

LIVING GOSPEL

7 Habits for Highly Effective Catholics



focus
fellowship of Catholic
university students

Copyright © 2016 FOCUS (Fellowship of Catholic University Students). You are free to make copies for non-commercial use as long as you attribute the material to FOCUS. For commercial use, please contact us.

All Scripture texts from the New and Old Testaments are taken from Revised Standard Version Bible: 2nd Catholic Edition, copyright 1989, 1993, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America, unless otherwise noted. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

LIVING GOSPEL

7 Habits for Highly Effective Catholics

By Kevin Cotter

Leader's Introduction	2 - 8
Chapter 1: Reading the Word of God	9 - 20
Chapter 2: Praying Daily	21 - 34
Chapter 3: Receiving the Sacraments	35 - 46
Chapter 4: Being Open to the Holy Spirit	47 - 58
Chapter 5: Building Our Character and Community	59 - 72
Chapter 6: Practicing Stewardship	73 - 84
Chapter 7: Sharing the Good News with Others	85 - 99



LEADER'S INTRODUCTION

The Big Picture

God's word is alive and it should be embodied in our lives.

What Do I Need to Know about This Study?

This Bible study has two simple aims.

First, this study will help believers, new and old, live out the Faith through seven essential habits of the Church.

Second, it will help college students learn to practice the art of reading Scripture, especially the Gospels. Hebrews 4:12 tells us that God's word is "living and active." We often seek to hear God's voice. Scripture is God's word that expresses His love for us and the plan He has for our lives. Cultivating the skill of reading Scripture can create an open and dynamic stream of communication with the Creator of the universe.

The title, "Living Gospel," reflects these two aims with its double meaning. On the one hand, we want students to live out the gospel and to embody its message in their lives. On the other hand, the Gospels are not just fairy tales or mere accounts of history, but a living reality that affects us today just as much as it affected Jesus'

listeners 2,000 years ago. This reality has the power to completely change our lives if we are open to hearing God's message.

How FOCUS Equip Studies Work

Each FOCUS Equip study highlights one particular passage of Scripture. As the leader, you guide a discussion about the passage, which allows participants to discover truths within the passage for themselves. This process is called self-discovered learning. Its format can help participants learn about Scripture and the way to discover Scripture on their own.

At the same time, you are not left alone to understand the Scriptures by yourself. Each chapter will contain a section titled "What Do I Need to Know about This Passage?" It will provide you with details about the passage, along with summaries about the passage's big picture, how it applies to Jesus, and how it can apply to your group.

UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

The discussion guide supplies you with an opening question, some background information to share about the passage, and a set of example questions and answers on each passage to use with your group.

DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

Prepare by studying “What Do I Need to Know about This Passage?” before the Bible study, and then use the discussion guide to direct the conversation with your group.

With all of this information at your disposal, you are all set and ready to go. You just need to pass out the notes, ask each question as it is written, and read the answers to the questions, right? Well, not exactly. It would not make for a very engaging Bible study. This material is a Bible study in a can: It is meant to preserve good-quality Biblical content and allow for a broad distribution, but someone still needs to take the material out of the can, spice up the content, and serve it to your study. That person is you.

This is where the audience for your study is crucial; these are the people for whom you are “cooking.” Whether you have a group that has never heard the Gospel before or a group that attempts to live out the Gospel each day, you can adapt the Bible study to the group. The flexibility of this format is what can make it so effective.

Most likely, however, you will have a group with both kinds of people. Follow the example of my dance lesson: try to create a Bible study where beginners can learn the basics while the experts can be rejuvenated. Scripture is a great way to do this. St. Gregory the Great once said, “Holy Scripture is a stream in which the elephant may swim and the lamb may wade.” Both groups should be able to discover something meaningful in the Scripture passage.

For more on How to Lead a Bible study, check out our resource on FOCUSEquip.org. As a review, FOCUS Bible study leaders have 3 roles and 3 goals in each study.

Your 3 Key Roles

With all of the above information in mind, remember that you have 3 key roles in this study. These 3 roles are your contribution to the study, and doing these 3 things well will make the study successful.

1. **Prayer:** Ultimately, it will be God Who changes the lives of the participants. By personal prayer and praying for your participants, you open the door for God to accomplish great things. Please take time to pray for your group, talking with God about each participant.
2. **Hospitality:** Effectively welcoming participants, getting to know them, meeting them outside of Bible study, and becoming real friends will be a great asset to the study. Create an environment that is open and personal, allowing participants to feel comfortable expressing their thoughts and experiences.
3. **Facilitator:** A good discussion really enhances the fruitfulness of a Bible study. Take the time to review the study and ask good, relevant questions to your group. Guide the discussion, allowing everyone to participate. Bring the discussion back if it gets too far astray.

Introduction

Your 3 Key Goals

There will, no doubt, be many questions and discussions that come up throughout the study. You may even find yourself a bit lost here or there. However, the goals listed below are what you are ultimately trying to accomplish. Keeping these in mind throughout the study will help you stay on course.

1. **Deep Transformation:** Through interaction with God's word and one another, it is our hope that the lives of your Bible study members will be profoundly changed. The purpose of a Bible study is not to simply learn information or to be a part of a Bible study club, but allow the Lord to transform our lives. Specifically, we hope that students, through Scripture, are drawn more intimately to our Lord in the sacraments and liturgy of the Church where they can most fully receive the gift of God's grace in their lives.
2. **Intimate Fellowship:** If people are going to be deeply transformed, they will need others along the way, not only to help this transformation, but also to make sure they continue this transformation in the future. Your goal as a leader is to take a group of people with various backgrounds and personalities and help them form authentic relationships with one another.
3. **Spiritual Multiplication:** Another important dynamic of small groups is their ability to be reproduced. As you lead, pray that the Lord will raise up members of your small group to go on to disciple others and to lead Bible studies of their own.

Final Note

One of the best ways to learn how to lead a Bible Study is to learn from others. Consider observing someone else's Bible study to learn how they have been successful. Also, ask a missionary or your discipler to come to your study and give you feedback on how you are doing.

The Challenge

To properly lead this study, you will need to prepare in advance and apply God's word in your own life.



Chapter 1

Reading the Word of God

John 1:1-18

UNDERSTANDING

Pages 10 - 15

DISCUSSION

Pages 16 - 20

UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

Read John 1:1–18

The Big Picture

The Bible is a direct path to hearing God's word.

The Gospel of John begins with one of the most elegant passages of the New Testament. In a poetic fashion, John places each line of Scripture into place with a distinct purpose. These first eighteen verses of John's Gospel provide a table of contents, so to speak, for the themes that will reoccur throughout this book. For our purposes, we are going to examine how these verses relate to our study of God's word. Let's break down some main aspects of these opening lines.

In the Beginning... (John 1:1–5)

John begins with the line, "In the beginning was the Word." John's original Jewish audience would immediately think of creation and the Book of Genesis, which opens with, "In the beginning." The Gospels of Matthew and Luke begin with Jesus' birth, but here John goes back

to the very beginning of time, revealing even more about Jesus' true identity. During creation, it is God's spoken word that brings our world into being (Gen 1:3; Ps 33:6). When God's word goes forth, a specific action immediately follows.

The concept of the word was significant in the Old Testament. Writers link the word of God with the wisdom of God, which was with God from eternity and created everything with Him (Prv 8:23; Wis 7:22). Now this word found in the Old Testament "is not simply audible; not only does it have a voice, now the Word has a face, one which we can see: that of Jesus of Nazareth" (Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, 12).

In these first five verses, John reveals more about the identity of Jesus. He notes that Jesus:

- is God (Jn 1:1);
- created everything with God (v. 2);
- is the life of men (v. 4); and
- is the light to men in darkness (vv. 4–5).

John the Baptist (John 1:6–8)

John breaks into his poetic stanza to speak about John the Baptist. Like a lawyer in a courtroom, John will use witnesses throughout his Gospel to help support the evidence for Jesus. John the Baptist is a key witness in John's case for Jesus: Among the Gospel's original audience, there was initially some confusion about whether to follow John the Baptist or Jesus (for example, see Acts 19:1–7). John tries to make it clear that John the Baptist was a messenger who testified to Jesus, not the Messiah himself. John the Baptist's purpose was to testify that

Jesus was the true light and that all should believe in Him. Our role as Christians is similar: We must testify to Jesus Christ and the light that He shed on humanity's search for meaning and purpose.

Children of God (John 1:9-13)

John exposes the irony of Jesus' coming: Jesus created the world, and yet the world did not recognize Him (Jn 1:10-11). This reveals the scandal of Jesus' rejection by those who should have accepted Him. However, if one *does* accept Jesus and believe in His name, one becomes a child of God (v. 12). It's easy to get used to this concept, but hopefully it will always be, in some ways, shocking. God, the creator of the universe, chooses to make us His own children. May this always cause awe and thanksgiving in our hearts.

