

MEETING JESUS SERIES

Seeker Bible Studies For Small Groups

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MEETING JESUS SERIES

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Beth Crawford, General Editor

Introduction to the *Meeting Jesus Series*

Dear Small Group Leaders:

This series is designed for use with people who are searching for Jesus. From the Gospels, we have chosen encounters people had with our Savior. Our hope is that you and those who participate will see Jesus more clearly and appreciate His great love and compassion for individuals from all kinds of backgrounds and life experiences.

You could use the studies in your small group after asking your group members to pray and invite seekers to a regular group meeting. Additionally, you and some of your group members might want to use them outside your group time by leading a few studies for co-workers, neighbors, classmates, or friends. It is even possible to use these in a one-on-one situation.

We recommend you and your group members pray about how the Lord would have you use these materials. You may want to talk about this at a meeting and then spend time for several weeks praying about whom to invite. You could review some principles of evangelism with your group, but the main thing is to begin to ask the Lord for opportunities to share His Word with folks. Pray that you will meet people with receptive hearts who don't know Jesus yet or that the Lord will prepare the hearts of individuals you already know.

Vineyard Columbus offers excellent training in evangelism. We have tried to glean a bit of wisdom from our Evangelism Pastor, Stephen Van Dop, and others who regularly share Christ with seekers. Following this introduction are some highlights of Stephen's teaching; suggestions for leading inductive Bible study discussions with seekers; tips for preparing the inductive study; a simple outline of the gospel; model prayers of repentance; suggestions for follow up; and a map of the Holy Land from the time of Jesus. These are tools that may help you as you interact with people investigating Jesus through the Bible studies. If you wish, **you may copy the gospel outline, sample prayers, and map** to hand out to your small group members. The map is specifically designed to help folks locate where Jesus met the people included in these studies. The gospel outline and map may be copied and handed out to seekers as well. However, copies of the studies should go only to the people who will be leading them.

You may want to look at other resources as well. Some can be found in our bookstore. We've listed a few books besides the ones Stephen refers to in his manual. In the end, we hope that these studies will assist you in sharing Jesus and the gospel records of His life with others who are seeking Him today.

Beth Crawford
General Editor
Vineyard Church of Columbus
2006

Evangelism Recommendations

Most of these ideas are from Stephen Van Dop's *1st Year VLI Evangelism Mentoring Manual* unless otherwise noted. We include them to help you prepare for these evangelistic studies.

1. We engage in evangelism because "Lost people matter to God" (Van Dop, p. 8). Components of effective evangelism are,
 - Being overwhelmed by the grace of God in your own life.
 - Respect for the other person's spiritual journey.
 - Remembering that salvation is God's idea and His work (Van Dop, "Gleanings").
2. Evangelism is a work of the Holy Spirit. We want to cooperate with Him in presenting the gospel of Jesus Christ through loving actions and appropriate words (Van Dop, p. 24). When you think of evangelism, remember the three C's:
 - Compassion: demonstrating the heart of God for the lost.
 - Consideration: thinking about people's needs and the best way to sensitively address them.
 - Great Counselor: allow the Holy Spirit to guide your conversation and prayers for the people God directs your way (Van Dop, "Gleanings").
3. Telling God's story [He created us for relationship; we rebelled or sinned; He offered reconciliation] in the framework of your personal story [how you met God] can appeal to all kinds of people since most cultures are narrative based. And when you share a brief overview of your life before, during, and after meeting Jesus, most listeners can't debate your personal experience (Van Dop, pp. 24–30).
4. Evangelism is much more than sharing a message. It's about demonstrating God's love to those separated from Him (Van Dop, pp. 10–11). Servant evangelism, which emphasizes grace or undeserved kindness, helps to get people's attention and begins to make connections between Christians and seekers (Sjogren et al, p. 69, cited in Van Dop, pp. 36–37).
5. Keep in mind these characteristics of people disconnected from God, from George Hunter's book, *How to Reach Secular People* (pp. 43–54, cited by Van Dop, pp. 54–55).
 - Secular people are not irreligious. They tend to pick and choose bits and pieces of spirituality from various traditions.
 - Secular people wrestle with moral choices. They feel more doubt than true guilt.
 - Secular people are not well informed about Christianity, and may have had negative experiences with a church or a Christian.
 - Secular people usually want to find life "now" not in the hereafter.
 - Secular people may be hesitant to trust others since so many have felt alienation in their relationships and other spheres of life. But this does mean they are hungry for love.
 - Secular people may have low self-esteem and seek to bolster it through material success.
 - Secular people often feel life is "out of control" for themselves and the world at large. They may be trapped in addictive behaviors and experience helplessness.

6. Secular people have little knowledge of the gospel or may have misinformation about it. Because we live in a pluralistic culture that is hostile to the exclusive claims of Jesus Christ [e.g., “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6)], Stephen Van Dop suggests we do the following to reach people effectively:
 - Build relational bridges to refute negative stereotypes and persuade that Christianity is relevant.
 - Share the gospel facts to inform and convince people of its credibility.
 - Help individuals commit to following Jesus by inviting them to receive Him as Savior and Lord (pp. 15–16).
7. Recognize that the Holy Spirit has been at work in a person who is open to investigating or receiving Christ. Remember that our goal is not just to have a person pray a prayer once but to become a lifelong disciple in relationship with Jesus Christ and to join with His people in a church or church small group. You may be the person the Holy Spirit uses to help them make these connections. Both are vital, so try to follow through with the person while sensitive to the individual’s choices (Van Dop, p. 17).

Evangelism Resources

Coleman, Robert E. *The Master Plan of Evangelism*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Revell, 2000.

Fay, William and Linda Evans Shepherd. *Share Jesus Without Fear*. Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 1999.

Hunter, George III. *How To Reach Secular People*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1992.

Pippert, Rebecca Manley. *How to Lead a Seeker Bible Discussion*. Saltshaker Resources. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003.

Richardson, Rick. *Evangelism Outside the Box: New Ways to Help People Experience the Good News*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000.

Sjogren, Steve, Dave Ping, and Doug Pollock. *Irresistible Evangelism: Natural Ways to Open Others to Jesus*. Loveland, CO: Group, 2004.

Strobel, Lee. *The Case for Christ: A Journalist’s Personal Investigation of the Evidence for Christ*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998.

---. *The Case for Faith: A Journalist Investigates the Toughest Objections to Christianity*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000.

Van Dop, Stephen. *1st Year VLI Evangelism Mentoring Manual*. Westerville, OH: Vineyard Leadership Institute, 2006.

---. “RE: Evangelism Mentoring gleanings.” E-mail to the editor. 2 March 2006.

Leading Bible Study Discussions with Seekers

Many of these ideas came from Rebecca Manley Pippert's *How to Lead a Seeker Bible Discussion*. Leading a Bible discussion geared towards seekers is only slightly different than leading one for your small group members. Consider these recommendations.

1. Prayer is essential as you plan the meeting, invite seekers, prepare the study, and continue to build relationships with individuals afterwards. However, lengthy prayers are uncomfortable for most people. So, either begin the study with a brief request that God help you study His Word, or delegate silent prayer to a co-leader and start the discussion without the group being aware of that (pp. 26, 34–35).
2. Let seekers know you are studying the Bible to see what it really says. They don't have to believe it's true or that it's God's inspired word. Just explain that it "is the primary source document of the Christian faith" (Siemens and Lum, qtd. in Pippert, p. 5) so it's the best way to examine who Jesus is.
3. Let the Bible be the authority, not you. Your job is to ask the questions and direct people to look in the text for answers (pp. 30, 35).
4. If you are able, purchase or borrow inexpensive copies of a modern translation so you all are reading the same version (p. 39).
5. Read the passage in context. As you read, keep in mind what kind of literature it is, and have other Scriptures written down to help support your interpretation. This models a good principle of interpreting Scripture with other Scripture (p. 39).
6. Stick to one passage as much as possible so that you are not asking them to navigate a book that is unfamiliar to them. You can show them the table of contents and explain the chapter and verse numbers to help everyone stay together (p. 37).
7. Be patient and allow for silence. Don't rush to answer your own questions. Let people have time to think.
8. Handle wrong or strange responses carefully. Pippert suggests the following:

Don't correct all wrong answers immediately. Never say an answer is wrong. Because seekers usually don't know much about the Bible, they fear looking foolish. It's better to say, "That's interesting. What do the rest of you think?" Receive several right and wrong answers without comment. Then ask the group if any verse in the text clarifies the point. It is not humiliating when several people are wrong (p. 38).
9. Show respect for other religions and beliefs. Let God bring correction and conviction through His Word and His Spirit (p. 47).

Pippert, Rebecca Manley. *How to Lead a Seeker Bible Discussion*. Saltshaker Resources. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003.

Preparation for Leading Inductive Bible Studies

These Bible studies are written as Inductive Bible Study Discussions. “Inductive” means you begin with a text and ask a series of questions to **discover** the truth in that passage. The leader encourages the group members to find answers in the Scripture and then apply God’s truth to their lives. Usually the leader poses a series of questions to the group that ask the following:

1. What can I **detect** in the text about the people, their situation, and events that take place? What kind of literature is this? What words or ideas stand out or are repeated?
2. What did the text **mean** when it was written? Why were certain themes addressed in it? How would this text impact the original audience?
3. How does the meaning of the text **apply** to me today? What is God saying to me personally from this passage of Scripture? How should I respond to Him?

The authors of this series suggest you read over the notes on “How to Teach the Bible in Small Group” and “Some Practical Suggestions for Leading a Small Group Discussion” in Vineyard Church of Columbus’ *Small Group Leadership Training Manual* if you feel your inductive study skills are rusty. Or, you could visit our web site:

<http://www.vineyardcolumbus.org/resources/sgresources/PDFs/HowToTeach.pdf>.

Before you go over the Scripture text, pray that God will teach you something relevant for your group. Then, read through the passage, keeping an open heart and ear to the Lord. Finally, work through the Bible study notes and questions below.

These studies contain more background material and information on the passages than your group will cover in a meeting. Therefore, use each written Bible study as a framework for the discussion you lead in your small group meeting. This means you will need to:

1. Go over the questions and **choose** those you want to emphasize and those you might eliminate since your time is limited.
2. *Note that the application questions are marked with an asterisk (*). Rather than leaving all of these until the end of the study, ask one or two as you work through the passage so people are being confronted by Scripture’s truths and applying them to their own lives.
3. Pace yourself. If you find you are falling behind schedule and need to move ahead, you could **summarize** some of the passage and then go to the final questions.
4. Select one **application question** you will use with your group at the end. The question may have more than one part, but focus on the vital Biblical truth you want to encourage your group to implement in your final question.
5. Feel free to suggest that your group **continue** a discussion at the next meeting or at another informal get together. Depending on the kind of meeting you are leading, you might want to leave time for worship, listening to God, and prayer ministry, so don’t feel you must cover every nugget of truth in a passage or allow each group member to share a mini-sermon on every question!

6. You may want to create your own introduction by using a personal example or current event that illustrates the point of the study. Your introduction and any background material shared should help lead the group members' thoughts from the present moment into the text.

The authors of this series are providing these questions and accompanying material for the leader's benefit—to help reduce your study and preparation time; to supply resources for possible questions group members may raise; and to clarify some gray areas of doctrine that may be in your mind as you prepare. Obviously, we cannot exhaust any one subject in a document like this, so you may want to do further reading and discuss doctrine with your pastor.

We highly recommend *The New Bible Dictionary* or *The New Bible Commentary* as excellent resources for further study.

Also note that some studies advise the leaders to make copies of a handout or bring some helpful communication tool, etc.

People First Language

In several of these studies, Jesus meets people with different physical needs. Some words, used in the past to label individuals with various disabilities, are now considered offensive. In order to remove any barriers to persons coming to know Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, we want to show sensitivity and respect to everyone. It is good to remind ourselves that sin has made all of us less-abled than God originally intended for us to be; thus we all struggle in life. Because some have “invisible” or not readily noticeable disabilities or illnesses, we may unknowingly offend someone if we are not considerate at all times.

Please use language that models the following principle: speak about the person first, and then refer to the disability second, if the disability even needs to be noted. For example, rather than saying “the blind man,” use “the man who was blind,” or “the man who was visually impaired,” or “the man who could not see clearly.” This will help remove some of the offense and labeling that can occur when discussing any form of disability. Also, the word “mute” should never be used. Replace it with “speech impairment,” “inability to speak clearly,” etc. You may even need to politely suggest alternatives to anyone in your group who might unknowingly use inappropriate terminology. Additionally, ask yourself if an individual's condition needs to be mentioned at all. Try to communicate what has to be said without referring to anything that makes the person seem different. At the same time, recognize that language usage varies and changes, so we may offend people no matter how careful we are.

