

Character

Who You Are
A Study on Character

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Introduction

Welcome

Welcome to “Who You Are: A study of character.”

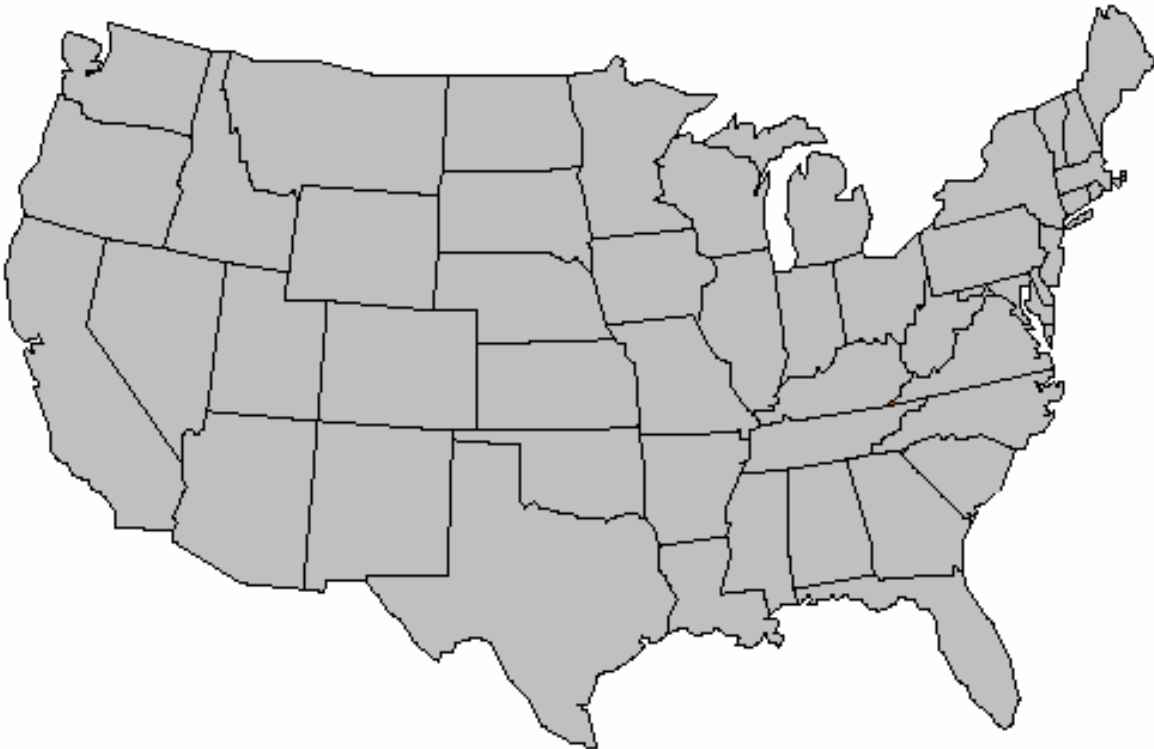
Have you ever stopped to think about who you really are. Not what job you do, not what clothes you wear, not what house you live in... but who you REALLY are. If your family and friends had to describe you, and they couldn't use your physical appearance or any of your possessions... how would they describe you? The words they used would give you great insight into your character... who you REALLY are.

In today's culture... where image seems to matter most, it is easy to lose sight of who we really are. It's easy to forget that our character is what truly defines us. “Who You Are” seeks to rediscover the important things of life. Through this small group you will encounter such topics as Loyalty, Contentment, and Responsibility. By engaging in these topics, your group will begin to see a pattern emerge... a pattern of true character.

Getting to know one another

Before we go any further, we want to take some time to get to know one another. Since this is the first time we are gathering, the majority of our time will be spent becoming familiar with the study and with the group members.

Mapping your Journey...



Previewing the Study

“Who you Are: a study of Character” takes an in depth look at eight different character qualities that each of us desire to possess. The topics are as follows...

- ❑ Teachability
- ❑ Contentment
- ❑ Responsibility
- ❑ Loyalty
- ❑ Servanthood
- ❑ Justice
- ❑ Purity
- ❑ Forgiveness

Each week as your group meets you will focus in on one of these principles. Your group meets to discuss what each individual has learned through their study and experience in the topic. To help prepare the discussion, “Who you Are” guides you through a lesson that will expose you to the issues each topic contains. It will also take you through a study of relevant bible passages on that issue. Below is an outline of the lessons. The first three sections will be completed by the individual members before the group meets. The final two sections will then be completed as a group together... drawing on the insights from the first three.

📖 Previewing the Issue

In this section you will get an overview of the issue at hand. The content of this segment will range from stories to statistics... from narratives to discourse. It will help set up the topic and wet your appetite for the study ahead.

📖 Probing the Scriptures

In our study of the different character qualities, we want to turn to the Bible for guidance. Written over the span of 1500 years, by over 40 different authors, the Bible speaks to almost every issue of life. It speaks of the earthly and the heavenly with equal ease and accuracy. We will benefit by going to so great a source in our study of character. “Who You Are” has chosen to use “The Message” as its translation. Unless noted otherwise, all quotations of scripture will come from this version.

📖 Perusing other Pages

This segment contains articles and insights from different writers on the topic your group is focusing on. Sometimes entertaining, sometimes informative... these articles will serve to further enhance your understanding of the subject. This will be the last section you do before your group meets.

📖 Processing Together

Probably the greatest gains in the study of character will come when we are processing the truths we learn together in community. This can be the most treasured time of your week, as you seek to learn and grow from one another’s insights and experiences

Introduction

☐ Putting into Practice

It would be a tragedy if we spent all this time studying character and didn't let it effect how we lived our lives. The final thing that your group will do is to take what you have learned in your study and apply it to your life today. This is a critical step, and has the potential to be life changing. Take time as a group to work through this... developing action strategies based upon your study of the different traits.

Final Thoughts

It is our desire that you have the best semester you can, and so there are several ground rules that we encourage you to go by...

☐ Relationships!!!

Enjoy the group and have fun. This is not a lecture series; this is not a time for you to hear a leader tell you about character. It is a member participation format. So much will depend upon you. Everyone is given the right to their own opinion and "dumb questions" are respected. Dominating the discussion is discouraged. Your group leader will help you make new friends, learn about character and grow in your relationship with God.

☐ Confidentiality and Discretion

You and the members of your group will share personal experiences as a part of this time together. Rule #1 is that what's shared in the group, stays in the group!

☐ The Empty Chair

The group stays open to new people. When the group grows beyond the 12 - 16 range, it sensitively prepares to birth another group and/or spin-off a leadership team. This is absolutely necessary for the growth of individuals and the group.

☐ Support

Permission is given to call upon each other in time of need — even in the middle of the night.

Enjoy...

Teachability

Previewing the Issue

The famous writer and commentator, Mark Twain, once remarked, “When I was a boy of fourteen, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be twenty-one, I was astonished at how much the old man had learned in seven years.”

The humor in his words rings true for most. The reason is that we have all at one time or another found ourselves in a similar situation. We can all recall being young and brash... wise in our own eyes. Whether it was a mother, a father, a teacher, or an elderly individual, each of us probably despised their wisdom and deemed it foolishness. The catch is that now that we have matured some, we are beginning to realize that what we thought lame then, seems to have worth today.

Maintaining an attitude of teachability isn't always easy. Sometimes that brashness of our youth will creep back in and we will find ourselves impressed with our own knowledge. Even worse, we will be tempted to let others know just how much wisdom and insight we possess. This can lead us down a very dangerous path of becoming a “know-it-all”!

Probing the Scriptures

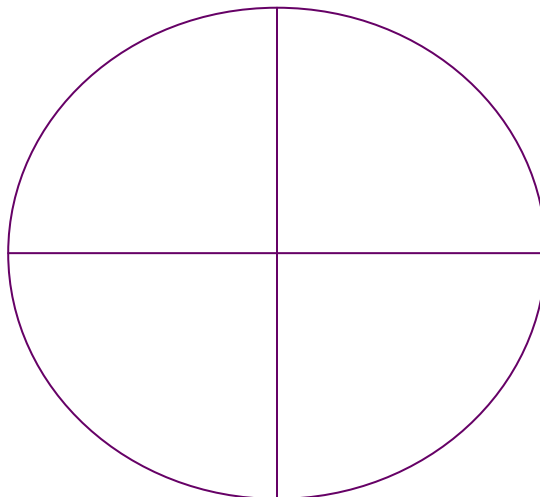
The first four books of the New Testament in your Bible detail the life and times of Jesus Christ. It is in one of these books that we find a summary statement of the early years of Jesus' life (between the ages of 12 and 30).

Luke 2:52

And Jesus kept increasing in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men. (NASB)

- ☐ How many synonyms can you come up with for the phrase “kept increasing”?

- ☐ What four areas did Jesus continue to grow in?



Teachability

Just prior to this verse is the account of a trip that Jesus and his parents took to the temple in Jerusalem.

Luke 2: 41-50

Every year Jesus' parents traveled to Jerusalem for the Feast of Passover. When he was twelve years old, they went up as they always did for the Feast. When it was over and they left for home, the child Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents didn't know it. Thinking he was somewhere in the company of pilgrims, they journeyed for a whole day and then began looking for him among relatives and neighbors. When they didn't find him, they went back to Jerusalem looking for him.

The next day they found him in the Temple seated among the teachers, listening to them and asking questions. The teachers were all quite taken with him, impressed with the sharpness of his answers.

His mother said, "Young man, why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been half out of our minds looking for you."

He said, "Why were you looking for me? Didn't you know that I had to be here, dealing with the things of my Father?" But they had no idea what he was talking about.

How old was Jesus at this time?

What did Jesus do while in the temple?

What were the impressions of those with whom Jesus spoke?

After reading this account, would you classify Jesus as a "know-it-all"? Why, or why not?

Now compare Luke 2:52 with Luke 2:47

Luke 2:47

The teachers were all quite taken with him, impressed with the sharpness of his answers.

Luke 2:52

And Jesus kept increasing in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men. (NASB)

☐ How was it that Jesus was so wise?

☐ Was Jesus of the attitude that he had come to know/learn all there was?

Perusing other Pages

One of the most important traits to remaining teachable is humility. Read this article as you consider the idea of teachability.

The Joy In Humility:

God promises rich rewards to the humble.

*Issue 105 May/June 1998
Warren and Ruth Myers*

The late Dr. J. F. Cowan told about a small Christian college that was in serious financial straits. One day a wealthy man came to the campus, walked up to a white-haired man in overalls who was painting a wall, and asked where he could find the president. The painter pointed to a house on campus and said, “I’m sure the president can be seen there at noon.”

At twelve o’clock the visitor knocked at the president’s door. Guess who admitted him—the same man he had talked to earlier, no longer in overalls. Over lunch the men discussed the needs of the college. Two days later a check arrived for \$50,000 (worth many times that now). God had opened the purse strings of this wealthy man, rewarding the humility of a college president who was not too proud to put on the clothes of a workman and do a job that needed doing.

What is humility?

Do we want God to work in us and for us and through us? Do we long for His full blessing on our lives? Then humility is not a nice extra. It’s indispensable. The prophet Micah declared that one of God’s basic requirements of His people is that they walk humbly with Him ([Mic. 6:8](#)). We cannot live and serve as the Lord desires without humility.

But what is humility? Humility is thinking true, realistic thoughts about God and ourselves—seeing both in the light of Scripture. We develop humility by learning biblical truth and submitting to it.

Remember how Job, as his bitter trials dragged on, became critical of God? How did He humble Job, bringing him to a place of contrition and new blessing? God asked questions that confronted Job with how great He is, how wise and powerful.

We, like Job, need to see God as the Creator and Sustainer of all things, majestic and holy and awesome—a sovereign God, exalted far above all, the Source of all that we humans take pride in. We also need to see Him as a God of tender love and mercy who deeply cares about us and longs for an intimate relationship with us. The Bible is full of breathtaking views of what our God is like. The more we grasp and experience these truths, the more our hearts will bow before Him with grateful humility.

Teachability

God's View of You

The Bible is also loaded with truths about who we are in God's sight. Some are humbling, some are uplifting. We're to submit to both if we want to grow in humility.

What kind of humbling truths has God revealed? For one thing, we are flawed. We sin. We fall short of His glorious ideal.

We are also small specks in a vast universe (Ps. 8:3-4). The Bible speaks of us as grasshoppers (Is. 40:22)—even worms (Is. 41:14). Our earthly lives are fleeting—like a puff of smoke that appears briefly, then vanishes (Jas. 4:14). We are needy, incomplete, inadequate in ourselves. We are total dependents. All that we're tempted to glory in is an undeserved gift from God. Such truths cut through our human pride.