Application to Jesus

John tells us who Jesus is—none other than God Himself manifested in the flesh.

The Word Became Flesh (John 1:14-18)

The previous lines set us up for verse 14—"God's Word became flesh and dwelt among us." The Greek word for "dwelt" literally means "tabernacled," or "pitched his tent." Because we are so used to the message that God loves us and is here with us, we lose sight of how radical this is. The Psalmist is in awe that God would even think of man (Ps 8:4). Rather than being distant like so many of the ancient

gods, Jesus shows that God is willing to live among us, as one of us, to show us truth and to give us grace.

John is not just an abstract storyteller; he saw and experienced Jesus' glory first hand (see also 1 Jn 1:14). We are not reading hearsay or stories passed down through generations but the up-close eyewitness account of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.

The Power of God's Word

Unlike the author or John the Baptist, we are not direct eyewitnesses to Jesus' ministry here on earth. But, through the word of God, we can have a living encounter with Him. Hebrews 4:12 says, "For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart." It is easy to see Scripture as merely lessons in morality or fairy-tale stories, but God's word is so much more. It is alive.

God's word has the ability to shed light into our lives. To give testimonies like John the Baptist or the author John, we need to be in a place where God is continually transforming us. We can then always be ready to share with others what God is doing in our lives.

How to Pray with Scripture

The Church has a deep reverence for the study of Scripture. The tradition of *lectio divina* in the Church has been a fruitful practice of praying and reading Scripture for centuries. It involves first reading through a passage of Scripture—for instance, a story from the Gospels—and then going through a progression of steps while you read the passage:

Lectio—What does the biblical text say in itself?...

Meditatio—What does the biblical text say to us?...

Oratio—What do we say to the Lord in response to His Word?...

Contemplatio—What conversion of mind, heart and life is the Lord asking of us?...

Actio—Making a resolution to make his our lives a gift for others in charity.

- Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, 87

Application to Our Lives

We can encounter God through His living word that is able to speak into our lives.

DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

John 1:1–18

STEP 1: OPENER

If you had one question you could ask God, what would you ask Him?

STEP 2: BACKDROP

The Gospel of John begins with one of the most elegant passages of the New Testament. In a poetic fashion, John places each line of Scripture into place with a distinct purpose. These first eighteen verses of John's Gospel provide a table of contents, so to speak, for the themes found in the Gospel of John. For our purposes, we are going to examine how these verses relate to our study of God's Word. Let's break down some of the main aspects of these poetic lines.

STEP 3: PASSAGE

Read John 1:1–18.

STEP 4: EXPLORATION: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Note that answers appear in italics.

1. Both Matthew's and Luke's Gospels begin by describing Jesus' birth. How does John open his Gospel in verse 1?

Answer: John starts by not focusing on Jesus' human birth but by showing how Jesus was present at the beginning of time.

2. Why do you think it is so crucial for John to focus on this beginning and the beginning of Jesus' earthly life?

Answer: John wants to reveal more about Jesus' true identity: Jesus is God and was with God during creation.

3. What else does John reveal about Jesus in verses 1–5?

Answer: John notes that Jesus is the Word (Jn 1:1), the life of men (v. 4), and light to men in darkness (vv. 4–5).

4. Why is this so radical to our world today?

Answer: It is easy to accept that Jesus was a great moral teacher, but if Jesus is God, His moral teaching takes on a much greater gravity. It would mean that we must accept Him entirely.

5. Read Genesis 1:3 and 1:6. What does the relationship between God's word and the created order say about God's word?

Answer: The relationship between God's word and what is created shows the direct connection between the two. It reveals how powerful God's word is—the same word that we find in the Bible.

6. Who is John the Baptist? What did he do?

Answer: John the Baptist was a prophet who testified to the coming of Jesus as the Messiah, the new Jewish king who would “take away the sins of the world” (for more, see Jn 1:19–34).

7. Why do you think John uses John the Baptist’s testimony?

Answer: John’s audience most likely would have known John the Baptist and respected him as a true prophet.

8. How does the testimony of others have an effect on us?

Answer: A testimony demonstrates the power of how a person has been changed. It is a tangible witness to the power of what is being described. Testimonies are hard to argue with because they reflect a personal experience.

9. Read 1 John 1:1–5. (Note: Be sure to read from John’s letter and not his Gospel.) What does this tell us about the testimony of John, the author of this Gospel? How does this change how we view his Gospel?

Answer: John tells us that he witnessed Jesus’ glory. We can trust that his Gospel is not just made up of fables or legends but comes from someone who saw Jesus himself.

10. How can we build a more powerful testimony to share with others?

Answer: See “The Power of God’s Word” in “What Do I Need to Know about This Passage?”

11. In verses 10–11, the world does not accept Jesus. What is ironic about this situation?

Answer: The irony is that Jesus made the world, and yet the world did not recognize its creator.

12. In light of what we have learned about God’s word, why is it significant that this word takes flesh in verse 14?

Answer: The Word created the universe and is God Himself. This Word humbles Himself to become a mere man and dwell among us.

13. The word “dwelt” in Greek means “tabernacled,” or “pitched his tent.” Traditionally, this concept has been called the Incarnation, when God takes on our very flesh. How can this change our view of God?

Answer: God doesn’t seem so far away but someone who is truly with us.

14. Read Hebrews 4:14–16. What does Jesus’ Incarnation allow us to do?

Answer: We realize that God relates to all of the difficulties we have in life. He allows us to draw near to Him to receive His grace.

15. Read Hebrews 4:12. How is reading God’s word different from reading any other book?

Answer: God’s word is “living and active.” Just like the power of God’s word in creation, God’s word has the power to change our lives.



Chapter 2

Praying Daily

Matthew 6:9-13

UNDERSTANDING

Pages 22 - 27

DISCUSSION

Page 28 - 34

UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

Read Matthew 6:9–13

The Big Picture

Knowing the details behind the Our Father give us insight into Jesus' outline for how we should pray.

Just like the Lord's disciples in Luke 11, many young Christians ask, "Lord, teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1). Jesus' response is what we know today as the Our Father, recorded in the Gospels of Luke and Mathew. Some wonder whether Christians should pray the Our Father word for word, or whether Jesus was simply providing a model for our prayer. The best answer is, both: The words of the Our Father are powerful in themselves, and they give us an incredible model for our own prayers. Let's walk through the Our Father in Matthew, phrase by phrase, to get a better understanding of how Jesus is teaching us to pray.

Our Father Who Art in Heaven

Faced with a hectic schedule, we can easily lose track of why we pray in the first place. These first words of the Our Father give us the

foundational reason: We are in a relationship with God. The Lord, the maker of heaven and earth, the source of all that is good, invites us to converse with Him. Prayer is a daily response to an invitation to participate in an incredible relationship.

Hallowed Be Thy Name

To understand this phrase, we have to understand the power of God's name. Using God's name in vain is forbidden in the Ten Commandments. This does not mean just the use of God's name as a swear word; it also means that we should not use God's name without a purpose. The name of God is sacred because of its power. In fact, when we utter God's name, we bring about His very presence (Mt 18:20; CCC 2666). This phrase is a reminder that God is with us when we call on His name in prayer through the sign of the cross.

Thy Kingdom Come, Thy Will Be Done on Earth as It Is in Heaven

At first glance, this is a confusing concept. Why are we praying for God's kingdom to come if Jesus announced, "The kingdom is at hand" (Mt 3:1-2)? There is no doubt that Jesus established His kingdom here on earth—and yet, the Lord allows us to work with Him. This phrase helps us think of how our words and actions can build up the kingdom of God each day.

What Do I Need to Know about This Passage?

It also seems as though the will of God would happen no matter what. Do we even have a choice of whether or not we follow it? The

answer is yes. We have a free will to choose whom we will follow—God or ourselves. The Christian author C. S. Lewis once wrote about our decision to follow God or to follow ourselves, and its implication for our eternal life: “There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, ‘Thy will be done,’ and those to whom God says, in the end, ‘Thy will be done.’” Silent prayer is a great outward and inward expression of a desire for God’s will. With our heart, mind, and body, we are saying that what God has to offer is more than what we can offer by ourselves.

Give Us This Day Our Daily Bread

Notice the sequence of the Our Father: It is only now that we bring a petition before the Lord—after we have recognized our relationship with God, praised Him for His holiness, and invited His kingdom and will into our lives. In this context, as children who first seek His kingdom, we make our petitions known to God (Mt 6:33). In one sense, we are asking God to provide for our material needs. Others have also noted that it is a request for the daily bread of the Eucharist. In both cases, we acknowledge that our material and spiritual needs must be turned over to God, who will provide for us.

