

witnessing



2009

is the year of

SHINING

SHINING
AY - 2009

“Let your light so shine before men that they may see your moral excellence and your praiseworthy, noble, and good deeds and recognize and honor and praise and glorify your Father Who is in heaven.”
—Matthew 5:16 (KJV - Amplified)

2009 **Small Group Discussions** for adventist youth

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2009 YEAR OF SHINING

small group discussions
for adventist youth

Prepared by:
Youth Ministries Department
General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists

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ABOUT THIS MANUAL

The year 2009 has been designated by the General Conference Youth Ministries Department as a year of Shining (Witnessing). This is part of the yearly themes for the youth around the world.

This year, the Seventh-day Adventist church around the world will be focusing on the joys and benefits of Renewing through Discipleship, Leadership, Evangelism and Service. The young people will learn how to close the gap that exists between belief and action, knowledge and practice.

These small group discussions have been developed to be used during Youth Meetings when youth meet for their weekly programs. There are enough programs for the whole year.

It is the prayer of the General Conference Youth Ministries Team that these discussions will help youth to grow in love with Jesus Christ and become like Him.

2009 is the year of **SHINING**

(letting your witness for Jesus shine)

“Let your light so shine before men that they may see your moral excellence and your praiseworthy, noble, and good deeds and recognize and honor and praise and glorify your Father Who is in heaven.”

–Matthew 5:16 (KJV – Amplified)

In the dark of night even one small candle can be seen from even a great distance. That same candle can share its flame with another and together they are brighter and light up a larger area. But if the candle tried to hide so that it wouldn't be so easily seen, then it would never have the opportunity to share its flame. We are called to be the light of the world, but too often we only allow ourselves to fully shine when we are together. This year our goal is to challenge our youth to shine all the time and to spread out and share the flame of hope and love of God with others.

Renewing through:

- **Discipleship**
- **Evangelism**
- **Leadership**
- **Service**

In our world of loneliness and despair, there is an enormous need for men and women who know the heart of God, a heart that forgives, cares, reaches out and wants to heal. In that heart there is no suspicion, no vindictiveness, no resentment, and not a tinge of hatred. It is a heart that wants only to give love and receive love in response. It is a heart that suffers immensely because it sees the magnitude of human pain and the great resistance to trusting the heart of God who wants to offer consolation and hope.

The Christian leader of the future is the one who truly knows the heart of God as it has become flesh, “a heart of flesh,” in Jesus. Knowing God's heart means consistently, radically, and very concretely to announce and reveal that God is love..., and that every time fear, isolation, or despair begins to invade the human soul, this is not something that comes from God. This sounds very simple and maybe even trite, but very few people know that they are loved without any condition or limits.¹

¹ Henri J.M. Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus*

In fact, most of us aren't surprised by God's judgment, but his *grace* is truly amazing, as author Max Lucado illustrates:

Lightning bolts on Sodom. Fire on Gomorrah. *Good job, God.* Egyptians swallowed in the Red Sea. *They had it coming.* Forty years of wandering to loosen the stiff necks of the Israelites? *Would've done it myself.* Ananias and Sapphira? *You bet.*

Discipline is easy for me to swallow. Logical to assimilate. Manageable and appropriate.

But God's grace? Anything but.

Examples? How much time do you have?

David the psalmist becomes David the voyeur, but by God's grace becomes David the psalmist again.

Peter denied Christ before he preached Christ.

Zacchaeus, the crook. The cleanest part of his life was the money he'd laundered. But Jesus still had time for him.

The thief on the cross: hellbent and hung-out-to-die one minute, heaven-bound and smiling the next.

Story after story. Prayer after prayer. Surprise after surprise.

Seems that God is looking more for ways to get us home than for ways to keep us out. I challenge you to find one soul who came to God seeking grace and did not find it. Search the pages. Read the stories. Envision the encounters. Find one person who came seeking a second chance and left with a stern lecture. I dare you. Search.

You won't find it. You will find a strayed sheep on the other side of the creek. He's lost. He knows it. He's stuck and embarrassed. What will the other sheep say? What will the shepherd say?

You will find a shepherd who finds him.

Oh boy. Duck down. Put hooves over the eyes. The belt is about to fly. But the belt is never felt. Just hands. Large, open hands reaching under his body and lifting the sheep up, up, up until he's placed upon the shepherd's shoulders. He's carried back to the flock and given a party! "Cut the grass and comb the wool," he announces. "We are going to have a celebration!"

The other sheep shake their heads in disbelief. Just like we will. At our party. When we get home. When we watch the Shepherd shoulder into our midst one unlikely soul after another.

Seems to me God gives a lot more grace than we'd ever imagine.

We could do the same.

I'm not for watering down the truth or compromising the gospel. But if a fellow with a pure heart calls God *Father*, can't I call that same man *Brother*? If God doesn't make doctrinal perfection a requirement for family membership, should I?

...If God can tolerate my mistakes, can't I tolerate the mistakes of others? If God can overlook my errors, can't I overlook the errors of others? If God allows me with my foibles and failures to call him *Father*, shouldn't I extend the same grace to others?²

In *What's So Amazing About Grace?*, Philip Yancey writes:

My study of Jesus' life convinces me that whatever barriers we must overcome in treating "different" people cannot compare to what a holy God ...overcame when he descended to join us on planet Earth.... I marvel that Jesus gained the reputation as being a "friend of sinners" ... As Helmit Thielicke wrote:

Jesus gained the power to love harlots, bullies, and ruffians...he was able to do this only because he saw through the filth and crust of degeneration, because his eye caught the divine original which is hidden ... in every man!...

When Jesus loved a guilt-laden person and helped him, he saw in him an erring child of God. He saw in him a human being whom his Father loved and grieved over because he was going wrong. He saw him as God originally designed and meant him to be, and therefore he saw through the surface layer of grime and dirt to the real man underneath. Jesus did not *identify* the person with his sin, but rather saw in this sin something alien, something that really did not belong to him, something that merely chained and mastered him and from which he would free him and bring him back to his real self. Jesus was able to love men because he loved them right through the layer of mud.

We may be abominations, but we are still God's pride and joy. All of us in the church need "grace-healed eyes" to see the potential in others for the same grace that God has so lavishly bestowed on us. "To love a person," said Dostoevsky, "means to see him as God intended him to be."³

² Max Lucado, *When God Whispers Your Name*

³ Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace?*

[A] friend who works with the down-and-out in Chicago [told me the following true story]:

A prostitute came to me in wretched straits, homeless, sick, unable to buy food for her two-year-old daughter. Through sobs and tears, she told me she had been renting out her daughter – two years old! – to men interested in kinky sex. She made more renting out her daughter for an hour than she could earn on her own for a night. She had to do it, she said, to support her own drug habit. I could hardly bear hearing her sordid story. ... I had no idea what to say to the woman.

At last I asked if she had ever thought of going to a church for help. I will never forget the look of pure, naïve shock that crossed her face. “Church!” she cried. “Why would I ever go there? I was already feeling terrible about myself. They’d just make me feel worse.”

What struck me about my friend’s story is that women much like this prostitute fled toward Jesus, not away from him. The worse a person felt about herself, the more likely she saw Jesus as a refuge.⁴

Because of this amazing love for us, God wants *all* of his erring children to return to him, and so:

The invitation goes out, along highways and down alleys. Yes, it goes out even to the path that is so lonely that only one solitary person walks it ...; there, too, the invitation finds its way and most easily when it brings back the fugitive to the Inviter. Come here, come here all of you – and you and you and you, too, you who are the loneliest.

This invitation stands at the crossroad, where temporal and earthly suffering has planted its cross, and there it beckons, “Come here, all you poor and miserable,....all you despised and discarded ones,....come here!” The invitation blasts away all distinctions in order to gather everybody together.

You sick at heart; ...all you who have been treated unfairly, wronged, insulted, and mistreated; all you noble ones, you who were loving and unselfish and faithful, yet who undeservedly reaped the reward of ingratitude – come here! All you victims of cunning and deceit and backbiting and envy... – come here!

...The invitation stands at the crossroad, there where the road of sin veers away from the hedgerow of innocence. Come here, you who are so close and yet so far away. Come here, all you who are lost and gone astray, whatever your error and sin, whether hidden or revealed. ...

⁴ Ibid.

Oh, turn around, turn around, and come here. Do not shrink back, no matter how hard it is. Do not fear the narrow way of conversion that leads to salvation. Do not despair over every relapse. God in his mercy has the patience to forgive and a sinner should have the patience to humble himself. Do not despair. He who says, “Come here,” is with you each step of the way. But come!

Come here, all of you; with him is rest. He adds no burden, he only opens his arms. He will not first ask you, as do the “righteous people” who try to help, “Are you not perhaps to blame for your misfortune?” It is so easy to judge by externals, to think that if someone does not get on well in the world that he is bad, or that he is an evil person that has done something wrong.

If you feel your need, he will not question you about it. He will not break the bruised reed even more but will lift you up when you accept him. He will not point his finger at you and thereby separate you from himself, so that your sin becomes even more terrible. He will provide you a hiding place with himself, and hidden in him he will hide your sins. For he is the friend of sinners. He does not merely stand still with open arms and say, “Come here.” No, like the prodigal son’s father he seeks the sinner, and like the good shepherd he seeks the lost sheep. He walks – no, he runs, but infinitely farther than any shepherd or any father. Indeed, he goes the infinitely long distance from being God to becoming man. And this he did to seek the lost!

The Inviter does not wait for those who labor and are burdened to come to him. He himself lovingly calls. He himself comes. ...Oh, that you could only accept the invitation, “Come here!”⁵

Come here! – Amazing! There is nothing especially amazing for a person in danger and in need of help to cry out,...and ordinarily the person who can truly be of help must be searched for, and once he is found, it is often hard to gain access to him. But the one who sacrificed himself, he is the one who seeks out those who have need of help, he is himself the one who goes about and, calling, almost pleading, says, “Come here.” He does not wait for anyone to come to him. He comes on his own initiative, for he is indeed the one who calls. He offers help – and such help!

“Come here to *me*.” Amazing! Yes, human compassion does indeed do something for those who labor and are burdened. We feed the hungry, clothe the naked, give charity, build charitable organizations, and if the compassion is really heartfelt, we also visit those who are downtrodden. But to invite them to come to one, that is something that is not so easily done. ...

⁵ Søren Kierkegaard, *Provocations*

This invitation can only be made by changing your own conditions, so they are in keeping with theirs, provided that your life is not already like theirs, as was the case with him who says, “Come here to me, all you who labor and are burdened.” This he said, and those who lived with him saw that there was not the slightest thing in his way of life that contradicts it. With the silent and faithful eloquence of action, his life expressed – even if he had never said these very words – his life expressed, “Come here to me, all you who labor and are burdened.”

“I will give you rest.” – Amazing! The words “Come here to *me*” should be understood to mean, “Remain with me, I *am* that rest.” It is not as it usually is, when the helper who says “Come here” then says “Now leave” as he explains where the particular help a person might need is to be found.... No, the helper is the help. Oh, how wonderful!

He who invites all and wants to help all treats the patient just as if he intended it for each one individually, as if each patient he had was his only patient. Ordinarily a physician must divide his help among his many patients. A physician, of course, cannot sit all day with one patient, even less have all his patients at home with him. How could he be all day with one patient without neglecting the others? The patient has the medicine the physician prescribes and uses it whenever he needs to. The physician checks on him occasionally, or the patient may visit the physician. But when the helper is the help, he remains with the patient all day long. How amazing, then, that this helper is the very one who invites all to remain with him!⁶

Elsewhere, Kierkegaard notes, “We read that Christ after his resurrection came through closed doors, where the disciples were assembled. This is sometimes mistakenly used as a picture of how eagerly Christ seeks the soul, how he can even get through the closed doors of hearts that are indifferent or hardened. But this is untrue. Rather, he stands before the door and knocks.”⁷ A better portrayal is the painting of Christ standing at a heavy wooden door – closed and overgrown – and knocking. If you look closely, there is no door knob on the outside. Because of God’s infinite love in giving us the freedom of choice, the door can only be opened from the inside.

As we focus this year on witnessing, let us thank God for the invitation we have received, and for the honor He bestows in involving us in inviting others and sharing the Good News we have received, that others may come to know the Lord for themselves. Let us further realize that the only real way to learn to effectively witness is to *do* it – I would encourage time be set aside each week for people to share their witnessing experiences and learn from them what went well and what could be done differently in the week to come.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

INTRODUCTION

Discipleship

Essence

“Am I My Brother’s Keeper?”

“None of us lives to himself...” (Romans 14:7).

Has it ever dawned on you that you are responsible spiritually to God for other people? For instance, if I allow any turning away from God in my private life, everyone around me suffers. We “sit together in the heavenly places...” (Ephesians 2:6). “If one member suffers, all the members suffer with it...” (1 Corinthians 12:26). If you allow physical selfishness, mental carelessness, moral insensitivity, or spiritual weakness, everyone in contact with you will suffer. But you ask, “Who is sufficient to be able to live up to such a lofty standard?” “Our sufficiency is from God...” and God alone (2 Corinthians 3:5).

“You shall be witnesses to Me...” (Acts 1:8). How many of us are willing to spend every bit of our nervous, mental, moral, and spiritual energy for Jesus Christ? That is what God means when He uses the word witness. But it takes time, so be patient with yourself. Why has God left us on the earth? Is it simply to be saved and sanctified? No, it is to be at work in service to Him. Am I willing to be of no value to this age or this life except for one purpose and one alone – to be used to disciple men and women to the Lord Jesus Christ? My life of service to God is the way I say “thank you” to Him for His inexpressibly wonderful salvation. Remember, it is quite possible for God to set any of us aside if we refuse to be of service to Him – “...lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified” (1 Corinthians 9:27).

– Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest*

Breakout time (divide in small groups)

Discuss the idea that you are responsible spiritually to God for other people. What does this mean? Explain why you agree or disagree with this statement, defending your answers with Biblical texts.

As a group, have people call out anything they associate with the word, “witness,” while someone records the ideas where everyone can see them (i.e., flipchart, chalkboard, whiteboard). Use a dictionary and concordance to fill in any gaps in meaning from the group exercise. Putting everything together, discuss as a group what it is to be a Christian witness. How has this changed/remained the same from the time Acts 1:8 was written? Explain.

Scripture

Read Acts 17 and answer the following questions:

- In what ways did Paul witness?
- How did his witnessing differ depending on the audience? In what ways was it the same, regardless?
- What dangers did Paul encounter, and why?
- How does this passage relate to modern-day witnessing? What can you apply to your own life and witness? Consider retelling or re-enacting the passage as it might happen today.

Read Acts 20:17-38. How did Paul feel about those to whom he witnessed?

Consider

Examine your life plans. How does witnessing fit in? If we assume the above statement to be true – that our value in this life is “to be used to disciple men and women to the Lord Jesus Christ – what needs to change?

These days, if we want to be effective..., we have to be able to discuss truth – both the truth of Scripture and the truth about God that’s philosophical in nature. How do we do that?

- *Know what you believe.* [Have a] basic understanding of sin and salvation. Take some time to expand your understanding of what “truth” is.
- *Know current thinking about God, truth, religion, etc.* [Y]ou can...get a grasp of these ideas from [surfing the internet,] watching television, or reading some magazines that talk about what’s happening in the world. Above all, the easiest place to learn about current thinking is to listen to what your unsaved friends are talking about.

Paul’s example [in Acts 17] is totally clear. Truth is too important to ignore. Current truth is too important to pass off as “ungodly” or sinful. We have to know what we believe, and infuse it into current thinking so our friends will completely understand what we’re trying to say, and why we live the way we do.

After looking at truth, and the way Paul presented it, you’ve got to ask “How did Jesus handle truth?” Since he was the Truth, wouldn’t studying Jesus present us with the best example of how to tell people the truth? Yep. Jesus was the master at presenting the truth.

– Tim Baker, *Witnessing 101*

LEADERSHIP

Story

Once there was a man who dared God to speak.

Burn the bush like You did for Moses, God ... and I will follow,
Collapse the wall like You did for Joshua, God ... and I will fight.
Still the waves like You did on Galilee, God ... and I will listen.
And so the man sat by a bush, near a wall, close to the sea, and waited for
God to speak.

And God heard the man, so God answered.
He sent fire, not for a bush, but for a church.
He brought down a wall, not of brick, but of sin.
He stilled a storm, not of the sea, but of a soul. And God waited for the man
to respond.
And He waited ... and He waited ... and waited.

But because the man was looking at bushes, not hearts; bricks and not lives,
seas and not souls, he decided that God had done nothing.
Finally he looked to God and asked, "Have You lost Your power?"
And God looked at him and said, "Have you lost your hearing?"
– Max Lucado

Scripture

Compare and contrast the above with Jonah 4 and 1 Kings 19:11-12.

Read the remainder of 1 Kings 19. What are the implications of the above
story and the scripture references to your ministry/witnessing?

Read the following Scriptures and outline the Biblical position on witnessing:
Mt 9:37-38; John 4:28-39 _____

John 14:6; Acts 4:12; 1 Tim 2:5 _____

Acts 1:8 _____

Romans 10:15 _____

Acts 4:2,31; 5:42; 8:4; 15:35 _____

Acts 2:41,47; 4:4; 11:18 _____

Read the following and identify other reasons for witnessing:

Ezekiel 3:18; 33:9 _____

John 15:8 _____

John 15:16 _____

Breakout time (divide in small groups)

Discuss what misconceptions you see in the readings. What are the dangers of such misconceptions? Identify any possible misconceptions in your ministry. What steps can you take to be sure you “hear” God when He speaks? Discuss God’s “silence.”

Identify as many different ways as possible that God “speaks” in the Bible. What are the implications for your ministry? Share ways in which God has “spoken” to you. How did you know it was God?

Discuss the idea of waiting on God to act before you do. Use Biblical texts to back up your points. On the one hand, is there ever a time where God has *not* already acted? On the other hand, is there ever a time you will be *fully* “prepared” to go witness? What is a person to do?

EVANGELISM

Essence

It's very easy to jump to conclusions, to think we've got ourselves together, and then step out and make total fools of ourselves.

