

The Practice of Living Faithfully

Leaders Guide



**13 online adult Sunday school lessons for Christian
involved with God's redemptive efforts in the world**

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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.

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Teaching Tips

Leadership Call

Few positions influence others as that of teacher. You are a special person, chosen to teach God's word to God's people. The role of teacher is an awesome one. James even warned that "not many ... should become teachers" (Jas 3:1). But teaching is the only way God's Word will be communicated to people who are struggling to find a star by which to guide their lives.

You have been chosen for that special task. It is difficult, but it is so rewarding. Most of all, you are exercising the gift God has given you to teach. That means that you do not teach on your own. You teach with God blessing you through the Holy Spirit.

These lessons in *The Practice of Living Faithfully* are windows you can open so people can let God's Spirit blow into their lives. Your purpose as a teacher is not to impart information; it is to introduce people to God so the Spirit can work in their lives.

We at Acacia Resources believe in you, and we welcome you as a significant part of the teaching team. We have enlisted writers who will give you ideas on how to communicate the truths of the lessons. However, you must take these ideas and shape them for your class.

Leadership Overview

The Practice of Living Faithfully is a way to look at 13 topics that intersect the lives of every person in your class. Two teaching options are available for each lesson. Choose the one you like the most. You can choose ideas

from either option. We hope that what we have suggested will stimulate new ideas in your own mind.

A supplemental article appears at the end of each lesson. Read the article and decide how you will use it. Some of the ways this feature can be used include:

- an enrichment study for the teacher
- as a discussion starter
- as an attention-getter to begin class.

Leadership Weekly Checklist

- Start early in the week—some teachers start on Sunday afternoon.
- As you read and meditate on the lesson, think about the members of your class and how the lesson will apply to their lives.
- Read the scripture references in several different translations.
- Look for articles in the paper or listen for current ideas on television or radio. And don't forget the experiences that have happened to you that you can apply to the lesson.
- Write out your own teaching plan.
- On Saturday or Sunday morning, pray for each member of the class as you make your final preparation.
- Ask God for help in making an impact on people you teach.

Leadership Teaching

► **Begin each class with prayer. Specifically pray for:**

- wisdom;
- the courage to face the biblical truths about our lifestyles;

- commitment to make appropriate changes; and
- endurance to stay the course of change.

► **Keep in mind these tips for better group discussion.**

- Enlist members in advance to read Scripture and portions of the lesson.
- Allow for silence, even though it might be uncomfortable, when you ask questions.
- Ask open questions that will allow members to share their feelings rather than closed questions that can be answered by short answers such as yes or no. A good way to generate discussion is to ask: How do you feel about ... ?

► **Share the Take-home Line at the end of each lesson.**

► **Begin and end on time.**

Take-home Line

The Take-home Line is a summary of the lesson and a challenge for class members to consider throughout the week. Write it on a notecard and distribute it to each class member or ask members to write it at the top of their notes. Encourage them to memorize and recite the Take-home Line. Use this idea for either of the teaching options.

Being Transformed

Take-home Line

God empowers believers to be transformed into the likeness of Christ.

Teacher's Goal

To remind members that transformation is a lifelong process

Option 1

Introduce the Lesson

► Ask members to give examples of people who have changed for the better—been transformed—in some aspect of their lives. Discuss the case of Barbara in the *Students Guide*. Point out the powerful quote, “I’m not the same woman I used to be.”

Ask: *What made Barbara change her way of thinking?*

Lead the class in discussing how God is constantly working to transform us to become more like Christ.

Examine the Biblical Witness

► Read Romans 12:1-2. Point out that the Old Testament view of true worship involved giving one’s best to God (the finest ram, the first fruits of a crop, etc.). Then ask:

- *What did Paul mean by “bodies”?*
- *Does this mean we can just show up physically at church and God will be satisfied?*

Point out that God wants the whole person—every aspect and element of our lives.

▶ Paul urged Christians not to be conformed to this world. Using the *Students Guide*, discuss what this meant in the Roman culture of the time. Ask:

- *How does this compare and/or contrast with our culture today?*

▶ When Paul told the Roman Christians to be transformed, he was calling for a complete change of character and conduct. Transformation is an ongoing process. Read Micah 6:8 and Matthew 22:34-40. By walking humbly with God, we can continue the process of transformation. Jesus took this one step further by melding right worship (love the Lord your God) with right conduct (love your neighbor as yourself).

▶ Turn to Ephesians 4:20-24. Say: As we stop conforming to this world, putting away our former way of life, we are to put on a new self (transform), becoming more like Christ in the process.

Offer Practical Handles

Transformation takes time, but it also takes a right relationship with God. God can only change us as we are willing to be changed. Asking God to help us identify where we need transformation and to change our hearts and habits is a big step in the process of being transformed into Christ's image.

Close with the Take-home Line

Option 2

State the Issue

▶ When we willingly present our whole selves to God, turning away from those things and habits and mindsets that keep us from him and adding that which is pleasing to God, we can be transformed.

Examine the Biblical Witness

▶ Have someone read Romans 12:1-2. Then ask:

- *What do you think Paul meant by “bodies”?*
- *How can we be living sacrifices?*
- *How do you avoid conforming to the world?*
- *What does it mean to be transformed?*
- *Is transformation a one-time deal?*

Point out that the Greek verb tense indicates an ongoing action. Transformation is a process.

▶ Read Micah 6:8 and Matthew 22:34-40. Ask:

- *What do these verses say about the connection between worshiping God and our actions?*
- *How do we become transformed?*

▶ Read and discuss Ephesians 4:20-24. Read aloud the statement from the *Students Guide*: “God works with us to grow a new life or character, one that takes its cues from Jesus Christ. The ongoing process's goal is to turn us into people who actively love God, self and neighbor.”

Put Faith in Action

► In *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis pointed out that “every Christian is to become a little Christ. The whole purpose of becoming a Christian is simply nothing else.”

Ask:

- *What steps can we take as individuals and as a class to continue this transformation process?*
- *How can we conform to this world?*
- *How do we become “nonconformists” as the Students Guide suggests?*
- *How do we “renew our minds”?*

Close with the Take-home Line

Written by Alison Wingfield, freelance writer, Dallas, Texas.

Transformation in the Church

Early in the Civil Rights struggle, Clarence Jordan was invited to speak in a Southern Baptist church located in a suburban area of a large city in North Carolina. Having been turned out of a Southern Baptist church five years earlier because of his views on race, he accepted the invitation—as a chance for a little bit of revenge. He assumed the church was an aristocratic, liberal church, who wanted someone to come up and pat them on the back for their liberal views on race. So he prepared a scorching message on race.

When he got to the church, he found it was located not in a wealthy suburb, but in a mill town. The building seated about 300, and there were about 600 there. The church was completely integrated with about 50 blacks singing in the choir.

At the end of the service, the pastor announced that they were going to have a dinner on the grounds—right out in front of the church were everybody driving down the street could see blacks and whites eating together!

At last, Jordan’s curiosity got the better of him and he asked the pastor how all this happened. The pastor explained he had been a mill worker who couldn’t even read. God had saved him and called him to preach. This little church was so poor they couldn’t afford a preacher, so he volunteered. Because he couldn’t read someone read to him out of the Bible that God was no respecter of persons, and he preached that.

The deacons came to him after the sermon and told him they didn’t want that kind of preaching, so the pastor said he fired them. He said they couldn’t fire him, because they

had never hired him. The next time they objected, he turned them out of the church.

“I preached awfully hard, and I finally preached them down to two. But,” he said, “those two were committed. I made sure that any time after that, anybody who came into my church understood that they were giving their life to Jesus Christ and they were going to have to be serious about it. What you see here is a result of that.”

Adapted from Clarence Jordan, The Substance of Faith and Other Cotton Patch Sermons (New York: Association Press, 1972), 43-44.

Pursuing Discernment

Take-home Line

Discernment guides believers through the crossroads of life.

Teacher’s Goal

To enable members to see God as the source of wisdom and discernment

Option 1

Introduce the Lesson

► Ask members to think of a time when they made a really bad decision. Then ask:

- *What were the consequences?*
- *What about a good decision?*
- *How did this affect your life?*

We all need discernment and wisdom to live our lives so they please God. Read aloud Romans 12:2.

Examine the Biblical Witness

► Discuss the four biblical principles found on pages 9-12 in the *Students Guide*. Have different class members read the verses. Write the italicized phrases below on the board before you discuss each one.

- ***Principle 1: Jeremiah 28.10-17***

Explain that the Israelites depended often on the prophets to discern what God expected of them, but not all prophets proved trustworthy. Point out that the emphasis is on community, not just individuals, and that the need for wisdom and discernment is on a practical level. Ask: *In what areas of your life are you pursuing discernment? In what areas do you need discernment?*

• **Principle 2: Matthew 10:16**

Using the *Students Guide*, explain how this view of wisdom is the middle way compared to other views held by some Christians. Ask: *How are Christians deceived? What steps can they take to be wise?*

• **Principle 3: Romans 12.1-2; James 1:5; 3:17**

God is the source of wisdom and discernment. Ask: *How does God give us wisdom? What role does the church play in helping members become discerning?*

As we present ourselves as living sacrifices in true worship together, God transforms us into people of discernment. Community is again the emphasis here.

