

Juvenile Institutional Ministries Bible Discussion Sheets

VOLUME III

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Juvenile Institutional Ministries, Bible Discussion Sheets, Vol. III
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FORWARD

This manual provides some basic material we have used in conducting Bible discussion groups for incarcerated youth in juvenile institutions. It is not intended to be a complete work, but rather merely an outline from which one can begin. Although this material is geared more for groups, it is easily adaptable for use with individuals on a one-to-one basis.

The meetings work best in a group of up to fifteen youth in one-hour sessions. Discussions are topical and cover such subjects as friendship, habits, hurts, love, self-image, anger, making decisions, etc. (See “Table of Contents” for complete listing). Ground rules for each meeting should be set and should include:

1. One person speaks at a time.
2. Each person’s opinion is respected.
3. No one in the group is allowed to talk about people who aren’t there.

The format of each meeting generally consists of:

- Opening Discussion: To solicit general conversation on the topic in order to create a non-threatening environment where it’s clear that all input is welcomed and appreciated. The discussion should lead toward establishing a “question” or “problem” that is common to all. The conclusion reached by the youth should be: “I can’t handle this area of my life on my own.”
- Story: This serves to further state the problem illustrated in the opening discussion. It helps create the need for a solution.
- Scripture: Here is where the solution is introduced.
- Wrap-up: This is where the leader transitions from an open discussion format into one of bringing the meeting to a close. Be sure to re-emphasize Scripture’s answer to the problem/question which was introduced in the opening discussion, and how God can help us deal with that area of our lives. Close by asking for prayer requests, and then by praying.

Ministering to juvenile offenders in institutions is an exciting and specialized ministry. We encourage you to read thoroughly the Orientation Manual included in the Appendix following the Bible discussion sheets, before launching such a ministry.

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TOPIC: Being Dependable

Opening Discussion

- Can you think of someone you know, who you feel like if they tell you they'll do something you **know** they will?
- Does that person always say, "yes" to the things you ask of them?
- When someone asks something of you, do you think it's easier to say "yes" or "no?" Think about that for a minute.
- What if the person who asks you to do something is someone you really like or respect? What makes it hard to say "no" to that person?
- Can you think of a time you said "yes," even when you knew you probably wouldn't do it? What happened?
- What are some reasons we do that?
- What does it mean to you to be dependable or reliable?

Scripture

Read I Samuel 20:1-17; 30-34, 42 (all of Chapter 20 if you have time)

- What did Jonathan do for David? Why did he do it?
- Why was that difficult for him? (Saul, his father hated David)
- What does that show about Jonathan? Do you know anyone as reliable as Jonathan?

Read Proverbs 25:19 - *Putting confidence in an unreliable person is like chewing with a toothache.*

- What do you think this verse means?
- What are some reasons we choose to be unreliable?
- What are the benefits of being reliable, a person of your word?

Read Matthew 5:37 - *Let your "yes" be "yes," and your "no" be "no."*

- What is difficult about doing what this verse says?
- How do you think your life would be different if you lived by that?
- How do you think you would feel about yourself?
- How do you think others would relate to you if you did?

Wrap-up

You get to decide whether you are reliable and dependable. Up until now, you may not have even trusted yourself. You can choose right now with God's help to let your "yes" be "yes," and your "no" be "no," and build up trust with yourself and others.

TOPIC: The Bible: God's Word to Us

Opening Discussion

- What do you think the Bible is? What do you know about it?
- The Bible continues to be the best selling book year after year. Why do you think that is?
- What sets it apart from other books and makes it so unique?
- Have you read it? How was that? Did you understand what you were reading?
- What do you know about it? (*It contains 66 different books written over 1,600 years, yet all inspired by God and consistent in the message God wants to give to us. Let's look at some of what it says about itself*)
- Why might God use a book to show people about Himself?

Scripture

The Bible itself has some answers about what it is:

- Read 2 Timothy 3:16 – *It is the very words of God*
- Read Hebrews 4:12 – *It is alive and active*
- Read John 17:17 – *It transforms our hearts*
- Read Psalm 119:9 – *It guides our decisions*
- Read Psalm 119:160 – *Every word of it is true*

Story

- Tell the true story of Timothy Kane on the following page.
- Also, tell of a time in your own life when the Bible has given you comfort or answers in a time when you needed them or of how it gives you those on a daily basis. Also, share how we can all better understand the Bible through reading with others, Bible studies and praying for guidance.

Wrap-up

The Bible is God's message to mankind, and to you and me personally. When we read it God speaks to our hearts. Through reading it we get to know Jesus and His plan for our lives. The Bible teaches us, guides us, corrects us and transforms us. We can trust what it says for our lives because every word of it is true. When you read it, ask God to speak to your heart, and He will. It's a book like no other!

The Story of Timothy Kane

In 1992 Timothy Kane was 14 years old. He was home alone and two older boys came and said they wanted to break into a house to get some money. Tim agreed to go along, but when they entered, an elderly woman and her son were home. As the older boys killed the two, Tim hid under the dining room table. Tim was sentenced to 25 years to life in prison, along with the older boys. When he was interviewed years later, Tim said he went along with them because he didn't want to stay behind alone and because he didn't want to be called a "fraidy-Cat."

When he was locked up, Tim was put in solitary confinement for 45 days after he didn't understand a guard's directions. The only thing in the room, other than his bed and toilet, was a Bible. Tim started to read it and he became a Christian. He was eligible for parole in 2017, but a DA recommended not considering him for that until 2027. The parole panel disagreed and he was released in May 2017.

He told an interviewer that the faith he found in reading the Bible is what got him through the 25 years he spent in prison, which included losing his mother, three of his grandparents, an uncle, and friends. "God is bigger than any problem we can put ourselves into. I hope people take that (idea) from me," Kane said. "The pit that I fell into was deeper than anything that anyone could have helped me with individually, but God found a way to bring me through." He now wants to share his faith with kids in lock up.

TOPIC: Choose to be a Winner

Attention Getter

Read the story of Leo

- What are some similarities you see between you and Leo?
- What would have happened to Leo if he had felt sorry for himself?

Discussion

- Do you ever feel that you could never be a winner; that you could never do well in life?
- Do you ever think God only cares about people who have their acts together, or who live good lives?
- Is it ever too late for someone to become a winner? Can you think of any examples where everyone had given up on someone, and then they turned it around? How did that happen?

Scripture

When Jesus was here He was trying to let people know that He came to give hope to people who have messed up lives and who realize they need His help to become winners.

Read [Luke 15:11-32](#)

- Why did the kid leave?
- What happened to him when he was on his own?
- What choices did he make that got him into trouble?
- What made him decide to come back home?
- What was his dad's response to him?
- What would have happened if the dad saw his son as a loser? How would that have changed how the story ended?

Wrap-up

This is how God relates to us. It doesn't matter what we have done, or how we have wasted our lives. He wants to make us winners! Leo knew with God's help he could live a fulfilled life in spite of his circumstances. We can live fulfilled lives regardless of our circumstances if we will allow God to work in our lives too.

The Story of Leo

The video footage rolled with the words typed across the screen, “This morning begins the 24,373rd day of Leo Beuerman’s imprisonment – not a prison of walls, but one of seclusion...” The camera focused on a typewriter Leo used, on watches he patiently repaired, on a Bible opened to his favorite book, Job.

The narrator spoke of a cart Leo made, and through the camera we moved outdoors, hearing of mobility and freedom. Sunflowers towered above us. A cow, curious, loomed menacingly close. Undetected by Leo’s deafened ears, a train appeared, frighteningly close. Experiences like these, said the narrator, convinced Leo’s mother to keep him indoors.

We know by now Leo is different, some kind of genetic freak. And then we see him – a shriveled, twisted dwarf, all his features disproportionate, surely no more than two feet tall... the kind of person we’re trained to look quickly away from and not stare.

Leo was shown on a tractor he and a nephew specially designed for his bent body. We learned that his mother had died by now, and Leo was alone, free to live as fully as his prison of flesh and bones would permit. Every day meant a ritual for him. A painful and time-consuming ritual of manipulating chains and pulleys and carefully hoisting his tiny red cart onto the tractor. His hands moved awkwardly, never quite in the direction he intended. Screwing on a bolt was a tedious chore involving several tries.

But pain could be ignored. And Leo’s time had to be filled somehow. So every day he made the pilgrimage on his tractor to town. There, once again, Leo carefully lowered himself and his cart down the complex ladder of chains and hoists. After that, he was ready for business. Leo patiently waited in his cart, his wares – watches, pencils and pens – spread out before him. Adults, not wishing to stare at the handicapped, reflexively ignored him. His customers were mostly children and others who chose not to disregard the grotesque and deformed.

A proud “I guarantee it” sign, hand-lettered on Leo’s cart, spoke of his business philosophy. Leo never asked for charity, never took more than the advertised price for his wares. Independent and free, he had achieved his goal of being in business for himself, and he enjoyed life.