Witnessing can be like that. We think we're ready...we step out to tell our friends about Christ and end up making ourselves look silly. Or we come really close to telling someone about Jesus but at the last minute chicken out and feel totally stupid. It's easy to get caught up in a method of sharing Jesus that we think will work but just doesn't, or a way of sharing Jesus that is incorrect. When we do that, we can cause some serious damage.

Telling your friends about Jesus is more than just spewing out all the truth you've been taught since you were three or all the stuff your youth pastor taught you about God. It's more than being able to answer your friends' questions and it's more than just being able to defend your beliefs.

Sharing Jesus with our friends can be more difficult than we imagine. And because it involves so many different elements, we take some crazy steps to make the whole thing seem simple. It's as if we leave important things out or overemphasize a bunch of "steps" that are easy to use, just so we can encourage more people to share their faith. When we do this, we end up with an incorrect picture of what witnessing really is.

– Tim Baker, *Witnessing 101*

Breakout time (divide in small groups)

Discuss each of the following ways Baker identifies that we try to change witnessing and in the end ruin it. Give Biblical and current examples of each:

1. God needs your help!
2. God doesn't need your help!
3. You have to know everything.
4. You've got to have a thrilling testimony.
5. God's keeping score.

Scripture

Skim through the book of Acts and identify the different witnessing styles of the following:

- Peter
- Stephen

- Philip
- Ananias (Acts 9)
- Paul
- Dorcas/Tabitha
- Barnabas
- John Mark
- Timothy
- Silas
- Priscilla and Aquila
- Apollos

Discuss others from both the Old and New Testaments. Can you identify a single witnessing “method”? What, if any, “preparation” did these Biblical witnesses undergo before entering their ministry? What are the implications for your witnessing?

Read Acts 15:36-40. This John Mark that deserted Paul was the same man that later authored the Gospel of Mark (and who was evidently reconciled to Paul, per 2 Timothy 4:11 and Colossians 4:10). What implications does this have for witnessing?

- Will you always be prepared?
- Will you always do things right?
- Can the Lord use you even as He’s still working on you?
- What significant role did Barnabas (“son of encouragement”) play?
- Should your mistakes (or those of your spiritual mentors) stop you from serving the Lord?
- With whom do you most identify in this passage at this point in your spiritual life?

SERVICE

Note

Each week focusing on service will include possible service project ideas and less “study”. Suggested projects are excerpted from *Everybody Wants to Change the World: Practical ideas for Social Justice*. You’ll want to look ahead at future service ideas, as some may take considerable preparation.

If your group is not already engaged in ongoing service, use this introductory lesson to explore the role of service in the Christian’s life and to plan future service projects.

Involve the youth in the identification of appropriate projects and discuss the need for various types of service, and how essential commitment and follow-through are in starting any given service project.

Quotable Quotes

We are known by our fruits, not by our lack of fungus or leaf rot.
– Mark Buchanan

The world can do almost anything as well as or better than the church. You need not be a Christian to build houses, feed the hungry or heal the sick. There is only one thing the world cannot do. It cannot offer grace.
– Gordon MacDonald

Scripture

Look up the following texts and note what they reveal about the example Jesus sets for us:

Matthew 4:23-25 _____

Matthew 6:1-4 _____

Matthew 10:1; 7-8 _____

Matthew 19:13-15 _____

Mark 1:35-39 _____

Mark 6:31-34 _____

Look up the following texts and note how the early church continued in service after Christ's death and resurrection:

Acts 4:32-35 _____

Acts 6:1-7 _____

Acts 9:36 _____

Acts 11:27-30 _____

Read Matthew 10:24-25. In following Jesus' example, what is one thing we can expect to encounter?

Read Mark 10:13-15. How can service / interaction with the world help us in our Christian walk?

Consider

Discuss together the role of service in the Christian church, reflecting on the introductory quotes and the texts you've just read. Make plans for how you can serve others more effectively, both individually and corporately.

Explore the ways in which service and witnessing intertwine. Discuss the possible dangers of too closely relating service with witnessing. Give Biblical examples of those who were a witness through their service. Do you find any Biblical examples that *withheld* service to those that did not accept their message?

reflections on CHRIST OUR EXAMPLE

DISCIPLESHIP

Essence

Imagine:

- Being so passionate about your friend's health that you go donate blood for a major operation she's got coming up.
- Being so concerned about your parents' stress level that you mow the lawn without them asking.
- Being so worried about your brother that you buy him lunch and just sit and listen to him talk about how his life is going.
- Being so happy about your best friend's new job waiting tables that you go there for dinner, even though you can't stand the restaurant.

Sacrifice seems impossible for many of us. Sacrifice takes time and effort. As humans we've got this natural instinct that says, *Go after your own interests first...help your friend tomorrow!*

But for Jesus, sacrifice was second nature. While people around Him were self-serving, He was constantly sacrificing. While He was preparing to die for humanity, His friends were arguing about who would get to sit next to Him in heaven. As He served, people were confused. As He was beaten, crowds of people cheered. As He was being crucified, soldiers divided up His clothes. He constantly confused people close to Him – not because He wanted to be confusing, but because He did things so selflessly that most people couldn't comprehend it.

This man, who is both God and human, who died for us, and who is our good news, also led us in how we ought to tell others about Him. Imagine that! Jesus was both the Good News and the best trainer in how to share the good news. People often talk about the way Jesus told stories to communicate truth, but Jesus was also the master at communicating truth in other ways. How did He do it? [Over the next few weeks, we'll] look at four examples from His life.

Jesus and the Rich Guy: The Art of Honesty

Mark 10:17-23 demonstrates Jesus' unparalleled ability to be honest. While on His way to a certain town, Jesus encountered a very rich young man. The guy knew who Jesus was and called Him a good teacher. Then the guy opened a can of worms and without knowing it got at the heart of one of Jesus' main themes while He was on earth – the struggle between riches and personal holiness. The man's question is basic, probably honest, and very eye-opening.

He asked, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Jesus, being the Master at answering those kinds of questions, responded to the guy with, "Go, sell everything you have, give it to the poor, and then follow me."

Here's what's really cool about what Jesus said: First, it's obvious that Jesus knew just how rich this man was. Probably not a big stretch, since the man was probably dressed very well. Jesus got at the heart of where this guy's trust was.

Second, Jesus knew just how much this man loved his stuff. Jesus might have said, "Sell everything but one hundred horses, give almost all of it to the poor, then follow me." Nah, Jesus' response to the man showed He was extremely aware of exactly where this man placed his trust.

Third, Jesus challenged this man's commitment to his religion. In their conversation, the man made it clear that he knew Jewish teachings. In fact, most historians believe that this man was probably a very good Jew. In the Jewish religion at the time, almsgiving (giving to the poor) was a very popular way to show how religious you were. Jesus' statement about giving everything that he had to the poor challenged his commitment to his religion.

But what's key in this passage is Jesus' honesty. He didn't mix words; He didn't soften the truth so the guy could handle it. He was just flat honest.

– Tim Baker, *Witnessing 101*

Breakout time (divide in small groups)

Have people list – anonymously on index cards – three things that prevent them from being honest with people. Collect the cards and discuss some of the themes.

Discuss whether there is – or even should be – a difference between our honesty and Jesus'. How is honesty related to “moral authority”?

DISCUSS: “He constantly confused people close to Him – not because He wanted to be confusing, but because He did things so selflessly that most people couldn't comprehend it.” Have you ever seen – or personally experienced – confusion over something simple because of expectations beyond face value? Looking for ulterior motives?

Scripture

There are plenty of Biblical examples of deception and even examples when being too forthright with the truth may not have been the best policy. Discuss some of these examples and the implications they hold for your witnessing. Is honesty always the best policy? Why or why not?

LEADERSHIP

Essence

Jesus and Nicodemus: The Art of Conversation

You probably memorized John 3:16 when you were little. But did you ever consider that that verse is a part of a conversation between two rulers? One a ruler of the church on earth, the other the ruler of the world. Check out John 3:1-21 and see what a strange conversation this really is....

Imagine the contrast in the worlds between Jesus, the Savior of the world, and Nicodemus, one of the major religious leaders of his time. See, the problem was that the religious leaders (Nicodemus included) didn't recognize Jesus as the Messiah, but still knew He was someone interesting.

Do we know what Nicodemus thought about Jesus? Well, we know two things for sure. First, we know what he thought of Jesus by the way he addressed Him. He called Him Rabbi, which means "teacher." Jesus had obviously gained respect as a teacher, and Nicodemus recognized that. Some people think that Nicodemus might have been speaking tongue-in-cheek and was only calling Jesus a teacher out of a fake kind of reverence. I don't think so. Nicodemus might not have understood Jesus' teachings or understood who Jesus really was, but he probably respected Him as a good teacher.

Second, we know what he thought of Jesus because he approached Jesus at night. There might be two reasons for this: avoiding the crowds that would have been around Jesus or not wanting his friends to see that he was talking to Jesus. After all, a religious leader's speaking to Jesus would have been seen as equal to his agreeing with Him. But whatever the reason, Nicodemus took a risk to talk with Jesus. Jesus honored his risky behavior with an excellent example of how to discuss truth. Here are the highlights:

1. *Jesus led Nicodemus into a deeper understanding of the born-again idea.*
He didn't hit him with the huge concepts of who He was until later in the passage. At first, Jesus just began by a simple leading response to Nicodemus's question.
2. *Jesus willingly engaged in a conversation with Nicodemus.* It's true, most of the stuff in this passage is Jesus talking, but it's conversational language. Jesus isn't preaching; He's talking...discussing...and it reads casually. That's the key element in this passage – the whole conversation thing. Jesus masterfully took Nicodemus to a place he never thought he'd go and with a person he never thought he'd have a chance to talk with.

– Tim Baker, *Witnessing 101*

Consider

Review John 3:1-21, noting the conversational style. Following the same style, discuss how you might have a conversation about how (a) Jesus is the promised Messiah; (b) God is real; (c) the Bible is the Word of God; (d) Jesus is coming again.

Note that in the discussion between Jesus and Nicodemus there was definite misunderstanding and opportunity for degeneration into debate – how do you keep from entering into debates/arguments, particularly with believers who may not believe exactly as you do (as in the case of Jesus and Nicodemus)? Discuss the different dynamics and challenges of conversations with believers versus nonbelievers. Explore the different ways Jesus approached conversations with these different groups and what lessons you can take from His example.

Brainstorm different ways to begin a conversation with someone who's not a believer: Have volunteers role play starting such conversations in various settings. Debrief the conversations, noting what was successful and what maybe didn't work.

EVANGELISM

Essence

Jesus and the Samaritan Woman: The Art of Compassion

Check out John 4:1-26. There's so much going on in this story that you've got to really get behind a lot of history to understand Jesus' compassion....

For starters, Jews and Samaritans didn't get along. In fact, they hated each other. It goes way back in history to when the Jews had land that the Samaritans wanted. They ended up fighting over it, and there'd been bad blood ever since. Most of the problem is described in 2 Kings 17, and you can read the story there if you want the details. Anyway, it's enough to say at this point that Jews and Samaritans were enemies. Culturally, Jesus would have been expected to completely ignore this woman or be extremely rude to her. He didn't do either.

Second, Jesus is God, and God can't stand adultery. He hates it. And this woman was adultery in the flesh. Her life was consumed with it. Jesus knew that and pointed it out to her. But Jesus didn't sit and discuss it with her. He didn't attempt to point out how wrong it is. She knew she was sinning, and it was enough for Jesus to point it out.

That's two strikes against her: She was a Samaritan; she was an adulterer. No doubt Jesus could wail on her. But He didn't.

Notice in this passage the way Jesus drew her into discovering who He was without being condemning. Jesus knew that her lifestyle totally clashed with God's truth, but He didn't hammer her with rules and laws. He basically just loved her with His words. That's Jesus demonstrating compassion. Because He was a Jew, He could have been hateful toward her. Because she was deeply adulterous, He could have been condemning. He didn't do either, and in the end He won the woman over.

– Tim Baker, *Witnessing 101*

Scripture

Racism, sexism, religious bigotry and many other things have been justified throughout history through Biblical misrepresentations. How could you use the following texts to correct such misrepresentations – some of which still exist today? What other texts can you think of?

Colossian 3:1-17 _____

Matthew 1:1-16 (especially verses 3 and 5) _____

Genesis 1:27 _____

Matthew 2:1-12 _____

Breakout time (divide in small groups)

Compare and contrast Jesus' "art of compassion" with the Samaritan woman with the "art of honesty" with the rich young ruler from two weeks ago. What makes the difference? How are we to make the distinction in our witnessing?

Brainstorm things that prevent us from being compassionate toward people. What practical steps can be taken to overcome these barriers to compassion?

Identify groups with whom society/culture would dictate you "shouldn't" get along – as Jews were not to get along with Samaritans and vice versa. In what ways does culture influence your religion? In what ways should your faith take precedence? How can you make this a reality? Assuming you get over all your prejudices in witnessing, what barriers still may exist in your unexpected outreach? What lessons can you glean from how Jesus overcame the Samaritan woman's surprise?

SERVICE

Essence

Jesus and the Disciples: The Art of Service

It's crunch time. A few days before He was led away to be killed, Jesus met with His disciples one last time. The plan? Simple: Eat a meal. Pray. Hang out. Then go to Gethsemane for prayer. Simple plan. Really, even with that plan no one knew what was going to happen except Jesus. He knew the complexity of the evening. He knew what was coming.

There, in the Upper Room with the disciples, Jesus demonstrated the art of service. The disciples were probably expecting Him to say all kinds of important things. They were expecting Jesus to give them final teachings about God or heaven. And they were certainly (because they'd been waiting for this one for a while now) expecting Jesus to be transformed from the suffering, persecuted Messiah to the conquering King who would prove Himself to the authorities and wipe out the opposing religious hypocrites. Instead, Jesus took an approach that totally caught them off guard. He got a basin of water and a towel, and he washed His disciples' feet.

This was an especially dirty task. Back then everyone wore sandals, and the streets were not paved. Add that up and you've got dirty, stinky feet. Isn't that an unbelievable picture to get in your mind? Dirty feet and Jesus (the Creator, the Savior) kneeling like a servant to clean them. Cleaning off the very stuff He used to make those feet.

The disciples didn't need convincing. They didn't need winning over. Jesus was demonstrating the kind of people He expected them to be. It's as if Jesus was saying, "Okay, boys. You know what to say. You know how to say it. So, now I'll show you how to live it."

Jesus did and gave the disciples the gift of service and the challenge to live it like an art form.

– Tim Baker, *Witnessing 101*

Serving

SERVICE PROJECT IDEAS

- **Give Blood.** We have a mystical relationship to blood. Literature of old tries to explain the elements of this liquid and how it gives us life, feeds our personalities and accounts for our spiritual selves. ...In the Church, we go much deeper into that mystery. We *do* believe that blood gives us life. We celebrate the blood of Jesus. Through it we have received the forgiveness of sins. Through it we have the gift of eternal life in heaven, where we will enjoy all the benefits of life in its most extravagant and pleasurable forms forever and ever. ...All this will happen because of the blood of Jesus. [Partner with a local blood bank to] organize an annual blood-bank drive at your church.... Suggest this partnership idea to your church leadership, and then help them make it happen by doing the legwork! Most local blood banks would be more than happy to help you set up a blood drive and provide your church with the resources you need to pull off this project. Some people in the congregation won't be able to give blood or may be unwilling to do so, but the majority will most likely gladly volunteer.

The physical act of giving your blood is a statement of unity with the cross of Christ and equality with the human race. It is a deed that makes us vulnerable to pain, because we care about others' pain. It is a form of giving that literally comes from within.

reflections on TESTIMONY

DISCIPLESHIP

Essence

The Compelling Majesty of His Power

“The love of Christ compels us...” (2 Corinthians 5:14).

...When we are born again by the Spirit of God, our testimony is based solely on what God has done for us, and rightly so. But that will change and be removed forever once you “receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you...” (Acts 1:8). Only then will you begin to realize what Jesus meant when He went on to say, “...you shall be witnesses to Me....” Not witnesses to what Jesus can do – that is basic and understood – but witnesses to Me....” We will accept everything that happens as if it were happening to Him, whether we receive praise or blame, persecution or reward. ...Paul said that he was gripped by the love of God and that is why he acted as he did. People could perceive him as mad or sane – he did not care. There was only one thing he lived for – to persuade people of the coming judgment of God and to tell them of “the love of Christ.” This total surrender to “the love of Christ” is the only thing that will bear fruit in your life. And it will always leave the mark of God’s holiness and His power, never drawing attention to your personal holiness.

– Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest*

We are witnesses. And like witnesses in a court, we are called to testify, to tell what we have seen and heard. And we are to speak truthfully. Our task is not to whitewash nor bloat the truth. Our task is to tell the truth. Period.

There is, however, one difference between the witness in court and the witness for Christ. The witness in court eventually steps down from the witness chair, but the witness for Christ never does. Since the claims of Christ are always on trial, court is perpetually in session, and we remain under oath. For the Christian, deception is never an option. It wasn’t an option for Jesus.

– Max Lucado, *Just Like Jesus*

Scripture

Read 2 Corinthians 5:14 in context. In what way does the love of Christ compel us? Discuss the experience of this in your own life and the implications on your witness.

Read Philippians 3. What further light does this shed on Paul's motivation in witnessing? What is *your* motivation?

Breakout time (divide in small groups)

Compare and contrast the role of Christian witness and that of a witness in court. We've read a couple different versions of Paul's testimony – what is yours?

Consider

Enact a courtroom scene in which you are called to testify regarding the claims of Christ. Further expand on the enactment by showing a scene beyond the courtroom – how is your testimony lived out?

LEADERSHIP

Essence

A testimony is just like a report. It's a story about what God has done in your life. Like last year, when you went on vacation and had an awesome time skiing in Aspen. You met some really hip movie stars and when you got back you bragged to your friends about all the fun you had while they were bored at home. You told them the testimony (story report) of your trip because something awesome happened to you, and you wanted to tell someone.

Testimonies are often used to explain the validity of things. They explain how true something is: If it's worked in your life it must work in someone else's. They also help package essential truth in a way that's easy for people to understand.

A testimony isn't a list of all the perfect things you've done, all the awesome experiences you've had with God, and all of the other people you've converted because of your experiences with Jesus. A testimony can have those elements in it, but it's not a chance for you to show off to someone who doesn't know Christ.