And Forgive Us Our Trespasses as We Forgive Our Trespassers

This phrase reveals a key teaching that occurs several times in Scripture: The mercy God grants us depends on our own forgiveness of others. When we truly experience and understand the gravity of God’s mercy, we will forgive others in turn. We will be, as Jesus says in Luke, “merciful even as your Father is merciful” (Lk 6:33).

And Lead Us Not into Temptation but Deliver Us from Evil

Temptations are a refining fire. Sometimes they bring out the very best in us; many times they bring to light our weaknesses. While we do not hope for temptations, we know the Lord uses them for our good, and He will not let us be tempted beyond our strength (1 Cor 10:13). Where do these temptations come from? In the Our Father, we usually say, "Deliver us from evil," but the Greek can be translated as "the evil one." 1 Peter 5:8 tells us that the devil prowls like a roaring lion; prayer is our spiritual weapon to fight this battle.

Application to Jesus

Through the Our Father, we continue to bring back the kingdom Jesus established.

Living Out Prayer

Prayer is at the heart of our relationship with God: It is our source of communication with the God who loves us. And yet, most Christians find prayer to be difficult. Deep prayer seems almost impossible, especially in such a busy, materialistic, and distracting age. But this is precisely why prayer is even more important for us today: We need silence in our lives, and most importantly, we need the presence of an eternal God to help guide our path. As one contemporary author noted, "No one died of hunger because of not having enough me to eat." Prayer turns our focus away from ourselves and to the One who alone can save us.

At the end of the study, you may want to challenge your group to pray twenty minutes each day. Be sure to show prayer not as an obligation

but as an opportunity to speak with the God of the universe. Also, be sure to give them resources on how to pray. Don't simply leave the members of your group with a challenge, but take the time to pray with them, either in or out of the study. Prayer is a lost art form, and your students will need examples to see how it is done. Finally, we included a "Prayer Card" with this study where the members of your group can commit themselves to praying each day, if desired.

Prayer Pledge

"And in the morning, a great while before day, He rose and went out to a lonely place, and there He prayed" (Mk 1:35).

"But so much the more the report went abroad concerning Him; and great multitudes gathered to hear and to be healed of their infirmities. But He withdrew to the wilderness and prayed" (Lk 5:15-16).

"And he told them a parable, to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart" (Lk 18:1).

With God's help, I resolve to spend at least twenty minutes in prayer to God each day.

Name: _____

Signature: _____

Resources to help me pray: *Time for God* by Jacques Philippe, *Praying Scripture for a Change* by Tim Gray

Application to Our Lives

Taking time each day to pray keeps us connected to the God of the universe.

DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

Matthew 6:9–13

STEP 1: OPENER

Many Christians find prayer to be difficult. Why do you think this is the case?

STEP 2: BACKDROP

Just like the Lord's disciples in Luke 11, many young Christians ask, "Lord, teach us to pray" (Lk 11:1). Jesus' response is what we know today as the Our Father, which is recorded in the Gospels of Luke and Matthew. It is easy to read or pray the Our Father without realizing its significance. Let's walk through the Our Father in Matthew, phrase by phrase, to get a better understanding of how Jesus is teaching us to pray.

STEP 3: PASSAGE

Read Matthew 6:9–13.

STEP 4: EXPLORATION: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Note that answers appear in italics.

1. What do you think is the most common way to pray?

Answer: Most people pray because they have a request to make to God. They need something or feel helpless, so they ask God for help.

2. Why do you pray?

Allow the group to discuss.

3. How does the very first phrase, “Our Father,” indicate why we should pray?

Answer: The phrase “Our Father” shows that we are praying because we have a relationship with God.

4. Prayer can feel like just another task to check off of our to-do list. How do we find ways to make it an opportunity and not an obligation?

Allow the group to discuss.

5. The names of God and Jesus have always been considered sacred throughout history. There is power in God’s name because it invokes His presence. (Read CCC 2666.) How does this apply to our prayer lives?

Answer: Prayer is our time with God. By invoking His name through the sign of the cross, we are asking for God to be present in a special way when we pray.

6. What comes to mind when you hear the words, “Thy kingdom come”?

Allow the group to discuss.

7. In what ways do you personally hope to bring about God’s kingdom?

Allow the group to discuss.

8. Why do you think we pray that God’s will be done? Don’t you think that God’s will should happen whether we pray for it or not?

Answer: God is powerful enough to make His will happen in any and every situation, but He allows us to have free will. He allows us to reject His will if we so choose.

9. What is the relationship between silence in prayer and wanting God’s will instead of our own?

Answer: When we enter into silence, we are saying with our bodies, minds, and hearts that we want to hear less of ourselves and more of what God has to say in our lives.

10. It’s only halfway through the Our Father that Jesus tells us to make our requests known. Why do you think this is the case?

Answer: Making your requests known to God isn’t a bad thing. The Our Father, however, shows us that the requests should be made in a context where we recognize our relationship with God and ask that His will be done first and foremost.

11. Read Luke 11:5–13. Why do you think that God doesn't always answer our prayers immediately or even at all sometimes?

Answer: God doesn't want to be a genie in a bottle; He wants us to have a relationship of trust with Him. Persistence helps us form this relationship. Sometimes it is because we fail to continue our prayers. At other times, God gives us what we need even if we can't see it at the time. In the end, God is always willing to give us His Holy Spirit (Mt 9:13).

12. When we turn over our material and spiritual needs to God, how does this change our relationship with Him? How can we actually do this?

Answer: We show that we don't rely on ourselves but on God. This will change our view of God and our anxiety about life.

13. Read verses 14–15. Why do you think God makes His own forgiveness dependent on our forgiveness of others?

Answer: It is only when we are able to act like the Father and forgive others that we truly understand and accept God's mercy.

14. How can temptations be helpful to us? How can they be harmful?

Answer: Temptations can bring out the best in us by showing us what we are able to withstand. But since temptations can also bring out the worst in us, we should pray not to go through them.

15. Where do these temptations come from?

Answer: Temptations come from the devil. The original Greek shows that this phrase from the Our Father could also be read, "But deliver us from the evil one." (Read 1 Pt 5:8 for more.)

16. Why do you think prayer is difficult in our world? What part of our culture can make it easier?

Answer: We live in such a busy, distracted, and materialistic age that setting time aside to pray silently about a spiritual need can feel like a waste of time or seem too difficult to accomplish. But with so much going on around us, we must take care to stay centered and be in touch with the One who will help us navigate our lives each day.

17. See the "What Do I Need to Know about This Passage?" section on how to help your group learn how to pray.



NOTES



Chapter 3

Receiving the Sacraments

John 6:35-59

UNDERSTANDING

Pages 36 - 41

DISCUSSION

Pages 42 - 46

UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

Read John 6:35–59

The Big Picture

The sacraments are the most direct and powerful way for us to be vitally connected to Jesus Christ and the Church.

People come to know Jesus Christ in a number of ways. The Catholic Church teaches that we can meet Him in the most personal and profound way through the sacraments, where we receive the grace necessary to live out a life fully dedicated to Him.

The purpose of this chapter is twofold: First, we want members of the study to develop a desire for the sacraments themselves. It's easy to view sacraments as dead rituals if we don't know the meaning behind them. Second, we want members of the study to see the scriptural foundations for the sacraments (in this case, the Eucharist). This chapter will introduce your study group to both of these ideas.

The Crowd in Context

The crowd in this passage is crucial in understanding our struggle with the sacraments. The surrounding passages tell us more about them: Some of the crowd had presumably already seen Jesus heal the sick (Jn 6:2) and multiply the loaves and fish (Jn 6:10–14). As a result, they tried to make Him their king (Jn 6:15). Despite this, the crowd refuses to believe in Jesus until they see another sign (v. 30). They do not want just any bread, but the bread (manna) from heaven that Moses had provided (v. 31).

Bread of Life (John 6:35–51)

In this passage, Jesus progressively reveals His teaching about the Eucharist. Jesus uses the request for bread to proclaim that He is the bread of life. Belief in Him is not just physical nourishment for the body but also food for the soul, leading to eternal life.

The Jews are taken aback by this response. Before, they wanted more signs; now, they discount Jesus because they cannot comprehend how this man, whose family they know, could have come from heaven (Jn 6:42).

The crowd reveals two tendencies in humanity's relationship with faith. First, we seem to always want more proof. And yet, faith does not work like this: Hebrews 11:1 tells us, "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Second, humans have a hard time seeing how the material can be made into the supernatural: How can Jesus be from heaven if we know His natural parents? This can be a stumbling block for many. For others, it can be an inspiration.

