A “pagan” or “heathen” is someone who has no knowledge of or relationship with the true and living God. The word “babble” implies meaningless, repetitive words. Jesus is not condemning long prayers (you’ll find some long prayers recorded in the Bible) or repeated requests (see Matthew 7:7-8). In contrast to believers, however, pagans prayed long prayers because they believed it would increase the chances their prayer would be answered (see 1 Kings 18:25-29). In the bible, some of the most famous prayers are actually quite short (see Ex.32:31-32; 1 Kings 18:36-37; Luke 18:13). This reveals genuine faith in God, His goodness and His faithfulness.

The emphasis in Jesus’ words here ought to be on the meaninglessness of going on and on, not the fact that a prayer happens to be long, or that a person might repeat himself during that prayer.

What are some examples of this type of praying?

This type of praying is the product of a faulty view of God. It is the view that God is not good or generous—that in fact, He begrudges us everything He gives us. So we must put on a good show when we pray if we hope to get anything from Him at all. It is like a little child at the candy store with his mother right before dinnertime. He might whine and whine about wanting candy until he wears his poor mother down and in her weakened state, she gives in and lets him have some candy. But she really didn’t want to. In contrast, when we pray, we ought to believe that God’s desire is to be good to us. The bible doesn’t say there are wrong things to ask for in prayer (aside from sin) but there are wrong attitudes to have when asking (see James 4:3). Even Jesus asked the Father if He could somehow avoid the cross (Lk.22:42). His attitude in the end, however, was one of complete submission to the Father and trust in the Father’s will for Him.

6. How does it make you feel to know that God is well aware of all your needs before you ever ask Him?

This should not make us feel resigned and unmotivated about prayer. “If God already knows what I need, what is the point of my asking?!” Instead, we ought to feel confident that when we do ask God for something, that He is both ready and willing to give us everything we need. He loves us and is therefore well aware of everything that is going on in our lives.

Do you think this truth ought to affect the way you pray? Why or why not?

Yes! It ought to build our trust in God and increase both the quantity and the quality of our prayers.

7. In these five verses, Jesus informed His disciples that it's not just what we say in prayer that is important, but also what our inner attitudes and hidden motives are as well. **What changes do you think you need to make in your prayer life in order to follow Jesus' guidelines?**

read matthew 6:9-13

This next section is known as the Lord's Prayer. Some churches regularly recite verses 9-13 because they believe this is what Jesus wanted done. He is not, however, telling us *what* to pray but rather *how* to pray. The Lord's Prayer is a *model* for us to follow when we do pray. In these several verses are all the essential elements of prayer, not necessarily the exact words to use when praying.

8. **How did Jesus tell His disciples to address God when they pray (v.9)?**

The phrase, "Our Father who is in heaven" contains a lot of information. First of all, the bible knows nothing of the "Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man" in the sense that God is everyone's Father and we are all brothers and sisters. The bible differentiates between those who are "in Christ" and those who are not. Only those who belong to Christ because of their faith in Him are permitted to call God "Father." And He is not "my" Father. We cannot make exclusive claims on God—He is the Father of all who call on the name of Jesus, and we are spiritually related to them as well. While the term "Father" communicates a certain intimacy and familiarity, we must immediately remember that God is our Father "who is in heaven." This tells us that God is to be revered, honored and respected. He is not human, He is completely other. It also communicates, however, that He is not an impotent Father, but that He is sovereign and powerful, able to grant our every request since He resides in the heavens..

There are dozens of ways people have addressed God in the Bible (Lord, King, Savior, Redeemer, The Almighty, etc.) **By choosing the words "our Father", what do you think Jesus wanted His disciples to understand about the nature of their relationship with God?**

The predominant theme of Jesus' teachings about His Father was His kindness, His compassion and His accessibility to those who need Him. So while God the Father never ceases to also be God Almighty, as New Testament believers we have the privilege of relating to Him primarily as beloved children who are cherished and cared for.

Is it helpful or harmful for you to address God as “Father” in prayer? Why?

It may be worth exploring some people’s childhood experiences with their earthly dads. A negative relationship with an earthly father often makes it hard for a person to view God in a positive light. Everything Jesus said about God as Father would sound confusing to them, particularly if all their own dad did was let them down, put them down or wound them. Some people need to understand that these negative childhood experiences can stay with them as adults and “color” their view of God. It’s not that for them, God is not good or loving or generous, but that when they look to Him, they are looking through the image of their own father. Confession and prayer to allow the Holy Spirit to bring healing is often necessary to move someone past these wounds and on to a satisfying relationship with God.

9. The Lord’s prayer contains six petitions and the first three concern God and not us. **What are these first three petitions (vs. 9-10)?**

The emphasis in the Greek (because of the word order) is not on the verbs but on the nouns. In the Greek it might read like this: Your Name be hallowed, Your Kingdom come, Your Will be done. So these first three petitions concern God’s Name, His Reign (Kingdom) and His Will.

Why do you think Jesus instructed His disciples do this before they began praying about what they wanted or needed?

It is important to see that we begin prayer with our focus on God—His greatness, His worthiness, His power. This ought to inspire us and fill us with faith so that when we do begin to ask for our needs, we ask believing, which according to James, is an essential ingredient to getting our prayers answered (James 1:6-7). In contrast, when we begin prayer with our focus on our problems and our needs rather than on God, faith can drain out of us like the air out of a balloon.

10. In what ways can you “hallow” God’s name?

<p>Names in the Bible are a reflection of the person and so are more significant than they are for us today. Hallowed literally means to treat as holy or to revere.</p>
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This means a whole lot more than just refraining from swearing or using the Lord’s name improperly. It means to not only hold God’s name as Holy, but to hold God Himself as Holy and to reverence Him in our words and in our actions. And this leads to a desire for everyone in the world to hallow God’s name as well. It is not enough that I do. This is what worshipping God is all about. It is admiring the wonder and splendor of God (through our words and our actions) and desiring everyone in the world to share our feelings about God. C. S. Lewis elaborated on this on this idea in his book, Reflection on the Psalms:

But the most obvious fact about praise, whether of God or anything, strangely escaped me. I thought of it in terms of

compliment, approval, or the giving of honor. I had never noticed that all enjoyment spontaneously overflows in praise... I had not noticed either that just as men spontaneously praise whatever they value, so they spontaneously urge us to join in them in praising it: 'Isn't she lovely? Wasn't it glorious? Don't you think that magnificent?' The Psalmists in telling everyone to praise God are doing what all men do when they speak of what they care about... We delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; it is its appointed consummation."

