

Doing the Will of God: Studies in Matthew

Leaders Guide



13 online adult Sunday school lessons

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About Acacia Resources

The biblical witness singles out acacia wood for its uniqueness. The only wood mentioned in the building of the ark of the covenant, the tabernacle and the altar is acacia. Acacia wood is listed with other precious objects—gold, silver, fragrant incense, onyx stones—given to honor God.

Today's acacia tree is known for its value, diversity and durability. Some acacia trees have fragrant flowers used in making perfume. The seeds are edible. The bark is rich in tannin, a substance used in tanning, dyes, inks and pharmaceuticals. Furniture, oars, tools and gunstocks are made of the hard lumber from the acacia tree.

Some 1,200 species of acacia trees and shrubs exist throughout much of the world, including Africa, Australia and North America. The acacia species is tough enough to survive the semiarid regions of Africa where its roots sink deep to capture the rare water which runs quickly into the soil.

The name *acacia* symbolically ties BCE's publishing initiative to our biblical heritage. The acacia tree represents the wise value attached to educational resources, the diversity of needs within churches and the durability demanded for growing healthy Christians, whether they are singles, couples with children or senior adults.

Acacia Resources will guide Christians and draw them godward, as the ark of acacia wood guided the people of Israel in their journey and represented the presence of God in their midst.

For more information about Acacia Resources, call 615-383-3192 or visit our Web site at www.acaciaresources.com.

Doing the Will of God Leaders Guide

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A *Doing the Will of God* Students Guide is also available from Acacia Resources (www.acaciaresources.com).

About the Sequence of These Lessons

While this curriculum unit is undated, it was originally released in the months preceding and leading up to Advent and Christmas. Many Sunday school classes planned to use the curriculum during the months of October, November and December. For that reason, the lessons related to the birth narrative were placed at the end of the unit, instead of the beginning.

If you plan to use this curriculum at a time which does not coincide with Advent and Christmas, you may wish to use the lessons in this order:

Tracing Our Roots, Matthew 1:1-17

Committed to Justice, Matthew 1:18-25

Signs for All to See, Matthew 2:1-12

Free to Choose, Matthew 2:13-23

Doing the Will of God, Matthew 3:1-12

Surrender Surprise, Matthew 3:13-17

The Temptation Trap, Matthew 4:1-11

The Forgiveness Factor, Matthew 9:1-8

There Goes the Neighborhood!, Matthew 9:9-13

Radical Relationships, Matthew 10:5-15

Hard-Wired Faith, Matthew 11:25-30

Above the Law, Matthew 12:1-14

Defining Family, Matthew 12:46-50

Preface

“It was God’s will,” a church member says to grieving parents whose child was stillborn.

A bigamist tells a 14-year-old girl that she must marry him. “If you do not submit to God’s will, you will lose your salvation,” he tells her.

“This is God’s will,” a delegate to a religious denomination’s convention says of her views prior to a critical vote that threatened to cause a schism. A man holding an opposing opinion also claimed that God’s will was on his side.

A pornography publisher and gubernatorial candidate asks people to pray, by name, for the death of a certain television commentator who had been critical of pornography. A spokesperson later says the call to prayer was a “spoof,” but also states that if the commentator dies, “it must be God’s will.”

A suicide bomber boards a bus and detonates the explosives, killing several schoolchildren and himself and wounding dozens of others. “God wills that we do this,” the terrorist group behind the attack later says.

A 14-year-old from Singapore who befriended conjoined Iranian twins in her country for surgery says, following their death, “I thought that after all the pain they had gone through they would survive but it’s God’s will.”

“I’m just trying to find God’s will for my life,” a college student says, after changing majors for the fourth time.

“We’re flying through some dark clouds. With God’s will, the sun will rise and shine again,” says a professional basketball player accused of sexual assault, giving a clenched-fist salute and flashing a peace sign to fans and supporters.

From a woman whose son was brutally murdered: “I’m leaving it up to God. With God’s will, everybody will be revealed who’s involved in my son’s death.”

“There’s nothing we can do,” a disillusioned woman says in reference to her paralyzed and ineffective marriage. “It must be God’s will.”

Without a doubt, people are both comforted and confounded by the idea of “God’s will.” Some toss around the term cavalierly in an attempt to justify their actions. Others use the phrase in an effort to explain tragedy and other misfortunes they do not understand. Still others speak of it as though it were a one-time acquisition, a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow or a chest of buried treasure.

Skepticism and unbelief, in addition to the influence of many world views and religions, add to the confusion Christians feel when trying to understand and commit to God’s will.

Also contributing to the misunderstanding is this: People believe that God’s will is individual and personal. It is. But it is also corporate and inclusive. That’s a part of the equation many fail to consider.

People often speak of “searching” for and “finding” God’s will as if it were a lost or hidden object. God does not hide the divine plan from us. God’s will is not veiled in mystery or characterized by confusion. God wants us to know the divine plan. So what’s the problem?

Many have failed to recognize Jesus as Messiah because they were looking for someone other than the one God sent. Similarly, we often fail to recognize God’s plan because we expect it to be something different than it actually is. We often want things so badly we interpret those desires to be God’s will when they are not. Our vision is quite narrow and short-sighted; our goals are self-serving. The divine plan is not. Further, our unwillingness to repent and forgive others can block our ability to understand and participate in the divine plan.

In spite of our incomplete understanding and often selfish motives, God continues to work through ordinary people like us to fulfill divine purposes, as in centuries past. Realization of the divine plan does not depend upon our participation, however. God invites us to be a part of the divine plan, but it will go forward in spite of our lack of interest or commitment or our outright disobedience.

Much of what happens in the world is clearly not God’s ultimate will. Still, God works in and through all people and circumstances to accomplish the divine plan.

Connecting the activities of God throughout history to the activity of God in the world today and in their personal lives is difficult for many people. People and events in the Bible that reveal God and the divine plan can seem dry and lifeless, little more than a recitation of history.

Yet it is through these accounts that we discover that God has always had a plan and works to fulfill it.

We can know and live God's will individually and corporately by consciously choosing to do those things we understand God expects of us. While we may not understand everything God expects all at once, we can understand enough to make choices and decisions that please God. In the process of our obedience, God confirms our choices, reveals more of the divine plan and often surprises us with serendipitous blessings.

Obedience to what we understand of God's will results in further understanding of the divine plan. And that makes for an exciting and rarely predictable life.

Living God's will is counter-cultural. We may face misunderstanding, opposition, ridicule or indifference.

Commitment to the divine plan results in ongoing contact with the people of the world, their needs and concerns. It may place us at risk or in an unpopular minority. It will also push us to question commonly held beliefs, policies, practices and prejudices and work for reform when necessary.

Even when it appears that the divine plan has been thwarted or that evil has prevailed, God continues to act and work. God is at work even in places that appear hostile to the message of Christ.

No one lived God's plan more fully than Jesus. By understanding the way he followed the divine plan, we can better follow it ourselves.

Allow the accounts of Matthew's gospel to frame the way you understand and live God's will.

Written by Jan Turrentine, managing editor for Acacia Resources, Baptist Center for Ethics, Nashville, Tenn.

Doing the Will of God Leaders Guide

Matthew 3:1-12

¹In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, ²"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." ³This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'" ⁴Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, ⁶and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁷But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸Bear fruit worthy of repentance. ⁹Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. ¹⁰Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ¹¹"I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹²His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Theme: God's will necessitates repentance.

Before You Teach

- Read the focal passage, the lesson from the Students Guide and the following teaching suggestions.
- The following online articles offer ideas that you can use to enhance your class dialogue:

“Triumph of the Therapeutic” (www.beliefnet.com/story/39/story_3908.html)

“Whatever Happened to Repentance?” (www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2002/002/6.56.html)

“Judge Not” (www.beliefnet.com/story/84/story_8409.html)

“So I’m Sorry Already” (www.christianitytoday.com/global/pf.cgi?/ct/8t4/8t4060.html)

As You Teach

Introduce the Lesson

- Illustrate the concept of retraction with an example such as this:

After denying a relationship for several months, former President Clinton later admitted that he had, indeed, had an inappropriate relationship with a young intern.

The evening before his farewell address to the Democratic National Convention, he appeared before some 4,000 pastors assembled at the Willow Creek Church in Illinois. In an interview with pastor Bill Hybels, Clinton told those assembled, “I wake up every day ... with this overwhelming sense of gratitude, because maybe if I hadn’t been knocked down in the way I was and forced to come to grips with what I’d done and the consequences of it, in such an awful way, I might not never have had to really deal with it 100 percent.

“I feel much more at peace than I used to. And I think that, as awful as what I went through was, and humiliating as it was—more often to others than to me, even, sometimes when you think you’ve got something behind you and then it’s not behind you, this sort of purging process, if it doesn’t destroy you it can bring you to a different place.”

Charles Colson, admitting that he thought he had “spoken his last words” about the incident, was compelled to write a few more:

“Pastor Hybels ...rightly tried to keep the focus on issues like sin and repentance. He reminded Clinton of his remarks at a White House prayer breakfast when the president said he had sinned and wronged his family, his Cabinet, and the country. But the president didn’t pick it up. There was little mention of God and no mention of sin. The emphasis was almost entirely on how the scandal and its aftermath affected Bill Clinton personally—which, of course, entirely misses the point, but does reflect how dramatically our culture’s attitude toward sin and forgiveness has changed” (www.beliefnet.com/story/39/story_3908.html).

Colson went on to write: “The president’s remarks stand in marked contrast to the words of another leader caught in sexual sin 3,000 years ago. David wasn’t thinking of himself when he wrote ‘have mercy on me, Oh God, according to your unfailing love. ...Against you, you only, have I sinned.’ David, you see, understood that true repentance leads to anguish over how God and others are affected by one’s individual behavior.”

- Ask class members to explain the difference between *retraction* and *repentance*. Point out key ideas from the Introduction in the Students Guide. Note the closing paragraph: “Repentance is recognition of wrongdoing and the confession of sin. But it is more than sorrowful admission of missing the mark or making hurtful statements. It is commitment to changing directions, turning from the wrong path and going down the right path in pursuit of God’s will.”
- Using insights from Frederica Mathewes-Green in her column “Whatever Happened to Repentance?”, suggest that, in an attempt to show that we are friendly and care and want to be “family” for people, many churches have drifted from talking about repentance and expecting that people repent.

When Jesus preached, Mathewes-Green wrote, his most consistent message was “repent.” We in the church never seem to get around to talking about that, she said. We “start forgetting it ourselves, and start believing that consolation is the main reason Jesus came. But what’s wrong with us required much more than a hug; it required the Cross” (www.christianitytoday.com/global/pf.cgi?/ct/2002/002/6.56.html).

“A gospel of comfort,” Mathewes-Green wrote, “is a gospel of minimal expectations. ... We act like once people are in the door and make a statement of faith, the whole thing is over. Paul envisioned something more like a transformation, Christ living in us and we in him.”

- State that, in order to do the will of God, we must first repent.

Explore the Bible

- Ask class members to suggest images that immediately come to their minds when they hear the word “repent” (fiery evangelists; choirs singing repeated verses of invitation hymns; weeping congregants; protracted altar calls; radical conversions from lives marked by drunkenness, promiscuity, gambling; etc.).

Note this insight from Mathewes-Green: “We don’t like the word ‘repentance.’ Even conservative Christians find it embarrassing, as it prompts images of crazed revival-tent evangelists and pathological self-loathing. But this is a distorted understanding. For the early church, repentance was the wellspring of joy and healing” (www.beliefnet.com/story/84/story_8409.html).

Encourage class members to look at the idea of repentance through fresh eyes and view it as the first step in a new way of living, of responding to God and intersecting with the world as Jesus did, with joy and healing.

- Ask a volunteer to read aloud Matthew 3:1-3. Identify John the Baptist and his relationship to Jesus’ family. Explain the meaning of repentance; then ask:
 - ▶ *What motivated the repentance John preached?*
 - ▶ *What is “the kingdom of heaven”?*
- Read aloud Matthew 3:4-6 and ask someone to explain the significance of John’s clothing and diet. Point out that John’s message was clearly not one of comfort or ease. Then ask:
 - ▶ *Why do you think so many people from Jerusalem were attracted to John’s message?*

- Note that “many Pharisees and Sadducees” came for baptism (Matt 3:7) and explain John’s warning and challenge to them (see vv 7-9). Remind the class that John the Baptist, and later Jesus, insisted that repentance “bears fruit”; in other words, repentance results in concrete actions.

Ask class members to locate the parallel account of this passage in Luke’s gospel (Lk 3:1-8), scan it and give examples of fruit-bearing John identified when asked by “the crowds,” “tax collectors” and “soldiers.” Then ask:

▶ *What does repentance “look like” in our lives? In other words, if our repentance “bears fruit,” what will that mean for us?*

- Recall for the class a recurring character from “The Bob Newhart Show” who once apologized to Bob, the psychiatrist, for being late for his appointment.

“You’re not late,” Bob said in response.

“Well then, I’m sorry I’m early,” he replied.

“You’re not early, either,” Bob told him.

“I’m sorry,” he sighed.