The Roman Road

This is one version of a gospel outline using verses only from the book of Romans. You can easily memorize it and avoid flipping through the Bible when you sit down with seekers to talk about putting their faith in Jesus. After looking up a verse, invite the other person to read it aloud. Then ask politely, “What do you think this means?” Below are also some suggestions of the points you would want to cover in your conversation.

1. Romans 3:32 “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

Since God is our Maker, we belong to Him. Since He is the ultimate Ruler over life and death, we ought to yield to Him. However, we resist God’s right to rule us and try to be in control of our lives. The Bible calls our rejection of God sin. And it says all of us sin against Holy God. We ignore, disobey, and offend God. And we do not meet the goal or even hit the target of what God had planned for us.

2. Romans 6:23 “For the wages of sin is death...”

The result of our sin is that we are separated from God and spiritually dead. After we physically die, we will face God as judge. He will look at every time we have ignored, strayed from, or refused His right to rule. He will examine all our self-centered thoughts, words, and acts. Ultimately, He will punish our rejection of Him and His ways by banishing us from His loving presence forever.

3. Romans 5:8 “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

Jesus Christ, God in the flesh, never refused or rejected God the Father. Jesus lived a perfectly obedient and loving life. He died in our place on the cross to pay the death penalty for our sin. God put all the charges against us on Jesus, and cleared us of our wrongdoing. The debt we owe God for disobedience was paid for by Jesus’ life of perfect obedience and His death as a substitutionary sacrifice. This means we do not have to work harder to be good enough to remove our offenses from our record.

4. Romans 10:9 “That if you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”

We can live forever in harmony with God if we do the following: believe Jesus Christ died in our place but was raised to life by the power of God; receive God’s forgiveness and His offer of a whole new life by inviting Jesus to live in us as our Savior and Lord; and tell others that we have made this about face or reversal from living a self-directed life to living under God’s direction. These actions will secure us in God’s love and family now and after we die forever.

After sharing, listening, and discussing these verses with seekers, ask them if they are ready to yield to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Lead them in a simple prayer repenting of sins, thanking Jesus for dying for them, and inviting Jesus to live in them and take control. You can pray for them as well, asking the Holy Spirit to fill them and reassure them of this important decision. It would be good to give them some Scripture to read as a follow up. If they reply they are not ready, then lovingly ask what might be keeping them from this decision.

Sample Prayers for First Time Commitment and Re-Commitment to Jesus Christ

These sample prayers are from Vineyard Columbus' Salvation Decision Prayer Team Training (qtd. in Van Dop, pp. 18–20). When someone indicates a desire to receive Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, invite the individual to pray along these lines:

Dear Jesus, I know that I am a sinner and need Your forgiveness. I believe that You died for my sins. I want to turn from my sins. I now invite You to come into my heart and life. I want to trust and follow You as Lord and Savior. In Jesus' name, Amen.

When someone indicates a decision to return to following Christ after a lengthy absence, ask the person what sins he or she pursued instead of loyalty to Christ. Remind the individual that it's necessary to renounce and turn away from those sins and yield all of life to God in order to have a restored relationship with Him. Help them pray in this way:

Dear Jesus, I confess that I have not followed you with my whole heart, and I choose to renounce and repent of _____. Please forgive me and help me turn away from _____. I confess that You, Jesus, are Lord over my entire life. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Then follow this prayer by praying for them to be forgiven, cleansed, filled by the Holy Spirit, and assured of God's forgiveness. Remind them of the promise we have in 1 John 1:9.

Additionally, pray regularly for and try to contact that person within 72 hours to see how things are going. Encourage new believers to visit your small group or a group designed for helping new disciples get integrated into a church community where they can develop relationships and grow. Help them see another step to following Jesus is to participate in baptism as a public identification with Him and His people.

Van Dop, Stephen. *1st Year VLI Evangelism Mentoring Manual*. Westerville, OH: Vineyard Leadership Institute, 2006.

Map of the Holy Land at the Time of Jesus



By Stephen Pflug © 2006 Vineyard Church of Columbus (BibleMap-3_8_2006-2.jpg)

Meeting Jesus Series

Study 1

MEET JESUS—WHO TOUCHES AN OUTCAST

Mark 1:40—45

By Mary Youtz

“You may call God love, you may call God goodness. But the best name for God is compassion.”

Meister Eckhart

“There was never any heart truly great and generous, that was not also tender and compassionate.”

Robert Frost

“It is good to see how Jesus approaches broken people—not from a superior position but from a humbler, lower position.... In fact, Jesus seems to be more ‘at home’ with the leper, the publican, the poor and the weak, the children, than with the Pharisee and the rich and the wise.

Those whom Jesus identifies himself are regarded by society as misfits. And yet Jesus is that person who is hungry; Jesus is that woman who is confused and naked. As I carried in my arms Eric who was blind, deaf and with severe brain damage, I sensed that paradox: ‘Whoever welcomes one of these little ones in my name, welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me, welcomes the one who sent me.’ ”

Jean Vanier

AIM

- To recognize the compassion and power of Jesus in His healing a man who most people shunned.

KEY VERSES

“Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. ‘I am willing,’ he said. ‘Be clean!’ Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cured.”

Mark 1:41—42

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Before you lead this study, please review the following sections in “Introduction to the *Meeting Jesus Series*”:

- *Leading Bible Study Discussions with Seekers*, for a refresher on seeker-specific issues.
- *Preparation for Leading Inductive Bible Studies*, for helpful hints on how to prepare for and lead this group of studies.
- *People First Language*, for guidelines about using sensitive and considerate language when referring to people who are physically impaired.

OPENER

Can you think of a situation when you were left out or excluded by others? How did that make you feel?

Allow participants to briefly discuss this. Encourage honest responses from seekers. At this point, if their ideas do not line up with Scripture, you do not need to correct people. Be patient and let the Bible speak for itself. Draw the opening discussion to a close, and tie it in with the Scripture passage.

People may feel unwelcome or excluded when they come into a new situation or group. Even visiting a church or Bible study—where folks are supposed to love you—can be disappointing. Christians can be cliquish, too. But Jesus never was. He reached out and welcomed people from all aspects of society, especially those who had been excluded by the religious leaders of His day. Let’s take a look at His encounter with a man shunned by almost everyone in the first century.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

This is background material for leaders. You may decide how much to share.

Mark was a companion of the apostle Peter. Since Peter was one of Jesus’ original twelve disciples, and was in the inner circle along with James and John, Peter was an important eyewitness to Jesus’ ministry. Thus Mark had access to reliable material for his account of Jesus’ life. Tradition states that Mark went to Rome with Peter when James, the brother of John, was martyred and persecution broke out against Christ’s followers (Acts 12:17, cited by Cook, “Introduction to Matthew”). Mark’s gospel may have been the first of the four written, and some scholars date it in the mid 40’s A.D. It is also the shortest gospel. Paul appears to quote from

Mark 7:14–23 in his Letter to the Romans in Chapter 14:14, written around 56 A.D. (Cook, “Introduction to Matthew”). Mark probably wrote for non-Jewish readers in Rome, where Peter preached and helped to start the church (Cook, “Introduction to Matthew”). Mark’s writing is known to be “blunt,” but that may be because, as one early Christian author stated, Mark wanted to record the preaching of Peter and add nothing to it (Cole, pp. 33–35).

This study emphasizes the compassion of Jesus in healing a leper. You might find it helpful to read the parallel passages found in Matthew 8:1–4 and Luke 5:12–16 since each gospel account includes some different information about the incident.

STUDY THE PASSAGE: MARK 1:40–45

Pray that the Scriptures will come alive and people will see Jesus as He really is: full of compassion and mercy.

CONTEXT

- 1. Let’s read Mark 1:38–39 to discover where this encounter with Jesus occurs and what is happening in Jesus’ life at this time.**

What is Jesus’ plan for the day (v. 39)? How do His activities reveal what His life is all about?

Jesus knows His reason for coming is to preach the gospel and announce the coming of the kingdom of God to earth. Jesus and the disciples are in Galilee, both preaching and driving out demons. They are healing the sick, too. These two activities demonstrate both the Words and Works of His ministry. The miracles and casting out demons help to validate the coming of the kingdom of God in this current age and reveal Jesus’ response to suffering.

MAIN PASSAGE

- 2. Would someone please read Mark 1:40–45 aloud?**

Who approaches Jesus during His time in Galilee (v. 40)?

A man with leprosy approaches Jesus.

It is important to understand how people viewed leprosy in this time and culture to see fully the impact of Jesus’ interaction with this man.

John Cook says in his notes on “Luke 5”:

Leprosy was the generic name given to many types of skin diseases in the ancient world. Some of them were not the condition that we refer to today as leprosy. But in its worst forms, leprosy was dangerous, degrading and painful. For sanitary reasons lepers were not permitted interaction with other people at any level. For this reason, leprosy had severe sociological implications. Lepers were outcasts, prohibited from engaging in any contact with others. They were unable to work and relied solely on charity to live. Specifically, due to concerns about communicability, Leviticus 13:46 prohibited lepers from even entering a city. ... Lepers lived on the fringes of first century culture. They had no friends (other than family members who provided support.) They lived alone or in colonies outside of normal society.

“According to the Old Testament, lepers were ceremonially unclean and weren’t permitted to engage in temple worship. Touching a leper rendered others ceremonially unclean as well. Therefore, lepers were the ultimate outcasts, unwanted persons who lived tortured existences, usually as beggars” (Cook, “Matthew 8”). Also, “leprosy was considered evidence of having been accursed by God. See Numbers 12:10, 12 and Job 8:13” (Cook, “Matthew 8”).

3. What is the man’s request of Jesus (v. 40)?

The man asks Jesus to take away his disease.

Luke’s account gives more detailed information about the extent and severity of the disease in the man. Luke is a physician and often includes more information about illnesses and healings. In Luke 5:12, Luke’s gospel says the man was “full of” or “filled with” leprosy (NIV “covered with leprosy”). “Commentators agree this probably reflects ... medical terminology that implicates an especially severe case” (Cook, “Luke 5”).

4. What does the man doubt about Jesus and a possible healing?

The text indicates that the man is unsure Jesus is “willing” to heal him since he begins his request with “IF.” However, this man believes Jesus has the *ability* to heal.

5. What is Jesus’ response (v. 41)? Why do you think He touches the man?

Jesus touches the man with leprosy and commands the disease to leave him.

Jesus *chooses* to touch the man. Since most at that time believed skin diseases were communicated by physical contact, Jesus risks infection. Second, He risks ceremonial uncleanness by touching a person with a skin disease. Jesus’ action would have horrified first century readers and would have scandalized His disciples as well as anyone else witnessing this act. (See above question #1 notes).

“Luke reports that the leprosy left him, terminology very similar to the description of demons leaving the demonized in Luke 4:35 and the rebuke of Simon’s mother-in-law’s fever which left her in Luke 4:39” (Cook, “Luke 5”). The command to be cleansed “reflects the Jewish teaching that lepers were unclean, so cleansing, not healing was appropriate” (Cook, “Matthew 8”).

6. What does Jesus feel toward the man (v. 41)?

Jesus feels compassion. It is important for the group to see Jesus’ compassion toward this man’s suffering. Other studies in this series show the compassion of Jesus toward people despite their sins and weaknesses.

7. What results from this man’s encounter with Jesus (v. 42)?

The man is cured immediately.

8. What does Jesus tell the man to do (vv. 43–44)? Why?

Jesus tells him to show himself to the Levitical priests and perform the actions the Law of Moses requires.

In his notes on “Luke 5,” John Cook writes:

Leviticus [13 and 14] have detailed instructions for priests on how to examine an apparently healed leper as a condition for his or her reentry into normal life, which was then accomplished by the offering of sacrifices in the temple. Jesus required the leper to go and formally be reinitiated into Jewish society in strict accordance with the Old Testament law. ... Jesus says this was a testimony ‘to them.’ But exactly who is the ‘them’ that he means? Some believe it was a testimony to the priests who would be brought face to face with Jesus’ messianic proclamation. But more likely ‘them’ is simply everyone else around the man. Jesus wanted every obstacle to his readmission to society to be swept away. Only compliance with the Old Testament law would allow the man to be reintegrated into ordinary life. ... Jesus always lived in accordance with the law of Moses properly interpreted.

Since either idea could be correct, if both ideas are suggested, avoid too much discussion over which is right. The main idea is to emphasize Jesus’ compassion even in wanting the man to fulfill the requirements of the Mosaic Law so that he might enjoy normal spiritual and social involvement.

9. What does the man do instead (v. 45)?

The man tells everyone that Jesus has healed him.

10. What impact does this have on Jesus and His ministry (v. 45)?

Jesus can no longer enter a town because of the crowds and instead must stay in lonely places—probably outside of the towns.