• **Principle 4: 1 Thessalonians 5:21-22**

Discernment is a continual process. Paul said to “test everything.” We should not take something at face value just because it is accepted in society. Discernment should be an active force in the ongoing work of the church. Ask: *What are some ethical issues believers should “test” in the religious world?*

Offer Practical Handles

► Read: An executive with a large telephone company made the decision to allow their phone lines to be used to transmit pornography. The executive said he disagreed with the concept of pornography, but he said if he did not do this, the pornography industry would sue and likely win. His company would have huge legal bills and have to pass the costs on to their customers.

Ask:

- *How do Christians discern what is right when issues are not clear cut?*
- *How does God give us wisdom and discernment?*

Close with the Take-home Line

Option 2

State the Issue

► By presenting our whole selves to God, we embark on a journey of continual transformation that leads to wisdom and discernment about how we are to live our lives in Christ.

Ask members to define wisdom and discernment.

Say: *Think of someone you consider wise. Why do you think he or she is wise?* Then ask:

- *Do you know of any churches that exhibit wisdom and discernment in their actions?*
- *What are some key qualities of these churches?*

Examine the Biblical Witness

► Have members read aloud each of the verses and then discuss the following questions.

Jeremiah 28:10-17

Explain that the Israelites needed to know which prophet spoke for the Lord. Then ask:

- *Can you think of some modern-day parallels?*
- *How can we know which preachers today are speaking truth?*

Matthew 10:16

- *What are the dangers for Christians who are too naive? Too arrogant?*
- *What is the happy medium?*
- *Is the “happy medium” the same for every believer? Why or why not?*

Romans 12:1-2; James 1:5; 3:17

- *Where are Christians to find the discernment and wisdom that God wants them to have?*
- *How does God give wisdom?*
- *Is that wisdom given just on an individual basis?*
- *How important is it for the community of Christ to be discerning?*

1 Thessalonians 5:21-22

- *Why do we as Christians need wisdom and discernment?*
- *How should we use it in our everyday lives?*

Put Faith in Action

► Ask:

- *How do we become wise and discerning?*
- *Can we do it on our own?*
- *What needs to happen corporately for individuals and churches to become more discerning?*
- *How should we use the gift of discernment?*
- *What are the three most critical areas in which believers need discernment today?*

► Read aloud James 3:17 for a definition of wisdom from God. Distribute paper and pencils. Ask members to write: *I pray that God will give me discernment in the area of....*

Ask them to keep this sheet in a visible place to remind them of their prayer.

Close with the Take-home Line

Written by Alison Wingfield, freelance writer, Dallas, Texas.

A Call to Exercise Discernment

As a child, I was intimidated by those who believed they had the gift of “the discernment of spirits.” Spiritual discernment seemed like a Christian version of ESP.

Only a few really spiritual people were equipped with spiritual X-ray vision. I remember wondering what it would be like to look into the soul of a person and see what kind of spirit he or she had. Spiritual discernment appeared to be an unusual, if not somewhat scary, gift.

The truth, of course, is every Christian is called to exercise spiritual discernment. According to the apostle Paul, everyone who has received the gift of God’s Spirit is equipped to discern all things (Rom 12:2; 1 Cor 2:14-15). For many, however, spiritual discernment may be a strange or unfamiliar aspect of the Christian life.

A careful examination of the meaning of discernment illustrates the integral connection between discernment and wisdom. Those who are wise are able to distinguish the Creator from the creation, the way of life from the way of death, right from wrong, true pleasure from corrupt lust, and authentic community from self-serving collectivism.

But the Bible never assumes wisdom is an inherent human characteristic. Paul described our relationship to wisdom this way: “Claiming to be wise, they became fools.... God gave them up to a debased mind” (Rom 1:22, 28b). Our sin-filled nature blinds us to the truth and severely diminishes our capability to make sound judgments and do the right thing.

Wisdom, or being restored to our right minds, is a gift of God. The ability to see ourselves and others as God sees

us comes through the activity of God’s Spirit in our lives. Through God’s transforming presence, our minds are renewed and our ability to make sound judgments and do the right thing is restored. This power to discern must not remain dormant in our lives. We will miss the power and blessing if we fail to exercise spiritual discernment.

As Solomon prepared to take the throne, God asked him, ‘What shall I give you?’ Solomon replied, “Give [me] ... an understanding mind ... able to discern good and evil.” In response to Solomon’s request, God said, “I will give you what you ask, a wise and discerning mind ... and also what you did not ask ... honor all your life” (1 Kings 3:3ff).

Written by Jim Holladay, pastor, Lyndon Baptist Church, Louisville, Ky.

Practicing Hospitality

Take-home Line

Whom can we welcome today, as Jesus welcomes us?
Whom can we welcome today, as we would welcome Jesus?

Teacher's Goal

To expand our understanding of personal and corporate hospitality to include those unknown and outside our social circles

Option 1

Introduce the Lesson

► Write *Hospitality* on the board. Hospitality may bring Martha Stewart images to mind. But it has to do not with being the perfect, most creative host, but with being *hospitable*: “given to generous and cordial reception of guests, offering a pleasant or sustaining environment.”

Invite learners to listen to a question of hospitality unrelated to a well-set table. Present the scenario of a pastor's hospitality dilemma on page 13 of the *Students Guide*.

We accept that Christians are called to hospitality. But the rub comes in when we face the further question of to *whom* we are to be hospitable.

Examine the Biblical Witness

► Ask a member to read aloud Romans 12:9-13. Ask members to listen and then be prepared to describe in one sentence a title for these verses. (Accept members' comments but their answers should be something like “the marks of a true Christian.”)

Explain that the lesson will center on the last of these marks, “extend hospitality to strangers” (v 13).

► Review rules of Jewish hospitality from the *Students Guide* that cover sojourners and travelers, widows and orphans, the homeless, all to be treated with dignity. Ask:

- *Why would these groups be especially singled out in biblical days?*
- *Would these groups be in as great a need today? Why or why not?*

► Read aloud Luke 11:5-13. Ask:

- *What do these verses tell us about God's hospitality to us?*
- *Which aspects of God's hospitality can we refuse to extend?*

Offer Practical Handles

► Ask:

- *Who are our personal strangers? (Who might we not really want in our lives?)*
- *Who are strangers to our church? (Mention the church “Wanted” ad on page 13 in the *Students Guide*.)*
- *Who might we not really want in our church? Or in this Sunday school class? Why?*

- ▶ Ask the group to brainstorm hospitality suggestions:
 - Invite people who use church social services (clothes closet, soup kitchen, Habitat home) to visit the church and join.
 - Sit next to someone we do not know or someone “different” in church today.
 - Have lunch with someone who might not be an obvious candidate for a new friend.

Close with the Take-home Line

Option 2

State the Issue

- ▶ Ask four people to define the word *hospitality*. (Hospitality is being hospitable or welcoming.) Then ask:
 - *To whom are we to be hospitable?*
 - *What does the term “Christian hospitality” bring to mind?*
 - *To whom is our church hospitable?*

Examine the Biblical Witness

- ▶ Read aloud Romans 12:9-13. Then ask:
 - *Are you a little surprised that Paul included hospitality in a list of marks of a true Christian?*
 - *How do safety and social concerns affect implementation of this command?*
- ▶ On a board, write the following (do not include italicized statements):

| Scripture | People | Description |
|---------------|------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| John 4:7-30 | <i>Samaritan Woman</i> | <i>living in adultery</i> |
| Luke 17:11-19 | <i>ten lepers</i> | <i>diseased</i> |
| Luke 19:1-10 | <i>Zacchaeus</i> | <i>dishonest</i> |
| Mark 10:13-16 | <i>children</i> | <i>considered of no consequence</i> |

Ask members to look at the four passages and identify the people referred to and their description and explain how Jesus showed hospitality.

- ▶ Read aloud Luke 11:5-13. Then ask:
 - *How has God shown hospitality to you?*
 - *On what basis can we refuse to extend hospitality to a stranger?*
 - *What basis will Christ accept?*

Put Faith in Action

- ▶ Most churches want upscale young families to join them—for appearances, budgets, programs and homogeneity that fosters growth. But is this emphasis really “doing” the gospel?

Consider the traditional spiritual: “Lord I want to be a Christian/ more loving/more holy/like Jesus in my heart.” Then ask:

- *If we want to be “like Jesus” in our hearts and in our actions, to whom might we reach out with the welcoming hospitality of Christ?*

Ask members to open their ears and eyes to opportunities this week to “extend hospitality to strangers.” Suggest they share results next week.

Close with the Take-home Line

Written by Karen Johnson Zurheide, executive director, The Fells, New London, NH.

The Gifts of Strangers

Our society portrays strangers as the bad guys. Don't talk to strangers, we tell our kids. They might hurt you. Strangers at our door scare us. Will they push their way in to rob or hurt us?

The biblical narrative paints a different picture of the stranger. We are called to love strangers, not fear them. And why? Because the stranger brings a gift.