11. Why do you think Jesus had them pray about God's will being done on earth? The bible teaches that God is sovereign—in control. Isn't His will already being done on earth? Why or why not?

God's kingdom is His sovereign reign and rule over His creation, much the same way a king rules over his country. In God's kingdom, His will (what He wants) is always done. Right now, what God wants is always done in heaven. Jesus told the Pharisees in Matthew 12:28 that because He was driving out demons by the Spirit of God, the kingdom of God had come to earth—it was inaugurated by His earthly ministry. But as we can see, God's Kingdom has not yet come completely or perfectly because His will is not always being done. We are in a period of time some Christians call "the already but the not yet." It has already come in the person of Jesus but it has not yet completely taken over. Jesus asks us, therefore, to pray that the kingdom (God's reign) will *expand* and *grow* to include more and more of God's creation.

The bible maintains a delicate balance between God being in control and God allowing us to have freedom. In reality, we are not as free as we might think (we were all slaves to sin; Rom.6:17 and we cannot come to Christ unless the Father first draws us to Him; John 6:44). But God never seems to violate a person's willful rejection of Him and His rule, which results in His will not being done a lot! Each of these first three petitions builds on the one before. When we hallow God's name as we should, then His Kingdom (His rule as King) has come into our lives. Our prayer, therefore, moves on from our desire to see everyone hallow God the way we do to everyone receiving Him as King, increasing the boundaries of His Kingdom. This is a prayer that will continue until the second coming of Christ since although the Kingdom is present, it is not yet covering the entire earth. Not only is there a need to see the Kingdom spread to more people, but we need to see it expressed more completely. We need to see those who are in the Kingdom surrendered to the King in every area of life.

What kind of prayers do you think will expand God's kingdom on earth?

Specific prayers. Prayers for individuals to be saved—people we know by name. Prayers of willingness to be sent out to share the gospel in areas where God's name is unknown. God's Kingdom is spread from one willing, surrendered heart to another. It also expands as individuals bring more and more of their lives into obedience to Christ.

What areas of your own life do you need to pray for God's will to be done?

12. The next three verses are requests we can make for our own needs. **What are these three requests and what, in your own words, are these three needs?**

The three requests are 1) asking for daily bread 2) asking for forgiveness 3) asking for deliverance from evil. The three needs these requests speak to are our need for provision, our need to be pardoned and our need for protection.

13. **In verse 11, do you think Jesus meant we can only ask Him for bread? Why or why not?**

Bread in the bible is seen as the sustenance of life—what is needed in order to live. It is clear, however, from other passages that God's view of life is not a meager existence on bread alone. Consider the spies who went into the Promised Land only to come out with an abundance of fruit and claims of flowing milk and honey. Consider Jesus' words, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10). Consider God's care and provision for that which is temporary and of less value than us (the grass of the fields and the birds of the air; 6:25-34). God desires to be generous to us and to pour out blessing on those who are His. Therefore, it is safe to assume that we are to pray for much more than just food.

What other things might this request include?

Any and all of our needs—relational (mate, friend, mentor), financial (job, affordable housing, self-restraint), spiritual (closeness to God, help understand the bible), needs for guidance (where to go to school, who to marry), needs for wisdom (what to do in a particular situation), emotional needs (healing from past wounds, courage for challenge ahead), etc. In other words, whatever we need in order to live as God's children is an appropriate subject for prayer.

What does it not include?

Anything that stems from selfishness or greed. For example, we can't pray for God to make us rich or for God to give us a prestigious job. We also can't pray for anything that is expressly forbidden in the bible, such as a non-Christian boyfriend or girlfriend. The key in understanding the boundary line for asking is the word "need." Paul tells us that God will provide all of our "needs" but not necessarily our wants (Phil.4:19). We may think we need something when God knows we don't. Part of spiritual maturity is the ability to trust God's good judgment.

14. How frequently should we make this request?

*The Greek word translated “daily” is *epiousion* and is found only in the Lord’s prayer. The exact meaning is debated somewhat but the best translation seems to mean “bread for the immediate future” or for just one day. This instruction is reminiscent of Israel in the wilderness gathering manna. They could only get enough for one day, which meant that each day they were required to gather more. The same principle can be said of prayer. We need to pray daily, expressing our needs to God.*

Right now in your life, are you this dependent upon God? Discuss.

The question may arise about whether or not a Christian can plan for the future. Based on the level of daily dependence we are to have on God, is it wrong for a Christian to save money in the bank, store up food, have life insurance, etc.? While the bible doesn’t lay out specifics in this area, it clearly does value planning ahead and hard work while it condemns laziness (see Prov.6:6-11; 10:5, 26; 12:11; 13:4; 14:23; 15:19; 28:19; 2 Thes.3:6-13).

15. What else do we need, according to Jesus (v.12)?

We need forgiveness for sin and we need to be forgivers of others. A quick review of study #3 from 1 John ought to help remind people that although they are saved and their sins were washed away when they surrendered to Christ, they still continue to sin and therefore still need to be forgiven on a daily basis by God. It is worth noting that Jesus chose to use the word “debt.” We are in debt to God because of our disobedience to Him. The only recourse for us is for God to forgive us what we owe Him because it is impossible for us to pay off all our debts ourselves.

How important is it for you to have forgiveness from God?

The bible is clear that unconfessed sin has detrimental consequences. It blocks our relationship with God (Is.59:1-2). We may feel like God is ignoring us if we are knowingly harboring unconfessed sin in our hearts. Unconfessed sin is also harmful to our health (see Ps.38:3-4). If we refuse to confess (admit we have done wrong) we will not be forgiven. Some may ask if it is necessary to confess sin to another person, such as a pastor, leader or priest. The New Testament teaches that at times, confessing sin to others is extremely beneficial (James 5:16), perhaps when there is a particularly besetting sin (one that is a habit or one that is shameful). It can be more liberating to confess to a mature Christian and to have them pray with us for forgiveness. But confession to others is definitely not required.