In the sacraments, God chooses natural materials such as bread and wine and makes them supernatural. Similarly, with these supernatural sacraments, our material bodies will be filled with God's supernatural grace and become more like God Himself.

Application to Jesus

Through the sacraments, Jesus reveals the love of the Father who seeks to show us His love and gives us eternal life.

Eating Flesh? (John 6:52-59)

After the murmuring of the Jews, Jesus affirms His teaching and then makes Himself even clearer. The bread that He offers is better than the miraculous manna in the wilderness. Those who ate that bread did not escape death; this bread leads to eternal life (v. 49). Finally, Jesus specifically says that this bread is, in fact, His very flesh (Jn 6: 51).

The Jews hear this and remark, "How can this man give us His flesh to eat?" It is clear that they understand Jesus to mean they should literally eat His flesh. Jesus does not correct their understanding; rather, He continues to preach the same message and notes that His flesh is food indeed and His blood is true drink.

Reading this passage in the Greek makes this point even more apparent. In verses 50-58 of chapter 6, John uses the word "eat" eight times. However, John employs two different Greek words that are both translated as "eat" in English:

Phago is used in verses 50–53. It means “to eat” or “to consume” and, in the Greek, is used symbolically.

Trogo is used four times in verses 54–57, when Jesus answers the Pharisees’ objection and clarifies exactly what He means. *Trogo* is more graphic—it means “to chew” or “to gnaw.” *Trogo* cannot be used symbolically in the Greek language; therefore, in this context, we must take it to mean *literally eating* the flesh of Jesus. This graphic word is used to emphasize this very fact.

The Eucharist Lived Out

The Church’s belief in the Eucharist is easy to understand but, at times, hard to accept. Even Our Lord’s followers in the Gospel confess that “this is a hard saying” (Jn 6:60). After listening to this teaching, many of His disciples decide to no longer follow Him (v. 60, 66).

And yet, what a beautiful teaching! Jesus wants to give His whole self—body, blood, soul, and divinity—to us in the Eucharist so that we can be in communion with Him and the whole Church. Throughout this passage, Jesus conveys that He is sent by the Father to give eternal life to those who believe in Him (Jn 6:37–40, 44–47). The sacraments reveal the love of the Father and allow us to receive grace and eternal life. It is easy to get caught up in the ritual and motions of the sacraments and not to see it as a gift of God’s love in a real and tangible way.

Find a tangible way to receive the sacraments more profoundly as a group: for instance, take time to attend daily Mass, go to adoration once a week, learn how to prepare yourself for the Eucharist before mass, or go to confession.

Application to Our Lives

God's grace is always available to us. By opening our hearts to His gifts, we can be filled with grace more abundantly.

DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

John 6:35–59

STEP 1: OPENER

Have you ever had the feeling that God was far off and distant from you? What did you do to help the situation?

STEP 2: BACKDROP

This chapter will examine the sacraments. It is important for us to see that the sacraments come from Scripture itself. If we do not understand what the sacraments really are, they become dead rituals with no meaning for our lives today. The sacraments and their supernatural character can be difficult to accept at times. The crowd in the passage today will help us appreciate this struggle.

STEP 3: PASSAGE

Read John 6:35–59.

STEP 4: EXPLORATION: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Note that answers appear in italics.

1. Use the section titled “The Crowd in Context” in “What Do I Need to Know about This Passage?” to give your group a little of the background for the passage.

2. What is strange about the crowd’s request for a sign in light of what Jesus did for them previously?

Answer: Jesus just performed a sign where He multiplied loaves and fish for this very crowd.

3. Why do you think that humans often look for signs?

Answer: Humans want proof for their faith.

4. How are signs or miracles helpful for our faith? How can they be harmful?

Answer: Signs and miracles can be helpful because they remind us of the power of God. At the same time, they can also cause us to constantly seek proof for the faith. Faith is not blind, but there is always a sense of trust or belief beyond what we can see (Heb 11:1).

5. How would you sum up Jesus’ exchange with the Jews in verses 35–42?

Answer: Refer to the first two paragraphs of the “Bread of Life” section in the “What Do I Need to Know about This Passage?”

6. Why exactly do the Jews not believe Jesus' message about His coming down from heaven?

Answer: The Jews don't believe Jesus is the bread of life that came down from heaven because they know His parents.

7. What do you think is the relationship between the doubt of the Jews and the doubts that we can have about the sacraments?

Answer: Refer to the last paragraph of the "Bread of Life" section from "What Do I Need to Know about This Passage?"

8. Why do you think God uses natural objects like bread, wine, and oil for the sacraments? How can these natural means of giving us the supernatural be helpful to us?

Allow the group to discuss.

9. How would you sum up what the Jews think Jesus is saying and how Jesus responds in John 6:52–58?

Answer: The Jews think Jesus is speaking literally. Jesus responds by telling the crowd that they must eat His flesh and drink His blood. Use "What Do I Need to Know about This Passage?" to teach your group about the significance of the Greek in this passage.

10. Read John 6:60–69. What is the reaction of Jesus' disciples?

Answer: Jesus' disciples note that the teaching is hard to accept, and many of them cease to follow Him. Peter speaks for the disciples who stay, saying they have faith in Jesus because He has the words of everlasting life.

11. If Jesus' disciples simply misunderstood Him, do you think Jesus would let them leave like this?

Answer: If His disciples simply misunderstood Him, you would expect Jesus to correct them and not let them go.

12. Examine the passage closely. Point out all of the connections between Jesus and the Father.

Answer: See the second paragraph of "The Eucharist Lived Out" section in "What Do I Need to Know about This Passage?"

13. What is the relationship between Jesus' connection to the Father and His teaching on the Eucharist?

Answer: Jesus is revealing the Father through His life. The Eucharist and the sacraments are an image of Jesus and, with it, an image of the Father. The Eucharist is a tangible sign of God's love and the eternal life God provides for us.

14. Read CCC 1324. What does it mean for the Eucharist to be the "source and summit of the Christian life"?

Allow the group to discuss.

15. How can we make the Eucharist the source and summit of our lives?

Answer: Allow the group to discuss. Refer to "What Do I Need to Know about This Passage?"

NOTES



Chapter 4

Being Open to the Holy Spirit

John 15:26-16:15

UNDERSTANDING

Pages 48 - 53

DISCUSSION

Pages 54 - 58

UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

Read John 15:26–16:15

The Big Picture

Christians receive the Holy Spirit at baptism but many fail to take advantage of this great gift.

In West Texas, there is a famous oil field known as the Yates Pool. During the Depression, this field was a sheep ranch owned by a man named Yates. Because Mr. Yates was not able to make enough money on his ranching operation to pay the principal and interest on the mortgage, he was in danger of losing his ranch. With little money for clothes or food, his family, like many others, had to live on government subsidy.

Day after day, as he grazed his sheep, he wondered how he would be able to pay his bills. Then a seismograph crew from an oil company came into the area and told Mr. Yates that there might be oil on his land. They asked for permission to drill a wildcat well, and he signed a lease contract.

At 1,115 feet they struck a huge oil reserve. The first well came in at 80,000 barrels a day. Many of the later wells were more than twice as large. Thirty years after the first well was drilled, all the wells still had the potential of pumping 125,000 barrels of oil a day. And Mr. Yates owned it all! The day he had purchased the property, he received the oil and mineral rights, yet he was living on government assistance. A multi-millionaire living in poverty! What was the problem? He did not know the oil was there. He owned it, but he did not know it! ¹

One of the most famous oil fields in West Texas is known as Yates Field. Originally a ranch, the owner of the land, Ira Yates, was in danger of losing it all during the Depression. Struggling to pay his bills and his mortgage out of the meager profit from his ranching business, he acted on a desperate hunch and invited an oil company to drill an exploratory well on his land to look for oil.

Little did Yates know that he was sitting on one of the largest oil reserves in the state: That test well became a gusher, and soon wells drilled all over Yates's property were producing tens of thousands of barrels of oil a day. Yates—a man who had been living in poverty on government handouts—became a multi-millionaire almost overnight. All that time, he owned the oil under his land; he simply did not know it.

When Jesus Christ ascended into heaven, He gave us the Holy Spirit as our guide, and yet many Christians fail to take advantage of their easy access to this wonderful Counselor. In a passage from John's Gospel, Jesus explains why He gave us the Holy Spirit and how the Holy Spirit can work in our lives today.

Application to Jesus

Jesus announces that it is better for the Holy Spirit to be with us than Jesus Himself.

Who Is the Holy Spirit? (John 15:26)

Along with Jesus Christ and God the Father, the Holy Spirit is one of the three persons that make up the Trinity (Mt 28:19). Here, in John's Gospel, Jesus calls the Holy Spirit the Counselor and the Spirit of Truth. Jesus will elaborate on these titles later in the passage.