But the Bible also glows with countless truths that show how valued and significant we are in God's sight. How wonderfully He has created us (Ps. 139:13-16)! We are new persons in Christ (Eph. 4:24), alive with His very life (Col. 3:3-4), totally forgiven and accepted (Eph. 1:7). We are dearly loved children, precious and honored in our Father's sight (Is. 43:4, 1 Jn. 3:1). We have supreme significance as His loved ones and His servants. He has given us the honor of advancing His purposes (1 Pet. 2:9).

God has revealed these glorious truths to meet deep needs He has placed within us. Only as we accept the truth can we be free from our drive to fill our inner needs through pride. Only then can we relate to other people with God's kind of love, seeing them, too, as wonderful though flawed.

So once again, what is true humility? Think of it as a two-sided coin. On one side, genuine humility accepts Jesus' pronouncement, "Apart from me you can do nothing" (Jn. 15:5). On the other side, genuine humility declares with glad confidence, "I have strength for all things in Christ Who empowers me—I am ready for anything and equal to anything through Him who infuses inner strength into me" (Phil. 4:13, AMP).

Humility says with the hymn writer, "I need You. Oh, I need You!" Then it lets faith take over with the glad affirmation, "I have You! Oh, I have You!" Far more than we know, we are needy persons. Yet we're fully supplied persons as we humbly trust in Him.

Humility's Rewards

All God's commands are invitations to greater blessing and enrichment. His commands to walk humbly with Him are no exception. Have you ever noticed how many wonderful things God promises to the humble?

God gives grace to the humble and shows them favor. We read in Jas. 4:6-10, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." ... Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up." The humble qualify for God's grace.

Grace is a marvelous word. It means that we are in favor with the King of kings. When we're humble, God is free to lavish His grace upon us, to fill our lives with special favors. As we humble ourselves, His Spirit leads us into an ever-growing enjoyment of the spiritual benefits we have in Christ (Eph. 1:3). But if we fail to humble ourselves, we force Him to oppose us—to bring extra chastening that we could have avoided.

God rewards humility by hearing us, forgiving us, and answering our prayers. He promises in 2 Chron. 7:14: If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land.

If we fail to humbly acknowledge our sins and repent, then our sins, like a dark cloud, block our prayers (Is. 59:2, Lam. 3:44). They rob us of blessings God wants to give us, including the glad freedom of a clear conscience.

Recently, I [Warren] was harsh and unloving with a fellow believer. Deeply distressed, I wrote the person, acknowledging my guilt and asking forgiveness. Then I reminded the Lord, "O Lord our God, you brought lasting honor to your name by removing your people from Egypt in a great display of power. Lord, do it again! Though we have sinned so much and are full of wickedness" (Dan. 9:15, LB).

In a short time, God wonderfully overruled Rosin, answered this prayer, and restored the relationship. Then I prayed, “Lord, I’m not in the least worthy of the way You overruled—and even used—my harshness for such good results.” And I sensed Him say, “Of course not. But you wouldn’t be worthy if you hadn’t sinned for a month. My help and favor never depend on your worthiness, but on Mine.”

God rewards humility by leading and teaching us. Psalm 25:9 says, “He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way.” When we are humble, we respect God’s wisdom. We sense our great need for Him to guide us, our great need to understand His principles for living. We show our humility by praying, as the psalmist did, “Show me your ways, O LORD, teach me your paths; guide me in your truth and teach me” (Ps. 25:4-5). We also show our humility by depending on His Word: “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.... The unfolding of your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple” (Ps. 119:105, 130).

This humble respect for God and His Word keeps us from running our own lives, from groping and stumbling in darkness. It keeps us from becoming like the Israelites in Jeremiah’s day who, when presented with God’s good way, declared, “We will not walk in it” (Jer 6:16). Proud of their own wisdom and set on their own desires, they replied, “We will continue with our own plans” (Jer 18:12). Those plans ended in disaster (Jer 6:19).

If we insist on our own plans, we, too, will miss the paths of blessing God has for us. If we let Him lead and teach us, we can find peace and comfort in His promise, “I know the plans I have for you ... plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future” (Jer. 29:11).

God rewards humility by sustaining and supporting us. Psalm 141:6 says, “The LORD sustains the humble.” Humility enables us to acknowledge our needs and weaknesses and to depend on God. In return, He constantly supports us, supplying what we need and keeping us from falling. According to Is. 46:4, He does this all through life: “Even to your old age and gray hairs I am he ... who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you.”

God enriches and honors the humble. “Humility and the fear of the LORD bring wealth and honor and life” (Prov. 22:4). God promises the humble spiritual riches and honor in His eyes. Seeking honor is not inconsistent with humility—as long as we seek only the honor that comes from the one true God (Jn. 5:44). The humble live to bring glory and honor to God, not to themselves. I [Ruth] have to guard against the temptation to do things for my personal glory. Often when I’m preparing a message or working on a writing project, I’m suddenly gripped with the fear that I’ll do it for my own glory and fail to honor the Lord. So I stop and pray, personalizing Ps. 115:1, “Not to me, O Lord, not to me, but to Your name be the glory.” This brings release to my heart—and that itself is a great reward.

God rewards humility with soul rest. Jesus promises inner rest to all who put themselves under His yoke and learn of Him (Mt. 11:29). We have long been inspired to keep growing in humility by the following quotation from Andrew Murray.

Humility is perfect quietness of heart. It is never to be irritated or anxious or disappointed. It is to expect nothing and to wonder at nothing that is done to me. It is to be at rest when no one praises me, and when I am blamed and despised. It is to have a blessed home in the Lord where I can enter and be at rest when all around and above is a sea of trouble.

I [Ruth] find that pride leads to inner turmoil, often in the form of anxiety. I may worry about my children or grandchildren, or my husband’s health, or a friend’s distressing situation, or how I’ll ever get everything done. When I look beneath the anxiety, I discover a more basic feeling—that it all depends on me. I’m stepping into God’s shoes, usurping His role. I’m trying to be the strong one, instead of depending on the strongest Strong One. That’s pride. It’s forgetting that God is the most important person in the situation, not me. So I confess my pride and humble myself before Him, trusting Him to work. This puts me back under His gracious lordship and sovereignty, where I can praise Him that He is in control. As I focus on Him, He replaces my inner turmoil with peace and rest.

Fullness of Joy

What God *does for us* as we humble ourselves is awesome; what He *is to us* is far better. We read in Is. 57:15:

Teachability

This is what the high and lofty One says—he who lives forever, whose name is holy “I live in a high and holy place, but also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite.”

God longs for us to fit in under Him, the high and exalted One. When we do, He dwells in us unhindered, reviving our spirit, filling us with fresh life, enabling us to experience Him more fully. Where He dwells there is splendor and majesty, strength and joy ([1 Chron. 16:27](#)).

Pride takes up space in our hearts that could be filled with joy. It pushes God, our highest joy, aside. Humility, in contrast, makes room in our lives for God, thus making room for joy. “In [His] presence is fullness of joy” ([Ps. 16:11](#), *KJV*); and He manifests His presence to the humble, not the proud.

Why does God hate pride? Because it blocks His children’s connection with Him, the only solution to their deepest needs. And pride brings immense loss to God, for it deprives Him of the genuine intimacy with us that He longs for. As we walk with Him, we increase His joy even as He increases ours. There’s no other way to walk with God but to walk humbly.

About the Authors

Warren and Ruth Myers have worked with [The Navigators](#) in Asia since 1952. They are the authors of several Bible studies and books, including *31 Days of Praise* ([Multnomah](#)). They now live in Colorado but still travel extensively to Asia and other parts of the world.

Processing Together

What subjects do you find fascinating? What interests do you have?

In what subjects/fields would you consider yourself an “expert” (or at least somewhat knowledgeable)?

What does it mean to say that a person is a “know-it-all”?

Do you like “know-it-alls”? Describe your reasons.

Would others say that in your field of expertise, you were a “know-it-all”? Why or Why Not?

☐ What do you do to maintain teachability in that area?

You know, it's easy to be teachable when we seek out others to learn from. What happens when we don't necessarily ask for instruction (or criticism), but receive it anyway? It's called "confrontation."

☐ What does it mean to confront someone?

☐ Have you ever been confronted by someone? For what? Were they correct in their assessment? How did you respond?

Read the following Proverbs:

Proverbs 17:10

A rebuke goes deeper into one who has understanding than a hundred blows into a fool. (NASB)

Proverbs 25:12

Like an earring of gold or an ornament of fine gold is a wise man's rebuke to a listening ear. (NIV)

☐ How does the Bible say we are to respond to being confronted?

☐ Why is this sometimes hard to do?

Teachability

Putting into Practice

- ▣ What good books are you reading right now? Share with the group so that others can begin to develop a reading list.

- ▣ What is one area of your spiritual life that could use a little boost (Knowledge of the Bible? Understanding of God? Making spiritual decisions, etc.)?

- ▣ Is there an action step that needs to be taken in your life concerning a character issue you've been previously confronted with?

- ▣ Ask a trusted ally for one area of growth and develop a plan to grow in that area. What did they recommend?

Contentment

Previewing the Issue

An American businessman was at the pier of a small coastal Mexican village when a small boat with just one fisherman docked. Inside the small boat were several large yellow fin tuna. The American complimented the Mexican on the quality of his fish and asked how long it took to catch them. The Mexican replied only a little while.

The American then asked why didn't he stay out longer and catch more fish? The Mexican said he had enough to support his family's immediate needs. The American then asked, but what do you do with the rest of your time? The Mexican fisherman said, "I sleep late; fish a little; play with my children; take siesta with my wife, Maria; stroll into the village each evening where I play guitar with my amigos. I have a full and busy life, señor."

The American scoffed, "I am a Harvard MBA and could help you. You should spend more time fishing and with the proceeds buy a bigger boat, with the proceeds from the bigger boat you could buy several boats, eventually you would have a fleet of fishing boats. Instead of selling your catch to a middleman, you would sell directly to the processor, eventually opening your own cannery. You would control the product, processing, and distribution.

You would need to leave this small coastal fishing village and move to Mexico City, then LA, and eventually NYC where you will run your expanding enterprise."

The Mexican fisherman asked, "But señor, how long will this all take?" To which the American replied, "15-20 years." "But what then, señor?"

The American laughed and said that's the best part. "When the time is right you would announce an IPO and sell your company stock to the public and become very rich, you would make millions." "Millions, señor? Then what?"

The American said, "Then you would retire. Move to a small coastal fishing village where you would sleep late, fish a little, play with your kids, take siesta with your wife, stroll to the village in the evenings where you could play your guitar with your amigos."

Probing the Scriptures

One of the wisest, wealthiest, most renown men to ever live was Solomon. King Solomon was the third ruler of the nation of Israel. He found himself blessed by God with wisdom, wealth and power... and he used these to his full advantage. There was nothing that he did not do or see. He recorded the adventures of his life in his final book. It was the book of Ecclesiastes. Read the following excerpts from his book Ecclesiastes.

Ecclesiastes 1:12 – 2:11

Call me "the Quester." I've been king over Israel in Jerusalem. I looked most carefully into everything, searched out all that is done on this earth. And let me tell you, there's not much to write home about. God hasn't made it easy for us. I've seen it all and it's nothing but smoke—smoke, and spitting into the wind.

Life's a corkscrew that can't be straightened, a minus that won't add up.

Contentment

I said to myself, "I know more and I'm wiser than anyone before me in Jerusalem. I've stockpiled wisdom and knowledge." What I've finally concluded is that so-called wisdom and knowledge are mindless and witless—nothing but spitting into the wind. Much learning earns you much trouble. The more you know, the more you hurt.

I said to myself, "Let's go for it—experiment with pleasure, have a good time!" But there was nothing to it, nothing but smoke. What do I think of the fun-filled life? Insane! Inane! My verdict on the pursuit of happiness? Who needs it?

With the help of a bottle of wine and all the wisdom I could muster, I tried my level best to penetrate the absurdity of life. I wanted to get a handle on anything useful we mortals might do during the years we spend on this earth.

Oh, I did great things: built houses, planted vineyards, designed gardens and parks and planted a variety of fruit trees in them, made pools of water to irrigate the groves of trees. I bought slaves, male and female, who had children, giving me even more slaves; then I acquired large herds and flocks, larger than any before me in Jerusalem. I piled up silver and gold, loot from kings and kingdoms. I gathered a chorus of singers to entertain me with song, and—most exquisite of all pleasures—voluptuous maidens for my bed.