Why must you be forgiving towards others before you will be forgiven?

The best illustration of this principle is found in Mt.18:21-35. It is the parable of the unmerciful servant that Jesus tells in response to Peter’s question about how many times he is required to forgive. All that we are called to do as believers is in response to what God has already done. For example, we are called to love others because He first loved us (1 John 4:11). The same is true of forgiveness. Our willingness to forgive others reveals the genuineness and the reality of God’s work of forgiveness in our heart.

The second half of this verse says that we are to forgive people who sin (do wrong) against us just as God forgives us our sin against Him. Jesus is not telling us here that we earn God's forgiveness by forgiving others. Forgiveness is a free gift that we do not deserve. It is like salvation, which is also a free gift. We won't be saved, however, unless we apprehend this free gift by faith. Our faith does not and in fact cannot earn us salvation—it is simply the means by which we receive it. The same is true of forgiveness. For us to be forgiven by God we must maintain a forgiving attitude towards those who have wronged us. Keep in mind that in everything, God takes the initiative. (1 John 4:19; John 13:15; Eph.4:32; 1 Peter 2:21).

16. Who is the "evil one?"

The Greek in this verse could be translated either "from evil" or "from the evil one." Many feel it is a distinction not worth debating but since it is clear from other things that Jesus said that He saw evil as coming from the evil one or Satan, "the evil one" is the preferred translation.

What does he want with us?

A review of study #5 can remind people of the various schemes of the devil. Basically, he wants to destroy us.

What exactly are we asking for in verse 13?

Verse 13 actually contains two separate clauses. One is asking for God not to lead us into temptation. Jesus is not contradicting what James wrote in 1:13 ("When tempted, no one should say, 'God is tempting me.' For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone.."). Rather, He is saying we should pray something like, "Considering how weak and vulnerable I am to sin, please don't allow me to enter into situations that will be too hard for me to resist." This first clause is a recognition of our human frailties and proneness to sin. The second clause addresses our need for protection from a prime source of temptation—the devil or evil. Again, we are recognizing our vulnerability and our need for God's help.

Being a Christian is sometimes referred to in the Bible as being a soldier in combat (see 1 Timothy 2:3 and Ephesians 6:10-18). Imagine yourself as a soldier in battle for the kingdom of God. **Where or when do you experience the most intense fighting?**

You may want to get as specific as possible here so that the group understands the real nature of temptation and resistance. For example, "I can't be alone with my girlfriend without wanting to go to bed with her," or "I can't sit around the lunch table at work without joining in the gossip," etc. Many new Christians believe they ought to be able to put themselves in the

most precarious situations and still walk in obedience. It can be extremely liberating for them to know that even mature Christians have their areas of weakness.

What, therefore, are your particular areas of weakness that you should pray about?

Prayer is simply talking to God. As Christians, it is at the very heart of our relationship with Him. Jesus gives us some guidelines here in Matthew to help us develop good prayer habits. We can learn a lot about prayer from those who practice it on a regular basis. Hear how the psalmist feels about prayer in his life:

I love the Lord, because He hears my prayers and answers them;
Because He bends down and listens, I will pray as long as I live!

Psalm 116:1-2 (paraphrase)

8

do i need “the church” in order to be a christian?

1 corinthians 12:12-26

openers: Everyone has some idea of what a church is. To many people, a church is a large, old building with stained glass windows and organ music playing in the background. You must be dressed up to go to church and you must be quiet once you get there. At church, you sit for an hour or so to watch other people say and do things that have little if any relevance to your own life. It should come as no surprise that church isn't very popular anymore.

This is *not*, however, the New Testament's idea of church. In fact, according to the bible, church is not a building or place at all—it is *people*. “Church” is all the people who have decided to be followers of Jesus Christ. Church is something you *automatically* join when you become a Christian. If you are a Christian, then God sees you as part of *the* church even though you may not be a formal member of any particular church at all! (By the way, scripture **does** encourage us to be part of a local church if we are Christians!)

So what exactly does the bible say about church and about what your role should be in it? The apostle Paul wrote a letter to the Christians in Corinth to help them understand church and how they should each be involved. We'll be looking at a passage that will give you the bible's perspective on “church.”

aim of study: To make sure people have a biblical understanding of what church is and the importance it should have in their lives as Christians.

1. Describe some of your experiences of church, both prior to accepting Christ and after.

Make a mental note of the things people share—you may want to refer to some of their ideas and beliefs about church later as you progress through this study. Keep in mind that experiences are powerful teachers and even through you point out in the bible that their experience was not God's desire, it may take them a while to actually change their ideas.

In your own words, how would you like church to be?

read 1 corinthians 12:12-14

2. In these verses, what did Paul compare the church to?

Comparing the church to the human body is perhaps the most ingenious analogy ever made.⁷ We know that even better today than Paul could have, what with all the advances in medical research. The human body perfectly illustrates the many truths Paul wanted to make about the church. In Corinth, much of what he needed to communicate was by way of correction. The Corinthian believers were not neglecting church—they were just doing it wrong. Paul had just finished addressing the issue of spiritual gifts in the church. The Corinthians were enamored with one particular spiritual gift—tongues—to the neglect of all the rest. Paul wanted them to have an appreciation for all the various gifts and talents expressed through individuals in the church. So he used the human body to illustrate his points.

When Paul said, “So it is with Christ,” he was not referring to the person of Jesus Christ. He was using a figure of speech known as a metonymy. He was using the word “Christ” to actually refer to the church. An example of a contemporary metonymy is the use of the phrase “the Crown” to refer to the British monarchy.

How is the church is similar to a body?

It is a unit made up of many, many interwoven but at the same time distinguishable parts—diversity in unity. Note that the church is not called a loose association but a “body”—an organism that shares a common life source. There exists in a body (and a church) a delicate balance and two extremes must be avoided. We must not force individuals within the church into conformity, sacrificing diversity. (The only conformity the church can insist on is conformity to God's Word.) At the same time, we also must not allow individual distinctions (gifts, talents or interests) to destroy the church's unity. This balance is clearly evident in the human body. The heart must remain the heart and function as the heart (and not as the stomach) in order for the body to stay alive. But the heart must also remain unified with the rest of the body, or it and the body will die.