“I was reminded of this apologetic character by the recurrent waves of apology sweeping over the country: whites apologizing to blacks, Catholics apologizing to Jews, Promise Keepers apologizing to everybody,” wrote Mathewes-Green. “In some cases there are good reasons for apologizing, and it’s a necessary first step. But what’s the second step? You can’t go on being sorry forever, unless you want to wind up on a psychiatrist’s couch. What’s supposed to happen after repentance?”

She went on to say, “So what do you say after you say ‘I’m sorry’? You get on with your life and make changes. ... After apology comes change. ... The shocking news of the gospel is that we can always be forgiven. God desires ‘I’m sorry’ more than ‘I did it,’ contrition more than confession” (www.christianitytoday.com/ct/8t4/8t4060.html).

- Read aloud Matthew 3:11-12 and note the difference between John’s baptism and the baptism of Jesus.

Apply Biblical Truth

- Acknowledge that the pages of the Bible as well history since are filled with accounts of people who tried to know and do God’s will with varying degrees of success. Suggest that one stumbling block for them, and for us, is the tendency to bypass or overlook the necessity of repentance.

Explain that part of the problem lies in our understanding of repentance. Note and describe the two extremes often associated with repentance as described in the Students Guide: radical conversion and rugged individualism.

- Challenge your class to think about what repentance involves for them personally. Then lead them to suggest specific actions we can take to demonstrate repentance. Ask:

► *What are some social justice issues with which we should become involved that will demonstrate that we have turned from conformity to the world and are following Jesus’ way in the world?*

- Read aloud the following from columnist Mathewes-Green: “...the early Christians felt solidarity with the poor and the oppressed; at the beginning, they *were* the poor and the oppressed, so the identification was literal and not merely sympathetic. They worked for justice by living it, by showing in their lives an alternative that defied the surrounding culture: They honored women, freed slaves, rescued abandoned infants, rejected abortion, pooled their money for the poor, upheld chastity. Wherever the faith went, this merciful justice followed ...In these attitudes, Christians did not ‘judge,’ but they stood against injustice by living a challengingly different life” (www.beliefnet.com/story/84/story_8409.html).
- Stress that repentance is more than feeling sorry. It actively demonstrates the difference the presence of Christ makes in our lives.
- Close in prayer, asking God to lead you from repentance to follow Christ in the divine plan.

Surrender Surprise Leaders Guide

Matthew 3:13-17

¹³Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” ¹⁵But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented. ¹⁶And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

Theme: God’s will calls for obedience.

Before You Teach

- Read the focal passage, the lesson from the Students Guide and the following teaching suggestions.
- Excerpts from the following two online articles are included below to enhance your teaching. You may wish to read them in their entirety:

“Living with Furious Opposites” (www.christianitytoday.com/global/pf.cgi?/ct/2000/010/4.70.html)

“A Divine Dunking” (www.beliefnet.com/story/16/story_1643.html)

As You Teach

Introduce the Lesson

- Begin by asking class members to respond to these thoughts from Philip Yancey’s book, *Reaching for the Invisible God*: “I used to believe that Christianity solved problems and made

life easier. Increasingly, I believe that my faith complicates life, in ways it should be complicated. As a Christian, I cannot not care about the environment, about homelessness and poverty, about racism and religious persecution, about injustice and violence. God does not give me that option.”

Yancey went on to quote the late Quaker philosopher Elton Trueblood, who wrote, “In many areas, the gospel, instead of taking away people’s burdens, actually adds to them.”

Trueblood recalled the example of John Woolman, “a successful Quaker merchant who lived a comfortable life until God convicted him of the offense of slavery. Woolman gave up his prosperous business, used his money to purchase slaves’ freedom, wore undyed suits to avoid using dye produced by slave labor, traveled on foot because slaves were not permitted to ride in carriages, and refused to eat sugar, rum, molasses, and other products tainted by slave labor. Largely because of this ‘quiet revolutionary,’ by 1787 not a single American Quaker owned a slave” (www.christianitytoday.com/global/pf.cgi?/ct/2000/010/4.70.html).

Trueblood also wrote: “Occasionally we talk of our Christianity as something that solves problems, and there is a sense in which it does. Long before it does so, however, it increases both the number and the intensity of the problems. Even our intellectual questions are increased by the acceptance of a strong religious faith. ... If a man wishes to avoid the disturbing effect of paradoxes, the best advice is for him to leave the Christian faith alone” (www.christianitytoday.com/global/pf.cgi?/ct/2000/010/4.70.html).

- Point out that both Yancey and Trueblood allude to the many ironies we encounter when we choose to follow Christ. Suggest that our baptism—which symbolically marks the end of our old life and the beginning of new life in Christ—rather than bringing an end to life’s problems for us, in some ways ushers them in. Such was the case for Jesus, and such is the case for us, if indeed Jesus’ baptism teaches us what should happen to us in ours.

Doing God’s will requires from us obedience, which can lead not only to opportunities disguised as problems but also to unexpected blessings.

- Acknowledge that baptism occurs for people at different times in various faith traditions and holds different meanings. Ask class members with backgrounds in various denominations or faith traditions to explain what baptism means in that tradition. Ask other class members to recall their baptisms and describe the experience and what it meant to them personally.

If time permits, relate some of the following reflections by Amy Sullivan, who grew up in the Baptist tradition: “One night when I was 10, I stopped waiting for a Damascus-like experience. I had done the math and realized that half my Sunday school class had already gone forward to be baptized. I searched my brain and could not think of any child in the church who had entered junior-high unbaptized. The time seemed about right. I told my mom, she contacted Pastor Bill, I attended new-member classes, and one Sunday I walked to the front of the sanctuary during the final hymn.

“More than anything, the decision to be baptized was the result of a simple risk assessment. I didn’t feel that in my 10 years on earth I had done anything sinful enough to require cleansing. On the other hand, the constant refrain from the pulpit admonished that, if a bus hit me on the way home and I died unbaptized, I would go to hell. Waiting in the baptismal, I sincerely wanted to experience the power of baptism. But I was also hedging my heavenly bets” (www.beliefnet.com/story/16/story_1643.html).

Sullivan recalled that before she knew it, she had been “... blessed, been dipped back into the water, got some water up my nose, made my dad cry, and returned to the choir-robe room to have my hair blown-dry by one of the deaconesses. I felt ... exactly the same. ... [F]or someone who has been raised in the Baptist church and has never done much of anything to stray, baptism is not the symbol of one affirmative choice but rather an experience that is recalled in thousands of small choices made over a lifetime. My baptism meant very little to me at age 10; it means everything to me now” (www.beliefnet.com/story/16/story_1643.html).

Ask:

► *How many people do you think see themselves in Sullivan's baptism experience?*

Remind the class that baptism is but one step of obedience. Obedience and commitment that result in God's pleasure and blessing involve more than a one-time act, as Sullivan noted. They are ongoing, steadfast and deliberate.

Explore the Bible

- Point out that instead of being written primarily to give us a chronology or sequence of Jesus' ministry, the Gospels were written to tell us who Jesus was. Unlike modern biographers, who usually chronicle early life experiences in detail, the Gospel writers recorded little about Jesus' life between his birth and his baptism. The one exception is the story of Jesus' encounter with the teachers in the temple (see Lk 2:41-52).

All four Gospels lead us to understand that Jesus began his public ministry when he was about 30 years old and that it lasted around three years. Ben Witherington, a New Testament professor and scholar, wrote that "The Gospels, as ancient works, are interested in discerning the character of Jesus and his ministry, and they accomplish this by showing Jesus in relationships with various people and movements of his times.

"First, there was his relationship with the prophet John, also known as 'the Baptist,' which reveals something of Jesus' relationship to all Jewish prophets. All four Gospels explain that the ministries of John and Jesus were closely related. It is also clear that Jesus had great admiration for John and frequently compared him and his ministry to John's. ... Most important, Jesus submitted to baptism at John's hands, which not only validated John's ministry but was a 'watershed' event for Jesus" (www.christianitytoday.com/global/pf.cgi?/ch/59h/59h012.html).

- Read aloud Matthew 3:13-17. Note our tendency to skip over verses 13-14, and even verse 15 which records Jesus' words, to get to the "drama" of verses 16-17. Lead your class to understand the significance of the earlier verses by exploring answers to questions such as these:

► *Why do you think Jesus went to where John was?*

► *Why was it important for Jesus to receive John's baptism? Could someone other than John have baptized Jesus and had the same significance or impact?*

► *Why do you think John at first protested Jesus' request to be baptized by him?*

► *In what ways did John fulfill the role of a prophet in the life of the people of God?*

► *In submitting to John's baptism, what did Jesus do for John's message?*

► *Apart from setting an example of obedience, why do you think Jesus was baptized?*

► *What did Jesus' baptism proclaim in terms of the divine plan?*

- Using the Students Guide, point out Frederick Bruner's observations about "the Spirit of God descending like a dove" (v 16). Note that not only does this serve as an example of God's movement toward us, it also serves as a call to us to move downward as servants in a world of hurts and needs. Then ask:

► *What else does the image of the Spirit as dove communicate about God's power and ways? What does this say to us about how we are to live and work in the world?*

► *Verse 17 records that along with the dove as a symbol of God's empowering presence, God spoke at Jesus' baptism, identifying him as "Son" and "Beloved" and indicating God's pleasure with him. Why is this significant?*

Of Jesus' baptism, Ben Witherington wrote: "During the baptism, Jesus, like other Jewish prophets, had a confirming vision and received an anointing from God for ministry. This call was unique, however, in that Jesus heard himself called God's Son, and he later responded by calling God *Abba*, a term of intimate familiarity. The Gospel writers suggested that Jesus' ministry was a confirmation and fulfillment of all

prophetic callings. God's final saving and judging activity was on the horizon, and God's people needed to be prepared. They needed to repent" (www.christianitytoday.com/global/pf.cgi?/ch/59h/59h012.html).

Apply Biblical Truth

- Point out that repentance and baptism are but first steps in a life of obedience as we live God's will. While some in our culture subscribe to a "name it and claim it theology" in which obedience to God's will assures us of personal, material success, the reality is that obedience to God's will can result in our being misunderstood, ridiculed or ignored and can mean associating most often with the down-and-out, not the rich and famous. Yet it is this obedience and commitment that result in God's pleasure and blessing and something much richer and deeper than material wealth.

Doing God's will results in God's blessing, approval, favor and encouragement and leads to an overall sense of well-being.

- Relate the following illustration:

Actor Martin Sheen, who plays President Josiah Bartlet on NBC's top-rated drama, "The West Wing," is widely known for his off-screen political involvement which he attributes to his deep Catholic faith.

Religion, he says, "if it's real, can't be a sometime thing. It can't be a Sunday thing. Christ was killed because—well, because he was a rebel. They didn't kill him because he was a nice guy. He was a troublemaker. He was changing the law, the letter of the law, because he changed the heart.

"Martin Luther King said the church is the place to go forth from. Even his fellow preachers said, 'Hey, man, what are you doing in the streets?' He said we've got to take what we believe into the streets. If it has moral value, we have to live it and lead" ("True Believer," by Michael Beschloss, *Reader's Digest*, June 2002, pp. 86-87).

- Pray, asking God to give you an understanding of and obedience to the divine plan that pushes you into active demonstrations of the faith you profess.

The Temptation Trap Leaders Guide

Matthew 4:1-11

¹Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ²He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. ³The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." ⁴But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" ⁵Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, ⁶saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" ⁷Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" ⁸Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; ⁹and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." ¹⁰Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! For it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him,'" ¹¹Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

Theme: God's will strengthens us in the face of temptation.

Before You Teach

- Read the focal passage, the lesson from the Students Guide and the following teaching suggestions.

As You Teach

Introduce the Lesson

- Begin with the following illustrations, in succession, without comment:

Illustration 1

Jennifer Blackshear was a freshman at the University of Maryland in the early 1990s. Her part-time, on-campus job enabled her to pay for her books and her car, but left little else in her pockets. When enticing credit card offers came her way and promised her freedom for spring break vacations she otherwise could not afford, she couldn't refuse.

After only one year in college, she had more than five credit cards and huge debt. She was forced to cut back on her course load and become a part-time student so that she could work full-time to keep up with her credit card payments.

Unfortunately, Jennifer's spending habits changed little. She amassed so much credit card debt during the next four years—\$26,000—that by the time she went to a credit counseling agency for help, they immediately sent her to a bankruptcy lawyer.

At the age of 23, Jennifer joined thousands of others—some 100,000 annually—in bankruptcy.

After more than a decade of being denied credit, Jennifer, now an accountant, eagerly anticipates the day soon when the bankruptcy label will disappear from her credit report ("Personal Finance 101," www.yahoo.com/news).

Illustration 2

He probably was not the first, but basketball star Wilt Chamberlain was likely the professional athlete who bragged the most about his adulterous affairs. In one account, he claimed to have had affairs—or at least one-night stands—with 20,000 women.

Tami Anderson, who was formerly married to an NBA player, says, "I don't think there's a single faithful man in the NBA. And if he's out there, then his wife has a very short leash on him" ("Foul Play," www.abcnews.com).

"Everybody's fair game," she says. "With this lifestyle, it's bound to happen."

For professional athletes who spend a lot of time on the road and away from home, every hotel lobby, club and restaurant presents them with a myriad of choices.