Abraham entertained three mysterious strangers, honoring them with a meal. They too had a gift—the news of a son in Abraham's old age.

Elijah knocked on the widow's door, but not for a polite cup of tea. Elijah asked for the last meal she had. And he gave the gift of unending flour and oil.

Another stranger walked the road to Emmaus with Cleopas and his friend. He too had a gift. But it wasn't until they extended hospitality that they received it—the gift of their resurrected Lord.

This resurrected Lord is always present when we offer hospitality in his name.

So how does this expectation change our hospitality? How does the gift of the stranger transform us?

Our ministry changes from simply giving to a partnership of giving and receiving. It's ministry *with*, not ministry *to*. Allowing strangers to minister to us gives them dignity and takes the pressure off us to always give.

We quit worrying about *our* stuff getting taken. We relax about being conned. Yes, some strangers steal. But God has promised to provide for us and to be present with us as we share *God's* things with others in need.

We live expecting surprises. We look for Jesus in the eyes of the strangers we meet. That expectancy changes the way we see the world, and that, in turn, changes us.

If we choose to anticipate these gifts from the strangers we meet, then we are choosing to see the world in a new way. We may be taking risks, but we are opening ourselves to new avenues of blessing as well.

Written by Michele Hershberger, author of A Christian View of Hospitality: Expecting Surprises and the project associate for The Giving Project. Adapted from Ethics Report.

Living Simply

Take-home Line

Materialism deprives you of spiritual well-being.

Teacher's Goal

To enable members to see the biblical basis and the value of a simplified lifestyle

Option 1

Introduce the Lesson

► Ask:

- *Has a move to a new house ever left you surprised by the amount of "stuff" you had to move?*
- *Has such an experience brought with it any resolutions about collecting and disposing of unwanted items in the new house?*

Note that too much to move points to a foundational problem in our society—materialism. Read the definition of materialism from page 17 of the *Students Guide* and ask members their initial impression of living life by this doctrine. Emphasize that scripture has some definite things to say about being overly concerned with material things.

Examine the Biblical Witness

► Read each of the biblical passages to the class without commenting on them. Ask members to express their immediate feelings about the passages. Then go back and look more closely at each passage, using the comments in the

Students Guide. Ask for volunteers to express the main point of each passage and ask others whether they agree or disagree with that summation?

Ask the following question related to each passage:

Deuteronomy 8:11-19

- *In what way did God provide for Israel?*

Matthew 10:9-10

- *Is Jesus saying that we are not to be prepared for the future?*

Luke 12:13-21

- *What are ways of living that make one rich toward God?*

Luke 18:18-22

- *What is the apparent connection between possessions and discipleship?*

Offer Practical Handles

- ▶ Discuss the suggestions the *Students Guide* writer makes for moving toward a simpler life. Then ask:
 - *What family activities could be reduced or eliminated for the sake of saving money and for providing more time at home together?*
 - *How many outside-the-home activities are appropriate for children?*
 - *How can parents help children set priorities?*

Suggest ministries of your church or community that could serve as family-time together and also provide a learning experience about giving to others.

Close with the Take-home Line

Option 2

State the Issue

▶ Many people measure their worth by the type of car in the garage, how big the house is and whether their children attend a particular school, camp or program. One of the problems with these measures of worth is that the scale tends to move upward, and it takes more and more money to meet our self-imposed expectations. When status symbols are the measure of value, people tend to neglect the part of life that the Bible calls the most important—the spiritual.

Examine the Biblical Witness

▶ Read aloud each Bible passage listed in the *Students Guide*. Ask members to identify any conflict between the biblical values and societal values. For example in Matthew 10:9-10, the biblical value of dependence on God opposes the societal value of dependence on self. List the values on the board.

Put Faith in Action

▶ Focus on the suggestions the *Students Guide* writer makes on page 20 for moving toward simplicity. Ask members to look at the values listed on the board in the discussion of the passages and to suggest concrete actions that move families closer to biblical values.

Close with the Take-home Line

Written by Wayne Hager, pastor, Calvary Baptist Church, Mount Airy, N.C.

Buying More

Americans feel the need to buy more things, while they pay for it in stress and financial problems, according to a series of articles in the *Detroit Free Press*.

Almost 40 percent of the Michigan residents polled said “they can’t afford everything they need for a comfortable life.”

The *Free Press* poll found that “the stress of consumption is hitting people in their 20s through 40s hardest.” Almost 50 percent of this age group said that they felt “the number of necessities increased in the last few years,” compared to only about 25 percent of older Michigan residents.

Only 10 percent of those over 65 years of age said “money was a chief source of arguments,” compared to 25 percent of those in their 30s and 40s.

The series noted that Americans are working longer to pay for shopping sprees and they are spending more than they make.

In addition to the poll, the series interviewed a scholar, a marketing guru, a financial planner and people on the street.

The writers discovered that instead of “keeping up with the Joneses,” Americans want to keep up with celebrities, wearing what they wear. Reflecting on this trend, a scholar noted the effect of trickle-down consumption as Americans seek upscale consumption. A marketing expert said celebrity publicity builds a brand, not advertising.

Another development is that Americans are buying services to make up for their lack of time. “Stress-relief services” include lawn services and eating out. “We find ourselves caught in this cycle, because we live in a world in which we solve problems by buying things—and in which buying things creates new problems for us. Now, people trade off time and money,” noted a scholar.

The poll found that “about half of those surveyed said they either wanted to, or already had, cut back on the number of things they need.”

Yet the *Free Press* said that “downshifTERS,” those who seek a simpler life, were actually a small minority, even though the writers found hundreds of web sites dealing with simple living.

Adapted from Ethics Report, November-December, 1999.

Giving Gifts

Take-home Line

Christian gift-giving flows from a grateful heart.

Teacher's Goal

To enable members to identify and use God's gifts to them

Option 1

Introduce the Lesson

► Ask members to share an experience of receiving a gift. List reasons why the gifts were special enough to recall. Point out that Christian gift-giving is based on our understanding of the gifts God has given us. A correct understanding of God's gifts should generate gratitude for God's grace. This gratitude should then lead us to invest our gifts and resources in God's work.

Examine the Biblical Witness

► Read Romans 12:6-8 and summarize these verses. Point out that the context for God's gifting us is our offering the gifts back to God and the body of Christ. Ask:

- *How does each gift listed benefit the church and the individuals in it?*

Then ask members to compare this list of gifts with Paul's list in 1 Corinthians 12:8-10. Remind members that neither list is exhaustive any more than the gifts God may give believers are exhaustive.

► Read 2 Corinthians 8:8-15 and summarize the biblical information in the *Students Guide*. Ask:

- *In addition to meeting the physical needs of the Jerusalem church, how would the offering from the Corinthian church build relationships and break down walls between Jewish and Gentile Christians?*
- *How could the recognition of Christ's generosity to all believers help reconcile the church?*

► Read Deuteronomy 15:7-11, 15. After summarizing the biblical material, ask:

- *What impact would debt forgiveness have on our society if it were practiced as Deuteronomy prescribes?*
- *How can we play a part in such liberation from debt?*
- *Does this Scripture apply to us personally? Nationally?*

► Read Acts 5:1-11. Emphasize that the early church was known for caring. Liquidating assets probably was not required for church membership, but many did this as needs arose. Emphasize Ananias's and Sapphira's sin was not keeping some money from the land sale but claiming the offering included all proceeds from the sale. Then ask:

- *What did Ananias's and Sapphira's actions reveal about their commitment to God and the group of believers?*
- *How was lying to the apostles actually lying to God?*
- *Why do you think their punishment was so drastic?*
- *How do our words and actions lie about our giving?*

Offer Practical Handles

► Ask:

- *Would you agree with Jesus' statement that it is more blessed to give than to receive? Why or why not?*
- *What principles from these verses would you apply in the following situations:*

A homeless person approaches you and asks for money.

You pass a bell-ringer in a Santa Claus suit as you come out of the grocery store with a cart overflowing with food.

The pastor preaches a sermon on tithing and asks members to consider it.

You receive five letters in the mail asking for money to fight disease, feed the hungry, clothe the poor, distribute Bibles, and minister to war victims.

Close with the Take-home Line

Option 2

State the Issue

► Write on a board or large sheet of paper: *God gives—We give.* Say: Most everyone enjoys receiving gifts. Gift-giving usually revolves around special occasions such as birthdays, anniversaries and Christmas. God, too, has given us gifts that revolve around a special occasion, our becoming a part of the body of Christ. Unlike the gifts we receive on other occasions where the goal is our receipt of

the gift, God's gifts to us begin our journey of giving gifts. Call attention to the statement you wrote on the board.

Examine the Biblical Witness

► Organize the class in four groups to examine the Scripture passages. Ask each group to summarize the *Students Guide's* comments on the passage. Pose the same questions to the groups that are mentioned in Option 1. Explore how each gift Paul listed can build up the body of Christ. Point out the importance of recognizing God's generosity so we can have a biblical attitude of gift-giving.

