



Bible Discussion Guide: Volume I



Juvenile Institutional Ministries Bible Discussion Sheets

VOLUME I

By Scott and Hanne Larson

Published by Straight Ahead Ministries, Inc.
Worcester, Massachusetts

Juvenile Institutional Ministries, Bible Discussion Sheets, Vol. I
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Published by Straight Ahead Ministries, Inc., 791 Main Street, Worcester, Massachusetts 01610

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Printed in the United States of America.

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FORWARD

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

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

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

The format of each meeting generally consists of:

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

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

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STRAIGHT AHEAD MINISTRIES

BIBLE STUDY LEADER ORIENTATION

Overview

Thank you for becoming a part of an outreach to young people who are often outcasts or who view themselves as outcasts from society. As a Bible study leader, you have been called into an exciting and important ministry. You work in a system that cannot, by law, promote or recognize God or religion. You minister to young people who have little understanding of the Gospel, yet who are hungry for the Lord's presence in their lives.

The bottom line is that you are ministering in a spiritual battlefield, where your presence will make a huge difference in the lives of hurting young people. By following some basic principles and keeping Jesus' words to His followers, "*Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore, be wise as serpents, and harmless as doves*" (Matthew 10:16), close to heart, you will have an eternal impact in the lives of hurting kids.

Straight Ahead Ministries' primary objective is to be used as instruments of salvation. It is our vision to create an international movement whereby every juvenile offender has the opportunity to hear and respond to the Gospel and grow in his or her relationship with Jesus Christ. God uses us, His children, to spread His word of love and hope to the young people we serve.

Before each study you lead, pray for an opportunity to bring these young people to a place where they will want to become followers of Jesus Christ. During the study, keep that purpose in mind, as distractions will arise. By keeping the Gospel first, the kids second and you third throughout your time with them, you will be an effective disciple and discipler.

Your involvement in this ministry is an answer to many prayers. You will be tested, discouraged, and elated, most likely, all in the same week. You are not alone in those feelings. That is the nature of this ministry. The highs are way up there and the lows can be tough; despite that, over eighty percent (80%) of our volunteers stay for longer than the one-year, minimum commitment we ask for.

There are a lot of "dos and don'ts" in this manual for a reason; it is designed to be a resource, covering many issues that may arise, but which you will rarely encounter. Please use this manual as a reference point, but also, please use the staff at Straight Ahead Ministries, the leaders of your own local ministry, and your fellow volunteers to assist you in areas where you need advice. By following these principles, by sticking to the basic message of the Gospel, and by relying on one another, you will be effective, you will love the youth you serve, and you will grow deeper in your own love for Christ.

Interactions within Institutions

Contrary to what some would have you believe, we do not have the right to lead Bible studies at the detention and treatment centers. As long as states provide opportunities for spiritual guidance, they are in compliance with various statutes and Constitutional requirements. When we're allowed into the centers, we're there as guests; therefore, it is important we know the rules of the institutions where we serve and we keep a servant/guest attitude.

Since 1987, Straight Ahead Ministries and our affiliates have had few Bible studies shut down due to problems that arose at the studies. But even one study is too important to lose. By following some

basic rules, understanding the system in which you serve, and keeping a servant attitude, you will become an integral part of the institution where you volunteer.

A. Staff Relationships

The facility staff and your relationship with them, play a significant role in how effective your study will be. Each facility is different in how its staff views the studies. Most staff are receptive to what you are doing and see you as helpers and support for their work. Some, however, are suspicious of anyone coming in as they have seen too many do-gooders come in, start programs, and then leave when things get a little tough. Most are protective of the youth and we need to have that in common with the staff. Once they see your commitment, they can be a great asset to get through to the youth.

There are many staff who are suspicious of Christians in general. They view Christianity as being the exclusive domain of those with conservative views, of those who say one thing and live another, and as being an exclusionary religion. Our faith should be the most inclusionary of all and you can be a witness and a catalyst for that. To the staff, you may be the only Christian with whom they have regular contact. Be open to their concerns and be available for their needs. Many staff members have come to faith in Christ as a result of the Bible studies or the interaction that they have had with the leaders of the studies.

Despite your best efforts, there may be times when you encounter someone who is hostile to what you are doing. If their hostility is interfering with your outreach, go to that person to see what is behind the behavior; it may have nothing to do with you, but something you represent. This can be a good place for open dialogue and a place where you can work through the difficulty. Also pray for that person and for the situation. If, after you've tried to talk through the situation, you still have difficulties contact your ministry supervisor for advice. It may be you will need to speak with someone else at the program to remedy the situation. Only do that if the problem cannot be resolved one-on-one as this can cause even deeper problems.

Once you've become established at the institution, the staff may come to look at you as the "God-Person." They may come to you with questions or concerns or they may look to you for prayer. The staff may see you as someone with a more direct connection to God. Be available to help them through struggles and you'll effectively show them the love of Christ. Remember the institution is a mission field and all those in that field are ones you've been called to serve.

B. Institutional Rules

In order to foster good relations with the institution, it's important we familiarize ourselves with its rules. Some programs rely on a behavioral modification model of treatment, where youth are rewarded and penalized points for following or disobeying the rules. Other programs are *seemingly* looser with the rules, as they rely on other treatment models. In either case, we need to become a part the established system of the institution, by knowing the rules, and living within them during our time there.

The best way to get information on the program is to ask a supervisor for an overview of how things work there. Many programs have manuals they give to new volunteers or staff. Ask for one of those and familiarize yourself with the philosophy of the program. In addition, many programs offer or require their volunteers to go through training sessions. These sessions can be informative and can give a good overview of the program and the kids it serves. By asking, you are showing an interest in something that they are committed to doing.

One of the most effective ways to avoid problems is to find the right person to go to if questions or situations arise. When you want to try something new (such as bringing in books or a guest, etc.) make sure you run it by the staff person in charge at least a week or two beforehand. Never assume you can bring something for the youth, can bring someone as a guest or can even show movies or have music. Such seemingly harmless things can violate some longstanding policies and can get the study shut down. Our respect for the program is essential if we are to minister effectively.

An important aspect of maintaining an effective outreach is to know the program's rules concerning interaction with youth. Each program will be different and due to issues regarding abuse by clergy and others in churches, the public is wary of religious groups that have interaction with young people. If you are a ministry supervisor, you should have a program for your volunteers and staff that reviews abuse prevention, have rules concerning interaction with the youth and policies on how to handle allegations of abuse. You should also know whom to contact in case of an issues arising in this area.

The bottom line is we owe it to the young people we serve not to harm them in any way. We have to avoid even the appearance of impropriety while still being able to minister in an effective, personal way. Those two goals are not mutually exclusive and can be achieved with well-thought-out policies.

The following are some general, though not exhaustive, rules that apply at each institution:

1. Do not be alone with a young person. If he or she wants to speak with you, do it in an open area within view of a staff person;
2. Do not give or take anything from a resident without first getting permission from staff;
3. Do not promise the youth anything you cannot deliver;
4. Do not take sides in staff/resident, parent/child disputes;
5. Do not ask why a youth is incarcerated – he or she may share this information, but that should be at the youth's discretion;
6. Do not promise confidentiality (more on this in the following section);
7. Be wary of physical contact with the youth (see below*);
8. Do not give residents your telephone number or address or take theirs without prior permission from the institution. If the institution allows you to give your address and telephone number and you do not feel comfortable doing so, you can give the youth your ministry address and the ministry can pass messages on to you;
9. Do not contact people outside of the institution for the youth. They may ask you to call a friend or a relative, but there are rules as to whom they can contact. Outside contact may only be done through the program and its staff;
10. Do not say anything negative about the program, staff or methods used at the program. The residents may try to get you to take their side when they put down the program. Even if you think that something may not be fair, do not voice that opinion to the residents. There are usually reasons behind seemingly unfair methods and you do not know what happens during the time when you are not there. If you do have concerns, ask a supervisor if you can bring up something you are unsure about.
11. Do be courteous to staff;
12. Do follow protocol and directives from the staff;
13. Do keep to time guidelines;
14. When taking prayer requests to pass on to the prayer chain, do not use last names or other identifying information, such as where they are from.

If you have a question about any situation you do not know how to handle, contact a Straight Ahead staff person or your ministry supervisor.

*Some institutions do not allow any physical contact between residents and volunteers; others do not have set guidelines. You need to learn, up-front, the institution's rules on physical contact and strictly adhere to them. In order to avoid difficulties, there are some basic issues that you need to consider:

- Many of the youth with whom we come in contact have been abused, neglected, or maltreated. Seemingly innocent gestures, such as a pat on the shoulder, can be difficult for some youth to interpret. They may pull away or get tense. They may not know how to react or they may misinterpret the gesture as one of an aggressive or sexual nature. Always err on the side of caution.
- You need to use your discretion. Try to get a sense of the youth with whom you are working. If you perceive the young person is uncomfortable being close you, do not try to get closer. Show your concern with words and prayer and don't try to push to "help" the youth. This can do more harm than good.
- Never be alone with one of the residents. If he or she hugs you, having a staff person around can verify the innocent nature of the gesture. Also, if you are feeling that the young person is relating to you in an inappropriate way, ask your co-leader what he or she thinks. Your partner will often see things that you may miss. If you are still concerned, ask the supervisor in private and share your concerns. Be careful how you do this, as you do not want to create a problem where one does not exist. This is another reason why it is best to have more than one leader at each study.

One final area that can cause tension involves staff involvement in the study itself. Programs will differ on whether a staff person sits in on the study, with some requiring a staff person to be there. In that situation, you can ask if he or she wishes to participate or would rather sit off to the side. In other places, no staff will be present, but will be accessible to you. Finally, at some programs, a staff person may come in until the program is comfortable that you can control the participants. As noted above, keep in mind many staff members have come to faith through sitting in on studies. While the youth may, at first, feel a little uncomfortable, they usually forget the staff person is there after the first few minutes.

C. Confidentiality and Privileged Communications

Juvenile offenders are subject to strict privacy/confidentiality laws. Those laws are designed to protect them and their families from public exposure and ridicule. In theory, the laws give the juveniles a chance not to be branded "criminals" for the rest of their lives. The basic rule surrounding confidentiality is all personal information about the young people, even their names, should be kept between you and your ministry staff. Period.

Unfortunately, confidentiality can be easily violated unintentionally. Here are a few examples:

- When information about the youth is discussed in casual conversations volunteers may have with colleagues, friends, church leaders, spouses and other family members;
- When conversations about the youth, that may be overheard by others, are held in public places; and
- In prayer requests from the youth where those contain too much personal information that may identify the youth to others—even when those requests are made to your church or to your prayer team. In order to maintain confidentiality, use only first names when giving prayer requests.

Remember, the world can be an awfully small place at times and someone who knows the youth, their families, or the victims may recognize the person you are talking about. Any breach of confidentiality is enough to stop the work you do in the institution, can lead to a loss of faith in the ministry from both the staff and the young people, and can cause the youth to be less open with personal information.

The second area of concern is with “privileged communications.” A situation could arise where youth want to get something off their chest or confess something that they’ve done. In most states, you do not have what the law calls “privilege.” In other words, if residents tell you of crimes they’ve committed, for which they’ve not been fully adjudicated delinquent (when all legal appeals are over), you could be required to testify against the youth. In most states, only ordained clergy, attorneys and some specific providers are given the right to keep such communications confidential. You should check with someone familiar with the laws of your state to determine if you have such a privilege.

The best way to avoid problems is to be up front and tell the youth that you cannot discuss past crimes unless they are ones for which they have been committed and fully adjudicated (no further appeals). Also, inform all the residents at the beginning of the Bible study that you are required to share with the staff any threats to commit crimes, threats they make against other residents or staff or any threats that they make to themselves. Explain that you have to do that out of concern for them. You also need to be up front and tell them you will have to report any kind of abuse that they share.

This is a serious issue, though one that does not often arise. If you are asked a question such as “If I tell you a secret, will you promise not to tell anyone?” you have to tell them you cannot make that promise. You can explain you will help them as best you can and if there is a staff person they trust, you will go with them to talk to that staff person. But you cannot make such a blanket promise. You never want to break a trust that has developed.

General Guidelines for the Bible Study

The general philosophy of Straight Ahead Ministries is that each Bible study should have its own characteristics, drawing upon the strengths and gifts of the leaders. The following guidelines are set out in general terms and are suggestions based on the experience of other leaders.

A. Effective Bible Study Formats

1. Before the study begins, take some time to mingle with the staff and residents. If there are new residents at the program, introduce yourself and invite them to the study. Try to remember names and if they do not come to the study, invite them to come to the study the next time that you see them (but do not use too much pressure).
2. Set up the room in a way that facilitates a good, open discussion. With the permission of the program, move the furniture into a circle or semicircle. This will be a subtle way of showing you are in control of the group. Also, sitting in a circle is a great way to facilitate discussion, shows you are all part of one group, and helps you see what is going on in the group. If you have more than one leader, sit opposite each other, so as not to have an “us and them” situation.

If someone doesn’t want to sit in the circle, ask him or her to come in, as it would be easier for you if they were closer. If they refuse, do not push the issue during the study. Afterwards, try to find out if there was a reason the youth didn’t want to join in the circle (they may be having trouble with others in the group). If there is trouble or if the youth feels uncomfortable, tell them to sit next to you during the next Bible study and explain that it is just easier for you when everyone is in the circle.

3. Start out by mentioning you are a volunteer, and you are not being paid to be there. Explain to the residents you are there out of your love for the Lord and out of your concern for them. They are not used to people helping them or caring for them for nothing. They will respect you for that and they will be more open to what you are sharing.

4. Open with prayer. This will set the tone for the time together and can often calm the residents down before you get into a discussion. If you have some new kids, ask someone to explain what prayer is. They may not know so you can share that prayer is simply talking with God, who is present in the room.
5. Make the study a safe haven for all who come. Often times, residents will see the Bible study as a break from the hassles and the fear they may experience in the institution. The study should be a place where all feel welcome and safe. To make this a reality, you need to maintain control at all times, make sure to include all who come in the discussions and prevent any verbal or physical bullying or put downs.
6. Follow a general format of starting a study with a story, having questions and answers about the story, reading applicable Scripture, reviewing what it means, discussing how it applies, and wrapping it up with a Gospel invitation. Be mindful that the youth will often have limited attention spans, so try to keep things moving. DO NOT preach at them, as they need to participate and be heard!
7. Make sure to leave time to take prayer requests from the residents. You can either have them tell you out loud what they want prayer for or have them write requests down. When taking the requests, you should write down the first name of the youth only (if there is more than one person with the same name, use a last name initial). Tell the residents that you will be sending the requests to people who have made a commitment to pray for them. And make sure you contact the prayer chain coordinator with the requests that night or the next day.
8. End the study with a time of prayer. If there is time, ask the kids in the group if they want to pray out loud. If some do not want to pray, then tell them they can say, "pass." Many have never prayed out loud before so this is a good opportunity to remind them God is present and prayer is simply having a conversation with God. Many residents look forward to this time of prayer. When you pray, keep it relatively short so you do not lose them.

B. Avoiding Problems

For the most part, you will have few issues when it comes to discipline or problems during a Bible study, especially after you have earned the trust of the young men and women who attend the studies. There are, however, steps you can take to get to that level of trust in an expedited fashion. Here are some ideas:

1. Bullying is a big issue, so pay attention to what is being said and how it is being said. Don't let the discussion lead to the putting down or making fun of staff, administrators, clinicians, other kids, their families or even gangs. Sometimes, a youth will have an issue with another resident or staff and they will try to bring the discussion to a personal level against that other person. You need to be firm in telling the youth we are there to support each other and not to put people down. If you start to see some issues, remind them they agreed not to do that. If they persist, again, remind them they all agreed to follow the rules and they are not doing that. If that doesn't work, you may have to end the group early or ask the offending youth to step out and then follow up afterwards.
2. Do not take sides on parental or staff issues. Many times the residents will present scenarios in which their parents or the staff look like the bad guys. That may be the case, but we should not take sides, as we do not know the whole story. Leaders should point out the Bible asks us to pray for those with whom we have trouble, the Lord requires respect for others, and speaking of others who are not there is gossip.

3. Use the same version of the Bible as the residents use. We encourage the use of a more contemporary version of the Bible written at an understandable reading level. Some translations that are designed for people who have English as a second language are helpful as many of the young people in lock up have difficulties reading. It is tempting to use our favorite translation of the Bible while we let the kids read in another version. Trouble can come when a kid gets stuck on a word that is not in your Bible and you cannot help him or her read that word or when they ask what a phrase means that you do not have.

Sometimes youth will have their own Bible and it may be a different translation from what you are using. This can lead to a good discussion on why there are so many different Bible translations as many of the kids may believe that the Bible was originally written in Old English or may not have a clue as to its origins. You can explain originally Scripture was written in Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic. As language has changed, so have the translations in order to reflect the original meaning of the Scripture.