APPLICATION

*** People with leprosy were considered outcasts in first century Jewish society. Who might be considered this way today? How do you think Jesus would respond to them?**

Possible answers include people with HIV/AIDS, people who are unemployed or homeless, people with mental or physical handicaps, the elderly, illegal aliens, etc. In examining Jesus’ interactions with humans treated as outcasts in His day, Jesus shows great compassion and understanding. He embraces them with the love of His Father. Likewise, He does not commend the pious Pharisees who avoid the “unclean” or who make the law burdensome for individuals so that they are essentially kept at a distance from God. Especially as we interact with seekers in these studies, we should imitate Jesus in conveying the compassion of God to those who feel unloved and unwanted.

*** What is Jesus' response to the people rejected by His society?**

Jesus demonstrates in this and other miracles (such as the demonized man living in the tombs, the beggar who is blind, the woman bent over, the man with dropsy) that "the unfortunate are not to be cast aside, despite personal risk and social disapproval" (Cook, "Matthew 8"). Jesus, unlike pious Jews and hardened Gentiles of His time, welcomes those who often feel unwelcome in religious circles and rejected by God. We should imitate Him in this as well. The good news of the kingdom is that Jesus has opened the door between sinful humans and holy God, and those who thought they were cursed or cut off from God are now welcome. By putting trust in Jesus, and all that He did in His obedient life and substitutionary, sacrificial death, people who think they have to clean up their act or do lots of good to outweigh the bad are invited into the family and kingdom of God.

Keep in mind that Jesus' receptivity to sinners needs to be balanced with a proper reverence for Him as King and Lord. He does counsel people stuck in sinful patterns to leave their sin or "go and sin no more" (John 5:14; John 8:11, KJV). It has been said that Jesus loves us as we are, but also loves us enough to not leave us as we are. However, Jesus does not expect seekers or His followers to wage battle against sinful forces within ourselves or without on our own. Only by surrendering to King Jesus and inviting Him to live in us through His Spirit, and continuing to trust in Him each day can we leave defeat and find victory.

*** How does the man with leprosy demonstrate his faith in Jesus' ability to heal him?**

A person with leprosy choosing to come near a rabbi and make a request in this culture is amazing (Cook, "Matthew 8"). As noted above, the rabbis of the day would have ordered him away because he would have been assumed to be cursed by God and because of the requirements of the Mosaic Law. He has probably heard of other healings of Jesus. He demonstrates his humility before the Lord by both kneeling and begging Him to heal his disease.

*** How can we overcome doubt in Jesus' desire to heal us and doubts as to whether He will answer our prayers or not?**

Reading the accounts of Jesus in the Gospels helps us see Him more accurately than just viewing Him through other's eyes or impressions we have formed from living in a fallen world. As we gain an understanding of what God's Word says, we can base our prayers on what we know of God's general will revealed in the Bible which may help us pray with greater faith. Reading verses about the compassion of both God the Father and Jesus the Son may also convince us of their desire to heal and answer prayer. We don't have any record of Jesus refusing to heal someone who asked. We can't claim that He healed every sick person on earth, either, but generally we should have confidence to approach Him with our requests.

If doubt lingers or our consciences accuse us, we may want to talk with another person about this. Sometimes we need assurance that God wants the best for us. We may have nagging doubts about how God could want something good for those of us who feel guilty about sins we have committed. For those who have not yet embraced Jesus as Savior and Lord, this is a perfect opportunity to deal with guilt and/or shame. Jesus is not waiting for us to clean ourselves up or right our wrongs. He didn't ask the leper to get well before He touched and healed Him! Jesus did everything right in His life, including obeying the Father's request that He pay for our sins on the cross. Jesus did that for us—to take away our sins and guilt and to restore us to a right relationship with His Father. He wants us to accept His perfect life and death on our behalf, and give Him our wretched deeds and guilty consciences in exchange. Dealing with our sin, guilt and shame this way not only gives us new life and eternal relationship with God, but also opens the door for numerous blessings, which may include healing and certainly includes answers to many prayers.

For those who have repented and received Jesus, we may need to hear again from another believer that our sins have been forgiven (1 John 1:9). However, we must not presume on God's grace by continuing to sin and expecting God to look the other way. Sometimes we also need to examine our lives to see if we need to repent of any current sin and forsake it. The Bible warns us that sin can potentially block us from His blessings in our lives (Isaiah 52:9; Jeremiah 5:25; Habakkuk 1:13; 1 John 1:6).

WRAPPING IT UP

Jesus Christ was full of compassion when He walked this earth. He healed people not only because it was the loving thing to do, but also because it was what His Father wanted Him to do as part of restoring God's beneficial rule to earth. From the beginning of His ministry to His dying breath, from His triumph over death even until today, He seeks to proclaim good news, release those oppressed by sin and evil, and announce God's favor to His people. We can have confidence that this is the same Jesus who invites us to come to Him because He is willing to meet with us. No matter how sinful we may feel, how distant we have been, how confused we may find ourselves, Jesus is willing to show us compassion, too. All we have to do is come humbly before Him and admit our need of His help.

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Meeting Jesus Series

Study 2

MEET JESUS—WHO HONORS THE FAITH OF FRIENDS

Mark 2:1—12

By John Ebert

“Miracles can occur without special effects. It takes more doing for a holy God to forgive an errant person than it does to part the waters of a sea.”

Martin Marty

*“Jesus’ friendship with people with disabilities serves as a model for us. ... He valued each disabled person as a person. The story of the paralytic who was let down through the roof in Luke 5 highlights Jesus’ belief that a disabled person was a **person**. In verse 20, he addresses the man as “friend,” or literally “man.” That one word cut right through the prevailing notion that disabled people were less than full human participants in society.*

*While elevating the status of each disabled person to that of a true human, Jesus also saw that each disabled person was also a **sinner**. ... In some cases, Jesus pointed out the disabled person’s need for forgiveness. The disability may not have been caused by sin, but that did not exclude the person with a disability from the community of sinners. Several times Jesus told disabled people that their sins were forgiven or that they should sin no more.”*

Joni Eareckson Tada and Steve Jensen

AIM OF THE STUDY

- To see how Jesus responds to the faith of men who bring to Him a friend who cannot walk.

KEY VERSE

“When Jesus saw their faith, He said to the paralytic, ‘Son, your sins are forgiven.’”

Mark 2:5

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Before you lead this study, please review the following sections in “Introduction to the *Meeting Jesus Series*”:

- *Leading Bible Study Discussions with Seekers*, for a refresher on seeker-specific issues.
- *Preparation for Leading Inductive Bible Studies*, for helpful hints on how to prepare for and lead this group of studies.
- *People First Language*, for guidelines about using sensitive and considerate language when referring to people who are physically impaired.

OPENER

How does it make you feel when you see someone you care about paralyzed by a difficult circumstance? How do you usually respond?

Allow participants to briefly discuss this. Encourage honest responses from seekers. At this point, if their ideas do not line up with Scripture, you do not need to correct people. Be patient and let the Bible speak for itself. Draw the opening discussion to a close, and tie it in with the Scripture passage.

It can be very frustrating when there is little we can do to help someone who is stuck in a difficult circumstance. However, there is one person who can always make a difference. Jesus has the power to bring something good out of life’s difficulties and He often transforms us in the process. Let’s take a look at His response to some men trying to help a friend who is in a seemingly helpless situation.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

This is background material for the leader. You may decide how much to share.

The first chapter of Mark introduces Jesus and records His rapid rise in popularity. The chapter begins with John the Baptist who comes to prepare people for the Messiah or Anointed One. In order for people to be ready, they must turn back to God and be baptized in water as a sign of being cleansed and starting a new life of obedience. John foretells that the power of the Spirit will mark the ministry of the Messiah (Mark 1:6–9). When John baptizes Jesus, Mark notes that Jesus is filled with the Holy Spirit (Mark 1:10). Then Mark tells us that the Spirit sends Jesus to the desert where Satan tempts Him (Mark 1:12–13). After this, Jesus travels around Galilee (Mark 1:14, 38–39), preaching (Mark 1:14–15) and teaching (Mark 1:21), performing miracles (Mark 1:23–26, 30–34, 40–42), amazing people (Mark 1:22, 27) and gathering a group of followers (Mark 1:16–20). He becomes so popular (Mark 1:28, 33, 37, 45) that He begins

keeping His work secret (Mark 1:43–44) and stays out in the country, away from towns (Mark 1:45).

In Chapter One, Mark paints a picture of a “Jesus-mania” sweeping through Galilee. It reminds us of the excitement that gripped the United States when the Beatles first came to the United States in the 1960’s. It seems that everyone wants to see Him, to watch what He is doing, or even to receive healing from Him. Given the power and authority He demonstrates, the people’s reaction is understandable. On the one hand, Jesus can’t help attracting crowds, traveling around to different places with His kingdom message (Mark 1:38), like a star on tour. On the other hand, like a celebrity desiring some privacy, He tries to get away from the crowds by going out to lonely places (Mark 1:35, 45). Actually, Jesus is acting in obedience to the Father’s timing before revealing Himself in Jerusalem as the awaited Messiah who will die for our sins.

The second chapter of Mark starts on a quieter note: Jesus comes home to Capernaum (Mark 2:1). Some think that Jesus has no home because in Matthew 8:20 and Luke 9:58, He says, “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay His head.” Perhaps this means that Jesus has no home later in His ministry, but at this early stage He apparently has a home in Capernaum. The Bible does not give any further details about this, so we don’t know whether Jesus owns a house there, if He has relatives in Capernaum, or if He is staying in someone else’s home.

In Capernaum, any peace and quiet Jesus finds is short-lived. As soon as the people hear that He is there, they mob the house. As many people as possible come into the house and more people crowd around the door to see what Jesus will say and do (Mark 2:1–2).

Capernaum was a city in Galilee, a region in the north of present day Israel, near Lebanon. Galilee did not contain the most important cities of Judaism. Further south, in the region of Judea, was Jerusalem, the location of the Jewish Temple. This sacred site was the religious, social, and political center of Judaism. Because Galilee was separated from Judea by Samaria, Galilee was more remote and less connected to the religious center of the country.

Archaeologists have found the location of Capernaum and have excavated there. From this work, it appears that “the capacity of the average Capernaum home may have allowed only about fifty persons standing close together (the longest span in excavated homes is eighteen feet)” (Keener, p. 139). This gives us an idea of about how many people could fit inside the house where Jesus was teaching. Mark 2:2 also indicates that more were crowded outside.

Considering the way houses were built in the Middle East in Jesus’ time, carrying someone up to the roof and tearing a hole in it might not be very dangerous or difficult. Homes usually had flat roofs and “the roof was approached by an outside staircase, so they could reach it unimpeded. The roof of single-story homes was sturdy enough for walking but was normally made of branches and rushes laid over the roof’s beams and covered with dried mud; thus one could dig through it” (Keener, p. 140).

STUDY THE PASSAGE: MARK 2:1–12.

Pray that your group would encounter Jesus through this study, and that they would experience forgiveness and healing through this encounter.

1. Let’s read aloud Mark 2:1–12.

Look carefully at what this story tells us about the men who bring to Jesus the man with paralysis. Describe what you think these men are like. What do you think motivates them to help the man who cannot walk?

The story does not provide any details about these men, so we can only speculate. This lack of detail may help us imagine that these men are somehow similar to us, allowing us to enter into the story and become part of the action.

One possibility is that the men are joking, laughing, and having a good time. Perhaps they hear about Jesus and think it would be fun to bring to Him a person who needs healing, just to see what would happen. For them, digging through the roof of someone's house might just be part of the fun. These men might not be all that concerned about the person who cannot walk; he might even be someone they meet in the street and pick up, as part of their "stunt."

It is also possible that these men are skeptical. Maybe they want to test Jesus to find out if the healings He has done are real. They may be more interested in testing Jesus than in seeing the man with paralysis become healthy.

However, Mark 2:5 provides a key clue to these men's attitudes. Mark writes, "Jesus saw their faith." This implies that the men come to Jesus with some expectation that He will help the man they lower through the roof. Based on this, it seems likely that the men are serious and compassionate. The man they bring for healing is probably a family member or friend of theirs. They believe that Jesus can heal this man and they seem determined that nothing will get in the way of that healing, not even the crowd or the roof.

Given that there are more than four men, there still could be a mixture of motives in the group.

2. What does this story tell us about the man who suffers from paralysis? What do you imagine he is like? How do you think he feels?

The story tells us even less about the man with paralysis than it does about the men who bring him. Others carry him; Jesus forgives and heals him. All he does is lie there and then gets up and goes home. Since Jesus notices the faith of the men who carry this man, but He makes no comment on the faith of the man on the mat, perhaps the man who cannot walk does not really expect to be healed. He may be resigned to his condition or think that paralysis is too big a problem for Jesus to cure.

This man may also be embarrassed by the whole situation. He isn't able to move, so others are carrying him around. Being lowered through the roof would make him the center of attention. If Jesus couldn't or wouldn't heal him, then he would be stuck there in front of the crowd, completely helpless and unable to get away from their stares or laughter.

This man may also be frightened. Being lowered through the roof could be a bit dangerous. Since he cannot move, he might not be able to hang on to anything or jump off the mat if it tips over or rips.