A testimony isn't full of words people don't understand. Don't try to impress someone with your knowledge of theological vocabulary. Avoid "sanctification," "justification," "washed in the blood," "living in the light," and other Christianese.

A testimony isn't an opportunity for you to package all of the truth you've learned growing up in church into a single speech where you tell your story and ram truth into someone's brain.

A testimony shouldn't be confusing. Your testimony should make sense to you and your best friend before you ever go out and tell someone else about it.

A testimony isn't a fabrication of things you wish you had done before you met Christ. And it's not a bunch of lies about all of the amazing things you've done since meeting Him.

Like we said earlier, a testimony is just the result of an experience that you've had with God. Just like a vacation report to your friends, a testimony gives the basics of the way you were before meeting Christ, how you met Him, and how you've lived since.

– Tim Baker, *Witnessing 101*

Breakout time (divide in small groups)

Develop a short (3-5 minute) personal testimony:

1. What were you like before you met Christ?
2. How did you meet Christ? What happened? How did you feel? What changed?
3. What has your life been like since you met Christ? What effect has Jesus had on your life? What struggles do you continue to face? [If you've been a Christian for awhile, make sure these are up-to-date examples...you can't use the same testimony from five years ago!]

Practice giving your testimony to two or three different people. Make sure the presentation is natural and doesn't feel scripted.

Discuss the activity as a group: What made you feel uncomfortable? What put you more at ease? How can you gain confidence in sharing your testimony? What makes you comfortable telling other stories, but not the story of your relationship with Christ?

EVANGELISM

Essence

As Miroslav Volf puts it, “the economy of undeserved grace has primacy over the economy of just deserts.”

From nursery school onward we are taught how to succeed in the world of ungrace. The early bird gets the worm. No pain, no gain. There is no such thing as a free lunch. Demand your rights. Get what you pay for. I know these rules well because I live by them. I work for what I earn; I like to win; I insist on my rights. I want people to get what they deserve – nothing more, nothing less.

Yet if I care to listen, I hear a loud whisper from the gospel that I did not get what I deserved. I deserved punishment and got forgiveness. I deserved wrath and got love. I deserved a debtor’s prison and got instead a clean credit history. I deserved stern lectures and crawl-on-your-knees repentance. I got a banquet spread for me.

...Weighed down by repeated failures, lost hope, a sense of unworthiness, we pull around ourselves a shell that makes us almost impervious to grace....

I know how I respond to rejection letters from magazine editors and to critical letters from readers.... I know that my self-image at the end of the day depends largely on what kind of messages I have received from other people. Am I liked? Am I loved? I await the answers from my friends, my neighbors, my family – like a starving man, I await the answers. Occasionally...I sense the truth of grace. There are times when I study the parables and grasp they are about me. I am the sheep the shepherd has left the flock to find, the prodigal for whom the father scans the horizon, the servant whose debt has been forgiven. I am the beloved one of God.

...At a seminar, [author and speaker Brennan] Manning referred to Jesus’ closest friend on earth, the disciple named John, identified in the Gospels as “the one Jesus loved.” Manning said, “If John were to be asked, ‘What is your primary identity in life?’ he would not reply ‘I am a disciple, an apostle, an evangelist, an author of one of the four Gospels,’ but rather, ‘I am the one Jesus loves.’”

What would it mean, I ask myself, if I too came to the place where I saw my primary identity in life as “the one Jesus loves”? How different would I view myself at the end of the day?

Sociologists have a theory of the looking-glass self; you become what the most important person in your life (wife, father, boss, etc.) thinks you are. How would my life change if I truly believed the Bible’s astounding words about God’s love for me, if I looked in the mirror and saw what God sees?

– Philip Yancey, *What’s So Amazing About Grace?*

Scripture

Read the following passages:

Matthew 18:21-35 _____

Matthew 20:1-16 _____

Luke 15:11-32 _____

Luke 21:1-4 _____

How does God’s view differ from the general world view in these passages?
Discuss any ways in which this difference offends our sense of “fairness.”

Read Matthew 5:1-11 noting the difference between common sense and what Oswald Chambers terms the “kingdom sense” found in this passage.

Breakout time (divide in small groups)

Starting with those listed in the passage above, list any other rules of the “world of ungrace.” How, then, do we live as Christians – showing God’s grace – in this world?

Discuss the theory of the looking-glass self. Explore different “selves” depending on who the most important person in someone’s life might be. In human relations, what is the role of perception? Now explore what your life would look like if God was most important in your life and you truly believed what the Bible says about His love for you. [As an aside, Oswald Chambers terms this “God-esteem;” consider exploring the differences between this concept and that of self-esteem.] What are the implications for your relationships with others and for your witnessing? Explain.

Quotable Quote

How deep the Father's love for us
How vast beyond all measure,
That He should give His only Son
To make this wretch a treasure.
How great the pain of searing loss
The Father turns His face away,
As wounds which mar the chosen One
Bring many sons to glory.

Behold the Man upon a cross
My sin upon His shoulders
Ashamed, I hear my mocking voice
Call out among the scoffers.
It was my sin that nailed Him there
Until it was accomplished;
His dying breath has brought me life
I know that it is finished.

I will not boast in anything,
No gifts, no power, no wisdom;
But I will boast in Jesus Christ;
His death and resurrection.
Why should I gain from His reward?
I cannot give an answer.
But this I know with all my heart
His wounds have paid my ransom.
–Stuart Townend

Serving

SERVICE PROJECT IDEAS:

- **Record the Stories.** We need to structure times with the elderly that help us, as people, regain our admiration for them. One way that we can do this is to ask the elderly to help assemble our history – to tell the stories of the past that will help us learn how we are connected to the generations that have come before us. Here are a few activities that you could do to accomplish this:

- **Create a Theme Evening.** Ask some of the older folks in your church to describe their homes of old. Involve your...group members...to draw the plan of the house as it is described. List the appliances and utilities that made their homes operate, and then draw a contrasting picture of our current homes. Other themes could include transportation, technology, kids' games or work. The idea is to get the older folks talking and sharing their memories with those in the younger generations.
- **Paint a Picture.** Ask those who have lived in your town or community for many years to tell what it was like "way back when." Ask them to paint a verbal picture of life in the good ol' days. You might even arrange a four-stop virtual tour through the town and have them explain what used to be there. ...
- **Talk About Family.** Ask the elderly to talk about their family. Plot out their family tree on a blackboard or whiteboard, going as far back as they can remember. Include where they were from, what they did for a living, the names of their children, and so on. You will develop a fascinating sense of being just a few breaths away from famous events, such as World War II.

Don't worry if the event doesn't go absolutely according to plan – the very act of sitting at the feet of the elderly will go beyond any words that you could articulate to demonstrate that you respect and honor them.

- **Leave the Church.** This idea may sound strange, but it's a serious evangelistic notion. We all need to consciously leave the security of fellow believers and put ourselves in an environment where Christ intends the Church to live. Here are several ways to help you make the first step to get outside of the church walls:

- **Volunteer in Your Community.**
- **Open Up.** Open [homes] to your neighbors. In the summer, invite them over...host a party for them...on special national occasions... As Christians, we need to be showing this kind of genuine hospitality.

In all of these endeavors, it is important to be genuine as you make friends. Remember, it is not necessary to jump into an unnatural evangelistic relationship. In time, God will allow your life to become sweet aroma and water for a thirsty heart. Let that be a natural process guided by the work of the Holy Spirit. With His guidance, it will be clear when and how to add life-giving words to your lifestyle.

One other thought: It is tempting to think that people who have different Christian beliefs do not know Jesus, but in fact this could be nothing more than a form of spiritual prejudice....

reflections on GO!

DISCIPLESHIP

Essence

His!

“They were Yours, You gave them to Me...” (John 17:6).

A missionary is someone in whom the Holy Spirit has brought about this realization: “You are not your own” (1 Corinthians 6:19). To say, “I am not my own,” is to have reached a high point in my spiritual stature. The true nature of that life in actual everyday confusion is evidenced by the deliberate giving up of myself to another Person through a sovereign decision, and that Person is Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit interprets and explains the nature of Jesus to me to make me one with my Lord, not that I might simply become a trophy for His showcase. Our Lord never sent any of His disciples out on the basis of what He had done for them. It was not until after the resurrection, when the disciples had perceived through the power of the Holy Spirit who Jesus really was, that He said, “Go” (Matthew 28:19; also see Luke 24:49 and Acts 1:8).

“If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple” (Luke 14:26). He was not saying that this person cannot be good and upright, but that he cannot be someone over whom Jesus can write the word Mine. Any one of the relationships our Lord mentions in this verse can compete with our relationship with Him. I may prefer to belong to my mother, or to my wife, or to myself, but if that is the case, then, Jesus said, “[You] cannot be My disciple.” This does not mean that I will not be saved, but it does mean that I cannot be entirely His.

Our Lord makes His disciple His very own possession, becoming responsible for him. “...You shall be witnesses to Me...” (Acts 1:8). The desire that comes into a disciple is not one of doing anything for Jesus, but of being a perfect delight to Him. The missionary’s secret is truly being able to say, “I am His, and He is accomplishing His work and His purposes through me.”

Be entirely His!

– Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest*

Scripture

Read Genesis 5:21-24. Often we think of Enoch as walking with God, but he had a family, as well. Discuss how – like Enoch – you can have earthly relationships but still be “entirely His.” What would this look like in today’s world? In your life?

Read the continuation of the above-referenced passage regarding the cost of discipleship in Luke 14:27-33. Do people really consider the cost of discipleship in the way they consider worldly endeavors before they enter into them? Can one truly know the cross they’ll have to carry before choosing to follow or, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer asserts, do we just know that the cost of *non*-discipleship is far greater? What, then, do you take from this passage?

Breakout time (divide in small groups)

Discuss what it means to be a “disciple.” Many of our translations render the Great Commission of Matthew 28:19,20 as going and “preaching” or “teaching,” but the better translation is “making disciples.” How does this change your understanding of the text? How does “making disciples” differ from preaching/teaching?

LEADERSHIP

Story

I would like to tell you a story about a group of people who called themselves fishermen. They lived in an area where there were many fish – waters all around them. In fact, the whole area was surrounded by streams and lakes and rivers just filled with fish. And the fish were hungry.

Week after week, month after month, year after year, these people who called themselves fishermen held meetings and talked about their call to be fishermen, the abundance of fish, and they passed along all the latest innovations in fishing. Year after year, they carefully defined what fishing was all about, defended fishing as a noble occupation, and declared that fishing is always the primary task of fishermen.

They constantly searched for new and better methods of fishing, and for new and better definitions of fishing. They loved such slogans as “Fishing is the task of every fisherman.” They sponsored special meetings known as “Fisherman’s Campaigns.” They went on nationwide and even worldwide tours to discuss fishing and promote fishing and hear about all the new developments and technological advances in fishing and new ways of presenting the bait to the fish that made it more attractive and alluring.

They built large, beautiful buildings called “Fishing Headquarters,” and selected some of their best fishermen to staff it. They appealed to everyone to become fishermen. There was only one thing they did not do. They didn’t fish. Ever.

In addition to organizing and holding regularly scheduled meetings, they organized a board to send out fishermen to other parts of the world where the fish were plentiful. The board appointed various committees and held many meetings to talk about fishing, defend fishing, and develop new strategies for fishing. But the committee members never went fishing.

Large, expensive training centers were built for the purpose of teaching fishermen how to fish. They offered courses on the needs of fish, the nature of fish, dealing with the different generations of fish, the psychological makeup of fish, and how to approach and feed fish. The professors all had degrees in fishology, but none of them ever went fishing. They only taught fishing. After completing the course of study, graduates were given their fishing license and sent out to do full-time fishing, some to distant waters that were filled with fish.

Many who felt the call to be fishermen responded. They were commissioned and sent to fish. But like the fishermen back home, they could talk for hours about the need for fishing, and they knew all the current developments in fishing, but they didn’t fish. They were too busy doing other things. Some said they really wanted to fish, but since they just didn’t have time, they would just furnish fishing equipment for others. Others felt that

their job was to establish a good relationship with the fish so that the fish would be more receptive to the fishermen.

After one stirring meeting on “The Necessity for Fishing,” one young fellow left the meeting and actually went fishing! He reported the next day that he caught two outstanding fish. He was honored for his excellent catch, and immediately a nationwide tour was scheduled so that he could visit all the big meetings and tell how he did it. So he quit fishing at once in order to have time to tell others about the experience. He was also placed on the Fishermen’s General Board, which consumed quite a bit of his time, so much so that he had no time at all for fishing.

Now it’s true that many of the fishermen made personal sacrifices and put up with all kinds of difficulties. Some lived near the water and had to bear the smell of dead and decaying fish every day. They were ridiculed by some who made fun of their fishermen’s clubs and for the fact that, though they claimed to be fishermen, they never fished. They wondered about those people who felt that attending weekly meetings to talk about fishing was a waste of time. After all, were they not following the Master, who said, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men”?

–Darrell W. Robinson, *People Sharing Jesus*

Breakout time (divide in small groups)

Discuss the implications of the above story or, better yet, go *fishing*...

EVANGELISM

Essence

The gospel is not at all what we would come up with on our own. I, for one, would expect to honour the virtuous over the profligate. I would expect to have to clean up my act before even applying for an audience with a Holy God. But Jesus told of God ignoring a fancy religious teacher and turning instead to an ordinary sinner who pleads, “God, have mercy.” Throughout the Bible, in fact, God shows a marked preference for “real” people over “good” people. In Jesus’ own words, “There will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.”

In one of his last acts before death, Jesus forgave a thief dangling on a cross, knowing full well the thief had converted out of plain fear. That thief would never study the Bible, never attend synagogue or church, and never make amends to all those he had wronged. He simply said, “Jesus, remember me,” and Jesus promised, “You will be with me in paradise.” It was another shocking reminder that grace does not depend on what we have done for God but rather what God has done for us.

Ask people what they must do to get to heaven and most reply, “Be good.” Jesus’ stories contradict that answer. All we must do is cry, “Help!” God welcomes home anyone who will have him and, in fact, has made the first move already. Most experts – doctors, lawyers, marriage counselors – set a high value on themselves and wait for clients to come to them. Not God. As Soren Kierkegaard put it,

When it is a question of a sinner He does not merely stand still, open his arms and say, “Come hither”; no, He stands there and waits, as the father of the lost son waited, rather He does not stand and wait, He goes forth to seek, as the shepherd sought the lost sheep, as the woman sought the lost coin. He goes – yet no, He has gone, but infinitely farther than any shepherd or any woman, He went, in sooth, the infinitely long way from being God to becoming man, and that way He went in search of sinners.

Kierkegaard puts his finger on perhaps the most important aspect of Jesus’ parables. They were not merely pleasant stories to hold listeners’ attention or literary vessels to hold theological truth. They were, in fact, the template of Jesus’ life on earth. He was the shepherd who left the safety of the fold for the dark and dangerous night outside. To his banquets he welcomed tax collectors and reprobates and whores. He came for the sick and not the well, for the unrighteous and not the righteous. And to those who betrayed him – especially the disciples, who forsook him at his time of greatest need – he responded like a lovesick father.

...If I focus on the ethics of the individual characters in the parables...I come away with a strange message indeed. Obviously, Jesus did not give the parables to teach us how to live. He gave them, I believe, to correct our

notions about who God is and who God loves.
– Philip Yancey, *What's so Amazing About Grace?*

Scripture

Read the above-reference parables in Luke 15. In what ways are they a “template of Jesus’ life on earth”? How do they serve to “correct our notions about who God is and who God loves”? What are the implications for our witness?

Breakout time (divide in small groups)

Discuss: “The gospel is not at all what we would come up with on our own.” Compile a list of all the characteristics we attribute to heroes – both real and imaginary. Now list the attributes of God and His plan of salvation. What elements can you identify that “we would [never have] come up with on our own”? How does this strengthen your faith? Your witness?

Quotable Quotes

What Have You Done Today?

You say you'll do much in the years to come, but what have you done today?
You plan to give wealth in a princely sum, but how much have you given away?
You'll heal broken hearts and dry every tear, bring to them hope and take away fear;
Carry His Word to those far and near; but what have you done today?

You say you'll be kind – after a while, but what have you done today?
The lonely and hurting wait for your smile, you promised to light up their way;
Your aim is to give truth a grander birth and to steadfast faith a deeper worth,
To carry His love to the ends of the earth, but what have you done today?

You plan to reap much in the by-and-by, but what have you sown today?
You plan to build mansions up in the sky, but what have you built today?
It's nice to dream and in visions bask, but here and now have you done your task?
The only real question that matters, I ask, is what have you done today?
– Anon

Christianity's intention is that because of grace, now as never before under the law, we shall see what a person can achieve. But instead of this we have used "grace" to prevent acting. Instead of grace being the basis of courage and mobility for action it gets applied in such a way that it even causes an unnatural obstruction. It is applied in such a way that one sinks deeper and deeper so as to require continually more and more grace. We continually run across this kind of thing: Since we are all saved by grace anyway, why should I exert myself. Let's keep clear of any kind of effort because it's all grace anyway. What a mockery! With Christ's grace we can then venture all the more intrepidly. We men, however, do it thus: Even the least little venture is foolish – since there is grace anyway.
– Søren Kierkegaard, *Provocations*

Serving

SERVICE PROJECT IDEAS

▪ **Celebrate Earth Day.** [Sit back for a moment and reflect on all the details and complexities that went into the process of the creation of the world....Yet it is curious how many Christians do not seem to care about being good steward of God’s creation....The Church has been silent for far too long on this issue. We have allowed those outside the faith to define our obligation to care for the garden. We have, in fact, withdrawn from our duty to tend it. Worse, we have often labeled people who *do* care for the earth as “liberal,” or something worse. When we care for the environment, we show our deep respect for the Creator.... When we fail to care for our planet, the world sees our treatment of Creation and unconsciously picks up the message regarding our disrespect.... Christians sometimes find it difficult to find common ground with people outside their faith. One way to come together with those who might not be Christians is to simply care for the earth by “greening” your city or community.]