4. Avoid embarrassing the residents. Nothing will stop a kid from returning to a Bible study quicker than an embarrassing moment, no matter how innocently it starts. Ask for volunteers to read and never call on individuals to read or to pray out loud. Many of the youth cannot read or read poorly. If a young person wants to read, but is having difficulty, help them along (but do not be overly helpful – let them try to work through a tough word), do not let other residents make fun of the reader, and encourage them with praise when they are done.
5. Give everyone a chance to answer. Sometimes one or two youth will want to answer all of the questions. Try to see if others can answer so they will not feel slighted or left out. If you have a bigger group, ask the kids to raise their hands before answering and tell them, “otherwise, I cannot hear all of the good answers.” If one or two youth dominate the discussion and try to answer every question, you can tell them you know they know the answers, but you want to see if anyone else does, too. This is another way to avoid embarrassing someone without losing the rest of the group.
6. Try to find something correct in each answer. Young people are encouraged when they answer correctly or answer in a partially correct way. Try not to say “no” to an answer if you can find even a grain of “correctness” in it. This is not easy, but you will have many more of the group involved in the discussion as none of us likes to be wrong, especially in front of others.
7. Be careful how you say things. Do not use words that are over the youths’ heads and remember, many Christian terms we use all the time have no meaning to them. They will usually not ask you what a word means, as they are too embarrassed. It is okay to use Christian terms, but make sure you give meanings for them or ask the group if they know what you are saying. Keep checking in with them to make sure they are following the discussion, especially after reading from the Bible.
8. Stay focused, yet be flexible. Often times we prepare a study only to find the needs of the kids lie elsewhere. Be prepared to focus on those needs, but be careful not to be led down a rabbit trail by one or two kids as you may lose the rest of the group. Gently try to get them to focus back on the discussion. If they persist, tell them you can talk about their subject after the study. If you do not do this, you will spend every lesson discussing demons and end times and you will lose the attention of the others in the group.
9. If you don’t know how to answer a question, tell the group you will try to find an answer for them by the next meeting. We often feel we have to know everything by rote, but we do not and the kids do not expect us to know everything. Young people will give you more respect for saying you do not know something and you will look into it, rather than trying to wing it.

10. There will be a time when, for the sake of the group, you have to ask one or two youths to leave as they are not following the rules and are distracting others. This is a difficult thing to do, but can be a rare occurrence if you keep control of the group. If you do need to do this, make sure that the staff know the young person is leaving the group. Ask if you can speak with him or her after the study to explain why you took the action you did. Many of the young people are not used to having people explain themselves and this could be a good learning moment for them. You can invite them to come back next week. If the problem persists, some people have found that asking the youth not to come back for a week can help them refocus.

Controversial Areas

A. In General

The young people will bring many ideas, attitudes and life experiences to the group, which are not necessarily what you would find in small group in a different environment. Many of those will take us out of our comfort zone, but that isn't a bad thing. It is in those moments, we can help the kids to understand at a deeper level.

When you go through the Bible study material, you will notice it keeps to basic, applicable themes relating the Gospel to every-day life for the youth. Many of the youth we work with have a difficult time with Christian concepts, such as faith, grace, and salvation. Keeping to those basics will keep us away from areas that are divisive. A general rule is if something divides the church, it is something to avoid in your time in the group.

When we look for new Bible study leaders and others to work with the youth, we look for those who are good teachers and those who are teachable. Those people can readily understand there are many areas the Lord left "gray" and for which He gave us the Holy Spirit and our own minds to look into.

There are areas in which Christians can disagree and still be on the same side of the fence. We need to be able to discuss issues, acknowledge when there are areas in dispute within the Church, and remember the Holy Spirit is the One who will do the convicting. Again, we need to keep in mind why we are in the institutions, that many attendees will be either new to the faith or will have no faith at all, and many of the issues that seem important to us, will be irrelevant to them.

With all that said, inevitably, areas that stir up debate will arise. In those situations a few general guidelines can assist in resolving them:

1. If youth have a controversial matter they wish to discuss, see if you can talk about it one-on-one (again, within view of staff) outside of the Bible study. Otherwise, such a discussion can disrupt a whole group. Others in the group may misinterpret what is said or may not have any idea what you are talking about. It only takes one resident telling the administration "the Bible study leader says that all _____ (fill in the blank) are going to hell" or are evil to have the group shut down – even if that was never said.

Also, be aware a youth in your group could be struggling with the issue and could be hurt or misled by what is said. Others may be trying to subtly "get" that person by bringing things out at the study. How you handle the subject will affect the young person's perception of God and his/her perception of God's view of them.

2. Find out why the young person wants to discuss the matter and find out where they stand on the issue. They could be dealing with the problem and you can point out we all have areas with which we struggle, God loves us as we are, Jesus came for those who struggle, and He will help us deal with our issues as they arise.

One way to connect with the youth in such situations is to share some of our own present struggles, but in a non-threatening, non-burdening way. If we refer to all of our problems as being in the past, we can give the false impression believers do not have any trouble in their lives. If we come across that way and the new believer starts to have a bad week, he or she may think, "I must not be a Christian".

The more transparent we are, the deeper our relationship will be with the youth. But again, before sharing a struggle, ask if it will benefit the youth or if it's for your benefit. Keep in mind the youth look to you as a representative of Christ. While sharing your struggles be sure to share the victories. Show them hope.

3. When asked, you are free to give your opinion on the subject, but make clear it's your opinion and why you believe it to be so. At the same time, point out that there are other Christians who may hold different positions from yours. Listen to their concerns and to their point of view. Tell them to openly ask God for direction on the matter. And keep asking yourself why you hold the position you do. Is it a well-reasoned opinion, one someone else told you, or one you have always just held? Be introspective and open.
4. Again, let the Holy Spirit do the convicting. We are there to present the Gospel and to make disciples. We can and should share our beliefs and the basis for those beliefs. In the end, however, it is the Holy Spirit who brings knowledge and discernment.
5. In general, stay away from political discussions as they are divisive and detract from the Gospel message. Jesus focused on bringing hope and Salvation during turbulent political times. Follow His example and stick to the Gospel of Hope.

B. Some Specific Issues

1. Sexual issues are probably the most common ones you will face. Most of the youth are in their early to mid-adolescence. Their bodies are changing and many are struggling with their own sexual issues and identify. Many have been sexually abused and such abuse will affect some of their thoughts on faith, guilt, forgiveness, and issues surrounding sex and sexuality.

For example, a young man once said he could hate gay people because God does. When asked where he had gotten that from, the young man said it's in the Bible. It turns out his father had sexually abused this boy. The Bible study leader was able to share how the Bible never says that and how God loves all, and does not hate gay people. This openness led to a deeper discussion about what the Bible does say about sex and love. Through this, the young man was able to see that there is no place in Scripture where hatred towards another person is acceptable.

It's important to keep in mind many Christian views on sexual mores are minority views. The youth may not agree with your point of view, but if you thoughtfully and lovingly set out your position they have a chance to consider something new for them.

2. Substance abuse is another area of controversy. A young person will often try to justify using drugs with such beliefs as, "If God made all of the plants and animals for humans, why can't we smoke marijuana?" Those beliefs may be very deeply held and thought out in an

adolescent's mind. Here again, a “the Bible says it. I believe it. That's the end of it” argument will be irrelevant.

Share why you believe the Lord has something better for us than what substance abuse leads to. To counter the argument a particular substance is “natural”, you can point out the plants themselves are not evil, it’s how we use them. For example, the active ingredient in marijuana can be used for medicinal purposes or to get high; opioids can either be used by a doctor to ease pain in a cancer patient or by an addict to get high. Recent studies have also indicated that marijuana is correlated with higher incidents of mental illness so you can point that out to those who say it is a harmless plant. Do some research, as the kids will have done theirs!

You don’t want the study to become a debate club, but you also want to let the young people know God asks us to stay away from drugs and alcohol abuse due to the physical, emotional, and spiritual damage such cause. Personal stories from over-comers can bring that point home. Also, get the young people to think about people they know who have had their lives ruined by drug and alcohol abuse.

One thing to keep in mind is many of the kids in the study will come from homes where abuse, neglect and abandonment are common. If we were in their place, wouldn't it make sense to get high if that would relieve the pain of everyday life? If you did not have Christ in your life, if you were living in a miserable place, often devoid of love, and you had little hope, why wouldn't you use drugs? One young man said marijuana was “Novocain for the soul.” He used it so he wouldn't hurt. Here is where you can point out such pain relief is only temporary and it is a slow killer, and it’s only Christ who can ease our pain, as He knows what we have been through and He knows how to help us.

Finally, discussions about substance abuse can lead to discussions about the body being God’s temple, His dwelling place within us. If we love God, we should respect His house as we would respect a church building. Concrete images go a long way to bring this point home (“Would you smoke a joint in church? Why not?”).

3. Do no attack their culture. We have to be on guard against a mentality of “because I was an X before coming to Christ, all X is bad” or “because I dislike Y and I am a Christian, all Y is bad.” When those feelings and attitudes come up in us, the Lord is asking us to examine them and their origins.

Most of the young people we’ll be in contact with will have a different way of looking at life. If we go into a program and talk badly about what, to adolescents, is the center of their lives – their culture, friends and family – then we will build barriers to the Gospel. A well-meaning visitor once went to a Bible study and said she thought wearing make-up was wrong based on her view of Scripture. When the Bible study leader came back the next week, several kids were upset and one asked if his grandmother was going to hell because she wears lipstick. Seemingly innocent comments can be taken to extremes.

If asked, you can give your opinion on issues such as dress, music, body piercing, etc., but listen to the youths' opinions also. Again, ask yourself why you believe a certain way. Is cultural or Scriptural? Point to Scripture to back up your view, but remember when Paul told men to groom themselves like men, they were wearing what we would consider dresses today. We do not need to compromise our standards, but we should be able to explain where those standards come from and see if those standards are based in Scripture or just in our cultural norms – which may not be applicable to the young people whom we serve.

Many of the youth may try to shock you with their behavior or statements as a test, to see if you will turn on them or away from them. They do this as a way to protect themselves from the hurt

of another lost relationship. Listen, do not judge, explain why you do not agree with something, and be open. Do you disagree with something because it goes against God's design as enunciated in Scripture, or because it goes against something with which you are comfortable? Be able to answer with "I believe" rather than "God says it so just do it."

4. We do not have to attack other religions while defending our faith so never put another faith down. Always point to the positive aspects of Christianity. Explain the basis of your faith, bringing in historical details and personal experiences. Know why you believe. Also, become familiar with other beliefs so you can show how Christianity is different from other faiths.

We can often use foundations of other beliefs to make the case for the veracity of the Gospel. For instance, a Jehovah's Witness' basic belief in the Bible and in God can lead to discussions on the three-person nature of God. A Muslim's belief in Abraham and in Jesus as a prophet can lead to discussions on the Fall of humanity and the Redemption.

Discussions on other faiths often come up when a young person loses a friend or loved one who was not a follower of Jesus. "Because my friend was a Buddhist, is he in hell? In such a situation, explain how God is the judge and not you, we can be sure of our salvation through faith in Christ, and we can hope that at some point the other person had come to faith. This is a difficult area, but one that comes up often. How you handle it can bring comfort and hope.

In different parts of the country, if our youth have any faith background or church experience, it is from the Roman Catholic Church. Many of our leaders come from the same background and may not have had a good experience in the church. We have to be careful not to allow this to affect how we present the Gospel. Believing Catholics and believing Protestants have many common areas of faith. While there are also significant differences, believers in each church will have much in common regarding the essentials of our faith. How we deal with the differences is important.

First, know what the teachings of the church are since they may be different from what is commonly believed. If you do not know about something (such as transubstantiation of the Eucharist), tell the youth that you will research it. Look into it and try to see where the different teachings come from.

Second, handle the discussion with tact and openness. A young man came to a new program and told the leader he would not go to the Bible study because the leader at another program had told him he could not pray to Mary. The new leader told him praying to Mary came (in part) from the belief that she is in closer proximity to God and He will listen to her for us. The leader then went on to explain how he prays to God through Jesus – a direct route, which lead right into an explanation of the Gospel. The leader never had to tell the young man not to pray to Mary. That young man came to the study and put his faith in Christ.

Finally, explain there are going to be differences, even within a church, that these differences have divided the Church for centuries, but those differences do not affect our own personal relationship with the Lord. Stick to the basic Gospel message and acknowledge that God can work through other belief systems to bring people to Himself.

Following up With Youth

One area that often discourages leaders in institutions revolves around what happens to the youth once they leave the programs. Young people who have grown in their relationship with the Lord in great ways often fall back into old behaviors once they get back home. They do not want to go to church or

youth group and they often end up back with their old friends. They have changed, but what they knew and grew up with has not. For all of us, it is easier to be pulled down than to pull up those around you.

There are ways to help. First, if a young person wants to stay in touch with you once he leaves a program, ask someone in the administration if you are allowed to have contact outside of the institution. Some states have laws against such contact while others welcome it. If you are allowed to have such contact, ask if you can take the youth's address and telephone number. If you cannot, ask if you can give him your address and number. Again, you can use the Straight Ahead or your own ministry address if you want.

If you cannot make a commitment to contact the young person, do not take the information. They do not need another adult letting them down.

In all likelihood, you will not be contacted by the youth. You will have to make the first contact. You may find that the youth's family is open to such contact, indifferent or even hostile to it. If the youth is not home, try to call back some other time. Kids will often not get messages that you leave for them.

If you do not make contact, try to set up a casual meeting. You do not need to do anything exciting or church related. A fast food meal, biking, playing ball, hanging out are all great events for the youth. Oftentimes, you will get to meet a lot of their friends, as they want to show you off. You will also have interaction with their families. These are great ministry opportunities, though you will see where the expression "the apple does not fall far from the tree" comes from.

In general, keep the discussion light. The young person may be feeling guilty about not praying or about wandering away from the Lord. Remind him that God is still there and still loves him.

One thing to be prepared for is the youth not showing up for a meeting. This can be difficult, but do not take it as a personal put-down. The young person may be testing you to see if you will keep trying to see him. Also, commitments are often something new for the kids. They may never have needed to keep an appointment (outside of court!) and may do something else if a better opportunity comes up. Call him later to explain that you were at the meeting spot as planned. See if you can try to get together some other time. Your commitment is a new model for them.

A young person with whom you have been in contact may stop returning your phone calls or may try to avoid you. This often happens when he is starting to mess up in some way. You are a reminder of what God wants him to be and he may be feeling guilty about that. When that happens, a card or a letter from you can help to break the ice.

Something else to keep in mind is that when a young person and you are starting to develop a healthy relationship, he or she may try to sabotage it. Again, they have not had many healthy relationships or the ones that they have had, have ended when the adult leaves. Subconsciously, they may want to protect themselves from the hurt that comes with such abandonment and they pull away. If that happens, point out to them what you are seeing and feeling—they often do not see it. Then reassure them that you are in the relationship for the long haul. This often results in a deeper level of commitment.

Also, a young person may act differently on the outside than when he is locked up. Many of the young people will not show affection in the same way or may act as if they do not want you to be around. Remember, they may not be comfortable at first or they may be the type of people who are not open or demonstrative with their affection. One leader met a young man near his home and they went to the mall where the young man talked with all of his friends and all but ignored the leader. The leader did not follow up with the young man after that and several months later he got a letter from the young

man, who was locked up again. In the letter the young man asked why the leader had stopped calling after they had such a great time together at the mall! They reconnected, with the leader understanding the limited nature of the young man's showing of affection and several years later, the leader was an usher at the young man's wedding.

One of the most difficult aspects of aftercare is trying to get a young person involved in a church. They, like most of us, are intimidated by new things, especially church. By the time they leave the program, they will have built up a relationship with you, not with another person or church. If you live near the youth, invite him to come to church or to an adult Bible study with you.

If they are looking for a church in an area that is not near to you, contact someone you know from a church in the kids' neighborhood. Find someone who is willing to meet with you and the youth and who is willing to commit to taking him or her to church. If you do not know of a good church or contact person, contact Straight Ahead or your local ministry supervisor and we can try to help out.

Even with young people you have gotten to know well on the inside one thing to be on guard against when they are out is manipulation. Most of the time, the young people will not try to get things from you as they respect you; however, they are used to getting things through manipulation and they do not always see it as being wrong. Fifteen or seventeen years of learned behavior does not usually go away overnight. If a youth asks for money, do not give it to him. Find out why he needs the money and see if you can help him in some other way (like filling out job applications). This can be hard to do, but it will keep your relationship on a solid foundation.

You should also check out what aftercare programs the youth is involved with through the state agency that has custody of the youth. Many organizations, such as Straight Ahead Ministries, have aftercare or job training programs and you can plug that youth into one of those programs.