Oh, how I prospered! I left all my predecessors in Jerusalem far behind, left them behind in the dust. What's more, I kept a clear head through it all. Everything I wanted I took—I never said no to myself. I gave in to every impulse, held back nothing. I sucked the marrow of pleasure out of every task—my reward to myself for a hard day's work!

Then I took a good look at everything I'd done, looked at all the sweat and hard work. But when I looked, I saw nothing but smoke. Smoke and spitting into the wind. There was nothing to any of it. Nothing.

- Make a list of the different possessions you think Solomon would have owned if he were alive today.

- How do you think others viewed Solomon? Was he revered? Was he despised?

- Name some of the pleasures of life that Solomon indulged in.

Contentment

☐ Do you sometimes wish you could trade places with him? Why, or why not?

☐ What were Solomon's conclusions as it pertained to the following?

◆ Wealth	◆ Excitement
◆ Power	◆ Sexual Indulgence
◆ Empire	◆ Fame

For many in this world who are destroying themselves to “keep up” or “get ahead”, Solomon's words can be very discouraging. The words may lead one to ask, “Is there anything in Life WORTH living for?”

If you look closely in the book of Ecclesiastes, you can see that Solomon has found something to make life WORTH living for. Tucked neatly into his discourse are about a dozen verses that give us a clue.

Read the following verses.

Ecclesiastes 2:24-25:

A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment?

Ecclesiastes 3:12-13:

I have concluded that there is nothing more beneficial for people than to be happy and to enjoy themselves as long as they live;^{3:13} And also that everyone should eat and drink, and find enjoyment in all his toil, for it is the gift of God.

Ecclesiastes 3:22:

So I perceived that there is nothing better than that a man should enjoy his work, because that is his reward;

Ecclesiastes 8:15:

So I recommend the enjoyment of life, for there is nothing better on earth for man to do except to eat, drink, and enjoy life; thus, joy will accompany him in his toil during the days of his life which God gives him on earth.

Ecclesiastes 5:18:

I myself have seen what is the only beneficial and appropriate thing for man: to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in all his hard work on earth during the few days of his life which God has given to him, for this is his reward.

☐ Do you notice a common theme in these verses? What is it?

Contentment

☐ Who do you enjoy your meals (eat and drink) with?

☐ What different occasions can you recall where family and friends gather to eat and drink?

☐ Do you enjoy work? Why, or why not?

Perusing other Pages

A Lesson in Contentment

Mary Lawrence Comm

We in America live in luxury. Running water in our homes is standard. Inside toilets are expected. Electricity is available at the flip of a switch. Most of us can maintain the perfect temperature within our homes year round if we so desire. We have access to the latest fashions. We have shoes for every occasion. We want for nothing. Or so you would think.

Seeing all that we have, it astounds me that I still want more. My kitchen sink is chipped. I want a new one. My floor tile is long out of style. I want to replace it. The carpeting throughout the house is old and, well, not what I would've chosen. I want new carpet. I want, I want, I want. Contentment becomes a casualty of the want-more's. I want more!

My husband and I have a great marriage. We have two beautiful children: a boy and a girl. We are all healthy. We own our home. We have two vehicles in the driveway. My husband has his own company. Most of all we have a growing, personal relationship with Jesus Christ. What more could we want?

In Philippians 4, Paul shares that he has "learned to be content whatever the circumstances." Ah, so this contentment thing is learned. He continues, "I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty." Okay, so he's been there. He's done without. "I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want." Oh, so there's a secret to this.... "I can do everything through Him who gives me strength." Ah-ha. It all comes back to Jesus.

That sounds simple enough. Simple, yes. But never easy.

In the past two years I've had two experiences where I was faced with doing "it" through Christ, in His strength. The first was the birth of our second child. The labor and delivery went perfectly. But a few hours later, for some unknown reason, our sweet baby girl stopped breathing...five times in one hour. I will never forget when the nurse practitioner came to tell us about Jenna's condition. There was no hope in her voice. She was preparing us for the worst. In a moment, the bottom dropped out of our joy and we were free-falling in the black uncertainty of an illness we knew nothing about. We were helpless. All we could do was trust God to do what was best for us and Jenna. All we could do was hold onto Him and His strength. There in that hospital room He became our strength---and our peace. He gently carried us through the next ten days as we watched and waited. Finally, on Christmas Eve we brought our precious gift from God home, perfectly healthy.

The second situation happened the following Christmas. After experiencing the temporary loss of my peripheral vision, I contacted my doctor to determine if I needed to be examined. I wasn't ready for her response. There was urgency in her voice as she advised me to seek the medical attention of an ophthalmologist as soon as possible. Her concern? Multiple Sclerosis.

Because of the Christmas holiday, I had to wait a full week for the appointment. During that week, my husband and I considered all the implications that accompany MS. Would I end up in a wheelchair? Would it be a minor inconvenience or a major change in every aspect of our lives? We assumed the worst, then hoped for the best.

The interesting thing about that week was that although I constantly mulled over the questions, internally I was filled with indescribable joy and peace. For probably the first time in my life, I was truly thankful for my mobility, agility, and independence. The sky seemed to be bluer than ever before. The trees, although brown and bare, were beautiful to me. I laughed more that week, enjoying the little things that so often went unnoticed.

As it turned out, what I had experienced was not MS, but a minor inconvenience, the result of stress. What could have been a diagnosis of disability, became a rare and precious gift. For Christmas, God had given me the gift of His strength, His joy, His peace—even in the face of fear.

I promised myself I wouldn't let the preciousness of that gift fade. I promised myself I wouldn't forget how blue the sky was or how thankful I was for those things in my life I had always taken for granted.

Even so, it wasn't long till discontentment began to ease its way back into my thinking. The kitchen sink was still chipped. The carpet still stained. But God has been true to Himself, and to me, in that He has gently reminded me about true contentment. And now I, like Paul, can say I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. The interesting thing is that need and plenty have been redefined. My need is to lean on Jesus no matter what the circumstances. Plenty smiles at me every morning from her crib and plenty fills my legs with strength as I walk over to pick her up. I still need reminders, but I can honestly say, I am learning the secret.

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Scriptures from New International Version*

Processing Together

☐ If you could wish for one thing, what would it be? (And you can't say "World Peace".)

☐ Do you struggle with want? For esteem? For popularity? For money? For possessions?

☐ What does the word materialistic mean to you?

Contentment

☐ Would you consider yourself materialistic?

☐ What makes us materialistic?

Review together the life and words of Solomon (see previewing the scriptures).

☐ How would you compare and contrast Solomon's description of the way he lived life and the way he commanded others to live life?

☐ Does the fact that he "did it all" change how you view his words? Why, or why not?

☐ What does it mean to be content?

☐ What are some of the "secrets" of contentment according to Solomon? Do you think he's right?

Putting it into Practice

Below is a list of areas of non-contentment. Place a checkmark next to the areas that challenge you the most. What would you be willing to do to grow in that area?

- Status
- Power
- Money
- Possessions
- Activities
- Adventure/Travel
- Other _____

Is there a “dream” that you have had your entire life that you feel God may be asking you to give up? If so, what is it? Would you be willing to release it and be content with where you are?

Responsibility

Previewing the Issue

Everywhere you look today you can see it. You see it at schools; you see it in the workplace; you even see it in the church. It's called the Blame Game. It always starts the same way. Something goes wrong. Sometimes it's a minor incident; sometimes it's a more significant one. In either case, once the mistake is made, the game begins.

The object of the game is to avoid taking responsibility for the mistake. You're allowed to shift the responsibility, skirt the responsibility, even ignore the responsibility. But at no time are you allowed to take the responsibility. You can blame the authorities or you can blame TV. You can blame others or you can blame your upbringing. You can blame just about anyone or anything you want, so long as you don't have to take responsibility.

Because of the simplicity of the Blame Game, one would think that children are the only ones playing it. Think again. In the world where we live and work, adults have become quite familiar with this game. From professional athletes to parents, it has become very convenient to shift the responsibility for the situations we find ourselves in to others.

Is this the way it's suppose to be? Is this what we should expect of the individuals in our society? Is this what we are to expect of ourselves?

As we examine this concept of responsibility more closely, we are going to find that there are two aspects. One is the issue of follow through. That is, doing what we say we are going to do. A conscientious person has learned that in order to be counted on, one must exhibit a measure of dependability. The other aspect of responsibility is owning up to the consequences of one's actions. A responsible person will recognized the effects of the choices and decisions they have made, and will not only take liability for them, but in doing so will learn and grow from them.

Probing the Scriptures

The early pages of the Bible are filled with fascinating accounts, stories that bring to life the spirit and nature of the human race. What we find in these accounts is sometimes troubling, and other times heroic. One such narrative takes place in the Book of Genesis.

God's chosen nation (Israel) was a young nation at the time, only consisting of one family. Jacob (also known as Israel) had twelve sons. These twelve sons and their father and sisters were all there was of this fledgling nation.

Ten of the twelve brothers had become jealous of their brother Joseph. They sold him as a slave, and then told their father that he had been devoured by wild game.

Joseph would go on to become the second highest ranking official in all of Egypt. His path would cross his brothers again when famine would strike and they would have to travel to Egypt for food. Let's pick up the story at this point.

When Jacob learned that there was food in Egypt, he said to his sons, "Why do you sit around here and look at one another? I've heard that there is food in Egypt. Go down there and buy some so that we can survive and not starve to death."

Ten of Joseph's brothers went down to Egypt to get food. Jacob didn't send Joseph's brother Benjamin with them; he was afraid that something bad might happen to him. So Israel's sons joined everyone else that was going to Egypt to buy food, for Canaan, too, was hit hard by the famine.

Joseph was running the country; he was the one who gave out rations to all the people. When Joseph's brothers arrived, they treated him with honor, bowing to him. Joseph recognized them immediately, but treated them as strangers and spoke roughly to them.

He said, "Where do you come from?"

"From Canaan," they said. "We've come to buy food."

Joseph knew who they were, but they didn't know who he was.

Joseph said, "You're spies. You've come to look for our weak spots."

"No, master," they said. "We've only come to buy food. We're all the sons of the same man; we're honest men; we'd never think of spying."

He said, "No. You're spies. You've come to look for our weak spots."

They said, "There were twelve of us brothers—sons of the same father in the country of Canaan. The youngest is with our father, and one is no more."

Then he threw them into jail for three days.

On the third day, Joseph spoke to them. "Do this and you'll live. I'm a God-fearing man. If you're as honest as you say you are, one of your brothers will stay here in jail while the rest of you take the food back to your hungry families. But you have to bring your youngest brother back to me, confirming the truth of your speech—and not one of you will die." They agreed.

Joseph took Simeon and had him tied up, making a prisoner of him while they all watched. Then Joseph ordered that their sacks be filled with grain, that their money be put back in each sack, and that they be given rations for the road. That was all done for them. They loaded their food supplies on their donkeys and set off.

When they got back to their father Jacob, back in the land of Canaan, they told him everything that had happened, saying, "The man who runs the country spoke to us roughly and accused us of being spies. We told him, 'We are honest men and in no way spies. There were twelve of us brothers, sons of one father; one is gone and the youngest is with our father in Canaan.'"

"But the master of the country said, 'Leave one of your brothers with me, take food for your starving families, and go. Bring your youngest brother back to me, proving that you're honest men and not spies. And then I'll give your brother back to you and you'll be free to come and go in this country.'"

The famine got worse. When they had eaten all the food they had brought back from Egypt, their father said, "Go back and get some more food."

But Judah said, "The man warned us most emphatically, 'You won't so much as see my face if you don't have your brother with you.' If you're ready to release our brother to go with us, we'll go down and get you food. But if you're not ready, we aren't going. What would be the use? The man told us, 'You won't so much as see my face if you don't have your brother with you.'"

Israel said, "Why are you making my life so difficult! Why did you ever tell the man you had another brother?"

Responsibility

Judah pushed his father Israel. "Let the boy go; I'll take charge of him. Let us go and be on our way—if we don't get going, we're all going to starve to death—we and you and our children too! I'll take full responsibility for his safety; it's my life on the line for his. If I don't bring him back safe and sound, I'm the guilty one; I'll take all the blame. If we had gone ahead in the first place instead of procrastinating like this, we could have been there and back twice over."

Their father Israel gave in. "If it has to be, it has to be. Go back to the man. And may The Strong God give you grace in that man's eyes so that he'll send back your other brother along with Benjamin. For me, nothing's left; I've lost everything."

- The brothers of Joseph did an evil thing in selling their brother into slavery. Do you see the irony in the above story as it is told in Genesis. What is it?

