

IGNITE



focus
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IGNITE

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Spiritual Conversations

UNDERSTANDING

(for your preparation as a leader)

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DISCUSSION

(to use with your group)

Prompts 1-4: Pages 6 - 17

UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS CHAPTER?

Spiritual Conversations

This study aims to serve as an on-ramp for those new to Bible study. These studies kick off relatable but thoughtful conversations in the initial stages of a Bible study. The hope is that because of these early conversations about God, the person of Jesus Christ, and the wisdom of Scripture, a newcomer might be “wowed” enough to desire to come back for more. You are welcome to use as many or whichever studies you believe would most serve the needs of your unique group.

This particular chapter serves to prompt a “spiritual conversation”, even before your group opens a Bible together. What is a spiritual conversation? Spiritual conversations are essential for evangelization. They catalyze great discussions about Jesus, but in an informal and relational way (not in a formal or institutional manner). There are times for formal teaching or institutional formation – like during RCIA classes, homilies, or formation opportunities – but especially at the beginning stages of evangelization, it is important to meet others where they are, even in conversation.

The key here is taking the conversation to a place where meaningful and spiritual things can be discussed, things such as truth, beauty, goodness, hopes, dreams, fears, anxieties... things that you can't see, touch, or feel physically but are very much a real part of our lives.

Spiritual conversations enable us to connect the Gospel with the felt needs and desires of those people we encounter every day. Practicing this habit, and starting your Bible study with these conversations, could be the essential factor in someone's realization that God is not only close to them but very much involved in the details of their lives. It could be the beginning of their coming to know that He not only cares about their fears and dreams but also loves them, deeply and personally, and has a specific plan for their flourishing.

Spiritual conversations help to cultivate the relationship necessary for you, as the leader, to earn the right to be heard in the lives of your participants. You can learn so much about your Bible study members during this time! Listen attentively to what they are sharing and allow this to form your heart and intercessions for them.

By learning to ask progressively deeper questions, you will gradually lead others to deeper conversation. For example, what is your favorite book? When did you first read it? Why does it stick out as your favorite? Do these elements of this story relate to any other stories you also love? How has this story changed your life or relationships? Etc.

You may choose any of the following prompts for your study. You may also use these prompts as a model for initiating a spiritual conversation on a topic of your own choosing.

DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

Prompt 1: Spiritual Conversation

1. Launching Question: What brings you to Bible study?

Allow the group to discuss.

2. Have you been a part of a Bible study before? What were they like?

Allow the group to discuss.

3. What worries do you have, if any, about Bible study?

Allow the group to discuss.

4. What worries do you have, if any, about Bible study?

Allow the group to discuss.

5. In Bible study, we will be engaging with Scripture which we, as Catholics, consider to be the Word of God. Have you ever heard God speaking in your life before? What was that like?

Allow the group to discuss.

Conclusion:

Please conclude with:

- Gratitude for sharing honestly with this group
- A compelling invitation to return to Bible study in order to dive more deeply into the most important things, by learning about Scripture and engaging in honest conversations - like you did today.

DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

Prompt 2: Bucket Lists

1. Launching Question: What is the top item on your bucket list?

Allow the group to discuss.

2. What about this item makes it rise to the top of your list?

Allow the group to discuss.

3. What would it take to achieve it?

Allow the group to discuss.

4. What are you willing to do to achieve this thing?

Allow the group to discuss.

5. How will you need to change or what would you need to sacrifice to achieve it?

Allow the group to discuss.

6. Are there goals or hopes in your life that would demand so much

of you—in time, effort, or sacrifice—that you are afraid to even work towards fulfilling them?

Allow the group to discuss.

7. What kind of goal or dream would be worth sacrificing everything for?

Allow the group to discuss.

8. It's pretty intense to imagine sacrificing everything, even for something or someone we deeply care about. As Catholics, we believe Jesus Christ sacrificed everything for us to save us, even when we didn't deserve it (Rom 5:7-8). Having reflected upon those things that you are willing to make sacrifices for, does this change the way you see Jesus Christ's sacrifice? Why or why not?

Allow the group to discuss.

Conclusion:

Please conclude with:

- Gratitude for sharing honestly with this group
- A compelling invitation to return to Bible study in order to dive more deeply into the most important things, by learning about Scripture and engaging in honest conversations - like you did today.

DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

Prompt 3: Holidays

1. Launching Question: What is your favorite holiday to celebrate?

Allow the group to discuss.

2. Which people did you celebrate this holiday with?

Allow the group to discuss.

3. What stands out to you in your memories of those celebrations and traditions?

Allow the group to discuss.

4. How has your relationship with this holiday and those you celebrate with changed over the years?

Allow the group to discuss.

5. How do you hope to keep celebrating this holiday or continuing those traditions?

Allow the group to discuss.

6. Why do you think it's important to pass on traditions and celebrations?

Allow the group to discuss.

7. It's so important to pass on our way of life from one generation to the next. By doing so, we can be close to those who've gone before us, even hundreds of years ago! Traditions ground us in something greater than ourselves and connect us to our families, even those we've never met. We could say that the rituals of the Church and her celebrations pass on to us the way of life of our Christian brothers and sisters, even those who have lived centuries ago, just like the traditions we've inherited in our holiday celebrations. How does this connection change the way you see something like the Mass? Or the Bible?

Allow the group to discuss.

Conclusion:

Please conclude with:

- Gratitude for sharing honestly with this group
- A compelling invitation to return to Bible study in order to dive more deeply into the most important things, by learning about Scripture and engaging in honest conversations - like you did today.

DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

Prompt 4: Admiration

1. Launching Question: Who in your life do you most admire?

Allow the group to discuss.

2. What about this person makes you admire them?

Allow the group to discuss.

3. Have you always admired this person? If not, who did you admire when you were younger?

Allow the group to discuss.

4. What is different about the person(s) you used to admire and those you do now?

Allow the group to discuss.

5. When and why did your admiration change?

Allow the group to discuss.

6. What qualities of those you admire would you want to embody?

Allow the group to discuss.

7. What changes would you have to make to become more like them?

Allow the group to discuss.

8. If you'd be willing to change to become more like the people you admire, would you also be willing to change to become like God? Or become who God desires you to be? Why or why not?

Allow the group to discuss.

Conclusion:

Please conclude with:

- Gratitude for sharing honestly with this group
- A compelling invitation to return to Bible study in order to dive more deeply into the most important things, by learning about Scripture and engaging in honest conversations - like you did today.



Who Is God?

UNDERSTANDING

(for your preparation as a leader)

Pages 19 - 28

DISCUSSION

(to use with your group)

Pages 29 - 36



UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

Show us the Father (John 14:8-11)

Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and we shall be satisfied." Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you so long, and yet you do not know me, Philip? He who has seen me has seen the Father; how can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father in me."

"The desire for God is written in the human heart" (CCC 27). We have an innate desire to know our creator. We were made for divine life and every person, whether they actively realize it or not, wants to know: God, Who are You? Are You out there? Do You care?

A proper understanding of God's identity is also central to the Catholic Faith. Unfortunately, having serious misconceptions about God's identity is all too common—even among Christians. Too often God is viewed as a detached, impersonal force in the universe, a grandfatherly, Santa-Clause-like figure in the sky, or "a combination of Divine Butler and Cosmic Therapist" as one sociologist observed.¹

¹Smith, Christian. On 'Moralistic Therapeutic Deism' as U.S. Teenagers' Actual, Tacit, De

These misconceptions damage our faith, because they trick us into believing that God is different than He really is—that He isn't interested, that he doesn't care, and that following Him and His ways doesn't really matter.

In the passage above, Jesus points us toward a correct understanding of God. The Apostle Philip wants to know God and says, "Show us the Father." Yet, Jesus' answer is surprising. Instead of telling Philip about God, He points back to Himself, saying "He who has seen me has seen the Father" (v. 9). This statement reveals an incredible truth of Christianity: by knowing Jesus, we know the Father. The Catechism tells us, "Christ's whole earthly life—his words and deeds, his silences and sufferings, indeed his manner of being and speaking—is Revelation of the Father" (CCC 516). If we want to know God—His love for us, His patience, His care, His zeal, His involvement in our lives—then we need only look to Jesus. Therefore, let's discuss what Jesus says about Himself, so that we can learn what God is truly like.