⁷ Paul was not original in his use of the human body as an illustration. Romans used it to illustrate the state and avert a revolt between social classes (e.g. “you may be of lower class, but you are still like the stomach—an essential part of the whole”). Stoic philosophers used it to illustrate the way the universe was made (the universe was like a body and God was like the mind, directing it). Paul adapted this common illustration to teach about the church.

3. Why do you think this idea of “diversity in unity” was so important to Paul?

Diversity in unity demonstrates the greatness of God. We see it in creation in the vast array of animals, plants, insects and birds that are able to exist in relative harmony on our planet. Now we also see it in the church. Only God is able to unify very different people into one organism—the church. What we see throughout most of the world is that people cannot and often will not get along with those who are different from them, whether the differences are racial, gender, ethnic or economic. We see group after group of like people unified together, but only in the church do we find great diversity in unity. This is glorifying to God! (see Eph.1:9-10; God’s ultimate plan for unity)

What practical implications does this truth about the church have for your life?

Hopefully, people will see that like parts of the human body, they cannot be “lone ranger” Christians—they will not survive. Being part of a church is part of God’s plan. The only significance a heart has is as part of the body. All by itself, it will die. The only significance we will have as Christians is as part of the church. This truth should help those in the group who feel “different.” They may be different because they just need to grow-up spiritually, but they may be different because God has designed and gifted them to be different. Note that Paul reiterates his main point in verse 14 by expressing it negatively—“the body is not one member.” In other words, the church is not just the pastor, or the bible teacher or the worship leader. The church is many different people, and each person is significant! Each person, therefore, needs the church and the church needs each person.

4. How is it possible for a lot of different kinds of people to be part of one body (v.13)?

The Spirit of God. The thing that unites Christians across language barriers and cultural barriers and age barriers and whatever other kinds of barriers that separate people is the fact that all Christians have the Holy Spirit. By definition, being a Christian means that God through the Holy Spirit has entered a person’s being and given them life (see John 1:4,12,13). We are, therefore, not to base our unity on something else (e.g. our style of worship, the way we dress, the bible translation we read, etc.). As a side note, it is a shame that the very thing that was meant to bring unity among believers worldwide has become a source of division and conflict.

When Paul said that we were all “baptized by one Spirit,” he was not referring to the rite of water baptism, nor to a “second experience” often labeled “the baptism in the Holy Spirit.” He was referring to the *conversion* experience, when a person is *born-again*. It’s at this time that he or she is given the Holy Spirit. The use of the word “baptize” illustrates that we are *immersed in* the Holy Spirit. The use of the word “drink” shows that we are *filled with* the Holy Spirit. As Christians, we are both *in Christ* and He is *in us*. (see John 17:20-23)

5. What specific groups of people did Paul refer to in verse 13?

Jews, Greeks, slave and free represent the basic distinctions between people in the first century—race, religion and social status. Any distinctions, however, were obliterated by Christ. Christians might still think of themselves as Jews or Greeks or slaves or freemen, but these things no longer defined who they were.

Back in Paul's time, these were the various social groups that people were divided into. **If Paul had written this letter today, what specific groups might he include?**

Today, we would use some of these same distinctions—race, religion and social class—but we would also include such things as ethnicity, gender and nationality. People may want to include in this list sexual orientation, which is a huge distinction today. The bible, however, does not view sexual orientation as an immutable trait (something you are born with that never changes, like race or gender) or as a social distinction (like ethnicity or economic class) but as a sin.⁸ The bible makes reference to some believers who were former "homosexual offenders," indicating people can change (1 Cor.6:9-11). And the bible clearly states that those who practice sexual immorality, whether it is homosexuality, adultery or fornication, will be excluded from the kingdom of God. No one who habitually sins sexually without repentance is guaranteed eternal life.

Does being a member of a particular group exclude you from being a part of the church? Why or why not?

Absolutely not. In fact, in the end, God is looking forward to people from every kind of group worshipping Him in heaven (Rev.7:9-10). Not only will people from every nationality and ethnic group be represented in heaven, but people who have come out from every imaginable sinful lifestyle. God's greatness is enhanced by the diversity of the people who worship Him. The greater the diversity, the greater the glory to God. This diversity also extends to gifting. God is not only interested in those who can preach and teach. He also wants those who can serve, show compassion, pray for the sick, give generously, etc. in His church.

Read 1 corinthians 12:15-20

6. Still using the body analogy, Paul made another point about the church in verses 15-16. What is it?

Paul personifies parts of the body to illustrate his point. If you are a Christian, then you are a member of the church (Christ's body), you are meant to be different from other members and you are important. Paul's emphasis in this entire section is on the fact that the members of the

⁸ It's worth pointing out that experts do not agree about whether or not homosexuality is an immutable trait. There have only been a couple *highly publicized* studies (Simon LeVay's study of hypothalamuses in people who had died of AIDS and another study of identical twins) that were purported to prove that homosexuality is something a person is born with. Many believe the results of these studies were dubious. Also, there is the mounting evidence of many homosexuals becoming heterosexual through Christian ministries such as Exodus and Desert Stream.

church are all suppose to be different. One body—many parts. It is absurd to think that just because a foot is not a hand or an ear is not an eye, that the foot and the ear are not part of the human body! The same thing can be said about Christians and the church.

What common problem do you think Paul wanted to address?

Feelings of inferiority. Such feelings would not be a problem if we were all exactly the same, but as Paul has been saying, we are not. Our tendency when we are different is to compare ourselves with others and when we do, we usually come up short. Within the church, we may feel that our gift or talent is not as important as someone else's and therefore, we don't really even belong in the church—we are not needed. It is interesting that Paul compares feet with hands and ears with eyes. In both cases, the two parts are rather similar (feet and hands are both extremities on two limbs; ears and eyes are both sense organs) but the one seems more useful or vital to the body as a whole. Paul must realize that it is human nature for us to compare ourselves with someone who we think is like us, only better (e.g. musicians compare themselves with other musicians, etc.).

Have you ever felt the way this “foot” and “ear” felt? Explain.

7. What truth can help Christians who feel they are not an essential part of the church (v.17,19)?

Diversity is what makes the church work. In fact, diversity of gifts is what makes the church, period. If everyone was the same, the church would not be the church. These truths are undeniable when they are applied to the human body, which is why Paul stuck with this analogy. Each person plays an essential role and without him or her, the church would be handicapped.