As Jesus begins telling the man on the mat that his sins are forgiven, he might be worried or ashamed because of what he has done in the past. Perhaps he thinks that Jesus won't heal him because of his sins. Maybe he feels guilty for some sin and sees himself as a hopeless and evil person. He may fear that Jesus will ask him why he cannot walk, and he will be forced to admit something very embarrassing.

It is also possible that the man is very hopeful. Maybe he is well liked and has talked his friends into bringing him to Jesus because he thinks Jesus *can* heal him.

- 3. The story does not report that the men who lower their friend through the roof say anything to Jesus. However, by lowering the man through an opening above Jesus, they are essentially requesting something. What do you think the men are expecting Jesus to do?**

Because of the reputation Jesus has gained as someone who has power to heal people, the men probably expect that Jesus will help the man who is paralyzed.

- 4. What does Jesus offer the man who cannot move? Why do you think He offers forgiveness?**

This is the most surprising development in the story. In Mark 1, Jesus demonstrates teaching with authority and healing power, but He never directly addresses the problem of sin. With that background and the information that the man is paralyzed, we, like the people in the story, expect that Jesus will heal the man. Instead, Jesus tells the man that his sins are forgiven (Mark 2:5).

Since everyone is watching to see if Jesus will heal the man, they are probably uncertain how to react when Jesus instead offers him forgiveness. Those who lower the man through the roof may be stunned; the man who is paralyzed may be disappointed; a hush and a murmuring may fall over the crowd. The only reaction recorded is that of the teachers of the law: “Why does this fellow talk like that? He’s blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?” (Mark 2:6–7).

We can understand the reaction of the teachers of the law in light of the Jewish view of sin. Keener writes (p. 140):

Sins were to be atoned for by offerings in the temple. Judaism taught that only God could forgive sins, but most Jews allowed that some of God’s representatives could speak on God’s behalf. The passive form, ‘are forgiven,’ could be interpreted in this way (Jewish teachers often used the passive form to describe God’s activity); but Jesus was not a priest, no one had offered sacrifice, and the scribes had heard no basis for the pronouncement of forgiveness, not even clear indication of repentance.

On reflection, perhaps the connection Jesus draws between sickness and sin is not that surprising. When something bad happens to someone, we may wonder what that individual has done to deserve it. Such a connection between sin and suffering or chronic illness was also known in Bible times (Luke 13:1–5; John 9:1–3). Jesus suggests it when he tells another man He heals of paralysis to “Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you” (John 5:14). However, Jesus does not always make this connection, so neither should we assume that someone ill is always in sin or guilty.

If the man who is paralyzed were known to be a wicked person before suffering paralysis, then perhaps the other people in Capernaum would believe that he needs forgiveness. Even if he were not known to be particularly bad, people may assume that he is guilty because he can no longer walk. They may think that he has done something bad to deserve such punishment. If he were guilty, forgiveness might be necessary prior to healing. In any case, Jesus chooses to remove the sin—which may have caused the man’s suffering—before dealing with the symptom—the paralysis.

The man with paralysis may be surprised by Jesus’ offer of forgiveness. Perhaps he knows that he has committed many sins and that he is in need of forgiveness. He may think that he is unworthy of healing because he is such a sinful person. If people have assumed that he has done something bad to deserve paralysis, he may have felt terribly condemned all his life and/or sensed more deeply his sinfulness. On the other hand, he may not recognize

that he needs forgiveness at all. Jesus' offer may be a shock that leads him to reconsider his past actions and attitudes and recognize that he has done wrong. He may also be disappointed, thinking that Jesus cannot heal him of paralysis, so Jesus is instead just forgiving him of sin.

Since we do not know the background or heart of the man who is paralyzed, we do not really know why, in this case, Jesus chooses to offer forgiveness before healing. Perhaps Jesus recognizes that the man is tormented by guilt over his sins or by condemnation from others for the wrong they suppose he has committed. Maybe Jesus knows that the man's bitterness and anger over his condition are a larger problem than the paralysis itself, presenting a barrier to the man's healing. Whatever the case, Jesus wants to heal our most life-threatening illness—sin—and restore us from the damage sin causes in our lives.

Since Jesus offers forgiveness as well as healing in this instance, we see that He is able to do both. He does not use His healing power just to boost His popularity; He uses the power of God to deliver people from the powers of evil. He is not just concerned with fixing external, visible problems; He addresses the condition of people's hearts. He doesn't want to make people just feel better; He wants to make people whole.

5. Optional: How would you answer Jesus' question in verse 9: "Which is easier: to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up, take your mat and walk'?"

(This is really a trick question and you should skip it unless you want to generate some interesting debate.)

"Jewish teachers knew that only God could ultimately forgive (on the Day of Atonement in response to sacrifice); but they also recognized that healing ultimately came from God. Both were from God but could be announced through God's agents acting according to his will" (Keener, p. 140).

Because both forgiveness and healing depend on God's power, neither is particularly easy. It might seem easier to say, "Your sins are forgiven," because it is hard to verify that someone's sins remain since we cannot see a person's heart. On the other hand, to say, "Get up and walk," would require visible results since everyone would be able to tell whether someone who is paralyzed could get up and walk. However, because the human body has some capability to overcome disease and even regenerate itself, recovery from paralysis by natural causes is feasible. With modern advances in medical science, we expect more and more to be able to heal disease and reverse paralysis through medical means. In any event, forgiving sins is still much more difficult than healing. No one expects science to develop a means of forgiveness and defeat the problem of sin.

In this instance, Jesus uses the visible miracle—the healing—to demonstrate that He has the authority from God to do the invisible miracle—the forgiving of sins. And in the end, to be forgiven of sin and to be in right relationship with God is of much greater consequence than the condition of one's physical body that will be discarded at death.

6. How do you think Jesus' words and actions will impact the friends of this man?

Notice Jesus' sensitivity towards the men of faith as well as the man who cannot walk. Jesus' response of healing the man on the litter shows that his friends' faith in Jesus is not in vain. Jesus uses His authority to heal and to forgive, bringing wholeness to the man in body and spirit. He uses His power and authority for good, rather than for tearing down the man as a sinner or showing contempt for people who interrupt His teaching.

APPLICATION

***What do you think Jesus wants to do for you?**

***Do you feel like the person who suffers paralysis in this story? Do you need forgiveness or healing, but feel that you are unable to come to Jesus?**

Take some time to listen to people's responses and reflect on the application questions. Especially consider the first question: What does Jesus want to do for you? In the story, many may have expected Jesus to heal the man who was paralyzed, but Jesus first offered the man forgiveness. Perhaps today Jesus wants to offer participants something other than what they originally expected. Do not, however, get hung up on looking for something else.

If someone wants prayer, you can take that person aside and let the rest of the group mingle. Prayer is an intimate encounter with Jesus and the other person, so always ask for permission to pray for someone or to include others.

Since prayer may be new for some seekers, suggest that prayer is like being carried right into Jesus' presence. When others pray for a person, they are like the men who lowered their friend through the roof. Prayer is bringing people to Jesus, trusting that Jesus will give them what they need.

***Optional question for an all-Christian group: Can you identify with the people helping the man who is paralyzed? Is there someone you can help bring to Jesus, even if you must go "through the roof"?**

WRAPPING IT UP

People who are sick may have difficulty coming to Jesus for healing. They may be discouraged after years of seeking healing from various sources. Or, they may feel that they are too sick or unworthy for Jesus to heal. They may simply lack faith that Jesus can heal. Some of us may have friends who seem to have greater faith than we do. Like the friends who bring the man with paralysis to Jesus, others can exercise faith on our behalf. When people pray for another person, they are simply bringing that person into the presence of Jesus, so that Jesus can give them what they really need. In the end, however, each of us needs to come face to face with Jesus.

Jesus came to heal the whole person. We may tend to focus on physical healing because we can more easily feel or see physical sickness or disability. The spiritual sickness of sin is harder to identify and more deadly. While not all physical illness is directly related to sin, there may be a connection between sin and sickness. Jesus is able to deal with both. In this story, Jesus heals a man from paralysis as a way to demonstrate that He can also heal this same man from the debilitating impact of sin.

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Meeting Jesus Series

Study 3

MEET JESUS—WHO TRANSFORMS THE TIGHTFISTED

Luke 19:1—10

By Mary Youtz

“Why does he [Jesus] eat with tax-collectors and sinners? Because, while other religious leaders of the day saw their task as being to keep themselves in quarantine, away from possible sources of moral and spiritual infection, Jesus saw himself as a doctor who’d come to heal the sick. There’s no point in a doctor staying in quarantine. He’d never do his job.”

Tom Wright

“God wants us to become contagious Christians—His agents, who will first catch His love and then urgently and infectiously offer it to all who are willing to consider it. This is His primary plan, the one Jesus modeled so powerfully, to spread God’s grace and truth person to person until there’s an epidemic of changed lives around the world.”

Bill Hybels

“If the world around us is ever going to hear truth and see its importance, it must be through us. ... The challenge is to live a lifestyle that is different enough from the world’s systems that we are not tainted by its values, while at the same time remaining relevant and attractive to unbelievers so that they will want to forsake their ‘leprosy’ of sin and come to Christ to be healed.”

Skip Heitzig

AIM

- To recognize that, regardless of what others thought about Him, Jesus' main concern was to connect with those who have a hunger for God.

KEY VERSE

“Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.”

Luke 19:9—10

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Before you lead this study, please review the following sections in “Introduction to the *Meeting Jesus Series*”:

- *Leading Bible Study Discussions with Seekers*, for a refresher on seeker-specific issues.
- *Preparation for Leading Inductive Bible Studies*, for helpful hints on how to prepare for and lead this group of studies.
- *People First Language*, for guidelines about using sensitive and considerate language when referring to people who are physically impaired.

OPENER

When you think about people who have gotten rich through questionable means—such as corporate executives, politicians, or professional lobbyists, how quickly do you judge them for their motives and methods? How cynical would you be if they began to claim a spiritual experience had changed their lives?

Allow participants to briefly discuss this. Encourage honest responses from seekers. At this point, if their ideas do not line up with Scripture, you do not need to correct people. Be patient and let the Bible speak for itself. Draw the opening discussion to a close, and tie it in with the Scripture passage.

People with great sums of money that were obtained illegally seldom get any sympathy. They are often vilified in the press and by the public. But Jesus saw through their greed and defenses of distraction and self-protection. He recognized their need to connect with God, not insulate themselves with more money, success, or stuff. Let's take a look at Jesus' response to a man who had more than most people but still was hungry for something else.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

This is background material for the leader. You may decide how much to share.

Luke

(This material on Luke came from “Introduction to the Gospel of Luke” by John Cook.)

Luke was a Greek physician who traveled with Paul on some of his missionary journeys. He was not an eyewitness to the life of Jesus as were gospel authors Matthew and John. However, Luke tells us that he was familiar with other accounts, and it seems he used Mark's and Matthew's gospels to help compile his own book. Since Mark recorded the apostle Peter's words, and

Matthew was one of Jesus' twelve apostles, Luke had reliable eyewitness accounts to work with. Luke also includes material not in Matthew, and focuses on a non-Jewish audience. While Matthew's gospel includes Gentiles seeking out Jesus, its main point is to prove Jesus is the long-awaited Jewish Messiah. Luke's gospel, on the other hand, focuses on describing Jesus as the Savior of the whole world. Luke's gospel points out Jesus' concern for the poor, the insignificant, and the non-Jew as he tells the story of God's salvation, beginning in the Old Testament, running through the life and work of Jesus, and past His death and resurrection into the founding of the church.

Luke also wrote the Book of Acts, which circulated with his gospel until the four gospel books (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) were made into a collection. Luke participated in some of the events recorded in Acts, so he was a credible witness to the ongoing salvation work of Jesus through His church. Since Acts ends with Paul under house arrest in Rome, which occurred around A.D. 62, it seems reasonable to think Luke completed his gospel account before that date. Both books are addressed to "Theophilus," which means "lover of God" (Luke 1:3; Acts 1:1). It's not clear if Theophilus was the person's actual name or a term used to refer to a person who was a new believer. Luke is writing to assure this person ("O most excellent Theophilus") of the facts of his faith in Christ. Some scholars think Luke researched and wrote these books while Paul was undergoing a series of trials and imprisonment. Regardless of the timing of Luke's writing, there was never any doubt from the earliest centuries that he was the author of Luke and Acts.

This Study

Collecting taxes has never made a person popular. And anyone who handles a great deal of other people's money always faces temptations—as insider trading and corporate scandals continue to illustrate in our day. In Jesus' time, the Romans collected several kinds of taxes through resident tax collectors who bid for the job. Whoever promised the highest return to Rome's representative got the contract. Undoubtedly tax collectors looked for ways to extort extra funds to keep as profit for themselves. Jericho was located on a major road near a border (Hagner, pp. 742–743) between Perea and Judea (Marshall, p. 696) so it was a key location for gathering taxes on goods being transported from one region to another.