Put Faith in Action

► Ask:

- *Are you growing in your giving?*
- *Are you giving a greater percentage of your resources now than you were three years ago?*
- *Why do you think God wants us to give?*
- *Can your answer be supported by these Scriptures?*

Ask members to share opportunities they have had this week to give and how they handled them. Then ask: *In light of today's lesson, would your approach to these requests change?*

Challenge members to go home and look through their check register to see how much of their money is going into God's work. If they find that the amount is unworthy of their profession as a Christian, ask them to consider a deeper level of commitment. Read the words from the poster.

Close with the Take-home Line

Written by Wayne Hager, pastor, Calvary Baptist Church, Mount Airy, N.C.

A Christian View of Money

God is God. Money is not. A simple truth that is complex to live by.

Advertisements invite our unthinking consumption. Society divides people into marketing segments, and we become commodities for exploitation. The stock market swings, and we swing between fear and greed.

We tithe to credit cards. We purchase discounted goods to save money and discover later they cost less because workers receive unjust wages.

Money is not God, but it can be a dominating and complex lord. This complexity tempts congregations to treat money as something secular.

Congregational money language centers on funding the church's enterprise ("meeting the budget"), and offers nothing for the member's economic life as a consumer, investor, worker, family member or citizen.

In congregations, we forget the offering is an act of adoration and fail to realize the distribution of these gifts is further worship of God. Congregations that want people to worship God and not money must realize money serves God and is not God's replacement.

Congregations can put money in proper perspective by teaching and modeling firstfruits living, a practice of giving back to God from the first and best of the resource we manage for God.

Congregations can move toward achieving firstfruits living if:

- Pastors consistently apply scripture to our everyday life with money. In this everyday life with money, our moral principles of honesty, fidelity, justice, love, hospitality and generosity find a voice.
- Congregations treat the offering as a celebration of God's grace and trust in God. This is quite different from focusing on meeting a budget.
- Congregations manage money through narrative spending plans that link mission, vision and goals with money expenditures.

God is God. Money is not. Effectiveness with this simple truth in a complex world requires deliberate economic teaching and organizational behavior.

May God's grace help us renew the church and ourselves in this way.

Written by Mark Vincent, director, The Giving Project, Elkhart, IN, and author of A Christian View of Money. Adapted from Ethics Report.

Praying in Public

Take-home Line

Genuine prayer is authentic communication, not pious performance.

Teacher's Goal

To enable students to discern the appropriate role of public prayer

Option 1

Introduce the Lesson

► In advance, enlist two people to enact the comic described in the lesson. The maitre d' or hostess stands with reservation book open on a podium. "How many, please?" The patron answers. "Will that be smoking or non-smoking?" The patron answers. "We'll have your table ready in about ten minutes." The patron responds, "Oh, do you think we could have a corner table? We like to say a blessing."

Ask these questions, for brief discussion or rhetorically:

- *Good or bad—to say a restaurant blessing?*
- *Good or bad—to request a corner table?*
- *Good or bad—to tell someone you plan to pray?*
- *Good or bad—if restaurant customer had asked for a table in the center of the room?*

Prayers in restaurants and other public places are neither all good nor all bad. Ask the class to listen for God's Spirit to teach on this subject from the Bible and from each other.

Examine the Biblical Witness

► Read Matthew 6:1, 5-13. Point out that the passage does not speak against practicing piety before others but against practicing piety *in order to be seen by others*.

Point out also that Jesus gave a corporate model prayer, so he was not altogether opposed to praying in the presence of others.

► Read Luke 18:9-14. By offering the extremes of the Pharisee and the tax collector, Jesus spoke clearly against pride and self-congratulation and for humility and penitence. But we are not likely found at either of these extremes in our public praying. Ask: *When and how do we pray in public?*

Offer Practical Handles

► Read the example of praying at the country club on page 28 of the *Students Guide*.

Survey the class as to their public prayer habits at restaurants, using the options of always/sometimes/never. This can be done privately on paper or by show of hands. Ask those in the "sometimes" category to explain on what their choice depends. Ask: *What are the negatives of praying in a public place?* The same survey can be done concerning praying during hospital visits.

Emphasize the continuing guidance of God's Spirit in our determinations of where and when to pray.

Close with the Take-home Line

Option 2

State the Issue

► Ask:

- *To whom do you pray?*
- *Are your private prayers directed differently than public prayers in restaurants, hospitals, baccalaureate services, government events and church?*
- *Are your public prayers said to God or to an audience?*

Examine the Biblical Witness

► Read Matthew 6:1, 5-13. Ask members to identify Jesus' specific commands about prayer in these verses.

- "Beware" (v 1)
- "Do not be like the hypocrites" (v 5)
- "Go...shut...pray" (v 6)
- "Do not heap up ...phrases" (v 7)
- "Do not be like them" (v 8)
- "Pray" (v 9)

Ask:

- *What specific verses prohibit praying in public?*
(None)
- *What verses would encourage praying in public?*
(The Model Prayer is a public prayer.)

► Read Luke 18:9-14. Call for a description of the Pharisee (religious, proud, praying to be heard by others, not praying to God). Call for a description of the tax collector (humble, troubled, in need, pleading with God). Then ask:

- *Who today prays like this Pharisee?*
- *Who today prays like the tax collector?*
- *Which type of prayer is more acceptable to us? Why?*

Put Faith in Action

► Ask:

- *What settings are appropriate for public prayer? Restaurants, city council meetings, legislative sessions, school, school events, worship services?*
- *And what kinds of prayer—silent, audible, "in Jesus' name," long, short, instructional?*

Answers to these questions require consideration of the purposes of such prayer.

- *What is the point of our public prayers? To witness, instruct, preach? Or to recognize God's presence, worship, thank God, seek help?*

► Ask the class to be led by God's Spirit in choices of whether and how to pray—maybe even today at lunch.

Close with the Take-home Line

Written by Karen Johnson Zurheide, executive director, The Fells, New London, NH.

Where You Pray

There's the joke about a professional football TV announcer who went to Denver and asked to use a special phone near the Broncos' bench. They told him it was a hotline to God and that he could use it for \$100.

The next week the announcer was in Dallas. He asked to use the phone near the Cowboys' bench. They told him it was a hotline to God and that he could use it for 35 cents.

"Why just 35 cents?" the announcer asked. "Because heaven is a local call from here!" The joke is about the places we pray.

Are there some places that we should not pray? Jesus said, "When you pray, don't be like the hypocrites who love to pray publicly on street corners and in the synagogues where everyone can see them" (Mt 6:5). In light of Jesus' praying in public principle, evaluate this list of places Christians shouldn't pray aloud.

- Prayers at civic meetings when the membership is religiously diverse and the prayer is supposed to be generic.
- Prayers in the public schools when the prayer is organized and/or led by a public employee.
- Prayers in restaurants when praying "makes a scene" or when everyone around the table cannot participate.
- Prayers at sporting events when the audience is religiously diverse and the teams represent schools funded by the government.

While there are places where we should not pray, there are places where we better pray!

Jesus said, "But when you pray, go away by yourself, shut the door behind you, and pray to your Father secretly" (Mt 6:6). While privacy was Jesus' principle, the Gospels show us times when he prayed publicly. So, where should we pray?

- In our closet.
- With our family.
- In church as we lead people into God's presence rather than entertain.
- Outdoors as we walk around our neighborhoods, churches, schools, parks, etc. (prayer walking).
- In public when the purpose of the prayer is genuine, participation in the prayer is voluntary, and the audience "supports" the experience of Christian prayer.

An old Shaker hymn speaks of finding "ourselves in the place just right." Believers should pray when they discover such a place.

Written by Ray Higgins, coordinator, Arkansas Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, Little Rock, Ark.

Fasting

Take-home Line

Fasting's primary purpose is to aid in focusing one's life on God.

Teacher's Goal

To demystify the practice of fasting and encourage the use of fasting and similar disciplines that point us to God

Option 1

Introduce the Lesson

► Explain: Our culture is obsessed with food. Though not many remain preoccupied with preparing it, we are as captivated by eating it (and dieting!) as ever. Then ask:

- *When was the last time you were really hungry?*
- *How long had it been since you had eaten?*
- *What did you think of at the time?*
- *Did your physical hunger increase your hunger for God? (Not likely, unless you were fasting, skipping meals for the purpose of connecting with God.)*
- *Do you think fasting is a bit wacky? Why or why not? (We may associate fasting with diets or political hunger-strikes; it is foreign to most of us.)*

Examine the Biblical Witness

► Review the lesson's various Old Testament scriptures that illustrate different purposes of fasting. The practice continued into New Testament times. Jesus assumed that his followers would fast. Read Matthew 6:16-18. Ask: *What*

in these verses indicates that fasting was to be a private discipline?

Offer Practical Handles

► Ask:

- *What dangers are associated with fasting?*
- *Why would anyone voluntarily fast?*

In a brief lecture, explain that a fast could point one to God by:

- Indicating to God our seriousness about drawing closer to him or about a particular concern
- Allowing us extra time (that would otherwise be spent buying, cooking, eating) to pray
- Reminding us when we feel the pangs of hunger to pray some more
- Giving us a special experience to look back on, as an ongoing reminder to pray

Allow members to add to the list.