The film narrator spoke of Leo’s determination: “An action need not alter the course of human events to be heroic.” We saw Leo as... yes, “a unique creation of God.” Leo didn’t look on himself with pity and revulsion. Though imprisoned in his body, he always found ways to transcend it. Actions we call normal – like driving, speaking, typing, reading – to Leo were marvelous goals attained only by supreme effort. But Leo attained. He drove his tractor 30,000 miles until his vision failed at age 66. Even blind and deaf in a rest home, he hand made leather purses to sell. As a legacy of exceptional achievement, Leo left his thoughts, painstakingly typed:

“I think everyone at times feels lonesome, sorry for himself. But I’m not a quitter. Once weak and sickly, I’m now doing what no one thought possible. I’m in business for myself, enjoying life. Do I believe in the goodness of God? You all know the Bible saying, ‘All things work together for good, for them that love God.’ So my experiences in the past and to this very day, I can answer you truthfully, I most certainly do.”

No one could have quoted that verse to Leo and comforted him in the midst of his adversity, because few have felt his kind of suffering. But the fact that Leo could still affirm God’s goodness is a tribute to God’s working in him. Only 13 minutes had passed when the film ended almost as it had begun” “And so ends the 24373rd day of Leo Beuerman’s imprisonment.” Imprisoned, but yet exceptionally free. Circumstances could not keep Leo from being a winner.

TOPIC: Dealing with Hurts

Attention Getter

One young man in a Massachusetts detention center said: *"I get into fights...I don't know why. I just get really angry and out of control, and I look for a fight. After I fight, I feel better for a day or two, but then the feeling always comes back, and I fight again. And every time I fight, they add to my time here and it gets worse for me."*

Opening Discussion

- Have you ever felt like that guy?
- Native Americans have a saying, "Hurt People hurt people." Do you agree with that? Why?
- What are things that we sometimes do to distract ourselves from the hurts inside of us?
- Think of times you have taken a bad situation and made it worse with how you chose to respond to it? (*Getting high, getting drunk, taking revenge, using someone, stealing, lying*)
- Do these things make us feel temporarily good when we do them? (*Yes*)
- What do they do for us in the long run? (*They create more problems*)

Scripture

Read the story of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4:1-8

- What was the thing that hurt Cain? (*He was frustrated and angry that God liked Abel's sacrifices better than his*)
- What did God tell Cain to do about it? (*He told Cain, "This sin is crouching at your door, and it wants to take control over you. Why don't you deal with the sin that's trying to take control over you, instead of blaming your brother Abel for your problems?"*)
- Does Cain own up to his own issues?
- What does he choose to do instead?
- Does his choice make things better for him, or worse?
- Someone once said, *"When something bad happens to you, it can make you bitter, or it can make you better."* Can you think of any examples of that in your own life?
- What could Cain have done?

Wrap-up

It's easy to lash out when we are hurt, but it never solves anything and only brings more pain and trouble. A priest said, "We either transform our pain or we transmit it." If we transmit it, we only end up hurting others and ourselves more. We can also let God use our pain to transform us into people we never were before – to become more humble, and desiring to help others, etc. Has that ever happened to you? Let's ask God to use our pain to transform us, as he is here with us and wants to do that.

TOPIC: Death: A Door or Hole?

Opening Discussion

- When you hear the word "death," what do you think of?
- What is death?
- Do you think death is more like a hole or a door? (One you get put into, one you go through).
- Why does every living thing die? Then what happens?
- Have you ever lost someone who is close to you?
- Death is a hard thing to talk about, but we have all been faced with death or know someone who has died, or we will one day.
- The Bible talks a lot about death and what it means. Why do you think that is?

Scripture

- Read 1 Corinthians 15:42-50
 - Paul is talking about two kinds of bodies: earthly, and heavenly or spiritual. What happens to our physical bodies? What about our spiritual ones?
- Read 1 Cor. 15:51-58
 - What does Paul mean when he says that we will be transformed?
 - What is he talking about when he says that death has no victory or no sting?
 - What does it mean that we can have victory over death through Jesus? (*Emphasize: Even though death is something we should not fear, God wants us here on this earth to do His work. We all have something God wants us to do, a purpose, and He is the one who decides when we should go "home" to him.*)

Attention-Getter Story

Read "Birthday Party in Heaven" on next page. (*Explain that one of the Straight Ahead Bible study leaders wrote this poem that shows that death is really like new birthday for someone who puts their faith in Jesus.*)

Wrap Up

God wants us to live this life without having to fear death. He wants us to understand that this life on earth is part of life in whole. We can have eternal life with God when we trust in Jesus and give our lives to Him. He will give us new life here, a life with a purpose, and will welcome us home when we leave this earth. Are you ready?

Birthday Party In Heaven

By Deb Erickson

I wish we could be there, see the glow on your face,
To celebrate YOU in this heavenly place.

I wish that our hearts could share in this day,
For the most incredible party ever coming your way.

I wish one more time we could hug you again,
To tell you in person what a joy you have been.

Then maybe this sadness so etched in the heart,
Would vanish completely for the time we're apart.

We miss you more than could ever be told,
No one else could fill up the place that you hold.

It's hard not to think how we hoped things would be,
To turn our minds forward to your eternity.

There always will be the questions you see,
The pain and the love, the mixed memory.

But knowing that now things are better by far,
Gives us hope for the day when we are where you are.

I hope that this day of celebration for you,
Will spill over on earth to each of us too.

That joy that you feel as you walk with the Lord
That is the hope, our coming reward.

The one thing I know, one day we'll be there,
Just think of how awesome the joy we will share.

The gift for this party we've already given,
Our prayers are in part your placement in heaven.

I know that this day from the perspective of earth,
Will hold some sadness as we remember your birth.

But the sadness we feel is not here to stay,
As we anticipate the joy when we see you one day.

So, happy birthday friend, our dear son,
We release you to joy so party on, party on...

TOPIC: Faith

Opening Discussion

- What is faith? How would you define it?
 - One young man in a Bible study said, “*Faith is believing something you know isn’t true.*”
 - What do you think about that definition?
- Here’s the Bible’s definition of faith: ***Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see*** (Hebrews 11:1).
 - How is that different from what the young man said?
- Have you ever felt like, “*If I could just see a miracle, if I could just know for sure that God is for real, then I would have **faith** in God, and then my life would change*”?

Story

- Read what missionary Brother Andrew said about miracles:
- Do you agree with what Brother Andrew said?
- We all want some proof, some kind of sign from God – a miracle, But are you sure that a miracle would be enough? There were lots of people in the Bible who saw miracles, but they still wouldn’t believe.
- Why, do you think that is?

Scripture

- Read the story of Lazarus in John 11:1-48, 53
 - What happened in the story? Who saw this miracle? What did they do?
 - The Pharisees see **or hear about** a real-life miracle – Lazarus comes back from the dead to show them that Jesus is the Son of God, and what do they do? Do they have faith now? (*No, they want to kill him. In fact, it gets worse...*)
 - Read John 12:9-11 (*When they see other people having faith from the miracle, they want to kill Lazarus too!*)
 - Did the Pharisees have a problem with their heads, or with their hearts? (*Their hearts!*)
 - If you saw Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead, would you have faith in Him? Do you think it would last?

Wrap Up

If our “faith” is based only on what we see, including miracles, then it isn’t really faith and will fade in time when others convince us what we saw was not real. We do need evidence for faith, but not proof. Jesus wants us to have a relationship with Him as that is real and it comes through faith-belief plus trust. Trust is the key to any relationship and we need to Trust Him.

Brother Andrew's View on Faith

People do seem to long for dramatic supernatural experiences – not because they need them necessarily, but often simply because they're looking for something to give them stronger faith. But when they get their miracles, they're rarely changed by them. Why? Because dramatic and unusual experiences do not constitute a relationship.

Back in the early 50's in my own village, when our little band of believers went around telling everyone we could find about Jesus, we met a lot of people who said to us, "Well, if God heals that poor sick girl in your group, then we'll believe." Everybody knew this girl. She was terribly ill with tuberculosis. So we prayed for her and she was instantly, miraculously healed – just like that! A tremendous miracle, like something out of the New Testament! But nobody believed!

We look at that and think, "How can this be? If I experienced a miracle I could never doubt the Lord again!"

But experiences wear off.

We simply cannot survive on experiences, no matter how thrilling they may seem at the time. It's not the dazzling mountaintop experiences that reveal God to us; it is his continuous daily presence in the big and little events of our lives.

TOPIC: Freedom vs. Bondage

Opening Discussion

- How would you define freedom? (*Dictionary defines as: “not under the control or in the power of another forces, able to act or do as one wishes*)
- What does it mean to be in bondage? (To be under its control).
- Given those definitions do you think it is possible to be out of lock-up and still be in bondage to something else? What might some of those be? (*Addictions, familiar and destructive patterns, peer pressure, anger, etc.*)
- The second part of the definition has to do with being “free to act as one wishes or desires.” What do you think are your deepest desires? (*Try to get to the core ones of doing good, making a difference, helping people, being there for my family/child, etc.*)
- When it comes to being free to be all you most desire, how many of you feel like you are in bondage instead?