Why Does the Holy Spirit Come? (John 15:27–16:7)

The Spirit comes precisely because Jesus is leaving His disciples. While Jesus is gone, the Holy Spirit will bear witness to Jesus (Jn 15:26). Jesus also foretells the persecution that the disciples will endure; the Holy Spirit is there to help them not fall away (16:1). Surprisingly, Jesus tells His disciples that it is actually a good thing that He is leaving. Most of us would choose to have Jesus Himself with us rather than the Holy Spirit, and yet Jesus tells us the direct opposite (16:7)! The Holy Spirit must be a powerful weapon.

What Does the Holy Spirit Do? (John 16:8–15)

Jesus then details what the Holy Spirit will do when He comes. First, He will convict the world of sin, of righteousness, and of judgment (Jn 16:8). Jesus is departing because of the lack of faith of the people who

will eventually crucify Him. Afterward, the Holy Spirit will convict these unbelievers of their lack of faith.

Jesus also knows that His disciples will be much more open to His message after His death and resurrection. After Jesus is gone, the Holy Spirit will guide the disciples to all truth with the same authority as Jesus (16:12–13). He will tell them of things to come and glorify Jesus (16:14–15).

What Else Does the Holy Spirit Do?

Scripture mentions numerous details about the Holy Spirit that help us to understand His role more clearly. The Holy Spirit:

- acts as a teacher (Jn 14:26);
- encourages us (Acts 9:31);
- intercedes for us (Rom 8:26);
- sanctifies us (Rom 15:16);
- leads us (Rom 8:14);
- gives us different gifts (1 Cor 12:4–11);
- lives inside of us (Rom 8:11);
- helps us avoid sin (Gal 5:16);
- can be resisted (Acts 7:51);
- aids us in prayer (Rom 8:26–27); and
- can be invited further into our lives (Acts 2:38).

The Holy Spirit in Our Lives

While the Holy Spirit comes to us most powerfully in the sacraments

of baptism and confirmation, we still need to continually open our lives up to this powerful Person of the Trinity. In his Second Letter to Timothy, Paul says this about the Holy Spirit: “Hence I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; for God did not give us a spirit of timidity but a spirit of power and love and self-control.” How can we “rekindle”—or, as other translations say, “fan into flame”—the Holy Spirit in our lives?

During his last homily of World Youth Day 2010, Pope Benedict XVI told the participants how to receive the Holy Spirit in their lives:

Yet this power, the grace of the Spirit, is not something we can merit or achieve, but only receive as pure gift. God’s love can only unleash its power when it is allowed to change us from within. We have to let it break through the hard crust of our indifference, our spiritual weariness, our blind conformity to the spirit of this age. Only then can we let it ignite our imagination and shape our deepest desires. That is why prayer is so important: daily prayer, private prayer in the quiet of our hearts and before the Blessed Sacrament, and liturgical prayer in the heart of the Church. Prayer is pure receptivity to God’s grace, love in action, communion with the Spirit who dwells within us, leading us, through Jesus, in the Church, to our heavenly Father.

May we put these words into practice and increase the role of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

Application to Our Lives

Through prayer and the liturgy of the Church, we can rekindle the gift of the Holy Spirit in a profound way.

DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

John 15:26–16:15

STEP 1: OPENER

Read the story and commentary about the Yates oil field in West Texas.

STEP 2: BACKDROP

The words found in our passage today come from the time just before Jesus is crucified. Having spent three years with His disciples, Jesus knows that His absence will be quite a change for his followers. In response, Jesus tells them about the Holy Spirit who will come after He is gone.

STEP 3: PASSAGE

Read John 15:26–16:15.

STEP 4: EXPLORATION: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Note that answers appear in italics.

1. After reading this passage, what stands out to you about the Holy Spirit?

Answer: Allow the group to discuss. This should give you a feel for the thoughts of your group.

2. Verse 26 mentions “bearing witness to Jesus.” What do you think this means?

Allow the group to discuss.

3. What does Jesus say will happen to His disciples when they bear witness to Him after He is gone?

Answer: Persecution is the result. In this case, Jesus says death is a possibility.

4. How do you deal with persecution of your faith?

Allow the group to discuss.

5. How can the Holy Spirit help you?

Allow the group to discuss.

6. Think about the situation of the disciples. Why would it be hard for Jesus to leave them?

Answer: The disciples have been following Jesus for three years and have given up everything for Him. They have sought to conform their whole lives to Him.

7. How does Jesus' departure help His disciples?

Answer: After seeing the power of Jesus' resurrection, the disciples will be much more open to learning Jesus' message and spreading it to others.

8. Is it hard for you to trust that it is better for Jesus to go than to be present with us now? Why is this the case?

Allow the group to discuss.

9. What will the Holy Spirit do when He comes?

Answer: Jesus is departing because of the lack of faith of the people who will eventually crucify Him. When He comes, the Holy Spirit will first convict the world of sin, of righteousness, and of judgment (Jn 16:8). Afterward, the Holy Spirit will convict these unbelievers of their lack of faith.

10. Read the account of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit comes to the disciples (Acts 2:1-12, 36-42). How does the Holy Spirit come to Jesus' disciples? How does He come to those who convert?

Answer: The Holy Spirit comes to the disciples with tongues of fire. He comes to those who convert through baptism.

11. Pick out three to five passages from the list of Scripture passages on the Holy Spirit provided in "What Do I Need to Know about This Passage?" Have individuals read these passages to the group to learn more about the Holy Spirit. Afterward, feel free to share the whole list with your group.

12. Think about the story of the Yates oil field in West Texas. When Yates was a poor man, what kept him from the wealth he already possessed?

Answer: Yates didn't know the riches he already possessed.

13. How does this relate to the Holy Spirit?

Answer: We possess the Holy Spirit, but if we don't know about this gift, we can't take advantage of it.

14. Read 2 Timothy 1:6. In his letter to Timothy, Paul reminds us to "rekindle" or, in other translations, to "fan into flame" the Holy Spirit in our lives. In a homily at World Youth Day, Pope Benedict XVI gives us some tips on how to rekindle the gift of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Read the quote from "What Do I Need to Know about This Passage?"

15. Take some time as a group to pray for the Holy Spirit to come. You can do this in a number of ways: You can pray individually in silence, as a group, or over one another as you ask for specific intentions and ways that the Holy Spirit can increase in the lives of your group.

NOTES



Chapter 5

Building Our Character and Community

Matthew 5:1-16

UNDERSTANDING

Pages 60 - 65

DISCUSSION

Pages 66 - 72

UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

Read Matthew 5:1–16

The Big Picture

The Beatitudes offer a radical picture of what our lives should look like when we follow Jesus.

Chances are, several members of your group are trying to figure out how their lives should be different in light of their relationship with Jesus Christ. This chapter focuses specifically on how to form our characters around the person of Jesus—and how the community around us can help.

Jesus’ message in the Beatitudes (Mt 5:1–12) seems to turn the thinking of the world upside down. The persecuted should rejoice. The meek will inherit the earth. How can this be? The Beatitudes are a reminder that, if we are truly dedicated to Christ, our lives should look distinctly different from what the world expects.

The Life and Times of a First-Century Jew (Matthew 5:1–2)

During the time of Jesus, the Jewish people were under Roman occupation. The Romans levied incredibly high taxes on the Jewish people, most of whom were impoverished already. The Jews faced this national crisis with the hope that, one day, their kingdom would be restored. Some Jews had already tried to restore this kingdom through revolutionary violence. As Jesus' ministry flourishes, people look to Him to see what kind of revolution He would lead. In response, Jesus gives His famous Sermon on the Mount, which includes the Beatitudes examined in this chapter. (If you want an idea of what a violent Jewish revolution looks like, see 1 Mc 3:15–26. Chapters 1–3 in particular offer more background).

Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3–12)

The word “beatitude” means “blessing.” These blessings not only give us an example to follow; they would also have been good news to the downtrodden Jews held captive under Roman occupation.

Application to Jesus

Jesus calls us to imitate Him in the Beatitudes.

Humility

The Beatitudes build on one another, beginning with “poor in spirit,” or humility. Many theologians throughout the history of the Church

have pointed to humility as the starting point in our relationship with God. Humility leads us to see that we cannot do everything on our own; we need God, His salvation and grace, to truly live.

Meekness

The blessing of meekness stands out because it is often seen as weakness. True meekness is not weakness but control over anger, especially during trials. In fact, Jesus Himself says, “Lo, I am meek and humble of heart” (Mt 11:29). By examining the Beatitudes, we realize that they are not just an ethical treatise on how we should behave but a reflection of Jesus’ own character. For instance, Jesus shows great meekness during His suffering and death. He could have stopped His torture at any moment and given His persecutors what they deserved—and yet His meekness allows Him to provide salvation for the world (see 1 Pt 2:23).