I AM

All of Christ's life reveals something about God. Yet, Jesus made a handful of statements that pointed directly to His identity. In the Gospel of John, Jesus makes seven "I am" statements that give a profound picture of Who God is:

- I am the Light of the World (John 8:12)
- I am the Door (John 10:9)
- I am the Good Shepherd (John 10:11,14)
- I am the Resurrection and the Life (John 11:25)

Facto Religious Faith. Accessed at <https://www.catholiceducation.org/en/controversy/common-misconceptions/on-moralistic-therapeutic-deism-as-u-s-teenagers-actual-tacit-de-facto-religious-faith.html> May 6, 2024.

- I am the Way and the Truth and the Life (John 14:6)
- I am the Vine (John 15:1,5)

It's important to note that the phrase "I am" is not just an ordinary statement from Jesus. In the Old Testament, God revealed His holy name, "I AM" or "I AM WHO AM," to Moses in the burning bush (Ex 3:14).² For the Jewish people, God's name was considered so holy that it was only uttered by the High Priest once each year on the highest Jewish feast day, the Day of Atonement. God's name was full of meaning and power—and it wasn't to be uttered lightly. Therefore, when Jesus uses this holy name to speak about Himself, He is making a very bold claim. It is as if He is saying, "I am God and if you want to know what God is like, listen." While we can't examine all of them, let's look at a few of these statements to learn from Jesus about Who God really is.

I am the Light of the World (John 8:12)

Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

Light is a key theme throughout the Scriptures. In the very beginning, God said, "Let there be light" to commence His creative work (Gen 1:3). In the Psalms, God's Word is spoken of as light for our path (Ps 119:105). And those lost in the world are spoken of as walking in darkness (Is 9:1-3). Light is a "common symbol for all that is good."³ Perhaps the most pertinent image of light in this context, however, is God's lighting of His people's way in the book of Exodus. As the

² The revelation of the ineffable name "I AM WHO AM" contains then the truth that God alone IS. The Greek Septuagint translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, and following it the Church's Tradition, understood the divine name in this sense: God is the fullness of Being and of every perfection, without origin and without end. All creatures receive all that they are and have from him; but he alone is his very being, and he is of himself everything that he is (CCC 213).

³ Hahn, Scott. Light, Catholic Bible Dictionary, p. 543.

Israelites journeyed from Egypt to the Promised Land through the wilderness, God provided a pillar of fire that gave them light, allowing travel even in the dark of night (Ex 13:21). The Israelites were called by God to freedom in a new land, but they could not arrive there on their own. They needed the light of the pillar of fire to reach their promised destination.

This background is key to understanding Jesus' words. When He says, "I am the light of the world," He does so during the Jewish feast of Tabernacles. As part of the celebration, golden candelabras were lit with fire, symbolizing the fire that led the people in the wilderness.⁴ Thus, when Jesus says, "I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness," He is specifically referencing this Old Testament image. The point is clear: just as the pillar of fire led the people of Israel to freedom in the promised land, Jesus is the "light of the world" guiding us through this earthly life (see Jn 1:9). We are like the Israelites in the wilderness, totally dependent on God's light for our journey. Only with the light of Christ, we will be able to travel the path to freedom, life, and eternal joy.⁵

What does this tell us about God? First, it tells us that God sees the darkness in our lives and wants to bring His light to those places. We all walk in darkness. It doesn't take much work to look around the world and see that humanity is desperately broken. Indeed, many are wandering in great darkness, unsure of where to go, what to do, who to follow, or how to live the life of joy and happiness they so eagerly desire but find so difficult to achieve. God sees this reality and cares about it deeply. He also provides the solution, Himself, the Light, to

⁴Ignatius Catholic study Bible New Testament note on John 8:12.

⁵The Church uses this same imagery in the Easter Vigil liturgy today. The Easter (or Paschal) candle is lit from a fire stationed outside the Church in the dark of night. The candle is then processed into the Church with the words "the light of Christ." The light of Christ leads us through the darkness. It is also from this light that the congregation will light their own individual candles as symbols of their enlightenment in Christ, which they have received in Baptism.

illumine for us a path to true life. God isn't indifferently observing our plight from afar. He wants to meet our darkness head-on. In fact, His light is the only solution to our darkness, and He eagerly wishes for us to receive it.