Finally, never give up hope. We do not know what impact a card, a call or a visit will have on a kid. One leader sent a Christmas card to a young man he had not heard from in over a year. Several months after Christmas, that young man sent a note to the leader saying that the card was the only Christmas card he had received. Through that seemingly small act, the leader was able to reconnect with the young man and the young man's faith is growing. God gives us the opportunity to plant seeds, but it is He who grows the crops.

Concluding Remarks

If we keep mindful of our purpose, to show young men and women that the God of all creation, loves them, cares for them, and wants to have a relationship with them, then we cannot fail. We need to let God work through us to bring these young people into a relationship with Him.

*This orientation manual was written by
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BIBLE DISCUSSION SHEETS, VOL I
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TOPIC: Anger

Opening Discussion

- What kinds of things make you angry?
- How do you act when you get angry?
- Do you think everyone gets angry?
- Is it a sin to get angry? [No. Jesus got angry too] Is anger ever right? [It can be]
- Who do you affect the most when you get angry? [self]
- Do you think there are ways to handle anger in a better way? What are some ways?

Scripture

- The Bible talks a lot about anger:
 - Proverbs 14:17,29 What are some foolish things you have done when you were angry?
 - Proverbs 15:1 How have you seen this to be true?
 - Proverbs 29:11
 - Ephesians 4:26-27, 31
- What does holding a grudge do to you?
- Do you ever act out of anger and then “stop and think about it?” What usually happens then?
- Someone once said that when you hold a grudge or are angry at someone, that person takes up a lot of space in your head. What do you think that means?
- So, based on all of this, how do you think God can help *you* with *your* anger?

Wrap-up

When we are angry at someone, we think more about that person than we should. He or she has done something to us and they end up inside our heads! They keep getting to us. When that happens, ask God to help you let it go, to move on and let God deal with that person so you can be free of them.

TOPIC: Dealing With Bad Days

Attention-getter

- Read the story, “Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day”

Opening Discussion

- Do you ever have days like that – when it seems like nothing goes right?
- What do you do with days like that?
- Do you think God can make a difference on those days? How?

Scripture

- Read Acts 16:16-24 (about Paul and Silas being arrested for doing good)
 - How do you think they felt about their day?
 - How would you have reacted?
- Read Acts 16:25-36
 - What do you think made Paul and Silas able to sing?
 - Do you think they knew what was going to happen as a result?
 - Do you think God could ever give you an attitude like that?
 - What was the result of their actions? What happened to their guard?
 - What if they had reacted like most people would have reacted? What could have happened?
- Read Philippians 4:12-13 Talk about Paul’s life and how through all of those different situations he had learned to be content.

Wrap-up

God can give us a peace on the inside that will give us strength to handle even the toughest situations. On the very bad days we can come to God and know that He understands and cares and will be with us through the whole situation.

**Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible,
No Good, Very Bad Day**

I went to sleep with my gum in my mouth and now there's gum in my hair and when I got out of bed this morning I tripped on the skateboard and by mistake I dropped my sweater in the sink while the water was running and I could tell it was going to be a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day.

At breakfast Anthony found a Corvette Stingray car kit in his breakfast cereal box and Nick found a Junior Undercover Agent code ring in his breakfast cereal box but in my breakfast cereal box all I found was breakfast cereal.

I think I'll move to Australia.

In the carpool Mrs. Bigson let Becky have a seat by the window. Audrey and Elliott got seats by the window too. I said I was being scrunched. I said I was being smushed. I said, if I don't get a seat by the window I am going to be carsick. No one even answered.

I could tell it was going to be a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day.

At school Mrs. Dickens liked Paul's picture of the sailboat better than my picture of the invisible castle. At singing time she said I sang too loud. At counting time she said I left out sixteen. Who needs sixteen? I could tell it was going to be a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day.

I could tell because Paul said I wasn't his best friend anymore. He said that Philip Parker was his best friend and that Albert Moyo was his next best friend and that I was only his third best friend.

I hope you sit on a tack, I said to Paul. I hope the next time you get a double-decker strawberry ice cream cone the ice cream part falls off the cone part and lands in Australia.

There were two cupcakes in Philip Parker's lunch bag and Albert got a Hershey bar with almonds and Paul's mother gave him a piece of jelly roll that had little coconut sprinkles on the top. Guess whose mother forgot to put in dessert?

It was a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day. That's what it was, because after school my mom took us all to the dentist and Dr. Fields found a cavity just in me. Come back next week and I'll fix it, said Dr. Fields. Next week, I said, I'm going to Australia.

On the way downstairs the elevator door closed on my foot and while we were waiting for my mom to go get the car Anthony made me fall where it was muddy and then when I started crying because of

the mud Nick said I was a crybaby and while I was punching Nick for saying crybaby my mom came back with the car and scolded me for being muddy and fighting.

I am having a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day, I told everybody. No one even answered.

So then we went to the shoestore to buy some sneakers. Anthony chose white ones with blue stripes. Nick chose red ones with white stripes. I chose blue ones with red stripes but then the shoe man said, We're all sold out. They made me buy plain old white ones, but they can't make me wear them.

When we picked up my dad at his office he said I couldn't play with his copying machine, but I forgot. He also said to watch out for the books on his desk, and I was careful as could be except for my elbow. He also said don't fool around with his phone, but I think I called Australia. My dad said please don't pick him up anymore.

It was a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day.

There were lima beans for dinner and I hate limas. There was kissing on TV and I hate kissing. My bath was too hot, I got soap in my eyes, my marble went down the drain, and I had to wear my railroad-train pajamas. I hate my railroad-train pajamas.

When I went to bed Nick took back the pillow he said I could keep and the Mickey Mouse night light burned out and I bit my tongue. The cat wants to sleep with Anthony, not with me.

It was a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day.

My mom says some days are like that. Even in Australia.

Judith Viorst, Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day (New York, Aladdin Books, Macmillan Publishing Company, 1972)

TOPIC: Can One Person Make a Difference?

Opening Discussion

- Who is the most important person in your life?
- Did this person make a difference in your life? How?
- Can you think of a time when you made a difference in someone else's life?

Story

Read the story of Miss Thompson

Scripture

- What did Jesus give up to make a difference in our lives?
- Read John 15:13-17 (Living Bible)
Discuss the passage. Explain what Jesus did in dying for us on the cross (go into the flogging and crucifixion and how we deserved it for our own sins) and the way of salvation.

Wrap-up

- Are there any things that you have to give up in order for Jesus to really make a difference in your life?
Jesus wants to make a difference in everyone's life, but it's only those who are willing to give up the control of their life that he's able to really make a difference in.

The Special Story of Miss Thompson

I know of a school teacher named Miss Thompson. Every year when she met her new students, she would say, "Boys and girls, I love you all the same. I have no favorites." Of course, she wasn't being completely truthful. Teachers do have favorites and, what is worse, most teachers have students that they just don't like.

Teddy Stallard was a boy that Miss Thompson just didn't like, and for good reason. He just didn't seem interested in school. There was a dead-pan, blank expression on his face and his eyes had a glassy, unfocused appearance. When she spoke to Teddy, he always answered in monosyllables. His clothes were musty and his hair was unkempt. He wasn't an attractive boy and he certainly wasn't likeable.

Whenever she marked Teddy's papers, she got a certain perverse pleasure out of putting X's next to the wrong answers and when she put the F's at the top of the papers, she always did it with a flair. She should have known better; she had Teddy's records and she knew more about him than she wanted to admit. The records read:

- 1st Grade: Teddy shows promise with his work and attitude, but poor home situation.
- 2nd Grade: Teddy could do better. Mother is seriously ill. He receives little help at home.
- 3rd Grade: Teddy is a good boy, but too serious. He is a slow learner. His mother died this year.
- 4th Grade: Teddy is very low, but well-behaved. His father shows no interest.

Christmas came and the boys and girls in Miss Thompson's class brought her Christmas presents. They piled their presents on her desk and crowded around to watch her open them. Among the presents, there was one from Teddy Stallard. She was surprised that he had brought her a gift, but he had. Teddy's gift was wrapped in brown paper and was held together with Scotch tape. On the paper were written the simple words, "For Miss Thompson from Teddy." When she opened Teddy's present, out fell a gaudy rhinestone bracelet, with half the stones missing, and a bottle of cheap perfume.

The other boys and girls began to giggle and smirk over Teddy's gifts, but Miss Thompson at least had enough sense to silence them by immediately putting on the bracelet and putting some of the perfume on her wrist. Holding her wrist up for the other children to smell, she said, "Doesn't it smell

lovely?" And the children, taking their cue from the teacher, readily agreed with "oo's" and "ah's".

At the end of the day, when school was over and the other children had left, Teddy lingered behind. He slowly came over to her desk and said softly, "Miss Thompson . . . Miss Thompson, you smell just like my mother . . . and her bracelet looks real pretty on you too. I'm glad you liked my presents."

When Teddy left, Miss Thompson got down on her knees and asked God to forgive her.

The next day when the children came to school, they were welcomed by a new teacher. Miss Thompson had become a different person. She was no longer just a teacher; she had become an agent of god. She was now a person committed to loving her children and doing things for them that would live on after her. She helped all the children, but especially the slow ones, and especially Teddy Stallard. By the end of that school year, Teddy showed dramatic improvement. He had caught up with most of the students and was even ahead of some.

She didn't hear from Teddy for a long time. Then one day, she received a note that read:

Dear Miss Thompson:

I wanted you to be the first to know, I will be graduating second in my class.

Love,

Teddy Stallard

And four years later:

Dear Miss Thompson:

As of today, I am Theodore Stallard, M.D. How about that? I wanted you to be the first to know. I am getting married next month, the 27th to be exact. I want you to come and sit where my mother would sit if she were alive. You are the only family I have now; Dad died last year.

Love,

Teddy Stallard

Miss Thompson went to that wedding and sat where Teddy's mother would have sat. She deserved to sit there; she had done something for Teddy that he could never forget.

Who Switched the Price Tags?, Tony Campolo, Copyright 1986, Word Publishers, Nashville, Tennessee (pp. 69-72). All rights reserved. Used by permission.

TOPIC: Coming Clean

Opening Discussion

- What does it mean to “come clean”?
- Have you ever “come clean” on something on your own? What were the results?
- Do you think it’s always best to “come clean?” Why or why not?
- Are there some things that you can never “come clean” on?
- What do you think God’s opinion is on “coming clean”?

Scripture

- Read the story of Zacchaeus ([Luke 19:1-9](#)). [Explain how tax collectors would collect more than people really owed and pocket it for themselves.]
- What made Zacchaeus want to come clean?
- What were the results?
- Why do you think Zacchaeus would want to give half of his possessions to the poor and pay back four times what he stole from people?
- Do you think Zacchaeus was better off coming clean or not? Explain.

Story

Read “The Chuck Colson Story”

What happened as a result of the “foolish” coming clean Chuck Colson did?

Wrap-up

God honors us when we come clean on things we’ve done wrong. Even when it doesn’t make sense to us, God will always use our honesty for the very best in our lives.

The Chuck Colson Story

Chuck Colson was head legal counsel to President Nixon. He had gotten where he was by mowing over a lot of people, perhaps that's why they had nicknamed him the "Hatchet Man." People knew to stay out the way of Chuck Colson or get hurt. That is exactly why President Nixon wanted him as his head lawyer. Colson knew how to get things done, whatever it took.

In the early 1970's, Nixon's schemes began to unwind. It climaxed at the famous "Watergate" Hotel where many of the conversations of the Democratic presidential re-election plans were secretly taped.

Over the course of the months following, the television news began to report on much of the corruption that was going on in the White House. Chuck Colson was in the thick of it. For the first time in his life, he saw the very real possibility of losing everything he had spent his entire life building.

One night when he was filled with anxiety, his name regularly being run through the muck on the evening news, Colson went to visit a friend who he knew was a Christian. Up until now Chuck had displayed no interest in God, but at this point in his life he knew he needed more than himself. His friend led Chuck to Christ that evening.

The transformation in Chuck Colson was like night and day. People said they could hardly tell it was the same person. But they were sure it wouldn't last. They had known the "Hatchet Man" for a long time, and he was always up to something corrupt.

As the media unraveled more and more of the "Watergate Scandal", President Nixon resigned from office. Many of his aids went to trial for their part in the illegal activities. One by one they got off through the services of the country's best lawyers.

When it came time for Chuck Colson to go to trial, he decided to go a different way. He was a Christian and serious about his faith, and so he confessed to all the illegal activities he had been involved in while working for the President. He wanted to "come completely clean." As a result,

Chuck was the only one of the entire group who was sent to prison. Everyone commented on what a fool Colson was.

While in prison, Chuck began to lead a Bible study for some of his fellow inmates. Through him, many of them grew in their faith. Chuck also saw how little there was for spiritual programming in prison.

When Colson was released, he intended to just live a quiet life with his family, but God had other plans. He couldn't get his friends on the inside of the prison out of his mind. He began praying fervently for them and God gave him the vision for beginning a prison ministry.

Today *Prison Fellowship* is the world's largest prison ministry with programs in hundreds of prisons throughout the world. God will never waste any of our experiences when we turn them over to Him.

Adapted from the movie, *Born Again*, Thomas Nelson Entertainment, Nashville, ©1982.

TOPIC: Compassion

Opening Discussion

- Who would you be the most upset about hearing that he/she had gotten hurt really bad?
- Are there some people who you wouldn't care about if they got hurt?
- What kinds of things have you done to help someone who really needed your help?
- How do you feel after helping someone out?
- Have you ever helped someone who really didn't deserve it?
- What are some of the things that help us to decide whether or not we should help someone? [Who they are . . . if I have enough time . . . can I afford it . . . have they even done anything for me . . .]

Scripture

- God says we have a responsibility to love our neighbor as ourselves. What do you think that means?
- Read the story of The Most Important Commandment and of The Good Samaritan ([Luke 10:25-37](#)). (Explain why Samaritans were despised)
- If Jesus had told the story today, who do you think He might have used as the characters?
- Who are the people Jesus might be asking you to have compassion for?
- Are there some people, while you are in here, that need your help?
- What specifically could you do for them?
- What are some ways in the future God might want to use you to help others?
- How has God shown His compassion to us?
- How did Jesus show compassion for us?

Story

- Read the story about Trevor

Wrap-up

- God had compassion on us by sending His Son to die for us. Read [2 Corinthians 8:9](#). He had no reason to come down and be poor for us other than the fact that He loved us. We can turn to Him and accept His love and be saved. With Himself as an example, He is asking us to do good to others. Read [Matthew 10:39 and 42](#) or [Matthew 25:35-40](#).

Trevor

In December of 1983, eleven-year-old Trevor Ferrell felt disbelief while watching a news program about the street people of Philadelphia. Unable to understand how people could live without a home just miles from his own suburban community, he coaxed his parents [Frank & Janet Ferrell] that very night to take him to the inner city where the dispossessed live.

This is part of a letter found in Frank Ferrell's car on February 9, 1984:

Last night in my loneliness, poverty, and utter despair I could have ended it all. It was freezing cold and pouring rain. I had reached the dregs of human suffering, having lost both my wife and son. After I had long since given up, there I was, a street person. A person I had often looked upon with uncaring eyes. Suddenly there in front of me stood a little boy with a face of spring, who gave me a respectful, "here sir, I have a blanket for you." He had given me more than a blanket, he gave me new hope. I could not keep back the tears. I fell in love with that little boy named Trevor and at the same time I fell in love again with life.

Trevor started going to the streets every night with blankets and other things for the street people. Now in Philadelphia, there is a mission for the homeless called "Trevor's Place."

Taken from the hardcover book jacket of Trevor's Place, Frank and Janet Ferrell, Harper & Row, NY, ©1985.

TOPIC: Contentment

Opening Discussion

- What does it mean to be content?
- What things do most people think will make them content? [money, power, things, relationships]
- What would make you content?
- Who is the most content person you know?
- Do you think God wants you to be content?

Scripture

- Read [Ecclesiastes 11:8](#)
- Why is this so hard?
- What do you think it means to “wish your life away?” Do you have a problem with this?
- Most people share this same problem. There’s a bumper sticker that reads: “Life is what happens to you while you’re making other plans.” What do you think that means?
- Read [Philippians 4:12](#) (Paul writes this from prison.)
- What do you think is the “secret” of being content?
- Paul says in [1 Thessalonians 5:18](#) – *Give thanks in all circumstances.*
- What things can you be thankful for?
 - Knowing God is in control.
 - Knowing God is always there . . . He’ll never leave me.
 - Knowing God won’t let me be tempted more than I can handle with His help.
 - Knowing God has a purpose for my life.
 - Knowing God will make good even the bad things that have happened in my life.

Story

Chinese Pastor Story

There was a man in China who had been in prison for thirty years because he was a pastor there. Under Communism it was illegal to teach about Jesus. After he was released he was asked what it was like to be in prison. Certainly the pastor could recount numerous stories of beatings and torture. Instead, he responded, “God has been very good to me.”

(From experiences of Scott Larson while smuggling Bibles into Communist China in 1984.)