Illustration 3

After serving in both the Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush presidential administrations, William Bennett became nationally known as a moral crusader and author of *The Book of Virtues*, commanding \$50,000 speaking fees.

In 2003 he became known as a compulsive gambler. *Washington Monthly* and *Newsweek* both reported that Bennett lost more than \$500,000 in a single month. Some reports indicated he had lost more than \$8 million in the past decade.

One source reportedly said that Bennett "prefers the high-limit room, where he's less likely to be seen and where he can play the \$500-a-pull slots. He usually plays very late at night or early in the morning—usually between midnight and 6 a.m." (www.ethicsdaily.com).

When the reports first broke, Bennett downplayed them, claiming he didn't play "the milk money," meaning he didn't jeopardize his family's financial security. He also said that he gave a "chunk" of his winnings to charity, and credited church bingo with teaching him how to gamble as a child.

After the issue became a public relations nightmare, Bennett finally said, "It is true that I have gambled large sums of money. I have done too much gambling, and this is not an example I wish to set. Therefore, my gambling days are over."

- After you have offered the three illustrations, ask:

► *What do these situations have in common?*

Stress that temptation is a reality for everyone, not just those in the public eye. It comes in a variety of forms. While it is often tied to human desires and attached to our senses, it can also be disguised as something helpful or positive. Sometimes we can recognize it for what it is, but sometimes we do not.

Our response to temptation reflects our obedience or disobedience to God's will. The way we respond to temptation always has consequences for us as children of God. In Jesus' temptation experiences, we see our own, and we also discover ways to stay obedient to the divine plan.

Explore the Bible

- Read aloud Matthew 4:1-2. Point out that God's Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness "to be tempted by the devil." Then lead your class to discuss the implications of Jesus' temptations by asking such questions as:
 - ▶ *What is your reaction to the fact that God allowed Jesus to be tempted? Why do you think God did this?*
 - ▶ *What is the significance of the location of Jesus' temptation experiences?*
 - ▶ *What unusual factors might have made Jesus even more susceptible to temptation at this particular time?*
 - ▶ *What was the essence of these temptations for Jesus?*
- Ask someone to read aloud Matthew 4:3-5. Note that the devil was clearly trying to take advantage of Jesus' extreme hunger and test him at that point. Then ask:
 - ▶ *Why did Jesus quote scripture in answer to the devil's challenge?*
 - ▶ *What is the significance of the particular scripture Jesus quoted?*
 - ▶ *In what ways are we tempted materially and economically?*
 - ▶ *What does Jesus' example during his physical temptation teach us?*
- Note the transition at the end of verse 5 where the devil took Jesus "to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple." Then read aloud verses 6-7. Point out that this temptation by the devil was an attempt to test God and God's

faithfulness to fulfill divine promises. Note the similar testing of God by Israel in Exodus. Then ask:

▶ *In what ways do we attempt to test God's faithfulness?*

- Read aloud Matthew 4:8-11 and note that the devil again took Jesus to another location. Ask:

▶ *What was the temptation for Jesus here?*

Stress that Jesus' temptations were real and difficult. While the devil tempted Jesus physically and spiritually, at their core the temptations were attempts to get Jesus to renounce his identity as God's son and thus refuse to fulfill the divine plan.

Suggest that when we are tempted, we too are enticed to refute our identity with Christ and forget about our commitment to God's will. It is that commitment, however, that enables us to be strong when we are tempted. Jesus knew that God was in control, had a plan and that he was a unique part of that plan. He knew that God would provide what he needed. Note the provision of God in the form of angels in verse 11. Because Jesus was tempted in every way like we are and successfully withstood those temptations, and because God met his needs, we can withstand temptation and have the assurance that God will give us what we need too.

- Point out that Jesus met these temptations and remained faithful to God's plan for him because he had a very clear sense of his identity. Remind the class that these temptations closely followed—although at least 40 days lapsed—Jesus' baptism, in which God made clear who Jesus was. Because Jesus had a clear understanding of God and God's plan, he could hold tight to his identity and remain faithful to his part of God's plan.
- State that we most often think of temptation in personal and individual terms. Point out that groups—even churches—are tempted to renounce their identity in Christ and fail when tempted. Ask:

► *At what points do you think our church might be tempted?*

Apply Biblical Truth

- Recall the illustrations from the introductory suggestions and ask adults to place themselves in one of those situations. Then ask:
 - *How would you respond? What would be your defense?*
- Lead the class to develop a step-by-step strategy or list of suggestions for remaining committed to God's will in the face of temptation. Suggest that they review Jesus' exchanges with the devil, and based on his responses, develop some guidelines for dealing with temptation.

Write their suggestions on a chart or board. Generate discussion as necessary with suggestions such as these:

- Know who you are as a child of God. Affirm your identity.
- Cultivate your relationship with God so that you can discern God's voice and God's plans above the din, distractions and attractions from other sources.
- Learn to recognize temptation for what it is, and acknowledge it immediately.
- Acknowledge the price of disobedience to God's will and giving into temptation. When faced with choices, ask yourself: *What will this cost me? Whom will it hurt? How will it affect my relationship with God? with other people? How will this affect my identity as a Christian? What are the short-term implications of this decision? What are the long-term implications? Will this move me closer to or farther away from God? Will it allow me to or prevent me from living God's will?*
- Affirm what you know about God and God's character. Acknowledge that God has always provided and will always provide you with what you need.
- Stay connected to those who can hold you accountable to your Christian commitment and whom you can hold accountable to theirs.

► Pray. Confess your weaknesses. Commit yourself to living God's will. Ask God to give you wisdom and strength.

► Avoid places and situations that take advantage of your vulnerable points.

- Close with prayer, renewing your commitment to God's plan and asking for strength to say no to those things that would prevent you from remaining faithful to it.

The Forgiveness Factor Leaders Guide

Matthew 9:1-8

¹And after getting into a boat he crossed the sea and came to his own town. ²And just then some people were carrying a paralyzed man lying on a bed. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven."
³Then some of the scribes said to themselves, "This man is blaspheming."
⁴But Jesus, perceiving their thoughts, said, "Why do you think evil in your hearts?
⁵For which is easier to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Stand up and walk'?"
⁶But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sons"—he then said to the paralytic—"Stand up, take your bed and go to your home."
⁷And he stood up and went to his home.
⁸When the crowds saw it, they were filled with awe, and they glorified God, who had given such authority to human beings.

Theme: God's will redefines religious expectations.

Before You Teach

- Read the focal passage, the lesson from the Students Guide and the following teaching suggestions.
- Ideas and excerpts from the following online article are included in the teaching suggestions below. You may want to read the article in its entirety to further enhance your teaching:

"Are We Ready to Forgive?", www.beliefnet.com/story/88/story_8880.html.
- Lewis Smedes, ethics and theology professor at Fuller Theological Seminary, wrote extensively about forgiveness in a book titled *The Art of Forgiving: When You Need to Forgive and Don't Know How* (Ballantine). In a magazine column in which a reader asked how we can know that we have truly

forgiven someone, Smedes answered by offering some additional realities you may find helpful as you lead your class to talk about forgiveness. You may read the column, "Keys to Forgiving," online at www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2001/015/42.73.html.

As You Teach

Introduce the Lesson

- Illustrate the power of forgiveness by telling the following true story:

Amy Biehl, an idealistic college student from California, won a Fulbright Scholarship and traveled to Cape Town, South Africa, to assist in the anti-apartheid movement. She believed she could make a difference in the lives of oppressed South Africans, particularly women and children. In August 1993, Amy was murdered by a mob during a riot.

In spite of their tremendous grief, Amy's parents, Linda and Peter, left their upper-middle-class lifestyle and moved to South Africa to continue the work in which their daughter was involved, becoming a part of the reconciliation effort in South Africa.

Even more remarkable, the Biehls eventually met two of Amy's killers and forgave them.

In September 1997 the Biehls launched the Amy Biehl Foundation Trust in South Africa in an effort to continue Amy's and their work. They divided their time between fund-raising efforts in the United States and hands-on efforts in South Africa. Two of the young men responsible for Amy's murder, full of remorse, were pardoned of their crime and became involved in public service through the foundation. The Biehls and the young men became friends, to the point that they address Amy's mother as "mom."

At the time of Peter Biehl's death in 2002 from complications of colon cancer, the Trust employed more than 80 South Africans, males and females of diverse races and ages. The Trust makes possible a number of projects including after-school care, music and literacy for thousands of children.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu knew the Biehls well and praised Peter Biehl for setting standards of restorative justice admired by people around the world. "What was so remarkable was not only that they forgave the killers of their daughter," he said, "but that they went so far as to rehabilitate them" (www.news24.com).

Linda Biehl is committed to continuing the work in South Africa. "People do experience loss all the time and they cope and they keep on going. Peter knew that, just like we learned from Amy how difficult it is for oppressed people, how they cope and live ... their dreams and aspirations. We feel privileged that we have had the opportunity to be involved on a grassroots level. It's always about learning and sharing" (www.news24.com).

- Ask class members to put themselves in the place of Amy Biehl's parents. Then ask:
 - ▶ *If this had been your child, what would your initial response have been?*

Acknowledge that most people struggle with the reality of forgiveness. It is not always an immediate and natural first response. Instead, retaliation often is. Few people would have questioned the Biehls had they refused to have anything to do with the men who murdered their daughter. But the Biehls apparently knew something a lot of people don't: forgiveness does as much, if not more, for us as it does for those we choose to forgive.

Scripture teaches us that we cannot be faithful in our efforts to know and do God's will if we are unwilling to forgive. Our unwillingness to forgive blocks the fullness of God's power in our lives.

- Relate to your class these statements Archbishop Tutu made about forgiveness in an interview following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001:

"We are exhorted to forgive one another even as God in Christ forgave us; we are in the forgiving business whether we like it or not. And we can do this only through God's grace. It is ultimately God at work in us to make us to be like God. Yes,

it is a tall order, but that is the love that changes the world, that believes an enemy is a friend waiting to be made" ("Are We Ready to Forgive?", www.beliefnet.com/story/88/story_8880.html).

Explore the Bible

- Call attention to Matthew 9:1-8 and ask: *When you first heard this story from the Bible, perhaps as a child in Sunday school, what was the focus or main point?*

Suggest that while this account does include a brave demonstration of faith by a paralyzed man and his friends and a miraculous healing by Jesus, its larger lesson is that God's will redefines religious expectations. When we understand and follow the will of God, we will do things that baffle and astound others, including demonstrating forgiveness and love in a world that is often unloving and unforgiving. Stress that because we have experienced forgiveness, we must extend it to others.

- Read aloud Matthew 9:1-2. Note that this encounter took place in Jesus' hometown, Capernaum, where people knew him well. Also point out the parallel of the friends carrying the paralyzed man and the idea that the church exists to help carry those who cannot carry themselves. Then lead the class to discuss the situation by asking:

- ▶ *What was so unusual about Jesus' first response to the paralyzed man?*

- ▶ *Why would Jesus' proclamation have been so disturbing to the scribes and other Jews?*

- ▶ *What do you think Jesus' real intent was in saying what he did?*

- Read aloud Matthew 9:3 and note the reaction of the scribes. Explain that it was their job to maintain the integrity of the religious expectations of the day. Jesus claimed to do something they believed only God could do. Their reaction was natural and expected.

Explain what blasphemy meant and how seriously the scribes took this statement by Jesus. They understood Jesus to say that he put himself in God's place.

Read aloud verses 4-8 and note that Jesus deemed their reaction "evil" because they opposed the will of God. Then ask:

▶ *What was Jesus' logic as he spoke in verses 4-6? What was his real intent?*

▶ *The faith displayed by the man and his friends was remarkable. Jesus' power to forgive and to heal was amazing. Yet this event revealed something even more astounding to the crowds who witnessed it and to us. What is it?*

Point out that one of Matthew's purposes in recording this event was to show Jesus' authority as God's Messiah. Note the crowd's reaction: "they were filled with awe, and they glorified God, who had given such authority to human beings" (v 8). Equally interesting is that Matthew recorded nothing as far as a response from the scribes. Apparently they were speechless. No doubt they, too, were awe-struck, but they were silent.

Suggest that when we demonstrate loving forgiveness to those our culture has determined do not deserve it, we elicit a similar reaction from those around us. We also give witness to the love and forgiveness of God and participate more fully in the divine plan. God does not expect that Jesus will be the only one to extend forgiveness. God expects that we will extend it also.

Apply Biblical Truth

- Stress that displaying forgiveness is just as important for churches as it is for individuals, and can be just as difficult. Too often, power struggles, dissension and unwillingness to forgive characterize churches instead of love, acceptance and forgiveness. Like individuals, churches characterized by an unforgiving spirit cannot fully understand and participate in the divine plan. The unwillingness to forgive by even one person within the faith community can affect the entire community. Likewise, the faith example of one person can positively

influence the rest of the community and result in deeper understanding of and participation in the divine plan.

Use insights such as the following summarized from the column by Lewis Smedes to lead your class to apply biblical truths about forgiveness:

▶ The first step in forgiveness involves our surrendering the right to get even. Instead of wanting the one who has wronged us to suffer at least as much as he or she has made us suffer, we allow God to settle the outcome of the matter.