Zacchaeus, the main character in this study, was a "chief tax collector." This indicated he had other tax collectors working for him. He would have gained his wealth by requiring a commission from each man working under him. The Jews of that day hated Zacchaeus and other tax collectors for several reasons: they worked for the oppressive enemy; they were greedy and dishonest, taking advantage of their fellow citizens for their own gain; and they were ritually unclean because of regular contact with Gentiles. Jesus must have shocked first century Jews by reaching out to tax collectors—especially Matthew and Zacchaeus—and by making one a hero in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector [Luke 18:10–14] (Hagner, pp. 742–743).

STUDY THE PASSAGE: LUKE 19:1—10

Pray that the Holy Spirit would reveal Jesus as He really is through this study.

1. Would someone please read aloud Luke 19:1–10?

Who is Zacchaeus and how is he described in the passage (vv. 2–3, 7)?

He is the chief tax collector for the region. In today's culture, the job might be comparable to a supervisor of the Internal Revenue service, but it might have the stigma of a loan shark, a con artist or hustler—someone always looking out for number one. Luke notes that Zacchaeus is wealthy, short, and considered a sinner.

2. How does Zacchaeus show interest in Jesus (vv. 3–4)?

He runs ahead of the crowd and climbs into a tree to see Jesus.

***What are some indications of interest in spiritual issues that you see in people around you?**

Participants' answers will vary. They might include questions about the Bible; wrestling with tough issues about pain, death, or one's purpose in life; interest in movies, television shows, or music with spiritual content; and comments that indicate dissatisfaction with one's life. It may be helpful for seekers to realize they are not alone or unusual in searching for spiritual answers.

3. How does Jesus reward Zacchaeus' interest (v. 5)?

Jesus stops, looks up in the tree, asks him to climb down. Jesus also invites Himself to be Zacchaeus' guest.

Jesus notices Zacchaeus has made an effort to climb a tree to see what is going on. This is unusual for a wealthy person to do, and suggests curiosity about Jesus, and possibly a deeper interest in His teachings and spiritual hunger. Jesus "cashes in" on these indicators by taking a risk, and it results in Zacchaeus' salvation (v. 9).

It's not clear from the passage if Jesus has a supernatural revelation of Zacchaeus' name, as He does with Nathaniel (John 1:47) (Marshall, p. 696), or if Jesus has prior knowledge about who Zacchaeus is, due to his role as a public official. But Jesus says that He "must" stay with Zacchaeus, implying that it is part of God's divine plan (Marshall, p. 697). Marshall translates part of verse 5 as meaning that Jesus wants to spend the night (p. 697). Note that Jesus takes a social and spiritual risk in befriending an unpopular person.

***How would you react if Jesus noticed you in a crowd, singled you out by name, and asked if He could come over to your place?**

4. How does Zacchaeus respond (v. 6)?

He climbs down "at once," and gladly welcomes Jesus to his house. After all, Jesus' visit to Zacchaeus' home means that Jesus is offering fellowship (Marshall, p. 697) to someone most people despise.

5. How does the crowd react (v. 7)?

All the people object to Jesus spending time with Zacchaeus because they regard him a sinner. In their culture, eating and spending time with sinful people is considered to be sharing in or accepting their sin (Marshall, p. 697).

6. At home, either during or after a meal with Jesus, how does Zacchaeus show a change of heart (v. 8)? What difference do you think it makes to go public with his decision?

Point out that verse 8 says Zacchaeus "stood up." This implies that he has been sitting, or more likely, reclining on a low couch as wealthy often did at banquets (Cook, "Radical Forgiveness"). Therefore we can assume that Jesus and Zacchaeus were interacting during a meal.

After he stands up, probably in front of other friends in the tax business, Zacchaeus publicly announces that he will “give half his possessions to the poor,” and those he has cheated will get four times as much back! Such a changed attitude towards money doesn’t happen often. It also doesn’t seem that Zacchaeus merely speaks to impress Jesus or his friends while never intending to follow through. He makes a bold promise with plenty of witnesses, and the fact that the story is in Scripture leads us to believe that his later actions were consistent with his words.

In turning his back on a presumed idol in his life, Zacchaeus goes beyond what Jewish law requires for giving to the poor or for repaying someone who has been cheated. Rabbis are expected to give 20% of their wealth to the poor (Marshall, p. 698), but in this case a man who has been ostracized by religious circles will give more than the clergy. The penalty required in addition to repayment for money illegally gained is only one-fifth of the original amount taken (Leviticus 6:1–5, cited by Marshall, p. 698); Zacchaeus offers 15 times that, a total of four times the original amount. Note: Some versions translate verse 8 with “if I have cheated,” but the Greek phrase is probably better translated “from whomever I have extorted money” (editor’s paraphrase, Marshall, p. 698).

*** Why do you think Zacchaeus has such a change of mind about wealth—whether it was rightfully or wrongfully gained?**

N. T. Wright comments that people like Zacchaeus who can’t resist the urge to get their hands on money really suffer from a kind of inner sickness that Jesus came to heal. He also notes that this story balances one Luke includes in the previous chapter about the rich young man (Luke 18:18–30; “Luke,” pp. 222–223). Certainly we see that many wealthy people in our own day show signs of boredom, dissatisfaction, unhappiness, and even severe dysfunction. Paul McCartney recognized that money couldn’t assure happiness or inner peace when he penned the now famous song, “Can’t Buy Me Love.”

Zacchaeus’ change of heart and behavior indicate that something else has become more important to him. N. T. Wright points out that Zacchaeus greatly reduces his wealth and perhaps will have a very different lifestyle from that time forward. But, “he doesn’t care. He has found something more valuable” (“Luke,” p. 223).

When people turn their lives around towards God and put Him at the center of everything, we say they have repented. They have a change of mind about God, relationships, priorities, themselves, etc.; their lives demonstrate the inner changes. And “repentance here isn’t just a change of heart; as in Judaism in general, repentance involves restoration, making amends” (Wright, “Luke,” p. 223).

7. How does Jesus summarize His mission and relate it to His encounter with Zacchaeus (vv. 9–10)?

Jesus says in verse 10 that He has come to seek and save the lost, and connects His reason for coming with Zacchaeus’ salvation. The account points out how different Jesus’ mission is from the culturally biased “religious” view of Jesus that many of us have. For example:

- Jesus rejects the accepted religious practices to bring salvation to a “sinner.”
- Jesus places the opportunity for one sinner’s salvation above the opinions of the masses around Him.
- Jesus is not concerned about how the public interprets what He is doing.

- Jesus rejects the cultural bias of His day regarding the worth of tax collectors and other types of “sinners.”

Jesus came to earth to demonstrate God’s love for all people, and to show that all who recognize their need for Him and repent receive His salvation. Salvation is not contingent on social or material worth, nor does God’s offer to save and make us whole depend on making ourselves acceptable in His sight. Jesus is just looking for people who are tired of being disconnected from Him and will trade in their old way of life for His.

APPLICATION

*** How does the character and mission of Jesus, as described in this passage, compare to what you previously thought about Jesus?**

***What impact do you think it would have if Jesus spent an evening with you and your friends? What would you want to do? What would you want to ask Him?**

While it’s a humorous quote, there’s truth in the observation Charles M. Schultz, the creator of the Peanuts comic strip, made: “No one would have been invited to dinner as often as Jesus was unless he was interesting and had a sense of humor” (Schultz, p. 99). We don’t know what Jesus said while at Zacchaeus’ house. There’s no “sermon” recorded. Perhaps it was simply the fact that Jesus spent time with Zacchaeus and his friends that helped this man have an astonishing change of heart. Keep this in mind when you are building relationships with the seekers: you can often reach people for Christ without preaching a sermon. Christ may become more attractive to others as we show genuine friendship and spend time with them.

*** Have any of you been put off by the thought that Jesus wants you to get your act together before connecting with Him? How does this study challenge that misconception?**

WRAPPING IT UP

There are deep needs within every human heart that money can’t provide. We often hear of wealthy, successful people whose lives are full of turmoil, broken relationships, and dissatisfaction. There is a need for love, friendship, and belonging that crosses all ethnic, social, and economic boundaries and lies within every human heart. Jesus alone can relieve a guilty conscience and fill a hungry heart. He offers a life more valuable than gold, a purpose more enthralling than accumulating wealth, a friendship more lasting than any treasure. Today, take time to seek Jesus out. If you’re interested in understanding more about how to connect with Him, how to open your heart and develop a friendship with Him, how to appropriately repent, talk to a group leader before you leave.

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Meeting Jesus Series

Study 4

MEET JESUS—WHO ANSWERS THE DESPERATE

Matthew 15:21—28

By Beth Crawford

“Christianity is not for the well-meaning, but for the desperate.”

James Denny

AIM

- To view how Jesus relates to someone outside His religious tradition, a desperate mother with a persistent plea.

KEY VERSE

“Then Jesus answered, ‘Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted.’ And her daughter was healed from that very hour.”

Matthew 15:28

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Before you lead this study, please review the following sections in “Introduction to the *Meeting Jesus Series*”:

- *Leading Bible Study Discussions with Seekers*, for a refresher on seeker-specific issues.
- *Preparation for Leading Inductive Bible Studies*, for helpful hints on how to prepare for and lead this group of studies.
- *People First Language*, for guidelines about using sensitive and considerate language when referring to people who are physically impaired.

OPENER

How do you usually respond to pain in your life or someone close to you? Do you tend to avoid or deny the pain? Do you give up easily and give in to despair, or are you pro-active and try to resolve the crisis?

Allow participants to briefly discuss this. Encourage honest responses from seekers. At this point, if their ideas do not line up with Scripture, you do not need to correct people. Be patient and let the Bible speak for itself. Draw the opening discussion to a close, and tie it in with the Scripture passage.

Life is full of painful situations—and some affect us more deeply than others. Let’s see how Jesus responds to a woman from a different cultural and religious background who turns to Him in desperation.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

This is background material for leaders. You may decide how much to share.

Matthew was one of the twelve men Jesus chose to live and work with Him for three years. Matthew’s account about Jesus is first in the New Testament collection of books. It links Jesus’ life with many Old Testament passages and promises (France, p. 15), so it works nicely as a bridge between the two halves of the Bible. Matthew was a tax collector who encountered Jesus and left his career when Jesus invited him to be a disciple (Matthew 9:9). There is no other Matthew of such importance in the New Testament, and ancient sources always considered him the author (Cook). Matthew seems to write for a Jewish audience, and probably finished the book before the Romans destroyed Jerusalem’s temple in A.D. 70 (Cook). Matthew emphasizes Jesus being sent to the lost sheep of Israel (Matthew 10:5–6, 15:24, cited by Cook), but includes non-Jews seeking Him out, and ends with the call to take the gospel to all the nations (Matthew

28:18—20). Thus he writes to prove Jesus is the Jews' long-awaited Messiah as well as the Savior for all nations (Cook).

STUDY THE PASSAGE: MATTHEW 15:21—28

Pray that God would reveal His compassion for people facing dire circumstances.

- 1. Let's read the passage together. Would someone like to read these verses aloud?**

Where does Jesus go (v. 21)?

Tyre and Sidon were cities along the eastern edge of the Mediterranean Sea in pagan, non-Jewish territory. The land was at one time known as Phoenicia, homeland of an ancient seafaring people. Ahab, King of Israel, married wicked Queen Jezebel, who was the daughter of the King of Sidon. Ahab began to worship the false god Baal, so God sent a message to Ahab that there would be no rain in Israel. Due to the drought, God sent the prophet Elijah to Sidon [of all places] to get food and drink from a poor widow. Because of several miracles, the woman believed in God (1 Kings 17:8—24), and Jews still lived in the area in Jesus' day (Keener, "Matthew").

- 2. Who comes to Jesus (v. 22)? Why does she approach Jesus?**

This woman is a Canaanite, a descendent of the citizens run out of the Promised Land many centuries before, when the twelve tribes of Israel conquered the territory God gave His special people. The Jews still considered the Canaanites their chief enemy (Keener, "Matthew"). However, two of Jesus' own ancestors, through His family tree recorded in Matthew Chapter 1, were Canaanite women: Tamar, the daughter-in-law of Judah (Genesis 38), and Rahab, the woman in Jericho that hid and protected the spies (Joshua 2; both examples qtd. in Keener, *A Commentary*, p. 415). Mark identifies this woman as "a Greek, born in Syria Phoenicia" (Mark 7:26). This might mean she lives in Syrian-ruled Phoenicia. She is probably "Greek" in the sense that her culture is heavily influenced by Greek philosophy and culture (Keener, *A Commentary*, p. 414).

The woman's daughter is suffering due to demonic activity. In the Vineyard, we prefer the term "demonized" rather than "demon-possessed" to describe a person experiencing any degree of demonic oppression. "Demonized" is closer to the Greek word and doesn't carry all the odd connotation that "possessed" does.