Have you ever struggled with feelings that you were not very important in the church? (“I can't teach, I'm not good at evangelism, I'm not musical—there is nothing for me to contribute to church life!”)

What do you think Paul would say to you regarding your struggles?

He would probably say that it doesn't matter so much how we feel about ourselves or if we believe our gift or contribution is important. We must believe that we are vital and our contribution is important because God has said so—He designed the church to work this way.

8. Who, according to Paul, gets to decide how the parts (the people) of the body (the church) are to be organized (v.18)?

The Lord. It is not the pastor, or the board of trustees or the small group leaders that make these decisions. God, who is sovereign, uniquely gifts people and then commissions them to fulfill a job within the church, Christ's body. It's the job of the church leaders to recognize how God has arranged the body—who is gifted to do what—and to help them discover for themselves their unique role and usefulness to the church.

Why do you think God doesn't leave it up to each person to decide for himself or herself which part they want to be?

Unity might be destroyed if everyone got to "do what was right in his or her own eyes." In every area of life, we as God's creatures are called to do His will, not ours. It should be no different when it comes to the church. Even Jesus did only what the Father directed Him to do. Most people discover, however, that doing what God wants is very often what they wanted all along as well. It is God's nature to gift us and to call us to do what we would enjoy doing.

How does it make you feel to know that God is the one who decides what part you and everyone else will be in the church?

It should take the pressure off us to perform or to prove ourselves to others. It ought to eliminate most of the competition that arises between people. Our goal in the church, therefore, is not to be better than someone else—our goal is to hear Jesus say, "Well done, good and faithful servant. You did what I wanted!"

read 1 corinthians 12:21-26

9. Paul addressed another "church" problem in verse 21. **What is it?**

Again Paul personifies the parts of the body to make his point. This time, the issue is not "I'm not needed" but rather "I don't need you!" One part feels so special and so superior to others that they're convinced they don't even need these other parts.

Why is it wrong for a Christian to exhibit this attitude?

Christians of all people ought to appreciate their "neediness." We need Christ, or else we are doomed to hell. We need the Holy Spirit or else we would be constantly defeated. And, we need each other in order to live out the Christian life in this world. We cannot and we will not make it alone. Christians of all people ought to understand that everything we have is by way of grace—it's all a gift—nothing we have has been earned or deserved (1 Cor.4:7). How can we possibly look down on another member of the body because of what God has chosen to give us?!

How can this attitude be harmful to the church?

In John 13, Jesus taught His disciples by example that they are to be servants because He had come "not to be served but to serve." Serving others involves "getting low" or being humble. Any attitude of pride or self-sufficiency goes completely against what Jesus both taught and modeled. It would destroy the not just the unity of the church, but the type of unity God desires for the church.

10. Using the physical body as a guideline, how did Paul classify the various parts of the church (v.22-24)?

Paul referred to “weaker” parts, “indispensable” parts, “less honorable” parts and “unpresentable” parts. He is probably making reference to the internal organs of the body (weaker yet indispensable) and the sexual organs (unpresentable, yet we treat with greater honor or modesty).

In your own words, what was the point he was trying to make?

It is an illusion that one part is more valuable than another. Look at the human body. Some of our weakest parts—our internal organs—are the most essential. Some parts that we never even see we couldn’t survive without. Our eyes, on the other hand, are completely dispensable. God in His great wisdom so designed the human body, and God in His great wisdom, so arranges the body of Christ so that every part is needed and every part is honored.

What would you say is the proper attitude we should have towards each other in church (v.25-26)?

There should be an attitude of mutual respect, care and honor. The church is to exhibit a unique kind of togetherness. Members should be so linked, that when one is hurting, they all hurt and if one experiences success, everyone is happy. This is certainly the case in the human body. If the tooth aches, the whole body feels miserable.

Think of examples when you or someone you know “suffered” with someone’s troubles or “rejoiced” when someone was honored. Which do you think is harder to do and why?

Most people find it much harder to rejoice when someone else is honored. Imagine being happy for a friend who gets engaged when you’ve been waiting for a mate for years. Imagine rejoicing when another friend lands the good job upon graduation while you’re still biding your time waiting tables. Imagine someone else is recruited to lead the small group your in or be on the worship team when that was what you wanted. Such situations are real tests of our love for our brothers and much, much harder than showing empathy and sympathy..

11. Based on what you learned in this study, is it essential for you as a Christian to be part of a church? Give reasons for your answer.

As Christians, God designed us to be incomplete by ourselves. We are merely a part of the whole and so we need the body—we need the church and the church needs us.

According to Paul, the church is a living organism, just like a physical body. In the church we find diversity, just like we do in a physical body. We don’t expect everyone to look alike or have the same function in the church. But the church is also a unity. It has one head (Jesus Christ) and it operates under His command. In the church, there is no such thing as independence, from Christ or from each

other. Every member *needs* the other members, making no member more important than any other. God desires the church to be free from envy, jealousy and competition, the things we expect to find in other social groups. Instead, the members of the church are connected with the other members, spiritually and emotionally, suffering when one is hurting and rejoicing when one is honored. Begin today to ask God to show you the “part” He has made you to be in the church and how you can begin to serve!

9

what am i suppose to do as a christian?

matthew 28:16-20

openers: If you wanted to get a message out to people worldwide, you would probably hire all kinds of media professionals and public relations experts. After all, it would be a big job and to do it right, you would need specialists. Have you ever wondered how the message of Christianity was spread? It is amazing to consider that what began as a small group of just twelve men, following an itinerant preacher through the back roads of a rural, middle eastern country during the first century, has become the world's largest and most influential religion. How did it happen? What was God's strategy to reach the world with His message?

God's strategy was to send people to do the job—average, everyday people who are followers of His Son. People just like you! Many might argue that God would have been better off to do His own public relations and spread the message Himself, but instead, He chose to use people.