Meekness can help us defend the faith (1 Pt 3:15–16), control our speech (Jas 1:19–20), and corral our anger (Eph 4:26–32).

Mercy

Being merciful is essential in our outreach to others. An unfortunate part of our coming to Jesus Christ is that we can often become prideful and judgmental of others. Rather, we should be merciful as our Father is merciful (Lk 6:36).

Purity of Heart

Even while doing “religious things,” we can end up doing them doing them out of pride (see Mt 6:2–6). “Man sees the appearance, the Lord sees the heart” (1 Sm 16:7). Purifying our intentions helps us to pursue a relationship with Jesus Christ for all the right reasons.

Community of Virtue (Matthew 5:13–16)

Jesus uses the example of salt and light to show how members of a community can influence others through their example. Salt is instantly recognizable as something used to flavor food. Jesus uses it as an analogy for influencing, or “seasoning,” others with our character.

Jesus also uses the analogy of light. Originally, God made His covenant with Israel so that the people of Israel could follow God’s law and be a light to the nations around them (Is 42:6). Jesus is reminding the Jews of this concept, and that their own faith and character are not just for themselves; they are an example that naturally invites others to want to know more about the God they follow (Is 49:6).

Practicing the Beatitudes and imitating the character of Jesus Christ do not happen overnight. Slowly, through the practice of virtue, we can develop a Christ-centered character. Virtues can be greatly strengthened when we have others around us who push to become better people.

What can you do to hold each other accountable to the people you would like to become? If your group is more than four people, it can be a good idea to have group members break into groups of two or three and hold each other accountable on a weekly basis.

Virtue helps our communities shine the light of Christ for all to see.

Application to Our Lives

Members of a community living the Beatitudes push one another to be the best version of themselves.

NOTES

DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

Matthew 5:1–16

STEP 1: OPENER

Have you ever gone to a store and become irritated or angry with the behavior of the staff? How did this affect your view of the store and whether you went back there again?

STEP 2: BACKDROP

During the time of Jesus, the Jewish people were under Roman occupation. The Romans levied incredibly high taxes on the Jewish people, most of whom were impoverished already. The Jews faced this national crisis with the hope that, one day, their kingdom would be restored. Some Jews had already tried to restore this kingdom through revolutionary violence. As Jesus' ministry flourishes, people look to Him to see what kind of revolution He would lead. In response, Jesus gives His famous Sermon of the Mount, which includes the Beatitudes examined in this chapter.

STEP 3: PASSAGE

Read Matthew 5:1–16.

STEP 4: EXPLORATION: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Note that answers appear in italics.

1. Taking the historical context into account, what do you see that would be shocking about Jesus' message to the Jews?

Answer: The Jews were expecting Jesus to lead a violent revolution, like other revolutionaries in the past.

2. What is striking about Jesus' message to us today?

Answer: Jesus' message seems counterintuitive—the opposite of the world as we know it.

3. What is it about Jesus' revolution that could make it more effective than others?

Answer: People know that Jesus acts selflessly, seeking something beyond the confines of the world's categories. People can trust this revolution more than others.

4. Give some brief notes from the first paragraph of the "Beatitudes" section from "What Do I Need to Know about This Passage?" The Beatitudes begin with humility, or being poor in spirit. Why do you think humility is first?

Answer: Many theologians throughout the history of the Church have pointed to humility as the starting point in our relationship with God. Humility leads us to see that we cannot do everything on our own; we need God, His salvation and grace, to truly live.

5. What does meekness mean?

Answer: True meekness is not weakness but control over anger, especially during trials.

6. Read Matthew 11:29. How does Jesus demonstrate meekness during His life?

Answer: Jesus demonstrates meekness several times, most especially during His trial and crucifixion.

7. How can we practice meekness?

Answer: Allow the group to discuss. Some examples from Scripture: when we defend the faith (1 Pt 3:15–16), in our speech (Jas 1:19–20), and in our anger (Eph 4:26–32).

8. The Beatitudes also call us to be merciful and pure of heart. Read Luke 18:9–14. What is the main difference between the Pharisee and the tax collector?

Answer: The difference between the Pharisee and the tax collector lies in their purity of heart and in their understanding of mercy. The Pharisee intends to show others how “holy” he is and, in doing so, inadvertently reveals how he looks down on others. He fails to grasp God’s mercy. The tax collector prays from the heart and directly seeks God’s mercy.

9. When we grow in our faith, we often act more like the Pharisee than the tax collector. Why do you think this is the case?

Allow the group to discuss.

10. What can we do not to fall into this trap?

Answer: As we improve our lives in imitation of Christ, we need to continually remember that we are able to do this because of God's mercy, not our own strength.

11. Give some background information on salt in verse 13 from "What Do I Need to Know about This Passage?" Why do you think Jesus uses this example?

Answer: Jesus uses salt as an analogy for influencing, or "seasoning," others with our character.

12. Read Isaiah 42:6. What was God's original plan for His people?

Answer: God's original plan was that the example of His people would be a light to the nations.

13. How is Jesus restoring this plan?

Answer: Jesus is hoping that the people in His kingdom can fulfill this plan.

14. Think of the example in the opener about the employees working in a store. As members of a community, why should we be concerned about our character?

Answer: People normally come to know Jesus Christ through a community. Our lives communicate to others who Jesus is.

15. How do we improve our characters and imitation of Jesus Christ?

Answer: We improve our character and imitation of Christ by developing virtue. See “What Do I Need to Know about This Passage?” and the accompanying article for more.

16. How do we help each other improve?

Answer: See “What Do I Need to Know about This Passage?” on accountability.

NOTES

NOTES



Chapter 6

Practicing Stewardship

Matthew 25:14–46

UNDERSTANDING

Pages 74 - 77

DISCUSSION

Pages 78 - 84

UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

Read Matthew 25:14–46

The Big Picture

Jesus gives us an eternal perspective by foretelling what God's judgment will look like.

This passage includes two powerful parables, where Jesus teaches His disciples about the end of the world and the judgment that will come. In doing so, Jesus wants us to see the eternal effect of our actions.

The Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:14–30)

This parable focuses on stewardship, or what we do with the gifts God gives us. Three men are each given talents by their master. A talent is a coin that was worth 6,000 denarii—the equivalent of 20 years' wages for a laborer, or about \$2 million today. Even the man who is given one talent is entrusted with a huge sum of money. This parable is the origin of our modern understanding of the word "talents," which applies to our God-given abilities. More than money, God's talents include everything that He gives us.

Each of the servants is given a different amount of talents. This parable reflects the human experience generally, where we each receive different gifts and talents. This is frustrating to some, just as the servant who received one talent may have been angered about receiving so little. The Catechism reminds us, “These difference belong to God’s plan, who wills that each receive what he needs from others, and that those endowed with particular ‘talents’ share the benefits with those who need them” (CCC 1937). Even the supernatural gifts that God bestows on us are different from one another (1 Cor 12:4–11).

Two of the servants invest their talents and double their return to the master. The servant given the smallest amount buries his talent in the ground. This servant is judged by God to be lazy and wicked (Mt 25:26). Fear prevents him from multiplying the talents he is given (v. 25). Notice that the servant gives back to God what God gave him, and yet God is still angry with Him. God is not satisfied with merely giving Him what He has given us; He wants us to take what we have been given and multiply His efforts and gifts. The talent of the lazy servant is taken from him and given to the one with ten talents.

Stewardship

The central theme of this parable is stewardship: giving back to God through our time, talents, and treasure.

With regard to money, the Old Testament had a law for tithing—giving 10 percent of your wages. In the Church today, there is no specific mandate governing the exact amount that we give. St. Paul notes in the New Testament, “Arrange in advance for this gift you have promised.... Each one must do as he has made up his mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Cor 9:7, 9).

While no specific tithe is required, we exist in a new covenant that is greater than the old. It makes sense that we should give more than what was required in the old covenant. Therefore, while 10 percent is not required, it does provide a great baseline for what to give to the Church.

God asks us to use our talents and to give our time to others. As 1 Peter 4:10 notes, “As each has received a gift, employ it for one another.” Just like the lazy servant, we must not hide the talents that God has given us, but instead selflessly use them for the service of others. The next parable gives us some concrete examples of ways to use our time and talents.

Application to Jesus

When we consider the eternal perspective, only Jesus’ opinion of us truly matters. We are living for this audience of one.