Wrap-up

You may feel that you could never be content in the situation that you’re in right now. Both Paul and this Chinese pastor found the secret of contentment even while they were in prison. If you learn that secret now, you will be content in any situation.

TOPIC: Daily Time With God

Opening Discussion

- If there is someone who you really look up to and you had an opportunity to get to know him/her, how would you go about it?
- What kinds of questions would you ask?
- Do you think you would ask for advice?
- How much time do you think it takes to really get to know someone? Spend time together once a month? . . . once a week? . . . once a day? . . . for how long?
- Once you really get to know the person, how much time would you want to spend with him/her? more? less? why?
- Is Jesus someone you would look up to and want to get to know? why?
- How do you think you would go about that?
- If you had the chance, what things would you want to ask Him about?

Scripture

- Read Mark 1:35
Why do you think Jesus needed to spend time with His Father?
- Read Psalm 143:8-12
What will we receive by spending daily time with God? [direction, rescue from enemies, know God's will, His leading in my life, protection from trouble]
- Read Psalm 119:9-16
What other benefits are given? [to be kept pure, kept from sin, taught God's ways]
- How can we spend time with God?
Even if we pray, how does God speak to us? (Bible, Holy Spirit, Others, Circumstances)
How do we know it is God? (will not go against what is in the Bible or the nature of God)

Wrap-up

If you wanted to spend time with your favorite musician or sports here, it wouldn't be possible. But God, the Creator of everything, wants to spend time with you every day! And the benefits you'll receive from spending time with God will far outweigh the sacrifice of time and energy.

TOPIC: Dealing With Uncertainties

Opening Discussion

- What are some things you fear about the future?
- Are there some of these things that you know will happen? [most things uncertain] Which ones? Which ones are you not sure will happen?
- What are some of the ways you deal with the fear of what might happen to you?
- If you could have anything about your future guaranteed, what would it be?
- Do you think God has any guarantees for your future?
- What might they be?

Scripture

- Read the story about Abraham and Isaac:
 - Genesis 15:5-6 What is God promising Abraham? [He is giving him a guarantee.] Explain why it was hard for Abraham to believe he was going to have a son. [He and Sarah were over 90.]
 - Genesis 22:1-18 Read and talk through the story. Talk about why it would be hard to understand that God's promise for Abraham's future still would happen. Why would God have had Abraham go through all this?

Wrap-up

- God has many promises for those of us who trust Him with our lives. We may right now be really uncertain about our future, but He knows all about it.
 - John 3:16 He promises eternal life with Him in heaven.
 - Joshua 1:5 He promises you that He will never leave you.
 - John 10:10 He promises abundant life.
 - Romans 8:28 All things will work together for good.
- Whatever you are facing right now, God is going to walk through it with you. He wants to develop you as a person while you are going through tough times. You are going to be alright with Him at your side.
- If you have never trusted God with your life, you can do that and He will be there for you and help you with the things you are facing.

TOPIC: Drugs and Alcohol

Opening Discussion

- What are some reasons why people use drugs and alcohol?
- Would you say that most people who use drugs would like to quit? Why?
- Do you think there are any positive reasons for using drugs?
- What would be some negative ones?

Attention-getter

- If you had the opportunity to speak about drug and alcohol abuse to a group of third graders, what would you say? [Have different ones in the group actually pretend they are making the speech.]
- What would you want to teach your kids about drugs?
- How could you best teach them? [by example]

Scripture

- Many people say that since many drugs are from plants that God made, then it must be okay to use them to get high. Read Genesis 1:9-13, 27-31.
 - Like most things in life, plants can be used for good or for bad. Hemp for marijuana or for clothing and medicine. Coca for novocain or crack. Poppies for morphine or heroin. It is how we use them that makes them wrong.
- Read John 10:10
 - What does Jesus want to give us? Who is the thief? What does he want?
 - Drugs and alcohol are like the thief: he promises everything—you will feel good, you will have no worries or pain, you will be liked, you will fit in—but he will take everything, fast or slow, he is killing the person you are or the one God says you can be.
- Read Proverbs 23:29-35
 - What can you relate to in this passage?

Wrap-up

God wants us to feel good inside permanently. Drugs and alcohol are a temporary solution to deal with pain that only causes more pain. Ask God to fill the emptiness inside of you with Himself and to help you be free from the pain of alcohol and drug abuse.

TOPIC: Failure

Opening Discussion

- What does it mean to be a failure?
- Does everyone fail?
- When have you felt like you failed?
- What does it feel like to fail?
- Is there a difference between someone who fails and a “failure”? What is the difference?
- Does it sometimes feel like it is not even worth it to try again?
- Do you remember your failures more, your successes more, or both equally?
- Why is it important to remember both? What happens if you only remember the successes? What happens if you remember only your failures?
- Are there times when it seems more comfortable to fail than to succeed? Why? [people already expect me to fail . . . people will have high expectations . . . it’s easier . . . it feels more familiar]

Scripture

- Read Mark 14:66-72 [or Luke 22:31-34, 54-62—discuss all that was going on that night] about Peter’s denial of Jesus after walking with Him for three years.
How do you think Peter felt?
- Read John 21:15-19 on what happened when Jesus saw Peter after the resurrection. [Jesus’ only concern was if Peter still loved him, not that he had failed Him. Jesus never brought it up to Peter again]
- How many times did Jesus ask Peter if he loved Him? [Three – once for each time he failed. Jesus restored him for each failure.]
Why was it important for Jesus to do this three times for Peter?
- What did Jesus tell Peter to do? [Feed My sheep.]
Why? [Gave him responsibility; showed He trusted Peter even when Peter failed.]
- What was the result of this forgiveness and showing of trust? [Peter became a leader of the apostles and three years later, refused to deny Jesus and gave his life for His faith, which helped others to keep strong].

Wrap-up

- Jesus knows we have failed many times. Just like Peter, we have made bad choices that lead to failure. In the middle of our failures God wants us to turn to Him. He does not condemn us. He wants to tell us He still loves us, and He wants to use us. We choose what we do when we fail.

TOPIC: Fears/Trusting Jesus

Opening Discussion

- Has there ever been something that you would really like to try doing, but you never have because you were too nervous? [Example: skydiving]
- What held you back?
- What's scary about trying something new?

Attention-getter

- Read "The Amazing Story of Henry the Ice Cube"
- What was Henry's fear?
- Was Henry happy with his life in the freezer?
- Why was it so hard for Henry to change when he was so miserable anyway?
- Have you ever wanted to change the way your life is going, but have been worried about what would happen to you if you changed?

Scripture

- Read Matthew 14:22-33 (Peter walks on the water)
 - Could all the disciples have walked on the water if they had wanted to?
 - Why was Peter the only one who got to?
 - What happened to Peter after awhile?
 - What made him sink?
 - What kept him from drowning? [Focus; Peter sank when he turned from Jesus; When he came back, Jesus rescued him.]
 - How long did Jesus wait before he helped Peter? [Peter cried out and Jesus immediately helped him]
 - What takes our focus off of Jesus?
 - How do we get it back?

Wrap-up

- Jesus invites us – like He invited Peter to come out on the water – to come and walk with Him through life. If you are feeling miserable the way things are going now, He wants you to take a risk with Him. He says, "I have a better life for you! But you will have to trust me, like Peter had to."
- Sometimes we decide to trust Jesus with our lives and all of a sudden we start to look around at the circumstances and we feel like there is just no way we can make it. That's when things start to fall apart. But Jesus is there for us, as He was for Peter, to pull us up so we can keep our eyes on Him instead of our circumstances.

The Amazing Story of Henry the Ice Cube!!!

Henry was an ice cube. He was a miserable ice cube. He felt frozen, as you can well imagine! And he wanted to be warm and comfortable.

But he was afraid, for somehow he sensed that if he was warmed up he would never be the same again!

So Henry managed to slip out of his tray and hide in a far corner. He was miserable, but in his own way he was safe, and for a while he convinced himself he was comfortable and happy. At times, though, when the door opened and he had to slink in behind a package of meat or under a corn package, he would think: "What a miserable existence! Why can't I be free? Why must I hide and shiver in this cold? If only I could pop out of this freezer and let happen what may!" But he was afraid, and he kept hiding for weeks and months on end.

Then one day he got so miserable he just couldn't take it any longer. He worked his way out past the meat and ice cream to the very edge of the freezer. He was determined not to be taken by whoever it was that took ice cubes, but he decided to expose himself to the outside world whether for better or for worse.

Now his shivering and trembling was out of fear. He even worked up an agonized ice cube type of sweat, for this was a terrifying moment! What happens to an ice cube that wants to be warm? Henry didn't know, but he was going to find out!

Then suddenly the door opened. It came when he didn't expect it. In fact, he was just getting ready to pop back into the far, inner

recesses of the freezer. But there he was, all exposed. He would surely be taken as the first ice cube if he didn't do something in a hurry. So without a second thought he popped out of that freezer in a flash, slithered down the leg of this strange creature who used ice cubes, and plopped gently down on the floor. He wasn't even noticed! Home free! Now he was on his own, fearful though his moment of freedom was for Henry.

He had hardly gotten settled on the floor when the leg moved and a bright sunbeam coming through the window caught Henry full on. How beautiful that sunbeam was, Henry thought! Henry shone and glistened. But he also, as you can well imagine, started to melt! That was, in fact, what made him glisten and shine so brightly.

Nobody really noticed him there as Henry became a glob of cold water, and then a patch of warm water, and then evaporating moisture, and of course nobody noticed him until he became part of a cloud, and then a raindrop (which, of course, most people noticed, although they never really picked Henry out from the rest!) So Henry began a life of great satisfaction. He wasn't cold and frozen anymore, and as he began to realize how much more meaningful life was out here that it had been frozen up into an ice cube . . . well . . . he was just mighty glad he had had enough courage to get out of that freezer in the first place. Things were much better once he had gotten out into the sunshine.

Hubert F. Beck, *Fantasies for Fantastic Christians*, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing, 1977). Used by permission.

TOPIC: Forgiving Others

Opening Discussion

- What do you think is the hardest thing to forgive someone for?
- What makes forgiveness so difficult?
- Do you think forgiveness is necessary?

Story

- Read the story about Jonah
- What made forgiveness the “most powerful force” in the world to Jonah?
- How hard do you think it must have been for that father to forgive Jonah?
- Why would he do it?

Scripture

- Read Matthew 18:21-35 The story of the unforgiving servant
 - What did Jesus mean to forgive 70 x 7 or 77 times? [each time]
 - What did the servant who was forgiven do to the other? Why?
 - What ended up happening to him?
 - This seems harsh, but what was the point Jesus was making? [used it to stress the importance of forgiveness both for the person needing it and the person needing to give it—that gives us freedom.]
- Read James 5:15-16
What does forgiveness do for the person who’s agreeing to forgive?
- Read Mark 11:25-26
Why would God not be able to forgive us if we won’t forgive others?
[Optional: Tell the story of Jacob and Esau’s reconciliation in Genesis 32-33.]

Wrap-up

- Forgiveness is something that we can’t do in our own strength. Yet there is nothing more freeing to both the person being forgiven and the person who is doing the forgiving. It is truly the “most powerful force in the world.”
- Because it is impossible for us to do this by ourselves, we need God to work in our hearts. First, we must confess that we can’t forgive this person in our own strength. Then, we must ask for God’s power to even want to forgive them. Lastly, we can say, “God, I forgive him/her and I ask You to forgive them, too.”

The Story About Jonah

Jonah had finally been caught. Ever since he was a boy on the streets of New York City his life had been full of violence. As a teenager he became deeply involved in the Mafia . . . as a hit man.

By his mid-twenties Jonah was finally convicted on three counts of murder and was sentenced to Attica State Prison. While he was there, the violence continued. Jonah did all that he knew about . . . hurting people. Jonah grew up in an abusive family where his father beat him, his mother, and his siblings. This was the only life Jonah knew.

One Sunday morning in Attica, one of the prison guards woke Jonah up and said he was on the list to go to church. Jonah said, “What? I’ve never been to church . . . I don’t want to go to church . . . I’ll never go to church. Get out of here!”

“Your name is on the list,” the guard said. “You signed up and you have to go.” They argued back and forth for several minutes until Jonah finally got out of bed saying, “Alright, get off my back!”

When Jonah walked into the chapel his mouth dropped. He recognized the guest preacher as the father of one of the guys he had killed. He had seen him every day during the trial in which Jonah was found guilty.

Immediately Jonah thought he had been “set up”, that this man was going to kill him. So when the preacher stopped preaching and walked over to Jonah, he panicked. When the preacher got to him, he said, “Jonah, I love you and I forgive you for what you did to my son.” And then he hugged Jonah.

When Jonah went back to his cell that day his head was spinning. But, it was that phenomenal act of forgiveness from that preacher that brought Jonah to give his life to Jesus Christ. He became active in at least five Bible studies a week. All that mattered to Jonah was getting to know Jesus Christ more and more.

Within a few years, Jonah was released from prison. He spent the first night in a burned-out car along the highway in the Bronx. But he knew that if he stayed there even one more day he’d end up right back in the same old stuff. The only phone number Jonah had was that of a Christian from Massachusetts who came into the prison chapel once a few years earlier. Jonah called him up and he told Jonah he could come up and live with them until he got on his feet.

God began using Jonah to go into some of the Massachusetts juvenile detention centers to share his life with kids.

Truly, forgiveness was the most powerful force Jonah had ever encountered.

TOPIC: Forgiving Yourself

Opening Discussion

- Have you ever had a time in your life when you knew others had forgiven you, but you couldn't forgive yourself?
- Did it matter at all that the other person forgave you?
- What are the things that make it hard to forgive yourself?
- How does it affect you when you can't forgive yourself?
- What problems can come up when someone cannot forgive him or herself?

Story

- Read "Duane's Story"

Scripture

- Read Acts 8:1-4.
[Tell about how Paul had ordered the death of many Christians.]
[Tell about Paul's conversion (Acts 9:1-28).]
- Read 1 Timothy 1:12-16.
What made it possible for Paul to forgive himself?
Do you think God would do the same for you?
- Read Isaiah 43:25, Jeremiah 31:34 and 1 John 1:9.

Story

- Read the story of "Repeated Sins"

Wrap-up

- While it is hard to forgive others, sometimes forgiving yourself is even harder. Yet it is essential if we're going to move on with our lives. Someone once said, "Seventy percent of people in mental institutions could go home tomorrow if they knew they were forgiven."
- If God, who is perfect, can forgive and forget our sins, we need to ask Him to help us forgive ourselves, too.

Duane's Story

Duane had been having nightmares while he was in detention. It was the first time he had time to think about what he had done.

Every night he would see his victim and how he hurt him so badly. No matter how hard Duane tried to block it out of his mind, the nightmares wouldn't go away. He dreaded when he would have to go to sleep.

*Duane was in a detention center Bible study that Scott & Hanne Larson led in Massachusetts.

Repeated Sins

There is a man who has been involved in some sinful pattern for longer than he cares to think about. How many times he has confessed this miserable sin to God, promising that he would never do it again? And how here he is again, confessing the same thing: "Lord, I could die with shame. Again and again I have done this thing. I confess it to you, and promise that I will never, ever sin this way again. Will you forgive me?" From heaven come words, "I forgive you. It is all forgotten. You are clean to start over again."

So that man feels wonderfully free. God has forgiven him. What more can he ask? All afternoon he revels in the belief that he will never fall into that same sin again. And then, that very night, temptation comes to him and he fails.

Well, he can hardly pray. Wasn't it just that morning he fervently promised God he would never sin that way again? He almost makes up his mind not to pray at all because he is so embarrassed. He will just ignore it, and maybe God won't notice. But his guilty conscience gets to him, and finally he begins to talk to God.

"God, I'm so embarrassed I can hardly talk to you. I did it again."

"Did what?"

"That sin. The one we talked about just this morning."

"That's funny. I don't remember any sin."

Philip Yancey and Tim Stafford, Unhappy Secrets of the Christian Life, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 199), p 60.

TOPIC: Friendships

Opening Discussion

- How many new people do you think you meet each year?
- How many of those do you consider friends?
One statistic says that the average person meets 2,500 new acquaintances per year, and out of that only seven would be considered as friends.
- Do you think there are different levels of friendship?
John Powell's five levels¹ (each one is more meaningful and risky):
 - (1) *Hey, how are you doing? What's up?*
 - (2) Share basic information: *Did you see the Bull's game last night?*
 - (3) Offer opinion: *I don't agree with what you're doing.*
 - (4) Share feelings: *I feel hurt by what you said.*
 - (5) Complete openness; share everything.
- What's the deepest friendship you've ever had?
- What are the necessary qualities of a good friendship? [trust, able to share openly, common interests, etc.]
- What are the benefits of having a really good friend?
- Do you think Jesus would make a good friend? Why or why not?
- Do you think that Jesus would want to be your friend?
- At what level is your friendship with Him right now?
- What do you want it to be?