- Who was responsible for Joseph winding up in Egypt? What were the circumstances surrounding his captivity there?

- What is Joseph's attitude towards his brothers? List some ways this attitude is displayed in his actions.

- What is Joseph's brothers' attitude towards him?

- When the brothers return to their father, who steps up and takes responsibility? Do you find this admirable, foolish, hasty, noble? Why?

- How well do you accept the consequences of your actions?

Perusing other Pages

Consider this story told by Bernard L. Brown, Jr., president of the Kennestone Regional Health Care System in the state of Georgia.

Brown once worked in a hospital where a patient knocked over a cup of water, which spilled on the floor beside the patient's bed. The patient was afraid he might slip on the water if he got out of the bed, so he asked a nurse's aide to mop it up. The patient didn't know it, but the hospital policy said that small spills were the responsibility of the nurse's aides while large spills were to be mopped up by the hospital's housekeeping group.

The nurse's aide decided the spill was a large one and she called the housekeeping department. A housekeeper arrived and declared the spill a small one. An argument followed.

"It's not my responsibility," said the nurse's aide, "because it's a large puddle." The housekeeper did not agree. "Well, it's not mine," she said, "the puddle is too small."

The exasperated patient listened for a time, then took a pitcher of water from his night table and poured the whole thing on the floor. "Is that a big enough puddle now for you two to decide?" he asked. It was, and that was the end of the argument.

Bits & Pieces, September 16, 1993, p. 22-24.

Responsibility

From the way my parents were acting just days before my tenth birthday, I thought for sure that I would finally get a horse of my own. I spent hours dreaming of riding across the fields, hand feeding it apples and carrots in the barn, and the fancy saddle that would make all my friends jealous. I squealed with excitement when my father walked in to my party and announced that he had a special gift for his birthday girl. Then my heart sank as he opened his cupped hands and presented me with a baby chick. My saddle dreams were dashed. Even though the disappointment was evident on my face, he smiled and handed me the chick. "It's all yours. I think you're ready to take care of this chick by yourself."

That chick turned out to be harder to raise than I thought. I had to mend all the small holes in the chicken yard fence, feed her and make sure she had fresh water. Some days the weather seemed too bad to have to trudge out to the chicken coop, but my father would remind me that my chicken was relying on me for its care and out the door I would go.

My eleventh birthday rolled around without anticipation. I had given up on my dream for a horse. As I walked into the kitchen that morning, my father pointed toward a large gift-wrapped box by the back door. Tearing open the wrapper, I found a beautiful saddle with a note that read, "Take this to your new friend in the barn, you've earned her."

Processing Together

Have you ever taken the blame for something that was not your fault?

Responsibility

☐ Have you ever seen someone else take the blame for something that you did?

☐ What do you believe to be some of the “keys” to taking responsibility for your actions?

☐ What are some ways that people today “back out of” responsibility?

As a group, let's resume the story of Joseph and his brothers. Spend some time recapping what you worked on earlier in the week. We will pick up the story with Joseph's brothers returning to Egypt.

The men took the gifts, double the money, and Benjamin. They lost no time in getting to Egypt and meeting Joseph. When Joseph saw that they had Benjamin with them, he told his house steward, “Take these men into the house and make them at home. Butcher an animal and prepare a meal; these men are going to eat with me at noon.”

The steward did what Joseph had said and took them inside. He presented Simeon to them, then took them inside Joseph's house and made them comfortable—gave them water to wash their feet and saw to the feeding of their donkeys. The brothers spread out their gifts as they waited for Joseph to show up at noon—they had been told that they were to have dinner with him.

When Joseph got home, they presented him with the gifts they had brought and bowed respectfully before him.

Joseph welcomed them and said, “And your old father whom you mentioned to me, how is he? Is he still alive?”

They said, “Yes—your servant our father is quite well, very much alive.” And they again bowed respectfully before him.

Then Joseph picked out his brother Benjamin, his own mother's son. He asked, “And is this your youngest brother that you told me about?” Then he said, “God be gracious to you, my son.”

Deeply moved on seeing his brother and about to burst into tears, Joseph hurried out into another room and had a good cry. Then he washed his face, got a grip on himself, and said, “Let's eat.”

Joseph was served at his private table, the brothers off by themselves and the Egyptians off by themselves (Egyptians won't eat at the same table with Hebrews; it's repulsive to them). The brothers were seated facing Joseph, arranged in order of their age, from the oldest to the youngest. They looked at one another wide-eyed, wondering what would happen next. When the brothers' plates were served from Joseph's table, Benjamin's plate came piled high, far more so than his brothers. And so the brothers feasted with Joseph, drinking freely.

Joseph ordered his house steward: “Fill the men’s bags with food—all they can carry—and replace each one’s money at the top of the bag. Then put my chalice, my silver chalice, in the top of the bag of the youngest, along with the money for his food.” He did as Joseph ordered.

At break of day the men were sent off with their donkeys. They were barely out of the city when Joseph said to his house steward, “Run after them. When you catch up with them, say, ‘Why did you pay me back evil for good? This is the chalice my master drinks from; he also uses it for divination. This is outrageous!’ ”

He caught up with them and repeated all this word for word.

They said, “What is my master talking about? We would never do anything like that! Why, the money we found in our bags earlier, we brought back all the way from Canaan—do you think we’d turn right around and steal it back from your master? If that chalice is found on any of us, he’ll die; and the rest of us will be your master’s slaves.”

The steward said, “Very well then, but we won’t go that far. Whoever is found with the chalice will be my slave; the rest of you can go free.”

They outdid each other in putting their bags on the ground and opening them up for inspection. The steward searched their bags, going from oldest to youngest. The chalice showed up in Benjamin’s bag.

They ripped their clothes in despair, loaded up their donkeys, and went back to the city. Joseph was still at home when Judah and his brothers got back. They threw themselves down on the ground in front of him.

Joseph accused them: “How can you have done this? You have to know that a man in my position would have discovered this.”

Judah as spokesman for the brothers said, “What can we say, master? What is there to say? How can we prove our innocence? God is behind this, exposing how bad we are. We stand guilty before you and ready to be your slaves—we’re all in this together, the rest of us as guilty as the one with the chalice.”

“I’d never do that to you,” said Joseph. “Only the one involved with the chalice will be my slave. The rest of you are free to go back to your father.”

Judah came forward. He said, “Please, master; can I say just one thing to you? Don’t get angry. Don’t think I’m presumptuous—you’re the same as Pharaoh as far as I’m concerned. You, master, asked us, ‘Do you have a father and a brother?’ And we answered honestly, ‘We have a father who is old and a younger brother who was born to him in his old age. His brother is dead and he is the only son left from that mother. And his father loves him more than anything.’

“Then you told us, ‘Bring him down here so I can see him.’ We told you, master, that it was impossible: ‘The boy can’t leave his father; if he leaves, his father will die.’

“And then you said, ‘If your youngest brother doesn’t come with you, you won’t be allowed to see me.’

“When we returned to our father, we told him everything you said to us. So when our father said, ‘Go back and buy some more food,’ we told him flatly, ‘We can’t. The only way we can go back is if our youngest brother is with us. We aren’t allowed to even see the man if our youngest brother doesn’t come with us.’

Responsibility

“Your servant, my father, told us, ‘You know very well that my wife gave me two sons. One turned up missing. I concluded that he’d been ripped to pieces. I’ve never seen him since. If you now go and take this one and something bad happens to him, you’ll put my old gray, grieving head in the grave for sure.’

“And now, can’t you see that if I show up before your servant, my father, without the boy, this son with whom his life is so bound up, the moment he realizes the boy is gone, he’ll die on the spot. He’ll die of grief and we, your servants who are standing here before you, will have killed him. And that’s not all. I got my father to release the boy to show him to you by promising, ‘If I don’t bring him back, I’ll stand condemned before you, Father, all my life.’

“So let me stay here as your slave, not this boy. Let the boy go back with his brothers. How can I go back to my father if the boy is not with me? Oh, don’t make me go back and watch my father die in grief!”

Joseph couldn’t hold himself in any longer, keeping up a front before all his attendants. He cried out, “Leave! Clear out—everyone leave!” So there was no one with Joseph when he identified himself to his brothers. But his sobbing was so violent that the Egyptians couldn’t help but hear him. The news was soon reported to Pharaoh’s palace.

Joseph spoke to his brothers: “I am Joseph. Is my father really still alive?” But his brothers couldn’t say a word. They were speechless—they couldn’t believe what they were hearing and seeing.

“Come closer to me,” Joseph said to his brothers. They came closer. “I am Joseph your brother whom you sold into Egypt. But don’t feel badly, don’t blame yourselves for selling me. God was behind it. God sent me here ahead of you to save lives.

Who “took responsibility” for the actions of the brothers in this encounter?

What was Judah’s promise to his father?

Was he willing to follow through with this promise? In what ways? To what extent?

What would have been the result had Joseph taken Judah up on his offer?

Would you be willing to pay such a price to “keep your word?”

Putting It into Practice

Would people say that you follow through on your word?

Is there something you told someone that you would do but have not done it yet? If so, what is that? Can you do it this week?

Is there a consequence of an action that you are avoiding? If so, what? Would you be willing to pay that consequence?

Is there anything troubling in your life that you are blaming others for? Is it truly their fault? Could any of the responsibility be yours? How could you grow from that?

Previewing the Issue

Have you ever wondered why it is said that a dog is “man’s best friend”? After all, he can’t carry on deep and meaningful conversation with his companion. He brings nothing to the table by way of finances. As a matter of fact, he can become a drain on one’s pocketbook when you add up food, vet bills, kennel stays. He’s bound to tear something up in the house or go to the bathroom where he shouldn’t.

So what is it that makes him “man’s best friend”? Surprisingly, it is one simple trait that dogs possess that make them the best friends that they are. It is the trait of loyalty.

The one absolutely unselfish friend that man can have in this world, the one that never deserts him, the one that never proves ungrateful or treacherous, is his dog. A man's dog stands by him in prosperity and poverty, in health and sickness. He will sleep on the cold ground, when the wintry winds blow and the snow drives fiercely, if only he may be near his master's side. He will kiss the hand that has no food to offer; he will lick the wounds and sores that come in encounter with the roughness of the world. He guards the sleep of his pauper master, as if he were a prince. When all other friends desert, he remains. When riches take wings and reputation falls to pieces, he is as constant in his love as the sun in its journey through the heavens.

Senator George Graham Vest (1870)

So... what can we learn from our canine friends?

Probing the Scriptures

Before King David assumed the throne of Israel, there was another who ruled. His name was Saul. In many ways he was a poor king. His most significant failure though was disobedience to God. As a result of his disobedience, God told Saul that he was going to rip the kingdom from his hands and give it to another. This would mean that David would ultimately commandeer the throne, but not without a fight from Saul. Caught in the middle of this was Saul’s son, Jonathan, who also happened to be David’s best friend.

Read the following excerpt of Saul’s desire to kill David from the portion of scripture that documents the lives of these three men (II Samuel 20).

David went to Jonathan. “What do I do now? What wrong have I inflicted on your father that makes him so determined to kill me?”

“Nothing,” said Jonathan. “You’ve done nothing wrong. And you’re not going to die. Really, you’re not! My father tells me everything. He does nothing, whether big or little, without confiding in me. So why would he do this behind my back? It can’t be.”

But David said, “Your father knows that we are the best of friends. So he says to himself, ‘Jonathan must know nothing of this. If he does, he’ll side with David.’ But it’s true—as sure as God lives, and as sure as you’re alive before me right now—he’s determined to kill me.”

Jonathan said, “Tell me what you have in mind. I’ll do anything for you.”

David said, “Tomorrow marks the New Moon. I’m scheduled to eat dinner with the king. Instead, I’ll go hide in the field until the evening of the third. If your father misses me, say, ‘David asked if he could run down to Bethlehem, his hometown, for an anniversary reunion, and worship with his family.’ If he says, ‘Good!’ then I’m safe. But if he gets angry, you’ll know for sure that he’s made up his mind to kill me. Oh, stick with me in this. You’ve entered into a covenant of God with me, remember! If I’m in the wrong, go ahead and kill me yourself. Why bother giving me up to your father?”

“Never!” exclaimed Jonathan. “I’d never do that! If I get the slightest hint that my father is fixated on killing you, I’ll tell you.”

David asked, “And whom will you get to tell me if your father comes back with a harsh answer?”