It is important to recognize, however, that the "light of life" that God wishes to give requires a commitment. Indeed, Jesus says, "he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (Jn 8:12, emphasis added). We cannot receive this great gift by simply asking God to give us what we want or begging Him to solve our problems. He wants so much more for us than that. His goal is not merely for us to feel good about ourselves and have a "positive outlook on life." Rather, God wants to meet the deepest darkneses in our lives and transform them. He wants to lead us along a different path that renews our minds and frees us from sin. But this transformation comes only when we are willing to follow Him wherever that might lead, even to those places that we might not currently desire to go. The light of life is available to us. We must follow Him to find it.

I am the Good Shepherd (John 10:11-15)

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. He who is a hireling and not a shepherd, whose own the sheep are not, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. He flees because he is a hireling and cares nothing for the sheep. I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know me, as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep.

We ought to notice a rather striking detail about Jesus' image of the Good Shepherd. Think for a moment about what being a shepherd must have been like. Most of the time, it probably involved remaining close to the sheep, walking with them in pastures and keeping them from getting too far away. Then, imagine what would happen when a wolf comes, hoping to steal a sheep for dinner. The shepherd would be responsible for fending off the wolf and keeping the sheep safe. No doubt many took this responsibility seriously, but surely others considered the value of their own lives and were unwilling to put themselves in danger for the sake of an animal. Jesus, however, goes even further. What makes Him a good shepherd is that He is willing to give up his own life for the lives of His sheep. Can you imagine being a shepherd who is willing to die to protect his animals?

Of course, in context, Jesus isn't merely speaking about animals; He is speaking about us. We are His sheep, and He is willing to give His life for us. This is perfectly accomplished by His death on the cross. Indeed, Jesus doesn't merely claim He is willing to give His life for His sheep. He truly does it.

What does this tell us about God? One thing it tells us is that God wants to do something for us, not merely demand something from us. Too often, we get it backwards. Instead of thinking God wants to save us and bring us new life, we convince ourselves that He wants to impose His rules upon us. While following Christ certainly has demands, God doesn't need our subservience like a tyrannical king. His desire is to save us. He demands something of us because He desires something good for us. Think of a good parent who asks their children to do their homework. The parent doesn't need the homework to be done. They simply want to help their child become a person of greater character and achievement. God is the same. He

is interested in us, personally. In fact, His chief desire is for us, not merely what we can do for Him. Jesus says explicitly that He “came not to be served but to serve” (Mt 20:28).

Similarly, this passage also tells us that God wants to have mercy on us and save us from our sins. Again, we often get this backward. Instead of thinking that God, in His love, wants to save us from our sins, we believe that He wants to hold our sins over our heads and condemn us. Instead of seeing God as a merciful savior, we view Him as a tyrannical judge. This false image couldn’t be further from the truth. Jesus says elsewhere, “God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him” (Jn 3:17). Indeed, we believe in a God of mercy.

Finally, at least one other element of this passage merits our attention. Notice the intimacy of the shepherd and his sheep. He knows them and they know him. You can imagine the closeness and proximity of a shepherd to his sheep. He is always with them, leading them, guiding them, and keeping them out of danger. God wants this same sort of closeness with us. Rather than being distant, uninterested, and uninvolved, God is radically attentive and present in our lives. He isn’t merely “out there” somewhere “watching from above.” He is personally close to us. In fact, He is with us “always” (Mt 28:20).

I am the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6)

In this final “I am” statement from Jesus, we get not one but three identifying characteristics: way, truth, and life. Certainly, much could be said about these identifiers. For the sake of this study, we are going to limit our discussion to one key point about God’s identity, one that is often misunderstood in today’s culture.

Today, it is not uncommon to encounter the idea that all religions are basically the same, and that the goal of these religions, is also largely similar: be a good person and when you die, God will let you into heaven. This proposition, however, is inconsistent with Jesus' words. Behind this be-a-good-person proposal is a misconception about God. The be-a-good-person God is not the God of Christianity; He is the cosmic pushover. He has no real standards, no great dream for humanity, no passionate love.

Jesus' statement, "I am the way, the truth, and the life" points us to the one, true God. There are not many ways, nor many truths, nor many types of life. There is one way and one truth and one life: Jesus Christ. In our pluralistic culture, such an idea might seem exclusivist, judgmental, or even intolerant but nothing could be further from the truth. God is so passionately dedicated to our good, to our union with Him, to our living the fullness of life that He won't bend on His principles. God made us. He knows what makes us tick. In fact, He knows us better than we know ourselves. Therefore, when He proposes to us one way and one truth that leads to life, He does so as the God of love. He loves us so much that He won't settle for our mediocrity. We are willing to compromise, but He is not. We are willing to sell ourselves short, but He is not. We are willing to settle for a mediocre, self-centered, uninspiring life, but He is not. Indeed, God loves us so much that He wants not merely the decent, the okay, the better-than-average for us. He wants what is truly best for us and is unwilling to surrender to our pursuit of lesser things.