Scripture

- Let's look at some of the qualities of friendship Jesus has:
John 14:6 – *truthful*
Isaiah 25:9 – *trustworthy*
Proverbs 18:24 – *always there*
Psalms 139:1-4 – *knows me completely*
John 15:9-17—what does Jesus say about Friendship? Why is He our friend?
If you have time, start with the story of Jonathan and David, 1 Samuel 20

Closing Story

- Read the story about Joe (pg. 22).

Wrap-up

- Have the hard times in your life served to strengthen your friendship with Jesus or hurt it?
- How could Jesus be a friend to you now?
- How does a friendship with Jesus begin?
- Read Romans 10:5-13 [explain the Gospel]

¹ John Powell, Why Am I Afraid to Tell You Who I am? (Niles, Illinois: Argus Communications, 1969).

The Story About Joe

Joe grew up in Roxbury, Massachusetts, always in trouble as a kid. Alcohol, drugs, violence, in and out of juvenile halls. These were just the normal ingredients in Joe's life.

When he was seventeen, Joe's girlfriend caught him cheating on her. This made her furious. Finding a way to get Joe back became her motivation for living. One day in Roxbury, a murder was committed. The police had no suspects in the case and were pleading on the television for anyone with information to please call in. "This is it!" thought Joe's ex-girlfriend. "This is how I can get him back."

She called the Boston Police Department and said she knew who had committed the horrible crime. "It was Joe," she said. Later that day Joe was arrested. The trial went quickly. With one eye-witness to testify about the crime, Joe was quickly convicted and sentenced to life without parole.

After several miserable years of bitterness and anger in prison, Joe began attending chapel services in the prison. It was there that he surrendered his life to Jesus Christ.

Over time Joe was able to forgive his ex-girlfriend for what she had done to him. He even

began to have a desire in his heart for her to come to know Jesus Christ herself. One day he asked the Bible study leader who had led him to Christ if he would go and share the same message with her. He agreed and went to see her. That night she also received Jesus into her heart.

A couple of months later she called the Bible study leader and confessed that she had made up the entire story about Joe committing the murder in Roxbury. She said she now wanted to come clean and tell the truth. He told her that doing so could mean that she could serve time for perjury. She said she knew, but wanted to do what was right.

That happened several years ago, and up to now, no judge has been willing to re-hear the case. But the amazing thing is that Joe, after nearly twenty years in prison, says about the years he has served: "They have been the best years of my life. This is where I found Jesus, and because of Him, my life has been full for the first time. He's my best friend, and I wouldn't trade that for anything."

*As told by Don Moberger of Burlington, MA, who led Joe and his girlfriend to Christ.

TOPIC: God's Plan Too Simple?

Attention-getter

- Tell the kids that you have a way for all of them to get out tonight. Tell them all they need to do is stand up and turn around three times while they're clapping.

Discussion

- Why didn't you all do it? [Did it seem too simple?]
- If I had come up with a complicated plan, would you have believed me more?
- If I had been a well-known magician, would you have believed me?

Scripture

- Read 2 Kings 5:1-14 [talk it through with the kids]
 - Why did Naaman almost walk away?
 - What if he had only dipped six times?
 - Was the river magic?
 - What really healed him?
 - What was God trying to teach Naaman by making him do all that?
 - What is in our lives that we need God to help us and heal us?
 - What is His solution for us? What does He ask us to do?
 - Is that plan too simple? Why not?

Wrap-up

- We are not all suffering from leprosy, but there is sin in our lives that messes up our lives. We need a cure!
- God has a solution, just as He did for Naaman.
- Read 1 Corinthians 1:21-25 [explain the Gospel]
- Just as Naaman had to humble himself and obey God, we also have to humble ourselves and admit we can't fix our lives on our own. We have to be willing to do it God's way in order for Him to heal us.

TOPIC: God's Plans vs. Our Plans

Opening Discussion

- If you could do anything with your life, what would you want to do?
- How much time do you spend planning for the future?
- If “hope for the future” was on a scale of 1 to 10, 1 being “no hope for me” and 10 being “I have great, great hope for the future”, where would you rate yourself right now?
- Do you think God has any plans for you?
- What do you think they might be?

Story

- Read “A Little Boy and His Dream” story
- Why wouldn't Billy's dad give him the red wagon he wanted? [he had something much better in mind]
- How is that like our relationship to God? [we think we really know what we need and want, and don't trust that God has the best for us]

Scripture

- Read Jeremiah 29:11
What does it say about God's plans for you? [to prosper you; not harm you; give you hope; give you a future]
Why is it so hard to just trust God's plans instead of trying to rely on our own?
- Tell the story of Moses:
How many of you saw the movie “The Ten Commandments”?
What do you know about Moses?
Read Exodus 2:11-15
What was Moses' plan? [to free the Israelites]
How did he go about it? [killed an Egyptian]
Where did it get him? [running for his life in the wilderness for forty years]
Read Exodus 3:1-11
What was God's plan for Moses? [free the two million Israelite slaves]
How did He want to go about it? [Moses opening Red Sea and doing miracles]
How was God's plan compared to Moses'? [much greater]
- How do you think we can find out what God's plan is?
 - Proverbs 3:5-6
 - Psalms 32:8
 - Psalms 73:24

Wrap-up

God's plans make ours look worthless by comparison. To know God's plan requires spending time with Him, reading and praying, so He can show us what they are.

A Little Boy and His Dream

Billy had seen the greatest thing today. He saw one of his friends on a little red wagon. Oh, he wanted a wagon like that!

What he couldn't do with a wagon like that!

Every day he would ask his father for such a gift as that red wagon. His father didn't respond to Billy and his requests.

Finally, Billy asked him point blank, "Dad, are you going to get me that red wagon or not?" His father said, "No, I'm not going to get you that red wagon, Billy." Billy got so mad at his father, that he wouldn't even speak to him any more. His father had denied him the one thing that he really wanted most in life.

When Billy's birthday came a few months later, Billy wasn't even excited about what gifts he might receive. All he knew was that he wasn't going to get that red wagon. Billy's dad brought out his present, and as Billy opened it he was shocked.

No, it wasn't a red wagon, it was a brand new beautiful red bicycle! He couldn't believe it! None of his friends had anything like that! He wouldn't even think of asking for such a gift.

TOPIC: God's Way, Not Ours

Opening Discussion

- Do you think God would ever ask a person to do something that was not humanly possible? Why, or why not?
- Can you think of anything in your own life that God might be asking you to do or give up which seems impossible for you to do in your own strength?
- Why would God do that to you?

Scripture

- Read about Gideon in Judges 7:1-22.
 - Why do you think God kept asking Gideon to make his army smaller?
 - Do you think it was humanly impossible to beat the enemy?
 - How do you think our own strength sometimes could get in the way of God doing things?
 - What would be some situations where God might ask you to trust Him, when it otherwise seems foolish to do what He's asking you to do?

Story

Read the story about Frank Costantino

- Why was Frank's decision humanly foolish?
- What made God's way better for Frank?
- Are there some decisions in your life that you know God has an opinion on which seems humanly stupid?

Wrap-up

- Read and discuss Proverbs 3:5-6

God gives us a promise that it always pays off for us to do things His way. God doesn't always give us the proof up front – Frank didn't know what the outcome was going to be. All he had was the same promise we have which we just read in Proverbs. Start trusting Him and you will see Him turn your life around.

Frank Costantino's Story

"Parole!" They could buy a parole! Wow! My head spun with the possibilities which were pouring through my brain. Bunny jumped up out of her chair and came and threw her arms around me and there were tears of joy in her eyes.

Wow! I'm through it! I'm through it! I couldn't think of anything else except that I had built all of this time and now I wasn't going to have to build any more. I was through it! It was like coming around the last curve in a long tunnel and seeing the daylight flooding in at the other end.

The Judge's voice broke through my excitement, "They have to lay out a lot of money for this, Frank, and they want you to agree it's a debt that you owe."

"I understand," I said.

I knew better than he knew and anger surged up inside me as I began to think of what that might involve. I began to see a picture of me going to pay my debt and the guy I saw wasn't the Frank Costantino who had walked in that chapel door ten minutes ago, it was the Frank Costantino who had come to court that morning in Miami, convinced he would never be convicted and even more convinced that if he were convicted, he'd never serve a day of the time.

The adrenaline was pumping. I felt as if somebody had swung one of those big, curved oriental swords with the blade about six inches wide at my head and had just barely missed.

"Judge," I said, "I thank you. I thank you for your interest in me and my family," and here I took a deep breath, "but I'm a Christian now. I've given my life to Jesus Christ."

The judge looked startled and he paled.

"What I'm about to say now, Judge, my wife might think this is very cruel to her, but for the first time in my life, I have peace of mind and I'd rather do every day of those twenty-two years with Jesus than to walk out of here without Him and leave Him behind."

I walked over to Bunny, kissed her, walked to the door and turned back into the room, looking at the judge on last time.

"Tell my friends I said thank you, but no thank you."

. . . and I turned around and walked out of that office and back to my dorm.

. . . It had been one and a half years since I turned down the judge's offer. After serving four years on my 22-1/2 year sentence for burglary, I was being sent to Kissimmee, Florida, on work release.

. . . I thought of the many times we had knelt in prayer together asking God to open the prison doors for me. The day had finally arrived. God had honored my step of commitment to follow Him and to do things right this time around. Many of my friends thought I was crazy when I turned down the judge, but it had paid off and now I had a fresh start with no favors owed.

Frank Costantino, *Holes in Time* (Dallas: Acclaimed Books, 1979), p. 203-208.

TOPIC: Habits

Opening Discussion

- What is a habit? What habits do people have?
- Have you ever had a habit you have tried to break?
- What is hard about breaking a habit?

Story

- Read “Creatures of Habit”
- Why didn’t the animals go into the new barn?
- What’s so hard about changing?
- Are there times when you’ve wanted to change [behavior, attitudes] and have known it would be better, but have still chosen the old way? Why?
- The Bible says it is totally impossible to change from the outside in.

Scripture and Wrap-up

- Read 2 Peter 2:22 [explain it]
- Discuss passage as you read John 3:1-8 [you must be born again]
What does it mean to be “born again”? [God makes us new from the inside out. Our actions change because we become new people.]
- Read 2 Corinthians 5:17

Creatures of Habit

Hiram was a good man – a good farmer, too. The crops had paid off well at the last harvest, and he and his wife felt quite snug and secure in their little home now that winter was coming on.

Only one thing bothered Hiram – the old barn. Its roof was leaky, there were a few boards rotted off the sides, and the dirt floor was uneven so that puddles collected when it rained. Hiram was a sensitive soul who really loved his animals, and he winced to remember last winter when the worst storm blew sleet right through the old barn from one end to the other. The horses' water froze solid, and the little calves had ugly yellow icicles hanging from their muzzles.

Rising from his chair so quickly that he startled his wife, Hiram went to the phone and called Moco Edwards. "That new barn I was talking to you about?" he reminded Moco. "I want it. Start right away so it'll be finished before real cold weather sets in."

Nothing had pleased Hiram so much in a long time as watching that new barn go up. It pleased Moco, too, because Hiram had insisted that nothing but the best materials and workmanship go into it. He and his wife were going to be mighty comfortable this winter in their house, Hiram reasoned, so why shouldn't his animals be comfortable, too? He had even had a thermostatically controlled heater installed.

As it happened, the finishing touches on the new barn were completed just the day before

the first cold snap was due to hit. An orderly man who liked to do things one clear step at a time, Hiram had Moco's workmen tear down the old barn that very day, leaving nothing but the outline of the old foundation.

That night Hiram proudly ushered his animals into their new home and pulled the doors shut, warm and tight. In his warm bed Hiram enjoyed not having to worry about his animals, and not feeling guilty about them being in a cold, drafty barn while he was in a snug house.

Next morning Hiram and the Mrs. set out early for town, leaving the barn doors open for the animals in case it should turn bad. While they were in town the wind began to blow, it began to rain, and the temperature dropped to freezing, turning the rain into sleet. Hiram didn't feel a bit uneasy though, thinking of his cattle and horses filing into the new barn.

When they returned to the farm early that evening, Hiram went out to the barn. When his eyes grew accustomed to the darkness of the warm inside, he saw that there wasn't a single animal there.

Puzzled and frightened, he ran outside to scan the fields, seeing nothing. Then behind the barn he saw all of his animals. Miserable, huddled together with drifts of sleet and snow heaped upon their backs, his cattle and horses stood within the vague outline of the foundation where the old barn had once stood.

Author Unknown

TOPIC: Hardened Hearts

Opening Discussion

- Do you know anyone who you would call a “hard” person?
- Do you think that person was always that way?
- What kinds of things make a person hard?
- Are there some experiences in your life that have made you hard?
- How can you tell from the outside that a person is hard? [actions, attitudes]
- Do you know a soft-hearted person? What is that person like?
- Have you ever had an experience that softened you?
- Do you think people’s hearts ever get hardened toward God?
- What kinds of things make people hard toward God? What softens them?

Story

- Read the story about Bob Erler
[Discuss what made Bob Erler soft toward God, and how that changed his life.]

Scripture

- Read Hebrews 3:12-15 [explain and discuss]

Wrap-up

There may have been a lot of things in your life that have caused you to get hard. Jesus really loves YOU and wants to soften your life like he did for Bob Erler. So don’t let your heart be hardened. Let Jesus into your life to cleanse you from all wrong. You can become brand new on the inside.

The Story of Bob Erler

Bob Erler was on escape from Florida State Prison where he had been serving time for being convicted of a double murder. He had changed his name and was now involved with organized crime in Florida. One day, while he was living in a small town waiting for a package to arrive containing a semi-automatic rifle, things began to unravel.

When he went to the post office, things looked suspicious. It turned out that the package had broken open and the gun had fallen out while they were sorting the mail. The post office called the police and they were waiting for Bob to pick up the gun.

Suspecting something was up, Bob quickly walked out of the post office and took off in his car. Soon, a fleet of police officers were trailing him. It turned into a 100-mile-an-hour chase. The police shot over 100 bullets into the car before Bob finally hit an embankment and rolled the car.

He got out of the car and continued to run and the Chief of Police chased him on foot, yelling for him to stop. Bob began a string of profanities telling him to kill him. Finally the Chief shot him with a bullet to stop him.

Back in the jail cell, the Chief told Bob, "I love you and Jesus loves you" and gave Bob a Bible. He just swore at him and told him, "If you want to say something to me, come in and fight me like a man!"

After several months in an isolation cell because of repeated suicide attempts, a group of professional Christian athletes came to the jail to put on a program. Two of the men, Roger Staubach (former quarterback for the Dallas Cowboys) and Paul Andersen (the world's strongest man) had heard about Bob Erler (the

notorious "Catch-Me Killer"). They asked the warden if they could talk to Bob.

The warden said they could, but that he was a dangerous man and would have to be shackled. The two men asked the warden to make an exception, and the warden reluctantly agreed.

They told Bob how God had a plan for his life, and if he gave his life to Christ, He would turn it around. Miraculously, that day Bob prayed to receive Jesus.

When he went back to his cell, nothing really felt any different. He began to read his Bible but he didn't understand it. He prayed for the first time in his life, "God, if you're really there, all I ask of you is that you let me see my son, Bobby. He's fourteen years old now and I haven't seen or heard from him since he was a baby."

The next day it was announced that Bob had a visitor. It would be his first visitor since being locked up. When he went to the visiting room, he saw the image of himself as his son, Bobby, stood there before him. He began to cry loudly, hugged his son and thanked Jesus for how He had shown him that He was real.

Bob began to grow in faith. Eventually he finished Bible college through correspondence courses, became an ordained minister, and baptized over 600 other inmates. He knew he would die in prison, for he was serving a sentence of 99-1/2 years, but he was committed to living every day of his life in service to Jesus.

Some years later, Bob received a full pardon from the governor, citing "a complete change of character" as the reason. Today Bob travels around the world speaking in prisons and churches about the power of God to soften a hardened heart and change a man forever.

Taken from the video Bob Erler Testimony, Cons for Christ Prison Ministries, Inc., Fredericton, CA, 1989.

TOPIC: How to Live the Christian Life

Opening Discussion

- What do you think it means to be a Christian?
- Who's the strongest Christian you know?
- What do you think makes a person a strong Christian?
- Have you ever tried to live the Christian life and felt like you failed at it?
- Do you agree or disagree with the statement, "It's impossible to live the Christian life"? Why or why not?

Scripture

- Read [Galatians 2:20](#)
- Read [John 15:1-15](#) (the vine and the branches)
- What do you think these verses mean? [The Christian life can only be lived by Christ. Our part is to allow Him to live His life through us.]
- Why do farmers prune branches? [to produce better crops]
- How is this different than trying to be a good person?
- What are some ways that we can stay connected to Jesus?
- What does loving each other have to do with being a Christian and staying connected with Jesus?
- How is being a Christian different than other religions? [Others are based on *what you do to get to God*. Christianity is based on *what Christ did for you so you can get to God*. In other religions, people are doing things to reach Go. In Christianity, it is God who reached down to us through Jesus.]