Scripture

Read Galatians 5:1 & 13-15 (*point out that whenever the Bible speaks of freedom, it is the freedom to love and to do well. It is always bondage to be controlled by our old ways*)

- From what has Jesus Christ set us free? What is the slavery Paul writes about (old patterns that keep us from living freely)
- What holds you back?
- Has anybody here ever been determined to do good when you get out? And then struggled with being enslaved to old ways of crime or addiction or old sinful patterns?

Read Romans 7:14-25

- What is the battle Paul is talking about? (Knowing what is right, but not being able to do it on his own).
- Have you ever felt like that? The old things you knew you were not going to do coming back and bringing you down again?

Read Romans 8:1

- What does it mean there is no condemnation?
- Paul is showing us we do have control over the old ways when God is in our lives. He gives us strength to move forward, to not be “condemned” to live like we used to live.
- He gives us the ability to be free.

Wrap-up

Like Paul, we can have freedom if we choose it, even while we are locked up. Old ways are easy to go back to, but they always lead to the same or worse results. Jesus wants us to have a full life. Ask Him to help you to get that

TOPIC: Generosity

Opening Discussion

- What does it mean to be generous?
- Do you know any generous people? What are they like?
- Is it important to be generous? Why?
- What does it mean to be generous?

Attention-getter Story

- Read the Story of Vanya
- Why did Vanya do what he did? Does it seem foolish for him to do that?
- How do you think the other kid felt? What about Vanya? Why

Scripture

Read Matthew 25: 31-40

- What are the ways Jesus said people treated Him well?
- What did He mean when he said, “However you treated the least of these, you treated me?”
- Why is that important to Him?
- Would you treat people differently if you thought they were Jesus?
- Someone once said, “God is generous so when we are generous, it brings us closer to God.” What do you think that means.

Read Isaiah 58:10-11

- God says to give what to the hungry? (ourselves) What does He mean?
- When we give of ourselves, what does Isaiah say will happen to us?

Wrap Up

One of the basic human needs is to be generous – to give ourselves to someone or something without expecting anything in return. When we do that, we find happiness that we do not find in other places. It brings us close to God. This week, find someone who needs help and do something good for that person. See how that feels, it could be the way God brings you closer to Him.

Story of Vanya

Straight Ahead's Director of International Outreach writes about a special meeting with a kid named Vanya: During one of our visits to the juvenile prison in Ukraine, we spoke about compassion, and how Jesus calls us to enter into the lives of others.

The guys were really listening and then we went to Matthew 25 where Jesus tells us however we treat those around us is how we treat Him. The prison can be a brutal place, but there is light in there so we gave the guys homework: find others who need help, see them as Jesus, and help them.

One of the kids who was listening most intently was Vanya. Vanya told us his mother had abandoned the family and his father had not responded to his letters. He's basically alone. When we were talking, I noticed Vanya's shoes, which were falling apart to the point where his socks were showing. I had brought a pair of shoes to give to someone who needed them so we gave them to Vanya. It was already cold and snow had fallen so he was thrilled, thanked us, and took off to bring his old shoes back to the barracks.

A little while later, Vanya returned along with another kid, who took Sergei aside. When Sergei came back, he whispered, "Someone has already done his homework." That kid told Sergei when Vanya went back to the barracks, he saw another kid whose shoes were worse than his, took the shoes we had given to him, and handed them to the other boy. He then put on his old shoes and came back. Vanya had seen Jesus and didn't walk away.

A couple of weeks later, we went back and stayed for about 5 hours, just talking and sharing. As we were leaving, Vanya especially gave hugs that were long and said so much. Before we left, I took Vanya aside and gave him my sneakers. He asked if they were for him and I told him of course. He couldn't believe it. His smile and hug will stay with me for a long time.

TOPIC: Goals and Decisions

Opening Discussion

- Where do you picture yourself 5, 10 years from now?
- Is that where you want to be, or is it just where life seems to be taking you? Do you have a plan to get where your desire to end up?
- Do you know what the “law of looking” is? Okay, listen to this story and then see if you can figure out what it is:

Stories

Read: Once a man was walking with his grandson after a snowstorm. They came to a field, and they were going to walk across it. “*Grampa,*” said the boy, “*Let’s see who can make the straightest path from here to the other side of the field, okay?*”

So off they went, and the boy was doing his best, watching his feet, being careful to look down and make sure they went one in front of the other, nice and straight. The grandfather never looked at his feet once. When they got to the other side of the field, they turned to see who won the contest.

- Who do you think walked the straightest line? Why? (*The grandfather did. He told his grandson, “I was able to walk a straight line because I picked a spot in the distance and I never took my eyes off of it the whole time we walked.”*)
- The “law of looking” is this: We tend to go in the direction we’re looking. That’s why, if you’re driving a car, one of the biggest rules is, “*Keep your eyes on the road.*” Otherwise, you might get distracted and drive off the road!
- Have you ever wanted your life to change, to do things differently, to start over? How did that work out for you? Why?
- It’s very easy to get distracted, isn’t it? We tend to take our eyes off the road. And then we **react** to what’s going around us, and we don’t **respond** the way we should.

So how do you keep from getting distracted and making good decisions? Listen to the story about Salome Thomas-El (next page).

Scripture

Getting to our goals takes making good decisions. The Bible has some things to say about that. As we read them, think about what they say about making good decisions?

- Proverbs 1:7 The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline.
- Proverbs 12:15 The way of a fool seems right to him, but a wise man listens to advice.

- Proverbs 14:16 A wise man fears the LORD and shuns evil, but a fool is hotheaded and reckless.
 - Proverbs 17:28 Even a fool is thought wise if he keeps silent, and discerning if he holds his tongue.
 - Proverbs 21:20 In the house of the wise are stores of choice food and oil, but a foolish man devours all he has.
 - Proverbs 23:19 Listen, my son, and be wise, and keep your heart on the right path.
 - Proverbs 29:11 A fool gives full vent to his anger, but a wise man keeps himself under control.
-
- We know that it's easy to get pulled off course when we react to things that happen to us, and we don't respond the way we should.
 - What's the difference between **responding** and **reacting**? (*A **reaction** is what we automatically do when we don't or won't control ourselves. For instance, an angry outburst is destructive to us and to others. A **response** is choosing to speak or act a certain way regardless of how we may feel... and it begins with taking **responsibility** for ourselves. When people hurt us, or something bad happens, we might feel angry or feel powerless or afraid, but we can still choose to respond with forgiveness and with calmness. That's called self-control. When we have **self-control**, things don't get **out-of-control!***)
 - Where can we get the strength for that kind of self-control, so we can **respond** and not **react**, and make good decisions? (*Obey the "law of looking!" Keep our "eyes on the prize!"*)

(If Time allows) Also Read Matthew 16:24-26

- Jesus said following Him is difficult and you'll have to make some tough choices. If that is the case, why should we do that?
- What does He mean when he says we can gain everything (the whole world) and lose our soul? (You can be rich or have a lot of things and still be miserable and hurtful).
- What can we gain when we follow Jesus?

Wrap-up

- Hebrews 12:2 says, *Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him, endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.* When we keep our eyes on Him, we can't go wrong.

Salome Thomas-El, The Teacher

Salome was interested in teaching kids how to play chess, because he wanted to teach them to learn to make good decisions. He would walk up to kids hanging around outside a convenience store and ask them if they wanted to learn to play chess. Of course the kids said “no,” chess not being the most fashionable sport on the playground. So Salome would tell them that telling him “no” was a bad decision, that if somebody offers to teach you something, you should give that person respect, and ask more questions to find out if you might need this information in the future.

That was a bad decision, Salome said to the kids, to dismiss me in that way. The kids didn't really know what to say, so they got tough, threatening him. Ah, Salome would say, another bad decision. I can see that, if you and I were playing chess right now, you would be losing, because in chess, you cannot make bad decisions and win. You have to make good decisions. Have you ever played chess? Salome asked.

I know how to play chess, one of the kids answered.

What is the legal move for a Rook? Salome asked the boy. The boy stood there silently until finally Salome spoke into his shifting eyes. *You're telling a lie, aren't you? You do not know how to play chess. A lie is another bad decision. If you knew how to play chess, you would not make so many bad decisions. You would know, intrinsically, the way to get ahead in life is to make good decisions. And so I will ask you again, and I want you to think about it for five seconds before you answer me. Don't answer right away, because that isn't wise. I want you to think about what I am going to ask you...*

Do you want me to teach you how to play chess? They all stood there, confused but interested, until one of them blurted out nervously, *Yes, I want to learn chess.*

Fine, then. You've made a good decision. This is the first rule of chess. Make good decisions. The only possible way you can lose in chess, and for that matter in life itself, is to make bad decisions. If you do not make bad decisions, you will not lose in chess, or in life. And the more good decisions you make, the better your life will be. It's as easy as that. Who else would like to learn to play chess? And, of course, the kids all wanted to, and he has influenced hundreds of young men since.