“Come outside,” said Jonathan. “Let’s go to the field.” When the two of them were out in the field, Jonathan said, “As God, the God of Israel, is my witness, by this time tomorrow I’ll get it out of my father how he feels about you. Then I’ll let you know what I learn. May God do his worst to me if I let you down! If my father still intends to kill you, I’ll tell you and get you out of here in one piece. And God be with you as he’s been with my father! If I make it through this alive, continue to be my covenant friend. And if I die, keep the covenant friendship with my family—forever. And when God finally rids the earth of David’s enemies, stay loyal to Jonathan!” Jonathan repeated his pledge of love and friendship for David. He loved David more than his own soul!

Jonathan then laid out his plan: “Tomorrow is the new moon, and you’ll be missed when you don’t show up for dinner. On the third day, when they’ve quit expecting you, come to the place where you hid before, and wait beside that big boulder. I’ll shoot three arrows in the direction of the boulder. Then I’ll send off my servant, ‘Go find the arrows.’ If I yell after the servant, ‘The arrows are on this side! Retrieve them!’ that’s the signal that you can return safely—as God lives, not a thing to fear! But if I yell, ‘The arrows are farther out!’ then run for it—God wants you out of here! Regarding all the things we’ve discussed, remember that God’s in on this with us to the very end!”

David hid in the field. On the holiday of the New Moon, the king came to the table to eat. He sat where he always sat, the place against the wall, with Jonathan across the table and Abner at Saul’s side. But David’s seat was empty. Saul didn’t mention it at the time, thinking, “Something’s happened that’s made him unclean. That’s it—he’s probably unclean for the holy meal.”

But the day after the New Moon, day two of the holiday, David’s seat was still empty. Saul asked Jonathan his son, “So where’s that son of Jesse? He hasn’t eaten with us either yesterday or today.”

Jonathan said, “David asked my special permission to go to Bethlehem. He said, ‘Give me leave to attend a family reunion back home. My brothers have ordered me to be there. If it seems all right to you, let me go and see my brothers.’ That’s why he’s not here at the king’s table.”

Saul exploded in anger at Jonathan: “You son of a slut! Don’t you think I know that you’re in cahoots with the son of Jesse, disgracing both you and your mother? For as long as the son of Jesse is walking around free on this earth, your future in this kingdom is at risk. Now go get him. Bring him here. From this moment, he’s as good as dead!”

Jonathan stood up to his father. “Why dead? What’s he done?”

Saul threw his spear at him to kill him. That convinced Jonathan that his father was fixated on killing David.

Jonathan stormed from the table, furiously angry, and ate nothing the rest of the day, upset for David and smarting under the humiliation from his father.

Loyalty

In the morning, Jonathan went to the field for the appointment with David. He had his young servant with him. He told the servant, "Run and get the arrows I'm about to shoot." The boy started running and Jonathan shot an arrow way beyond him. As the boy came to the area where the arrow had been shot, Jonathan yelled out, "Isn't the arrow farther out?" He yelled again, "Hurry! Quickly! Don't just stand there!" Jonathan's servant then picked up the arrow and brought it to his master. The boy, of course, knew nothing of what was going on. Only Jonathan and David knew.

Jonathan gave his quiver and bow to the boy and sent him back to town. After the servant was gone, David got up from his hiding place beside the boulder, then fell on his face to the ground—three times prostrating himself! And then they kissed one another and wept, friend over friend, David weeping especially hard.

Jonathan said, "Go in peace! The two of us have vowed friendship in God's name, saying, 'God will be the bond between me and you, and between my children and your children forever!'"

What are some examples of the deepness of friendship that Jonathan and David have with one another?

Do you believe, after reading this section, that anything could come between these two? Why or Why not?

What have been some reasons that past friendships you have been in have ended?

Would you do anything different with those relationships if you could go back?

What are other reasons that you have seen friendship (not necessarily your own) end?

☐ If David were not in the picture, who would be the successor to Saul's thrown?

☐ Does this bring greater significance to Jonathan's loyalty to David? Why?

☐ Make a list of people in your life that you would be willing to enter into a David/Jonathan type relationship with right now.

Perusing other Pages

Loyalty

My best friend and I had spent many lazy summers talking about how we would someday own our own business. At age ten, we didn't have a clue as to what that business would be, but we knew we would do it together. We were inseparable, even the day we went roaming up a nearby canyon.

As we hiked up through the brush, my friend's shaggy old sheep dog wagged along behind. Without warning, the ground gave way below us and we tumbled into darkness. Somehow our fall only caused bruises and scrapes, but we now looked up to the small hole of sunlight high above, with no way out.

The only thing we could see was a beam of dusty light and the silhouette of that shaggy dog looking down and barking at us. "Go home!" shouted my friend, "Go home!" After a few whimpers, he disappeared from our view. An hour or so later, the sunlight began to fade as night fast approached.

We were getting scared and thought for sure we would be down there for the night, when we began to hear the faint barking. It was that old dog coming back. Soon the barking grew louder and we saw flashlights pierce down through the darkness. A rope was dropped down to us and we joined our rescuers on the surface.

My friend and I stayed close and reached our dream of working together. We still suffer occasional bruises and scrapes in the business world, but a picture of that old sheep dog sits on my desk to remind us that together we can succeed.

Processing Together

☐ Do you feel like you have a "best friend"?

Loyalty

☐ How would your closest friends describe you?

☐ Have you ever had to choose between a friend and money? Popularity? Esteem? Advancement? What choice did you make? What was the outcome?

Review together the story of David and Jonathan. Do you remember these words that Jonathan spoke to David, “If I make it through this alive, continue to be my covenant friend. And if I die, keep the covenant friendship with my family—forever. And when God finally rids the earth of David’s enemies, stay loyal to Jonathan!”

Jonathan did indeed die, along with his father in one last battle. Would David’s loyalty continue to extend to Jonathan and his family?

Read the following excerpt of a day in the life of the new king together as a group.

One day David asked, “Is there anyone left of Saul’s family? If so, I’d like to show him some kindness in honor of Jonathan.”

It happened that a servant from Saul’s household named Ziba was there. They called him into David’s presence. The king asked him, “Are you Ziba?”

“Yes sir,” he replied.

The king asked, “Is there anyone left from the family of Saul to whom I can show some godly kindness?”

Ziba told the king, “Yes, there is Jonathan’s son, lame in both feet.”

“Where is he?”

“He’s living at the home of Makir son of Ammiel in Lo Debar.”

King David didn’t lose a minute. He sent and got him from the home of Makir son of Ammiel in Lo Debar.

When Mephibosheth son of Jonathan (who was the son of Saul), came before David, he bowed deeply, abasing himself, honoring David.

David spoke his name: “Mephibosheth.”

“Yes sir?”

“Don’t be frightened,” said David. “I’d like to do something special for you in memory of your father Jonathan. To begin with, I’m returning to you all the properties of your grandfather Saul. Furthermore, from now on you’ll take all your meals at my table.”

Shuffling and stammering, not looking him in the eye, Mephibosheth said, "Who am I that you pay attention to a stray dog like me?"

David then called in Ziba, Saul's right-hand man, and told him, "Everything that belonged to Saul and his family, I've handed over to your master's grandson. You and your sons and your servants will work his land and bring in the produce, provisions for your master's grandson. Mephibosheth himself, your master's grandson, from now on will take all his meals at my table." Ziba had fifteen sons and twenty servants.

"All that my master the king has ordered his servant," answered Ziba, "your servant will surely do."

And Mephibosheth ate at David's table, just like one of the royal family. Mephibosheth also had a small son named Mica. All who were part of Ziba's household were now the servants of Mephibosheth.

Mephibosheth lived in Jerusalem, taking all his meals at the king's table. He was lame in both feet.

What happened to Saul's (and Jonathan's) kingdom after they died?

Do you think it would have been common in that day for someone other than a descendant to take the throne? Under what circumstances could they?

With Saul and Jonathan dead, who was the remaining descendent who might have claim for the throne?

Why did David want to see Mephibosheth? Do you think Mephibosheth thought that David's intent was pure? Why, or why not?

Was it risky for David to do what he did? Why, or why not?

Why would David take that risk?

Loyalty

Putting it into Practice

Is there a person in your life whom you have hurt by being disloyal?

How could you begin to reconcile that relationship? Will you do that this week?

What steps will you take this week to ensure that you remain a loyal friend? Employee? Spouse?

Previewing the Issue

A search on the internet for the following words produced these results:

Prestige	2,030,000 Results
Fame	5,150,000 Results
Notoriety	212,000 Results
Money	65,200,000 Results

A search on the internet for a less popular word produced this result:

Servanthood 27,000 Results

Enough said.

Probing the Scriptures

Jesus and his followers shared many times together. During these times, Jesus was always teaching. These followers (his disciples) were sometimes slow learners.

Read the following excerpts of Jesus' dealings with his disciples.

Matthew 17:22-18:1

As they were regrouping in Galilee, Jesus told them, "The Son of Man is about to be betrayed to some people who want nothing to do with God. They will murder him—and three days later he will be raised alive." The disciples felt terrible.

At about the same time, the disciples came to Jesus asking, "Who gets the highest rank in God's kingdom?"

Matthew 20:17-21

Jesus, now well on the way up to Jerusalem, took the Twelve off to the side of the road and said, "Listen to me carefully. We are on our way up to Jerusalem. When we get there, the Son of Man will be betrayed to the religious leaders and scholars. They will sentence him to death. They will then hand him over to the Romans for mockery and torture and crucifixion. On the third day he will be raised up alive."

It was about that time that the mother of the Zebedee brothers came with her two sons and knelt before Jesus with a request.

"What do you want?" Jesus asked.

She said, "Give your word that these two sons of mine will be awarded the highest places of honor in your kingdom, one at your right hand, one at your left hand."

Servanthood

Mark 9:30-34

Leaving there, they went through Galilee. He didn't want anyone to know their whereabouts, for he wanted to teach his disciples. He told them, "The Son of Man is about to be betrayed to some people who want nothing to do with God. They will murder him. Three days after his murder, he will rise, alive." They didn't know what he was talking about, but were afraid to ask him about it. They came to Capernaum. When he was safe at home, he asked them, "What were you discussing on the road?"

The silence was deafening—they had been arguing with one another over who among them was greatest.

Luke 9:43-46

While they continued to stand around exclaiming over all the things he was doing, Jesus said to his disciples, "Treasure and ponder each of these next words: The Son of Man is about to be betrayed into human hands."

They didn't get what he was saying. It was like he was speaking a foreign language and they couldn't make heads or tails of it. But they were embarrassed to ask him what he meant.

They started arguing over which of them would be most famous.

Luke 22:14-24

When it was time, he sat down, all the apostles with him, and said, "You've no idea how much I have looked forward to eating this Passover meal with you before I enter my time of suffering. It's the last one I'll eat until we all eat it together in the kingdom of God."

Taking the cup, he blessed it, then said, "Take this and pass it among you. As for me, I'll not drink wine again until the kingdom of God arrives."

Taking bread, he blessed it, broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, given for you. Eat it in my memory."

He did the same with the cup after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant written in my blood, blood poured out for you."

"Do you realize that the hand of the one who is betraying me is at this moment on this table? It's true that the Son of Man is going down a path already marked out—no surprises there. But for the one who turns him in, turns traitor to the Son of Man, this is doomsday."

They immediately became suspicious of each other and began quizzing one another, wondering who might be about to do this.

Within minutes they were bickering over who of them would end up the greatest.

☐ Do you notice a pattern in the previous sections?

☐ Use the chart below to outline the sections.

Text	What Was Jesus' Focus?	What was the Disciples' Focus?
Matthew 17:22-18:1		
Matthew 20:17-21		
Mark 9:30-34		
Luke 9:43-46		
Luke 22:14-24		
Summary of All Texts		

Now read Jesus' answers to the disciples on "who is the greatest."

"For he who is least among you all—he is the greatest."

"Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all."

"Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave"

"If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all."

"Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest"

☐ According to Jesus, what is the path to greatness?

☐ Do you believe this? Why or Why not? How has this worked in your life?

Perusing other Pages

Below is the transcript of a message on servanthood delivered by Steve Pearman...

Tonight I want to pick out three Servants in the bible to use as examples for our attitude to servanthood. I read last week a quote from someone who said, "God did not save you to be a sensation; He saved you to be a servant." I like that. I don't know who said it, but I wish a man called Diotrefes had heard it. You see, you can carry out ministry in two ways: you can reason, God called me to lead or heal or pray or pastor; and I'm going to show God and everyone else how good I can do it. Now doing your best for God is laudable. In deed, I would encourage every Christian to minister to the best of his/her ability, but there is a thin line that can easily be crossed; and Diotrefes crossed it.