Wrap-up

Sometimes we get so frustrated trying to live the Christian life that we don't even realize we're trying to do it on our own. Jesus never intended for us to try doing what's impossible. Instead, He wants us to turn to Him and ask Him to live His life through us.

TOPIC: Hurts

Opening Discussion

- What kinds of things hurt people?
- How have you been hurt?
- How does getting hurt affect us and how we relate to people?
- Do you sometimes feel like no one understands?
- What are some things people do to forget about their hurts?
- Do you think it makes a difference that God says He cares?
- Do you think He can relate to how you feel?

Attention-getter

Read “God Leads a Pretty Sheltered Life”

Scripture

- Read [John 4:7-18, 25-30, 39-42](#) [explain about the woman most likely being an outcast since she was there by herself, and explain the story as you go along, emphasizing that Jesus offered her living water even when he knew she was not living right—he knew that she was hurting]
 - Explain in verse 13 how getting thirsty again relates to our attempts to get rid of our hurts [only temporary solutions]
 - Explain in verse 14 that God’s solution brings lasting results.
 - Explain in verses 16-18 that Jesus knows her need for love, and that she’s been trying to get it through men, but it hasn’t worked.
 - What are some ways you’ve tried to fill your needs, but it hasn’t worked?

Wrap-up

Jesus comes to you as He did to the woman at the well, not expecting your life to be perfect. He knows exactly what you need. The new life He is talking about is the only thing that will be able to heal your hurts permanently. [Explain how kids can get this new life.]

God Leads a Pretty Sheltered Life

At the end of time, billions of people were scattered on a great plain before God's throne.

Most shrank back from the brilliant light before them. But some groups near the front talked heatedly – not with cringing shame, but with belligerence.

“Can God judge us? How can he know about suffering?” snapped a pert young brunette. She ripped open a sleeve to reveal a tattooed number from a Nazi concentration camp. “We endured terror . . . beatings . . . torture . . . death!”

In another group a black boy lowered his collar. “What about this?” he demanded, showing an ugly rope burn. “Lynched . . . for no crime but being black!”

In another crowd was a pregnant schoolgirl with sullen eyes. “Why should I suffer,” she murmured, “It wasn't my fault.”

Far out across the plain there were hundreds of such groups. Each had a complaint against God for the evil and suffering he permitted in his world. How lucky God was to live in heaven where all was sweetness and light, where there was no weeping or fear, no hunger or hatred. What did God know of all that man had been forced to endure in this world? For God leads a pretty sheltered life, they said.

So each of these groups sent forth their leader, chosen because he had suffered the most:

a Jew, a black, a person from Hiroshima, a horribly deformed arthritic. In the center of the plain they consulted each other. At last they were ready to present their case. It was rather clever.

Before God could be qualified to be their judge, He must endure what they had endured. Their decision was that God should be sentenced to live on earth – as a man!

“Let him be born a Jew. Let the legitimacy of his birth be doubted. Give him a work so difficult that even his family thinks him out of his mind when he tries to do it. Let him be betrayed by his closest friends. Let him face false charges, be tried by a prejudiced jury and convicted by a cowardly judge. Let him be tortured.”

“At the last, let him see what it means to be terribly alone. Then let him die. Let him die so that there can be no doubt that he died. Let there be a great host of witnesses to verify it.”

As each leader announced his portion of the sentence, loud murmurs of approval went up from the throng of people assembled.

And when the last had finished pronouncing sentence, there was a long silence. No one uttered another word. No one moved. For suddenly all knew that God had already served his sentence.

P. T. Forsythe, *Justification of God*, p. 32.

TOPIC: Is God Fair?

Opening Discussion

- Have any of you ever been blamed for something you didn't do?
- Were you punished for it?
- How did that make you feel?
- Whose fault was it? [Who did you blame?]

Story

- Read Part A of the "Harold Morris Story"
 - If you had a relationship with God, do you think things like that would happen to you?
 - Do all things go well for godly people?
 - Then what difference would it make to give your life to God?

Scripture

- Read Genesis 39
 - What do you think made Joseph not go to bed with Potiphar's wife? [vs. 9]
 - What did God do for Joseph?
 - How do you think Joseph felt about God while he was in prison?
 - How could he have reacted? [Briefly explain what happened while he was in prison: he never turned his back on God or blamed Him.]
- Read Genesis 41:37-43 [Explain how God honored his obedience even when things didn't look good for him.]
- Read Part B of the "Harold Morris Story"

Wrap-up

- God promises in Romans 8:28 that if you trust God, He will produce good things in your life even through the worst situations.
- We always have a choice in how we react to our situation. We can become bitter, or we can trust that God will work things out for the best.

The Harold Morris Story

Part A

Harold Morris grew up an OK kid. Sure, he partied more than he should have, was never too faithful to any one girlfriend, didn't care much about school . . . but he wasn't much different than any of his other friends, and in fact, he was better than most of them.

After getting through high school, he was with a couple of party friends when one of them told Harold to pull his car over at a convenience store. They told Harold to stay in the car while they held up the small store for some cash. After several minutes, the two guys came running out yelling, "Drive! Drive!"

"What's going on?!" Harold demanded after they'd gotten a ways out of town. He knew from the looks on his friends' faces that something had gone wrong.

"The jerk wanted to be a hero. He went for the alarm to call the cops. I pulled a gun on him and told him stay away from the alarm, but he wouldn't listen to me."

"What?! You shot a guy? Are you crazy?!" Harold screamed. "Is he dead, or what?"

"No, no he's fine, I just shot him in the leg. Keep driving."

Shortly after that Harold moved to Atlanta, ditched that crowd and tried to start over. Before long he found himself right back with the same old stuff. Parties every night, not able to hold down a job, a string of girlfriends . . .

One night Harold received a call from an old girlfriend who had caught up with him.

"Harold, what's going on? I just saw your picture on the front page of the newspaper. You're wanted for murder!"

"What?! That convenience store worked must have died. Wait a minute. I had nothing to do with it. I was in the car. It wasn't even my idea . . ."

"Well, you're in a lot of trouble, Harold."

Within a couple of days the police arrested Harold. At the trial, both of his so-called friends testified to the fact that Harold shot the man. Harold was given two consecutive life sentences at Georgia State Prison, while his buddies walked.

Part B

After serving twelve years in Georgia State Prison, Harold Morris knelt in a roach-infested cell and gave his life to Jesus Christ. God began to do a great work in Harold.

Sometime later, the prison began allowing him to speak at local high schools about the negative effects of drugs, sex, and crime. Harold had committed to serving Christ in that prison and to being God's light there for the rest of his days. But God had other plans.

In 1984, the Governor of Georgia signed a full and complete pardon for Harold Morris, freeing him from prison and from even having a criminal record. Since that day he has been serving Jesus Christ with his life, speaking to thousands of youth about how God can take a life that was going nowhere and change it forever.

Taken from Twice Pardoned by Harold Morris (Colorado Springs, Colorado: Focus on the Family Publishing, 1986).

TOPIC: Lasting Change

Opening Discussion

- How many of you have said to yourself while you were in here or at another treatment center, “I really want to change when I get out” or “I really want things to be different”?
- How has it worked so far for you?
- What’s so hard about changing?
- Do you ever feel frustrated about it?
- What about God, do you think He can make a difference?
- Some people say, “I’ve tried God, but it didn’t work for me.” What do you think they mean by that?
- What does it mean to have it work?

Scripture

- [Tell about Paul. He was a very committed Christian and yet he wrote [Romans 7:15-8:1](#).]
- Have you ever felt like Paul?
- Can you think of a time when you really wanted to do the right thing, but ended up doing just the opposite?

Before Paul was a Christian, all he had was the old nature. Now he has the old and the new natures battling. Do you ever feel like there’s a battle going on inside of you?
- What things determine which nature wins the battle? [the nature you feed]
- What things in your life right now are feeding the old nature?
- What things are feeding the new?

Wrap-up

Trying to starve the old nature, and feeding the new nature is impossible to do in our own strength. Even Paul couldn’t do it on his own. Read Romans 8:1 again. He realized it was only when he gave up trying on his own that Jesus could live through him.

TOPIC: Loneliness

Opening Discussion

- Do you know someone who is lonely?
- What makes that person feel lonely?
- Are there times in your life when you have felt lonely?
- What does that feel like?
- When you feel lonely, what is your greatest wish?
- Have you ever felt lonely in a group of people?

Story

- Read the story about Nicky Cruz. [Explain how he was a gang member in New York City.]
- What made Nicky Cruz feel lonely when he seemingly had a lot of friends?
- Have you had similar feelings? When?
- The preacher kept saying, “Jesus loves you.” How can that make a difference for a person who is lonely? [Tell about how Nicky Cruz later gave his life to Christ and how it gave him a new purpose to live and a feeling of never being alone.]

Scripture

Read [Psalm 139:3-12, 17-18](#)

Wrap-up

We have all had times in our lives when we felt lonely and empty inside. As we just read in the Bible, God is there all the time even when we feel the worst. We have to choose, just as Nicky did, whether we want God to be personally involved in our lives so He can fill the emptiness with His love. Once we have a relationship with Him, we will never be alone again.

Nicky Cruz Story

I tried to stare him down, but he kept talking. “Nicky, I’m not scared of you. You talk tough, but inside you’re just like all the rest of us. You’re sick of your sin. You’re lonely. But Jesus loves you.”

Something clicked. How did he know that I was lonely? I didn’t know what he was talking about when he said sin. I was afraid to admit my fear. But how did he know I was lonely? The gang was always with me. I had any of the girls I wanted. People were afraid of me – they would see me coming and move off the sidewalk and into the street. I had been the leader of the gang. How could anyone think I was lonely? And yet I was. And now this preacher knew it.

I tried to get smart. “You believe you are going to change me just like that?” I said, snapping my fingers. “You think I’m going to hear you and pick up a Bible and walk around like a preacher and people are going to start saying Nicky Cruz – angel – saint?” But I realized that he meant business. That he was sincere.

“Nicky, you didn’t sleep much last night, did you?” Again I was amazed. How did he know that I hadn’t slept?

Wilkerson continued, “I didn’t sleep much last night either, Nicky. I stayed awake most of the night praying for you. But before I did, I talked to some of your boys. They tell me that no one can get close to you. They are all afraid of you. But Nicky, I’ve come to tell you that

somebody does care. Jesus cares. He loves you.” And then he looked me straight in the face, “One day soon, Nicky, God’s Spirit is going to deal with you. One day, Nicky, you are going to stop running and come running to Him.”

I said no more. I got to my feet and turned my back on him and walked back into my apartment, shutting the door behind me. I climbed the steps to my room and sat on the side of the bed looking out the window. His car was already gone when I looked down. In the east, the sky was beginning to turn a rosy hue. The huge building across the street that housed Brooklyn Tech blocked my view of the horizon. But suddenly, like catching a whiff of the sea when you’re still miles up the river, I had a feeling there was more to life than this. More than these towering concrete buildings – these prison walls of glass and stone.

I thought of his words, “One day you will stop running, and come running to Him.” I didn’t even know who He was. But I thought, sitting there on the side of my bed looking out over the trash-filled street with the sound of the trucks grinding and roaring down the thoroughfare, that He must be something like the sun rising out of the ocean on a cloudless day. Or maybe something like the morning star that still hung in the dawning sky. Maybe . . . Someday . . .

The time was closer than I knew.

Nicky Cruz, Run Baby Run (Old Tappan, NJ: Spire Books, 1964), pg. 114-115.

TOPIC: Looking Back/Moving On With God

Opening Discussion

- Have you ever had an experience where God really did something for you, or where you really felt He was real?
- What were your feelings about God right then?
- Have those first feelings changed? How?

Scripture

- Read Exodus 15:19-24.
 - What are some things that have happened to you that made you doubt God or think that what He did for you wasn't real?
 - Do you sometimes feel that things were easier before you met God?
- Read Exodus 15:25-27.
 - What did God do for the people?
 - Why do you think God told Moses to throw the wood into the water instead of just turning the water sweet right away?
 - Are there things you think God might be asking you to do for you to see Him work in your life again?
- Read Exodus 16:1-3.
 - Do you ever look back and think that the old life was much better, before you let God start changing you?
- Read Exodus 1:11-14.
 - How was it different than what they remembered?
 - When we look back, how do we remember things differently than they really were?
 - What were some things God wanted to teach them in the desert?
 - What are some things God might want to teach us when the feelings aren't as strong as at first? [trust]
 - Do you think there was a punishment for the people of Israel for continuing to not trust God?
- Read Numbers 14:2-4, 20-23.
 - What do you think would be the consequences for us to not trusting God?

Wrap-up

God has great plans for all of us. We need to learn to trust Him even when things are tough. He never forgets about us even when we don't feel Him as strong as we have in the past. If we keep looking back and not trusting God in the situation we are in right now, we may never see all the great things God has ahead for us.

TOPIC: Love

Opening Discussion

- What do you think about when you hear the word “love”?
- What are some definitions for the word love?
- How would you define love?
- Do you think that everyone needs love?
- Are there different kinds of love?

“IF” Love If you make me feel good . . .
 If you look good . . .
 If you do what I want you to . . .

“BECAUSE” Love Because you are my mother . . .
 Because you have the same interests that I do . . .
 Because you hang around with me . . .

“ANYHOW” Love No matter what you do, I still love you!
 This is what real love is.
 This is what we all really need.

Scripture

- Romans 5:8 [Explain]
- 1 Corinthians 13:4-8a [Discuss]
 - Have you ever been loved like that?

Story

- Read “Tom’s Story”

Wrap-up

- It seems impossible to get that kind of love, so we lower our standards for love and we end up never really being loved or loving others. If we have never received real love, we will have a hard time really loving others.
- You can receive real love from God if you want it. He has already extended it to each of us. It’s there whether you believe it or not, but to experience it in your life you must accept it like any other gift.

Tom's Story

Tom had been in and out of trouble all his life. At fifteen he joined a local gang. Problems at home, problems in school, problems with everyone . . . It seemed nothing and no one could reach Tom.

One week a Christian singing group came to Tom's town. They were doing concerts in different churches throughout the city. Tom learned where their first concert was and was determined to disrupt it. He drove his motorcycle around the church, roaring the engine so loud that people could hardly hear inside.

The second night Tom sat in the back of the church and disrupted the group as they gave testimonies about their lives. When the concert was over, one of the musicians came over to Tom. Tom was looking forward to a big argument. The musician instead thanked Tom for coming and asked if he would like to go out for something to eat with the group when they

finished packing up their equipment. Tom quickly said, "No way. I don't want anything to do with you religious fanatics. Leave me alone!"

This same routine continued all week. Wherever the group was performing, Tom would be there trying to disrupt it. And the group would be loving Tom in return, trying to reach out to him . . . and praying for him, as well.

By the end of the week, when the band gave an invitation for anyone who wanted to receive Jesus Christ as their personal Savior, guess who walked in the back door and down to the front of the church? They hadn't even seem Tom that night . . . but he had been sitting outside listening.

Tom said, "No matter how much I tried to get you guys to hate me, you only kept loving me more. There must be something to this Jesus you keep talking about."

Taken from Feeling Good by Tom Eggum (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1979).

TOPIC: Making Decisions

Opening Discussion

- How many times per day do you think you have to make a decision? [the average person makes over 2,000/day]
- What are some of the toughest decisions you have to make?
- What are some decisions you have made that you have regretted?
- How could you have avoided making that wrong decision?
- What are some of the things you look at, or should take into consideration, when you have to make a tough decision? [consequences, who will be affected, etc.]

Attention-getter

- Point to a span on the wall that's about seven feet long [see example below]

{age 15-20} {..... rest of your life}

 ↗

- Every decision you make in this small section of time now, directly affects the rest of the line (rest of your life).
- What consequences are you experiencing now which are the result of decisions you made earlier in your life?

Scripture

- Read Proverbs 13:20. How have friends influenced your decision making?
 - Do you think God could play a role in your decision making? How?
- Read Psalms 16:7-8.
 - How can God counsel us?
 - How can we know if it is God we're hearing?
- Read Isaiah 30:21.
 - Have any of you ever experienced that?
 - Do you think God gives direction to everyone?
 - Who does He give direction to? Proverbs 3:5-8

Wrap-up

- We can choose to trust God with our lives so we won't have to keep making so many poor decisions.
- God knows the future and knows today which decisions would be best for us to make.
- God wants to be a friend to us, who can help us live one step at a time in the best possible way.

TOPIC: Money

Opening Discussion

- What are some of the advantages of having a lot of money?
- How would your life be different if you were really rich?
- Would it make a difference to you how you became rich?
- How do you feel differently about money you worked hard for vs. money that came real easy?
- What do you think this Proverb means?