They learn to play, to plan, to reason, and they play men five times their age and beat them. They're going off to college, becoming successful, starting families, and raising children who feel secure in their homes. These are not the sons of doctors and lawyers, they are kids without fathers. But they learned what their fathers should have taught them. They've learned to make good decisions.

From the book *To Own a Dragon*, by Donald Miller.

TOPIC: God Uses Broken People

Opening Discussion

- Did you know that Jesus was a foster child?
- Who was his mother? Who was his father? (*God was his Father. On earth, God gave Jesus an earthly father named Joseph, who raised Jesus as his own son.*)
- When the Bible was written it was important for people to know who your relatives were and where you came from. People often judged you by who was in your family. Does that still happen today?
- Let's look at some the people who were in Joseph's family, as they would be part of Jesus' family too.

Scripture

Read Matthew 1:1-6

- Who were some of the great people of the Bible mentioned in there? Do you recognize any names? (*Some kids may know Abraham or David—if not, explain who they were and how God used them.*)

Read Joshua 2:1-7

- What did Rahab do for a living? (Prostitute). How did she help God's people?
- How do you think God saw Rahab? Why? What was important to God?

Read 2 Samuel 11:1-17

- What were some of the things that David did wrong here? (*Go on to explain how David killed Uriah and then married Bathsheba and they had Solomon*)
- David later asked God for forgiveness for what he had done and prayed that God would use him. How did God use David?
- In Jesus' time, people judged you by who was in your family. If that's the case, why would God have people like Rahab and David in Joseph and Jesus' family tree?

Read 1 Samuel 16:7

- What does that show about God and how he looks at us?

Wrap-up

We often think God sees us as other people do and He looks down on us and He can never forgive us, give us another chance or ever use us. But God shows us through Rahab and David that when we turn to him and put our faith in him, He will give us some pretty big things to do in this life.

TOPIC: God's Grace: A Gift we often Resist

Opening Discussion

- How many of you like to receive gifts?
- What's the best gift you can remember ever receiving?
- What makes a gift a gift?
- Can you think of a time when you received a gift you felt like you had to pay back somehow? How did that make you feel?
- When have you felt like you almost would rather *not* receive a gift?
- What are some of the reasons it could be hard to receive a gift? (*Feeling unworthy, feeling like I could never pay the person back, don't want to feel like less or that I need something from someone else*)

Story

Shawn was a kid who moved into the Straight Ahead Ministries Discipleship home. He really struggled with receiving the love that was being shown him in the home. At one point of his greatest frustration, and right before he did something that would land him back in lock-up, he said, "I'd be more comfortable if you would beat me, than love me!"

- Why do you think Shawn might make such a statement?
- Have you ever felt like that? Why

Scripture

Read [John 3:16-21](#)

- What is the gift Jesus is talking about?
- Why would God give such a gift?

Read [Romans 6:23](#)

- What would be a reason someone might not want to accept this free gift?
- When have you felt like you didn't deserve God's love?

Read [Ephesians 2:8-9](#) and [Romans 3:23](#)

- From these verses who deserves God's love or grace? (*No one*)
- Is it possible for someone to deserve it less than someone else? (*No*)
- According to Ephesians 2:8-9, who gets it? (*Those who have faith – who believe*)

Wrap-up

- It is clear that God's free gift is not about if you deserve it or not. No one does. It is about who God is, and our ability to trust that and receive His goodness. He says in John 10:10 "*I have come that you might have life in all its fullness.*" This is His gift.
- What would it take for you to receive this gift today?

TOPIC: Grieving

Opening Story and Discussion

A pastor went to the hospital to be with a friend whose young son had just died. When the pastor got there, he gave his friend a hug and sat next to him in silence. They sat there for a long time, without saying a word, and then the pastor left. “I wanted to say something to help Tom, but I didn’t know what to say so I just sat there with him. I felt so guilty.”

After the funeral, Tom came to the pastor and said, “Thank you for sitting with me at the hospital. It was the biggest comfort and help for me to have you there and not to have to say anything. God used that time.”

- Why do you think the pastor sitting with Tom helped him so much?
- What are some different ways that people deal with death or loss?
- Do you think it helps to have other people around? Why or Why not?
- What about if it’s someone who has been through a similar loss?

Scripture

We are going to read a story of what happened when a friend of Jesus died. Read [John 11:1-16](#)

- Why didn't Jesus go to Lazarus right away? (*Explain that Jesus delayed for a purpose, so that others could be helped in the future, and that sometimes we do not understand something until later, too*)

Read [John 11:17-29](#)

- What was Martha's reaction to Jesus? Was that reasonable? Did Jesus get upset?

Read [John 11:29-48](#)

- What was Mary's reaction when she saw Jesus?
- Why do you think Jesus cried, even when He knew that He was going to raise Lazarus? Why did God allow Lazarus to die only to be brought back to life? What was the result of that? (*See verse 45*)
- How can knowing that Jesus cares that much about His friends who were grieving help us when we grieve? (*If appropriate, share how your faith has helped you in times of pain.*)
- If time allows, read [Psalm 23](#), a familiar passage often read at funerals, and ask what is comforting about this Psalm.

Wrap-up

In an ancient Jewish tradition, when a person dies, friends come and sit with the family of the person who died. They just sit and do not say anything or offer advice. If the family wants to say something, the friends listen. If they want to cry, the friends give them a shoulder to cry on. This gives the family great comfort as they are not alone, but they do not feel pressured to speak. This is how God is with us. He is there so that we are not alone, He listens to our hurt and, as Jesus did before, He cries with us. If you are hurting, speak with your counselors here as they can help you, but also speak to God and ask Him to help you get through this. Remember, you are never alone.

TOPIC: Guilt vs. Shame

Opening Discussion

- What is guilt? Is it a good thing? What does it do in a positive way?
- How can guilt be something bad or destructive?
- What is the difference between guilt and shame? [Guilt helps you to see what you have done wrong and try to make it right. Shame is when "you" become the bad thing and not the bad thing that you have done.]
- What are some of the things that can happen when a person feels shame and thinks that he or she is bad?

Scripture

- Read Luke 5:1-11
 - Why do you think Jesus chose Simon's boat?
 - What made Simon agree to go out to fish more? What happened?
 - In Verses 8-9, it says that Simon bowed down? Why? What did that show? What did he know about Jesus at that time?
 - When Simon told Jesus to go away did he feel guilt? Shame? Both? Why?
 - What was Jesus' answer to him? Why? What was Jesus offering him?
 - When Simon followed Jesus, He gave him a new name, Peter, which means *Rock* and made Peter one of the leaders. Peter became a leader of the early church and told many people about Christ's love and how we can be forgiven for our sins.
- Read 1 Peter 1:1-4
 - What does Peter say that God gave him and us? What is mercy and what is the new life that Peter talks about?
 - If Simon had been too ashamed of himself to follow Jesus, what might have happened?
 - What is Jesus asking us to do with our shame? (*Give it to him and replace it with his forgiveness and love*)

Wrap-up

Guilt can show us what we are doing wrong and can be God's way of helping us to stay away from trouble. But when guilt turns to shame, it can keep us away from God. If you feel ashamed of yourself, give that to God and receive his forgiveness and mercy.

TOPIC: Heaven on Earth

Opening Discussion

- When you hear the word "Heaven" what do you think of?
- What do you think Heaven be like? How do you think it will be different from here?
- The Bible says this about heaven: "*He (God) will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.*" Revelation 21:4.
- How would you describe life here on earth? Is it like that?
- Why isn't life here on earth more like the life we think of heaven being?
- Do you think that there is a way to change some of that?

Scripture

- Read Matthew 22:34-40
 - What does Jesus say is the greatest commandment? Why is that first? How about the second?
 - What does Jesus mean when he says in verse 40, "The entire law and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments?" (*Hold up the Bible and explain that everything in it is based on those two commandments*)
 - What would the world be like if everyone kept those two commandments?
 - What would change?
 - What would change in your life?
 - How can we each start to make those changes? (*Share a story of a changed life and how that impacted others*)
- If time allows, Read Matthew 5:21-48 or take a section and discuss it and what a difference such living would make.

Wrap-up

If we put God first in our hearts and in our lives, He will give us the strength and ability to change the way we look at other people. It is not always easy, but when people see how God has changed us, they may start to wonder if God can help them too. This is how we show Jesus to other people.

TOPIC: Heroes

Opening Discussion

- Superhero comics and movies are really popular. Who are some of the most popular Superheroes? Why?
- What is a hero? Are there heroes in real life, not just in movies or comic books?
- What are some specific qualities people look for in a hero?
- Who are some heroes you have, or that other people have?
- Why do you think we have heroes?
- Can a hero play a big or important part in a person's life? If so, how?