► Ask if some particular issue is of great concern to class members. Suggest that if physically able, learners consider going without food for a day or skipping a meal to focus on God and meeting that need. If unable to do without food, they might skip a favorite television show or other activity to spend the time conversing with God. Although a personal endeavor, fasting could be entered into with a partner, one who would join (whether in the same locale or not) in fasting and prayer.

Close with the Take-home Line

Option 2

State the Issue

► Ask if members have ever been around a preschooler who was hungry. The condition takes over the child's entire focus. The child can think of nothing else and will not quit whining until satisfied. We may be quieter about it, but our own physical hunger nags at us. Then ask:

- *What if that hunger could point us toward God?*
- *What if delaying the gratification of eating could draw us closer to our Lord?*

It can, if we fast.

Examine the Biblical Witness

► Read Matthew 6:16-18. Jesus assumed his followers would fast. Like other spiritual disciplines, fasting was to be done privately.

Review the lesson's listing of Old Testament examples of fasting's purposes.

Read: "Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high" (Isa 58:4b). Read Isaiah 58:6-7, indicating results of true fasting. Ask: *What spiritual dangers may result from fasting?*

Put Faith in Action

► Ask:

- *How do you personally feel about fasting?*
- *Have you ever fasted? With what results?*

- *Why would one fast?*
- *What would prevent one from fasting?*

Eating is not the only activity from which one might "fast." We can take an intentional reprieve from another activity in order to meet God. Remind the class of the practice of giving something up for Lent.

► Ask what people might give up this week to turn their hearts more fully toward God. They might consider a night of television (pick the night with your favorite shows!), that last half-hour of sleep in the morning, dessert or a couple of meals.

Close with the Take-home Line

Written by Karen Johnson Zurheide, executive director, The Fells, New London, NH.

Abstinence Makes the Heart Grow Fonder

Fasting, abstaining from food and drink, is a tradition that's as old as the Bible; its primary purpose is to guide one's reflections toward God and one's relationship with God. However, for some, particularly insulin-dependent diabetics and others with endocrine disorders, fasting may not be an option. For these, the threat to one's physical health far outweighs the benefits of abstaining from food and drink for even a few hours. Yet, regardless of one's health status, fasting need not be limited to food. Here are just a few examples of how we can abstain and eat!

Step away from technology. Most of us could use some time away from computers, televisions, radios and telephones. Why not take an entire day off from checking e-mail or surfing the World Wide Web. Why not turn off the television for one week and spend that time nurturing your relationship with God or your family. Limit receiving and returning phone calls to either mornings or afternoons and use this "air time" to refresh your spiritual life.

Spend time away from money. A fast from money! Is that possible? It is in as much as we are willing to rely on God and God's grace. Why not keep your cash in the bank and your credit card in your wallet for a determined amount of time? With each urge to spend money, reflect on your total dependence on God.

Step away from work. Plan a day or several days when you can take a personal retreat to reenergize your relationship with God. A number of books are available for these retreats. One such book is *A Guide to Prayer*, published by Upper Room Books. This popular guide provides several

private prayer retreat models as well as scripture readings and prayers for daily devotional times.

Step away from people. None of us exists apart from relating to others. We are called upon to love God and to love others as we love ourselves. Yet, all of us need breaks from the presence of other people, even those closest to us. Calendaring such a time may be necessary; yet, these moments may provide the needed refreshment some people need.

Whatever your choice, hopefully, you will be surprised at what fills the moment of time you chose to fill with only the presence of God.

Written by Tom Allen, with some material adapted from Patricia D. Brown, Learning to Lead from Your Spiritual Center (Abingdon Press, 1996).

Honoring the Sabbath

Take-home Line

The sabbath is for worship, rest and compassionate deeds.

Teacher's Goal

To expand the concept of sabbath beyond mere church attendance to encompass time for rest and acts of compassion

Option 1

Introduce the Lesson

- ▶ Ask: *What does it mean to keep the sabbath?*

Read the 1610 Virginia ordinance on page 32 in the *Students Guide*.

Jump to the 1950s, when a certain pastor would not buy even a newspaper on Sunday. By the 1970s, he was purchasing two Sunday papers—and probably gas and a jug of milk.

Ask members to discuss the change in acceptable Sunday behaviors.

Examine the Biblical Witness

- ▶ Read Exodus 20:8-11 and review the *Students Guide* commentary on this text.

- ▶ Read Mark 2:23-3:6. Picking grain and healing people were considered unacceptable sabbath activities. But Jesus declared that “it is lawful to do good on the sabbath” (Mt 12:12b).

Offer Practical Handles

- ▶ The sabbath is still taken seriously in Orthodox Jewish life. No Orthodox Jew would ever work on the sabbath. The time of sunset each Friday is vital information even in ultramodern New York City, enabling the Orthodox to start the sabbath observance and safely satisfy its many restrictions.

We are less strict in honoring the Lord's Day, focusing on principles like these:

- Responsibility and need to worship God regularly
- Healthfulness of a rhythmic pattern of rest and work
- Human finitude and required rejuvenation
- Opportunity for family time

Ask members to describe how friends, neighbors and colleagues observe Sunday. Then ask:

- *Do we see sabbath being practiced?* (Even an organization with Christian roots, the YMCA, offers indoor soccer for children in a Connecticut town from 9:00 a.m. to noon on Sundays.)
- *How can we preserve or reclaim times of worship, rest and compassionate service?*
- *Can we stay away from a virtual office on Sunday afternoon?*
- *Could the church sponsor a periodic Sunday afternoon care project—visiting a hospital or nursing home, perhaps conducting a worship service?*

Close with the Take-home Line

Option 2

State the Issue

► Pastors and other ministers work on Sunday. We depend on emergency and other services—medical, police, fire that require people to work on Sunday. Ask:

- *How many of you will go out to eat today? To the grocery store? To a movie or to a book store?*
- *Do you ever work on Sunday? What about “going in to the office” or bringing work home?*
- *How does Sunday work and activity jibe with God’s commandments?*

Examine the Biblical Witness

► Read Exodus 20:8-11 and review explanations of this text mentioned in the *Students Guide*.

An ad stated that a certain newspaper was “What Sundays Were Made For.” The Bible tells us that “the sabbath was made for humankind.” Ask someone to read Mark 2:23-3:6.

While Sundays may not have been made for reading a particular newspaper, the notion is not entirely wrong. Sundays are a time-out when we can worship, relax and do good.

Put Faith in Action.

► The “shalt nots” are to protect us and the “shalts” are to give us joy. Ask:

- *Considering the Fourth Commandment as a “shalt,” how does our Sunday give us joy?*
- *What if we take a job requiring Sunday work?*
- *How might we still keep the sabbath? (Perhaps we could rest on another day of the week, attend mid-week church and spend personal time with God.)*

Ask the class about other periodic rests. Most Western Europeans take an entire summer holiday month. Meanwhile, Americans are favoring long weekends over traditional one-or-two week vacations. Ask: *Does this practice enhance or deter rest?*

► Meeting human needs is another sabbath purpose. Ask: *How can we use Sundays to do good, perhaps involving other family members?*

Close with the Take-home Line.

Written by Karen Johnson Zurheide, executive director, The Fells, New London, NH.

Living Faithfully in a 24/7 Society

The hour has come to turn our hearts and minds to the problem of time in our lives.

In the 24/7 (24 hours a day/7 days a week) economy emerging with the new millennium, signs of distress are everywhere. The pace of life is accelerating. Demands on workers, parents and children are multiplying. Americans work or shop or seek entertainment at every hour, on every day, in every season.

Our problem with time is social, cultural and economic. But it is also a spiritual problem—one that runs right to the core of who we are as human beings.

Distortions in the shape of our time foster distortions in the shape of our lives, undermining our relationships with other people and with God.

The time crunch can drive us into the arms of a false theology. We come to believe that we, not God, are the masters of time. We act as if our worth must be proven by the way we spend our hours or as if our ultimate happiness depends on good time management.

Christian faith offers guidance to those who are caught in the time crunch. Through practices that remind us time is God's gift, we learn to resist inhumane patterns. These practices do not require us to discard our clocks and calendars.

Instead, they foster critical mindfulness of the patterns within which we presently live in expectant attention to the possibility God might have something better in mind for us.

In biblical faith, days began and ended at dusk (Gen 1); God was out growing the crops before the farmer was up and knitting together the wound before the clinic opened. Even those who work nights can discern here a pattern: a day of 24 hours that includes some sleep and conceives of our waking up as a joining in rather than as a getting started. Gift comes each day, and not just task.

Keeping a weekly Sabbath guides us in living more faithfully in time. This practice arose within and continues as a definitive practice within Judaism from which Christians have much to learn.

Complex historical developments led most churches to absorb the Sabbath into the celebration of the Lord's day. Resting and worshiping on this day, we remember that God, not we, created the world (Ex 20:8-11). We remember God led the people of Israel out of bondage and does not intend unremitting labor for anyone (Deut 5:12-15). We also celebrate, every Sunday, Christ's resurrection and the breaking into history of a new creation.

Living in the Christian story through the seasons of a year reminds us what time really is. At Christmas, God meets humanity in time. At Easter, God vanquishes the force that will end our earthly days, and we rejoice.