- 3. How does this non-Jewish woman address Jesus (v. 22)?**

She calls Jesus "Lord" and "Son of David." Here, "Lord," is like the title "Your Majesty" denoting His right to rule (Keener, *A Commentary*, p. 418), and "Son of David" is a synonym for "Messiah" [the "anointed one" in Hebrew, "Christ" in Greek]. The messianic title "Son of David" refers to a descendent of King David who was expected to rule over the Jews and defeat all their enemies (Wright, p. 215).

*** How do you see Jesus?**

*** Optional: On what do you base your view of Jesus?**

4. How does Jesus respond (v. 23)? How do the disciples respond?

Jesus says nothing! That may surprise people who expect Him to show compassion toward children and parents in pain. The disciples urge Him to send her away. They don't want to be bothered by her persistent crying out. This isn't surprising however, since they don't want to be bothered by people in other situations, too (Matthew 14:15; Mark 10:13). However, Jesus doesn't send her away (Keener, *A Commentary*, p. 416). You might want to discuss why He doesn't dismiss the woman.

5. What does Jesus finally say (v. 24)?

Jesus reminds them and her that His mission is to “the lost sheep of Israel.” While He will one day be proclaimed as the Savior of the world, now is the time for the Jews to believe that He is the Messiah promised centuries before. Jesus' role as Messiah was not to overthrow the political oppression by Rome but to fulfill the calling of Israel to be God's chosen people (Wright, pp. 199–200) exhibiting His goodness and glory to the world.

6. How does the woman persist (v. 25)?

The woman again calls Jesus “Lord” and begs on her knees for His help.

Optional: *When have you persisted in trying to get something you desperately wanted?

7. How does Jesus reply this time (v. 26)? What is strange about His comment?

Jesus refers to the Jews as “the children” and the woman and other pagans as “dogs.” Many canines in the ancient world roamed wild as scavengers and were associated with unclean things like garbage or carcasses, so calling a person a “dog” usually would be an insult. But wealthy Greeks of Jesus' day could afford to have pet dogs, and if this woman were from the Hellenized class, she might own a dog. Jesus probably means the household pet variety, so His comment is not cruel although He maintains a clear distinction between the Jews and the woman (Keener, *A Commentary*, pp. 416–417).

“Children's bread” seems to refer to what the children are entitled to, and Jesus indicates that the “children” ought to be taken care of before their pets. Many today still feed their family members first and then let their pets have some of the leftovers, or what falls from the table. [However, some in your group may be very attached to their pets and consider them equal family members. They may also disagree with feeding table scraps to a pet or take offense at the derogatory use of the word “dog.” As Christians, we share a common concern for all of creation because God has called us to be stewards. Thus we should not neglect an animal's welfare. But don't let this become a distraction from what Jesus is really saying.]

8. How does the mother reply this time (v. 27)? What does this reveal?

For the third time, she calls Jesus “Lord.” She agrees with Jesus that the children, the Jews, should be given preference over others. But she presses Jesus for mercy saying that she, a non-Jew, is willing to accept whatever “crumbs” He has leftover to share with her daughter. By acknowledging her lack of status with the Jewish Master, yet not giving up and turning away, this woman shows great faith in Jesus' compassion as well as in His ability and authority to heal.

9. What is Jesus' ultimate response (v. 28)? What results?

Jesus commends her great faith, and grants her request. Mark adds that Jesus says the demon has left (Mark 7:29), and then repeats that the woman found her daughter in bed and the demon gone (Mark 7:30).

APPLICATION

*** What are you desperate for in your life? What do you think Jesus will say to you if you approach Him about this matter? Why do you think He'll respond this way?**

*** How could you demonstrate "great faith" in Jesus today?**

At this point, some people may be ready to place their trust in Jesus for the first time or as an act of returning to Him. You could use the outline, "The Roman Road," at the beginning of these studies, to lead them through an initial prayer of surrender to Jesus as Savior and Lord, or to help them surrender to Christ after walking away from Him for a time.

Others may not be ready to take such a step; respect their decision, but you may want to ask something like, "What do you think is keeping you from placing all your reliance on Jesus?"

WRAPPING IT UP

In this encounter between a desperate mother and Jesus, we see that He has a clear sense of His calling to the Jewish people. Even though she is not a Jew, Jesus tests her only a short while. Ultimately He is not indifferent to her and her suffering child. He commends the mother for putting all her confidence in Him and grants her request. His powerful word heals her precious daughter. We, too, can experience the compassion and life saving power of Jesus when we put our **trust in Him today**.

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Meeting Jesus Series

Study 5

MEET JESUS—WHO REMOVES BARRIERS TO GOD

Mark 7:31—37, 8:22—25, 10:46—52

By Rhodara S. Shreve

“Growing up in a culture with little taste for risk, we like to hedge our bets as much as possible. Instead of waiting for the divine eye to fall on us and notice our condition, we naturally want to do as much as possible to ensure that we’ll get relief when we need it. That’s the way the game of life is played now, at least in what we call the developed nations of the world. We’ve learned to rely on safety nets and insurance policies, diversified mutual funds and managed health care. Once in a while, some of us get the itch to feel the thrill of living close the edge, but we do it by hang-gliding or stock-car racing, something that makes us look bold and adventurous, not ridiculous. We want risk to be something we choose, not something—like faith—we’re forced to rely on out of desperation.

Faith probably came a lot easier to people who’d never experienced the benefits of antibiotics or known they were covered by disability insurance. But desperation is the true country of faith, the place where all the props have been knocked out from under us. And though we train ourselves to think it’s a land we’ll never visit, any day now we might find ourselves wandering where nothing looks like the scenario we expected or planned for. Any number of circumstances can catapult us into the dark region—divorce, bankruptcy, betrayal. But the most common one is illness.

Then we may go looking for Jesus....”

Virginia Stem Owens

AIM

- To recognize that Jesus reaches out in intimate and personal ways to individuals who may feel disconnected from God and others.

KEY VERSE

“Jesus stopped and said, ‘Call him.’ So they called to the blind man, ‘Cheer up! On your feet! He’s calling you.’”

Mark 10:49

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Before you lead this study, please review the following sections in “Introduction to the *Meeting Jesus Series*”:

- “Leading Bible Study Discussions with Seekers,” for a refresher on seeker-specific issues.
- “Preparation for Leading Inductive Bible Studies,” for helpful hints on how to prepare for and lead this group of studies.
- “People First Language,” for guidelines about using sensitive and considerate language when referring to people who are physically impaired.

OPENER

Do you ever wonder if God is listening to you? How does it feel when you are not sure if you can get through to Him or if He will respond to you?

Allow participants to briefly discuss this. Encourage honest responses from seekers. At this point, if their ideas do not line up with Scripture, you do not need to correct people. Be patient and let the Bible speak for itself. Draw the opening discussion to a close, and tie it in with the Scripture passage.

Many people feel that God is far away—if He does exist—and are uncertain if they can get through to Him. Lots of things seem to get in the way of communicating with God even though He can see or hear us plainly. At times even people of great faith feel distant from God. But Jesus came to reveal God more fully, strengthen our faith, and remove some of the barriers in this life between God and us. Let’s look at a few examples of how Jesus responded to people who were unable to clearly connect with God and others.

[Editor’s note: The Psalms reflect the cry of humans searching for God when He seems far away. Jesus expresses this when He quotes from Psalm 22 on the cross. Down through the centuries, Christian authors testify to experiencing the feeling that God is distant or absent including Thomas a Kempis, St. John of the Cross, George Fox, and Richard Foster (Foster, pp. 17–25).]

BACKGROUND TO THE PASSAGE

This is background material for leaders. You may decide how much to share.

Mark was a companion of the apostle Peter. Peter was an important eyewitness to Jesus' ministry. He was one of Jesus' original twelve disciples, and was in the inner circle along with James and John. Thus Mark had access to reliable material for his account of Jesus' life. Tradition states that Mark went to Rome with Peter when James, the brother of John, was martyred and persecution broke out against Christ's followers (Acts 12:17, cited by Cook, "Introduction to Matthew"). Mark's gospel may have been the first of the four written. Some scholars date it in the mid 40's A.D. Mark is also the shortest gospel. Paul appears to quote from Mark 7:14–23 in his Letter to the Romans in Chapter 14:14, written around 56 A.D. (Cook, "Introduction to Matthew"). Mark probably wrote for non-Jewish readers in Rome, where Peter preached and helped to start the church (Cook, "Introduction to Matthew"). Mark's writing is known to be "blunt," but that may be because, as one early Christian author stated, Mark wanted to record the preaching of Peter and add nothing to it (Cole, pp. 33–35).

CONTEXT

These three passages take place at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. As He travels north and west of Jerusalem, He announces His purpose on earth by quoting a passage from the Old Testament book written by the prophet Isaiah. This passage sets the pattern and thrust of Jesus' ministry—good news directed to people in desperate need. His ministry will set prisoners free, restore sight to those who are blind, release people from oppression, and confirm that this is, in fact, the time of the Lord's favor (Luke 4:16–9). These miraculous signs will confirm the truth of His claim to be inaugurating a new day for God's people. Since then, some have been tempted to "spiritualize" the signs of Jesus' ministry or make them into a psychological scheme for deliverance, but Jesus was speaking literally, as well as figuratively. We will see in these Mark passages that His actions towards people with significant physical and emotional needs result in dramatic, visible proofs of the power of God in their midst.

Jesus has been traveling and ministering extensively around Galilee, resulting in crowds growing more curious and interested in Him by the minute. At the same time, there are powerful Romans and their sometimes allies who are not particularly favorable towards Jesus. One example is Herod Antipas, a Herodian ruler who controls the area. There are Jewish leaders skeptical of Jesus' approach to religion, and some are probably jealous of His popularity. Other Jews even want to make Him king by force in order to overthrow Roman rule. You would think stirring up all this interest would be a plus for Jesus, but in fact, He wants to tone it down. So He leaves Galilee, making an excursion to the nearby cities of Tyre and Sidon. These cities are heavily influenced by Greek culture, a culture very different from the Jewish one in which Jesus grew up. This area is also a center of the Canaanite religion. There are tombs and temples of kings and deities that were built to honor their gods. For the disciples, this trip puts them in an environment in which they felt anything but comfortable. For Jesus, it is a chance to avoid attention from the powerful Jewish leaders in Jerusalem while continuing to demonstrate the reality of the Kingdom of God.

Mark records three very personal stories that illustrate the kinds of activities that Jesus engages in as He travels through this area. Each story has elements in common with the others. They involve individuals who have visual, auditory, or speech impairments. In reading these accounts we'll see how meeting Jesus brings freedom from physical, social, and spiritual barriers. Their life-changing encounter with Jesus will give these men the opportunity to know God and others more fully.

STUDY THE PASSAGE: MARK 7:31—37, 8:22—25, 10:46—52

Pray that each of us will recognize how personally and sensitively Jesus relates to people who may have felt cut off from God and have been traditionally excluded from the mainstream of life.

- 1. Would three volunteers each read aloud one of the stories we are discussing: Mark 7:31—37, 8:22—25, 10:46—52?**

What similarities do you see among the men Jesus helps? What differences?

Key similarities include that each has one or more severe physical disabilities. Then, each encounters Jesus, and after each has a personal interaction with the Savior, each is healed. Note that Jesus does not relate to these men as if they belong to a category of people with disabilities but rather engages them one on one individually.

Key differences include that the men in each episode have somewhat different physical disabilities. Other people initiate two of the encounters with Jesus while a person with a disability initiates in the third. Only one man who is healed, Bartimaeus, seems to exhibit great faith in Jesus, and he also is the only person identified by name besides Jesus.

Note that the man in Mark 7:31—17, is not actually “mute.” However, the NIV uses this word in the subheading above this passage. Remember, it is very offensive today to use the word “mute.” This man has some form of a speech impediment so he is able to talk but not freely (Lane, p. 266), which the NIV translates as “could hardly talk.” While Jesus says, “Be opened” (Mark 7:34), and Mark writes, “his tongue was loosened” (Mark 7:35), this does not necessarily indicate that the man is bound or oppressed by a demon. There was no other sign of demonic activity in this man’s encounter with Jesus (Lane, p. 267).

- 2. Describe what you think it would be like for each man to live with the condition he has.**

Have you ever found yourself feeling marginalized from society or on the fringe like these men? Have you ever been dependent on others for even the simple things in life?

In Jesus’ time, people with such significant physical limits would probably be marginalized from everyone around them, shut out of the world of the living you might say, almost like dead men. Old Testament Law forbid those who are blind, deaf, or unable to walk from serving as priests (Leviticus 21:16—23), but at the same time demands that individuals with disabilities receive mercy and care (Leviticus 19:14, Deuteronomy 27:18, qtd. in Macalister and Harrison, p. 524). They would have to depend on others for food or shelter. They generally could not make a living except by begging. They might have been abandoned by their families and taken in by others who pitied them. All of them would be living with limitations that they could not change. Their destiny would be to live without sight, without hearing, and without speech the rest of their days. Some would be unable to go anywhere, literally, unless others took them.