Following the resurrection, Jesus appeared to His disciples on a mountain in Galilee to tell them about a job He had for them. For the past three years, Jesus had been the one to go and to preach and to heal, but soon He would be returning to heaven. He passed the baton, so to speak, to His disciples and they have been passing it on to Christians ever since. In this last study, let's consider what this job is that God wants us to do as Christians.

aim of study: To help people to understand the importance of and purpose for evangelism and to commit themselves as Christians to the practice of evangelism.

1. Think back to how you became a Christian. **Who shared the message of the gospel with you?**

Why did you respond and accept Christ when you did?

Encourage people to share what it was about the messenger that caused them to respond. Was it the love and acceptance they were shown? Was it their willingness to answer certain questions? Was it the clarity with which they explained the gospel?

How do you feel about doing the same thing with someone else?

Hearing others share their testimonies of how they came to Christ can help make evangelism less “scary” and can even motivate people to want to try it!

read matthew 28:16-20

2. **Where did the eleven go (there were only 11 disciples since Judas, who had betrayed Jesus, had killed himself; 27:5) and why (see 26:32 and 28:7,10)?**

This incident is recorded only in Matthew and has been the focus of much study since it is how Matthew concluded his gospel account. The disciples (in contrast to the chief priests and soldiers, who made up a false story about Jesus’ missing body, v.11-15) do exactly like Jesus had instructed them to do. They go to Galilee, the humble beginning of Jesus’ earthly ministry, to meet with Him. It is here that Jesus chose to instruct them about how His ministry was to continue after His departure for heaven. It was to continue through them. Luke viewed the ministry of the apostles, and subsequently the ministry of Christians throughout the ages, as a continuation of the ministry Jesus had begun (see Acts 1:1).

Why do you think Jesus made a point of telling the disciples twice to meet Him in Galilee—once before His death, and once after His resurrection?

Jesus obviously did not want them to miss this meeting! It is significant that it took place on a mountain. God often held important meetings with people on mountains (e.g. Moses on Mt. Sinai). Although Jerusalem was the center of Jewish religious life, Galilee was the center of Jesus’ ministry. He had been better received in Galilee than in Jerusalem and it was there that He did many of His miracles and taught extensively. Galilee was familiar to the disciples and it probably held many positive memories for them. It is interesting how God sometimes uses a familiar place that holds certain memories for us to teach us. Galilee was also removed from the uproar and commotion of Jerusalem where Jesus had just been tried and crucified.

3. What did they do when they saw Him (v.17)?

*They worshipped Him. This does not necessarily mean they recognized Jesus for who He was—the risen Lord and worshipped Him like we will one day in heaven. The Greek word *proskyneo* was used throughout Matthew (2:2,8,11; 4:9,10; 8:2; 9:18; 14:33; 15:25; 18:26; 20:20; 28:9) and often referred to dropping to one’s knees out of respect or to pay homage. But their reaction to the sight of Jesus was mixed. Apparently some worshipped while some doubted. This little statement smacks of authenticity. We can have confidence in Matthew’s account. (He is not making this stuff up!)*

<p>The Greek word for doubt in this verse does not imply unbelief but rather hesitation. The word was also used to describe Peter when he was walking on the water in Matthew 14:31.</p>
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What do you think some of them “doubted?”

The resurrection. It is possible that initially, they were seeing Jesus at a distance, because in verse 18, it says He came up to them, implying that He came up closer to them. At first glance perhaps they weren’t even sure it was Him and doubted. But we would expect that some would be hesitant to believe that Jesus, who had just been brutally killed, was now alive. Luke wrote that the disciples did not initially believe the women’s report of the empty tomb (Lk.24:10-11) and John wrote that Thomas did not believe his closest friends, the men he had spent the last three years with—he needed to not only see for himself, he needed to put his hands in the wounds (John 20:24-31). It is worth noting, however, that once the disciples were convinced, they went to their death refusing to deny the fact of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Real faith is not afraid to ask hard questions or admit doubt. Real faith does not deny reality but looks reality squarely in the face. The disciples were not afraid to question even what they were seeing. We should not be afraid to ask questions, either, so that our faith is firmly grounded in truth and not on wishful thinking or fantasy.

The disciples had never worshiped Jesus before, even though they had spent three years with Him and had witnessed hundreds of miracles. **Why do you think they worshiped Him now?**

For those who truly believed it was Jesus risen from the dead, this was probably the most remarkable event of their entire lives. Worship or praise for God is the most natural response under the circumstances.

There is one reference in Mt.14:33 when Jesus had walked on the water, where the disciples are said to have worshipped Him. In the parallel account in Mk.6:45-52, it said that the disciples were “completely amazed” yet at the same time, did not understand. Walking on the water was a feat Rabbis reserved exclusively for God. Only He could walk on the water (Job 9:8). This event may have been a moment of insight for the disciples in the boat, so they worshipped. This moment on the mountain in Galilee may have been another such moment.

Spiritual insight and understanding which leads to genuine worship often comes gradually and in stages. The more truth we understand about Christ and what He has done for us, the more genuine and sincere our worship becomes.

4. What claim did Jesus make in verse 18?

By “authority,” Jesus meant the *right* and the *power* to rule or govern. Jesus had been given *authority* over the affairs on the earth and the affairs in heaven! To illustrate this, imagine a policeman. He has the *right* to stand in the middle of the street to stop traffic but he does not have the *power* (physical might) to actually stop a moving car. Jesus has been given both the *right* to rule and the *power* to rule.

Jesus had authority prior to the resurrection (see Mt.7:29; 9:6; 10:1; 11:27; 21:23-27; John 2:18-19; 10:17-18; 17:2) but the sphere of His authority had now increased. The key word is “all.” His authority is now over everything! The cross and resurrection had leveled a decisive blow to our enemies—that which had power over the entire human race—sin, death and Satan. Jesus triumphed over all three (Rom.7:21-25; 1 Cor.15:21-27,54-57; 2 Tim.1:10; Col.2:15; Mt.12:29; John 12:31; Heb.2:14-15). It is worth pointing out that one of Jesus’ temptations in the wilderness was the offer of all the kingdoms of the earth and the authority over them (Lk.4:5-7). Jesus knew that one day He would be given all authority, but it would be by way of the cross.

Who is it that gave this authority to Jesus?