Money made in haste grows wings and flies away. (Prov 23:5)

- How much money do you think it would take to make you happy?

Story

Read the story of John Rockefeller.

Scripture

- Read Proverbs 23:1-8.
 - What are these verses talking about?
 - What does it mean that evil men's kindness is a trick?
 - Have you ever experienced being tricked by evil men? How did it turn sour?
- Read Luke 12:15-21 (the parable of the rich fool).
 - Why does the story say that real life and real living are not related to how rich we are?
 - Why does God call the man a fool?
 - What does it mean to get rich in heaven?
 - Do you think God is saying it is wrong to make a lot of money?
- Read 1 Timothy 6:17-19.
 - What does God tell those who are rich not to do?
 - How does a person put his trust in money? How would that affect his/her life?
 - What does God promise us if we trust Him?
 - How should the rich spend his/her money? Why is that better than spending it all on yourself?

Wrap-up

- God is saying to us that we are fools if we think money will bring us the happiness we are looking for. It's almost like a trap that looks good on the outside, but will disappoint us again and again. It is only through a relationship with Jesus, and trusting Him to take care of us, that we won't be let down. Most people go to great lengths to plan for their wealth and welfare here on earth, but very few plan for eternity. How have you planned for eternity?

The Story of John D. Rockefeller

They say that John D. Rockefeller was the richest man to ever live. He was a billionaire. Do you know how much a billion dollars is? If you received a billion dollars 2000 years ago and spent \$1,000 ever hour, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, you still to this day would not have spent one billion dollars!

They asked him a very important question. How much money is enough? Surely, if anybody would know the answer to that question, John D. Rockefeller would know. Would he say one hundred thousand dollars? One million dollars? Ten million dollars?

He thought about it for quite awhile. Then he replied, "Just a little bit more."

TOPIC: Obedience

Opening Discussion

- When do you have trouble doing something someone else wants you to do? [When I don't agree with what is being asked of me, or when it seems stupid.]
- Are there times when you have no trouble doing what you're asked to do?
- Does it matter who is asking you to do something?
- What if God asked you to do something that seemed crazy to you?

Scripture

- Read Genesis 6:8-7:24, or tell the story of Noah in your own words.
 - What do you think Noah thought when God first told him to build the boat?
 - What do you think other people thought when Noah began building the boat?
 - What made Noah keep going?
 - Would you have gone into the boat if you were there before it even started to rain?
 - Do you think God would ever ask you to do something that seemed crazy?
 - What would you have done if you had been Noah?
 - Do you think God would come through for you like he did for Noah?

Story

Read the story about Tom.

Wrap-up

God asks us to trust Him with our lives. Once we do, He asks us to obey Him. When we obey God we can also be sure that He will step in on our behalf like He did for Noah and for Tom.

The Story About Tom

Several years ago Tom was with a friend in Europe. The two of them split up for awhile and began to share their faith in God with people as the Lord directed them.

Tom had been talking with a young man for awhile when suddenly a big brute of a guy interrupted their conversation. He had overheard Tom speaking about God.

“Are you a Christian?” he retorted in an angry voice. Tom, being a small man, and seeing the size and hatred of the intruder, thought it might be best to just make his way out of that part of town. After all, even if he did say “No”, nobody would ever know the difference. Even his friend was nowhere in sight. Anyway, it looked like this guy was looking for a fight, and that was one thing that Tom didn’t want.

But he remembered the words that Jesus spoke in the Bible, “If you deny that you know me before men, I’ll deny that I know you before my Father in heaven.”

Nervously, Tom said, “Yes, I am a Christian.” The man responded, “Well, I hate Christians.” The idea of quickly leaving that neighborhood was seeming more and more appealing to Tom.

Then the man continued, “I heard that in the Bible it says that if somebody punches you on one cheek, you’re supposed to turn the other cheek and let him punch that one, too. Is that true?” Reluctantly, Tom said, “Yes.”

With that, the man punched Tom in the face as hard as he could. Tom went down on the ground, stunned. As he pulled himself off the ground, the brute said, “So, are you going to be a good Christian and let me hit you again?”

Now Tom had grown up as the leader of a gang in the Midwest. He was not accustomed to letting anybody hit him and get away with it. Yet, after but a brief pause, Tom answered, “Yes, you can hit me again.”

He could hardly finish the sentence before the man laid into Tom’s face again. Tom fell to the ground. Even more dazed this time, he got up slower, wiping the blood from his cut lip.

As he pulled himself together and looked up, the big man began to cry. By the time Tom was standing he was crying even more. “I want what you have,” he said. “I want to be a Christian.”

Story as told by Tom Eggum, Peoria, Arizona

TOPIC: Our Value to God

Opening Discussion

- Have you ever lost something that was special to you? [Something you made? Something you were really proud of?]
- How did you feel? Did you find it? How did you feel?
- Are there some things, that if you lost them, you would feel like you could never replace them?
- What about it would make it irreplaceable?
- Have you ever been lost?
- How do people feel when they are lost? [lonely, insecure, afraid, confused, etc.]

Scripture

- Read Luke 15:3-7 (lost sheep)
 - Why was it important for the sheep to be found?
 - How would it have survived alone?
 - Who is the shepherd and who are the sheep? [God is the shepherd; we are the sheep]
- Read Luke 15:8-10 (lost coin)
 - Explain how the ten coins most likely were on a chain around her neck. The necklace was incomplete without the one coin.
 - According to this story, how does God feel about us? [we are valuable to Him]
 - Why would one lost person be so valuable to Him when He already has so many others?

Wrap-up

- Just as the lost sheep, we need to be found by the Shepherd so He can lead us through life. We will get lost and hurt on our own.
- You are valuable to God and He is searching for you because He desperately wants you. Sheep are found by “baa-ing”. In the same way, we need to call out to Jesus, if we want to be found and rescued.

TOPIC: Prayer

Opening Discussion

- Do you ever pray to God? Why? Or why not?
- Have you ever had your prayers answered? [Have them share answers.]
- Have there been times when you felt like God didn't hear you or answer your prayer?

Scripture

- Things to consider about prayer
 - (1) Must have faith (James 1:5-8). Why is that important?
 - (2) Jesus' friends asked Him how to pray, this is how He answered them.
 - (3) Read Matt. 6:9-13
 - (4) What are some things Jesus is saying about how to pray?
 - (5) What do you think it means, "Your will be done?"
 - (6) Read Matt. 6:33. What's required for us to receive from God all we need?
 - (7) Read Matt.7:7-11
- God is good, he is not trying to trick us and wants what is the very best for us
- Why do you think God would have us pray and ask when he already knows what we need?
- If you ask for something very specific, what are different ways God could answer that? [Yes, No, Not yet]

Wrap-up

One of the most important things about prayer is that it is taking time to talk with God, get to know Him and get to know the good things He has for you. The more time you spend praying to Him the more you learn to trust Him. It's developing your relationship with Him.

TOPIC: Priorities

Opening Discussion

- Are there some things that are more important than others?
- How do you decide what things are most important?
- What are the most important things to you right now?
- Does it seem that other things get you sidetracked and keep you from focusing on what's most important?
- What kinds of things sidetrack you most?

Story

- Read C. S. Lewis' "Principle of First and Second Things"
 - What is this talking about?
 - Have you ever experienced putting a second thing first, and losing both? [Example: Putting one day of fun over a job, and losing both the job and freedom to have fun]

Scripture

- In God's opinion, what do you think OUR first priority should be?
- Read Matthew 6:33.
 - What is of first importance in this verse?
 - What does God say about the things of second importance? [He'll take care of them.]
- What do you think God's first priority is when it comes to us? [That we come to know Him better.]

Wrap-up

If the most important thing in life is to know God better, then even something as bad as being locked up could be seen as being of *second importance* when compared to what is of *first importance*. Think of ways in which being locked up has actually helped some of the things you said were most important to you.

Principles of First and Second Things

Things have different values, some greater than others. Whenever we reverse this order of values and treat a lesser value as though it had a greater value – whenever we sacrifice a first thing for a second thing – we not only lose the first thing, but the second thing as well.

For instance, when we treat a hobby or a pet as more important than a person, we not only sacrifice the person, but we also spoil our enjoyment of the hobby or pet, making it an addiction, an obsession. When we treat our bodily health as more important than anything else, we worry ourselves sick.

For most people, if they were given the choice of being crippled either physically or mentally, they would choose to be crippled physically. The physical is of lesser importance than the mind. To lose your mind is to lose yourself.

Taken from a lecture by C. S. Lewis titled, “We Are Dwarfs Standing on the Shoulders of Giants”

TOPIC: Real Freedom Has Rules

Attention-getter

- What do you think would happen if the mayor of your city decided to eliminate all the traffic laws – no speed limits, no traffic lights, no stop signs?
- Would people feel free to drive?
- Do traffic laws give people more or less freedom?

Opening Discussion

- What do you think this place would be like with no rules?
- What are some rules in here that give you more freedom than if the rule was eliminated?
- Do you think God has any rules for us? What are some of those rules? [Ten Commandments, etc.]
- Did God give us these rules to punish us, or to protect us?
- Do these rules give us more freedom, or less freedom?

Scripture

- Read [Proverbs 3:1-2](#) [Jesus says if you want true freedom, you need to decide to do what He wants and to follow Him.]
- Read [John 8:31b-32](#) [discuss and explain]

Wrap-up

- God intended for us to experience life to the fullest and with the ultimate freedom. If we were left with no rules or restrictions, we would destroy ourselves and others, much like it would be in your town with no traffic rules.
- There is no true freedom without rules.

TOPIC: Rejection

Opening Discussion

- What kinds of things make you most angry?
- How does your anger affect you?
- Has anger ever been the reason you got into trouble?
- What are ways you've tried to deal with your anger?
- Someone once said, "All deep-seated anger is caused by feelings of rejection." What does that mean? Do you agree with it?

Attention-getter

- Imagine that you have an "anger thermometer" inside of you that goes from one to ten. One is "no anger" and ten is "out of control." Where would you say your anger level is right now?
- What kinds of rejection have you experienced that might have contributed to your present anger level?
- What's the opposite of rejection? [acceptance]

Story

- Tell Raoul's story
What made Raoul's anger level go down?

Scripture

- Read and discuss 2 Corinthians 5:17, 18, 21 and Romans 8:1
How do you think God's acceptance of you can help lower the "anger thermometer" in you?

Wrap-up

Deep anger, the kind that comes through rejection, can only be relieved through acceptance. Just like with the chaplain and Raoul, Jesus took all of our hurt and rejection upon Himself on the cross. That's what it means when it says, "He became sin for us." In exchange, we receive all of God's acceptance. If God – who knows us better than anyone – accepts us, we can ask Him to drain the anger from us.

Raoul's Story

Raoul had been a part of an escape attempt where he was locked up. As a result, he and all the other guys in the detention center were locked in their rooms for three weeks.

During that time Raoul tried to commit suicide. This resulted in all of the furniture being taken out of his room except for his mattress. He also got two more weeks of lock-down in his room.

One night he asked for the Bible study leader to come to see him in his room. When the He got there, Raoul was so full of anger that he couldn't even acknowledge that the someone was there. Instead he just continued hitting his hand against the wall, his face full of rage.

The Bible study leader knew that there was nothing he could say that could reach Raoul in this condition. He just walked over to him and put his arm around him.

Raoul then began hitting the Bible study leader in the chest, in the same way he had just been hitting the wall. The Bible leader let Raoul continue hitting him for several minutes.

After awhile Raoul's blows became less and less hard. And then he started to cry. He cried for awhile. When he finally looked up, Raoul said, "Please pray for me. I've blown it so bad." The Bible study leader said, "Just say to God what you said to me. He understands." Raoul prayed one of the most beautiful prayers ever prayed.

Raoul is a boy that Scott and Hanne Larson met in a detention center in Massachusetts.

TOPIC: Rip-offs

Opening Discussion

- What does it mean to be ripped off? [expecting one thing and getting another]
- What are different ways people get ripped off? [drugs, crime, thinking that a thing will make you happy]
- What are ways that you have been ripped off?

Story

Tell the story about Marc

Scripture

- God has created us with genuine needs, which He wants to fill. Satan tries to trick us into accepting a counterfeit to the need. Some examples are:
 1. The need to “feel good”
 - Genuine from God (Ephesians 5:18):
“Do not get drunk on wine . . . Instead, be filled with the Spirit.”
 - What are some of Satan’s counterfeits? [get drunk and take drugs to feel good]
 2. The need for “power”
 - Genuine from God (Acts 1:8):
“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you . . .”
 - What are some of Satan’s counterfeits for power? [guns, violence, abuse]
 3. The need for “love and acceptance”
 - Genuine from God (Ephesians 1:4):
God *“chose us in Him before the creation of the world . . .”*
 - What are some of Satan’s counterfeits? [sex, following the crowd, latest fashion]

Wrap-up

Jesus says in John 10:10 that He came “that [we] may have life, and have it to the full.” Sometimes we think we know what it means to really live, when in fact we’re really being ripped off. Tell God you’re tired of being ripped off, and that you’re ready to submit to all that He has for you.

Marc's Story

Marc (not his real name) had just joined a gang. He did it for logical reasons. He wanted acceptance and a sense of power. He wanted to belong to something; and in his neighborhood you had to be in a gang if you really wanted to go places. Besides, the gang he was a part of never did really bad things anyway. It was more for protection from others who were *really* bad.

One day, Marc's gang was playing basketball in the neighborhood. Marc had sprained his ankle and so he couldn't play. He was sitting on the sideline next to several of the guns owned by his friends. Suddenly a rival gang came over the hill and someone with a knife came running toward Marc. Out of instinct, Marc grabbed one of the guns and shot the kid in the chest.

Everybody ran. A couple of days later Marc was arrested . . . for murder. The kid had died.

Now as he sits in detention, he re-thinks the situation – over and over and over. He never expected that this would have happened to him. Joining the gang just seemed like the logical thing to do. Now he feels he's been ripped off.

*Scott and Hanne Larson met Marc while he was locked up in a detention center in Massachusetts.

TOPIC: Salvation

Story

- Read “The Ant Story”

Discussion

- If you saw a bunch of ants in danger, would you want to become an ant to warn them?
- Would there be any other way you could warn them?
- If you did become an ant to warn them, do you think they all would listen to you? Why or why not?

Scripture

- Read Numbers 21:4-9
 - What was the danger these people were facing?
 - What was God’s solution?
 - Do you think everyone who was bit turned around and looked at the snake? Why or why not?
 - The Bible talks about a danger we are all facing that is worse than snake bites. Do you know what that danger might be? [our sin]
 - Do you think God has a solution for us?
- Read John 3:14-19
 - Why was it necessary for God to come down as a man when He could have stayed up in Heaven?
 - What made Him want to come?
 - What do people have to do to be rescued from their sin? [receive Christ]
 - Do you think there were people back then who didn’t believe Him?
 - How about now?

Wrap-up

God already came down as a man to warn us and let us know the solution to our problem. We have a choice, as the ants did, whether we want to listen or ignore Him. He came to give life to all those who want it. He came to give life to you, if you want it.

The Ant Story

Imagine yourself walking out in a field and you suddenly come across a big ant hill. You sit down in the dirt and begin watching those ants and become fascinated by them.

Have you ever seen an ant hill?

All at once while watching the ants you hear in the distance a tractor. A farmer is starting to plow the field. You know that in a matter of minutes the sharp plow blade will rip through the ant hill killing some of its inhabitants, scattering others and leaving all homeless.

You frantically start yelling at the ants and tell them to leave while there is still time, but they ignore you and go on with their work. They don't hear you because you're not speaking their language. If anything, they are probably scared of all your loud, high-pitched noises.

The only way that they would listen to you would be if you became an ant and began to talk their language. As you get to know them as an ant, they could then trust you and in turn believe you about the impending disaster.

Taken from Youth for Christ Ministry Resource Manual, Vol I, 1974, "Who is Christ," Youth Guidance Section, p. 17

TOPIC: A Second Chance

Opening Discussion

- Have there been times in your life when you have wished you could “start all over?” Share some of these times.
- What would it be like to have your record wiped totally clean?

Attention-getter

- Read “Marty”
 - Why didn’t things change for Marty in junior high?
 - Was his record really wiped clean?
 - Marty still had the old tapes going in his mind. What were some of the old tapes saying?
 - What are some of the old tapes you have in your mind? [You’re just like your father . You’ll never amount to anything. You’ll always be in trouble]

Scripture

- Read John 8:3-12 [woman caught in adultery]
Discuss what Jesus did for this woman.

Wrap-up

- Just as the woman caught in adultery, we all need a second chance.
- We have all blown it in one way or another. Sometimes we feel like if we only could move away to a place where no one knew our past, we could start all over. But then the same old tapes would still go with us. Jesus forgives the things that are on these tapes that we feel are unforgivable.
- He has a new story for us to play in our heads.
 - I’m a brand new person (2 Corinthians 5:17).
 - I have great value in God’s sight (Matthew 6:26).
 - God sees me as His son (Galatians 3:26).
 - When I mess up, His forgiveness is there (1 John 1:9).
 - God has good plans for my life (Jeremiah 29:11).