▶ The second step in forgiveness leads us to acknowledge the humanity of the person who has wronged us. We concede that this person is as frail and weak as we are.

▶ The third step in forgiveness leads us to wish the person well who has hurt us. While this is quite difficult and maybe even unnatural, it is in fact how God deals with us.

Forgiving ought to come naturally to those who have been forgiven, Smedes wrote. After all, Jesus taught that if we refuse to forgive, we can't expect God to forgive us.

- Challenge the class with the following words from Archbishop Desmond Tutu:

"Forgiveness and reconciliation are not cheap. They are costly. After all, they cost God the death of God's Son. Forgiveness is not to condone or minimize the awfulness of an atrocity or wrong. It is to recognize its ghastliness but to choose to acknowledge the essential humanity of the perpetrator and to give that perpetrator the possibility of making a new beginning. It is an act of much hope and not despair. It is to hope in the essential goodness of people and to have faith in their potential to change. It is to bet on that possibility. ... God does not give up on anyone, for God looks on each of us as a masterpiece in the making. But God took an incredible risk in creating us not to be automatons but to be decision-making creatures with the freedom to choose to obey or not to obey God, to love or not to love God" ("Are We Ready to Forgive?", www.beliefnet.com/story/88/story_8880.html).

Stress that God's call to us to forgive and to love stands in stark opposition to conventional wisdom and the tendencies of our culture. In doing so, however, we show Christ's presence in an otherwise unforgiving and unloving world and thus do God's will.

- Close with prayer, asking God's forgiveness and committing to live lives that demonstrate that forgiveness in a world that seldom expects it.

There Goes the Neighborhood! Leaders Guide

Matthew 9:9-13

⁹As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him. ¹⁰And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. ¹¹When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" ¹²But when he heard this, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. ¹³Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners."

Theme: God's will redefines community.

Before You Teach

- Read the focal passage, the lesson from the Students Guide and the following teaching suggestions.
- The illustration suggested in the Introduction comes from an extensive article by Reverend Pamela Baker Powell. You may wish to read it in its entirety at www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2000/011/6.50.html.
- The comments suggested for use in concluding the lesson come from "The Quest for Community" by Leonard Sweet. The article is archived at www.christianitytoday.com.

As You Teach

Introduce the Lesson

- Begin by asking the class to name television shows and movies in which exclusion/elitism are either a major or an underlying theme: for example, Archie Bunker's outright

disdain for his black neighbors, the Jeffersons, in “All in the Family”; Mrs. Drysdale’s utter dismay over her socially backward neighbors, the Clampetts, in “The Beverly Hillbillies”.

Suggest that whether they focus on talent, endurance, skill, cunning or matchmaking, most all of today’s reality TV shows operate from the same basic premise: they systematically exclude and eliminate participants until only “the best” remains.

Remind the class that exclusion is not only a common theme for movies and television shows; it is also a common reality for many people, unfortunately even for some who seek community within the church.

- Contrast the idea of exclusion with the concept of community using the following example:

At the congregation’s request, Pamela Baker Powell served Messiah Presbyterian Church in Lubbock, Texas, as pastor from 1994-1996. At the time, the congregation had 21 adult members, eight children and a total constituency of around 43 people. The congregation is black; Powell is white.

“It is no exaggeration to say that Messiah Church and I were from two different worlds, and even in the best of circumstances, merging these worlds can be complicated for both blacks and whites,” she recalled (see “The Lord in Black Skin,” www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2000/011/6.50.html).

But race was only one of many differences Powell and her congregants faced. Education, socioeconomic class, regional upbringing and even their faith experiences made them seem worlds apart. Yet through a series of shared ministries and life experiences, they became a community of faith.

One of their ministries—a real faith exercise of providing expensive, prized athletic shoes free of charge to children who chose to excel in school and stay away from drugs—resulted in a lot of media attention and gained the church much notoriety. People from the community often visited the church, including the city symphony’s conductor and his

Dutch-American family. They regularly attended for over a year but he never told the congregation about his work. Because Powell was in line to become the president of the board for one of the local ballet companies, she obtained free tickets to *The Nutcracker Suite* one Christmas and distributed them among the congregation. During intermission of the performance, one of the church’s elders, a jazz pianist named Ed Higgins, approached Powell and exclaimed, “Did you see? That’s George down there in front conducting the orchestra!”

Then, Powell said, he lowered his voice and whispered to her, “I said to myself, *Now, there’s one of ours!*”

“In the most profound sense,” Powell reflected, “being able to tell each other *There’s one of ours*, whatever their color or socioeconomic class, is a tremendous testimony to the power of Jesus Christ to bring us together in his body, the church. ... When I first came to Messiah, I drove to another part of town and found people who were strange and different from me. But after meeting and knowing Messiah, I find something has happened—and I am at home in a new way in God’s world.”

Explore the Bible

- Call attention to Matthew 9:9-13 and point to it as one of Jesus’ object lessons in redefining community.

Lead your class to examine the passage by dividing it into three segments: The Man; The Meal; The Message. Encourage community-building within your class by dividing them into three small groups and making the following assignments. Suggest that they use the information in the Students Guide along with the scripture to help answer the questions.

The Man: Matthew 9:9

► *Who was Matthew?*

► *What do we know about Matthew’s work?*

► *Why were tax collectors so despised in first-century Jewish life?*

► *What religious and social restrictions did Matthew's job bring?*

The Meal: Matthew 9:10-11

► *What was so unusual about the meal Jesus shared?*

► *What were the consequences of this meal for Jesus and his disciples?*

► *Why were the Pharisees so disturbed by what Jesus and his disciples did?*

► *What message do you think Jesus was trying to send by sharing this meal with "tax collectors and sinners"?*

The Message: Matthew 9:12-13

► *Compare Matthew 9:9-13 with 9:1-8. What parallels do you see?*

► *How did Jesus defend or explain his choice to eat with tax collectors and sinners?*

► *What did Jesus mean by "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick" (v 9)?*

► *How do you interpret Jesus' challenge to the Pharisees to go and learn the meaning of 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice'?*

- After several minutes, ask volunteers from each group to read aloud their assigned scriptures and provide insights and answers to the questions. Encourage additional insights from other class members.
- Ask class members to suggest reasons why people in our culture feel excluded from churches.

Suggest that one barrier to church community for many people is the very idea Jesus addressed on several occasions: they perceive self-righteousness on the part of

many church members and believe that they must 'clean themselves up' before they can be acceptable to the church.

Point out that actually, the converse is true. Tim Keller, senior pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City, noted that the gospel is 'inside out.' Once we know God's blessings and grace on the inside, then our actions and behaviors—the outside—will change.

Unfortunately, Keller noted, those outside the church "see how often religion leads to self-righteousness, exclusion, and oppression." The gospel, he believes, calls us to repent from our self-righteousness. "Only when Christians non-condescendingly serve the poor, only when Christians are more firm yet open to their opponents will the world understand the difference between religion and the gospel" (see "Religion-Less Spirituality," www.christianitytoday.com).

Apply Biblical Truth

- Ask class members to evaluate how well they think the church in general and yours in particular are doing in terms of encouraging community. Then ask:
 - *Where, apart from church, do people in our culture look for community?*
 - *How fulfilling do you think they find these other sources?*
- Illustrate the quest and challenge for community using these insights from Leonard Sweet:

"One of the favorite words used in the context of the Web is 'community.' eBay is in the business of building communities, they say; theirs is less an information source than a social medium. The paradox is this: the pursuit of individualism has led us to this place of hunger for community, not of blood or nation but communities of choice. More than buying and selling, the electronic emporium is about posting messages on bulletin boards, discovering new friends, and launching relationships at the eBay Café. ... eBay may just be the closest experience of small-town America available to postmoderns. Where else can they find people with similar interests ...? Where else can they be

drawn into community around a single purpose? Where else can they tell the stories most central to who they are and find people eager to hear them? Where else can they participate so fully and have their lives changed by the experience? Nowhere else. Except, perhaps, the church. And isn't that what the gospel is all about?" (www.christianitytoday.com).

- Close with prayer, asking God to help you build a stronger sense of community within your church that will attract and invite those outside the church.

Radical Relationships Leaders Guide

Matthew 10:5-15

⁵These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, ⁶but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. ⁷As you go, proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' ⁸Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment. ⁹Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, ¹⁰no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for laborers deserve their food. ¹¹Whatever town or village you enter, find out who in it is worthy, and stay there until you leave. ¹²As you enter the house, greet it. ¹³If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. ¹⁴If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town. ¹⁵Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town.

Theme: God's will redefines our presence in the world.

Before You Teach

- Read the focal passage, the lesson from the Students Guide and the following teaching suggestions.
- You may wish to read the following online article from which the Introductory illustration was drawn:

"Law Professor Pushes Tax Reform in Alabama"
(www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=2424).

As You Teach

Introduce the Lesson

- Begin by relating the following:

Susan Pace Hamill, a law professor at the University of Alabama, played a major role in mobilizing thousands of Alabamians on the issue of tax reform as a result of the thesis she wrote while pursuing a master's degree in theological studies at Samford University's Beeson Divinity School.

Labeling the state's tax system as sinful and calling reform a Christian duty, Hamill and others pushed tirelessly for a rewrite of the tax laws, claiming they benefited middle- and upper-income taxpayers while placing an undue burden on the poor.

"Alabama's tax structure fails to meet any reasonable definition of fairness and violates the moral principles of Judeo-Christian ethics," Hamill wrote in her thesis.

A brochure titled "The Least of These," summarizing her thesis, was produced and circulated in churches throughout the state. Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Catholics and Jews joined together to back changes in the tax code.

Hamill, who attends Trinity Methodist Church in Tuscaloosa, believes all Christians have a moral obligation to support tax reform and called Christian legislators and religious leaders to seek justice for the poor and oppressed. She was critical of political and religious leaders who avoided the issue either for fear of losing votes or of rocking the boat.

Though it enjoyed widespread support in the Christian community, Hamill's plan was opposed by the Religious Right, which claimed it would result in higher taxes for businesses and some families. One representative of the state's Christian Coalition took the debate to a personal level, sending out a mass email questioning Hamill's personal views on abortion. The move was interpreted by many as a ploy to undermine her credibility with religious conservatives.

"I am not about abortion," Hamill told *The Birmingham News*. "I am about tax reform."

- Lead the class to discuss Hamill's bold move by asking such questions as:

▶ *How does God's will affect our engagement with our world?*

▶ *Can we participate in the divine plan and remain detached from the world?*

▶ *What might commitment to God's will cost us physically? Socially? Financially? Emotionally?*

Stress that God's will redefines our presence in the world and pushes us into radical relationships that stretch and challenge us. As a result, the needs and concerns of the world's people become our needs and concerns, causing us to work for reform and justice.

Explore the Bible

- Introduce Matthew 10 by noting what transpired in the closing verses of chapter 9. Jesus had traveled widely teaching, preaching and healing. "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (Matt 9:36).

Then Matthew 9:37b-38 records these words of Jesus to his disciples: "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."

While we have no clear idea of how much time lapsed between the words of Jesus which close of chapter 9 and his actions which open chapter 10, the connection between the words and events which follow is clear. Matthew Henry, the 18th century theologian, noted that chapter 10 is an "ordination sermon" for the disciples. In chapter 9, Henry noted, Jesus "had stirred up them and others to pray that God would send forth labourers, and here we have an immediate answer to that prayer" (Matthew Henry Complete Commentary on the Whole Bible, www.crosswalk.com).

Chapter 10 records Jesus giving the disciples a specific mission with detailed instructions, which at first glance, seem a little baffling since they seem exclusive. Further, Jesus told them exactly how to act and how to proceed, depending on the reception they received. Note that our challenge is to determine how these words of Jesus apply to us as we engage with the world.

- Ask someone to read aloud Matthew 10:5-6. Then lead the class to discuss it by asking such questions as:

▶ *Why did Jesus instruct the disciples to avoid going among the Gentiles and Samaritans?*

Note that Jesus was particularly compassionate toward and concerned about “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (v 6) and made the first offer of salvation to them. The Jewish religious leaders showed little concern for the average person and made their lives burdensome and difficult. This restraint Jesus placed upon the disciples was for this mission only, as he later gave them specific instructions in Matthew 28 “to make disciples of all nations” (v 19).

- Read aloud Matthew 10:7-8; then lead the class to discuss answers to such questions as:

▶ *What was the nature of the disciples’ assignment?*

▶ *What was the nature of the message Jesus told them to preach? What is “the kingdom of heaven”?*

▶ *What did Jesus mean when he said, “You received without payment; give without payment” (v 8b)?*

Suggest that one way Jesus intended the disciples—and us—to demonstrate the nature of the gospel was by not profiting personally from it. Jesus gave the disciples unprecedented power and authority. They could have healed people and worked miracles for a hefty fee, yet Jesus warned them against doing this. The power that allowed them to perform these miracles had cost them nothing, and they were to charge nothing for it, thus exemplifying God’s love and reflecting the generosity Jesus had given to them.