The Judgment of the Nations (Matthew 25:31–46)

Matthew 25:31–46 gives us an even more sobering parable than the first. To help us truly understand what it means to help others, Jesus places Himself in the place of those in need (v. 40). In fact, Jesus’ own life was filled with His service to the poor and afflicted (see Mt 4:23–24, 8:1–17, 11:4–6). By serving the disadvantaged, we serve Christ Himself.

The Church calls these acts of service the Corporal Works of Mercy. They include:

- feeding the hungry;

- giving drink to the thirsty;
- clothing the naked;
- offering hospitality to the homeless;
- visiting the imprisoned;
- caring for the sick, and
- burying the dead.

Notice the gravity of our response to these actions. In the parable, this is the king's criteria for our eternal salvation. During the last judgment, the Catechism notes, "In presence of Christ, who is Truth itself, the truth of each man's relationship with God will be laid bare. The Last Judgment will reveal even to its furthest consequences the good each person has done or failed to do during his earthly life" (CCC 1039). This perspective helps us to reflect concretely on whether our lives have been lived in service for or against the Lord. Our faith isn't supposed to be lived out in a one-hour Bible study and one hour at Mass each week. As a Bible study, how can your group live out practically the Corporal Works of Mercy? Plan out a service project to fulfill one of these works in the upcoming weeks. The creativity of your group just might surprise you.

Application to Our Lives

How can we live out the concrete examples Jesus gives us?

DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

Matthew 25:14–46

STEP 1: OPENER

Have you ever looked at an old photo or yourself and remembered something odd you used to do, or a strange perspective you used to have? How has the course of time helped you realize your mistakes?

STEP 2: BACKDROP

This passage includes two powerful parables from Jesus. In both parables, Jesus is teaching His disciples about the end of the world and the judgment that will come. In doing so, Jesus wants us to see the eternal perspective of our actions.

STEP 3: PASSAGE

Read Matthew 25:14–46. You may want to read the parables and their questions one at a time.

STEP 4: EXPLORATION: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Note that answers appear in italics.

Matthew 25:14–30

1. Why do you think the master gives the men different amounts of talents?

Answer: Allow the group to discuss. Read CCC 1937.

2. Do you think this affected the behavior of the servant with the least amount of talents?

Answer: The servant with the least amount of talents may have been discouraged by being given so little.

3. A talent is worth 6,000 denarii, or about \$2 million today. Do you think the servant with one talent should have let this amount affect him?

Answer: Despite not having what the others had, the servant still should have appreciated the trust the master had in him.

4. How does this parable apply to the talents God gives us?

Answer: At times, we can complain about the gifts God has or has not given us and be jealous of others' gifts.

5. How can jealousy keep us from using the talents God has given us?

Answer: We can focus too much on what we do not have, which distracts us from seeing the wealth of talents God has given us.

6. What keeps the lazy servant from multiplying his talents?

Answer: The lazy man fears his master.

7. What causes us to be fearful about using our talents?

Answer: Sometimes we fear what others will think. It is easier not to try, and thus not fail, than to try and open ourselves up to the possibility of failure. Using our talents to their fullest capacity also takes an immense amount of work. This is why God calls the servant lazy.

8. God receives back what He gave the servant. Why is He still upset?

Answer: God expects us to multiply the talents and gifts that He gives us, not just to hold on to them.

9. What are some ways that we can give back to God?

Answer: Allow the group to discuss. Time, talent, and treasure are three categories where we focus most of our efforts.

10. Read Luke 16:10–13. What does God expect from us with regard to money?

Answer: God expects our hearts turned towards Him and not toward wealth or possessions. We should use our gifts for the service of others.

Matthew 25:31–46

11. What is the setting for Jesus' parable in Matthew 25:31–46?

Answer: The setting is the Last Judgment, where God judges all the people of the world.

12. Why are some granted entrance into God's kingdom?

Answer: Some are granted entrance into God's kingdom because they took care of the disadvantaged. They exercise what the Church calls the Corporal Works of Mercy.

13. Why do the others go into the eternal fire?

Answer: The others go into the eternal fire because they fail to take care of the disadvantaged.

14. What is significant about Jesus' relationship to the disadvantaged?

Answer: Jesus puts Himself in the place of those who are disadvantaged. He makes them who He is.

15. How are we able to see Jesus in the disadvantaged?

Answer: One way to see Jesus in the disadvantaged is to see the value of each and every person, to view them as sons and daughters of God.

16. Read CCC 1039. Think about how you are living your life right now. How can this eternal perspective change the way you think?

Answer: The eternal perspective can help us stop focusing on the here and the now. It allows us to see past all of the trivial things in our daily lives and to try to live for what really matters.

17. As a group, what are some ways you can practice some Corporal Works of Mercy together?

Allow the group to discuss.

NOTES



Chapter 7

Sharing the Good News with Others

John 4:4-46

UNDERSTANDING

Pages 86 - 91

DISCUSSION

Pages 92 - 99



UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

Read John 4:4-46

The Big Picture

Jesus gives us a model for evangelization in His conversation with the woman at the well.

In this chapter, we're going to look at a passage in John's Gospel from the perspective of evangelization. Some of your students may have heard of evangelization, but practically, why and how should we evangelize? This passage teaches us about the human condition, the answer Jesus has to our deepest questions, and our responsibility to share Him with others.

Taking the Initiative (John 4:4-9)

The passage begins with Jesus having to "pass through Samaria" on His way to Galilee (Jn 4:4). Jesus' journey to this place is noteworthy: Because of their history with one another, Jews and Samaritans did not get along and avoided each other at all costs (v. 9). Originally, there were twelve tribes of Israel. The ten northern tribes, later known

as the Samaritans, rebelled and broke away from the two southern tribes of Judah and Benjamin, later known as the Jews. Eventually, the Assyrian empire conquered the ten northern tribes and forced them to intermarry with five other nations (2 Kgs 17:24). This brought about a separation from the southern tribes—both culturally and religiously, as the foreign nations introduced their foreign gods. Despite this history, Jesus dares to travel into the Samaritans' country to have a conversation with a particular woman. We too are called to be daring in sharing the gospel, no matter the situation.

The cultural background of the woman makes Jesus' actions even bolder. First, in Jesus' culture, men do not strike up conversations with unknown women. Then, the text tells us that the woman is getting water at the sixth hour, or noon. In Palestine, this would have been one of the hottest times of the day. Almost everyone in the city would do this chore early to avoid the mid-day heat. Instead of avoiding the heat, the woman chooses to avoid everyone else in the city. We'll see why in a minute, but this is just another reason for Jesus to stay away from this woman. It is important to see what Jesus is willing to risk to share the gospel with this woman.

Meeting People Where They Are (John 4:10-15)

Jesus begins the conversation by relating to something the woman can understand: water. Jesus takes this simple concept and uses it to show man's thirst for something more. It catches the woman's attention, and she asks to learn more (Jn 4: 15). Jesus' method calls us to reflect on how we share God's love. Are we willing to make our message relevant and accessible to our listeners? How do we change our language and approach when speaking to those who are not living out the Faith?

Application to Jesus

Many people seek to fill legitimate needs in illegitimate ways. We need to be able to show them the love that truly satisfies.

A True Husband (John 4:16–26)

Jesus then seems to do something very odd: He asks the woman to go get her husband (Jn 4:16). After she responds, Jesus reveals her past history with five different husbands. This detail is symbolic of the history of the Samaritans, who intermarried with the five foreign nations. These nations introduced their own gods, the main one being Baal, which in Hebrew means “husband.” These ten tribes intermarried with the five nations, accepting their gods and spurning their relationship with their *true* husband, God.

Throughout the Old Testament, the Israelites’ worship of foreign gods is compared to adultery. Maybe the clearest example is the prophet Hosea: When Hosea prophesizes to the ten northern tribes, God asks him to marry a prostitute who continues her unfaithfulness after their marriage. He does this to symbolize the actions of the ten northern tribes (Hos 2:14–23).

God’s point is this: He is the only one that can fill our need for love, yet we continue to chase other things to fill this void. Jesus embodies this message: He comes as the true bridegroom to this Samaritan woman and to the world, as He provides living water that truly satisfies. Our desire to reach others would soar if we owned this reality: Jesus is the answer to the longing of everyone’s heart.

Conversion (John 4:27–30)

Throughout the conversation, the woman's view of Jesus progresses. First, she calls him "sir" (Jn 4:11), then "prophet" (v. 19), then "Messiah" (v. 29). In her excitement, she leaves her jar and runs into the city to tell others about Jesus. Some have pointed out that the jar symbolizes her formal life that did not satisfy her. She leaves it behind now that she has a higher purpose. Have we left our own past behind, in light of the gospel? Do we call others to do the same?

Testimony and Conversion (John 4:31–42)

St. John Chrysostom noted, "The Apostles, when they were called, left their nets; this woman leaves her water jar and proclaims the gospel, calling not just one person but influencing the whole city." Through the woman's testimony, many Samaritans come to believe in Jesus.