Marty

When I was in the sixth grade about to graduate to junior high, Mr. Melella gave our whole class a speech. He said we were all going to get a second chance. We would arrive in junior high with our records wiped clean. None of the old teachers' remarks which had accumulated in our files would go on to tip off our new teachers. "If you want, you can be totally new people next year," he said. "And that includes you, Marty."

Marty was always in trouble for smarting off or fighting. To teachers and parents he was the Kid Headed for Trouble. We kids knew that if there was trouble, Marty would get blamed. It occurred to me then that everything could instantaneously change. Nobody would know the old Marty.

But it wasn't long into the next fall before Marty had obviously failed again. He'd been sent to the principal's office, and it was to happen half a hundred times before we graduated from high school. The fresh start hadn't worked.

Somehow I doubt Marty got a truly fresh start. His "record" had been forgiven, but not the record that ran in his own brain. A truly fresh start would have to erase not only the official records, but also all those built-up expectations of trouble that existed inside Marty. Without that, he didn't stand a chance.

But wouldn't it have been wonderful if Marty had really had a new beginning?

Tim Stafford, Do You Sometimes Feel Like A Nobody, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980), p. 64.

TOPIC: Self Image

Opening Discussion

- How do you think most kids feel about themselves? [9 out of 10 don't like themselves]
- What are the reasons they don't like themselves? [ugly, dumb, no friends]
- What do most people think it takes to really make it? [money, good looks, intelligence, athletic, popular]

Attention-getter

- Show kids a framed picture.
- Take the picture away and ask them to recall what they saw. [Most likely, none will mention the frame. Ask why?]
- Just as the frame is only what holds the substance of the picture, so our bodies are only the frame of who we really are on the inside.

Scripture

- Read 1 Samuel 16:6-13 [David]
Emphasize verse 7 [God looks at the heart]

Wrap-up

- Just as God had something for David, He wants to make something out of your life. He doesn't look at outward things as people do, but He looks at your heart.
- Read Psalms 139
- Since God knows all about you and still loves you, won't you allow Him to come into your life to make you everything that He created you to be?

TOPIC: Son or Daughter vs. Orphan

Opening Discussion

- What does it mean to be an orphan?
- How might it feel to be an orphan? [Insecure. Have to take care of myself. Don't trust anyone. No one's watching out for me]
- What would the "ideal father" be like?
- What would be the benefits of being a son/daughter of an "ideal father?" [know someone's always watching out for me – feel secure – know I'm never alone]

Scripture

- Read the story of the "Prodigal Son" in [Luke 15:11-32](#)
 - What are some of the things the father did that he wouldn't have done if he weren't the boy's father?
 - What would the boy have done differently if he weren't the father?
 - Why do you think the father wouldn't just hire him as one of the workers like the boy wanted? [he "belonged" to the father]
 - Why do you think God calls Himself our father, and we his sons/daughters?
 - How is that different than Him just being a God to us?
 - In what ways do you act like an orphan, like you have no heavenly father?
 - How would your actions be different if you were acting like a "true son/daughter of God?"
 - Do you think God would take you back the way the father in the story did if you behaved like the son did? Why? [You "belong" to Him]

Story

- Read the story of "Anna from Calcutta"
 - Why do you think Anna still behaved like an orphan even though she was now a daughter?
 - What do you think it would take for her to start living into who she really is?

Wrap-up

Most of us feel and act like orphans most of the time. God, our Heavenly Father, wants us not only to know He is our father, but to feel that He loves and protects us so that we can act as secure sons and daughters and experience all the benefits of it.

Anna from Calcutta

The Thompsons had wanted a daughter for a long time. They had applied through an adoption agency, but nothing ever worked out. That's why they were so excited when they received the news that they would be getting a little five year old from India. Anna was an orphan who had lived on the streets of Calcutta.

They spent the next several weeks decorating the bedroom for little Anna. The day she arrived they made a beautiful dinner and gave her all new clothes.

At the dinner table they noticed Anna sneaking food from the table and putting it in her pockets and down her dress. Later when they went to her bedroom to say "goodnight," they saw Anna wearing her old clothes and eating the food she had stuffed in her dress while crouched in the corner of the room.

TOPIC: Sticking Up for What You Believe

Opening Discussion

- How do you feel about standing alone in a crowd?
- How big of an influence do you think peers have on most people?
- How do your peers influence you? Positive? Negative?
- Do you know someone who is good at standing alone without getting dragged down by his/her friends?
- How do you feel about this person?

Scripture

- Read Daniel 3
 - Why wouldn't they bow down to the statue?
 - Couldn't they have bowed down and still believed in God on the inside?
 - How do you think they felt when they were told they were going to be thrown into the furnace?
 - How would you have felt about God, after sticking up for Him?
 - How did God pull through for them?

Story

- Read the story about Russ Taff

Discussion and Wrap-up

- Some of you have given your lives to God. How do you think your friends will respond to that when you get out?
 - Will they know there's a difference in you? Should they?
 - Will it be hard to stick up for God?
- God will stick by you no matter what when you get out, and He will give you the power to stand for what is right. Follow Him even when it's not the popular thing to do. It pays off.

The Story About Russ Taff

Russ Taff grew up as a rough kid in Texas. He was one of the leaders of a local gang. Both the kids and teachers were afraid of this group of people. Often it seemed that they ran the school.

That's why people were so surprised when Russ Taff came to a Christian camp the summer after his sophomore year. Everybody was kind of uneasy having Russ at the camp; he just didn't fit in and they were wondering what he thought of it all.

They were even more surprised when Russ Taff stood up at the campfire the final night of camp. The place was silent as he said, "I just don't know what to think of all this talk I've heard this week. I've never been into God, and don't know much about Him. But if all that you're saying is true, then I want to live the rest of my life for Him." Then he just sat down. Nobody said a word. By the next morning people were saying with skepticism, "Sure, he'll follow God. We'll just see." With that, most of them forgot about Russ Taff for the remainder of the summer.

The first day of school, Russ' old gang was going to be making trouble. People were quite surprised to see Russ Taff show up at school,

instead of hanging with the gang and skipping school that day. The gang was especially surprised, and when they came to school, they confronted Russ Taff in the hall in front of everybody. Russ told them he cared about them, but would not take part in some of the things they were doing. They beat him right there in the hallway. Nobody stepped in – no teachers, no students, no anybody.

For weeks, nobody would talk to Russ Taff – not the gang, and not any kids at school. But he continued to trust God, saying to himself, "If God is really who He said He is, then I'm going to follow Him."

Other kids began to watch Russ Taff with a lot of respect. They had never seen somebody change so much and be able to stand up for something against so much opposition. By the time Russ Taff graduated from high school, seventy percent of the students in his class had given their lives to Jesus Christ because of the example they saw in Russ.

He eventually became a famous Christian singer and songwriter who performed all over the world and received two Grammy Awards for his music.

Taken from the personal testimony of Russ Taff.

TOPIC: Stress

Opening Discussion

- What does it mean to be “stressed out?”
- What are the things that stress you out the most?
- How do you think you are affected by stress?

Attention-getter

- Have a balloon available and designate one person in the group to be the balloon blower. Go around and have each person in the group mention one thing that could cause stress in someone’s life. One breath is blown into the balloon for each stress mentioned, until eventually the balloon pops.

Discussion

- What are ways that you might “pop” when you have too many stresses in your life?
- What are the side effects of stress in people? [anger, exploding, depression, ulcers, can’t sleep, sleep too much]
- What are the things that cause you the most stress?
- What is the biggest stress in your life right now?
- Can you think of any positive ways of dealing with stress? [talk with someone, exercise, pray]

Scripture

- Read and discuss what God says can help us with our stress:
 - [Proverbs 3:5-6](#)
 - [Matthew 6:33-34](#)
 - [Philippians 4:6-7](#)
 - [James 4:7](#)
 - [Galatians 6:2](#)

Wrap-up

We all have some level of stress in their lives, but unresolved stress can wear us down both physically and mentally. Stress needs to be dealt with. Sometimes stress can be our best friend, if we let it draw us closer to God.

TOPIC: Temptation

Opening Discussion

- What does it mean to be tempted?
- What are the things that people are tempted by?
- What are the biggest temptations you're facing right now?
- Do you think it's a sin to be tempted? [It is not, as even Jesus was tempted according to [Hebrews 4:15](#), and yet he didn't sin]

Scripture

- Where does temptation come from? Read [James 1:12-16](#). [self and Satan]
- Read [1 John 2:16](#) and discuss the three types of temptations:
 - (1) Lust of the flesh [sexual, drugs, over-eating, etc.]
 - (2) Lust of the eyes [stealing, jealousy]
 - (3) Pride [power, fighting, the need to always win]
- Which of these do you struggle with the most?
- How do you think God can help you with temptation? Read [1 Corinthians 10:13](#)

Wrap-up

Satan knows where to tempt us. We can't say *no* to temptation on our own, but Jesus has promised us that if we trust Him with our lives, He will provide a way out.

TOPIC: Thankfulness

Opening Discussion

- What kind of things are you thankful for?
- What are some things your parents or friends have done for you that you are thankful for?
- How did you show them you were thankful?
- Do you ever wish you could repay someone for what he or she has done for you?

Attention-getter

- Read “The Story of Eddie Rickenbakker”
 - What was Eddie thankful for?
 - How did he express his thanks?
 - How often?

Scripture

- Read Luke 17:12-19 and explain.
 - Did Jesus do the same thing for all ten men?
 - How did the one leper show that he was thankful?
 - Why do you think the other guys didn't come back?

Wrap-up

- Do you think Jesus has done anything for all of us?
- Explain the Gospel using Romans 5:6-8.
- How do you think we should respond to this?
- God gave up His only Son for us, but a lot of people don't even care. It's only when we thank Him for what He has done and accept it and live with the power that He gives us that He can make any difference in our lives.

The Story of Eddie Rickenbakker

Every morning in a park by the ocean in California a strange scene can be observed. An old man spends a good part of the morning feeding seagulls that gather. They seem to have a relationship together. People who observe it will often say, “Oh, that poor, lonely old man.” But now let’s hear . . . the rest of the story.

In 1940, World War II fighter pilot Eddie Rickenbakker was flying his crew of four across the Pacific Ocean. Something went wrong and the plane caught on fire. In an emergency landing, all five managed to bail out before the plane exploded. They landed in the ocean with an inflatable lifeboat that they had thrown overboard with them.

Several days had gone by without food and water for the five men as they were battered around in the small boat. They were starving to death and their hopes of survival were dwindling. One morning, much to everyone’s surprise, a seagull came and landed on Eddie Rickenbakker’s head.

He grabbed it and broke its neck. Then the men had enough supplies in their survival kit to cook the gull and eat their first meal in many days. They also saved some of the meat, using it for bait to fish. Before long, they had caught a fish, and enjoyed their second meal. They continued this routine of eating fish and saving some for bait, until after a few weeks they were spotted by a plane and rescued.

The seagull in the ocean had given its life as a sacrifice so that Eddie and his crew could live. In appreciation, Eddie Rickenbakker now goes down to serve the seagulls by feeding those whose lives represent the one who gave its life for him.

Taken from “The Rest of the Story” radio broadcast by Paul Harvey.

TOPIC: The Tongue

Opening Discussion

- Which is harder for most people, to control their actions, or their words? What about for you?
- What do you think hurts worse: to be physically hurt, or to be hurt by someone's words? Which heals faster?
- How have you been hurt by words?
- Can you think of a time when you have hurt someone with your words?
- What are some reasons people attack others with what they say?
- What are some different ways to attack verbally? [gossip, accusations, calling names, talk behind your back, sarcasm, etc.]

Scripture

- Read James 3:1-13
 - How is the tongue like a horse's bit or a ship's rudder?
 - How is it like a spark that starts a forest on fire?
 - What is so fun about gossiping?
 - What is so hard about taming the tongue?
 - How do you think it is possible that good and encouraging words can come out of the same mouth as bad and negative words?
 - What kinds of things do you think would help us to have more positive than negative things come out?
 - How do you think God could help us?

Wrap-up

- The Bible says that no MAN can tame the tongue. That is why we really need GOD's help with that. The more we are filled with Him on the inside, the more good things will flow out. If you haven't invited Him into your life, that is what you need to start with and He will start changing you on the inside. If you already have a relationship with Him, the more time you spend with Him by reading the Bible and praying, the more you will be filled with good.

The Bob Erler Story

Bob Erler grew up trying to always be the best at everything. It earned him the titles of “Golden Gloves,” “Black Belt,” “Special Forces,” “Green Beret,” and eventually “Super Cop.” But inside, Bob’s life was more like a time bomb. Soon after his wife left him with their baby boy, Bob began working double shifts of police duty to cover up the pain in his life.

One night between shifts he was running on the beach to get some exercise when a woman came up and asked if she and her daughter could sleep on the beach, since they had nowhere else to go. Bob said “no” but added that he would be working that night and they could sleep in his trailer house if they wanted to. When he brought them there the lady asked him for fifty dollars. Bob said, “No, I don’t have \$50, lady.” The lady said, “How would it sound to the Chief of Police if I told him that one of his officers tried to rape me and my daughter?”

Bob snapped, “That sounds like a lie and a threat!” Before he had gathered his senses, he pulled his gun and shot both the mother and the daughter. Then out of desperation he called the police station to confess what he had done. As soon as someone picked up the phone he said, “I’ve just shot two people. Catch me before I kill again!” and hung up.

Bob put the two bleeding women in his car and headed for the hospital. On the way he reasoned, “What am I doing? If I tell them what happened, I’ll go to prison!” So he dumped them out of his car into a ditch where they both died. When he got to the police station, he decided to confess the whole thing to the Chief. But there

was so much commotion over the telephone call that the Chief wouldn’t meet with him. Instead, he assigned Bob Erler as the head detective on his own murder case!

Eventually, Bob was convicted and sentenced to 99-1/2 years in prison. After several years there, Bob became a Christian. He knew he would never get out, but had committed his life to serving Christ as His man in the prison. He went through Bible college by correspondence courses, became an ordained minister, and baptized over six hundred men inside the prison.

One day, Bob got word that it looked like he might be released from prison because they didn’t have enough evidence to hold him any longer. He couldn’t believe it! On the day he was to be released, he went into the prison chapel to thank God and pray. On the wall he saw the Bible verse, “*If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*” Bob knew he must tell the truth and confess to the crime. After he did, he remained in prison serving out his term.

After five more years of faithful service to God in the prison, the Governor decided to pardon Bob and overturn the case, so he could leave “clean.” Since that time Bob Erler, the famous “Catch Me Killer” has been traveling across the world speaking in hundreds of prisons and churches about the power of God to change a life.

Taken from the video “Bob Erler Testimony”, Cons for Christ Prison Ministries, Inc., Fredericton, CA, 1989.

TOPIC: Wanting What You Can't Have

Opening Discussion

- What kinds of things have you wanted that you couldn't have? Why couldn't you have them?
- What are things people do to get what they want? [steal, cheat, lie, murder]

Scripture

- Read the story about David and Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11:1-17 and 26-27)
 - What did David want that he couldn't have?
 - What did he do about it?
 - What should he have done?
 - What should you do when you are in a situation when you want something that you can't have, or are feeling jealous?
- Read Psalm 51 and explain how David wrote this after he was confronted with sin, and how God completely restored him.

Wrap-up

We all “want” things that we can't have. In fact, James 4:1-3 says that all of our quarrels and fights come as a result of wanting what we don't have. But God knows what we really “need” and He promises to give it to us as we ask and trust Him for it. In fact, He says that He'll give us more than we could ask for or even imagine!

TOPIC: Worry

Opening Discussion

- What things do you worry most about?
- Why do people worry about things?
- Are there times when you worried that something bad would happen and it never did?
- Do you think it's good to worry?
 - How does it help the situation?
 - How does it make it worse?
- How do you think worrying affects people physically? [ulcers, headaches, etc.]
- How does it affect us emotionally? [depression, paranoid]
- Do you think there is a difference between “worrying” and being concerned?” What is it? [Being concerned can lead to action while worrying is generally more destructive]

Scripture

- Read [Matthew 6:25-34](#) and discuss.
 - What things does it say not to worry about?
 - What is the reason we shouldn't worry about those things?
 - How do you think God views “a worrier?” [someone who doesn't trust Him]
 - Do you think this means we shouldn't make any plans for the future?
 - What do you think Prov 16:9 means? “*A person makes plans, but God directs their steps*”
 - What do you think it means to “seek God's Kingdom first?”

Wrap-up

- God wants to take care of us and all of our needs. Rather than spending our time worrying, He says, “Trust me with your life and I will look after you.”
- First we have to come to Him and give Him our lives, and then HE will take care of the things we need.