When we live these practices, we see time differently—and thus dwell in time in ways that are more attentive to God's presence and more attuned to God's intentions.

Many Christians already engage in these practices to some extent. Growing more deliberate in them may strengthen us to discern to others an alternative vision of time that is sorely needed today.

Written by Dorothy C. Bass, author of Receiving the Day: Christian Practices for Opening the Gift of Time and coauthor of Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People. Adapted from Ethics Report.

Speaking Kindly

Take-home Line

Kind speech is a fruit of disciplined living.

Teacher's Goal

To guide members to practice kind speech in all their relationships

Option 1

Introduce the Lesson

► Share a personal example of a kind word you have heard or received recently, and then ask class members to do the same. Contrast those stories with two or three news accounts or information from Web sites that tell about hate groups and their verbal conflict or abuse. Ask: *Do you agree with the Students Guide writer who says speaking kindly means swimming against the current of popular culture.*

Examine the Biblical Witness

► Unkind speech is not a recent development. The biblical references address different aspects of speaking kindly. James 3:2-10 deals with the blatant abuse of speech. Matthew 12:34-37 condemns hypocrisy. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 13:1 and Ephesians 4:15, argued for consistency and pairing our speech with love.

Organize the class in three groups and ask them to take a text and report back three to five major hurdles they find in living out these admonitions.

Offer Practical Handles

► On pages 38-39 in the *Students Guide*, the writer provides four strategies for learning to speak kindly. For each one, try to name a specific individual you believe practices or practiced this idea. Have members offer personal examples as well.

Lead members to covenant, in writing if possible, to make a deliberate attempt to practice communicating kindness over the coming week. Perhaps they could begin by writing a note of encouragement to someone prior to the end of class. Provide note cards, envelopes and stamps.

Close with the Take-home Line

Option 2

State the Issue

► Learning to speak kindly requires disciplined practice and a keen awareness of God's presence in everyday life.

Examine the Biblical Witness

► Invite members to read one of the texts for this lesson and ask the following questions:

- *How is the "speech issue" addressed in the text currently seen in the life of secular America and in the life of the church?*
- *What implications would a positive practice of this kind of speech have for your family, career, church?*
- *What is your most significant obstacle to practicing this type of kind speech?*

Put Faith in Action

► Introduce the idea of the emotional bank account from *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (p. 188) by Stephen Covey. Explain the idea of making deposits and/or withdrawals in relationships through our speech. Ask members to identify three significant relationships and then estimate the current balance (on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being a low balance and 10 being a high balance) in their emotional bank account with that individual.

Suggest that speaking kindly can be hardest with those we know best. To be proactive with family members, close friends and coworkers will require deliberate action and attention. Encourage them to list five withdrawals they have made and five deposits they could make in each relationship.

Discuss how speaking kindly is one of the most effective means of making deposits in human relationships. If time permits, ask members to recount a time when someone made a significant deposit in their life by speaking a kind word. Cite examples of how Jesus made this a part of his interaction with people. Encourage the class to imagine how recipients of Jesus' kindness changed as a result of Jesus' kind words.

Close with the Take-home Line

Written by Bill Wilson, pastor, First Baptist Church, Dalton, Ga.

Kind Speech as an Antidote to Violence

In the wake of the high school shooting in Littleton, Colorado, and the rash of similar tragedies, there has been much focus on the epidemic of young male rage in our society and the availability of guns to act upon it violently. Much less has been written about the cruel violence of words, especially those spoken by unsympathetic peers. Such uncaring speech is itself a bullet striking to the heart, causing a slow bleed of seething bitterness. Undoubtedly, violence starts with speech. Cruel words are the seeds of murderous deeds.

According to national surveys, 15 to 20 percent of students in U.S. schools are subject to some form of heckling or bullying. Three million children are badgered each day, and 100,000 others stay home from school on a given day simply to avoid such unpleasantness, much of which escalates into physical violence.

If this is true with negative speech, does the opposite hold as well? What might have happened in Littleton and in countless other places had peace been waged over time through the weapons of good words from the great arsenal of kind speech?

In her children's book, *I Like Your Buttons*, Sarah Lamstein strikes the child's chord in us all with such an appealing scenario. Building on the premise, what goes around, comes around, Lamstein invites us to participate in a chain reaction of kindness, prompted by a simple, premeditated word of goodwill uttered in a classroom. Soon, words of praise have spread throughout the school and are being volleyed all across town, and a long string of kind deeds

follows closely behind. Such a plot will appear fanciful until one experiences the remarkable power of words to change hearts. If we are honest, most of us can think of concrete examples from our own lives of this very phenomenon.

Deeds follow from mindfulness. Mindfulness by definition begins with words, uttered aloud or in our heart of hearts. The practice of kind speech will profoundly affect the quality of our doings for the better!

Written by T. Wyatt Watkins, Indianapolis, IN and author of Gospel, Grits and Grace.

Judging Others

Take-home Line

We can judge without being judgmental.

Teacher's goal

To help members make wise evaluations while avoiding a judgmental attitude

Option 1

Introduce the Lesson

► Ask class members to share a snap judgment they made that proved to be an error. Start the discussion with a personal example.

Briefly summarize the popular attitude mentioned in the *Students Guide* that Christians should not judge. Ask: *What is the difference between judging and being judgmental?*

Raise the dilemma the author describes for Christians who try to balance the biblical directive not to judge with the consistent biblical practice of declaring some things right and others wrong.

Examine the Biblical Witness

► Suggest that Matthew 7 and Romans 14 may provide us a way through our dilemma.

► Ask members to read silently Matthew 7:1-5 and then the comments in the *Students Guide* on the passage. Have

them highlight or underline a key teaching from the lesson material. Once they have reported to the larger group, ask for contemporary examples of the “beam and splinter” approach to judging others.

▶ Ask members to read Romans 14:1-13. Again, ask each member to read the comments in the *Students Guide* on the passage and highlight or underline a key learning. Talk about the place of humility in the discussion on judging.

Offer Practical Handles

▶ On pages 42-43 in the *Students Guide*, the writer suggests five ways to engage in healthy self-criticism. Have individuals rank the suggestions in the order that they believe will be most feasible and effective for them. Suggest that they choose a learning partner for the coming week who will hold them accountable for making a sincere effort to follow through on the suggestions.

▶ Break into pairs (no spouses!) and have the learning partners clarify their intentions for following the suggestions for the coming week. Ask them to contact one another at least twice during the week to check on their progress.

Plan to begin your next session with a report from the learning partners on their experiences.

Close with the Take-home Line

Option 2

State the Issue

▶ Ask:

- *How does a Christian avoid being judgmental while maintaining high expectations of self and others?*
- *Does the Bible intend us to offer a blind eye to events and people who violate our understandings of right and wrong?*
- *Is it possible to judge without being judgmental?*

Examine the Biblical Witness

▶ Set up a debate between two groups. One group is to use Matthew 7:1-5 and Romans 14:1-13 to support the position that Christians are prohibited from passing judgment on others.

The other group is to use the same texts to justify the position that Christians are to judge those who violate God’s rules and standards.

After a time of debate, ask:

- *Does the lesson offer a third way of solving the dilemma? How?*

Lead a discussion on the idea of self-criticism as a necessary prelude to critiquing others.

Put Faith in Action

▶ Recent inappropriate behavior by political leaders, sports figures and entertainment stars has focused clearly this issue for thinking Christians. Ask for three specific examples that have caused class members to be tempted to be judgmental.

► Have the class consider the five suggestions the authors present in the *Students Guide*. Then ask:

- *Which would most appropriately apply in the examples cited?*
- *Which would be the most difficult to implement?*
- *What other suggestions would you make?*

Close with the Take-home Line

Written by Bill Wilson, pastor, First Baptist Church, Dalton, Ga.

Civil Critique Instead of Scapegoating

The idea of *scapegoating* originated in the biblical ritual called the Day of Atonement. According to Leviticus 16:7-22, two goats were selected. One goat was sacrificed. The other was held while the chief priest ceremonially placed the collective sins of the people on its head. The goat was then driven into the wilderness. The second goat symbolically carried off the sins of the people

We no longer force goats to carry the blame for our social ills and moral sins. Instead, we self-righteously blame others, placing the burden for wrong doing on the heads of individuals and groups.

Scapegoating

Scapegoating is wrong. It resolves no disputes and solves no social ills. It is reckless and fuels hate speech. Scapegoating is destructive for three reasons.

Scapegoaters pridefully see themselves as faultless. Scapegoaters are so blind they fail to see the contribution they make to social ills. Their pride is destructive (Prov 16:18).

Scapegoaters justify themselves by claiming they stand for good against evil, even though evil results from their words and deeds.

Scapegoaters lack genuine care for others, even though they accuse others of lacking care.

Civil Critique

Civil critique expresses disagreement respectfully. Civil critique often resolves disputes and offers a course of action to solve social ills. Civil critique is constructive and responsible speech. It allows us to judge the words and actions of others—but only with humility, prudence and empathy.

Civil critique happens when we humbly acknowledge our own responsibility for social failures, injustice and hatred. We are all in this mess together.

Civil critique occurs when we recognize that even our best efforts to do good may cause harm. Our own self-judgment leads us away from the temptation of self-justification that energizes scapegoating.