The Father. Jesus was always under the Father’s authority during His ministry (John 5:19, 26-27; 6:38; 7:16; 10:25). The only thing that is not under Jesus’ authority now is the Father (1Cor.15:27-28). The authority, therefore, was the Father’s to give. The giving of this authority, from “the Ancient of Days” to “one like a son of man” is referred to in Dan.7:13-14.

There is a hierarchy of authority within the Trinity. The Son always does the Father’s will and the Spirit only says the words of the Father and the Son (John 16:13-15). The Son never submits to the Spirit and the Father never submits to the Son. This is part of the mystery of the Trinity. We cannot in our finite human minds fully understand the exact nature of the Godhead.

Why was it given to Jesus? (see Phil. 2:6-11)

According to Paul, God exalted Jesus, giving Him and His name authority, to vindicate Jesus’ humiliation and suffering. It was knowledge of this honor that was waiting for Him after Calvary that enabled Jesus to face the agony of the cross (Heb.12:2). This is the nature of authority in God’s kingdom—it is given to the one who is willing to serve. When James and John requested special places of honor and authority in Jesus’ kingdom, He warned them that

they didn't realize what they were asking. Such honor came at a price—they had to be willing to share His fate (Mark 10:35-45).

How does Jesus' authority affect you personally? To what degree do you recognize His authority over your life?

On a personal level, Jesus' authority means that He calls the shots. He's in the driver's seat. We bow to Him, letting Him choose the course of our lives—where we live, what job we take, who we marry, etc. No area of life should be off-limits to Jesus' authority—not our sex lives, our finances, our leisure time—nothing. The fundamental problem of the entire human race is that we have willfully turned away from God and gone our own way, done our own thing. It is difficult to relinquish authority over to Jesus, but that is what being a Christian is all about.

5. What did Jesus tell His disciples they must do in verse 19-20?

*They are basically told to make disciples. They are to reproduce themselves all over the world. The phrase "make disciples" is actually just one word in the Greek—*matheteusate*. Contrary to what some believe, the emphasis in Jesus' command is not on going but on making disciples. To make a disciple is to bring a person into relationship with Jesus Christ as a pupil to a teacher and a follower to a leader. Disciples are people who hear, understand and obey the teachings and instructions of their Master (Mt. 12:46-50).*

List the four specific parts of this command.

If the command is broken down into parts, these parts would be:

- Go
- Make
- Baptize
- Teach

The way to re-construct the command would be:

- Make disciples by
 - Going
 - Baptizing
 - Teaching

What is the ultimate goal of Jesus' command? What is not the goal?

Christians refer to this command as *The Great Commission*. A commission is the granting of authority to perform certain tasks (like a commissioned officer in the military) or to act in the place of another. Some refer to these verses 18-20 as "the Great Claim, the Great Commission and the Great Comfort."

We are to make disciples of Jesus Christ—people who are submitted to Him as Lord, doing what He wants them to do. We are not trying to get people to follow us, or agree with our opinions or join our church (although disciples of Jesus usually do join churches). We are to act as ambassadors for Jesus. We are representing Him and His interests and His desire for more disciples (2 Cor.5:20).

Why were the disciples (and why are we) able to fulfill the Great Commission? (In other words, what is the “therefore” in verse 19 there for?)

(A fundamental principle of good bible study is that whenever you find a “therefore” in the bible, you should find out what it is there for.) It is significant that it was after Jesus announced His authority that He told the disciples to go. It is because of Jesus’ all-reaching authority that the disciples can go forth and proclaim the good news—the gospel of the kingdom—Jesus reigns! His authority supercedes every other authority and His kingdom rule extends everywhere. The disciples can now have confidence as they go that Jesus has sovereign control over them and what happens. It is like being in a country that has just been liberated from an evil dictatorship and now has a benevolent king in power. Things you couldn’t do before because those in authority wouldn’t allow it, you are now free to do. Spiritually, Jesus’ authority has liberated us His followers to go out into the world and make disciples.

In what ways are they/we to “act in the place of” Jesus?

They (and we) are to continue on a worldwide scale what Jesus began on a national level in Israel. Jesus represented His Father and spoke His words. We are to represent Jesus and speak His words. Jesus expressed the love of the Father not only through His words, but also through His deeds (healing the sick, raising the dead, feeding the hungry, etc.). We are to do likewise. A simple way to understand this is to say we are to be Jesus’ feet, hands, eyes, ears and mouth. As disciples, we are to be Christ-like in our ministry as well as our character.

6. Jesus told the eleven to make disciples, not just converts. **Explain the difference between a convert to Christ and a disciple of Christ.**

A convert is a person who has changed his or her mind about something. A Christian convert is someone who has changed his or her mind about Christ. They are no longer hostile with their back to God—they have turned towards Him in love, convinced Christianity is true. Every disciple must be a convert. But a disciple is more than a convert. It’s more than mental agreement with a set of truths about Jesus. Discipleship is a life-long process of walking with God and being changed by Him—putting off old habits and ways of life and putting on new ones. It’s conforming to how God wants you to live and doing His will. Conversion is an event that begins the process of discipleship. We can’t skip it, but we must go beyond it.

How would you identify yourself and why?

7. How do we find people to make into disciples (v.19)?

Jesus told them and tells us “to go” out and find people. His command here is in contrast to His first commissioning of the twelve, when He told them NOT to go among the gentiles...(Mt.10:5). All restrictions have been removed and the eleven are told to just go. Since in the Greek the phrase “therefore, go” is a participle, it could mean “therefore, as you go” make disciples. This means that as we go about our lives—going to work, going to school, going to the market—we are to also be about the business of making disciples of Jesus. But throughout history, Christians have interpreted Jesus’ words to mean “go, leave your home and country, and make disciples.” It would be impossible to make disciples of “all nations” if no one ever left their home and country. “All nations” in the Greek does not refer to the modern nation-state but rather to identifiable people groups. So within a country, there might be dozens of people groups with their own language or dialect, customs and culture. Obviously reaching these people groups requires planning and taking deliberate steps to leave what is familiar and take the message of Christ to a place it has never been heard.

Why do you think Jesus didn’t say we could just wait for those people who are interested to come to us?