Thankfully today, there are many more options and resources for people with disabilities, and they can live full, productive, meaningful lives. Those with visual, auditory or other hindrances can utilize computers and other technology to complete challenging

educational programs and hold jobs in all sectors of society—in government, medicine, education, business, etc. People living with substantial motor impairment can navigate with state of the art technology in wheelchairs, automobiles, accessibility improvements, etc. While many in our society may still marginalize those with less apparent abilities or who may seem unable to be “productive,” we want to convey that every life is precious and can be “useful” in the purposes of God. Please do not communicate an antiquated view that pities or diminishes the potential of people living with visible or invisible disabilities today. Individuals with disabilities rarely want pity. They want to be treated like any other human being with thoughts and the desire to express them, with likes and dislikes, hopes and dreams, hobbies, etc. Many long for friendship that looks beyond their bodies and engages their minds, emotions, and spirits. As Christians, we have a unique opportunity to model the kind of friendship Jesus showed people with disabilities that accepts them as precious in God’s sight and conveys the gospel of hope through Christ as well (Tada and Jensen, pp. 35–43).

Even if participants in the study have not had severe physical challenges, they might have found themselves at times feeling that they could not “see” what was ahead of them, could not “hear” what was being said to them although it seemed clear to others, or could not “say” what they wanted to express. These kinds of life experiences may help bridge the gap in people’s minds with what the individuals in the gospel accounts lived with on a daily basis.

3. In these stories, what happens in the encounters between Jesus and each of these men?

Depending on who discusses these Scriptures with you, there could be a variety of responses to Jesus healing individuals. Seekers may have questions about whether this was just phenomena centuries ago or whether it can happen today. You may want to give a concise answer in this meeting but could arrange to talk with folks at another time if they want to discuss this at length. You could recommend they read *Power Healing* by John Wimber and Kevin Springer; purchase tapes or transcripts of messages by Rich Nathan; or read on healing and the kingdom of God in other works by John Wimber, Derek Morphey, Don Williams, etc.

4. How does Jesus heal them? Do the methods Jesus employs to heal each man have any significance? Why or why not?

Mark 7:31–37

A member of our church provides personal insight into the Mark 7 account regarding Jesus’ intimate understanding of people’s needs. The member has 40 % hearing loss in both ears and is sometimes overwhelmed by noise when she’s wearing her hearing aids. The Mark 7 account says Jesus did not begin the healing process until after He took the man aside, away from the crowd. The VCC member thinks Jesus did this because He understood how the man might be overwhelmed if he were healed suddenly in the midst of a noisy crowd. Imagine how startling it would be to go from utter silence to the sounds of a group excitedly discussing this amazing miracle! Our church member emphasizes that Jesus knows what we need, and how we need to receive it.

Jesus may also want to shield this man from others’ stares. He shows concern for the humanity of each of the men in these passages by trying not to make a public spectacle out of them. This text also indicates that Jesus does not want a report circulating about this miracle, since it could bring more attention to Him as a possible Messiah.

A Bible commentator suggests that Jesus' motions were like sign language to help convey His intentions to the man. "Here Jesus may be acting out 'healing,' 'speech,' and ... 'from God,' to let the man know what he is about to do (Jewish law recognized that deaf-mutes could communicate via signs)" (Keener, pp. 154–155). Another scholar refers to Jesus' actions as a form of mime (Cole, p. 124). In either case, Jesus seems to enter the man's world in order to connect with him.

Scholars point out that Jesus' use of spit could be viewed two ways by His contemporaries. To spit on someone was a terrible insult as it still is today. But some in the ancient world believed that spittle contained medicinal properties (Dorsey, p. 604).

Mark 8:22–26

This is an unusual healing incident in the gospels. It is the only time that we read that Jesus touches someone twice in order for complete healing to occur. While we do not know why this occurs, we do know that Jesus always does what the Father tells Him to do (John 5:19–20), so we may presume there is a reason for Jesus' actions (Heselton). Today, in praying for the sick, we often see a gradual healing take place over time. Francis MacNutt has documented real improvement in people who have repeatedly received "soaking prayer" from trained Christians, and John Wimber often saw healing occur as a process, not just as an instantaneous event (both qtd. in Wimber, p. 145).

Mark 10:46–52

Jesus stops and indicates He will speak with the blind beggar. He could just pass by the man as many of us do on a busy street when we are trying to get somewhere. Jesus treats Bartimaeus as someone worth listening to by asking a question rather than assuming that He knows what Bartimaeus wants (Tada & Jensen, pp. 42–43). Of course this gives Bartimaeus an opportunity to express his belief in Jesus as the Son of Man with the power to heal. Jesus replies to Bartimaeus' faith with a simple command: "Go." Jesus then indicates that Bartimaeus' faith has healed him and the beggar's sight is restored without Jesus touching him. This is quite different than the way the other two men are healed. But the personal treatment Jesus shows Bartimaeus is evident in the previous two incidents, and as Jesus interacts personally with each man, He brings them emotional and social healing as well.

5. What part does faith play in these healings? Is there a direct link between faith and healing in each of the three stories?

Bartimaeus cries out for Jesus to have mercy on him. He calls Jesus the *Son of David*. This was a clear reference to Jesus as the Messiah the Jews had been waiting for. Bartimaeus boldly expresses faith in Jesus, and because of this, he gets Jesus' attention. In verse 52, Jesus notes that it is Bartimaeus' faith that has healed him. The other men in this study are healed without much indication about their own personal faith in Jesus. However, the friends of the man with hearing loss and inability to speak beg Jesus to lay hands on him, indicating they believe Jesus could heal. In Mark 8:22, some people bring the man who is blind to Jesus and beg Jesus to touch him. Jesus seems to respond in these latter two situations to the faith of people who are instrumental in bringing folks to Jesus for healing.

6. What might this tell us about how God relates to us? Is it based on our faith in Him, God's compassion, His desire to make us well, or His longing to have relationship with us? Or, can it be all of these?

7. What affect does healing have on each man? What barriers does Jesus remove? What does Jesus ask of them?

Each man can now communicate more easily with others. The men who no longer are blind can now navigate their way in the world unassisted. Each may be able to learn a trade and earn a living instead of depending on others' charity. These men can re-enter society to worship, work, and transact business without being labeled or treated as "different" or "inferior." This will greatly impact relationships with other humans. Undoubtedly this will also impact their relationship with God. Their healing might help dissolve any anger, resentment, or doubt the men or their loved ones have toward God.

In the Mark 7 and 8 accounts, Jesus tries to keep the healings private and quiet. Jesus does not want to incite crowds to follow Him as the Messiah they expect to overthrow Rome. Jesus is going to be a different kind of Messiah—one who will submit to arrest and crucifixion rather than topple the powers in Jerusalem. Thus He often tells individuals not to speak about His miracles (Wright, pp. 107–109). However, when Jesus heals Bartimaeus, He is already en route to Jerusalem where He will enter as the promised Davidic king. Bartimaeus' healing is not hidden but very public, and the former beggar joins the crowd accompanying Jesus.

8. What do these miracles demonstrate about Jesus' purposes and power?

They demonstrate that Jesus is compassionate towards people in difficult circumstances. Jesus does not refuse the men who come to Him for healing; He does not ignore Bartimaeus' cries despite the fact that others try to silence him. The way Jesus interacts with people with disabilities also indicates that Jesus values people no matter what their condition is in life. They show us that Jesus has the power to change the observable physical world as well as the physical conditions of individuals. They reveal that Jesus employs God's immense power for good, not for harming or destroying people. They also indicate that God wants to connect with humans. God initiated relationship with us by sending His Son into the world in a human form so we might know God and enjoy a restored relationship with Him. God also recognizes our spiritual blindness and deafness due to sin. He not only heals in the physical realm to demonstrate His compassion, but He also uses these miracles to help us put our faith in Him and be healed spiritually, too. At the same time, God remains sovereign, and when He chooses not to heal, we have to decide whether to trust His purposes are for a greater good.

APPLICATION

***What would you say if Jesus asked you the question, “What do you want me to do for you?”**

***In Mark’s account, Bartimaeus is sitting by the side of the road unable to see Jesus. When some people nearby tell him who is coming, he starts shouting to get Jesus’ attention. Try to put yourself in Bartimaeus’ place. It seems that he figures out quickly this might be the opportunity of a lifetime. Would you have the nerve to call out to someone like he does and risk embarrassment if you thought you would get help in a way that would change your life? Have you ever felt this desperate for change?**

Would you like to make a profession of faith in Jesus like Bartimaeus made?

You might want to talk with individuals and, depending on their readiness, you might show them the “The Roman Road” gospel outline found at the beginning of these studies.

***Is there any spiritual blindness, deafness, or inability to speak that is preventing you from sensing the presence of God in your life? What is keeping you from believing in Jesus?**

WRAPPING IT UP

The Bible records many incidents in which Jesus heals people. Jesus is willing to touch people at their deepest needs, and He does so in ways that shows He respects their dignity and understands them intimately. The Jesus we see in the Bible continues to touch people at their points of need today. We can come to Jesus in faith, and He will meet our deepest needs.

In opening the eyes of those who could not see and the ears of those who could not hear, Jesus not only demonstrates that God loves us but also that He wants to connect with us. In dying on the cross, Jesus took our punishment as our sin-bearer so that He could remove the sin barrier between His Holy Father and us. In rising from the dead, Jesus proved that He is Lord and that one day nothing will separate us if we will open up our lives and invite Him to live in us.

If you want to understand more about what it means to come to Jesus in faith, don’t leave without discussing it with me. We can pray together or set up a time for further discussion.

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Meeting Jesus Series

Study 6

MEET JESUS—WHO WELCOMES THE LOVE OF SINNERS

Luke 7:36—50

By Rhodara S. Shreve

“Forgiveness is man’s deepest need and God’s highest achievement.”

Horace Bushnell

AIM

- To grasp the concept of God’s radical love and forgiveness for anyone who will repent of sins and receive Jesus, and to avoid justifying oneself before God.

KEY VERSE

“Therefore I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little.”

Luke 7:47

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Before you lead this study, please review the following sections in “Introduction to the *Meeting Jesus Series*”:

- *Leading Bible Study Discussions with Seekers*, for a refresher on seeker-specific issues.
- *Preparation for Leading Inductive Bible Studies*, for helpful hints on how to prepare for and lead this group of studies.
- *People First Language*, for guidelines about using sensitive and considerate language when referring to people who are physically impaired.

OPENER

How could it change your life to have the worst thing you ever said or did totally forgiven and completely erased from your conscience?

Allow participants to briefly discuss this. Encourage honest responses from seekers. At this point, if their ideas do not line up with Scripture, you do not need to correct people. Be patient and let the Bible speak for itself. Draw the opening discussion to a close, and tie it in with the Scripture passage.

If we’re honest, we might admit to having some hidden guilt or shame in the core of our being. Some of us have guilty consciences that time doesn’t seem to erase. Jesus came to earth to free us from such burdens and give us another chance in life. Let’s take a look at how He interacted with a woman others thought could never be forgiven.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

This is background material for the leader. You may decide how much to share.

Luke

(This material on Luke came from “Introduction to the Gospel of Luke” by John Cook.)

Luke was a Greek physician who traveled with Paul on some of his missionary journeys. Thus, he was not an eyewitness to the life of Jesus as were Matthew and John, who also wrote about Jesus’ life. However, Luke tells us that he was familiar with other accounts, and it seems he used both Mark and Matthew’s gospels to help compile his own book. Since Mark recorded the apostle Peter’s words, and Matthew was another one of Jesus’ twelve, Luke had plenty of

eyewitness accounts to work with. He also adds material not in Matthew, and focuses on a non-Jewish audience. While Matthew includes Gentiles seeking out Jesus, his main point is to prove Jesus is the long-awaited Jewish Messiah. Luke, on the other hand, writes that Jesus is the Savior of the whole world. He points out Jesus' concern for the poor, the insignificant, and the non-Jew as he tells the story of God's salvation, beginning in the Old Testament, running through the life and work of Jesus, and past His death and resurrection into the founding of the church.

Luke also wrote the Book of Acts, which circulated with his gospel until the four gospel books were made into a collection. Luke did participate in some of these events, thus making him a credible witness to the ongoing salvation work of Jesus through His church. Since Acts ends with Paul under house arrest in Rome, around A.D. 62, it seems reasonable to think Luke had already completed his gospel account before that. Both books are addressed to someone called "Theophilus," which means "lover of God" (Luke 1:3; Acts 1:1). It's not clear if this is his actual name or a way to refer to this new believer. Luke is writing to assure this person ("O most excellent Theophilus") of the facts of his faith in Christ. Some scholars think Luke researched and wrote these books while Paul was undergoing a series of trials and imprisonment. Whenever he compiled the material, there was never any doubt from the earliest centuries that Luke was the author.