Scripture

- How does Jesus measure up as a hero? Why?

Read [Matthew 21:1-11](#)

- What made people admire him?
- If you had been there do you think you would have looked up to him?
- What are some things he did that made him a hero? (*Matthew 21:14*)
- What happened to Jesus in the end?

Read [Luke 23:32-43](#)

- How was Jesus a hero when he died?
- How is Jesus different from other heroes who have died?

Read [Luke 24:1-7](#)

- Since Jesus is alive how could he affect your whole life now?

Wrap-up

Many heroes that we have, we will never get a chance to know personally. Jesus is someone who has the highest qualities we could imagine, and he wants to be our personal friend. He will help us to model our lives after him, and show us the way to live. We have to decide if we want him to be our personal hero.

TOPIC: Honesty

Opening Discussion

- What are some reasons people choose not to be honest? (*Wanting to be liked, to protect themselves, not wanting to hurt others, etc.*)
- How old do you think you were when you told your first lie? Why do you think you chose to lie?
- Think of a time you lied to protect yourself, but it actually hurt you in the end. In what ways might it hurt you even if you don't get caught?
- In what ways does lying hurt others?
- Think of ways your lying may have affected how you view yourself.
- What do you think are the risks involved in being honest?

Story

Read Andre's Story below:

Andre was excited as he came to the Bible study group. "I had my meeting today and they said I can go home in a few weeks. And God helped me!" The group leader asked Andre how God had helped him and Andre told what happened: "During the meeting, they asked me why I was doing so well in the program and why I thought I was strong enough to go home. I knew they wanted me to say that my counseling and my working the program had helped and that is true. But I also knew it was because of my faith in Jesus and His helping me with the counseling and the program. But I was scared that if I said that, they wouldn't let me go home. But then I remembered in the Bible Jesus saying not to deny Him before people so I told them the whole truth. Now I am going home!"

- What would you have done if you were Andre?

Scripture

Read story about Esau and Jacob from [Gen. 25:24-34](#) and chapter 27 (*You may want to paraphrase the story*)

- What did Jacob get as a result of lying? (*Mention both the positives and the negatives*)
- What did he lose? (*Connection with his family, peace, etc.*)
- Was he able to enjoy what he did get?
- What would have been possible if Jacob would have been honest?

Wrap-up

Read [1 John 1:5-9](#)

- Jesus invites us to walk in the light, the truth. That is how we have His protection and connection with Him and each other.

TOPIC: Jealousy

Opening Discussion

- What kinds of things make people jealous?
- What makes you jealous? What is jealousy?
- What does inferiority have to do with jealousy?
- Have you ever done anything about it when you were jealous of someone?
- What are different things people will do when they are jealous? (*Cut the person down, destroy their reputation, steal, hurt them*)

Scripture

Read story of David and Bathsheba in 2 Samuel 11:1-17, 26-27

- Who was David jealous of?
- What did he do about it?
- What did his jealousy finally lead to?
- What should he have done?
- What should you do when you are in a situation where you become very jealous?
- How would your life be different if you were never jealous?
- How do you think God can help us with our jealousy?

Wrap-up

Read Psalm 51, and explain how David wrote this song after his sin was exposed.

David realized that he needed to admit his wrongs to God and that only God could cleanse him from it. Humanly we will be jealous a lot. But comparing ourselves to others will only trap us further in our jealousy. As the Psalm says, God is interested in a broken spirit, and then He will take over and help us and do for us, what we can't do for ourselves.

TOPIC: Jesus Loves You... and He Likes You

Opening Discussion

- How many of you have good friends? What makes them good friends?
- How many of you have someone who loves you? Does that person like you? What is the difference between liking someone and loving them? Can you have one without the other?
- If someone says that they like you, what does that do for you? How does that change how you feel and how you interact with that *person*? (*You want to be with that person and to know him or her better. If necessary, explain that there are some people we may love, like a relative, but we may not like that person too much*)
- The Bible tells us that Jesus loves us, but do you think He likes you? Why? Why not?

Scripture

Read Mark 10:17-22

- What did the rich young man want to know from Jesus? Why was that a good question to ask?
- Why did Jesus tell him to sell all of his things and follow Him? (*Money was too important; eternal life was through faith in Jesus—following Him*)
- Why was Jesus sad when the young man went away? (Verse 21) (*He genuinely loved and liked him and wanted to spend time with him.*)
- In John 15, Jesus calls his followers his friends. What does it mean that Jesus wants to be your friend?

Wrap Up

- In his Book, *The Wisdom of Tenderness*, Brennan Manning writes: *Several years ago, Edward Farrell of Detroit took his two-week summer vacation to Ireland to celebrate his favorite uncle's 80th birthday. On the morning of the great day, Ed and his uncle got up before dawn, dressed in silence, and went for a walk along the shores of Lake Killarney. Just as the sun rose, his uncle turned and stared straight at the rising sun. Ed stood beside him for twenty minutes with not a single word exchanged. Then the elderly man began to skip along the shoreline, a radiant smile on his face.*

After catching up with him, Ed commented, "Uncles Seamus, you look very happy. Do you want to tell me why?"

"Yes, lad," the old man said, tears washing down his face. "You see, the Father is very fond of me. Ah, me Father is so very fond of me."

- God is very fond of you. He likes you as well as loves you. Live this week knowing that Jesus likes you and see how that feels. He really does and maybe that will make you skip like Uncle Seamus!

TOPIC: Joy

Opening Discussion

- Do you know someone who always seems to be happy? Why do you think that is? Do you think that they are never down or sad? Are you like that? Why/Why not?
- When you hear the word "Joy" what do you think of? Is there a difference between happiness and joy? Let's see what the Bible says:

Scripture

Read Romans 5:1-11

- According to Paul, what brings us peace with God? What has Jesus done for us?
- How can that help us when we run into problems?
- What does it mean when it says that problems help us to develop endurance?
- It says that Jesus died for us when we were still what? What does that tell us about God's love for us? How can that bring us joy?

Read John 15:9-17

- Why does Jesus say that he has loved us and wants us to love one another? (*v 11 says it's so that we will have his joy and so we can share it*).
- What does it mean that Jesus chose us? What does it mean that he chose us to love us and to do his work here on earth?
- How can that bring us joy, even when we do not always feel happy?

Wrap-up

There is greater joy in God through Jesus Christ than any other source. It's a joy that will last, a joy that enables you to live above the circumstances of life and a joy that is catching. When others observe genuine joy they long for that as well as the love it is a reflection of. The love that brings true joy is a love that gave up everything, that sacrificed, agonized and was poured out for all mankind. This joy is not cheap; it's a rare and wonderful gift. Enjoy that joy today!

Closing Prayer

Father, please fill each of us with that unspeakable joy that comes from you alone. Use it to make the good news of Jesus attractive to those we meet.

TOPIC: Living Each Day to the Fullest

Opening Discussion

- If you could have a button that you could press each time you had a tough problem in your life, that would transport you to the future just far enough to avoid the problem, would you want that?
- What would be good about that?
- What would be not so good? (*Never learn, whole life would be gone quickly, etc.*)
- Do you ever fall into the trap of “wishing your life away” – for example, wishing this wouldn’t have happened, or that something else would have happened?
- What is your greatest wish right now? Do you think that getting that would keep you happy?
- Do you think it would be possible to be truly happy even if that wish didn’t come true? Do you know others who have been happy without that?
- How do you think someone becomes “truly happy?”

Scripture

Read Romans 5:3-7

- How can problems bring hope according to Paul, who was a follower of Jesus?

Read Philippians 4:4-7; 13

- Paul was in prison when he wrote this. Do you think it was hard for Paul in there? He had been a powerful man and now was in prison for his faith.
- How does Paul use his hard times to help others?
- Have you experienced God bringing good things out of your time in lock-up? What things?

Wrap-up

The apostle Paul is a person who had experienced having much, and having very little in his life, yet he said, “I have learned the **secret** of being content in any and every situation (Philippians 4:12). That is real Freedom! Listen to what Paul says while he’s in prison as he’s telling his friends how he’s doing (read Philippians 1:12-14). First he tells them to be happy because he has been able to tell the guards about Jesus, and secondly because others in prison are speaking about God more boldly because of his being there.

True contentment comes from having Jesus Christ within us, not from the things around us. That becomes a rip-off of chasing things that can never make us truly happy.

TOPIC: Lying to Yourself

Opening Discussion

- What do you think are some reasons people lie?
- What are some reasons you have lied?
- A big reason people lie is to protect themselves. What can you protect yourself from when you lie?

Story

Andrei grew up in an orphanage and he had been there since he was 5 years old. When someone asked him why he was there, Andrei told him his parents had died in a car accident so he had to come to the orphanage. Later, Andrei told the other guy the truth: “My parents were alcoholics and they wouldn’t stop drinking and couldn’t take care of me so they put me here. It was easier to tell myself and others they died because it didn’t feel like they had chosen alcohol over me.” After Andrei told the leader and himself the truth, he felt better.