Servanthood

In John's third letter, Diotrephes is not commended! Why? Because he refused to give hospitality and told others not to be hospitable. If they did - he would turf them out of the church! What's going on here? Well, in the early stages of the church. An Apostle would start a church in an area, teach them for a while, set them up and then move on. They did not have full-time teachers, so itinerant preachers would go from one church to another. Of course, these would require hospitality during their stay.

Why, then is Diotrephes refusing to give hospitality to visiting teachers? Verse 9, I think, gives us the answer. John speaks of Diotrephes "who loves to be first.....and will have nothing to do with us." The visiting speakers were viewed by Diotrephes as a threat to his leadership. Maybe they didn't teach the things he wanted, perhaps they were better speakers than him, it could have been that he felt that they stole the limelight. But that's not what ministry is all about.

Ministry in Christ's church is about servanthood. Some people think that a good leader in a church is one who takes the helm and says to the rest, "we're going this way - and you are coming with me." Some people think that a good church leader is one who throws himself or herself into everything - taking all the meetings, planning every activity, being a one-man/woman ministry. But that's not being a biblically-based leader. A good leader will encourage others to get involved. He will train up others to lead. A good leader will quite often appear to be putting himself out of a job, because he is serving Christ and His people.

What does John say he will do to Diotrephes? He will expose him for what he is if he comes. You know, it only takes one person to stop a church from doing the Lord's bidding. One man. One woman. I have experienced the harm one man can do in a church. The work, witness, and worship of a church can be bound up because of a Diotrephes in the congregation. And I say, if we discover such a person in our church, we need to expose them for the sake of our heavenly Father. We are called to be servants not masters. Christ is the head, our Master.

In contrast, we note that John is writing to a man named Gaius. This man is an outstanding servant. He IS showing hospitality to travelling teachers (verse 5). He is welcoming strangers; and John describes him as walking in the truth. I think Gaius was a humble, gentle man who just wanted to serve Christ and His cause.

Jesus spoke often about putting yourself last. When you serve - don't make some big song and dance over it. Don't boast about what you've done because, in truth, it's not you that have done it - it's Christ who has worked through you. God knows what you do. You don't have to wave your arms to attract His attention. He will see your acts and will reward you.

Col 4v14. Paul talks about Demas as a fellow worker with him and with Dr. Luke. But later on in Paul's life, Demas did something that must have broke the heart of Paul. In 2 Timothy 4v10 we read Paul's words: "for Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me and has gone to Thessalonica." He worked with Paul - the great church planter, the apostle to the Gentiles. He could have done marvelous things for the sake of God's kingdom; but he abandoned it all. Why? Because he fell in love with the world.

Read with me 1 John 2v15-17: Loving the world means going after material pleasures, aiming for human goals, liking earthly things more

than spiritual things. To follow Christ and serve Him and for Him, you've got to give up loving the world. It's a different way of living. How do you know whether you are loving the world more than Christ? I think if you stop for a moment and analyze your decision-making, you will get a good idea where your priorities lie.

Here's some questions that might come your way:

- a) Do I stay in my warm home or do I go to the bible study?
- b) Should I attend the worship service or watch this great TV program?
- c) Do I tell my friend that I'm a Christian and risk being rejected, or do I keep quiet?
- d) Should I volunteer to help at Church and give up an hour of my valuable time?

You can go on.

Do you see what I'm saying? If you are scoring more times on the worldly side than on the spiritual side, come before the Lord and seek His help in getting your perspective right. Because it doesn't take much to become a Demas.

- * The world says "grab", God says "be willing to give".
- * The world says, "hold on to what you've got", God says "be quick to share".
- * The world says, "Get the best, the most, the greatest you can - no matter who you step on." God says, "develop your Spiritual gifts, and trust God with your life."
- * The world says, "an eye for an eye - give as good as you get." God says, "Forgive each other. If someone uses you, it's OK. You don't have to be their judge - I will."

Sometimes it seems as if the whole world is walking one way and we are walking in the total opposite direction. And it's a struggle...it really is a struggle. We get stepped on, hurt, used, abused, while we're giving, helping, teaching, serving. You and I have all heard that little voice that says, "Life's a whole lot easier if you turn around and go with the flow." You've heard that voice, haven't you? That's the voice Demas heard....and he gave in! And it can happen to anyone here tonight.

Acts 9v36: Tabitha (Dorcas). If ever you wanted a true example of servanthood, you should turn to Tabitha. Here is what Luke says about her in Acts 9: She was always doing good and helping the poor. She continually poured out goodness to others. Reading between the lines, we can imagine a lady who gave up her life in order to serve people. We know she was a follower of Jesus Christ. She wanted to love and serve others as Christ had loved and served her.

So she is giving great service to people and (verse 37) right in the middle of this, she dies. Her body was washed and placed in an upper room. Peter happened to be in a neighboring town, so they went to him and urged him to come at once. Tabitha was so loved by the people there, they could not imagine life without her. So they went to Peter and he said he would come.

They took him to the upper room where a group of widows stood weeping and holding the clothes that Tabitha used to make for them. They were honoring her. These widows were saying, "This lady loved us and served us. She gave of her time and energy for us. We didn't even own any clothes before she came, but Tabitha made some for us." Peter was so moved by this that he prayed and called Tabitha to rise. She sat up, and the widows were called in. It was as if God was saying, "You

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need a servant like this around you; so I'm giving her back to you." Tabitha made garments for needy widows. She loved and she served in small acts of kindness. She used her gifts to make them count for the sake of Christ.

What kind of servant are you - in your home, at work, with friends, in your street, around the church?

* Are you like Diotrephes - pushing yourself forward too much? If that's you, turn to God tonight and ask Him to break you, melt you, mould you, and fill you.

* Are you like a Demas - slowly slipping away from serving because of the glitter of the world, or because you just want the easy life that others have? If that's you, come to God right now and say, "make me strong. Give me the strength and the encouragement I need to serve you and your people well."

* Are you a Tabitha? How many people would stand round your death bed and plead for you to be raised because of the contribution you have made? That thought has certainly been on my mind the last few days. Would anyone miss my servanthood?

We need to bow before God and seek His help tonight. In a quiet, reflective moment, we are going to sing a song. Here are the words:

Father, I'm ready to serve You;
I bring my life to Your throne.
And all I have, Lord I give You,
take me and all that I own.

I know I've not been committed
to serve You all of my days;
but now Lord I just want to give You
my best endeavor and praise.

Processing Together

☐ Who is the most famous person you have ever met? When and where did you meet them? What happened?

☐ What do you think makes a person great?

Review the encounters with Christ and his disciples in the Probing the Scriptures section.

☐ What does Jesus say makes a person great?

☐ Does serving come natural to you?

☐ Can you think of a time that you did serve? How did you feel afterward?

☐ Why do you think it is difficult to serve others?

Read the following words that Jesus spoke of himself:

Mark 10:45:
That is what the Son of Man has done: He came to serve, not to be served—and then to give away his life in exchange for many who are held hostage.

☐ According to Mark, what was Jesus' life mission?

☐ Did Christ accomplish His mission? How?

☐ In what way were the many “held hostage”? By whom? Or by what?

Servanthood

☐ How did Christ set those who were held hostage free?

Putting it into Practice

☐ Do you serve? How?

☐ Who in your sphere of influence could you serve tomorrow?

☐ How will you serve the following people next week?

◆ Your Spouse	
◆ Your Children	
◆ Your Friends	
◆ Your Co-workers	

☐ Spend this week filling out this chart.

Individual or Group	What is Their Need?	How Can I Serve?

Previewing the Issue

Hollywood has yet to make it. They would be too crazy to do so. It just wouldn't work.

Have you ever seen a movie where the bad guy gets away and the good guy loses? Sure you have! But think about it closely. There was always something redeeming about the situation. Either the bad guy was the one that the movie made you identify with; therefore, it was really the hero that was getting away. Or, through the loss of the good guys, decency was somehow accomplished. But nowhere did evil win... simply for the sake of evil. Moviegoers wouldn't put up with it. They would hate it. They would tell their friends to avoid it. Why?

It would violate our society's sense of justice! That sense of "rightness" that each of us have deep within us.

Sometimes the sense of "rightness" that we feel gets perverted in our selfish pursuit – but it is still there. Sometimes it gets ignored when it is not as convenient – but it is still there. The challenge that we all face, is that of doing what is RIGHT, even when it is not expedient.

Probing the Scriptures

God gives us clear instruction in His Bible on how we are to live. One verse that summarizes well what is expected of us is in the book of Micah.

Micah 6:8:

But he's already made it plain how to live, what to do, what GOD is looking for in men and women. It's quite simple: Do what is fair and just to your neighbor, be compassionate and loyal in your love, And don't take yourself too seriously— take God seriously.

☐ God is requiring three things of his followers. What are those three things?

☐ Which of those three do you do well with? Which are a struggle for you?

☐ Write out your definition of just.

Justice

☐ Do you think it is different than the word fair?

Notice how Nelson's Bible Dictionary Defines Justice:

JUSTICE — the practice of what is right and just. Justice specifies what is right, not only as measured by a code of law, but also by what makes for right relationships as well as harmony and peace.

The English term "justice" has a strong legal flavor. But the concept of justice in the Bible goes beyond the law courts to everyday life. The Bible speaks of "doing justice" (Ps. 82:3 ; Prov. 21:3), whereas we speak of "getting justice." Doing justice is to maintain what is right or to set things right. Justice is done when honorable relations are maintained between husbands and wives, parents and children, employers and employees, government and citizens, and human beings and God. Justice refers to neighborliness in spirit and action.

☐ Why do you believe that we spend more time today talking about "getting justice" than "doing justice"? Why?

☐ What is the difference between just and legal? What is it?

☐ Can you think of a situation that may be legal... but not just?

Read the following proverb from the scriptures:

Proverbs 22:22-23:

Don't walk on the poor just because they're poor, and don't use your position to crush the weak, Because God will come to their defense; the life you took, he'll take from you and give back to them.

☐ Who are the "weak" and "poor" that you encounter during your week?

☐ Who is pleading their case? Could You? Why or Why not?

☐ What happens to your relationship with God when you use your position to “walk on” or “crush” others?

Perusing other Pages

One of the most difficult challenges presented to the Christian faith is the problem of evil. Spend some time this week reviewing this article by Eric Frank entitled: “Why Doesn’t God Do Something... NOW”

A study on the justice of God (theodicy) is as much practical as it is theological. Most people will never read Charles Hodge or Benjamin Warfield, but they will look at their own lives and experiences, as well as those of others, and ask such questions as: How?, Why?, and What for?

The gruesome images portrayed on TV. seem to make this sensitivity even more acute. Graphic pictures from Bosnia, Somalia, and other places bring the tragedies of thousands (often little children) right into our living rooms, causing us to come to grips with the bleakness that many experience.

The same questions that have plagued mankind for centuries still confront us today: "Why does evil come?," "Where is the justice of God?," "Why doesn't God do something?" Usually responses like these come from people who are sincere in their concern, and yet feel compelled to indict God with complacency and wrongdoing. Even those within the Church are not immune to this disposition. Often, without perceiving it, Christians can lose sight of the sovereignty and mercy of God and begin to doubt his wisdom.

Inquiring into these matters is not necessarily wrong. The Scriptures list many examples of saints who questioned God about the trials of life. In James, the Lord's brother instructed believers to ask God for wisdom when they were being tested. However, in the same context the saints were exhorted to ask in faith and single-mindedness and to never accuse God of wrongdoing (James 1).

Using this biblical passage as a paradigm I have endeavored to answer two questions in this article. First (something frequently asked by those who are antagonistic against God), "Why doesn't God do something now?" And second, "What should the Christian perspective be concerning world crises?" There are no solid answers to these dilemmas apart from the Word of God. All the wisdom that we can hope to attain must come from the Bible.

Why doesn't God do something Now?

For everyone who has read the Scriptures and has a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ the first question stated above is nonsense. In the Gospel of John Jesus said, "My Father has been working until now, and I have been working" (Jn. 5:17). Since the fall of man God has continued to work his will and bring salvation to his people. Therefore, a more accurate question to ask would be, "What is God doing now?"

From a mere human standpoint, suffering indicates God's apparent unwillingness to rescue people, because it seems as though He is not doing anything. However, the Bible reveals God as more than just a Savior, but as the righteous Judge. Theodicy not only means God executing justice for his people, but the opposite also, a just judgment for sins committed.

Justice

Scriptural evidence supporting this doctrine is abundant. Both Noah and the Israelites were preserved through an overwhelming flood, while their adversaries found judgment in a watery grave. During the time of Abraham the Amorites were allowed to continue in the land of Canaan because their sins had not reached their full measure, but four hundred years later they found no mercy from the descendants of Abraham or God.