- Note the radical nature of faith as Jesus called for it in Matthew 10:9-10. Then ask:

▶ *Why did Jesus insist that the disciples serve in such vulnerability, with not even the basic equipment for sustenance and self-defense?*

▶ *What do you think following Jesus’ instructions taught the disciples?*

▶ *Do these instructions of Jesus apply to us? How?*

- Read aloud the remainder of Jesus’ instructions to the disciples in Matthew 10:11-15. Remind the class that Jesus sent the disciples out among people whom they did not know. They were uninvited and unexpected. Jesus told them how to act among these strangers, both those who welcomed them and those who would not. Ask:

▶ *What did Jesus tell the disciples to do when they arrived at a new place?*

▶ *What did Jesus mean by “worthy” in verses 11 and 13?*

▶ *What was the disciples’ greatest vulnerability?*

▶ *Jesus prepared the disciples not just for acceptance from those to whom they went, but also for rejection. How did he tell them to respond when they met with rejection?*

▶ *What did Jesus mean by his reference to “the land of Sodom and Gomorrah” (v 15)?*

Apply Biblical Truth

- Remind the class of the disciples’ unusual mission and the radical faith Jesus expected them to display. Note that the disciples had little experience in doing what Jesus asked them to do, and their skills were limited at best. Jesus instructed them to go without any provisions and depend on the hospitality of strangers who would hopefully become their ministry partners. The likelihood of rejection was ever-present. Still, they went. They participated in the divine plan.

- Stress that a personal relationship with God through Christ launches for each of us our participation the divine plan. That means extreme faith, radical relationships and great vulnerability. True discipleship—doing God’s will—causes us to say yes in spite of the risks of opposition, criticism and perceived failures. As a result, the people of the world, their needs and concerns, become part of our lives, and we become as Christ to them. The task is huge and can overwhelm us if we forget in whose power we serve.

Recall for the class the example of Mother Teresa, who was quoted as saying: “I never look at the masses as my responsibility. I look at the individual. I can love only one person at a time. I can feed only one person at a time. Just one, one, one ... So you begin—I begin. ...The whole work is only a drop in the ocean. But if I didn’t put the drop in, the ocean would be one drop less. Same thing for you, same thing in your family, same thing in the church where you are. Just begin ... one, one, one” (www.amongthefirst.com/momteresa).

- Close with prayer, asking God to move you into greater contact with the world and the concerns and needs of its people. Pray that God will give you wisdom as you examine and question policies and practices and work for reforms.

Hard-Wired Faith Leaders Guide

Matthew 11:25-30

²⁵At that time Jesus said, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; ²⁶yes, Father for such was your gracious will. ²⁷All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. ²⁸Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

Theme: God’s will redefines our understanding of God.

Before You Teach

- Read the focal passage, the lesson from the Students Guide and the following teaching suggestions.
- The following online articles from EthicsDaily.com can enhance your teaching:

“Bruce Almighty” (www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=2599);

“Finding God at the Movie House” (www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=2809).

- You may also find the following online article helpful as you prepare to teach this lesson:

“Are humans ‘hard-wired’ to believe in God?” (www.baptiststandard.com/2003/4_28/pages/hardwired.html).

As You Teach

Introduce the Lesson

- Ask class members to think through their experiences with television and movies and suggest what these media have conveyed in general about God. Lead them to discuss the role of television and movies in their understanding of God by asking such questions as:
 - ▶ *In what ways have movies and television portrayed God? How have these media characterized God?*
 - ▶ *In what ways have TV shows and movies contributed to your understanding of God? In what ways have they created conflict or confusion for you in terms of your understanding of God?*
 - ▶ *At what points have you found the portrayal of God in TV and movies to support your understanding of and beliefs about God? Where have you felt major disagreements?*
 - ▶ *How have Christians typically been portrayed in TV and movies? What do you think this has done to enhance or detract from people's understandings of God?*
 - ▶ *Has there been a particular secular TV show or movie that has had a significant influence on you spiritually? If so, what?*
 - ▶ *If you were not a Christian and relied almost exclusively upon TV shows and movies for your understanding of God, what do you think you would believe?*
- Ask those who have seen it to comment on the 2003 Jim Carrey movie "Bruce Almighty." While some in the religious community criticized its premise as sacrilegious, others gained from it a lot of entertainment and some support for the gospel message. In a review of the movie, EthicsDaily.com culture editor Cliff Vaughn wrote that the movie's message was, "Take care of each other. Do the hard work. Realize that God's love is manifested through each of us and how we act toward each other" (www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=2599).

Note some of the conclusions of EthicsDaily.com columnist Dwight Moody, who drew some comparisons between going to a worship service and going to a movie: "To begin with, the weekly religion business has reshaped its program in a more entertainment-orientated way, complete with split screens, surround sound, theater seats and the use of both 'worship artists' and marketing campaigns. On the other hand, the local cinema offers an increasing number of movies that focus on existential, moral and theological questions" (www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=2809).

Church and cinema are somewhat alike, Moody concludes, "and this might be a good thing for both. Religion is important even to unchurched people, perhaps too important to leave solely in the hands of ministers, many of whom lack the freedom and imagination to engage the issues in ways appropriate to our times."

- Suggest that, inaccurate though it may be at times, the portrayal of God through various media reflects humanity's quest for God. Cite examples from various polls that indicate people's beliefs about God, such as:
 - ▶ a December 2002 CNN/*USA Today*/Gallup Poll which reported that 61% of respondents said religion is "very important" in their life (www.pollingreport.com).
 - ▶ a 1998 Harris Poll in which 83% of those responding described themselves as a Christian (www.pollingreport.com).
 - ▶ a 2000 *Newsweek* Poll in which 94% of respondents said they believe in God and 84% said they believe God performs miracles (www.pollingreport.com).

Stress that because God created us in God's image, something within us wants to know and understand God. God created us for relationship. We grow in our understanding of God and God's will as we participate in the divine plan.

Explore the Bible

- Note that Matthew 11 records the beginning of Jesus' teaching "in their cities," (v 1), referring to his specific efforts

with the Jewish people. This section of scripture immediately follows a lengthy discourse in which he taught his disciples. In verses 20-24, Jesus condemns those cities in which the people reject his message and refuse to repent. Verse 25 marks a significant contrast in Jesus' tone and message.

Read aloud Matthew 11:25-26 and point out that, although Jesus was praying to God, he nonetheless continued to teach those who stood by and listened. Ask:

- ▶ *For what was Jesus grateful?*
- ▶ *Who was included in Jesus' references to the "wise" and "intelligent"?*
- ▶ *To whom was Jesus referring when he spoke of "infants"?*
- ▶ *What does this prayer of Jesus teach us about how we can relate to God?*

- Call attention to the unique relationship between Jesus and God by reading aloud Matthew 11:27. Stress that Jesus' identity as well as his complete knowledge came from God. Suggest that Jesus' claims here were likely troubling to the Jews: Jesus claimed to know everything God knew. While the Jews resonated with the idea of a personal God, Jesus took this idea to its deepest level and revealed himself as one with God.

Note especially Jesus' assertion that "no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him" (v 27). Then ask:

▶ *How does this statement by Jesus contribute to your understanding of God's will? What does it say about how we can know and do the will of God?*

- Ask someone to read aloud Matthew 11:28-30. Note the apparent shift in focus on Jesus' part. Ask class members to recall specific occasions during which they have heard ministers and others quote these words of Jesus.

Stress that while Jesus' words do bring comfort, they are also filled with the challenge to "learn." Often we focus exclusively

on the idea of "rest" in this verse, when that is only part of what Jesus offers.

Remind the class that those to whom Jesus spoke at this time had been shackled with the demands of religious obligations they could not meet. They were tired, burdened and anxious. Keeping in mind that Jesus was speaking particularly to those who had struggled for so long to keep the law and found it increasingly impossible, ask:

- ▶ *What did Jesus mean by "rest"? What does it mean for us today?*
- ▶ *What significance did Jesus' use of "yoke" have for this particular audience?*
- ▶ *What did Jesus promise in these verses? What is required of us?*
- ▶ *What do Jesus' words mean for us as we try to understand and do God's will?*

Apply Biblical Truth

- Call attention to the illustration in the Students Guide from Rabbi Sandy Sasso and her daughter. Sasso, who has written several children's books, often talks to both children and adults about their images and understandings of God. "When I've asked children what their favorite name for God is, they always choose the names they've been taught by their parents or heard used in their religious communities," she wrote. "Often they say 'Father.' Jewish children frequently say 'Adonai,' a Hebrew word; Christian youngsters often say, 'Jesus.'"

"Then I tell them about people who called God by different names, about how they argued trying to decide which name was best, until finally they realized that all the names of God were good. Afterward, I ask again what is their favorite name for God. Most frequently they say 'Mother' and 'Friend'" (www.beliefnet.org/story/9/story_991.html).

Lead your class to reflect on how their understanding of God has grown and changed over the years by asking such questions as:

- ▶ *When do you first recall an awareness of God?*
 - ▶ *How did you perceive God as a child?*
 - ▶ *When do you first recall hearing the concept of God's will? How did you perceive at that time that someone knew or did God's will?*
 - ▶ *What is your understanding of God's will today? How do we know and do God's will?*
- Close with prayer, committing obedience to God's will as you understand it. Ask God to show you ways to participate in the divine plan so that your understanding of God and God's plan will continue to grow.

Above the Law Leaders Guide

Matthew 12:1-14

¹At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the sabbath; his disciples were hungry, and they began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. ²When the Pharisees saw it, they said to him, "Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the sabbath." ³He said to them, "Have you not read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? ⁴He entered the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence, which it was not lawful for him or his companions to eat, but only for the priests. ⁵Or have you not read in the law that on the sabbath the priests in the temple break the sabbath and yet are guiltless? ⁶I tell you, something greater than the temple is here. ⁷But if you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless. ⁸For the Son of Man is lord of the sabbath." ⁹He left that place and entered their synagogue; ¹⁰a man was there with a withered hand, and they asked him, "Is it lawful to cure on the sabbath?" so that they might accuse him. ¹¹He said to them, "Suppose one of you has only one sheep and it falls into a pit on the sabbath; will you not lay hold of it and lift it out? ¹²How much more valuable is a human being than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the sabbath." ¹³Then he said to the man "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and it was restored, as sound as the other. ¹⁴But the Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him.

Matthew 9:14-17

¹⁴Then the disciples of John came to him saying, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?" ¹⁵And Jesus said to them, "The wedding guests cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast. ¹⁶No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak, for the patch pulls away from the cloak, and a worse tear is made. ¹⁷Neither is new wine put into old wineskins; otherwise the skins burst, and the wine is spilled, and the skins are destroyed; but new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved."

Theme: God's will redefines our practice of faith.

Before You Teach

- Read the focal passage, the lesson from the Students Guide and the following teaching suggestions.
- The following online article is referenced in the Students Guide. You may wish to read it in its entirety:

"24/7: One Hundred Sixty-eight Reasons to Rest With God" (www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=1704).
- Plan to allow plenty of time and opportunity for class discussion as a result of studying these scriptures. Use the suggested questions or some of your own to engage the class in careful, thoughtful dialogue about faith practices.

As You Teach

Introduce the Lesson

- Begin by asking class members to respond to this question:
 - ▶ *What "rules" about your religion or someone else's are particularly troublesome or even offensive to you?*
- Follow this discussion with a series of questions and opportunities for further dialogue:
- ▶ *Did your family have particular rules, guidelines or expectations about Sunday when you were growing up? If so, what were they? What happened when someone "broke a rule"? Did your family's rules seem to match those of your friends' families, or were there points at which the rules differed?*
 - ▶ *Did you live in a community or an era in which "blue laws" were enforced? What effect did these laws have on how you lived? Did you know their original intent?*
 - ▶ *Do you think that there are some essential rules in the practice of our faith? If so, what are they?*

▶ *Do you think that many people associate Christianity with a list of "dos" and "don'ts"? Does this perception affect their willingness to become a part of the faith community?*

▶ *Does the church make it easier or more difficult for people to practice their faith because of rules, either perceived or real?*

▶ *Did Jesus have rules?*

- Provide the class with a general understanding of the religious and social environment in which Jesus lived by relating the following information:

From its beginning, Israel's practice of faith included trust, worship and obedience to the law. Increasingly, their faith was understood as "keeping Torah," which included observing the Sabbath and other holy days and maintaining the sacrificial system. The rabbis equated faith in God and obedience to the Torah, both the written and the oral teachings. This development continued through the beginning of Christianity.

The law occupies a different role in Christian scripture than in Hebrew scripture and Judaism. In Hebrew scripture and Judaism, the law is at the center of the relationship between God and people. In Christian scripture, Jesus, not the law, occupies the central position.

Jesus expressed a very positive attitude toward the law and claimed that he came to fulfill it, not destroy it. Yet as far as the Pharisees were concerned, Jesus broke the law on numerous occasions (healing on the Sabbath, eating with sinners, etc.). Jesus' conflicts with Jewish religious leaders often centered on interpretation of the law.

Explore the Bible

- Ask someone to read aloud Matthew 12:1-2. Then ask:
 - ▶ *What was wrong with what Jesus and his disciples did, according to the Pharisees?*

Point out that by simply plucking the grain and eating it, Jesus and his disciples did not actually violate the law. But in

order to eat it, they had to “thresh” it, which when done on the Sabbath to prepare grain for market, was prohibited. Obviously Jesus and the disciples were not preparing the grain to sell; they only wanted to eat. But the Pharisees used this action to try to trap and accuse Jesus. They were certain that anyone who did the things Jesus did could not really be related to the God of Israel.