...Earth Day (April 22) [provides] a way for people to focus ... attention on issues that concern our environment. [Volunteer at a local Earth Day event or organize one of your own. For more ideas, visit] websites such as www.earthday.gov, www.earthday.net and www.earthdaybags.org.

reflections on OPPORTUNITY

DISCIPLESHIP

Story

A revival can begin with one sermon.

History proves it. John Egglan had never preached a sermon in his life. Never.

Wasn't that he didn't want to, just never needed to. But then one morning he did. The snow left his town of Colchester, England, buried in white. When he awoke on that January Sunday in 1850, he thought of staying home. Who would go to church in such weather?

But he reconsidered. He was, after all, a deacon. And if the deacons didn't go, who would? So he put on his boots, hat, and coat and walked the six miles to the Methodist Church.

He wasn't the only member who considered staying home. In fact, he was one of the few who came. Only thirteen people were present. Twelve members and one visitor. Even the minister was snowed in. someone suggested they go home. Egglan would hear none of that. They'd come this far; they would have service. Besides, they had a visitor. A thirteen-year-old boy.

But who would preach? Egglan was the only deacon. It fell to him.

And so he did. His sermon lasted only ten minutes. It drifted and wandered and made no point in an effort to make several. But at the end, an uncharacteristic courage settled upon the man. He lifted his eyes and looked straight at the boy and challenged: "Young man, look to Jesus. Look! Look! Look!"

Did the challenge make a difference? Let the boy, now a man, answer. "I did look, and then and there the cloud on my heart lifted, the darkness rolled away, and at that moment I saw the sun."

The boy's name? Charles Haddon Spurgeon. England's prince of preachers.

Did Egglan know what he'd done? No.

Do heroes know when they are heroic? Rarely.

Are historic moments acknowledged when they happen?

You know the answer to that one. (If not, a visit to the manger will remind you.) We seldom see history in the making, and we seldom recognize heroes. Which is just as well, for if we knew either, we might mess up both.

But we'd do well to keep our eyes open. Tomorrow's Spurgeon might be mowing your lawn. And the hero who inspires him might be nearer than you think.

He might be in your mirror.

– Max Lucado, *When God Whispers Your Name*

Scripture

Read 1 Peter 3:15 and discuss how it relates to the above story. If you found yourself in a similar situation as Eggen, what might your message be?

Now read verses 8-17 for context. How do you understand the passage? What implications does it have for how you live your life?

Breakout time (divide in small groups)

Have members of the group describe times they felt God's leading. Discuss the results both of following God's lead and ignoring the call.

American writer John Greenleaf Whittier wrote, "For all sad words of tongue and pen, The saddest are these, 'It might have been'." Discuss the practical reality of living without regrets: What might that look like? What are the benefits? The risks?

LEADERSHIP

Essence

Fast forward from the moment Jesus called the disciples to the time He left them and went into heaven... Acts leads us into an awesome understanding of how the disciples lived after Jesus went to heaven.

Acts 1:6-11. Here's the scene: Jesus has just risen from the dead, and He's spent His time hanging with the disciples. He's been walking with them, eating with them, and spending some time getting a few last-minute things straight with them before He goes away. After Jesus said everything that He needed to, He began to rise. He floated higher and higher until the disciples couldn't see Him anymore.

So there they were. All alone. Just the disciples, the promise of the Holy Spirit, and that's about it. The disciples without Jesus probably felt like a band without their lead singer. You'd think that would have been it.

But that wasn't it. The disciples didn't quit, and they didn't give up. ...[L]ater, they were all together, both the disciples and a large crowd.

Acts 2:1-41. While they were together, a sound like a roar fell on them. They were filled with the Holy Spirit. This is where the fun began!

With the power of the Holy Spirit and the experiences they had with Jesus, the disciples were ready to go and tell others about their experience. What did these bold men do? This passage in Acts gives us a huge amount of information.

Peter gives the message of a lifetime. Jews had come to Jerusalem from all over – as far as Rome, which was about eight hundred miles away. They were there for Pentecost. And Peter, full of the Holy Spirit and the power of God, got up and preached about Jesus. Over three thousand people came to Christ that day....

These first believers imitated Jesus. They lived love just like the Savior. They did everything within their power to follow in Jesus' footsteps. We've discovered that they sometimes had amazing mess-ups, and they often had some hefty successes.

One thing we haven't mentioned is that these guys faced all kinds of anti-Jesus beliefs. In Jesus' time there were all kinds of religions and offshoots of the Jewish belief system. And after Jesus left the earth and turned things over to the disciples, more and more beliefs popped up that claimed to possess the ultimate truth. This made the disciples' jobs much more difficult. While they had to tell others about Jesus, they also had to set many people straight on what the truth really was. They had to know what the gospel was, and they had to know what other beliefs of the time were preaching in order to actively speak against the massive amount of untruths that were flying around.

These days it's no different. While Christianity continues to spread, so do false religions, false beliefs, and inaccurate truths. As you seek to live like a disciple and follow in the footsteps of Jesus, you'll no doubt encounter incorrect beliefs. You've got to be ready to face these if you're going to be effective.

– Tim Baker, *Witnessing 101*

Scripture

Read the first two chapters of Acts. Discuss what it would have been like to be part of that group at that time. We often think it would be easier if we had seen Jesus, but imagine trying to explain that someone with whom you'd walked and talked and eaten was God! Imagine the hopes and dreams the disciples had wrapped up in Jesus and their disappointment; the closeness of their communion and initial sense of loss.

Read the following passages and discuss how the disciples addressed false beliefs of their times:

- Acts 8:18-24
- Acts 15:1-31
- Acts 17:1-4
- Acts 17:16-34
- Acts 19:1-7
- Acts 19:8-10
- Acts 19:23-20:2
- 1 Cor. 1:10-17
- 1 Corinthians 8
- 1 Timothy 4:1-6
- Revelation 2-3

Breakout time (divide in small groups)

Discuss tangible ways you can “follow in Jesus’ footsteps” even if you have “amazing mess-ups.”

Is it important to study other beliefs? Is this necessary, or is it only necessary to be truly grounded in your own beliefs? Discuss the advantages/disadvantages, benefits/risks involved.

Discuss the idea of truth. Many claim to have it while others claim there is no such thing as absolute truth. What do you believe, and how can you convey this in love? Seventh-day Adventists are fond of saying they “have the truth.” What is the implication for one to whom you’re witnessing that believes differently? What are the advantages/disadvantages of such a statement? What is meant by it? What role does Jesus’ statement in John 14:6 play in our understanding of what – or *who* – truth is?

Discuss the importance of genuine *listening* to what others have to say about their beliefs. How can listening help you discern what it is a person is looking for? What Biblical examples can you find of the importance of listening in evangelism?

Discuss the following four characteristic Baker lists regarding the disciples' and their implications in witnessing: (1) The disciples told people about the love of God; (2) The disciples demonstrated the love of God; (3) The disciples trusted Christ; (4) The disciples were very, very human.

EVANGELISM

Essence

There are a few stories in the Bible where everything turns out right. This is one. It has three characters.

The first is Philip – a disciple in the early church who had a penchant for lost people. One day he was instructed by God to go to the road that leads to Gaza from Jerusalem. It was a desert road. He went. When he arrived he came upon a ruler from Ethiopia.

Must have been a bit intimidating for Philip. It would be similar to your hopping on a motor scooter and following the secretary of the treasury. At a stoplight you notice he is reading the Bible, and you volunteer your services.

That is what Philip did.

“Do you understand what you are reading?”

“How can I unless someone explains it to me?”

And so Philip did. They have a Bible study in the chariot. The study is so convicting that the Ethiopian is baptized that day. And then they separate. Philip goes one way, and the Ethiopian goes another. The story has a happy ending. Philip teaches, the Ethiopian obeys, and the gospel is sent to Africa.

But that’s not all the story. Remember I said there were three characters. The first was Philip; the second was the Ethiopian. Did you see the third? There is one. Read these verses and take note.

“An angel of the Lord said to Philip, ‘Get ready and go south....’ So Philip got ready and went” (Acts 8:26-27).

“The Spirit said to Philip, ‘Go to that chariot and stay near it.’ So...Philip ran toward the chariot” (Acts 9:29-30).

The third character? God! God sent the angel. The Holy Spirit instructed Philip; God orchestrated the entire moment! He saw this godly man coming from Ethiopia to worship. He saw his confusion. So he decided to resolve it.

He looked in Jerusalem for a man he could send. He found Philip.

Our typical response when we read these verses is to think Philip was a special guy. He had access to the Oval Office. He carried a first-century pager that God doesn’t pass out anymore.

But don’t be too quick. In a letter to Christians just like us, Paul wrote, “Live by following the Spirit” (Gal. 5:16).

“The true children of God are those who let God’s Spirit lead them” (Rom. 8:14).

– Max Lucado, *When God Whispers Your Name*

Breakout time (divide in small groups)

What does it mean to let God's Spirit lead you? What would your life look like if you truly did this on a regular basis? What would be different? What's keeping this from happening?

DISCUSS: Perhaps Christians are scared to ask for the Holy Spirit or follow His leading because they've read the Bible and *know* how the Spirit can turn their lives upside down.

SERVICE

Quotable Quote

We all long for heaven where God is, but we have it in our power to be happy with Him at this very moment. Being happy with Him now means loving as He does, helping like He helps, giving as He gives, serving as He serves, rescuing as He rescues, being with Him twenty-four hours a day – touching Him in His distressing disguise.

–Mother Teresa

Serving

SERVICE PROJECT IDEAS

- **Local Food Drive.** Shelters and kitchens have to find a massive amount of food every day to supply their pantries and fridges. Yet there is a very simple way to help these organizations with their food needs.

...Contact two or three local organizations that provide a food service to the hungry in your town. Ask them what kinds of [nonperishable] food items they would like to have stocked on their shelves regularly.... Put together a simple shopping bag made of canvas that has a community statement on the one side (for example, “Shoppers Against Hunger in Peoria”), and ... logos of several businesses in town that have agreed to join the effort [on the other] (this is how you cover the cost of producing the canvas shopping bags...).

Next, print out a short list of items that someone could pick up while doing his or her regular weekly shopping. Make it really double – three cans of soup, two cans of vegetables, two cans of fruit. Try to figure out items that would cost between \$5 and \$15. Put the list in the bag.

Approach several grocery stores in town and ask if you can set up shop outside their stores [during times that work] for your team.... Post a sign at your table that will catch the attention of local shoppers. Ask folks to pick up a canvas bag when they enter the shop and to fill it with the items that are listed inside. Explain that any amount they purchase will help – whether it is one, two or all of the items listed in the bag.

When the shoppers come outside, they can simply drop the bag off at the table (remember, the bags are reusable). Offer each shopper a little thank-you sticker or pin that has your logo on it, and invite people to drop by each time they come shopping. You will be surprised to find out how many people like to add this act of kindness to their regular shopping routines. Arrange with the shelters or soup kitchens to have their staff come and pick up the food at the end of each gathering-in day. Also, ask these organizations to provide you with a little informational display for your table so that local folks can learn about the variety of shelters or soup kitchens you are supplying.

This is a win-win situation. Local shelters get a good supply of staples, shoppers get that “feel good” sensation every time they are at the grocery store, and the local stores get more sales. You will even find that some grocery stores will agree to supply some of the food at a discount or that they will agree to match part of your donors’ purchase totals.

reflections on TELLING OTHERS

DISCIPLESHIP

Essence

[There was] a nineteenth-century Sunday school teacher who led a Boston shoe clerk to Christ. The teacher's name you've never heard: Kimball. The name of the shoe clerk he converted you have: Dwight Moody.

Moody became an evangelist and had a major influence on a young preacher named Frederick B. Meyer. Meyer began to preach on college campuses and while doing so, he converted J. Wilbur Chapman. Chapman became involved in the YMCA and arranged for a former baseball player named Billy Sunday to come to Charlotte, North Carolina, for a revival. A group of Charlotte community leaders were so enthusiastic afterward that they planned another campaign and brought Mordecai Hamm to town to preach. In that revival a young man named Billy Graham yielded his life to Christ.

Did the Boston schoolteacher have any idea what would become of his conversation with the shoe salesman? No, he...had a chance to help Jesus journey into another heart, so he did.

– Max Lucado, *And the Angels Were Silent*

Scripture

Read the following passages and discuss the role individuals play in bringing others to Christ:

- John 1:35-37
- John 1:40-42
- John 1:45-46
- Acts 8:26-38

Read the following passages and discuss the role the community of believers plays in *supporting* an individual's decision for Christ, even if they didn't play a process in leading the person to Christ:

- Mark 2:13-17
- Acts 9:10-18
- Acts 9:26-28

From the following passages, what should be a natural response to the gospel? Is this your response? Is Romans 1:16 true of your life?

- John 4: 28-30
- Mark 5:18-20

Breakout time (divide in small groups)

Have group members trace their spiritual family tree as best possible. Discuss the roles individuals played in your accepting Christ. Who in your life could you be helping "Jesus journey into [their] heart"?

LEADERSHIP

Essence

Respond with Gentleness

But dedicate your lives to Christ as Lord. Always be ready to defend your confidence [in God] when anyone asks you to explain it. However, make your defense with gentleness and respect. – 1 Peter 3:15

When you're challenged or asked about your faith, you shouldn't respond arrogantly. You shouldn't be defiant or forceful, as if you were tearing trees out of the ground. Rather, you should respond with fear and humility, as if you were standing before God and answering him. If you were summoned before kings and princes and had prepared yourself well in advance with Scripture, you might think, "Just wait, I'll answer correctly." But the devil will grab the sword out of your hands and give you a shove. You will be disgraced and find out you put your armor on in vain. He can even take your best verses from your hands so that you can't use them, even though you have them memorized. God allows this to happen to subdue your arrogance and make you humble.

So if you don't want this to happen, you must stand in fear and not rely on your own power. Rely instead on what Christ promised: "When they hand you over [to the authorities], don't worry about what to say or how to say it. When the time comes, you will be given what to say. Indeed, you're not the ones who will be speaking. The Spirit of your Father will be speaking through you" (Matthew 10:19-20). When you have to give an answer, you ought to arm yourself with Scripture. But don't pound it home with a proud spirit. Otherwise, God will tear the verse from your mouth and from your memory even if you were armed with all the verses beforehand. Therefore, caution is needed here. But if you are prepared, you can answer princes, leaders, and even the devil himself. Just make sure you aren't speaking insignificant human words, but the Word of God.

– Martin Luther, *By Faith Alone*

Scripture

Read Matthew 4 and discuss Christ's response to Satan's temptations in the wilderness. If there was anyone that *could* have "pounded it home," it was Jesus...

Breakout time (divide in small groups)

Discuss the notion of the Word as a “two-edged sword” in light of the above. Does this mean the Word is a “weapon” to be used against people? Explain. (Consider cross-referencing Revelation 10:9-11.)

DISCUSS: The Gospel is not a debate or argument to be “won.” (Cross-reference Acts 10:8-9.) What does it say about God when His followers engage in debates/arguments about Him or the truth He has revealed? Does this help or hurt your witness (even if you “win”)? Explain. How can you keep yourself from engaging in such debate/argument?

Consider

Research Martin Luther’s life – if anyone knew what it was to have to answer to authorities for his faith, it was Luther!

EVANGELISM

Story

My family did something thoughtful for me last night. They had a party in my honor – a surprise birthday party. Early last week I told [my wife] Denalyn not to plan anything except a nice, family evening at a restaurant. She listened only to the restaurant part. I was unaware that half a dozen families were going to join us.

In fact, I tried to talk her into staying at home. “Let’s have the dinner on another night,” I volunteered. Andrea had been sick. Jenna had homework, and I’d spent the afternoon watching football games and felt lazy. Not really in a mood to get up and clean up and go out. I thought I’d have no problem convincing the girls to postpone the dinner. Boy was I surprised! They wouldn’t think of it. Each of my objections was met with a united front and a unanimous defense. My family made it clear – we were going out to eat.

Not only that, we were leaving on time. I consented and set about getting ready. But to their dismay, I moved too slowly. We were a study in contrasts. My attitude was *why hurry?* My daughters’ attitude was *hurry up!* I was ho-hum. They were gung-ho. I was content to stay. They were anxious to leave. To be honest, I was bewildered by their actions. They were being uncharacteristically prompt. Curiously enthused. Why the big deal? I mean, I enjoy a night out as much as the next guy, but Sara giggled all the way to the restaurant.

Only when we arrived did their actions make sense. One step inside the door and I understood their enthusiasm. SURPRISE! No wonder they were acting differently. They knew what I didn’t. They had seen what I hadn’t. They’d already seen the table and stacked the gifts and smelled the cake. Since they knew about the party, they did everything necessary to see that I didn’t miss it.

Jesus does the same for us. He knows about THE PARTY. In one of the greatest chapters in the Bible, Luke 15, he tells three stories. Each story speaks of something lost and of something found. A lost sheep. A lost coin. And a lost son. And at the end of each one, Jesus describes a party, a celebration. The shepherd throws the party for the lost-now-found sheep. The housewife throws a party because of the lost-now-found coin. And the father throws a party in honor of his lost-now-found son.

Three parables, each with a party. Three stories, each with the appearance of the same word: happy....

The point is clear. Jesus is happiest when the lost are found. For him, no moment compares to the moment of salvation. For my daughter the rejoicing began when I got dressed and in the car and on the road to the party. The same occurs in heaven. Let one child consent to be dressed in righteousness and begin the journey home and heaven pours the punch, strings the streamers, and throws the confetti. “There is joy in the presence of the angels of God when one sinner changes his heart and life” (v. 10).

...And so my challenge to you is simple. Ask God to help you have his

eternal view of the world. Every person you meet has been given an invitation to dinner. When one says yes, celebrate! And when one acts sluggish as I did last night, do what my daughters did. Stir him up and urge him to get ready. It's almost time for the party, and you don't want him to miss it.

– Max Lucado, *Just Like Jesus*

Breakout time (divide into small groups)

If we had the same kind of view of heaven that the daughters in the above story had about the party, how would our witness change? What tangible things can you do in the week ahead to keep this view and reflect it in your witness?

What role do preconceived notions of how others will respond to your message play in your witness? How do you talk yourself out of telling others the Good News? What are some things you can do to address these barriers?

SERVICE

Quotable Quotes

When people say they have no need of God they usually mean that they are quite happy without God. What they fail to realize is that our greatest need is not 'happiness' but 'forgiveness.'