Christians must lead the way in our society by drawing a line between scapegoating and civil critique. We must stop scapegoating and start judging the words and deeds of others with civility.

Written by Robert M. Parham, executive director, Baptist Center for Ethics, Nashville, Tenn.

Keeping Our Word

Take-home Line

Keeping our word is a powerful testimony to our Christian commitment.

Teacher's Goal

To help members see that believers are to keep their word in all circumstances

Option 1

Introduce the Lesson

► Honesty and integrity seem to be endangered species in our culture. Bring a Sunday newspaper (or two) and divide its sections among class members. Ask them to point out articles that describe examples of lying and dishonesty. Point out that the stories come from every part of the paper: international, national, state, business, sports, lifestyle, finance, etc.

Suggest that this issue strikes at the core of our struggle to “be in the world but not of the world.”

Examine the Biblical Witness

► Ask members to open their Bibles to Joshua 7:1a and find why God was displeased with Israel (“broke faith in regard to the devoted things”). Use the *Students Guide* to explain “devoted things.” Then ask:

- How is “breaking faith” at the center of our failure to keep our word?
- What implications does this phrase have for our families, colleagues and fellow church members?

► Ask half the members to look at Matthew 5:33-37 and the other half to look at James 5:12 to find how Jesus simplified the complex codes of speech.

Ask: *Why is this simple but demanding standard so often rejected today as being unrealistic?*

Provide or ask for scenarios where this maxim would work well or would be unmanageable.

Offer Practical Handles

► The *Students Guide* writer suggests that our commitment to honesty provides a unique opportunity to “challenge and intrigue secular society by our example.”

Ask members to illustrate how this might happen in marriage, parenting and on the job. (If your members work well in groups, assign each of these three areas to a third of the class.) Ask class members to suggest principles for each of these arenas of life that might serve to guide their behavior in the coming days. Put each principle on a large self-adhesive note and arrange these on a larger sheet titled “Principles to Live By.” Group the principles by common themes and plan to print them on a card by the next class session.

Close with the Take-home Line

Option 2

State the Issue

► Say: Honesty and integrity are such rare commodities that we have an opportunity for a powerful witness when we keep our word. Someone has suggested that we must become “cultural atheists” (rejecting the values and beliefs of modern culture) if we are to be authentic examples of the followers Christ envisioned. Ask:

- *Do you feel the need to be a “cultural atheist”?*
- *How might this impact your lifestyle? your speech?*

Examine the Biblical Witness

► Tell the story of Joshua 6 and 7 by having the class members skim the biblical story and then summarize the events, each person taking a turn, one sentence at a time, so that the entire story is told within 60 to 90 seconds. Ask if anyone is willing to share a personal example of a time he or she “broke faith” with a promise he or she had made.

Discuss what roles rationalization and justification play in our efforts to live truthful lives. Then ask: *How do Matthew 7 and James 5 square with our tendency to excuse our behavior?*

Put Faith in Action

► In his book *Integrity*, Stephen L. Carter suggests three steps in being a person of integrity:

- Take the time to discern right from wrong.
- Fight for what you believe is true and right.
- Act consistently with what you have decided is right.

Keeping your word follows a similar logic. Ask members to develop three steps in being a person who keeps his/her word. If you used groups, call them together and come up with a summary of the kinds of actions that lead people to keep their word.

Close with the Take-home Line

Written by Bill Wilson, pastor, First Baptist Church, Dalton, Ga.

Honor Student Dishonesty

Cheating in school is not limited to underachievers.

A study by *Who's Who Among American High School Students* found that 80 percent of the nation's best students said they have cheated in school, according to a recent issue of the American School Board journal.

This is an increase of 4 percent over the previous year, and it marks the first time that cheating among honor students reached the 80 percent mark. Only 5 percent of those who admitted to cheating said they were caught. Slightly more than half of the respondents called cheating "no big deal."

Of those surveyed, 57 percent said it would be easy to obtain test questions and answers at their school, and 34 percent said they had never heard anything about cheating from their parents.

"With such a casual attitude toward cheating on the part of so many parents and school authorities, it's no wonder more than half of the cheaters just shrug it off, saying 'it didn't seem like a big deal,'" said Joe Krouse, associate publisher of *Who's Who Among American High School Students*. "If the folks in charge of moral guidance don't make a bigger fuss about ethical behavior, it won't be a big deal."

Meanwhile, a recent report of cheating at a prestigious university may indicate cheating by the academic elite continues into college.

Near the end of the spring semester, the university charged more than 60 students in several sections of an introductory computer science class with violating the school's honor

code. The students will face possible disciplinary action before the school's honor council in the fall. Punishment could range from receiving a failing grade in the class to permanent expulsion from the university.

While several students have admitted guilt, one student told the student newspaper the case had been blown out of proportion. "I am in the computer science class, and I do not believe that there was any serious cheating," the student said.

Reprinted from Ethics Report, May-June, 1999.

Forgiving

Take-home Line

Forgiving others models God's grace to us.

Teacher's Goal

To lead members to recognize the role of forgiveness in the Christian life

Option 1

Introduce the Lesson

► Say: Forgiveness is often seen in our society as something unusual, even rare. Organize the class in pairs and distribute newspapers from the previous week. Ask the partners to examine the news stories for situations in which forgiveness is needed or forgiveness has been given. Have each pair report to the class why they feel the situation warrants forgiveness or tell how difficult they think forgiveness was to give in a particular situation. Then ask:

- *Did the paper contain more stories warranting forgiveness than it did stories showing forgiveness? Why?*

Examine the Biblical Witness

► Read Matthew 18:23-25. Ask:

- *What is the point of this biblical story? (God has forgiven us and we are expected to forgive others.)*
- *Why would the servant who had been forgiven much not forgive another?*

- *How does his loss of forgiveness and his punishment for not forgiving others make you feel?*
- *What implications does this parable have for us?*

► Read Matthew 6:12. The *Students Guide* writer suggests forgiveness is a basic need in our lives as is daily bread and protection from temptation and evil. Ask: *How does forgiveness add to the quality of life for both the forgiver and the offender?*

► Read Matthew 18: 21-22. Read aloud the following quote from *Practicing Our Faith* by L. Gregory Jones: “The practice of forgiveness also calls us to develop habits by which to unlearn sin and learn holy living. Doing something on seventy times seven occasions, after all, would begin to weave it into the patterns of our lives. . . Just as learning a craft requires the apprentice to learn what to do in particular situations and to develop patterns of right thinking, feeling, and acting that extend throughout life, so also does learning forgiveness.” Ask:

- *Do you agree with Jones’s basic point that forgiveness can become a habit through repetition? Why or why not?*
- *Does the motivation behind forgiveness matter or is the act of forgiveness the greater concern?*

Ask the pairs to choose one of these three Scriptures and develop a modern case study based on it. Let volunteers share.

Offer Practical Handles

► Point out that one way of measuring the worth of forgiveness is to think of the meaningful relationships in our

lives and consider the number of times forgiveness has occurred. Whether we are the offender or the offended, are we glad that forgiveness occurred? Lead members to commit through prayer to make forgiveness a part of their lives.

Close with the Take-home Line

Option 2

State the Issue

► Write *forgiveness* on the board. Under the word, draw a line and divide the board in two areas labeled: *personal* and *societal*. Ask the class to suggest different situations in which forgiveness is needed and list the situations under the appropriate label. Then ask: *Is it harder to offer personal or societal forgiveness? Why?*

Remind the class of the three answers the *Students Guide* writer gives on page 48 for why Christians must forgive. Ask for responses.

Examine the Biblical Witness

► Summarize the *Students Guide* writer’s comments on each of the passages covered in the lesson. Raise the following questions on these passages:

Matthew 18:23-35

- *Is gratitude for God’s forgiveness something you feel daily? Why?*

- *How can one cultivate an “attitude of gratitude” for forgiveness?*
- *How does this attitude help us forgive others?*

Matthew 6:12

- *What would life be like if there were no forgiveness?*
- *How would the deprivation of forgiveness affect the way one views the rest of life?*

Matthew 18:21-22

- *Does forgiving someone “seventy times seven” (KJV) set us up to be people of whom others take advantage?*
- *If so, why would we want to be “used”?*

► Point out what the *Students Guide* writer says on page 50 about relationships and repeated forgiveness. Ask: *How does extending forgiveness build relationships?*

Put Faith in Action

► Ask members to turn in the *Students Guide* to page 50 and read Smede’s four steps to forgiving our deep hurts. Discuss each step and ask members to suggest ways each step can be realized.

Close with the Take-home Line

Written by Wayne Hager, pastor, Calvary Baptist Church, Mount Airy, N.C.

From Forgiven to Forgiving

An old comedy routine goes something like this. The straight guy asks his bumbling partner what is in the little bottle the partner is wearing around his neck. “Nitroglycerin,” the partner says.

The straight guy looks surprised that his partner would be wearing a necklace of nitro. The partner tells him about a fellow who has a bad habit of poking people in the chest while he’s speaking. He further explains, “It drives me crazy and makes me mad. I’m wearing this nitro so the next time he pokes me, I’ll blow his finger off!”