God is always the initiator in our relationship with Him. In fact, we are incapable of coming to Him at all unless He first draws us (Jn.6:37,44,65). Jesus declared that He had come to “seek and to save that which is lost” (Lk.19:10). In response to the Pharisees’ criticisms of Him eating and relating to “sinners,” Jesus told three parables about things that are “lost” (Lk.15) to illustrate His motivation for seeking sinners who are lost. The assumption, then, is that since God goes out after those who are lost, so should we. We must break out of the walls of the church and take Jesus and His message out into the “marketplace”—schools, neighborhoods, offices, businesses. Never are we told to just sit back and wait for the interested to come to us. This does not mean that every time we go and to every person we go to that we will experience success. Not everyone will be receptive and responsive to our message. Jesus warned the twelve in Mt.10 that when they went, their message may not be received. When their message was rejected, He told them to “shake the dust from their feet.” We are not to allow rejection to get a grip in our souls.

How do you feel about “going out” to make disciples? Why do you feel that way?

It may be helpful to allow group members to share their fears about evangelism, to discuss ways to overcome fear and share success stories.

8. Jesus does not intend for us to "shove" the gospel down people's throats because no one can be forced into becoming a disciple. **How can you interest people in becoming disciples without "shoving it down their throats?"**

Peter wrote that Christian wives should win their husbands to Christ “without a word” (1 Pet.3:1-2). Paul wrote that “through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of Him” (2 Cor.2:14) and that Gentile Christians can actually make Jews envious of their relationship with God (Rom.11:11). The way we live our lives ought to make the message of Jesus attractive. People ought to see something in us that makes them want to listen to what

we have to say. It can be the joy we exhibit, the peace we have, the kindness we show, etc. The way we live can pave the way for the message of the gospel. We must be careful, however, not to error on the other side. While it's very unhelpful to force the message of Jesus down someone's throat (especially when it's done in a rude manner), it's equally unhelpful to be kind, loving and joyful, yet never open your mouth to share with people the source of your joy.

9. Where did Jesus say they could find people to make into disciples?

If we consider "go" to mean "as you go," we can find people all around us. Any person we have contact with throughout the course of our day is a potential disciple. If we consider "go" to include going to "all nations," it may mean that we will find people outside the boundaries of our social circle. Many people have an interest in a particular group of people. That may be the Holy Spirit prompting them to begin to reach outside their "group" into another "people group" in order to make disciples. There may be dozens of distinct people groups even in the U.S. that have not been significantly reached with the gospel. Each one may require a special approach in order to respond to Christ. Various organizations have committed themselves to reaching various "groups" with the gospel—City Missions for the homeless, Teen Challenge for teenage drug addicts, Campus Crusade for college students, Young Life for high school students, International Friendships for international college students, etc.

Jesus' disciples may have been surprised that He did not tell them to make disciples only from Jews. It was extremely radical for Jesus to include Gentiles in with His disciples. At first, the disciples had a problem with this (read Acts 15:1-35) but eventually they saw that it was God's plan from the beginning to unite all people in Christ, both Jew and Gentile. (see Eph. 2:11-18).

Is there a type of person that you would find it hard to share with about Jesus and/or hard to accept as a fellow Christian? If so, why do you feel that way? How can you go about correcting your attitude?

The scene when we get to heaven will be thousands of people from every "nation, tribe, people and language" worshipping God together (Rev.7:9). While many people may struggle with some form of prejudice, there is no room for that in the life of a Christian. God is accepting of all people and so should we be. That said, it is often helpful to confess negative attitudes and to pray for a change of heart. We may not want to admit that we are intimidated by a certain type of person, making it difficult for us to want to share with them about Jesus. Perhaps we are intimidated by a college professor who is well educated, or our boss who has a bad temper. If we are aware of this kind of fear, prayer again can help free us and make us dependent upon Jesus (Phil.4:13).

Baptism is the outward sign of the inward work of grace in a person's life. It does not produce that work of grace but it does graphically depict what happens to a person when they are saved. In the early church, baptism closely followed the conversion experience. Jesus mentions the three parts of the Godhead when referring to baptism. It is vitally important that as the disciples are making new disciples, that these new followers are united personally with the Father **and** the Son **and** the Holy Spirit.

10. How did Jesus conclude this Great Commission? Why do you think He said this?

It is so significant that this gospel ends not with a command, but a promise. Jesus made this promise emphatically. "Take note!" he said. "Pay attention to what I am saying! It's important!" Jesus promised to be with us always—throughout all time and on a day to day basis, day in and day out. Considering the task at hand—taking over for Jesus and making disciples of all nations, it's good to know he promises to be right there with us all the time. God's presence with His people is a theme throughout Matthew. At His birth, Jesus is called Emmanuel, God with us (1:23). Later, He promised His disciples He would always be present when they were together (18:20). Now He is reaffirming His commitment to be with us in 28:20. God's presence is an important theme throughout the Old Testament as well. His presence was what Moses wanted. It is what made God's people unique, different from all the people on the earth (Ex,33:15-16). The removal of God's presence was dreaded (Ps.51:11). We must never think that we do not need Jesus in order to accomplish this job He has given us (John 15:5). Just have His instructions is not enough. We need Him to be with us every step of the way.

In what ways are His words comforting?

There is really nothing like being with someone you love and care about. A letter isn't the same—neither is a phone call. The same can be said about being with God. There is something about having His presence with us at all times and in all circumstances. Jesus never promised that it would be easy to follow Him. It's comforting to know that we not only have His written Word to guide us, we have His presence to see us through.

Which part of this commission will you find the easiest to obey and why?

Which part will you find the most difficult? Why?

Christians throughout history have taken these words of Jesus to heart and have gone! Many have crossed land and oceans, racial and cultural boundaries to fulfill Jesus' command to make disciples. But you can go just across the street and still be making disciples. Wherever the love of Jesus and the gospel message has not been is where you should go! Sharing the message with others is called "evangelism"—the sharing of the "evangel." If you are unsure about how to share with others the truth about Christianity and the good news about Jesus, you may want to read a book on evangelism. Here are a few suggestions to get you started:

- Becoming a Contagious Christian by Bill Hybels & Mark Mittelberg
- Inside the Mind of Unchurched Harry and Mary by Lee Strobel
- Out of the Saltshaker and Into the World by Becky Pippert
- How to Give Away Your Faith by Paul Little
- Know What you Believe by Paul Little
- Know Why you Believe by Paul Little