We all need forgiveness. Without it we are in serious trouble. For God is not only our loving Father; He is also a righteous judge.

-Nicky Gumbel, *Why Jesus?*

Christ has no hands but our hands
To do His work today;
Christ has no feet but our feet
To lead men in His way;
Christ has no tongue but our tongue
To tell men how He died;
Christ has no help but our help
To bring them to His side.

- Anon

Christ has no body now but yours,
No hands, no feet, on earth but yours.

Yours are the eyes through which he looks
With compassion on this world.

Yours are the feet
With which he walks to do good.

Yours are the hands
With which he blesses all the world.

Yours are the hands, yours are the feet
Yours are the eyes, you are his body.

Christ has no body now on earth but yours.

-attributed to St Therese of Lisieux

Serving

SERVICE PROJECT IDEAS:

- **Go Tell the News.** [Each year, thousands of local church members take part in various short, international and cross-cultural trips. ...Jesus sent His disciples on short-term missions trips (see Luke 10). So if it worked for the Master, it can work for us too!]

A huge benefit of going overseas and serving people in some capacity is its life-changing value to the people who participate. Many pastors and church leaders are deeply committed to these cross-cultural excursions for their congregations for no other reason than they light a fire inside their church members. A pastor-friend of ours says it is *the* key to his discipleship program and that it would be the church's last budget item to go.

Going on short-term evangelism trips can provide excellent opportunities for people to sharpen their commitment, gain courage and experience God's faithfulness in their lives. Although we must be careful not to fall into the trap of thinking that we can only do evangelism in a foreign land, these kinds of international trips can be powerful. We regularly hear stories about people who come back from these trips with a new energy. They return revitalized and excited....Here are a few organizations that you could partner with to take evangelism on the road:

- **Youth With A Mission (YWAM).** www.ywam.org
- **Youth for Christ.** www.yfc.net
- **Vacation With a Purpose.** http://www.hppc.org/pages/outreach_vwap (one such program found at Highland Park Presbyterian Church website)
- **Bridge Builders.** www.bridgebuilders.org
- **Discover the World.** www.discovertheworld.org
- **NieuCommunities.** www.nieucommunities.org

reflections on SALT

DISCIPLESHIP

Essence

[E]ncountering our passionate God faces us with an even bigger challenge. He calls the church to live out his passion in the world around, modeling his love and justice not just in our relationships together as Christians but also through our commitment to those in need. He calls us to share his priorities in embracing a hurting world, treating the most unlovely of people with dignity and affirmation. He challenges us to step outside the comfortable safety of what is familiar to us. He calls us to risk sharing in his zeal for love and justice to be worked out in society, investing into building a sense of community amongst people who are very alone.

When faced with all of this, it is understandable that we might be tempted to retreat into just pursuing our personal lives. Maybe it is all a bit daunting, or our individual sphere of influence seems too limited. However, it is worth remembering that one snowflake on its own melts on the cheek but a snowstorm can stop the traffic! In other words, together with each other and God we can make a difference. The challenge and the wonder of encountering a God with passion is that we can never truly be the same again.

– Fran Beckett

Scripture

Read the following New Testament references to salt and believers. Discuss what they mean, and the significance of salt.

- Matthew 5:13
- Mark 9:50
- Luke 14:34-35
- Colossians 4:2-6

Use a concordance or topical Bible to find other references to salt. You should see references to a “covenant of salt,” the use of salt in offerings, salt as healing, and salt as destruction. How does this fuller understanding inform what Jesus says about us “being salt”?

Breakout time (divide into small groups)

Identify your “safety zone.” What do you need to do to step out of this safety zone? What does it look like for “his zeal for love and justice to be worked out in society”?

How do you build “a sense of community amongst people who are very alone”? Be sure to list some concrete, tangible actions.

What do you find “daunting”? What tempts you “to retreat into just pursuing your personal life”? Discuss tangible ways to address this.

Discuss the snowflake analogy and its parallel to the Biblical notion of salt.

How do these ideas speak to a corporate role for the body of believers beyond an individual role? Discuss the idea of “balance” in each of these analogies – the danger of too little or too much, but the benefit of just the right amount. Identify some tangible corporate actions your group can take in working out God’s love and justice in your community.

LEADERSHIP

Essence

Mark it down. God's greatest creation is not the flung stars or the gorged canyons; it's his eternal plan to reach his children. Behind his pursuit of us is the same brilliance behind the rotating seasons and the orbiting planets. Heaven and earth know no greater passion than God's personal passion for you and your return. Through holy surprises he has made his faithfulness clear.

Noah saw it as the clouds opened and the rainbow appeared. Abraham felt it as he placed his hand on aging Sarah's belly. Jacob found it through failure. Joseph experienced it in prison. Pharaoh heard it through Moses.

"Let my people go."

But Pharaoh refused. As a result, he was given a front-row seat in the arena of divine devotion. Water became blood. The day became night. Locusts came. Children died. The Red Sea opened. The Egyptian army drowned.

Listen to these seldom read but impassioned words of Moses as he speaks to the Israelites.

Nothing like this has ever happened before! Look at the past, long before you were even born. Go all the way back to when God made humans on the earth, and look from one end of heaven to the other. Nothing like this has ever been heard of! No other people have ever heard God speak from a fire and have still lived. But you have. No other god has ever taken for himself one nation out of another. But the Lord your God did this for you in Egypt, right before your own eyes. He did it with tests, signs, miracles, war, and great signs, by his power and strength. [ref. Exodus 15]

Moses' message? God will change the world to reach the world. God is tireless, relentless. He refuses to quit.

– Max Lucado, *And the Angels Were Silent*

Scripture

Read Psalm 136. Discuss the juxtaposition of God's many acts and the repeated refrain, "His love endures forever."

Breakout time (divide into small group)

Brainstorm the many Biblical examples in which God “changed the world to reach the world.” Can you think of any post-Biblical examples? If this is what God is willing to do to reach the world, what is our role? What implications does this have on your witness?

Discuss your response to:

- flung stars
- gorged canyons
- God’s eternal plan for salvation

How can your response to God’s more tangible works influence your response to His more intangible plan for salvation? I have a friend who is a definite agnostic and highly skeptical about the notion of God, but he tells me that when he looks at the expanse of the ocean and the far-off horizon, it’s the only time he entertains the idea that God might exist. For him, nothings else does that – not mountain, not stars – but when he contemplates the ocean, he’s not sure how else that could happen except for God. How do you take individuals’ responses to such tangibles of God’s creation and incorporate that into your witness?

EVANGELISM

Essence

Matthew doesn't tell us why the people refused to let the blind men get close to Jesus – but it's easy to figure it out. They want to protect him. He's on a mission, a critical mission. The future of Israel is at stake. He is an important man with a crucial task. He hasn't time for indigents on the side of the road.

Besides, look at them. Dirty. Loud. Obnoxious. Embarrassing. Don't they have any sense of propriety? Don't they have any dignity? These things must be handled in the proper procedure. First talk to Nathanael who talks to John who talks to Peter who then decides if the matter is worth troubling the Master or not.

But despite their sincerity, the disciples were wrong.

And so, by the way, are we when we think God is too busy for little people or too formal for poor protocol. When people are refused access to Christ by those closest to him, the result is empty, hollow religion. Ugly religion.

A striking parallel to this occurred in a San Antonio hospital.

Paul Loetz took a bad fall that left him with a punctured lung, broken ribs, and internal bruising. Lying in an emergency room, barely conscious, he probably thought things couldn't get much worse.

They did.

As he looked up from his hospital bed, the two doctors responsible for his care began arguing over who would get to put a tube into his crushed chest. The argument became a shoving match and one doctor threatened to have the other removed by security police.

"Please, somebody save my life," Loetz pleaded as doctors fought over him.

The two doctors were arguing over procedure. While they were debating, two other physicians assumed responsibility for the patient and saved his life.

Hard to believe isn't it? Needs ignored while opinions are disputed? Yet it happens – even in the church. I got a call this week from a man who listens to my radio program. He grew up in a non-Christian home. He works, however, with two Christians of two denominations. I thought it strange he called me when he had Christian coworkers. Then he told me, "One says this and one says that. All I want to do is find Jesus."

It happens today.

It happens when a church spends more time discussing the style of its sanctuary than it does the needs of the hungry. It happens when the brightest minds of the church occupy themselves with dull controversies rather than majestic truths. It happens when a church is known more for its stance on an issue than its reliance upon God.

– Max Lucado, *And the Angels Were Silent*

Scripture

Read the following passages and discuss God’s break from “protocol.” What other Biblical examples can you think of? How would life – even salvation – be different if God stood on “protocol”? Explain.

- John 3:1-21
- John 4:1-26
- John 12:1-8
- 1 Samuel 16:1-13
- 2 Samuel 6:14-16, 20-23

Breakout time (divide into small groups)

Discuss what barriers we erect that might prevent people from getting to God. What can we do to tear down these barriers? What are the reasons behind these barriers? If there’s some grain of goodness in them, how do we keep *that* while eliminating the erroneous parts?

EXAMPLE: “God is a God of order...” While I’m not sure anyone disputes this, it is often used to prescribe a certain form of “reverential” worship. The idea comes from 1 Corinthians 14:33, but the affirmative part of this verse is that God is a God of *peace*, which has nothing to do with how this verse is often misused. If we look at the picture of worship in heaven we’re given in Revelation, this would certainly seem to be “confusion” or “disorder” in many minds, so the question becomes whose definition of “order” we’re using, and is it what the Bible is saying in this verse or in its fuller revelation? How, then, do we keep the Biblical notion and get rid of the human “protocol” we’ve built around it?

In what ways do we argue over procedure? How much more serious when eternal life is involved than merely the temporal illustration given above (which certainly seems serious enough)!

Is your local church “known more for its stance on an issues than its reliance upon God”? What about the larger Seventh-day Adventist church? Explain. What tangible steps can you take to rely more on God and/or live that reliance in a way the world sees as more prevalent than the church’s stance on particular issues/doctrines?

Consider

If someone “just wants to find Jesus,” would they feel comfortable coming to you? Why/why not? Identify anything else that might be in the way and *get rid of it!*

SERVICE

Quotable Quote

While women weep as they do now, I'll fight;
while little children go hungry as they do now, I'll fight;
while men go to prison, in and out, in and out, I'll fight;
while there yet remains one dark soul without the light of God,
I'll fight – I'll fight to the very end!
– General William Booth, founder Salvation Army, in his last speech

Serving

SERVICE PROJECT IDEAS

- **Write Letters.** Many offenders are shipped to prisons far from their families and have no contact with friends for the duration of their sentence. Over time, many of their friends drop away, leaving them feeling empty and alone. Perhaps you could step in to fill that void.
...As with the other projects involving prisoners, you should approach writing letters to prisoners with wisdom, caution, and care. One excellent organization that you and your church could partner with in this effort is Prison Fellowship Ministries' Pen Pal ministry.... [T]he Pen Pal ministry provides a safe and accountable means by which you can correspond with those prisoners who have been isolated from family and friends. Prison Fellowship Ministries provides an information guide called "Visit Prison in an Envelope" that outlines who should or should not participate in the program and what to do when problems – such as attempted scams, romantic overtures, and other manipulations – occur.
If you or your friends choose to correspond with an inmate, make sure that you can make at least a minimal commitment – say, one letter a month. Meet together with your friends and talk about what you hope to do, and then ask everyone to write his or her first letter right there on the spot. As you receive responses from the inmates, pray together as a small group for these people who have to live away from their families and in conditions that are less than dignifying.
Encourage people in your group to offer Bible study materials to the prisoners. Those prisoners who already have a relationship with the Lord will appreciate your sensitivity in helping them grow spiritually. Others who may never have taken a step toward Christ may find the awful life of prison a nudge toward God. *One word of caution:* Your intention should be to love and befriend prisoners, not necessarily to "win their souls" (although that would be great). Prisoners are likely to be turned off if they sense your letters are merely a method of evangelism.

reflections on FRIENDS

DISCIPLESHIP

Story

Some years ago, I was on a campaign in Hawaii. (Hey, somebody has to go to those desolate places!) My job was to go door-to-door and invite people to our nightly meetings. Most of the folks were kind but not too interested. Though no one was rude, no one asked us in either. Then we came upon a lady of grace who is not mentioned in Scripture only because she was born two millennia too late.

I don't know her name, but I remember her presence – and her presents.

She was a wisp of a lady.... Shoulders hunched by the years. A woman of modest means, she worked as a maid at one of the many hotels that dot the beach. When she learned we were sharing Christ, she insisted we come into her house and see how she was trying to influence her coworkers. Into a back room we went. In it was a large table covered with decoupage material. Glue. Paint. Wooden frames.

But most of the space was taken up by pieces of wood that were carved to look like an open wooden book.

She explained that she couldn't read, so it would be difficult for her to teach. She explained that she had little income, so it would be impossible to give money. But somewhere she had learned this craft and was now using it to introduce her faith to her friends. Her plan was simple. She took the wooden book and on one side of it pasted a Polaroid picture of her friend. On the other she put a Bible verse.

Her rationale? People love to see a picture of themselves. Most of her friends were simple folks with few wall decorations. Here was a way to hang a Bible verse on their wall where they would see it every day. Would something come of it? You never know.

But God does. God uses tiny seeds to reap great harvests. It is on the backs of donkeys he rides – not steeds or chariots – just simple donkeys.

If I had asked my questions to the Hawaiian lady she would have answered, “He always needs us. We are his mouth. We are his hands.” I can see her blush, honored that her gifts would be chosen by a king.
– Max Lucado, *And the Angels Were Silent*

Breakout time (divide into small groups)

Discuss the honor of being chosen by a king to present His message – to be His mouth, His hands. How does this idea impact your witness?

What are your gifts? How are you using them to share Christ? Brainstorm new ways you could be using your gifts in helping other find Him.

Brainstorm creative ways to reach your friends.

LEADERSHIP

Essence

Why would Jesus, on his first journey, take his followers to a party? Didn't they have work to do? Didn't he have principles to teach? Wasn't his time limited? How could a wedding fit with his purpose on earth?

Why did Jesus go to the wedding?

The answer? It's found in the second verse of John 2. "Jesus and his followers were also invited to the wedding."

When the bride and groom were putting the guest list together, Jesus' name was included. And when Jesus showed up with a half-dozen friends, the invitation wasn't rescinded. Whoever was hosting this party was happy to have Jesus present.

"Be sure to put Jesus' name on the list," he might have said. "He really lightens up a party."

Jesus wasn't invited because he was a celebrity. He wasn't one yet. The invitation wasn't motivated by his miracles. He'd yet to perform any. Why did they invite him?

I suppose they liked him.

Big deal? I think so. I think it's significant that common folk in a little town enjoyed being with Jesus. I think it's noteworthy that the Almighty didn't act high and mighty. The Holy One wasn't holier-than-thou. The One who knew it all wasn't a know-it-all. The One who made the stars didn't keep his head in them. The One who owns all the stuff of earth never strutted it.

Never. He could have. Oh, how he could have!

He could have been a name dropper: *Did I ever tell you of the time Moses and I went up on the mountain?*

He could have been a showoff: *Hey, want me to beam you into the twentieth century?*

He could have been a smart aleck: *I know what you're thinking. Want me to prove it?*

He could have been highbrow and uppity: *I've got some property on Jupiter...*

Jesus could have been all of these, but he wasn't. His purpose was not to show off but to show up. He went to great pains to be as human as the guy down the street. He didn't need to study, but he still went to the synagogue. He had no need for income, but he still worked in the workshop. He had known the fellowship of angels and heard the harps of heaven, yet he still went to parties thrown by tax collectors. And upon his shoulders rested the challenge of redeeming creation, but he still took time to walk ninety miles from Jericho to Cana to go to a wedding.

As a result, people liked him. Oh, there were those who chaffed at his claims. They called him a blasphemer, but they never called him a braggart. They accused him of heresy, but never arrogance. He was branded as a radical, but never called unapproachable.

There is no hint that he ever used his heavenly status for personal gain. Ever. You just don't get the impression that his neighbors grew sick of his haughtiness and asked, "Well, who do you think made you God?"

His faith made him likable, not detestable. Would that ours would do the same!

Where did we get the notion that a good Christian is a solemn Christian? Who started the rumor that the sign of a disciple is a long face? How did we create this idea that the truly gifted are the heavy-hearted?

May I state an opinion that may raise an eyebrow? May I tell you why I think Jesus went to the wedding? I think he went to the wedding to – now hold on, hear me out, let me say it before you heat the tar and pluck the feathers – I think Jesus went to the wedding to have fun.

Think about it. It's been a tough season. Forty days in the desert. No food or water. A standoff with the devil. A week breaking in some greenhorn Galileans. A job change. He's left home. It hasn't been easy. A break would be welcome. Good meal with some good wine and some good friends...well, it sounds pretty nice.

So off they go.

His purpose wasn't to turn the water to wine. That was a favor for his friends.

His purpose wasn't to show his power. The wedding host didn't even know what Jesus did.

His purpose wasn't to preach. There is no record of a sermon.

Really leaves only one reason. Fun. Jesus went to the wedding because he liked the people, he liked the food, and heaven forbid, he may have even wanted to swirl the bride around the dance floor a time or two. (After all, he's planning a big wedding himself. Maybe he wanted the practice?)

So, forgive me, Deacon Drydust and Sister Somberheart. I'm sorry to rain on your dirge, but Jesus was a likable fellow. And his disciples should be the same. I'm not talking debauchery, drunkenness, and adultery. I'm not endorsing compromise, coarseness, or obscenity. I am simply crusading for the freedom to enjoy a good joke, enliven a dull party, and appreciate a fun evening. Maybe these thoughts catch you by surprise. They do me. It's been awhile since I pegged Jesus as a party lover. But he was. His foes accused him of eating too much, drinking too much, and hanging out with the wrong people! (See Matt. 11:19.) I must confess: It's been awhile since I've been accused of having too much fun. How about you?

We used to be good at it. What has happened to us? What happened to clean joy and loud laughter? Is it our neckties that choke us? Is it our diplomas that dignify us? Is it the pew that stiffens us?