- Why was it easier for Andrei to believe the lie he made up?
- How did it help him? How did it hurt him?
- Why did he feel better after he told the truth?
- Do you find yourself lying more to others or to yourself?
- What are reasons we lie to ourselves?
- What are some things you have lied to yourself about?

Scripture

Read: the story of David, Bathsheba, and Nathan

2 Samuel 11:1-4

- What did David have to tell himself in order to do what he did? (“*Her husband will never find out.*” “*I’m so powerful I have a ‘right’ to whatever I want,*” etc.)

2 Samuel 11:5-27

- What other lies did David have to tell himself after Bathsheba got pregnant?

2 Samuel 12:1-6

- What does this reveal about what David really believes about what is right?
- What do you think are the reasons David didn’t see himself in the story?
- Can you think of times you have been blinded by your own lies?
- What could be a reason you would want to see the truth?

2 Samuel 12:7-9

- What good could come out of being confronted with the truth, for David?

2 Samuel 12:13

- This became a turning point for David. Are the lies you have been telling yourself that you need to confess and receive God's forgiveness for? This could be a turning point for you.

Read Psalm 51:1-10 – the psalm David wrote after this turning point,

- Verse 6 says, “*You desire honesty from the heart.*” How would David's story have turned out differently if there had been honesty in his heart?
- How might your story have turned out differently?

Wrap-up

Today you get to begin a new story – with God's forgiveness you are clean and new.

TOPIC: Peer Pressure

Opening Discussion

- What is peer pressure?
- Have you ever been affected by it?
- What are some things people do when they are under peer pressure?
- What makes it so difficult to resist peer pressure?
- What are some ways we are affected by the people around us?
- Can it be positive or negative? Give examples.
- What do you think of people who hardly ever decide anything for themselves, but follow others in everything?
- What do you think of people who stand up for what they think and dare to be different?

Attention Getter

- What is a pickle? (*It is a cucumber that is put into a jar of vinegar and salt and spices*)
- How does the cucumber become a pickle? (*It absorbs the liquid around it until it is transformed into the image of a cucumber*)
- How are people like cucumbers that become pickles? (We are all affected by what is around us and the outside becomes a part of us).

Scripture

Read Romans 12:1-5 (whole chapter if time allows)

- Is what Paul wrote hard to do? Why?
- If people did that, would they go against their peers?
- What would your life be like if you lived like that?

Read Psalms 139:1-5, 13-18, 23, 32-43

- How do you think knowing that you are already known and accepted by God could affect how you relate to peer pressure?

Wrap-up

Wouldn't it be powerful to be free from the need to be a people pleaser, to have to have everyone like us in order to feel good about ourselves? Psalm 139 tells us that the only one who really matters, God, already knows us completely and loves and accepts us the way we are. If we take His acceptance, we will be free to be exactly who we were created to be.

TOPIC: Perseverance

Opening Discussion

- What are some reasons that people, after doing good, might give up? (*Fear of failure, fear of success, don't think can keep doing well so might as well screw up now before have so much to lose, etc.*)
- What are some times you have given up?
- What are some tough or bad things that happened that you weren't expecting when you did good or made some good choices? (*Disappointments, others around me didn't change, didn't get the job applied for, etc.*)
- Do you know someone who keeps moving forward or keeps getting up again even when things don't seem to go well?
-

Story

Read the story of Wilma Rudolph.

- What do you think made Wilma keep going?

Scripture

Read Galatians 6:7-9 (NLT if have it)

- What does it mean that, “you will always reap what you sow”?
- Does this mean that you will always get to reap what you sow right away?
- When you do well or make right choices do you always reap the benefit right away?

Read verse 9 again

- What does this verse say about that? (*Don't get discouraged – you will reap at the appropriate time*)

Read Romans 5:3-5

- What does it say we get from going through hard times? (*Endurance, perseverance*)
- What does endurance and perseverance produce? (*Hope that doesn't disappoint*)

Read Luke 24:1-7

- Since Jesus is alive how could He affect your whole life now?

Wrap-up

Sometimes it doesn't seem worth it to keep going or doing well. God promises hope and blessing if we don't give up. It may not look like what we thought it would, but if you stick it out with Him, He's got your back.

The Story of Wilma Rudolph

Wilma didn't get much of a head start in life. A bout with polio left her left leg crooked and her foot twisted inward so she had to wear leg braces.

After seven years of painful therapy, she could walk without her braces. At age 12 Wilma tried out for a girl's basketball team, but didn't make it.

Determined, she practiced with a girlfriend and two boys every day. The next year she made the team. When a college track coach saw her during a game, he talked her into letting him train her as a runner.

By age 14 she had outrun the fastest sprinters in the U.S.

In 1956 Wilma made the U.S. Olympic team, but showed poorly. That bitter disappointment motivated her to work harder for the 1960 Olympics in Rome – and there Wilma Rudolph won three gold medals, the most a woman had ever won!

Today in the Word, Moody Bible Institute, Jan, 1992, p.10.

TOPIC: Real Value

Opening Discussion

Ravi Zacharias said, "The loneliest moment in life is when you have just experienced what you thought would deliver the ultimate, and it has let you down."

- What do you think that means?
- It's like you think, "*If I could only have this thing, or do that thing, then I'd be happy and satisfied!*" Share some of those times.
- And when you finally got that thing you wanted so badly, and it turned out to be not quite what you had hoped for, how did that feel?
- This happens to everyone, even some people in the Bible, so let's look at a couple of them.

Scripture

Read Mark 10:17-22

- What did the rich young man want to know?
- It seems like he had everything, and did the right things, what was missing in his life?
- What was Jesus' solution for the young man?
- Why didn't he choose to follow Jesus?

Read Mark 10:28-31

- What did Jesus promise for those who follow Him?
- Was Jesus talking about money or something else?
- What would following Jesus like that cost? What would you receive? (His love, community, forgiveness, eternal life, but also persecution).

Read Matthew 13:44-46. Jesus talked about what was the most valuable thing.

- Matthew is telling us, "*The best, most valuable thing is realizing that God made us and knows us. That Jesus died for us, loves us, and will never leave us. That's His Kingdom.*"
- If there's anything in your life that doesn't fit with that reality, then sell it. In essence, Jesus is saying, *Put down the million things in your life that are worth only a dollar, and grab the one thing that's worth a million!*

Wrap-up

God wants us to know His love and caring for us. Sometimes that means having different priorities and making hard choices. But when we seek Him, He gives us a new life that is so much better than we could have imagined. Are you willing to take that chance?

TOPIC: Sin

Opening Discussion

- If I ask you what sin is, what comes to your mind? Not things that *are* sins, but what *is* sin itself?
- The word most used in the Bible for sin is one that means "missing the mark"—like when you shoot an arrow at a target and do not hit the bull's eye.
- How are those things sin? (*Not putting God first*)
- Who sins? (Romans 3:23)
- Why doesn't God want us to sin? (Separates us from God, hurts us)
- We will read about the first sin and how it affected mankind's relationship with God.

Scripture

Read Genesis 3 (*explain that there was no sin before this*)

- Before they sinned, what was life like for Adam and Eve? Where was God and how did they communicate with him?
- God told them that they could do anything except eat from the tree of knowledge of Good and Evil and from the Tree of Life (those two trees represented all knowledge and eternal life—which are God's to know and to give). Why would he give them that choice?
- How did the serpent tempt them to sin? Did they have a choice not to do that? Do you think that you might have done that?
- What was their sin? (*Disobedience; Wanting to be independent from God; Wanting to be like God by knowing everything*)
- After they ate the fruit, what happened? What did they realize? (*Their nakedness represents a loss of innocence*)
- What did they do next? Why? (*Felt guilt*)
- Where was God? What changed in their relationship? (*Never before had there been anything between them and now they hid from Him*)
- What other consequences were there?
- Sin separates us from God in some way and God wants to be close to us.

Read Romans 5:12-19 (*explain*)

- How can we come back to God, to not be separated?
- What does it mean that as sin came into the world through one man, we can be made right with God through one Man?

Wrap-up

Sin is something that interferes with our relationship with God. Making things right with God by putting our faith in Jesus will restore our relationship with Him!

TOPIC: Taking a Chance: Sharing your Faith

Attention Getter

Read "The Meanest Kid in Lock-up"

Opening Discussion

- Why didn't John want to ask JB to come to the Bible study? What did he think might happen? What did happen?
- What might have happened if John didn't listen to what God was telling him to do?

Scripture

Read: Acts 9:1-9

- What was Saul doing against Christians? Why do you think he was doing that?
- What happened to Saul on the road to Damascus? Why do you think that God did something so dramatic?