Just think about who this woman was. This same woman was shunned by her community, and yet she has the courage to tell them this good news. The change in her life is so significant that those who ostracized her are willing to listen to her and believe what she has to say. How much more will our friends and family be willing to hear how the Lord has changed our own lives! It is important to know how the Lord has changed our lives and to be able to express this to others. Testimonies are powerful!

All can learn something from the different stages of the woman's life. Have they had a conversion? Have they left their old lives behind? Are they willing to tell others about it? Find ways the members of your group can improve. Help them follow the courageous example of the woman at the well.

Application to Our Lives

Where do we find ourselves in the story? Jesus and the woman at the well both have many things to teach us about how to share the good news of Jesus Christ with others.

NOTES

DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

John 4:4-46

STEP 1: OPENER

Name some people you admire for the way they share their faith. What characteristics allow them to be so effective?

STEP 2: BACKDROP

In this passage, Jesus travels to Samaria. Jesus' journey to this place is noteworthy because of the history between the Jews and the Samaritans. Originally, there were twelve tribes of Israel: The ten northern tribes, later known as the Samaritans, rebelled and broke away from the two southern tribes of Judah and Benjamin, later known as the Jews. Eventually, the Assyrian empire conquered the ten northern tribes, forcing them to intermarry with five other nations (2 Kgs 17:24). This brought about a cultural and religious separation from the southern tribes, as the Samaritans incorporated the worship of foreign gods. Thus, the Jews and the Samaritans did not get along and avoided each other at all costs (Jn 4:9).

STEP 3: PASSAGE

Read John 4:4-42.

STEP 4: EXPLORATION: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Note that answers appear in italics.

1. What do Jesus' travels to Samaria say about His evangelization, given the history of the relationship between the Jews and the Samaritans?

Answer: Jesus is willing to take risks to reach others with His message.

2. How should this story affect how we share Jesus with others?

Answer: We cannot stay in our comfort zones. At times, we will have to be bold and courageous in sharing the Faith.

3. Use the "What Do I Need to Know about This Passage?" section to teach your study more background information about the Samaritan woman.

4. How does Jesus start the conversation with the Samaritan woman?

Answer: Jesus asks for a drink of water.

5. Why do you think Jesus starts the conversation this way?

Answer: Jesus wants to relate to the life of the woman.

6. How does Jesus use this natural example of water and take it to a higher level?

Answer: Jesus uses water to show the emptiness that each one of us has inside. This emptiness cannot be satisfied by anything natural here on earth but by Jesus alone.

7. What does John 4:16–18 say about the woman’s past marriage history?

Answer: The woman has had five husbands.

8. What is symbolic about the woman’s response, given the history of Samaria’s intermarriage with other tribes?

Answer: See the “True History” section of “What Do I Need to Know about This Passage?”

9. The Old Testament often uses adultery as a symbol for Israel’s worship of foreign gods. Perhaps the most direct example is found in Hosea, when God asks the prophet Hosea to marry a prostitute (Hos 3:1). Read Hosea 2:14–23. How does this human example give us a glimpse of God’s love for His people?

Answer: The courage and love it would take to overcome the repeated adultery of a loved one is astonishing. God continues to do this every day.

10. How does Jesus fulfill this prophecy?

Answer: Jesus is the true bridegroom who comes to make a new covenant with us and rescue us from our sin that led us astray.

11. What is the woman’s reaction to Jesus’ message?

Answer: The woman leaves her water jar and goes into the city to tell everyone about Jesus.

12. Read the quote from St. John Chrysostom from the “Testimony and Conversion” section of “What Do I Need to Know about This Passage?” What do you think the relationship is between our own conversion and how we share Jesus with others?

Answer: The more our hearts turn toward God and accept His mercy, the more we should want to share this great gift with others.

13. Put yourself in the shoes of the woman. What is so remarkable about her willingness to share the gospel with others? What is so remarkable about their response?

Answer: She was ostracized by so many people in the city, and yet she is still willing to share the Good News. Not only is she willing to share, but the people in the city overcome their rejection of her and accept what she has to say (Jn 4:39).

14. See the last paragraph of the “Testimony and Conversion” section in “What Do I Need to Know about This Passage?” How can the members of your group improve and follow the courageous example of the woman at the well?

Allow the group to discuss.

Article 6 – The Corporal Works of Mercy

In Matthew 25, Jesus speaks very clearly about the judgment of the world in the last days: “Then the King will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me’” (Mt 25:34–36). When the righteous ask when they did these things for our Lord, He responds, “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of my brethren, you did it to me” (Mt 25:40).

While striking, this passage is part of a long tradition of charitable works to the less fortunate that stretches through the Old and New Testaments (for more, see Mt 25:31–46, Is 58:6–7; Heb 13:3, 1 Jn 3:17, Tob 4:5–11, Jas 2:15–16).

Through this tradition, the Church has developed what is commonly known as the Corporal Works of Mercy: feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, offering hospitality to the homeless, visiting the imprisoned, caring for the sick, and burying the dead.

While Jesus’ command and the list above are fairly straightforward, here is a list of 35 practical ways to act out the Corporal Works of Mercy.

Feed the Hungry.

- Make sandwiches and pass them out to the homeless.
- Keep granola bars in your car to pass out to people in need at stoplights.
- Pick up leftovers at a local grocery store, bakery, or restaurant and deliver them to a food bank or homeless shelter.

- Take a friend out to lunch, your treat.
- Keep a list of local food banks and soup kitchens on hand to pass out to those you encounter around your town who could use such services.
- Volunteer at a food bank.
- Serve at a soup kitchen.
- Prepare and take a meal to someone in your community who is seriously ill or welcoming home a newborn.
- Help out at a Knights of Columbus pancake breakfast.
- Give to or host a food drive.

Give Drink to the Thirsty.

- Pass out water bottles to the homeless.
- Have a “donations only” lemonade stand and use the proceeds to help a worthy cause.
- Pay for the coffee of the person behind you at a coffee shop.
- Take a cold glass of water to a neighbor doing yard work.
- Donate baby formula to a local pregnancy help center.
- Work a drink station at a local charity race.

Clothe the Naked.

- Go through your closet and give away what you don't need.
- Host a clothing drive and donate the items.
- Knit, crochet, or sew baby blankets for your local pregnancy help center.
- Knit, crochet, or sew scarves, hats, and gloves for your local homeless shelter.

- Score some sweet deals at garage sales and send the items to a foreign mission site.

Shelter the Homeless.

- Attend a FOCUS mission and help build homes
- Volunteer to do manual labor to help in the upkeep of a homeless shelter.
- Chaperone a youth group mission trip with Catholic Heart Work Camp, Nazareth Farm, Bethlehem Farm, and help maintain existing homes and keep those in need in their homes.
- Keep a list of local homeless shelters on hand to pass out to those you meet on the street.
- Become a mentor to a foster child.
- Send a care package with special treats to an orphanage.
- Help a family working towards adoption by hosting a fundraiser for them.
- Sponsor a child through the Catholic Foundation for Children and Aging (CFCA).
- Donate to or volunteer with programs such as Christ in the City to further their efforts in working with the homeless.

Visit the Sick.

- Volunteer at a hospital.
- Volunteer to call Bingo at a nursing home.
- Send flowers or a card to someone you know who is in the hospital.
- Attend a FOCUS mission, such as the trip to Kolkata, to serve the those who are ill (Start planning for next summer!).

- Take the Eucharist to the homebound in your community.
- Visit a seriously or terminally ill member of your parish.
- Sponsor an elderly person through the Catholic Foundation for Children and Aging (CFCA).

Visit the Imprisoned.

- Lead a bible study at a local prison. •Help with a communion service or Mass at a prison.
- Donate bibles and/or spiritual reading materials to a prison.
- Mentor a teen at a juvenile correction center.

Bury the Dead.

- Attend wakes and/or funerals of those you knew.
- Volunteer with a hospice program.
- Supply a dish for a funeral luncheon.
- Help a widow or widower in need with yard work or errands.
- Visit the cemetery and pray for the dead.
- Donate to ministries that offer free Catholic burials to those who are unable to afford one.
- Pray at an abortion clinic for the lives lost to abortion.
- Attend services for an inmate who was executed.

Ideas adapted from FOCUS blog article, *50 Corporal Works of Mercy Ideas for Your Summer Bucket List* by Lisa Cotter

FOCUS Equip

'FOCUS Equip' is based on Ephesians 4:12 "for the equipment of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for building up the body of Christ." These materials seek to equip you for lifelong Catholic mission. We would love to hear your feedback at: focusequip@focus.org

LIVING GOSPEL