– Max Lucado, *When God Whispers Your Name*

Scripture

Find different references to parties (feasts, banquets, special celebrations) in the Bible. Discuss what differentiates those in which Jesus did or will participate and those that He wouldn't have "approved" of. What makes the difference? Discuss the fact that He was criticized, regardless, for the ones he went to while on earth. Discuss the fact that you're not God and, therefore, realistically probably not as strong a moral agent as He was even in human form. What should you take into account in deciding whether or not to attend a given party? Do the benefits outweigh the potential risks?

Contrast the charges against John the Baptist and Jesus in Luke 7:33-34. What example are we to take from these two different approaches, both of God? What is the lesson to be learned of people criticizing either path? Does this give us license to do whatever we please, simply discounting criticism? Explain.

Read the following passages that instruct believers to "have nothing to do with" certain people. In light of the context and the example we have in Jesus, are we admonished to have nothing to do with nonbelievers or those that call themselves believers but do not act accordingly? Explain.

- 2 Timothy 3:1-5
- Titus 3: 10

Breakout time (divide into small groups)

Think about your ideal best friend, then discuss the following as a group, compiling the characteristics of a composite ideal best friend:

- Describe the ideal best friend – what are they like; what do they do for fun; how do they treat you; how often do you spend time together; etc.
- Share times when someone was a really good friend to you and what it was that *made* them a good friend.
- Brainstorm definitions of friendship.

Read John 15:12-14. In light of what you discussed as a group and the Biblical teaching on friendship, how can you be a better friend? (Be sure to identify some tangible ways to do this in the week ahead.) What implications does this have for your witness?

Consider

Have a party at church or off site and invite your friends. In the planning, be sure to find ways to keep it a party that doesn't compromise your witness, while at the same time making it attractive to your friends that don't attend church.

EVANGELISM

Essence

Sometimes God is so touched by what he sees that he gives us what we need and not simply that for which we ask.

It's a good thing. For who would have ever thought to ask God for what he gives? Which of us would have dared to say: "God, would you please hang yourself on a tool of torture as a substitution for every mistake I have ever committed?" and then have the audacity to add: "And after you forgive me, could you prepare me a place in your house to live forever?"

And if that wasn't enough: "And would you please live within me and protect me and guide me and bless me with more than I could ever deserve?"

Honestly, would we have the chutzpah to ask for that? No, we, like the friends [in Mark 2], would have only asked for the small stuff.

We would ask for little things like a long life and a healthy body and a good job. Grand requests from our perspective, but from God's it's like taking the [scooter] when he offers the limo.

So, knowing the paralytic didn't know enough to ask for what he needed, Jesus gave it anyway: "Young man, your sins are forgiven" (v. 5).

The Pharisees start to grumble. That's not kosher. Even a tenderfoot Jew knows, "Only God can forgive sins" (v. 7).

Their mumbling spawns one of Christ's greatest questions: "Which is easier: to tell this paralyzed man, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to tell him, 'Stand up. Take your mat and walk?'" (v. 9).

You answer the question. Which is easier for Jesus? To forgive a soul or heal a body? Which caused Jesus less pain – providing the man with health or providing this man with heaven?

To heal the man's body took a simple command; to forgive the man's sins took Jesus' blood. The first was done in the house of friends; the second on a hill with thieves. One took a word; the other took his body. One took a moment; the other took his life.

Which was easier?

So strong was his love for this crew of faith that he went beyond their appeal and went straight to the cross.

Jesus already knows the cost of grace. He already knows the price of forgiveness. But he offers it anyway. Love burst his heart.

By the way, he hasn't changed. What happened then happens today. When we take a step of faith, God sees. The same face that beamed at the paralytic beams at the alcoholic refusing the bottle. The same eyes that danced at the friends dance at the mom and dad who will do whatever it takes to get their child to Jesus. And the same lips that spoke to the man in Capernaum speak to the man in Detroit, to the woman in Belfast, to the child in Moscow... to any person anywhere who dares to come into the presence of God and ask for help.

And though we can't hear it here, the angels can hear him there. All of heaven must pause as another burst of love declares the only words that really matter: "Your sins are forgiven."

– Max Lucado, *He Still Moves Stones*

Scripture

Review the story of the friends in Mark 2:1-12. Discuss the role of the *friends'* faith and actions in this individual's salvation. For what would you bring your friends to Christ? What would make you tear up a roof to get your friends to Christ? What's stopping you?

Consider

What if You Don't Tell Your Friends?

Choosing not to tell people about Christ actually does have eternal implications. It's a weird but true fact that our lack of effort could affect the eternity of our friends. Need an explanation of the problem unsaved people face? ...Genesis points out that humanity – men and women – were created in God's image. In some way we look like God, act like God, think like God, and are emotionally built like God. Our purpose is to have fellowship with God.... God doesn't have a set way for you to share Jesus with your friends. He wants you to use your unique strengths to tell others about your relationship with Him. He just wants you to do it. Without Him, your unsaved friends will face an eternity separated from God. With Him, your friends have the opportunity to live forever in an amazing relationship with their Creator. God is counting on you to be an honest and connected friend so your friends can see the reality of the Savior and their need for Him.

– Tim Baker, *Witnessing 101*

SERVICE

Quotable Quotes

My Forever Friend

Everybody needs a little help sometime
No one stands alone.
Makes no difference if you're just a child like me
Or a king upon a throne.

For there are no exceptions
We all stand in the line
Everybody needs a friend
Let me tell you of mine.

He's my forever friend
My leave-me-never friend.
From darkest night to rainbow's end.
He's my forever friend.

Even when I turn away He cares for me
His love no one can shake
Even as I walk away he's by my side
With every breath I take.

And sometimes I forget him
My halo fails to shine
Sometimes I'm not His friend
but He is always mine.

He's my forever friend...

If you still don't know the one I'm talking of –
I think it's time you knew
Long ago and far away upon a cross
My friend died for you.

So if you'd like to meet Him and don't know what to do
Ask my friend into your heart
And he'll be your friend too.

He's my forever friend.

– Charlie Lansborough

The glory of friendship is
not the outstretched hand,
nor the kindly smile,
nor the joy of companionship;
it's the spiritual inspiration
that comes to one when he discovers
that someone else believes in him
and is willing to trust him
with his friendship.

– Ralph Waldo Emerson

Serving

SERVICE PROJECT IDEAS

- **Practice Hospitality.** Imagine hardened leaders of a labor union meeting for prayer and Bible study in the basement of a church. This kind of thing actually happens!

A friend of ours is a leader in a church located across the street from a business that was recently the target of a strike. Every day, the organized workers walked up and down the sidewalk with placards bearing messages about unfair labor contracts. Some mean tactics were being used against those employees who crossed the picket lines, and church and civil leaders (our friend included) condemned the behavior of the strike leaders. The strike lasted into the winter. On one bitterly cold morning, the Lord prompted our friend to offer the church building as a place of warmth for the strikers. Did he respond, *You've got to be kidding Lord?!* Nope. He set up a coffee table in the church basement and went over to the very people he had condemned, inviting them to use the church – coffee and all – as needed to take shelter from the cold.

The invitation was enthusiastically received, and soon the church became a regular place of relief and relaxation. Church members began to mix with the strikers, and before long, the members' prejudices began to slip away as real men and women replaced the caricatures they had created in their minds of the hardened labor leaders.

The strike lasted that entire winter, and all of the unstructured downtime allowed for hearty arguments about life and faith. Halfway into the winter, several strikers joined our friend for a special Bible study each morning. He was able to pray with these people who were experiencing the economic crunch of the strike. Church members visited family members who were sick, and some of the families even started coming to the church. What went on in this situation? The church was willing to follow Jesus' words, "Love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back" (Luke 6:35). Most of us would naturally

provide shelter for our friends, but Jesus wants us to do the same for those whom we do not call friends. This sort of hospitality is at the heart of what it means to be a Christian and lays the groundwork for leading others to Christ. Our friend was responding to the Lord's nudges. The genuine, loving nature of his deeds spoke of the substance of the gospel clearly and paved the way for evangelism.

There are many ways you can provide hospitality to the people with whom you come into contact each day. Is there a classmate at school who seems lonely or depressed? Take the initiative to get to know that person.... Is there a person in your church who could use your help with a project? Volunteer your time and expertise. ...Serving soup kitchens and other volunteer projects for the homeless is an excellent way to show hospitality. In one church, members organized a dinner each week and brought the food to the local park where the homeless gather. Such acts of hospitality not only provide an excellent witness for the love of Christ but also serve to change some people's stereotypes regarding these individuals in our society.

These simple acts of love cut across the hurried and often harsh pace of life. Showing love to fellow human beings is all too scarce in our world today. And who better than the family of God to communicate this message?

reflections on LIGHT

DISCIPLESHIP

Essence

The Scent of Water

Just as Jesus touched the lepers and welcomed the outcasts, so must we. Just as He identified with the poor and the weak, so must we. He calls us to put our lives on the line for the suffering, the vulnerable, the victims of injustice. Loving the unloved is not just an optional extra. It is the heart and soul of the Christian gospel.

Jesus did not mince words, yet even today many of His followers fail to understand. “Whatever you do for the least of these, you do for me,” He said. He is saying that, if we claim to love Him, we have to love them, the despised and down trodden. To do this is not just to obey Christ. It is to minister to Christ Himself.

To each of us who profess to serve Him, Jesus looks us in the eyes and asks, “How much do you love me? You say that you love me, you sing that you love me. But how much do you really love me? For I am out there on the streets, lost and lonely, lying in the gutter. I am being battered and abused, robbed of my childhood. I am selling my body on the street corner, I am locked in a brothel bedroom. I am violent, despised, disposable. Do you really love me as much as you say? Then prove it.”

Job 14:7 tells us that when a tree is cut down, there is always hope that it will sprout again and produce new branches: Its roots may grow old in the ground and its stump die in the soil, yet at the scent of water it will bend and put forth shoots like a plant.” We need to be that “scent of water” bringing hope and life, the life of Christ, to a dying world.

– Matt Roper

Scripture

Read the following passages and discuss the idea that “Loving the unloved is not just an optional extra. It is the heart and soul of the Christian gospel.”

- Micah 6:8
- Isaiah 58

Discuss the above reading in light of John 21:15-19. What is the connection between Christ’s asking if we love Him and our service to others?

Breakout time (divide in small groups)

Discuss how you (individually and corporately) can be the “scent of water” to those “cut down.”

Consider

Choose a societal problem in your area. Develop tangible ways to address this problem and set about doing it.

LEADERSHIP

Essence

I was standing at the counter preparing to pay for something I'd bought in a mall store when a woman came over to me.

"I know you must be busy and I don't want to keep you, but I would be very grateful if you could say a prayer for me if God brings me to your mind," she said. I looked into her eyes and recognized the pained look of someone barely holding herself together. "Do you have time for a cup of coffee?" I asked the woman.

We made our way to a coffee shop, where the woman told me about the devastating accident the week before that had killed her husband and two small children.

"We sat there for a while holding hands, tears pouring down our cheeks. There was nothing to say, nothing that would make it better. After a while, she dried her eyes and got up to leave. We embraced and she looked deep into my eyes and thanked me. In one sense I didn't "do" anything. I didn't come up with any clever words, or magic prayers. We had just sat for a while together, two people who love God sharing the heartbreak of life and death.

The old Sheila would have prayed for that woman and hurried on, feeling self-satisfied that I had done a good thing. But this time I really saw her. And we touched for a moment and left, knowing our only hope is the Lord.

– Sheila Walsh, *Honestly*

Breakout time (divide in small groups)

Can you think of a single example in the Bible where someone just asked Jesus to pray for them? Why do we do this? How can we uncover the deeper needs of people we encounter? [Consider discussing in light of Jesus' interaction with the woman at the well...no condemnation was given, no long Bible studies offered, and yet He *did* uncover and address her deeper needs. Use other Biblical examples in your discussion, as there are several instances of Jesus uncovering people's deeper needs when they came to him with more surface requests.]

DISCUSS: What do people really *need*? In his famous "hierarchy of needs," Maslow identifies five categories: Physiological (hunger; thirst; shelter); Safety (security; protection); Social (sense of belonging; love); Esteem (self-respect; recognition; status); Self-Actualization (purpose; meaning). Where does Christian witness fit into this model? Explain, using Biblical examples.

Consider

We can't solve all the world's temporal problems – for that matter, Jesus didn't even do this when on earth – but this is not the greatest gift God's church has to give. Many other organizations meet people's temporal needs... the only unique thing the church has to offer is His love, forgiveness, and grace. Role play encountering people with various needs and different ways in which you might address these.

EVANGELISM

Story

Peter Greave wrote a memoir of his life with leprosy, a disease he contracted while stationed in India. He returned to England, half-blind and partially paralyzed, to live on a compound run by Anglican sisters. Unable to work, an outcast from society, he turned bitter. He thought of suicide. He made elaborate plans to escape the compound, but always backed out because he had nowhere to go. One morning, uncharacteristically, he got up very early and strolled the grounds. Hearing a buzzing noise, he followed it to the chapel, where sisters were praying for the patients whose names were written on its walls. Among the names, he found his own. Somehow that experience of connection, of linking, changed his life. He felt wanted. He felt graced.

Religious faith – for all its problems, despite its maddening tendency to replicate ungrace – lives on because we sense the numinous beauty of a gift undeserved that comes at unexpected moments from outside. Refusing to believe that our lives of guilt and shame lead to nothing but annihilation, we hope against hope for another place run by different rules. We grow up hungry for love, and in ways so deep as to remain unexpressed we long for our Maker to love us.

...As I look back on my own pilgrimage, marked by wanderings, detours, and dead ends, I see now that what pulled me along was my search for grace. I rejected the church for a time because I found so little grace there. I returned because I found grace nowhere else.

–Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace?*

Scripture

Use a concordance and/or topical Bible to find texts about grace. After having studied these, what is your understanding of grace?

Breakout time (divide in small groups)

DISCUSS: “I rejected the church for a time because I found so little grace there. I returned because I found grace nowhere else.” What tangible things can you do individually and corporately to show more grace?

Read Acts 2:42 and identify the four essentials to which the believers devoted themselves:

(1) _____

(2) _____

(3) _____

(4) _____

DISCUSS: “We could call these the four corners of a church foundation. No church is complete without all four. Leave out any one of them and you may have a school a prayer group, a Bible study, or a social gathering – and each of those is a good thing – but you won’t have a church.” (Charles R. Swindoll, *So You Want to Be Like Christ?*) How do these four essentials make the church unique – despite “all its problems” – in what it has to offer hurting people? How strong are these “four corners” of your own church’s foundation? How strong are they in your own life? How do the individual and corporate relate?

Quotable Quote

I HEARD THE VOICE OF JESUS SAY

I heard the voice of Jesus say,
“Come unto Me and rest;
Lay down, thou weary one, lay down
Thy head upon My breast”:
I came to Jesus as I was,
Weary, and worn, and sad;
I found in Him a resting-place,
And He has made me glad.

I heard the voice of Jesus say,
“Behold, I freely give
The living water; thirsty one,
Stoop down, and drink, and live”:
I came to Jesus, and I drank
Of that life-giving stream,
My thirst was quenched, my soul revived.
And now I live in Him.

I heard the voice of Jesus say,
“I am this dark world’s light;
Look unto me, thy morn shall rise,
And all thy day be bright”:
I looked to Jesus and I found
In Him my star, my sun;
And in that light of life I’ll walk
Til traveling days are done.
– Horatius Bonar

Serving

SERVICE PROJECT IDEAS

- **Give a Dollar a Day.** Those who are among the 1.2 billion people forced to live on less than one dollar a day must depend on nonfinancial resources to get through life. For these individuals, the two most important lifelines are their social networks...and their environment. Over 80 percent of people who live on less than one dollar a day live on small plots of land, where they try to eke out their living through farming and raising chickens. There is a saying that holds true for these folks: To hurt the earth is to hurt the poor....[Poor women and children] always lost when the earth is devastated by storms, earthquakes and landgrabs. ... An organization called Target Earth focuses on the poor of the earth. Their slogan is simple enough: “Serving the Earth, Serving the Poor.” Their longer mission reads: “Serving the Earth and the poor in regions of the world where people live on less than a dollar a day.” Target Earth looks for villages and communities that have been bypassed by the large development companies and seeks to identify local indigenous solutions to environmental poverty. The work of Target Earth is funded by a simple mechanism: People give one dollar a day to help the organization serve people who live on one dollar a day. There’s something both symbolic and material about this approach. Sending away a check every month for one dollar a day reminds people who are wealthy that they really do have a lot of resources. Looking for ways to cut one dollar out of their daily budget becomes a highly spiritual act of service – and a reminder that they need to serve others who have to make it all work on just one dollar. And of course the one dollar they give each day funds actual programs that care for the earth and those who depend on the earth for their future. [Have your youth group members] figure out how to cut one dollar a day [from their] budget and then send the funds off to Target Earth. Make it at least a one-year commitment. ...Make a goal of finding [others] who will stay committed to helping the poor of the earth for one year. Pool your funds each month and send them off to make a real difference. You can contact Target Earth at www.targetearth.org.

reflections on
NEIGHBOR

DISCIPLESHIP

Quotable Quote

INDIFFERENCE

When Jesus came to Golgotha they hanged Him on a tree,
They drove great nails through hands and feet, and made a Calvary;
They crowned Him with a crown of thorns, red were His wounds and deep,
For those were crude and cruel days, and human flesh was cheap.

When Jesus came to Birmingham they simply passed Him by,
They never hurt a hair of Him, they only let Him die;
For men had grown more tender, and they would not give Him pain,
They only just passed down the street, and left Him in the rain.

Still Jesus cried, "Forgive them, for they know not what they do,"
And still it rained the wintry rain that drenched Him through and through.
The crowds went home and left the streets without a soul to see,
And Jesus crouched against a wall and cried for Calvary.

– G.A. Studdert Kennedy

Breakout time (divide in small groups)

Discuss the above passage. In what ways can indifference be worse than the intentional causation of pain? Explain. What causes us to be indifferent to others? What can we do to change this?

In light of the above, discuss the following story of indifference (noting this is not an isolated incident – a strikingly similar story was reported just a year earlier from Los Angeles):

NEW YORK (AP) – City hospital officials said they were shocked by surveillance footage showing a woman falling from her chair, writhing on the floor and dying as workers failed to help for more than an hour.