Read: Acts 9:10-22

- What did God want Ananias to do?
- Why was Ananias afraid? Did he have a good reason to be afraid?
- What made Ananias finally get up the courage to go?
- When he did go to Saul, what do you think went through his mind?
- What was the result of his obedience?
- Are there people here or outside who are like Saul or JB or ones you just do not want to share your faith with? Why?
- How can we change that?

Wrap-up

Sometimes God asks us to do some scary things, like share our faith with others or to love our enemies. We cannot do those by ourselves, but Jesus said, "With God, all things are possible." Do you believe that? If you do, pray to ask God to show you what he wants you to do.

"The Meanest Kid in Lock up"

John had a chance to start a Bible study at a new program so the first night he went, he decided to get to know the guys by playing basketball with them. All of the guys were respectful, except for JB, who would curse and throw elbows at John and the others. JB just didn't seem to care at all.

After John started going to the program each week, JB would just stare at him or would go into another room when John tried to speak with him. John noticed the JB was always on edge and would get into fights or put people down. He was probably the meanest kid John had ever met in lock up. John knew he should try to talk with JB more, but he kept his distance.

One day John was heading to do the Bible study and he saw JB doing his laundry so he just walked by. Something made John stop and he felt like God was telling him to ask JB to come to the study. At first, John tried to walk away, but he knew he had to ask so he did and, surprisingly, JB agreed to come. During the study, JB just sat there and didn't say anything. But the next week, he came and the next and he started to participate each week.

After a while, JB asked God to forgive him and asked Jesus to change his life. John and the staff noticed that JB's attitude had changed and JB kept growing closer to God and to others—he even asked someone to forgive him for blowing up and he had never done that before. JB started getting other kids to come to the Bible study and when he left the program, God used JB to bring others to Christ. God had given JB a new life and a new attitude.

To this day, John is thankful that he listened to God and not to the fears that can keep him locked in silence.

TOPIC: Taking Advice

Opening Discussion

- On a scale of 1 to 10, how willing are you to take advice from others?
- What are some reasons you don't want to take advice? (*Want to learn things for myself. Don't want anyone else to tell me what to do.*)
- What do you feel like you're losing if you follow someone else's advice? What could you gain?
- What is a time in your life that you can look back to and wish you had followed someone's advice?
- Do you think it takes more or less maturity to listen to advice from others? Why?

Scripture

Read Proverbs 4:1-13

- This is talking about God's wisdom. In verse 7, what is the reason wisdom would be worth paying all that you have for?
- What are some things you gain from that kind of understanding?

Read Proverbs 15:21-22

- How have you seen these verses play out in your life?
- Who are some people you know who have given advice to you that could be like Godly wisdom?
- What would you gain if you made it a practice to ask for input or advice?
- Think about one person this week you will ask for input or advice from. (*Have different kids share who that would be for them*)
- What do you think you would gain if you made this a regular practice of your life?

Wrap-up

There is a Chinese proverb that says, "The best time to plant a tree is twenty years ago; the second best time to plant a tree is now."

- What do you think that means?

Let's pray for an open heart to hear God's wisdom to each of us this week.

TOPIC: Trusting Others

Opening Discussion

- On a scale of 1 to 10, how important would you say trust is in a relationship? Why?
- What happens in a relationship that has no trust?
- Think about a relationship where you felt like you were trusted – how do you think that affected your relationship?
- When have you been in a relationship with someone where you didn't feel trusted? How did that affect you and how you were in that relationship?
- Can you think of a person who is absolutely 100% trustworthy? (*No one is*)
- Can anyone ever earn your 100% trust? (*No*)
- **So if you trust someone, at least part of it is not earned, but a gift.** What do you think about that statement?

Scripture

Read John 2:24-25. The NIV translation says, "Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew what was in a man's heart."

- Who do you think Jesus and God might have trusted, even though he didn't entrust himself to these people? (*He trusted Mary, a human, to raise his son. Jesus trusted Judas with the money even though he knew he would betray him in the end*)
- How do you think Jesus could do that? (*Because he ultimately trusted God with his life*)

Read Psalm 119:138

- How much can we trust God on a scale of 1 to 10, according to this verse?

Read Isaiah 26:4

- How would trusting God completely give you the ability to give trust as a gift to others?

Read 2 Timothy 1:12 "*For I know the one in whom I trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him.*"

- What difference do you think it could make in your relationships if you could give trust as a gift?
- How would it affect you, if you were given trust even if you hadn't 100% earned it?

Wrap-up

You are only free to give trust to someone if you are 100% sure that you have *entrusted* your life to God – where you know that he has you covered. You can afford to be let down and disappointed because he is able to guard what you have entrusted him.

TOPIC: The Power of Prayer

Opening Discussion

- Do any of you ever pray?
- What kinds of things do you pray about?
- Have you ever had God answer one of your prayers? What happened?
- How do you think prayer can be powerful?
- In what situations would we need prayer for power?
- Who and what would we fight against with prayer?

Scripture

- Read 2 Corinthians 10:4 and discuss.
- Read James 5:13-15 and discuss.
- Read Ephesians 6:10-20
 - What do you think this means?
- Read James 1:5-8
 - Why do you think Jesus is telling us not to be wishy-washy?

Wrap-up

There are many things in our lives that we can't handle on our own. God has given us a power that is guaranteed to win. We have the choice of whether or not we want to use it. If we turn our lives over to God, His Holy Spirit will live inside of us and will be there to fight for us. Even when He lives inside of us we need to decide each day to use the power of prayer in our lives.

TOPIC: What's So Special About Jesus?

Opening Discussion

- Who are your favorite stars and why?
- What makes people want to be like them?
- Think about a time when you saw photographers hounding celebrities. What did you see?

While cameras are relatively new, crowds that follow famous people are not. Today we're going to look at a story of one of the most famous people of all time. And we'll try to discover why crowds were so into Him.

Scripture

- Read John 6:1-2
 - Why did people follow Jesus? (*They wanted to see miracles*)
- Read John 6:3-7
 - What did Jesus ask Philip? Why? (*To test him*)
 - To test him in what way? (*To see where his faith was*)
 - What does Jesus' question show about God? (*God cares about our needs and wants us to trust him*)
- Read John 6:8-9
 - How did Andrew help?
 - What did it reveal about his faith? (*He believed partially*)
 - Do you think you would be like Andrew, believing, but not all the way?
- Read John 6:10-13
 - What happened next?
 - What does this reveal about God? (*He is not hindered in any way by the stuff in our lives. He enjoys making impossible situations possible*)
- Read John 6:14
 - How did the crowd react? (*They believed*)

Wrap-up

Jesus was unlike anyone who has ever lived. He was perfect, and yet he chooses people who have messed up, who do not have perfect faith. This shows that God cares about you more than you can imagine. He cares not only for your daily physical and emotional needs, but also for your spiritual needs. That's why Jesus came to die – so that you and I can have a personal relationship with God in Heaven and live forever with Him there.

TOPIC: Who Gets the Power?

Opening Discussion

- How do you know who has the most power?
- Have you ever felt like you gave your power away to someone you didn't even respect?

Attention-getter

Read "He Gave his Power Away"

- When he went after the guy who talked trash to his sister, what do you think he was trying to do with his power? Do you think he got what he was after?
- Do you agree the guy gave up power?
- In what ways did he actually give power to the guy he hated?
- Who in your life have you given power to, even if they were the last person you would want to have it? Talk about how that is true for you.

Scripture

Talk about how Saul had been chosen by God to be the very first king in Israel, and how he had been given a lot of power. Tell how David had been chosen by God, how God had used him to defeat the Philistines, and now had been brought to the palace to bring joy to Saul with his music.

Read I Sam. 18:5-11

- What made David change in the eyes of Saul? Do you think David had tried or even wanted to take Saul's power?
- What made Saul feel like David was a threat to his power?

Read I Sam. 23:7,14 & 21-23

- What did Saul's jealousy for David do to his life as a king? In what ways do you think he gave his power away?

Read I Sam. 26:7-12

- Why do you think David didn't kill Saul? What does this show about who David gave his power to? Do you think this made David more or less powerful as a person?

Wrap-up

It's really easy we give our power away to the very people we least want to give it to. We can have our whole lives driven by hate for another person or driven by fear of losing someone's approval. God longs to have us live free from the control of others' power, and instead allow us to rely on His power to live free.

He Gave his Power Away

One young man came to Bible study frustrated that he was locked up again... When asked what happened, he said, "I had to protect my sister from this dude who was talking trash to her."

When the Bible study leader asked him if he liked that guy who had been talking trash to his sister he quickly responded, "No, I hate him!"

"Then why would you give him so much power?" the leader asked.

"What do you mean? I didn't give him any power!" he quickly said.

"Well, he's still out there. And you're in here. And how can you help your sister or anybody else while you're in here? It seems to me, that you gave up an awful lot of your power to a person who you don't even particularly like."