Although this teaching is not popular today, evidence of God's judgment on sin will become an ever-present reality to us. In all of the synoptic Gospels Jesus' Olivet discourse is recorded with vivid language;

And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not troubled; for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be *famines, pestilences, and earthquakes* in various places. All these are the beginning of sorrows"...For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until that time, no, nor ever shall be. And unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect's sake those days will be shortened. (Matt. 24:6-7, 21)

These verses make it clear that eventually this present world order will be judged and brought to an end, and God's Kingdom will be fully manifested and established. He will wipe away every tear, and pain and sorrow will cease.

Even though we should continue to pray that relief would come to those who suffer tragedy, let us never lose heart at *apparently* unanswered prayer. Instead let us pray, "Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven;" our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.

Some may ask, "What about God's people who find them-selves in the midst of these world judgments? Can God in his omni-science distinguish between the righteous and the unrighteous?" These are good questions. The answer is tucked away in the small book of Habakkuk, and has become a cornerstone of Pauline, Augustinian, and Lutheran theology: "The just shall live by faith."

This almost sounds like a pat answer, and yet it is very pertinent for this discussion. Habakkuk the prophet complained to God about the sin in his homeland, Judah. The Lord told him that his complaint would be answered; God was raising up the Babylonians to execute His judgment. This aroused another objection from the prophet, "How can you judge my country by using a nation that is more sinful" (text question summarized). God did not give the reasons for His sovereign choice; the proud Babylonians would be judged. In the mean time "the just will live by faith."

But what does this mean? Habakkuk was distinguishing between nations, while God was looking upon individuals. The transgressions of Israel were as evil as the sins of the Babylonians; only those who had faith in Judah (and Babylon if there were any) would live.

The apostle Paul picked up on this same theme in the book of Romans. In chapter one Paul quotes from Habakkuk describing the gospel that he preached among the Jews and the Gentiles. In almost an identical context he places this promise of life within a setting of God's judgment;

For in it [the gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith [faith of Jews and Gentiles]; as it is written, 'The just shall live by faith.' For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness (Rom. 1:17-18).

The reference to *all* ungodliness and unrighteousness describes the sins of both Jew and Gentile, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." (Ro.3:23, NIV)

The passages in Habakkuk and Romans hold the same assurance; even in a time when God is judging the world, the just shall live by faith. The life that we receive by faith is eternal. Even if believers perish in the midst of calamities, the promise of everlasting life will never be nullified.

This whole subject raises another important question; "Does suffering always indicate God's displeasure and judgment?" Once again the Bible gives us helpful insight.

Toward the end of Jesus' ministry our Lord encountered a man who was born blind. The disciples asked Jesus a theological question, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus promptly answered that neither the man nor his parents had sinned, but that the works of God should be revealed in him (Jn. 9). There was a deep purpose for this man's affliction; God would glorify his own name by healing his blindness, and the man, although he was blind for a season, rejoiced anew with physical and spiritual sight.

The O.T. is also steeped with similar examples. Joseph could see the hand of the Almighty even in the wicked plots of his brothers; "You intended to harm me (Joseph told his brothers), but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (Gen. 50:20). In order to preserve his people during a time of judgment, the Lord sent his servant Joseph ahead to Egypt. During the famine that followed Israel and his descendants found deliverance through a surprising candidate. What seemed to be a hopeless situation for Joseph was really the beginning of a perfect plan of salvation.

The oldest book in the Bible is also exclusively devoted to the causes of suffering. In Job the patriarch and his three "friends" discuss why he had lost his possessions, family, and even his own health. Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar were convinced that the righteous Job had sinned greatly before God, while Job maintained his innocence.

The readers of this discourse have an advantage over the three men. In chapters one and two we read of a heavenly council between God and Satan. The accuser charged that Job only loved God because of material and physical blessings; if these were removed he would curse the Almighty to His face. God, on the other hand, knew that Job's piety was genuine and that he would maintain his integrity even in the midst of calamity. The Scriptures give this testimony showing that God's keeping power is greater than Satan's power to test: "In all this Job did not sin nor charge God with wrong" (Job 1:22).

After Job, the three "theologians" and young Elihu gave their long-winded speeches, God spoke the final word from a whirlwind:

Who is this who darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Now prepare yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me. Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding (Job 38:2-4).

Although Job had not cursed God in the beginning like Satan said he would, as his three friends continued to denounce him for his "hidden sins," Job began to elevate his own righteous character above God's supreme wisdom for his life; he justified himself instead of God. In chapter 31 Job said, "Oh, that I had someone to hear me! I sign now my defense, let the Almighty answer me; let my accuser put his indictment in writing. Surely I would wear it on my shoulder, I would put it on like a crown" (vs. 35-36).

In the response that God gave Job, the Almighty did not explain his actions; He merely pointed to the mysteries of the universe and asked Job to explain them. Just as the stars of the heavens were under God's sovereign control so also were the circumstances of Job's life.

God's infinite wisdom is beyond our grasp. All that we need to know is that the Lord of all the earth will do right and that all things work together for our (believers) good and God's glory. The Lord did not leave Job in this state of calamity, "The Lord blessed the latter part of Job's life more than the first" (42:12). Truly all things worked together for his good and the Lord was magnified even more in his life. Job's final words before God are enough to respond to the question, "Why doesn't God do something now?"

I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted. You asked, "Who is this that obscures my counsel without knowledge?" Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know. (Job 42:2-3)

What Should the Christian Perspective be Concerning World Crises?

Hopefully, by endeavoring to answer the first question much of the perspective that we should have has already been answered. It is clear from the Scriptures that God is continually working his will in all of the happenings of this world. In his sovereignty God glorifies his name and brings deliverance to many, and at the same time sends judgment on both nations and individuals. Therefore, we should understand all circumstances in the light of God's omniscience and omnipotence. The God of all the earth will do what is right.

Justice

Promises for believers should also be a part of our outlook and a true comfort to us: "All things work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose," and even in the midst of judgment and wrath, "The just will live by faith."

However, we have not considered one important point that is crucial for a proper Christian perspective on suffering. How do we view this life? Are we biblical or are we conformed to a worldly viewpoint?

Those who do not know the Lord Jesus Christ perceive this life as coming to an end with no hope of heaven. We, however, are not to sorrow as those who have no hope, but we are to comfort one another with the promise of the appearing of Jesus Christ.

Many times we have a worldly perspective on our suffering, when we should have our hearts fixed on the Kingdom of heaven. The sufferings that many go through are painful and real, and yet there is a light at the end of the tunnel. The Apostle Paul had the proper perspective, "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us" (Rom. 8:18). Paul placed his sufferings (more than many of us will ever suffer) on a scale with the glory of heaven; there was no comparison for him, nor should there be for us.

Our life now is like a drop of water taken from the ocean of eternity. If we have to suffer now, understand that soon we will stand before the throne of God with resurrected bodies; never again will we hunger or thirst or have pain and sorrow for the former things will have passed away.

Conclusion

Is God doing something now? Yes, my heavenly Father is always at work, both willing and doing his good pleasure. What should my perspective be concerning crises? The God of all the earth will always do what is right. He is able to discern between the righteous and the unrighteous, and soon those who are faithful will receive an inheritance that will never perish, spoil, or fade that is reserved in heaven for us. Come quickly Lord Jesus!

Processing Together

Anyone who has kids has heard the phrase, "that's not fair!" uttered more than once.

Is life fair? Why, or why not?

Is God fair? In what ways.

Is God just? What is the difference?

Read together this story from the life of Jesus Christ. It takes place in John.

Jesus went across to Mount Olives, but he was soon back in the Temple again. Swarms of people came to him. He sat down and taught them.

The religion scholars and Pharisees led in a woman who had been caught in an act of adultery. They stood her in plain sight of everyone and said, "Teacher, this woman was caught red-handed in the act of adultery. Moses, in the Law, gives orders to stone such persons. What do you say?" They were trying to trap him into saying something incriminating so they could bring charges against him.

Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger in the dirt. They kept at him, badgering him. He straightened up and said, "The sinless one among you, go first: Throw the stone." Bending down again, he wrote some more in the dirt.

Hearing that, they walked away, one after another, beginning with the oldest. The woman was left alone. Jesus stood up and spoke to her. "Woman, where are they? Does no one condemn you?"

"No one, Master."

"Neither do I," said Jesus. "Go on your way. From now on, don't sin."

According to the Jewish law, what was the legal penalty for this woman's affair? What do you think of that?

Is there anything in this story that makes you question the justice of her penalty?

How does Jesus respond?

What does he command her to do?

Do you feel that Jesus acted justly in this situation? Why, or why not?

Justice

- ▣ Have you ever been tempted to do something which was legal, but would be considered unjust? What was the issue? What was the outcome?

Putting it into Practice

- ▣ Can you think of someone specifically that you would dread to meet again because you have not been completely just in your dealings with them?

- ◆ Who is it?

- ◆ What was the situation?

- ◆ What could you do this week to make things right?

- ▣ What area of your life do you struggle most with as it pertains to justice? In other words, what area do you have the most difficulty in doing what is right?

- ▣ Financial
- ▣ Employer
- ▣ Employee
- ▣ Family/Children
- ▣ Co – Workers
- ▣ Other _____

- ▣ Is there a person or a situation in your life that you are taking advantage of? It may be legally permissible, but is it just? Think through the following questions and develop a plan to address this area.

- ◆ What is the issue?

◆ Who is affected?

◆ What steps need to be taken to make it right?

◆ Who will hold you accountable to do this?

Previewing the Issue

What would it be like, if those who followed Christ lived lives that were completely pure? A life of no compromise? A life of complete virtue?

The people that we live and work with would begin to take notice. Our relationships with one another would deepen. Our lives would be free of guilt and struggle that is associated with various impurities.

Is this possible?

What would it be like?

Probing the Scriptures

In his letter to the church in the region of Philippi, Paul offers a command to those who follow Christ. Look at what he instructs them to do.

Philippians 4:8 (NIV)

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.

▣ What are some things in your life that you can think of often that are...

- ◇ True? _____
- ◇ Noble? _____
- ◇ Right? _____
- ◇ Pure? _____
- ◇ Lovely? _____
- ◇ Admirable? _____
- ◇ Excellent? _____
- ◇ Praiseworthy? _____

▣ When we think of the word purity, often we narrowly define it. What is your definition of purity?

The scriptures speak of being pure in many different areas. In this study, we will be taking a look at four of those areas. (Sexual, Speech, Thoughts, Finances)

1. Sexual Purity

Ephesians 5:3 (NIV)
But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity... because these are improper for God's holy people.

☐ To what level are we permitted to engage in sexual impurity? Why do you think this is the case?

☐ What do you believe are some specific examples of sexual impurity? (You will NOT be asked to share the answer to this question with the group)

2. Purity of Speech

Ephesians 4:29 (NIV)
Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.

☐ What is your definition of unwholesome?

☐ Define the following

◆ Cursing

◆ Gossip

◆ Lewd or coarse joking

Purity

☐ Would you categorize any of those as unwholesome? Why, or why not?

☐ Which of those areas is it most challenging for you to overcome? Explain?

3. Purity in Thoughts

David, the King of Israel wrote the following song.

Psalm 139

GOD, investigate my life; get all the facts firsthand.

I'm an open book to you;

even from a distance, you know what I'm thinking.

You know when I leave and when I get back;

I'm never out of your sight.

You know everything I'm going to say

before I start the first sentence.

I look behind me and you're there,

then up ahead and you're there, too—

your reassuring presence, coming and going.

This is too much, too wonderful—

I can't take it all in!

Is there anyplace I can go to avoid your Spirit?

to be out of your sight?

If I climb to the sky, you're there!

If I go underground, you're there!

If I flew on morning's wings

to the far western horizon,

You'd find me in a minute—

you're already there waiting!

Then I said to myself, "Oh, he even sees me in the dark!"

At night I'm immersed in the light!"

It's a fact: darkness isn't dark to you;

night and day, darkness and light, they're all the same to you.

What if all your thoughts (good and bad) were to be recorded onto a videotape and played in front of all your friends? Would you be proud or embarrassed? Why?

Does it affect you the same to know that God sees them all? Why, or why not?

4. Financial Purity

Proverbs 11:1 (NIV)

*God hates cheating in the marketplace;
He loves it when business is aboveboard.*

Is your attitude toward finances the same as God's? If not, how does it differ?

Are you honest (or pure) in ALL of your financial dealings?