Surveillance video shows a woman lying on the hospital floor for almost an hour before anyone helped her.

[The woman] had been waiting in the emergency room for nearly 24 hours when she toppled from her seat at 5:32 a.m. June 19[, 2008], falling face-down on the floor.

She was dead by 6:35, when someone on the medical staff, flagged down by a person in the waiting room, finally approached....

Until the staffer's appearance, Green's collapse barely caused a ripple. Other patients waiting a few feet away didn't react. Security guards and a member of the hospital's staff appeared to notice her prone body at least three times but made no visible attempt to see whether she needed help....

LEADERSHIP

Essence

Lying in a Manger

She gave birth to her firstborn son. She wrapped him in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger because there wasn't any room for them in the inn. – Luke 2:7

Everyone should use the gospel to evaluate himself. How near or far are you from Christ? How are you doing in faith and love? Many become inflamed with dreamy devotion when they hear about how impoverished Christ was when he was born. They grow furious at the people of Bethlehem and criticize their blindness and ingratitude. They think that if they had been there, they would have served the Lord and his mother. They wouldn't have allowed them to be so miserable. But these people don't even notice their own neighbors who are nearby and need their help. They ignore them and leave them as they are. Who on earth doesn't have miserable, sick, blundering, or sinful people around them? Why don't they show their love to these people? Why don't they do for their neighbors what Christ did for them?

Don't deceive yourself by thinking you would have treated Christ well when you don't presently do anything for your neighbor. If you had been at Bethlehem, you would have paid just as little attention to him as everyone else did. You only want to serve him because you know who he is. Let's say that he were to come, lay in the manger, and let you know that he is the one you now know so much about. Of course you would want to do something to help. But before that, you wouldn't have done anything.

Similarly, if you could see your neighbor now as he will be in the future, and if he were lying in front of you, then you would certainly take care of him. But because you only see him for what he is now, you ignore him. You fail to recognize Christ in your neighbor.

– Martin Luther, *By Faith Alone*

Breakout time (divide in small groups)

Discuss the concepts of “worthy” and “undeserving” poor. In what ways do these notions stem from such theologically inaccurate, but often repeated, ideas as, “God helps those who help themselves”? What other barriers do we erect to helping people? In each act of neglect/indifference to our neighbor, how does our heart become a little harder toward God? Explain.

What tangible things can we do to help us see people through God's eyes?

Consider

“Prejudice Wall”: Come up with several pairs of people (male/female; rich/poor; heterosexual/homosexual; Christian/non-Christian; black/white; etc.)

and place them one at a time on opposing walls. Have people move to the wall with the type of person listed toward whom they would more readily gravitate. Don't ask for reasoning or explanation, and be sure everyone suspends judgment. Move on to the next pairing, and continue until you've gone through all your pairs. Leave the pairs on the walls where people can see them, but have the group move to a neutral area to discuss and debrief the exercise.

EVANGELISM

Essence

Loving Our Neighbors

All of Moses' teachings are summarized in a single statement, "Love your neighbor as you love yourself." – Galatians 5:14

No one should think he fully understands this command: "Love your neighbor." Certainly this is very short and very easy as far as the words are concerned. But where are the teachers and learners who actually practice this in life? These words, "Through love serve one another" and "Love your neighbor as yourself," are eternal words. No one can think about, urge, and practice them enough.

It's remarkable that believers will immediately have a troubled conscience if they fail to do something trivial. But these same people feel nothing at all when they neglect love and when their heart isn't sincere and brotherly toward their neighbor. Unfortunately, this happens every day. For they don't regard God's command to love as highly as their own superstitions....

The second most important commandment is this: "Love your neighbor as you love yourself."

No other commandment is greater than these. – Mark 12:31

When you're wondering whom you should show love to, there's no living creature better than your neighbor to show love to. Your neighbor is not a devil, lion, bear, or wolf. He is not made of stone or wood, but he is a living being who is much like you. There is nothing living on the earth more lovable, kind, useful, good, comforting, or more necessary. He was even created for friendly conversation and for social life. There is nothing in the whole world more worthy of our love than our neighbor.

But it's the remarkable craft of the devil that he not only severely darkens our hearts and tears this superior object of our love from our hearts. But he also persuades our hearts of the opposite opinion so that we think our neighbor is more worthy of bitter hatred than of love. This is easy for the devil to do. He simply nags us: "See, this person has such and such a fault. He abused you. He hurt you...." Then this object of love quickly becomes contemptible to us so that we no longer recognize our neighbor as one who should be loved but rather as an enemy worthy of intense hatred. In this way, Satan can amazingly change the love in our heart so that, instead of loving our neighbor, we become capable of demeaning, hating, and persecuting him. Then all that remains of this commandment, "Love your neighbor as you love yourself," are the hard and empty letters and syllables.

– Martin Luther, *By Faith Alone*

Scripture

Review the context of Christ's comment on loving your neighbor in Mark 12. What greater understanding do you get from this passage?

Breakout time (divide in small groups)

Think about the sermons you've heard over your life. As a group, identify the common themes you seem to hear most often. Why is it that "believers will immediately have a troubled conscience if they fail to do something trivial [but] feel nothing at all when they neglect love and when their heart isn't sincere and brotherly toward their neighbor"? How do you remedy this? What are some practical steps you can take in the coming week to love your neighbor and overcome any barriers to this that might exist?

In *The Screwtape Letters*, C.S. Lewis – writing in the voice of a “senior devil instructing a junior devil in the art of temptation” – lays out how easy it is to reclaim converts, even in church:

When he gets to his pew and looks round him he sees just that selection of his neighbours whom he has hitherto avoided. You want to lean pretty heavily on those neighbours. Make his mind flit to and fro between an expression like “the body of Christ” and the actual faces in the next pew. It matters very little, of course, what kind of people that next pew really contains. You may know one of them to be a great warrior on [God's] side. No matter. Your patient...is a fool. Provided that any of those neighbours sing out of tune, or have boots that squeak, or double chins, or odd clothes, the [person] will quite easily believe that their religion must therefore be somehow ridiculous. ...of course, if they do [afford some *rational* ground for disappointment] – if the [person] knows...the man with squeaky boots a miser and an extortioner – then your task is so much the easier. All you then have to do is to keep out of his mind the question “If I, being what I am, can consider that I am in some sense a Christian, why should the different vices of those people in the next pew prove that their religion is mere hypocrisy and convention?”

Why is it so simple for us to think the worst of our neighbors? To what extent would it help if we would look *up* instead of looking around? If we were to compare ourselves only to God's standard, rather than to others and, in realizing we fall short of God's mark, be more forgiving of others' shortcomings?

Discuss how love can turn to hatred or demeaning or persecuting actions? On a larger scale, how do genocides come about? What must be done on the smaller scale to prevent the escalation to the larger scale?

Quotable Quotes

A Christian is full of love to his neighbor, of universal love; not confined to one sect or party; not restrained to those who agree with him in opinions, in outward modes of worship; or to those who are allied to him by blood or recommended by nearness of place. Neither does he love those only that love him or are endeared to him by intimacy of acquaintance. But his love resembles that of him, whose mercy is over all his works. It soars above all these scanty bounds, embracing neighbors and strangers, friends and enemies.
– John Wesley

When sin in a person is encompassed by love, sin is out of its element. It is like a besieged city with all communications cut off. True, sin may use love as an occasion (for what can't a corrupt person use for corruption!). The sinner can become embittered by love, and rage against it. Yet, in the long run sin cannot hold out against love.
– Søren Kierkegaard, *Provocations*

Serving

SERVICE PROJECT IDEAS

- **Bridge the Gulf.** Many people feel uncomfortable around those with disabilities. Our quest for immortality, our vulture's fixation with the perfect body, and high society's club of the beautiful people are all barriers to the gospel fact that God created us all in love and dignity. We all carry the full measure of His image in us. The Church needs to stand against the lie that...people [with disabilities] are lesser beings and begin to reflect the truth of God's creation.

Christians need to call their church communities to bridge the gulf that separates people in our society according to physical capabilities. Several ways to do this include:

- **Be Accessible.** Ensure that your church [is accessible] for people who have physical limitations – including ramps, special seating areas and rest rooms that are wheelchair accessible.
- **Provide Transportation.** Consider volunteering or get a team of people together who can provide regular transportation and other services for those who require assistance in your community.
- **Include [People with Disabilities].** Get the word out that you want to bring [people with disabilities] into the regular life of the church because your church needs them. Invite those who are new to your church to join a small group or regular community gathering, and offer to provide transportation.

reflections on SHAKING OFF THE DUST

DISCIPLESHIP

Essence

Many of those he healed would never say “thank you,” but he healed them anyway. Most would be more concerned with being healthy than being holy, but he healed them anyway. Some of those who asked for bread today would cry for his blood a few months later, but he healed them anyway.

Jesus chose to do what you and I seldom, if ever, choose to do. He chose to give gifts to people, knowing full well that those gifts could be used for evil.

Don't be too quick to attribute Jesus' compassion to his divinity. Remember both sides. For each time Jesus healed, he had to overlook the future and the past.

Something, by the way, that he still does.

Have you noticed that God doesn't ask you to prove that you will put your salary to good use? Have you noticed that God doesn't turn off your oxygen supply when you misuse his gifts? Aren't you glad that God doesn't give you only that which you remember to thank him for? (Has it been a while since you thanked God for your spleen? Me, too. But I still have one.)

God's goodness is spurred by his nature, not by our worthiness.

Someone asked an associate of mine, “What biblical precedent do we have to help the poor who have no desire to become Christians?”

My friend responded with one word: “God.”

God does it daily, for millions of people.

What did Jesus know that allowed him to do what he did? What internal code kept his calm from erupting into chaos? He knew the value of people.

– Max Lucado, *In the Eye of the Storm*

Scripture

Discuss the general understanding you have of “shaking the dust off your feet” (Matthew 10:14; Mark 6:11). Note that this is in the context of Jesus sending the disciples so, despite warnings that not all will welcome his emissaries, He still wants us to go. How do you keep from becoming embittered by those that do not accept the message? How do you keep from taking it personally, realizing that this decision is between an individual and God and really has nothing to do with the messenger?

Read Luke 22:39-46. How did Jesus keep from being disappointed? He always expected the best, while allowing for and forgiving the worst. How do we keep from having pretenses about the nature of people while not having an attitude of expecting the worst?

Breakout time (divide in small groups)

Discuss the many reasons we come up with for not helping people. For not witnessing to people? We *guess* at others’ motives and/or reactions and make excuses; God *knows* and still wants us to reach out. (Consider Jonah)

Consider

Do you need to be thanked for what you do? Do you need recognition? Take stock of your own motivation and hold it up to the standard of Christ. God *always* sees – what more are we looking for from man?

What do you do? Someone on the street asks you for money to get a bite to eat, but you’re not sure... Why not take them to lunch and provide even more than the physical food by your willingness to connect and show them some basic human kindness and dignity?

LEADERSHIP

Story

Of Calluses and Compassion

Peculiar, this childhood church memory of mine.

For many, early church recollections are made of zippered Bibles, patent leather Easter shoes, Christmas pageants, or [Sabbath] schools. Mine is not so religious. Mine is comprised of calluses, straight pins, and dull sermons.

There I sit, all six years of me, My father's hand in my lap....to keep me from squirming. A robust preacher is behind the pulpit, one of God's kindest but most monotonous servants. Bored, I turn my attention to my father's hand.

If you didn't know he was a mechanic, one look at his hands would tell you as much. Thick, strong, scrubbed clean but still bearing traces of last week's grease.

I'm intrigued as I run my fingers over the calluses. They rise on the palm like a ridge of hills. Calluses. Layer upon layer of nerveless skin. The hand's defense against hours of squeezing wrenches and twisting screwdrivers.

On the back of the pew in front of me is a collection of attendance cards. At the top of each card is a red ribbon for the visitors to wear. The ribbon is attached to the card by a straight pin.

I have an idea. I wonder how thick those calluses are?...

I take the pin, and with the skill of a surgeon I begin the insertion. (I told you it was peculiar.) I look up at Dad. He doesn't move. I go deeper. No response. Another eighth of an inch. No flinch. While the rest of the church is intent on the words of a preacher, I'm fascinated by the depth of a callus. I decide to give it a final shove.

"Umph," he grunts, yanking his hand away, closing his fist which only pushes the pin further. He glares at me, my mother turns, and my brother giggles. Something tells me that the same hand will be used later...to make another point.

Peculiar, this childhood memory. But, even more peculiar is that three decades later, I find myself doing the same thing I did at age six: in church, trying to penetrate calluses with a point. Only now I'm in the pulpit, not the pew. And my tool is truth, not a pin. And the calluses are not on the hand, but on the heart.

Thick, dead skin wrapped around the nerves of the soul. The result of hours of rubbing against the truth without receiving it. Toughened, crusty, lifeless tissue that defies feeling and ignores touch.

The calloused heart.

To such hearts Jesus spoke on his last Tuesday. With the persistence of a man with one final message, his point was intended to prick the soul.

He told two stories that contain a common thread, crimson with guilt: the proclivity of people to reject God's invitation not once or twice, but time and time again.

The first story was that of the landowner....The second is the story of the king who prepared a wedding feast for his son....

A landowner whose servants are beaten and killed? A king whose messengers are ignored? Surely the landowner and the king will wash their hands of these people. No doubt they will send the police and the military next.

Wrong.

In both cases they send more emissaries....

What surprising tolerance! What unexpected patience! Servant after servant. Messenger after messenger. Jesus verbally painting the picture of a determined God.

When our oldest daughter, Jenna, was two, I lost her in a department store. One minute she was at my side and the next she was gone. I panicked. All of a sudden only one thing mattered – I had to find my daughter. Shopping was forgotten. The list of things I came to get was unimportant. I yelled her name. What people thought didn't matter. For a few minutes, every ounce of energy had one goal – to find my lost child. (I did, by the way. She was hiding behind some jackets!)

No price is too high for a parent to pay to redeem his child. No energy is too great. No effort too demanding. A parent will go to any length to find his or her own.

So will God.

– Max Lucado, *And the Angels Were Silent*

Scripture

Read the parable Jesus tells in Luke 14:16-24 and Matthew 22:1-14. How are we to understand “shaking the dust off” in light of such a determined and merciful God? How should this inform our witness when we're told if we don't do it, the rocks will cry out (Luke 19:40)?

Using a concordance or topical Bible, find the many places where the Bible speaks of hard hearts, stony hearts, hearts of flesh, etc. Discuss this passion of God's for His people's hearts to turn to Him in light of the above story. What role do you have to play in piercing calloused hearts?

EVANGELISM

Story

I took my sketchbook and cycled down to the nature reserve near my home. It was a bright day, and a bit breezy. I stood at the edge of one of the lakes, watched the ripples on the water and tried to work out how I'd paint them.

The trouble was they kept changing color. One moment the ripples looked sky blue, the next they were muddy brown. It's all a matter of reflection. The water's like a mirror; it reflects the blue sky when the angle's right, but when the angle changes, blown by the wind, you just see the muddy water. Both colors are true depending on your position.

In a way we all reflect what's going on around us. When life gets rough it shows in our attitudes and behavior. It's the same with others. When someone's depressed or unresponsive..., maybe something really is wrong and they need more understanding than we're prepared to give.

And when I find myself getting critical of other people and the way they are, perhaps if I changed my position slightly I might see them in a more favorable light. And when someone has a different point of view from mine maybe they're simply seeing things from a different angle.

– Eddie Askew, *Slower than Butterflies*

Breakout time (divide in small groups)

In light of the above story, discuss the distinctions between absolute truth and relative “realities.” (It's interesting that the definition of faith given in Hebrews speaks of things not seen, for it is often our sight that deceives us.)

How can we better reflect Christ instead of the world around us? Should we strive to completely avoid reflecting the world around us? Is it possible?

How can we “change [our] position slightly” and choose to see others in a more favorable light?

Consider

What role do you play in encouraging or discouraging gossip? When someone comes to you with something negative about another person, do you say something? Do you offer a possible different perspective, challenging the person to see things in a more positive light? How can silence even encourage gossip, lending it tacit agreement? Role play different responses so you're better prepared the next time someone brings gossip to you.

SERVICE

Quotable Quotes

I also am other than what I imagine myself to be. To know this is forgiveness.
– Simone Weil

Father in heaven! Hold not our sins up against us but hold us up against our sins, so that the thought of you when it wakens in our soul, and each time it wakens, should not remind us of what we have committed but of what you forgave, not of how we went astray but of how you saved us!
– Søren Kierkegaard, *Provocations*

Serving

SERVICE PROJECT IDEAS

- **Take Back the Night.** Take Back the Night is an organization that seeks to end sexual violence against women. The organization’s origins date back to as early as 1877. When women in England sought to bring attention to how dangerous the streets of London were for women at night. In 1976, women in Belgium lined the streets with candles for the first “Reclaim the Night” march, which was held in conjunction with an international conference to draft a convention against violence directed toward women.

...Today, Take Back the Night operates in countries throughout the world, hosing candlelight vigils, conferences, rallies and educational workshops to stem the tide of sexualized violence. The organization’s website offers resources, connections to other events (both national and international), a means to post your own events to the site, and a list of organizations that offer assistance to victims of sexual violence. [If you host your own event, be sure to have several resources available, including material from local community organizations that work with victims of sexual violence; literature from the local police department regarding the criminal nature of and penalties for sexual violence; etc.]

Take Back the Night also has a creative campaign titled “Shatter the Silence,” which allows victims of rape, incest and sexual abuse (called “crimes of silence” because of the shame that surrounds these violations) to post their personal stories of abuse. By posting these stories, the organizers hope to help other victims of abuse know they are not alone and, hopefully, to encourage them to report the violations. You can learn more about Take Back the Night at the organization’s website, www.takebackthenight.org.

reflections on ONE ACCORD

DISCIPLESHIP

Essence

Early on, Stalin built a village in Poland called Nowa Huta, or “New Town,” to demonstrate the promise of communism, he could not change the entire country at once, he said, but he could construct one new town with a shiny steel factory, spacious apartments, plentiful parks, and broad streets as a token of what would follow. Later, Nowa Huta became one of the hotbeds of Solidarity, demonstrating instead the failure of communism to make just one town work.