- Read aloud Matthew 12:3-8 and guide the class to discuss answers to questions such as these:

▶ *How did Jesus respond to the Pharisees’ charge?*

▶ *What did Jesus mean when he said “something greater than the temple is here” (v 6)?*

▶ *What was Jesus’ purpose in quoting Hosea 6:6?*

▶ *What did Jesus mean when he said “the son of man is lord of the sabbath” (v 8)?*

▶ *What reaction do you think the Pharisees had to Jesus’ declaration in verse 8?*

Note that this was not the first time Jesus quoted Hosea 6:6 and advised the Pharisees and others to go and learn what it meant (see Matt 9:13). Point out also that scripture does not record the Pharisees’ reaction or any response from them to Jesus’ assertion in verse 8, but they no doubt considered this to be blasphemous. Jesus, on the other hand, was merely stating the fact that he, more than anyone else, should know the meaning and purpose of the Sabbath.

- Note that from the encounter with the Pharisees over the grain incident and Jesus’ subsequent teaching about the Sabbath, he “left that place and entered their synagogue” (v 9), where he encountered a man with a disabled hand.

Read verses 9-14; then ask:

▶ *How did Jesus justify healing the man’s hand on the Sabbath?*

▶ *What was the Pharisees’ reaction to what Jesus did and said?*

▶ *What was their ultimate intent?*

- Briefly call attention to Matthew 9:14-17 which records Jesus’ encounter with some of John’s disciples who questioned him about why his disciples did not fast. Note that those questioning and seeming to oppose Jesus were not limited to Pharisees. In this exchange, Jesus used two common practices—mending torn cloth and putting wine into wine-skins—to illustrate the changes in faith practices his coming instituted. Jesus wanted them to gain new and fuller perspectives not only about fasting and Sabbath-keeping but about the practice of faith overall.

Recall for the class the movie *Amistad*, Steven Spielberg’s film about Africans on the slave ship *La Amistad* who were captured and tried for mutiny in the US in the 1830s. In one scene, an African name Yamba explains to his friend Cinque what he has come to understand about the gospel message from studying pictures in a Bible. He turns pages of the Old Testament and points to pictures revealing that the lives of the Hebrew people were filled with suffering. Then, turning to a picture depicting the birth of Jesus, he says, “Then *He* was born and everything changed.”

Emphasize that Jesus’ coming ushered in a new era of relating to God in which relationship, not rules, are paramount. Jesus is the ultimate revelation of both God’s law and God’s love.

Apply Biblical Truth

- Ask:
 - ▶ *Do rules, laws and/or commandments have any purpose for us as we practice our faith and do the will of God? Should we completely toss them out?*
 - ▶ *In light of this scripture and discussion, if you had to write a rule for the practice of Christian faith, what would it be? Could you limit it to one rule?*

Suggest that if Jesus had a rule, he had only one: Love. As far as Jesus was concerned, if people love God and love others, they fulfill the law. Jesus taught God's people to take their character from God, who is merciful and good even to those who disregard the law. Jesus taught God's people to show mercy and goodness and even love their enemies. His ideas were revolutionary, both then and now.

- Pray, asking God to help you demonstrate the love of Christ, thereby fulfilling God's law and doing God's will.

Defining Family Leaders Guide

Matthew 12:46-50

⁴⁶While he was still speaking to the crowds, his mother and his brothers were standing outside, wanting to speak to him.

⁴⁷Someone told him, "Look, your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you."⁴⁸But to the one who had told him this, Jesus replied, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?"⁴⁹And pointing to his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers!"⁵⁰For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."

Theme: God's will redefines the nature of family.

Before You Teach

- Read the focal passage, the lesson from the Students Guide and the following teaching suggestions.
- The account of the Possum Trot community is taken from a story which first appeared in *Reader's Digest* ("Maybe a Miracle," by Skip Hollandsworth, December 2001). The CBS News Program, "48 Hours," also told this story in a special holiday edition called "Incredible Families" on December 21, 2001. You might easily find an article reprint and read it in its entirety.
- Thoughts for the closing comments to your class come from an article by Greg Asimakoupoulos, "My Big Fat Greek Church Family," which first appeared in *Leadership* magazine. You may wish to read the entire article online at www.christianitytoday.com/global/pf.cgi?/le/2003/001/14.93.html.

As You Teach

Introduce the Lesson

- Guide your class to think about the concept of family using the following illustration:

Residents of Possum Trot, a tiny community on the Texas-Louisiana border too small to be included on any Texas maps, know the true meaning of family. They also know what it means to do the will of God. Since 1997, they have adopted or become foster parents to more than 80 children, most of whom have been abused and neglected.

Most of Possum Trot's 300 or so families are hard-working African-Americans who eke out livings from the logging industry or at a chicken processing plant. The per capita income is less than \$20,000 annually. They have no store, no gas station, no post office. The center of community life is the Bennett Chapel Missionary Baptist Church, where Rev. W.C. Martin is pastor to about 50 of the families. Martin himself works a second job selling insurance to make ends meet.

Things began to change in Possum Trot when Donna, Martin's wife, convinced her husband that they needed to adopt some children. They already had two, including a developmentally-disabled teenaged son. Donna wanted to adopt at least two more children—Mercedes and Tyler—biracial siblings already living nearby in state care. Their mother had recently died.

The children, four and two years old at the time, had been terribly neglected and abused. Mercedes had learned to steal from a convenience store so she and her younger brother could eat. They trusted no one.

Susan Ramsey, the social worker assigned to Donna, tried to warn her about what she would be getting into, but Donna was undeterred. Following the intensive training course designed for people wanting to adopt at-risk children, Mercedes and Tyler went to live with the Martins.

As the Martins struggled with helping Mercedes and Tyler learn what it means to be family, Rev. Martin couldn't shake

from his mind the many other unwanted children in state care. One Sunday he challenged his congregation: "You know we're not here just to save souls. We're here to save lives. God is calling us to give these children a second chance. And there is no better place for them to get that chance than in Possum Trot."

Rev. Martin invited Susan Ramsey to come to Possum Trot and meet with other families willing to adopt children. She told him she would come if he could get at least 10 families to attend the meeting. When she arrived, 23 families were waiting.

As she had done with Donna Martin, Ramsey tried to explain to the prospective parents what they could expect. The children had many problems; raising them would be difficult and taxing. One woman spoke up and said, "We don't just watch out for our own children. We watch out for all Possum Trot children. You let us have your kids, and we'll show them the right way to live."

Single mothers, middle-aged couples already raising children, older adults whose children were already grown—all became parents to "throw-away" children. Four sisters took a combined total of 11 children.

Later in a Sunday morning worship service, Rev. Martin looked out among the 100 or so worshipers, many of them smiling children, and said, "You know this is your home, where you will always be protected. This is where you belong."

- Remind the class of the many ways God's will redefines our lives, including our families. Stress that following Christ in discipleship cannot happen in isolation. It connects us not only to Christ but to the wider community of faith, and it pushes us to act in ways that demonstrate God's mercy and love.

Explore the Bible

- Note that Matthew 11-12 contain a collection of stories that reveal emerging opposition to Jesus' teaching and ministry.

From John the Baptist and his disciples to the Pharisees and even to Jesus' own family, questions and doubts mounted.

Point out that Jesus did not walk away from these challenges to his claims of messiahship and divinity. Instead, he used them as opportunities to teach and enlighten about the nature of faith.

The record of the challenge from Jesus' own family is brief but poignant and somewhat troubling at first glance. Just as Jesus minced no words in dealing with John the Baptist and the Pharisees, neither did he mince any words in response to the challenges from his mother and brothers.

- Read aloud Matthew 12:46-47 and guide the class to discuss answers to these questions:
 - ▶ *What expectations did Jesus' mother and brothers have of him as the oldest son?*
 - ▶ *Why was it problematic for Jesus' family when he acted outside the boundaries of Jewish law?*
 - ▶ *What responsibilities did Jesus' family have toward him?*
 - ▶ *Why did Jesus' family approach him on this particular occasion?*
 - ▶ *What did people expect Jesus to do when he was notified that his family wanted to see him?*
- Ask someone to read aloud Matthew 12:48-50; then ask:
 - ▶ *What was Jesus' response to the news that his mother and brothers wanted to speak to him?*
 - ▶ *Was Jesus really rejecting his family?*
 - ▶ *What did Jesus' response imply?*
 - ▶ *What do Jesus' words mean for us individually? as a community of faith?*

Emphasize Jesus' insistence that his family includes those who *do* the will of God, not those who only know or agree to certain doctrines. Also point out that doing God's will redefines family without regard for biology, nationality, race and other distinctions and means that we all need each other and are enhanced by living out our faith together. We experience and express the Christian faith both personally and corporately. Each is essential.

Apply Biblical Truth

- Poll your class members to see how many live within a 2-3 hour drive of family members (parents, children, siblings, grandchildren). Then find out the distances or locations others must travel in order to see these family members.

Remind the class that relatively few people on average enjoy the opportunity to live close to their families. Many children rarely see grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. Adults sometimes see parents and siblings only once or twice a year. And in an increasingly technological culture, people have fewer opportunities overall for the personal interaction and relationships they need.

Ask class members to give personal examples of how the church has been family to them and how their faith has been bolstered and encouraged by sharing the faith experiences of others.

- Greg Asimakoupoulos has written an entertaining but profound column comparing his church family with the family in the movie "My Big Fat Greek Wedding." Note for your class the following insights from Asimakoupoulos:
 - ▶ As in the movie's Portokalos family, the person in the church family who is actually in charge may not appear to be. Gus was "head of the family" in the movie, but his wife claimed to be the neck. "The neck can turn the head in any direction she wants," she told daughter Toula.
 - ▶ In the movie and in the church, everyone has an opinion, and they all count. Even though we may occasionally argue or disagree, we also laugh together and comfort each other during difficult times.

- ▶ We may sometimes feel that we can't live with our "big fat church family," only to realize that we really cannot live without them.
- ▶ We need to recognize that our traditions and customs in the church can appear strange to outsiders.
- ▶ We need to acknowledge that we do not always welcome newcomers to the family as readily as we should. We may be more like the Portokalos family in the movie than we care to admit.
- ▶ We should celebrate transformations. When Toula, the movie character, realized someone loved her even though she was less than perfect, she was completely changed. Toula became a beautiful woman because of the new way someone perceived her. Christ changes us all, and we should acknowledge and celebrate those changes.
- Close with prayer, committing to God your willingness to become the kind of family Jesus defined. Ask God to reveal areas where change is necessary in order for this kind of family to emerge more fully.

NOTE: The scriptures used in the remaining four lessons in this unit jump back to the beginning of Matthew's Gospel. These lessons were placed in this order because the unit was originally released in early fall. Many Sunday school classes planned to use the following lessons during Advent. If your class uses the curriculum at a time which does not coincide with Advent and Christmas, you may prefer to use the following four lessons first.

Tracing Our Roots Leaders Guide

Matthew 1:1-17

¹⁶and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah. ¹⁷So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations.

Theme: God's will works through human history.

Before You Teach

- Read the focal passage in its entirety, the lesson from the Students Guide and the following teaching suggestions. Note the names listed in the text, particularly those you recognize. Also note the mention of several women's names.
- Anne Lamott is profiled in the introductory suggestions below. She and others have written extensively about her struggles with addiction and an unwed pregnancy and then her salvation experience. The following two online articles are among those you may want to read for additional information about her:

"Jesusy' Anne Lamott," (www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2003/001/8.56.html); and

"Why Sam Goes to Church" (www.christianitytoday.com/le/2003/001/13.89.html).

- Information about Jackie Joyner-Kersey is adapted from an article which first appeared in *Today's Christian Woman* ("Jackie's Gold Medal Faith," September/October 1998). You may wish to read the entire article online at www.christianitytoday.com/tcw/8w5/8w5046.html.

As You Teach

Introduce the Lesson

- Guide your class to begin thinking about the diversity within Christianity's faith family tree by using the following profile:

Anne Lamott, a best-selling author, columnist and commentator for National Public Radio, "came to Jesus just as she was—a foul-mouthed, bulimic, alcoholic drug addict" (www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2003/001/8.56.html). Many of her views are controversial, debatable and questionable to other Christians. Her language can be coarse and offensive. She writes openly about her past struggles and her somewhat dysfunctional family as well as about her total love for Jesus.

She occasionally hears from people who tell her she will not be spending eternity where she thinks she will. Yet she constantly asserts her love for Christ and points to a specific point in time when she committed her life to him. She regularly hears from others who credit her with pointing them toward faith in Christ. She's in some demand as a speaker at both writing workshops and evangelical events.

Lamott, who is white, was embraced by an African-American congregation in the ghetto when she was barely sober, unmarried, poor and pregnant. They have been her spiritual family for many years and have mentored her and her young son in the faith.

"The only people I know who feel safe, who have what I want—connection, gratitude, joy—are people in community. And this funky little church. It is where I was taken in when I had nothing to give, and it has become in the truest, deepest sense, my home. My home-base" (www.christianitytoday.com/le/2003/001/13.89.html).