What everybody seems to know—except the fellow carrying the nitro—is that the nitro will not only blow off the other guy’s finger. It’ll blow the man wearing the nitro necklace to smithereens! That’s what happens when we hang something like nitro where forgiveness should be.

Here are three curves in the road on the journey from forgiven to forgiving.

The first curve is the things that make forgiving hard. Three things make forgiving hard. Forgiving is hard because of what we need to forgive: grievances, trespasses, wrongs, injustices, injuries, debts and sins. Forgiving is also hard because the wounded are the ones who need to take the initiative to forgive. And forgiving is hard because we are supposed to keep on forgiving.

The second curve is the things that make forgiving right. First, forgiving is right because God forgives us. Second, forgiving is right because we need to keep on being forgiven. Third, forgiving is right because it is the way we heal.

The third curve is the things that make forgiving work. First, right timing makes forgiving work—don't be too quick or too slow to forgive. Second, forgiveness works when those who do wrong suffer the just consequences of their actions. Third, forgiveness works when we can live with the progress or lack of progress forgiveness restores to the relationships.

All of us stand in need of—but do not deserve—God's forgiveness. We know we need the forgiveness of family and friends. All of us know people whom we need to forgive. Forgiving is hard. But forgiving is right. And, yes, forgiving works. It makes the journey from forgiven to forgiving worth it!

Written by Ray Higgins, coordinator, Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Arkansas, Little Rock, AR.

Blessing

Take-home Line

Blessing reminds us of God's continuous presence and care.

Teacher's Goal

To help members learn how to practice blessing

Option 1

Introduce the Lesson

► Write the word *blessing* on a board or a sheet of paper. Ask members to offer ways the word blessing is used today and list these on the board. Ask: *Which definition is the most meaningful? most spiritual?*

State that this lesson will help them come to a biblical understanding of the concept of blessing and to learn how to accept and give blessings.

Examine the Biblical Witness

- Read aloud Numbers 6:22-27. Ask:
- *In what context do you imagine Aaron's blessing was to be given to the Israelites?*
 - *What had been the Israelites' previous relationship with God?*

- *How would the Israelites' previous experience with God influence how they heard the blessing?*
- *In what ways had Yahweh already kept his promises, been gracious to, and brought peace to the people?*
- *How does previous experience with someone affect the impact of the blessing?*
- *Based on this passage, what does blessing mean?*
- *How does our relationship with God affect the way God blesses us? Why?*

► Read Genesis 17:1-8. Ask:

- *How old was Abraham when God spoke to him?*
- *If you were Abraham, how would you hear the blessing that included children and a great nation?*
- *Name God's promises in this blessing. Based on this passage, what does blessing mean? (List these on the board.)*
- *Do you view a blessing that promises to reward you materially in a positive or a negative way? Why?*

► Read Luke 6:27-28 and Romans 12:14. Ask:

- *What are some examples in Jesus' life in which he obeyed his own words?*
- *In what ways might you "bless" someone who curses you?*
- *Based on this passage, what does blessing mean? List these on the board.*
- *What do you think will be the effect on an enemy when you bless him or her?*
- *Does that matter?*
- *What do you think is the relationship between "blessing" and "praying for" someone?*

Offer Practical Handles

► Ask the class to suggest various stages of family life in which a blessing would be welcomed. An example could be when children enter school or when a parent leaves or begins a job.

Ask members to describe the emotions an individual or family may feel at each of these stages. Lead the class to apply some assurances of faith to these emotions.

Distribute paper and pencils and ask members to turn to someone seated near them and ask them to write a blessing dealing with one of the suggested stages. Let several volunteers share their blessings. Collect the papers and tell the class you will keep the blessings and pass out copies of them the next week.

Close with the Take-home Line

Option 2

State the Issue

► Say: At each stage in life, celebrating God's presence is important. Offering blessing is one way we can celebrate God's presence and invite God to be a part of our lives. Blessing assures us of the elements of our faith: hope, promise, grace and peace. Today's lesson will lead us through some biblical blessings and encourage us to use blessing as a faith tool.

Examine the Biblical Witness

► Organize the class in three groups and assign each group one of the following Scriptures: (1) Numbers 6:22-27;

(2) Genesis 17:5-8; and (3) Luke 6:27-28; Romans 12:14.
(If you prefer not to use groups, you can do this as a class.)
Ask groups to report to the entire class the following:

- *In what modern life circumstance can you imagine the biblical blessing/scripture being used?*
- *What emotions—such as fear, anxiety or anger—does the blessing/scripture address?*
- *What elements of faith mentioned in the blessing address the situation?*
- *Develop a modern-day case study that illustrates your scripture.*
- *Complete: Blessing reminds us of God's continuous presence and care by*

Put Faith into Action

► Make five strip-posters by using the five subheads in the “Down to Earth Faith” section in the *Students Guide*. Place the first step on the wall and briefly summarize the material in the *Students Guide*. Do this for the other four steps. Ask: *Have you received a blessing? Have you given a blessing to those who look to you for a blessing?*

Close with the Take-home Line

Written by Wayne Hager, pastor, Calvary Baptist Church, Mount Airy, N.C.

Blessing and Receiving a Blessing

The language of blessing others was unfamiliar to me when I first read this lesson. Yet, the concept of giving and receiving a blessing resonated deeply within me. I felt guilty over what I had not done as a father when my children were young. But the wonderful thing about blessing is that you can change at any point. Unfortunately, of course, we cannot change all the past, but we can begin now to bless and affirm those around us.

I decided that I would offer a blessing to each of our family members. The next time all of our family would be together was Thanksgiving. Since we were eating together at my son's house, I requested my daughter-in-law to give me five to seven minutes before the meal.

I prepared a card for each member of the family using a computer program. I chose a symbol for each member of the family and wrote a brief reason why I felt that symbol was appropriate for that person. I printed out the cards and took them with me to the dinner.

Before we had our prayer for the meal, I explained what I wanted to do and why. Then, I simply read the verse on each card and gave it to the person. There were ten of us present—my son, his wife, and their two-and-a-half year old son; my daughter, her husband, and their two boys five and two-and-a-half; my wife; and a couple with whom we had shared Thanksgiving dinner for three or four years. Because of the time I had chosen to do this, I simply read the card and did not elaborate more.

Although the apostle Paul links Jesus' statement that it is “more blessed to give than to receive” to money, I found that

it also applies to blessing as well. I cannot speak for the significance this had for those I blessed; I can affirm what it did for me. I was blessed more than anyone else.

So not only does our blessing help others, it also benefits ourselves.

Written by James E. Taulman.

Additional Study Resources **for** *The Practice of Living Faithfully*

BCE recommends the following books to provide additional insights into *The Practice of Living Faithfully*:

Dorothy C. Bass, *Receiving the Day: Christian Practices for Opening the Gift of Time*. 142 pages. Hardcover. \$20.00

A spiritual reconsideration of our frantic approach to time, *Receiving the Day* invites readers to embrace the temporal landmarks of our lives as opportunities for deeper relationships with God and one another. Dorothy Bass invites readers into a way of living in time that is alert to both contemporary pressures and rooted ancient wisdom. She encourages us to reevaluate our understanding of the temporal and thereby to participate fully in the Christian practice of knowing time as God's gift.

Dorothy C. Bass, Editor, *Practicing Our Faith*. 232 pages. Softcover. \$14.00

This book examines 12 time-honored practices shaped by the Christian community over the centuries, yet richly grounded in contemporary experience. Of this book, Robert Wuthnow, sociologist of religion at Princeton University, writes: "Millions of Americans claim to be interested in deepening their spirituality, but many are swimming contentedly in shallow waters. The essays in this highly readable volume challenge us to practice our faith with greater dedication and imagination. Drawing inspiration from

biblical tradition and from contemporary literature as well as their own experience, the authors show how such practices as hospitality, keeping Sabbath, forgiving, and singing, among others, can forge more deliberate and rewarding connections with the sacred.”

Michele Hershberger, *A Christian View of Hospitality: Expecting Surprises*. 284 pages. Softcover. \$12.99

In a world of polite conversation, linen tablecloths and busy schedules, how can one be hospitable? In a world filled with drive-by shootings and neighborhood muggings, how does one love the stranger? This book calls readers to see the stranger as one who brings the gift of hospitality.

Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*. 205 pages. Softcover. \$15.00

Christine Pohl revisits the discipline of welcoming strangers and provides the foundation for renewed commitment to recovering hospitality as a Christian tradition. Combining biblical and historical research with extensive interviewing of people in contemporary communities of hospitality, Pohl explores anew the necessity, difficulty, and blessing of practicing hospitality today.

Check out these other undated adult Bible study curricula from Acacia Resources!



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- ***Honoring the Ten Commandments: Monument or Movement?***
- ***In the Beginning God: 13 Lessons from Genesis***
- ***Leading Churches into 21st Century Missions: 13 Lessons in Acts***
- ***Living Wisely, Living Well: Lessons from The Proverbs***
- ***Looking at Leadership: Lessons from 1 and 2 Kings***
- ***Walk His Way: Discipleship Lessons from Mark's Gospel***

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