TOPIC: Wisdom

Opening Discussion

- Would you rather:
 - Have 90 degrees outside or 9 inches of snow?
 - Have to sleep on a small raft in a pool or on a kitchen table?
 - Be rich or poor?
 - Be rich or wise?
- What is “wisdom?”
- When you hear that someone is a “wise person,” what does that mean to you? (Not just someone who is smart, but someone who knows how to use their knowledge)
- The Bible says a lot about wisdom. Let’s compare the wisdom of two insects and two animals.

Scripture

Read: Proverbs 30:24-28 (*Point out the difference in each of these animals*)

- Ants: *no leader to tell when/how to work; not strong but survive because of foresight; make preparations.*
- Rock Badgers: *not fierce; can’t defend themselves; live in cliffs for protection from predators.*
- Locusts: *no leader; advance like an army and devastate crops.*
- Lizards: *easily caught by predators; find their safety in palaces and homes; find way in.*

- How does each of the animals show wisdom? (*They use what they have*)
- What does that say about how we can be wise? (*Not try to be something we are not, but rely on what God has given us*).

Read James 1:5-8

- If we want to be wise, how does the Bible tell us to do that?
- Why does James say we have to have faith without doubting? How does that show wisdom? (*Showing we rely on God as our source of wisdom*).

Wrap Up

- Read “Wisdom Triumphs Over Physical Strength”
- When we rely on our physical strength or even just our “smarts,” we can get in trouble. God wants us to rely on Him and to use wisdom. That’s what will last and bring us to where we want to go in life!

Wisdom Triumphs over Physical Strength:

A Turn of the Tables: There is a story of a missionary in India who was attacked in the jungle by a jaguar. The jaguar was a skillful hunter and was much more powerful than the man. The animal was an expert at killing its prey.

The missionary appeared to stand no chance against the beast. But, the missionary, who was unarmed, knew one way to save his life. It didn't seem to make sense but it was the only thing he could do and he gave it a try.

So, when the jaguar, which was biting his head, let go for a better bite, the man stuck his hand right into the mouth of the big cat. He didn't stop there. He continued to reach farther and farther down its throat, until the man's entire arm was in the mouth of the jaguar.

The cat probably thought, "This is easy. The man is no longer fighting me, but is actually feeding himself to me!" But within a few minutes the cat began to choke. With the man's arm stuffed way down inside, the cat couldn't breathe!

The tables had been turned and now the cat was in danger of dying! As a last act of desperation, the jaguar freed himself and ran away. The man did with wisdom what he could never do with physical strength.

TOPIC: Would You Rather Be a Victim?

Opening Discussion

- What does it mean to be a victim?
- What are some of the ways you have experienced being a victim? (*Have kids share ones that are **not** related to physical or sexual abuse*)
- What are some of the bad feelings you have had as a victim? (*Anger, powerless, weak, hurt, sad, etc.*)
- Can you think of any good feelings you got from it? (*Sympathy from others got to feel sorry for myself, etc.*)
- What could be some of the things that could feel good about having others feel sorry for you?

Scripture

Read the story about the man by the pool of Bethesda in [John 5:1-9](#)

- Why do you think Jesus asked a man who had been paralyzed for 38 years if he wanted to get well?
- What could have been some reasons he wouldn't want to?
- What in the story shows that he saw himself as a victim?
- What could he have liked about that? (*familiar, friends are all there, no need to get a job*)
- What did Jesus tell the man to do? (*Pick up his mat and walk. To take responsibility for his life*)
- What is one area in your life where you feel stuck as a victim?
- Imagine Jesus coming up to you asking you, "Do you want to get well – unstuck?"
- What would you honestly say?
- What would it cost you if you said, "yes?"
- What would it cost you if you said, "no?"

Wrap-up

Jesus said, "I have come that you might have life abundantly." Are you willing to get unstuck from being a victim? If you are, it takes work, but He will give you back your life.

TOPIC: You Are Wanted

Opening Story

Read Mother Theresa's excerpt on loneliness below from *In the Heart of the World*:

“There is much suffering in the world --- very much. Material suffering, suffering from hunger, suffering from homelessness, from all kinds of disease. But I still think that the greatest suffering is being lonely, feeling unloved, just having no one. I have come more and more to realize that it is being unwanted that is the worst disease that any human being can ever experience.”

Opening Discussion

- Do you agree with what Mother Theresa said? What do you think she means when she talks about feeling unwanted?
- Do you know people who have felt unwanted? Have you ever felt like that? What is that feeling like?
- How do you think that could change?

Scripture

Read: Matthew 9:9-13

- Matthew was a tax collector. In that society, tax collectors were looked down upon and were outcasts because they worked for the Romans, who took over Israel, and because they often took more money than they deserved. “Sinners” were also shunned by society and cast aside.
- Why did Jesus go to Matthew's house? What does it show when he ate with him? (*We eat with people we want to get to know better*).
- Why do you think Jesus would ask such an outcast to follow him?
- How do you think that Matthew felt when Jesus reached out to him and invited him to become his follower?
- What did Jesus mean when he said that it is not healthy people who need a doctor, but sick people?

Read: Matthew 12:46-50

- How does Jesus see those who follow him?
- How do you think Matthew felt about being part of Jesus family?
- Do you think that you can be a part of Jesus' family? How? If you are, what should you do? (Reach out to others so they feel wanted).

Wrap-up

Everyone needs to feel wanted. It is something that is important to each of us. If you are feeling unwanted, remember that Jesus not only loves you, but He wants to be with you. When you come to him, He comes to you and welcomes you into His family.

TOPIC: You've Got What It Takes

Opening Discussion

- Has anyone ever said to you, “You’re too young to do such-and-such?”
- How did that feel to you?
- When have you been afraid *that* you didn’t have what it *takes*, that you wouldn’t be able to live up to somebody’s expectations, *or* that you wouldn’t be able to “get it done?”
- When have you felt like a failure?

Scripture

Read about Moses. Exodus 3:10-15, 4:1, 8-17.

- Why do you think Moses makes all those excuses? (*He’s afraid*)
- What do you think he’s afraid of? (*Being hurt, embarrassed, looking bad*)
- What do you think about God’s patience with Moses?
- Would you have been that patient?
- God ended up giving Moses a helper. What does that show about God’s caring?
- In what ways do you think God would be that patient with you?

Read about Gideon. Judges 6:11-16

- Gideon says, “God, if you like me so much, why is my life like this?”
- What can you relate to in that question?
- How would you answer Gideon’s question? Why might his life be like it is?
- Gideon says, “God, my family is the weakest and the worst – and I’m the weakest of the weakest!”
- And God keeps saying, “You are a strong warrior...you will be strong!”
- It’s almost like God trusts Gideon, even when Gideon doesn’t trust God...

- Read about Jeremiah. Jeremiah 1:4-8
- God tells Jeremiah, “I knew you before you were born,” and “Don’t say you’re too young – I will give you my words to say.”
- If you knew that God loved you, and that he was with you and would protect you, would that change you? If yes, how?

Wrap-up

- What negative things did all these people believe about themselves? (*All weak, sinful, and afraid*)
- What positive things did they all have in common? (*God knew them, wanted them, and strengthened them. And God gave them hope and important work to do*)
- Do you think God could change your life like that? Give you strength like that?
- Since God knows you and loves you like that, why don’t you ask him to begin to change you and use you too?

TOPIC: Your Sins are Forgiven: How?

Opening Discussion

- If you were to stand before God right now and He had to decide if you were going to get into Heaven based on the things you have done so far in your life, what do you think would happen?
- Do you think it's determined by: "If more than 50% is good, you can come in, but if less, then you are out," is that fair? Why? Why not?
- What is "sin?"
- Why is sin such a problem? What does it do to our relationship with God? With other people?
- How do we deal with sin?
 - We can ignore it. What does that do?
 - We can try to stay away from it on our own. What usually happens?
 - What did people in the Bible do?

Scripture

Read [Luke 7:29-35](#)

- Jesus and John the Baptist often sat and ate with people who the religious leaders said were sinners. Why did those leaders think it was bad for them to eat with them? Was it? Why would Jesus and John do that?

Read [Luke 7:36-50](#)

- Simon was a Pharisee. What were Pharisees? Why did Jesus have such a problem with them?
- How do you think Simon and other Pharisees believed sins were forgiven?
- When this woman came to the house, why was it such a scandal? (*Simon would have rich, powerful religious people at his home, and this woman was known to have done some things that gave her a bad reputation*)
- How did she show that she was sorry for what she had done? (*Humility and sincerity*)
- Why did Jesus tell the story about people who owe more than others and having those debts forgiven?
- When Jesus said, "your sins are forgiven" why were people shocked? (*Only God can forgive sins*)
- What was it that saved her and allowed her sins to be forgiven?
- But what about all of the bad things? Is that fair? Is it right?

Wrap-up

The Bible says that we are saved – that our sins are forgiven – through our faith. That is a free gift from God and we accept that gift through faith in Jesus. Jesus did not tell the woman to go and do good things and then come back when she was better. He took her as she was and he does that with us too! That's what gives us the power to change our actions.