Perusing other Pages

Take time this week to read this article by Gary L. Thomas called "Pure Refreshment"

Throughout history, human hearts have longed to see God. Moses pleaded with God, "Show me your glory" (Ex. 33:18). David spoke for many of us when he penned the words, "My soul pants for you, O God" (Ps. 42:1). That's why Jesus warned His disciples that even rumors about His return would send people running into the desert or dashing into inner rooms (Mt. 24:26), all for a chance to see God returning in His glory. In medieval times, monks desperate for spiritual intimacy crawled across broken glass, believing the pain would help them catch a little clearer vision of God.

But Jesus doesn't connect "seeing God" with pain, heroic spirituality, secret knowledge, or intense personal discipline. His recipe is much simpler: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God" (Mt. 5:8). Here Jesus connects our God-given passion to love Him more deeply and experience Him more fully with a simple little virtue called purity.

What is this inner purity? If Christ has already purified us by His death and resurrection, why do we need to pursue it today?

Polluted Purity

Being pure, quite simply, is being like Christ—an unpolluted representation of the incarnate Son of God. In Israel’s earliest days, before Christ came to embody this virtue, purity was largely—though not exclusively—a ceremonial and ritual concept. Various diseases made you impure, as did normal sexual activities (Lev. 15:16, 1 Sam. 21:5-6) and natural bodily processes such as menstruation (Lev. 15:19). Ethical considerations also came into play, primarily with immoral sexual activities such as adultery (Lev. 18:20), rape (Gen. 34:5), and homosexuality (Lev. 18:22). Purity was a rather broad concept, encompassing diet and basic hygiene and observance of the sacrificial system of Yahweh.

In Mk. 7:14-23, Jesus challenges the then-prevailing sense of ritual purity by changing the focus from what we eat to our inner motivations:

Don’t you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him “unclean”? ... What comes out of a man is what makes him “unclean.” For from within, out of men’s hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man “unclean.”

—vv. 18 , 20-23

The new purity Jesus talked about is not achieved by closely adhering to a list of dos and don’ts. It’s rather an internal river of life, cleansing our thoughts and actions from within. It’s a powerful force of Christ likeness that chisels us, day by day, into the very image of Jesus Himself.

This new purity first marks our hearts when we are reborn, spiritually, through the process of salvation and regeneration. This is imputed purity—a gift from God to which we contribute nothing. But *behavioral purity*—the transformation of our character—develops even further with our cooperation.

It is this “cooperative” aspect of purity that has been so troublesome to so many Christians. Unfortunately, the call to inner purity has itself been polluted. The history of the church is littered with movements (including the Montanists in the second century and the German Cathari in the twelfth) that tried to “out pure” the rest of the church, creating legalistic barriers and hurdles—and a generous share of spiritual casualties.

Even today we have our share of legalists. A friend of mine honed his faith in an intense, accountability-stressing Christian group. There is nothing wrong with either intensity or accountability, but sometimes such groups can lose the purpose behind the method. My friend was so tied up trying to keep all the rules that he became exhausted. He started serving the rules instead of relating to God.

During a severe financial drought, he felt forced to stop tithing. This went against every legalistic tendency that shaped my friend’s soul. Ironically, however, he eventually found this withholding almost liberating. “To me, it takes more faith *not* to tithe than to tithe,” he confessed. “Before, I always assumed I’d get cancer or someone in my family would get seriously ill if I didn’t send in my 10 percent.”

I’m not in any way suggesting we shouldn’t be faithful, at minimum, with a 10 percent tithe. But my friend wasn’t tithing out of obedience; he was tithing out of fear. He was convinced that if he didn’t keep the rules, God would punish him with a severe crisis. That’s not faith; that’s legalism.

True biblical purity is a *liberating* experience rather than a confining one. It is not a set of hurdles to overcome but a freedom to be embraced. Listen to Peter’s sermon in the book of Acts: “Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, *that times of refreshing may come from the Lord*” (3:19, emphasis mine). Purity is a “refreshing” enterprise.

Most people don’t connect the words *refreshing* and *purity*. Too often we see purity as something that cramps our style or weighs us down. In truth, however, purity provides lightness of soul. Shame is a heavy burden. Regret can be soul crushing. Purity lightens us, refreshes us, helps us to express who we truly are and truly want to be in Jesus Christ.

Do you feel spiritually tired, in need of God’s refreshment? If so, you might want to do a purity check. Sin is a debilitating choice for Christians, inevitably placing a heaviness upon our souls. Do you still struggle with an ongoing sense of shame and regret, even though you know you’re forgiven? Purity is a powerful response to these spiritual ills.

In addition to helping us see God and experience soul refreshment, the practice of purity carries many other benefits. It gives us a powerful testimony, leads to deeper and more meaningful relationships, and elicits God’s pleasure.

Adapted from an article called Pure Refreshment by Gary L. Thomas, Discipleship Journal, Mar./Apr. 2000 Issue # 116.

Processing Together

In your preparation for the study, you looked at Philippians 4:8. A list of attributes were given in order for us to “meditate” on them. As a group, define these attributes.

- True _____
- Noble _____
- Right _____
- Pure _____
- Lovely _____
- Admirable _____
- Excellent _____
- Praiseworthy _____

Looking at the above list, which attribute have you mastered the most and the least?

In the different areas of purity, we looked at Sexual, Speech, Thoughts, and Financial. Which do you think Americans struggle with the most? In what areas of society do you see the effects?

How can you as a group encourage one another in areas of purity?

Purity

Putting it into Practice

☐ Spend some time in your group in “meditation”, taking time to think on the things God has given you that are true, lovely, excellent, admirable, etc.

☐ Are there any areas of purity (or lack of) that you need to confess to God?

☐ Are there other people that have been hurt by your lack of purity (speech, financial) that you need to go to and seek restoration?

☐ Spend this week contemplating Philippians 4:8. Take a different attribute each day and dwell on it. Write down your thoughts.

- ◇ True

- ◇ Noble

- ◇ Right

- ◇ Pure

- ◇ Lovely

- ◇ Admirable

- ◇ Excellent

- ◇ Praiseworthy

Forgiveness

Previewing the Issue

Jesus had a unique way of telling stories that would capture the human attention, and focus it on the issue at hand. Here we find Him addressing the issue of forgiveness.

“The kingdom of God is like a king who decided to square accounts with his servants. As he got under way, one servant was brought before him who had run up a debt of a hundred thousand dollars. He couldn’t pay up, so the king ordered the man, along with his wife, children, and goods, to be auctioned off at the slave market.

“The poor wretch threw himself at the king’s feet and begged, ‘Give me a chance and I’ll pay it all back.’ Touched by his plea, the king let him off, erasing the debt.

“The servant was no sooner out of the room when he came upon one of his fellow servants who owed him ten dollars. He seized him by the throat and demanded, ‘Pay up. Now!’

“The poor wretch threw himself down and begged, ‘Give me a chance and I’ll pay it all back.’ But he wouldn’t do it. He had him arrested and put in jail until the debt was paid. When the other servants saw this going on, they were outraged and brought a detailed report to the king.

“The king summoned the man and said, ‘You evil servant! I forgave your entire debt when you begged me for mercy. Shouldn’t you be compelled to be merciful to your fellow servant who asked for mercy?’ The king was furious and put the screws to the man until he paid back his entire debt.”

Probing the Scriptures

☐ What about the above story irritates you? Why?

☐ If you were a witness to this, what would your reaction be?

The above story comes straight from the pages of the Bible. It is a parable. A completely fictional story told by Jesus to illustrate a life point. Often times we find ourselves in these parables.

☐ If you were to identify with one of these characters, who might you be? How would you compare yourself?

Forgiveness

☐ Which character do you believe represents God? In What ways?

☐ In what way have you been forgiven a debt that you could not repay?

☐ How should that affect your view of God? Of your fellow human beings?

Jesus tells this story in response to a question posed by one of his followers.

Matthew 18:21-22

At that point Peter got up the nerve to ask, "Master, how many times do I forgive a brother or sister who hurts me? Seven?"

Jesus replied, "Seven! Hardly. Try seventy times seven."

☐ Have you ever had anyone wrong you in the same way seven times? What was it? How did you feel?

☐ Would it be hard or easy for you to forgive them seven times? Why?

☐ Was Jesus impressed with Peter's generous offer? Why do you say that?

- ☐ What do you think Peter's response would have been to Jesus' suggestion to forgive someone 490 times (7 X 70)?

- ☐ How many times have you let God down in one particular area? What is the area? How do you respond?

- ☐ Does it bring you comfort to know that he has commanded us to forgive so generously? Why?

Perusing other Pages

Forgiveness

When we are wronged in some way, our natural inclination is to fight back, to get even. Needless to say, this reaction, though thoroughly human, is almost always in error. "Forgiveness," said Epictetus, "is better than revenge, for forgiveness is the sign of a gentle nature, but revenge is the sign of a savage nature."

A dramatic example is the experience of a Hungarian refugee—to protect his privacy we'll call him Joseph Kudar. Kudar was a successful young lawyer in Hungary before the uprisings in that country in 1956. A strong believer in freedom for his country, he fought Soviet tanks in the streets of Budapest with his friends. When the uprising failed, he was forced to flee the country.

When Kudar arrived in the U.S. he had no money, no job, no friends. He was, however, well educated; he spoke and wrote several languages, including English. For several months he tried to get a job in a law office, but because of his lack of familiarity with American law, he received only polite refusals.

Finally, it occurred to him that with his knowledge of language he might be able to get a job with an import-export company. He selected one such company and wrote a letter to the owner. Two weeks later he received an answer, but was hardly prepared for the vindictiveness of the man's reply. Among other things, it said that even if they did need someone, they wouldn't hire him because he couldn't even write good English. Crushed, Kudar's hurt quickly turned to anger. What right did this rude, arrogant man have to tell him he couldn't write the language! The man was obviously crude and uneducated -- his letter was chock-full of grammatical errors!

Forgiveness

Kudar sat down and, in the white heat of anger, wrote a scathing reply, calculated to rip the man to shreds. When he'd finished, however, as he was reading it over, his anger began to drain away. Then he remembered the Biblical admonition, "A soft answer turneth away wrath." No, he wouldn't mail the letter. Maybe the man was right. English was not his native tongue. Maybe he did need further study in it. Possibly this man had done him a favor by making him realize he did need to work harder on perfecting his English.

Kudar tore up the letter and wrote another. This time he apologized for the previous letter, explained his situation, and thanked the man for pointing out his need for further study. Two days later he received a phone call inviting him to New York for an interview. A week later he went to work for them as a correspondent. Later, Joseph Kudar became vice president and executive officer of the company, destined to succeed the man he had hated and sought revenge against for a fleeting moment -- and then resisted.

Bits & Pieces, March 31, 1994, pp. 12-15.

Processing Together

- Begin your group time by making a list of things that only God can do.

- Now make a list of those things that God does that we also can do.

- Did forgiveness make that list? You've heard the old expression: "To forgive is Divine." What is meant by that expression?

- Are there times when forgiveness is NOT the right thing to do?

- Do you believe that there is a difference between forgiving someone for the way they've treated you, and disassociating yourself from that person?

☐ How do you draw that distinction?

In Christianity, we find our basis for forgiveness in the character and makeup of God. We forgive because God first forgave us. Our forgiveness though did not come without a price. God did not merely pass over our wrongdoing. He made sure that justice was served. He dealt with our offenses by sending Jesus Christ into the world. By Christ living the life no man or woman could live (a life of perfection), he became the only person that didn't need forgiveness from God. And he became a perfect substitute for the human race. God is now able to forgive us, because our sins have been dealt with by Christ's death on the cross.

Christians have a ritual that we have participated in for the past 2000 years to commemorate the death of Christ. You are invited as a group to participate in this practice.

Communion

☐ The Bread

- ◆ Reading of the selected Bible passage (Isaiah 53:3-6)
- ◆ Offer a prayer of praise to God
- ◆ Break the bread and pass the elements
- ◆ Read 1 Corinthians 11:24
- ◆ Take the elements

☐ The Wine

- ◆ Reading of the selected Bible passage (Matthew 27:33-42)
- ◆ Offer a prayer of gratitude to God
- ◆ Pass the cup
- ◆ Read 1 Corinthians 11:25
- ◆ Drink the elements

☐ The Affirmation

- ◆ Reading of the selected Bible passage (Mark 15:33-39)
- ◆ Pray together in a group as though you were in conversation with God and one another

Putting it into Practice

☐ Is there something in your life that you need to seek forgiveness from God for?

Forgiveness

- ▣ Is there someone in your life that God is asking you to forgive? A friend... a parent... a spouse? What is the issue? Ask the group to hold you accountable to handle it this week.

- ▣ Is there someone in your life who you need to go to and ask them to forgive you?