This Study

The more you read the Gospels, the more you see how difficult it is to put Jesus in a tidy little box. He defies the kind of stereotyping we often see in the media. He is not concerned about staying within the boundaries of the culture in which He grew up. More often than not, He is doing things that are totally unacceptable to the religious establishment. One such example of this boundary pushing is found in a story Luke includes in his account of Jesus. It is the story of a woman who is known as the "town harlot" (Peterson, *The Message*, Luke 7:37) or more literally in the Greek, "a sinner in the city" (Cook, "Radical Forgiveness"). Plain and simple, she is a prostitute. It is also the story of one of the Jewish Pharisees named Simon who invites Jesus to his home for a meal. Let's see how this drama unfolds. But before we do, it is important to understand a few things about the setting or the background. If we don't do this, we will not fully appreciate the way Jesus handles Himself at this particular meal.

As you lead this study, use this background material to understand what is going on in terms of cultural dynamics. Luke does not tell us this directly. This is why understanding the historical context is helpful when studying the Bible.

The Setting

We don't know what town this dinner party took place in, but it may have been in the village of Nain mentioned earlier in Luke 7. Nain was a village about 10 miles southeast of the town of Nazareth, where Jesus grew up, in the region of Galilee (Cook, "Radical Forgiveness"). Jesus stops a funeral procession in Nain and raises the son of a widow. Perhaps this is why Simon, a Pharisee, invites Jesus to his home for dinner (Cook, "Radical Forgiveness").

The Host

First of all, let's look at the Pharisee, Simon. In his sermon, "Radical Forgiveness, Radical Love," John Cook notes:

Pharisees were the people in Israel who were meticulous about following the Old Testament Law. They were so fanatical about it they devised a series of rules they called a "hedge" around Law so that if you followed these rules you could be sure you'd never

inadvertently break the Law. The Pharisees believed only a few Jews would ultimately be saved, and guess who they thought those “few” would be? Themselves! They were the religious elite. They were respected by the common people because they were believed to be extraordinarily holy. They were fanatical about ritual purity, never coming in contact with anything that might render them ceremonially unclean, like Gentiles or sinners. ... Jesus and the Pharisees hadn’t been getting along too well. The Pharisees thought Jesus was too lax; He didn’t buy into their fanatical preoccupation with maintaining ritual purity. He even hung out with unclean people, like tax collectors and sinners. No Pharisee would ever do that.

We can speculate that Simon invites Jesus to dinner because Simon and his friends hear about Jesus and what He is doing. Simon probably also thinks Jesus is a prophet or a messenger from God (Luke 7:39, qtd. in Cook, “Radical Forgiveness”). Jesus is not afraid to dine with those who want to examine Him under a microscope rather than spend time with Him because they enjoy His company. But Jesus still uses this situation to advance the message of God’s love.

The Customs

It is important to the story to understand the customs practiced when entertaining guests in this culture. John Cook, in his sermon “Radical Forgiveness, Radical Love,” explains:

The Greek in verse 37 is quite clear it is a banquet, a formal dinner party. At a formal dinner in the first century all the guests reclined at the table. They [lay] on couches with their feet farthest from the table and leaned on their left elbow as they ate. Eating at a Pharisee’s home, everyone would expect the discussion to center on theological talk, discussions about the kingdom of God.

Now let’s take a quick look at the customs Simon violated when Jesus arrived.

1. Simon offers no kiss of honor.

Again, quoting from John Cook’s sermon, “Radical Forgiveness, Radical Love”:

A host at a party would effuse thanks to his guests for attending and honoring him by their presence. A guest would likewise respond by praising his host for honoring him by the invitation. It was highly ritualized, and no one would dream of deviating from the expected pattern. ... When a guest entered your home it was expected that the host would welcome his guests with a kiss. The word “greet” means literally to “embrace.” If the guest was a peer, the host was expected to kiss him on the cheek. If the guest was especially prestigious, he was expected to kiss him on the hand. In fact, every male member of the host’s home would line up at the door and one by one kiss the hand of the rabbi who entered the home. To offer no kiss at all was an insult.... Undoubtedly, the other guests were shocked and horrified.

2. Simon offers no water to wash Jesus’ feet.

John Cook tells us (“Radical Forgiveness”):

To refuse to offer water for the washing of the feet was another insult. Feet got dirty walking the dusty roads of Galilee. They were unclean, literally, which is why they reclined at table with the feet as far away as possible from the food and the table. It was common courtesy to offer a servant to wash the feet of a respected guest. To fail to do so was to communicate you considered the guest unworthy. It was an insult.

3. Simon offers no oil to anoint Jesus' head.

In John Cook's sermon, "Radical Forgiveness, Radical Love," we learn:

Olive oil was cheap and plentiful, and because in the hot sun the skin got dry and scaly, olive oil was often routinely offered to relieve the dryness in advance of a meal. To fail to offer oil to refresh the face and head was not as great an insult, but combined with the other two failures, the net result was clear to all. Simon was intentionally insulting Jesus, purposely treating him with no respect. ... Amazingly, Jesus said nothing and simply took his place at the table despite the rudeness of his host.

The Uninvited Guest

The other main character in this event is a woman of the town who had lived a sinful life. Simon would never invite or allow her in the house near himself, Jesus, or any of his other guests. She probably watches Jesus from outside since houses are open and many people following Jesus out of curiosity would be crowding around the windows to get a view of what is going on inside. She could see that Simon neglects to offer the usual customs of hospitality to Jesus. Simon's rudeness must partly motivate the woman to respond to Jesus the way she does. The woman may also be prompted by a previous interaction with Jesus (Cook, "Radical Forgiveness").

Another detail that needs explaining is that the woman brought costly perfume with her. Again John Cook notes, "In an age before mouthwash and body spray, perfume was used by women to mask the scent of perspiration. A prostitute used perfume to make herself more appealing to her customers" ("Radical Forgiveness"). So she has with her a very important commodity used in her "business." It was probably expensive and used very sparingly. Her spontaneous act of love was in sharp contrast to Simon's downright rudeness towards his guest of honor. Jesus used this to teach Simon a lesson about what motivates someone to pour out all they have for Him.

STUDY THE PASSAGE: LUKE 7:36—50

Pray that God's radical love and forgiveness would penetrate everyone so that none would remain outside God's mercy and favor.

1. Would several people take turns reading the passage aloud?

In verses 36 and 38, Luke describes the main characters? Who are they?

2. What do you think Jesus expects when He goes to dinner at the house of a religious leader?

3. Why do you think the woman comes to the Pharisee's home (v. 37)?

John Cook maintains that Jesus ministered to this woman prior to the meal. He believes Jesus had healed her or showed her acceptance and love that profoundly impacted her. Cook believes that when she learns Jesus will be at Simon's home, she comes with her perfume in order to anoint His feet out of respect ("Radical Forgiveness").

4. How does the woman act when she sees Jesus being treated rudely by His host (v. 38)?

John Cook sees it this way (“Radical Forgiveness”):

The woman, who was already there (v. 45) when Jesus arrived, was furious. She was mad at the affront to Jesus’ honor.... Her original intent was merely to anoint his feet with her perfume. But full of anger and shocked she burst into tears and instead washed his feet with her tears. The general hubbub in the room didn’t make her totally disruptive doing so, but she quickly realized she needed to somehow wipe them off. Instinctively, she undid her hair and wiped them dry. Finally, she returned to her original plan and anointed his feet with her perfume.

In breaking the bottle and pouring out all this costly fragrance, the woman indicates that she no longer needs these tools of her trade. She demonstrates that she is turning her back on a life of prostitution. Still, she acts scandalously and embarrasses everyone. By touching Jesus, she makes Him “unclean” to dine. By letting down her hair in public, she acts very sensuously; a Jewish man could divorce his wife just for this (Cook, “Radical Forgiveness”).

*** When have you been offended by someone’s behavior in public?**

5. What are Simon the Pharisee’s thoughts about Jesus (v. 39)?

Simon thinks if Jesus were a true prophet, He would avoid contact with such a sinful woman.

6. In verse 40, whom does Jesus speak to? What is He concerned about? Why do you think Jesus does not speak to the woman first?

Jesus knows exactly who the woman is and what Simon is thinking. He recognizes that it is Simon who is mistaken, proud, and full of sin. Simon judges the woman and misjudges Jesus. Simon also smugly justifies himself by comparing his life to the woman’s. Simon, not the woman, misunderstands Jesus and the Father’s love. Therefore, it is Simon whom Jesus will instruct and rebuke, not the woman (Cook, “Radical Forgiveness”).

7. Jesus tells a story in verses 41–43. What is this story about?

John Cook summarizes (“Radical Forgiveness”):

Jesus tells a simple parable about two debtors. ... In Aramaic the word for “debtor” and “sinner” is the same. Jesus intentionally chooses a story and a term that contains a double meaning. The parable isn’t merely about people owing money, but also about people who have sinned and offended God Himself. ... Note that the NIV says in verse 42 the moneylender “canceled their debts.” This could also be translated “freely forgave.” The verb is the same one Paul uses in his letters meaning to “offer grace.” Grace is unmerited favor. ... Note neither [debtors] did anything to merit the cancellation of his debt. Grace is by definition unearned. Their debt, their sin, has been cancelled. Both should be very grateful, but the one forgiven \$60,000 will be more grateful than the one who was forgiven only \$6,000 [50 denarii is roughly \$6,000 and 500 denarii would be \$60,000]. The terms “love” and “grateful” in Aramaic are the same word. The greater love/gratefulness comes from the greater grace/forgiveness.

8. What does Jesus ask Simon at the end of His story (v. 42)?

9. Simon knows he is trapped. How does he answer (v. 43)?

***Optional: Whom would you be more eager to thank: someone who writes off your \$6000.00 debt or someone who pays off your \$60,000.00 debt?**

10. What contrast does Jesus make between Simon and the woman (vv. 44–47)?

It is interesting to note that not only was Simon rude to Jesus by snubbing Him when He arrived, not only did the woman outrage Simon and others by her departure from proper behavior, but also Jesus abandoned normal etiquette by openly rebuking His host. It was understood in the first century that you did not complain about the hospitality you received. And yet Jesus behaved in this shocking way out of love and concern for His hard-hearted host (Cook, “Radical Forgiveness”).

11. How had Simon minimized his own sin and need for forgiveness when he compared himself to the “sinful” woman?

***Optional: Why do we compare our behavior to others’ behavior? How do you try to justify yourself to God or others?**

12. What two things did Jesus announce to the woman (vv. 48, 50)?

13. Had the woman earned forgiveness or was it a gift from Jesus?

John Cook points out (“Radical Forgiveness”):

The NIV translation [of verse 47] is inaccurate. The Greek word *hoti* can mean “from,” as the NIV translates it, but it can also have what grammarians call a “consecutive use” making it show result, depending on the context. In that case, it means “therefore.” The NRSV and the TNIV both translate it that way. Love doesn’t earn forgiveness. Rather, **radical forgiveness brings forth radical love** [editor’s emphasis]. As Jesus told the woman in verse 50, her *faith* had saved her. Not her love. Faith is the open hand that receives from Jesus. The woman faced her sinfulness and opened her hand to receive Jesus’ forgiveness. Simon did not. ... Simon’s root problem was looking at the woman and deciding he was okay because he was better than she was.

14. How do the guests react to Jesus' authoritative statements (v. 49)?

- * How do you react to Jesus implying that He—like God—can forgive the sins of those who put their faith in Him?**

APPLICATION

- * If you thought all the wrong things you've ever thought, felt, said, or done could be erased, would you want that to happen? Why would you be willing to take the gift of having all your offenses against God and others wiped out?**

- * Jesus offers each of us this gift of radical forgiveness. Is there anything keeping you from accepting His radical love?**

WRAPPING IT UP

Luke records an amazing story about Jesus' ability to forgive and transform lives. Jesus' radical love attracts a woman who abandons her ungodly lifestyle and shame for relationship with Him. His radical forgiveness prompts her extraordinary display of gratitude, too.

Jesus never falters from His mission of love. Instead of becoming defensive, He is not intimidated or ruffled by the public insults of his host. Nor is He embarrassed or taken off guard by the shocking behavior of the prostitute.

By telling a simple story, Jesus is able to go beyond Simon's religious understanding of God and help him comprehend how he has majored in the minors, and in so doing, completely missed the presence of God. Simon is not prepared for such a radical display of undeserved love and forgiveness. Nor is he prepared for such an immediate display of God's extravagant grace. Nevertheless, Jesus wants Simon to understand His Father's willingness to embrace the humble and repentant. Do you understand that this is God's nature? Will you embrace or miss God's presence today?

[Be sure to allow people in your group to respond to this wonderful gift of grace.]

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