"Jesus has come to me, and I experience God's love in an immediate and personal way through his companionship," she said. "Sometimes I think God loves the ones who most desperately ache and are most desperately lost—his or her wildest, most messed-up children. ... God created us all and

loves us and brings us home, into what may be the first *shalom* we have ever had the chance to experience.”

She is often embarrassingly honest and forthright. “I don’t even pretend to understand much of anything. I just try to love and serve everyone, and bring everyone water, and lend an ear; that’s what Jesus said to do” (www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2003/001/8.56.html).

- State that Anne Lamott joins a long line of names in faith’s family tree. A careful reading of scripture reveals that in God’s family, spiritual connections, not bloodlines, create the ties that bind us to God and to each other. Throughout history, God has reached out to the scandalized, the tawdry, the outcasts and the bewildered and drawn them into the kingdom. God continues to add to faith’s family tree in that same way, often using the most unlikely to accomplish the divine plan.

Explore the Bible

- Introduce Matthew’s account of Jesus’ genealogy—Matthew 1:1-17—by reminding class members that it is important to read it from the perspective of Matthew’s church, which viewed it as a theological instead of biological family tree. It contains only a partial listing of those God used throughout history to engender faith in the work of Christ.

Note that Matthew’s list is a selective list. The name of every person who played an important role is not included. Yet each person who is listed is tied to the central figure in the story—Jesus—just as each of us is.

Remind the class of the importance of the oral tradition in Matthew’s day. The mere mention of these names brought to mind stories of people who connected listeners to their past.

Point out that Matthew’s genealogical account is markedly different from other genealogies, and ask class members to suggest how. Using information in the Students Guide, summarize the distinctions of Matthew’s genealogy. Note especially the four prominent women: Tamar (v 3); Rahab (v

5); Ruth (v 5) and the “wife of Uriah” (v 6), whom Matthew’s church would have understood to be Bathsheba. Then ask:

► *What do the women in this genealogy have in common?*

► *What other names that appear in the genealogy are surprising? Why?*

- Read aloud Matthew 1:16-17 and note that these are the climactic verses in Matthew’s genealogy. Point out the phrase “Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary” (v 16) and note the unusual emphasis on Jesus’ mother. Note that instead of Mary being presented as Joseph’s wife, Joseph is instead introduced as Mary’s husband.

Remind the class of the unusual mention of “brothers” of individuals in the genealogy in verse 2 and 11. Then ask:

► *Why do you think verses 12-16 make no mention of brothers?*

► *Why did Matthew include the mention of people like Manasseh (v 10) in this genealogy? What does that mean for those in subsequent generations?*

► *What do genealogies such as Matthew’s teach us about our spiritual family tree?*

► *What does this genealogy teach us about what it means to be family?*

► *How should we come to view others as a result of understanding the sometimes less-than-desirable roll call of people in Jesus’ genealogy?*

Apply Biblical Truth

- Lead adults to think about the people in their personal faith family trees. Ask:
 - *Who has played a significant role in your faith development? If you had to draw a personal faith family tree, whose names would appear?*

► *Whose names would appear on our church's faith family tree?*

Remind adults that the family of faith is not dependent upon bloodlines or ethnicity and includes all whom God has used to engender faith in Christ.

Then ask:

► *What role are you playing in the lives of others to help them understand that they can be a part of the family of faith?*

- Use the following profile to emphasize the invaluable role each person plays in doing God's will and furthering God's kingdom:

Jackie Joyner-Kersey is among the world's greatest female athletes. A six-time Olympic medalist and gold medalist several times over in the World Championships in track and field events, she is more importantly a dedicated Christian who can easily trace her spiritual roots.

Born to poverty-stricken parents in East St. Louis, at the age of 11 she witnessed someone's murder in front of the family's home. A year later her grandmother was shot and killed. Her mother died from a sudden attack of meningitis when Jackie was a 19-year-old college student at UCLA. The following year, she was diagnosed with asthma.

Even though the family had little money, they shared tremendous love and support and a strong faith. They attended the same church Jackie's mother was raised in, and Jackie made a personal commitment to Christ as a young child. Her parents, particularly her mother, were her strongest influences.

Jackie continues to advocate for families and the roles parents and grandparents can play in the lives of children, whether they are biological relatives or role models from the community. That is what she credits with making a difference in her life.

"Athletics has given me a great opportunity to be a role model for the world. But what I'm giving back is far more important:

I'm showing kids that with determination, courage, and getting on the right track with school and their relationship with God, they can be successful. I want to cheer them on—to show them there's so much more to life than winning. That's what some of my role models, such as Wilma Rudolph, Rosa Parks, and Dr. Martin Luther King, did for me," she said (www.christianitytoday.com/tcw/8w5/8w5046.html).

"I have to realize that if certain doors don't open for me, I might be the one who pushes those doors open a crack for the next person. ... I had a foundation of love and hope—family, friends, and mentors who believed in me and showed me that, through hard work, good choices, a firm faith in God, and a determination to never give up, I could be successful. And that's made all the difference!"

- Close with prayer, thanking God for the rich history and common bonds Christians everywhere share. Ask God to use you at this point in human history to further the divine plan.

Committed to Justice

Leaders Guide

Matthew 1:18-25

¹⁸Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. ²⁰But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." ²²All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ²³"Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." ²⁴When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, ²⁵but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

Theme: God's will redefines our practice of justice.

Before You Teach

- Read the focal passage, the lesson from the Students Guide and the following teaching suggestions.
- Note the story of Amina Lawal suggested for the Introduction. Enter her name into a Web search engine to find out the latest information on her case. Add your findings to your introduction as appropriate.

As You Teach

Introduce the Lesson

- Relate the following facts as reported through various news sources:

Amina Lawal, a 32-year-old woman from Katsina, Nigeria, was convicted of adultery in March 2002 after giving birth to a child out of wedlock, even though her daughter was born more than two years after her divorce. The baby's alleged father was acquitted after he denied any responsibility.

Lawal lives in one of a dozen predominately Muslim states in northern Nigeria which have adopted Shariah, or Islamic laws.

Judges there ordered that Lawal be buried up to her neck in sand and then stoned to death. They postponed carrying out her sentence until her child is weaned.

In spite of repeated requests by Nigeria's federal government that Lawal be freed, officials of Katsina State insisted that the case continue through the appeals process.

Lawal's case received international attention from civil rights and women's groups. Numerous hearings were scheduled and cancelled, leaving her fate up in the air. Following a hearing on August 27, 2003, an Islamic court adjourned until September 25 for judgment.

Lawal, who has two other children, is neither the first nor the latest Nigerian woman to face such scrutiny and possible death under Sharia law. In 2002, human rights groups and lawyers were successful in appealing the case of Safiyah Husseini, who was charged with the same crime as Lawal.

The cases are cause for embarrassment for Nigeria's secular federal government, as Lawal and Husseini have inspired candlelight vigils and support from groups around the world seeking their acquittal. The government must tread a fine line between appeasing these groups and offending Nigerian Muslims.

Lawal's lawyers claim that her original trial was unfair, her case was mishandled even under the extremely tough Sharia laws and her conviction was based on unreliable testimony. Further, they argue that Lawal was already pregnant when Sharia went into effect in Katsina State, so that her adultery took place under secular law and would warrant only a prison sentence.

- Lead class members to discuss Lawal's case and the practice of justice by asking such questions as:
 - ▶ *Followers of Islam who practice Sharia law believe they are doing God's will in cases such as Lawal's. What is your response to that?*
 - ▶ *If you lived in Katsina State and came under Sharia law, how do you think you would respond to Lawal's treatment?*
 - ▶ *How do you define justice?*
 - ▶ *Do you feel that you have ever been the victim of injustice? How?*
 - ▶ *Does civil law always reflect God's law? Why or why not?*
 - ▶ *Are there times when Christians might give a clearer picture of God's love and the divine nature by doing not what the law allows but instead by responding in love? Can you give an example of this?*

Explore the Bible

- Ask someone to read aloud Matthew 1:18. Then ask:
 - ▶ *How was Mary's situation similar to Amina Lawal's? How was it different?*
 - ▶ *According to the law, what options did Joseph have when he found out she was pregnant, knowing that he was not the baby's father?*
 - ▶ *What obligations did Joseph have if he wanted to prove his love for God?*
- Read aloud Matthew 1:19-25 and lead class members to discuss Joseph and his actions by raising and answering such questions as:
 - ▶ *What did it mean in Joseph's day that he was described as a "righteous man"?*

- ▶ *What decision did Joseph make?*
- ▶ *What happened that stopped Joseph from following through with his decision?*
- ▶ *What did the angel's instructions imply about Joseph's role in Jesus' birth?*
- ▶ *What is significant about the instructions surrounding Jesus' name?*

Point out that the phrase "when Joseph awoke from sleep" implies that Joseph immediately followed the angel's instructions. Then ask:

- ▶ *What do you think Mary's reaction was to Joseph's decision?*
- ▶ *How do you think people in their community reacted when they learned of the situation?*

Note that Joseph, an often overlooked figure in the Nativity story, opens Christian scripture by modeling justice that respects the law and lives out Christ's command to love. He made a conscious decision to live not the letter of the law but the heart of it. In doing so, he acted in a way contrary to what would be expected of one who is "righteous." Joseph showed unusual faith and openness to a deeper understanding of God and the divine plan. The way God led Joseph to respond to Mary is the way Jesus would respond to the world: redemptively and personally.

Guide the class in discussing answers to questions such as these:

- ▶ *What do you think Matthew's purpose was in including such details about Joseph, his dream and his decision? What did he want the early church to understand?*
- ▶ *What does Joseph's example and its inclusion at the beginning of Christian scripture mean for us in terms of how we practice justice?*

Point out the first miracle in Christian scripture is not something Jesus did but something God did. Matthew used the story of Jesus to talk about God and show that God is with us. Our commitment to doing God's will affects our practices of justice.

Apply Biblical Truth

- Acknowledge that people in our culture often seem obsessed with litigation. Many are quick to take their grievances to court in an attempt not only to get their fair share but to get even and "make the other person pay." Our legal system is a legitimate recourse in many cases. It is set up to insure impartiality, fair treatment and objectivity and hold people accountable for their actions.

Point out, however, that the practice of justice extends far beyond the courtroom and in fact begins not there but in homes and families. It moves into relationships with neighbors, friends and coworkers. It is in these arenas that we most often seek and practice justice. In fact, allowing God's will to redefine our practice of justice in these relationships would likely go a long way in unclogging the court system. Ask: *How do we, as followers of Christ, practice justice, if love, instead of the letter of the law, ultimately dictates our standards?*

- Guide class members to establish and verbalize some guidelines for our practice of justice as people committed to doing God's will. Suggest that they categorize their guidelines in areas such as thoughts/attitudes, speech and actions/behaviors. Use the following ideas to help them get started or to supplement:
 - ▶ Recognize that life is not always fair. We will not always get what we think we deserve.
 - ▶ Examine personal thoughts and motives and realize that speech and actions flow from these.
 - ▶ Acknowledge that our commitment to doing God's will means that we live in community and seek the common good rather than only what we want and think we deserve.

- ▶ Commit to expressing love rather than seeking material gain or the upper hand.
 - ▶ Exercise empathy and realize that it goes a long way in extending justice. Listening to achieve mutual understanding is more important than having the last word.
 - ▶ Treat other people the way we want to be treated.
 - ▶ Consider potential actions and responses not only for their effect on family members and neighbors across the street but also on people around the world.
 - ▶ Remember common decency and civility. Control temper and speech. Use constructive rather than destructive speech.
 - ▶ Go the second mile.
 - ▶ Seek ways to be positive.
 - ▶ Become proactive rather than reactive.
 - ▶ Avoid letting other people or influences determine attitudes.
 - ▶ Accept personal responsibilities ahead of demanding "rights."
 - ▶ Avoid scapegoating. Instead, critique carefully when necessary and express disagreement respectfully.
- Close with prayer, asking God to guide you as you practice justice that places love above the letter of the law.

Signs for All to See

Leaders Guide

Matthew 2:1-12

¹In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ²asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.” ³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: ⁶‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.’” ⁷Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.” ⁹When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the house where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Theme: God’s will works even among those who are not part of the faith community.

Before You Teach

- Read the focal passage, the lesson from the Students Guide and the following teaching suggestions.

As You Teach

Introduce the Lesson

- Guide your class to consider the idea that God’s will works among those outside of the faith community by using an illustration such as this:

Mohandas K. Gandhi (1869-1948), a Hindu from Western India, worked tirelessly to improve the rights of Indians who had immigrated to Southern Africa. During this time he developed his creed of passive resistance against injustice and was frequently jailed for leading protests.

After he returned to India, he led in the struggle for independence from Britain, never wavering in his belief in nonviolent protest and religious tolerance. When Muslims and Hindus committed acts of violence either against the ruling British or each other, he fasted until the fighting stopped. After independence came, to Gandhi’s despair, India was divided into Hindu India and Muslim Pakistan. He spent the last two months of his life trying to end the horrible violence that ensued. He was assassinated at the age of 79.

Some people refuted Gandhi’s claim to Hinduism because he believed in and advocated so strongly for non-violence, calling him a Christian in disguise. He argued that non-violence is common to all religions but finds its highest expression and application in Hinduism.