What if Christians used that same approach in secular society and succeeded? “In the world the Christians are a colony of the true home,” said Bonhoeffer. Perhaps Christians should work harder toward establishing colonies of the kingdom that point to our true home. All too often the church holds up a mirror reflecting back the society around it, rather than a window revealing a different way.

If the world despises a notorious sinner, the church will love her. If the world cuts off aid to the poor and the suffering, the church will offer food and healing. If the world oppresses, the church will raise up the oppressed. If the world shames a social outcast, the church will proclaim God’s reconciling love. If the world seeks profit and self-fulfillment, the church seeks sacrifice and service. If the world demands retribution, the church dispenses grace. If the world splinters into factions, the church joins together in unity. If the world destroys its enemies, the church loves them.

That, at least, is the vision of the church in the New Testament: a colony of heaven in a hostile world. Dwight L. Moody said, “Of one hundred men, one will read the Bible; the ninety-nine will read the Christian.”

– Philip Yancey, *What’s So Amazing About Grace?*

Breakout time (divide in small groups)

Discuss the vision of the church as “a colony of heaven in a hostile world.” Note the prepositions: *of* heaven *in* a hostile world. Why is it important that this idea not be that of an enclave, but one in which others are invited to join? How does this fit with Paul’s idea of being “ambassadors” (2 Corinthians 5)?

Discuss some practical applications of the third paragraph.

DISCUSS: “Of one hundred men, one will read the Bible; the ninety-nine will read the Christian.” What implications does this have for your witness?

Consider

Act out contrasting scenes portraying the difference between the church as a “mirror” versus a “window.”

LEADERSHIP

Story

View of the High Country

While in Colorado for a week's vacation, our family teamed up with several others and decided to ascend the summit of a fourteen-thousand-foot peak. We would climb it the easy way. Drive above the timberline and tackle the final mile by foot. You hearty hikers would have been bored, but for a family with three small girls, it was about all we could take.

The journey was as stirring as it was beautiful. I was reminded how the air was thin and my waist was not.

Our four-year-old Sara had it doubly difficult. A tumble in the first few minutes left her with a skinned knee and a timid step. She didn't want to walk. Actually, she refused to walk. She wanted to ride. First on my back, then in Mom's arms, then my back, then a friend's back, then my back, then Mom's... well, you get the picture.

In fact, you know how she felt. You, too, have tumbled, and you, too, have asked for help. And you, too, have received it.

All of us need help sometimes. This journey gets steep. So steep that some of us give up.

Some stop climbing. Some just sit down. They are still near the trail, but they aren't on it. They haven't abandoned the trip, but they haven't continued it. They haven't dismounted, but they haven't spurred either. They haven't resigned, and yet they haven't resolved.

They have simply stopped walking. Much time is spent sitting around the fire, talking about how things used to be. Some will sit in the same place for years. They will not change. Prayers will not deepen. Devotion will not increase. Passion will not rise.

A few even grow cynical. Woe to the traveler who challenges them to resume the journey. Woe to the prophet who dares them to see the mountain. Woe to the explorer who reminds them of their call...pilgrims are not welcome here.

And so the pilgrim moves on while the settler settles.

Settles for sameness.

Settles for safety.

Settles for snowdrifts.

I hope you don't do that. But if you do, I hope you don't scorn the pilgrim who calls you back to the journey.

It's worth it to keep moving.

As I tried, unsuccessfully, to convince Sara to walk, I tried describing what we were going to see. "It will be so pretty," I told her. "You'll see all the mountains and the sky and the trees." No luck – she wanted to be carried. Still a good idea, however. Even if it didn't work. Nothing puts power in the journey like a vision of the mountaintop.

By the way, a grand scene awaits you as well. The Hebrew writer gives us a National Geographic piece on heaven. Listen to how he describes the mountaintop of Zion. He says when we reach the mountain we will have come to “the city of the living God.... To thousands of angels gathered together with joy.... To the meeting of God’s firstborn children whose names are written in heaven.... To God, the judge of all people,... and to the spirits of good people who have been made perfect.... To Jesus, the One who brought the new agreement from God to his people.... To the sprinkled blood that has a better message than the blood of Abel” (Heb. 12:22-24).

What a mountain! Won’t it be great to see the angels? To finally know what they look like and who they are? To hear them tell of the times they were at our side, even in our house?

Imagine the meeting of the firstborn. A gathering of all God’s children. No jealousy. No competition. No division. No hurry. We will be perfect...sinless. No more stumbles. No more tripping. Lusting will cease. Gossip will be silenced. Grudges forever removed.

And imagine seeing God. Finally, to gaze in the face of your Father. To feel the Father’s gaze upon you. Neither will ever cease.

...What a mountain! Jesus will be there. You’ve longed to see him. You finally will. Interesting what the writer says we will see. He doesn’t mention the face of Jesus, though we will see it. He doesn’t refer to the voice of Jesus, though it will shout. He mentions a part of Jesus that most of us wouldn’t think of seeing. He says we will see Jesus’ blood. The crimson of the cross. The life liquid that seeped from his forehead, dripped from his hands, and glowed from his side.

The human blood of the divine Christ. Covering our sins.

Proclaiming a message: We have been bought. We cannot be sold. Ever.

My, what a moment. What a mountain.

Believe me when I say it will be worth it. No cost is too high. If you must pay a price, pay it! No sacrifice is too much. If you must leave baggage on the trail, leave it! No loss will compare. Whatever it takes, do it.

For heaven’s sake, do it.

It will be worth it. I promise. One view of the peak will justify the pain of the path.

By the way, our group finally made it up the mountain. We spent an hour or so at the top, taking pictures and enjoying the view. Later, on the way down, I heard little Sara exclaim proudly, “I did it!”

I chuckled. No you didn’t, I thought. Your mom and I did it. Friends and family got you up this mountain. You didn’t do it.

But I didn’t say anything. I didn’t say anything because I’m getting the same treatment. So are you. We may think we are climbing, but we are riding. Riding on the back of the Father who saw us fall. Riding on the back of the Father who wants us to make it home. A Father who doesn’t get angry when we get weary.

After all, he knows what it’s like to climb a mountain.

He climbed one for us.

– Max Lucado, *When God Whispers Your Name*

Consider

Where are you in your spiritual journey? Are you still moving or are you settling? Has a bad experience made your spirit timid? What needs to happen to get you moving again?

Breakout time (divide in small groups)

Discuss how you can be an encouragement to others along the way. Discuss each scenario: other pilgrims; those just off the path; those with no interest in returning to the path; those who have yet to start on their way; and any others you can think of. What role can you play in encouraging them to reach the mountaintop, to see what God has in store for us?

Discuss how a clear vision of the mountaintop helps you in the difficult climb. (consider Proverbs 29:18)

Brainstorm some things that might tempt people to “settle.” How can you address these very real challenges?

EVANGELISM

Essence

[Jesus] had every intention of getting away and being alone. So what happened? Why didn't he tell them to get lost? What made him change his mind and spend the day with the people he was trying to avoid?

Answer? Take a look at five words in Matthew 14:14: "He had compassion on them."

...When Matthew writes that Jesus had compassion on the people, he is not saying that Jesus felt casual pity for them. No, the term is far more graphic. Matthew is saying that Jesus felt their hurt in his gut:

- He felt the limp of the [person with the disability].
- He felt the hurt of [those with diseases].
- He felt the loneliness of the leper.
- He felt the embarrassment of the sinful.

And once he felt their hurts, he couldn't help but heal their hurts. He was moved in the stomach by their needs. He was so touched by their needs that he forgot his own needs. He was so moved by the people's hurts that he put his hurts on the back burner.

Maybe that's why God brings hurting people into your world, too. All solitude and no service equals selfishness. Some solitude and some service, however, equals perspective.

– Max Lucado, *In the Eye of the Storm*

Breakout time (divide in small groups)

DISCUSS: "All solitude and no service equals selfishness. Some solitude and some service, however equals perspective." Why is it important to meet others' needs *especially* when you don't feel like it? Why is it important to set aside quiet time with God? How do you keep proper perspective in all things?

Read the second chapter of Acts: how does being on one accord with others enhance your witness? Imagine what it would have been like to be in that room – on a good day, the disciples weren't of one accord, arguing about who would sit at Jesus' right hand. How much more after they had deserted Jesus at his arrest...there were some issues to be worked out! What issues do you need to work out? What issues need to be worked out in your church? Identify tangible ways to make this happen, for when believers are on one accord, God brings Pentecost!

SERVICE

Quotable Quote

Lord, make me a channel of your peace
Where there is hatred, let me sow love,
Where there is injury, pardon
Where there is doubt, faith
Where there is despair, hope
Where there is darkness, light
Where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master, grant that I may
not so much seek to be consoled as to console
not so much to be understood as to understand
not so much to be loved as to love;
for it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
it is in dying that we awake to eternal life.
– St Francis of Assisi

Serving

SERVICE PROJECT IDEAS

- **Soup's Up:** [If you're] opening a soup kitchen, your first priority should be to build a team of coworkers who can make a commitment to work a regular schedule for a set period of time (six months, one year, and so on). Then make a start by setting up a Saturday or Sunday evening soup kitchen in a local community building that has approved public cooking facilities.... Give it an upbeat name [and] create the space in such a way that communicates warmth and fun and lets people know that they are welcome.... Set a menu that is simple, yet delicious [and with]...four or five sandwich and soup combinations that are healthy, filling and visually appealing. [It's important to avoid the idea that those without food will do fine on a boring sandwich.]
Given the fact that your workforce is made up of volunteers and your rent is free, your newly launched Café Paris can be funded by a very small base of paying clientele. Write up a price board for paying customers, and make sure to invite local youth groups and all your relatives living in the region to come out and financially support the effort.
To ensure the dignity of those who cannot afford to pay, create a coupon that offers a free soup and sandwich. Distribute these coupons directly to patrons in your community who would benefit from the café, or leave them at your

local social services office. You might also consider setting up a resource table in the cafe. This table could have information on public services in town that provide a variety of social needs....

For information on how the New York City Coalition Against Hunger runs its soup kitchens, visit its website at www.nyccah.org.

reflections on DAILY LIVING

DISCIPLESHIP

Story

...William Borden was a millionaire, a graduate of Yale, a handsome and privileged young man. God called him to the cause of world missions, and he said, “Yes.” His friends thought he was crazy. One of them wrote to him, “You’re throwing yourself away.” It didn’t stop him. But at age 25, in 1913, on his way to China, Borden contracted meningitis and died. He left a note as he lay dying, which simply said, “No reserve, no retreat, no regrets.” His whole life made that statement.

A friend wrote of Borden, “No one would have known from [his] life and talk that he was a millionaire, but no one could have helped knowing that he was a Christian.”

In Borden’s favorite book, this sentence was underlined: “The supreme human condition of the fullness of the Spirit is a life wholly surrendered to God to do his will.”

Borden trusted the promise of 1 Jn. 2:17 – “The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever.”

– Michael Luke, *Making Worship a Lifestyle and not an Event*

Breakout time (divide in small groups)

Can you truly say of your life: “No reserve, no retreat, no regrets”? Why/why not? If not, what would need to change? What would your life look like? If so, what is it that makes you able to say that of your life? How can you encourage others to live the same way? How do you continue to have this attitude when others are sure to misunderstand?

DISCUSS: “No one would have known from [his] life and talk that he was a millionaire, but no one could have helped knowing that he was a Christian.” What do people know from *your* life?

What would your life look like – what would be different – if it was “wholly surrendered to God to do his will”?

LEADERSHIP

Essence

We are not saved only to be instruments for God, but to be His sons and daughters. He does not turn us into spiritual agents but into spiritual messengers, and the message must be a part of us. The Son of God was His own message – “The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life” (John 6:63). As His disciples, our lives must be a holy example of the reality of our message. Even the natural heart of the unsaved will serve if called upon to do so, but it takes a heart broken by conviction of sin, baptized by the Holy Spirit, and crushed into submission to God’s purpose to make a person’s life a holy example of God’s message.

– Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest*

Breakout time (divide in small groups)

What does it mean for the message to “be a part of us”?

Discuss the three elements presented by Chambers: (1) a heart broken by conviction of sin; (2) baptized by the Holy Spirit; and (3) crushed into submission to God’s purpose.

Brainstorm Biblical examples (and maybe some outside the Bible) the group feels lived their message daily in this way. What are the common characteristics these individuals share?

EVANGELISM

Essence

You'd think we didn't believe in the Trinity. We talk about the Father and study the Son – but when it comes to the Holy Spirit, we are confused at best and frightened at worst. Confused because we've never been taught. Frightened because we've been taught to be afraid.

May I simplify things a bit? The Holy Spirit is the presence of God in our lives, carrying on the work of Jesus. The Holy Spirit helps us in three directions – inwardly (by granting us the fruits of the Spirit, Gal. 5:22-24), upwardly (by praying for us, Rom. 8:26), and outwardly (by pouring God's love into our hearts, Rom. 5:5).

In evangelism the Holy Spirit is on center stage. If the disciple teaches, it is because the Spirit teaches the disciple (Luke 12:12). If the listener is convicted, it is because the Spirit has penetrated (John 16:10). If the listener is converted, it is by the transforming power of the Spirit (Rom. 8:11). If the new believer matures, it is because the Spirit makes him or her competent (2 Cor. 3:6).

You have the same Spirit working with you that Philip did. Some of you don't believe me. You're still cautious. I can hear you mumbling under your breath as you read, "Philip had something I don't. I've never heard an angel's voice." To which I counter, "How do you know Philip did?"

We assume he did. We've been taught he did. The flannelboard figures say he did. An angel puts his trumpet in Philip's ear and blares the announcement, and Philip has no choice. Flashing lights and fluttering wings are nothing to deny. The deacon had to go. But could our assumption be wrong? Could it be that the angel's voice was every bit as miraculous as the one you and I hear?

What?

You've heard the voice whispering your name, haven't you? You've felt the nudge to go and sensed the urge to speak. Hasn't it occurred to you?

You invite a couple over...Nothing heroic, just a nice evening with old friends. But from the moment they enter, you can feel the tension. Colder than glaciers, they are. You can tell something is wrong. Typically you're not one to inquire, but you feel a concern that won't be silent. So you ask.

You are in a business meeting where one of your coworkers gets raked over the coals. Everyone else is thinking, I'm glad that wasn't me. But the Holy Spirit is leading you to think, *How hard this must be*. So, after the meeting you approach the employee and express your concern.

You notice the fellow on the other side of the church auditorium. He looks a bit out of place, what with his strange clothing and all. You learn that he is from [another country], in town on business. The next [Sabbath] he is back. And the third [Sabbath] he is present. You introduce yourself. He tells you how he is fascinated by the faith and how he wants to learn more. Rather than offer to teach him, you simply urge him to read the Bible.

Later in the week, you regret not being more direct. You call the office where he is consulting and learn that he is leaving today for home. You know

in your heart you can't let him leave. So you rush to the airport and find him awaiting his flight, with a Bible open on his lap.

"Do you understand what you are reading?" you inquire.

"How can I unless someone explains it to me?"

And so you, like Philip, explain. And he, like the Ethiopian, believes.

Baptism is requested and baptism is offered. He catches a later flight and you catch a glimpse of what it means to be led by the Spirit.

Were there lights? You just lit one. Were there voices? You just were one. Was there a miracle? You just witnessed one. Who knows? If the Bible were being written today, that might be your name in the eighth chapter of Acts.

– Max Lucado, *When God Whispers Your Name*

Scripture

Read the following texts and note the role of the Holy Spirit in witnessing:

John 15:26; 16:13,14 _____

Acts 1:8; 6:10 _____

Acts 4:31 _____

1 Corinthians 2:10-12 _____

2 Corinthians 1:21,22 _____

Read Acts 6 and 7, noting each mention of the Holy Spirit. What role did the Holy Spirit play in Stephen's life and testimony? What role does the Holy Spirit play in *your* life and testimony?

Breakout time (divide in small groups)

Discuss the roles laid out for the Holy Spirit: granting the fruit of the Spirit; praying for us; and pouring God's love into our hearts. If we're granted the fruit of the Spirit and prayed for, how can we sit on God's love? This love was not meant to be kept to ourselves, but shared.

Look back at the third paragraph illustrating how the Holy Spirit is on center stage in evangelism. How does it help overcome fears you might have about witnessing to know all the work is the Holy Spirit's?

Discuss how the Holy Spirit is on center stage in evangelism, but God chooses to work through human vessels. Philip could have said "no" – just as Jonah tried to – but how much greater when we choose to work in concert with the Holy Spirit's leading. Discuss the benefits to the person following the Holy Spirit's lead.

SERVICE

Quotable Quotes

There are two things to be done with the gospel: believe it and behave it.
– Anon

If you want me to believe in your Redeemer, you have to look a little more redeemed.
– Friedrich Nietzsche

You're writing a gospel,
A chapter each day,
By the deeds that you do,
And the words that you say.
Men read what you write,
Distorted or true;
What is the gospel
According to you?
– Anon

Preach the gospel with all of your life and if necessary, with words.
– St Francis of Assisi

Do all the good you can
By all the means you can
In all the ways you can
In all the places you can
To all the people you can
As long as you ever can.
– John Wesley

Serving

SERVICE PROJECT IDEAS

- **Give to the Elderly.** A small farming town in the Northwest has found a wonderful way to involve children in giving to the elderly. The town has one school and one convalescent center. Since many of the school kids have relatives living in the center, the town developed a way to bring these groups closer together.

The lower grades are typical of any school; they do crafts every other day (or so it seems). These crafts serve as a good learning tool in creativity, but unfortunately, they are usually tossed out, at the end of the week, if not the end of the day....

However, this particular school came up with a creative solution. On holidays and other special days, the kids in the lower grades make cards and crafts for the folks in the local convalescent center. The convalescent center is a wonderful sight on these special days, and the elderly truly appreciate the thought.

If your town has a convalescent home, you can follow this little town's lead. Start by visiting the center to get to know some of the folks who live there....If you feel really ambitious, get you church's [younger children] involved...making cards for the elderly. Also ask some of the area preschools to participate and, if possible, let the kids deliver the cards and crafts themselves. The reaction from the folks will be that much greater!