Gandhi’s writings about nonviolence and tolerance are legendary. “Nonviolence is the greatest force at the disposal of mankind. It is mightier than the mightiest weapon of destruction devised by the ingenuity of man” (www.engagedpage.com/gandhi.html).

Of Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr. said, “Gandhi was inevitable. If humanity is to progress, Gandhi is inescapable. He lived, thought and acted, inspired by the vision of humanity evolving toward a world of peace and harmony. We may ignore Gandhi at our own risk” (www.engagedpage.com/gandhi.html).

Then ask:

▶ *Gandhi was a Hindu who devoted his life to the pursuit of peace, justice and tolerance. Even though Gandhi claimed not to be a Christian, did God work through him to help raise awareness of the need for peace and harmony in the world?*

▶ *Do you agree that God sometimes works the divine plan through people outside the Christian faith? Why or why not?*

▶ *Can you cite examples of people outside the faith community through whom God has worked? What were the circumstances?*

▶ *How open do you think most Christians are to the idea that God works the divine plan through those outside the faith community?*

▶ *Has someone who was not a Christian ever said or done anything that gave you new insight into your Christian faith? Are you open to that possibility?*

- Suggest that we sometimes run the risk of missing some of God's activity in the world because we fail to recognize it when it is accomplished through unlikely people and circumstances. Such was the case with Herod, the chief priests and scribes when Jesus was born.

Explore the Bible

- Read aloud Matthew 2:1-2. Then ask class members to help set the stage for this passage by pooling their knowledge about Herod and Bethlehem. Supplement the facts they contribute with the following information:

Herod

Herod was named King of Judea by the Romans and enjoyed favor with Rome. He had a reputation for showing little regard for Jewish law. He was known as a ruthless man; anyone who challenged his authority ran the risk of being killed. He had, in fact, killed his wife, mother-in-law and brother-in-law.

He was also credited for quite an impressive building program that included theaters, palaces and fortresses. He was

responsible for rebuilding the Temple in Jerusalem that Jesus and his disciples knew.

Herod's family life was anything but peaceful. He had at least 10 wives and 15 children, including 10 sons. His household was characterized by plots, counterplots, lies and deception as each child tried to discredit the others and gain favor with their father. His lack of scruples extended to his children; he even killed some of them.

Bethlehem

The 'little town of Bethlehem' is located about 5 miles south of Jerusalem. It figures prominently in many events recorded in Hebrew scripture. Levitical priests are associated with Bethlehem (Judg 17-19), and it is the setting for the story of Ruth (Ruth 1:1-2). Bethlehem was also David's home place and the site where Samuel anointed him king (1 Sam 16:1-13). It is, of course, best known as the birthplace of Jesus.

- Then ask:

▶ *Why was Bethlehem an unlikely place for the Messiah to be born?*

▶ *Where would people likely have expected to be the Messiah's birthplace?*

▶ *What was so unusual about the response of the wise men (magi) to the appearance of the star?*

- Ask someone to read aloud Matthew 2:3-6. Note Herod's reaction to the news that a new king had been born to the Jews. Remind the class of his reputation for dealing with people who challenged him and his authority.

Point out that even though the chief priests and scribes had been blind to the star that the Gentile wise men had seen, Herod nonetheless turned to them for the information he needed so that he could take action. They knew their religious traditions well. From the writings of the prophet, they were able to identify Bethlehem as the place where the star was leading. Presumably, they should have been anticipating the very event that was unfolding right before their eyes, yet

they did not recognize it as it was happening and paid no attention until the wise men pointed it out to Herod.

- Read aloud Matthew 2:7-12 and lead the class to discover the significance of the events it describes by asking such questions as:

▶ *What was the response of the chief priests and scribes upon hearing about Jesus' birth and its location?*

▶ *What did Herod determine to do?*

▶ *What did the wise men do?*

▶ *How were the wise men a crucial part of God's plan?*

Note that even though they had the words of a prophet and a sign in the sky, from all indications, the chief priests and scribes—the very ones who should have recognized these events as God's plan—did nothing in response to it.

Contrast their apathy with Herod's downright hostility. He determined to do everything he could to thwart God's plan. His continued rule was much more important to him than anything God might be doing.

The wise men—Gentile astrologers who lacked the knowledge and religious traditions of the chief priests and scribes—were sensitive enough to divine power to respond to it appropriately. They purposefully followed the star to the house where Jesus was, probably arriving when he was a toddler. When they found him, they first worshipped him and then presented him with exquisite gifts. Even more amazing, they obeyed instructions they had received in a dream to return home a different way, thus preventing Herod from carrying out his scheme.

Apply Biblical Truth

- Suggest that those of us within the church run the risk of missing some of God's activity in the world and the opportunity to participate in the divine plan because we think we know how God will act and what God will do. Our confidence in our knowledge of scripture and Christian history can lead to

arrogance and the feeling that we more than others have insight into God's will and ways.

Remind adults that God will accomplish the divine plan without us and sometimes in spite of us. Instead of being among the first to realize what was happening, the religious leaders at the time of Jesus' birth instead became part of a plan to defeat God's will. God worked through unassuming men who knew nothing of prophets and a long-awaited Messiah.

Also point out that the overwhelming presence of evil and sin in the world can sometimes blind us to God's activity and ways we can be part of it. Rather than focusing on where it appears that God's purposes are being threatened or speculating where God "might" be working, we more accurately ought to assume that there is no place where God is not at work, and no place nor people among whom God cannot carry out divine purposes.

- Close with a prayer of gratitude for God's unprecedented ability to fulfill divine purposes in all parts of the world and among all its people.

Free to Choose Leaders Guide

Matthew 2:13-23

¹³Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child to destroy him.” ¹⁴Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, ¹⁵and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, “Out of Egypt I have called my son.” ¹⁶When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. ¹⁷Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: ¹⁸“A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.” ¹⁹When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, ²⁰“Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child’s life are dead.” ²¹Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. ²²But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. ²³There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, “He will be called a Nazorean.”

Theme: God’s will gives us the freedom to choose.

Before You Teach

- Reread the Preface and note the quotations of people referring to God’s will. Read the focal passage, the lesson from the Students Guide and the following teaching suggestions.

As You Teach

Introduce the Lesson

- Begin by calling attention to the statements in the Preface that show various ways people refer to “God’s will.” Either read aloud the statements yourself, or ask various class members to read them aloud, pausing after each and asking adults to respond to the theology the statement seems to reveal.
 - ▶ “It was God’s will,” a church member says to grieving parents whose child was stillborn.
 - ▶ A bigamist tells a 14-year-old girl that she must marry him. “If you do not submit to God’s will, you will lose your salvation,” he tells her.
 - ▶ “This is God’s will,” a delegate to a religious denomination’s convention says of her views prior to a critical vote that threatened to cause a schism. A man holding an opposing opinion also claimed that God’s will was on his side.
 - ▶ A pornography publisher and gubernatorial candidate asks people to pray, by name, for the death of a certain television commentator who had been critical of pornography. A spokesperson later says the call to prayer was a “spoof,” but also states that if the commentator dies, “it must be God’s will.”
 - ▶ A suicide bomber boards a bus and detonates the explosives, killing several schoolchildren and himself and wounding dozens of others. “God wills that we do this,” the terrorist group behind the attack later says.
 - ▶ A 14-year-old from Singapore who befriended conjoined Iranian twins in her country for surgery says, following their death, “I thought that after all the pain they had gone through they would survive but it’s God’s will.”
 - ▶ “I’m just trying to find God’s will for my life,” a college student says, after changing majors for the fourth time.

▶ “We’re flying through some dark clouds. With God’s will, the sun will rise and shine again,” says a professional basketball player accused of sexual assault, giving a clenched-fist salute and flashing a peace sign to fans and supporters.

▶ From a woman whose son was brutally murdered: “I’m leaving it up to God. With God’s will, everybody will be revealed who’s involved in my son’s death.”

▶ “There’s nothing we can do,” a disillusioned woman says in reference to her paralyzed and ineffective marriage. “It must be God’s will.”

Point out that each statement comes either directly from news accounts or from personal experiences. Together, they reflect a broad spectrum of misunderstanding and confusion when it comes to God’s will. Christians are often as confused as people of other faith traditions or of no faith traditions when it comes to how they can personally know, understand and follow the divine plan.

- Guide adults to examine their own feelings about and understandings of God’s will by asking such questions as:
 - ▶ *Can you recall the first time you had an awareness of God’s will? What did you understand that to mean?*
 - ▶ *As a Christian, how do you respond to the idea of “searching for” and “finding” God’s will? What can those phrases imply when they are attached to the divine plan?*
 - ▶ *What preconceived ideas do people have about the will of God? What misconceptions do they have?*
 - ▶ *How does our understanding or picture of God affect our understanding of God’s will?*
 - ▶ *What can prevent us from recognizing God’s will?*
- Acknowledge that much of what happens in the world is not God’s will. Because God gives people freedom to choose, each of us makes choices that may or may not be in line with

the divine plan. Still, God works in and through people and circumstances to accomplish the divine plan. Such was the case in Jesus’ young life. Herod was determined to destroy him. Jesus’ parents were faced with numerous choices they probably did not completely understand. But because they were obedient to what they understand of God’s will, God continued to lead them and show them the next steps that would lead to fulfillment of divine purposes. Freedom, choice and responsibility are crucial components of our nature and are gifts from God to us to use in living out the divine plan.

Explore the Bible

- Read aloud Matthew 2:13-23 and ask adults to listen for the following:
 - ▶ the occasions Joseph learned God’s will through dreams;
 - ▶ the occasions Matthew referenced Hebrew scripture;
 - ▶ noticeable parallels between the life of Jesus and the life of Moses;
 - ▶ the times Joseph was faced with a choice;
 - ▶ the sequential, step-by-step disclosure of God’s will;
- Lead adults to discuss these miraculous circumstances in Jesus’ young life by asking such questions as:
 - ▶ *How did God use dreams to again communicate the divine plan to Joseph? What were the circumstances each time?*
 - ▶ *How did Matthew use Hebrew scripture in relating these events? Why was this important to him and his audience?*
 - ▶ *What similarities exist between the life of young Moses from Hebrew scripture and the life of Jesus at this point? How are these significant? What would they mean to Matthew’s audience?*
 - ▶ *Imagine the emotional high Mary and Joseph must have felt following the visit from the wise men and the certain affirmation from them that Jesus was indeed worthy of*

worship. How do you think that equipped them to deal with God's revelation to Joseph that Herod was out to destroy him?

► *What choices did Joseph face? How did he know he was doing the right thing?*

- Deal honestly with Herod's edict that led to the slaughter of all children under the age of two in and around Bethlehem. Remind the class of Herod's ruthless reputation and that he had murdered members of his own immediate family.

The murder of innocent children, while shocking to us and to the families involved, further revealed the maniacal character of a man who was obviously threatened by Jesus and God's plans for him. Still, Herod's evil and insane actions, which left countless families writhing in grief and horror, could not stop God's plan to redeem humanity.

- Stress that one lesson we can learn from the example of Mary and Joseph is that God's will is usually progressive. Seldom does anyone know it all at once. Joseph's obedience to the first dream led to God's revelation in the next, and so on. When we respond in obedience to what we understand that God wants from us, we position ourselves to learn more of what God's will for us involves.
- Point out that it was through yet another dream that Joseph knew it was safe for him to return with Mary and Jesus to Israel. But he also learned in a dream that one of Herod's sons, Archelaus, was the ruler over Judea. His reputation as a cruel and hostile man rivaled his father's. Fearing again for the family's safety, Joseph decided to settle in Nazareth, which was beyond the jurisdiction of Archelaus.

Matthew saw the fact that Jesus became a resident of Nazareth as fulfillment of yet another prophecy, although it is difficult to pinpoint which one. Hebrew prophecy referred generally to the fact that the Messiah would grow up in obscurity, just as he had been born in the tiny town of Bethlehem. Joseph's discernment and obedience helped further the divine plan.

Apply Biblical Truth

- Suggest that a careful study of scripture reveals that God does not hide the divine plan from us. Our pursuit of it is not like searching for buried treasure. God wants us to know the divine plan and be involved in it.

We often fail to recognize God's plan because we are more concerned with what we want than what God wants. We sometimes want things so badly and think that they are so good and noble that we assume they are God's will when they are not. We also limit our understanding of and participation in the divine plan when we do not repent and refuse to forgive others.

Troubling events around us and throughout the world should not lessen our conviction that God continues to work. As the early life of Jesus reveals, even when people attempt to thwart God's plans and do evil and harm, God still acts and works.

American culture in particular places great value on personal, individual freedom. Some people seem to resist making a personal commitment to Christ and the divine plan because they fear it will limit their personal choices.

God always gives us a choice. Our choices, not fate nor happenstance nor God pulling our strings like a puppet, determine outcomes. As we can learn from the example of Joseph and many others in scripture, discerning and doing God's will is not always precise. We always have a choice, and God honors our obedience with further understanding of the divine plan. Commitment to the divine plan results in true freedom.

- Close with prayer, asking God to help you exercise wisdom and discernment as you make responsible choices within the freedoms God gives.

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