Finally, what is best for us? If God truly wants what is best, what is it that He wants for us? The answer is simple: Himself. God is the way, the truth, and the life. Therefore, His deepest desire is for us to know Him. He wants this for our sakes, not His own. For it is only in God that we find the best path for our lives, the deepest truths of our

existence, and the joy of living for which we so ardently long. In the words of St. Augustine, “When I am completely united to you, there will be no more sorrow or trials; entirely full of you, my life will be complete” (CCC 45).

Extra: Moral Therapeutic Deism (Optional)

Sociologist Christian Smith examined the beliefs of young people in 2010. He found that while many claimed a particular religious tradition, they also overwhelmingly adopted “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.” This set of beliefs expressed what young people actually believed, even if they claimed a specific religious affiliation. While the tenets of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism have elements of truth in them, they present a distorted image of God and Christianity. In this chapter, take note of these misconceptions, so that you can respond to them accordingly. Here are the tenets of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism:

1. A God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth.
2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
4. God does not need to be particularly involved in one’s life except when he is needed to resolve a problem.
5. Good people go to heaven when they die.⁶

Smith summarizes his conclusion this way:

⁶Smith, Christian. On ‘Moralistic Therapeutic Deism’ as U.S. Teenagers’ Actual, Tacit, De Facto Religious Faith. Accessed at <https://www.catholiceducation.org/en/controversy/common-misconceptions/on-moralistic-therapeutic-deism-as-u-s-teenagers-actual-tacit-de-facto-religious-faith.html> May 6, 2024.

[W]e can say that we have come with some confidence to believe that a significant part of “Christianity” in the United States is actually only tenuously connected to the actual historical Christian tradition, but has rather substantially morphed into Christianity’s misbegotten step-cousin, Christian Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. This has happened in the minds and hearts of many individual believers and, it also appears, within the structures of at least some Christian organizations and institutions. The language — and therefore experience — of Trinity, holiness, sin, grace, justification, sanctification, church, Eucharist, and heaven and hell appear, among most Christian teenagers in the United States at the very least, to be being supplanted by the language of happiness, niceness, and an earned heavenly reward. It is not so much that Christianity in the United States is being secularized. Rather more subtly, either Christianity is at least degenerating into a pathetic version of itself or, more significantly, Christianity is actively being colonized and displaced by a quite different religious faith.⁷

⁷ Smith, Christian. On ‘Moralistic Therapeutic Deism’ as U.S. Teenagers’ Actual, Tacit, De Facto Religious Faith. Accessed at <https://www.catholiceducation.org/en/controversy/common-misconceptions/on-moralistic-therapeutic-deism-as-u-s-teenagers-actual-tacit-de-facto-religious-faith.html> May 6, 2024.

DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

Passages: John 14:8-11, John 8:12, John 10:11-15, John 14:1-6

Introduction

1. (Optional) Launching Question: Have you ever met someone, thinking they were going to be one way (maybe mean or uptight or careless or something else), but once you met them, they turned out to be very different? What was your misperception and what was the reality?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud: In this study, we are going to explore God's identity. Who is God? And what does that mean for our lives today? To begin:

2. Launching Question: When you think of God, what do you think of? What is God like?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud: There are a lot of ideas about Who God is. In today's study, we are going to discuss what Catholicism teaches about Who God is. To start, let's begin with a question from one of Jesus'

disciples, who wanted to understand Who God was.

Who is God?

Read John 14:8-11

3. What does Philip ask for? And how does Jesus answer?

Answer: The Apostle Philip wants to know God and says, "Show us the Father." Yet, Jesus' answer is surprising. Instead of telling Philip about God, He points back to Himself, saying "He who has seen me has seen the Father" (v. 9).

4. Jesus' answer to Philip tells us something about how we can know God. What do you think Jesus' answer suggests to us about learning what God is like?

Allow the group to discuss. Answer: By knowing Jesus, we know the Father. The Catechism states, "Christ's whole earthly life - his words and deeds, his silences and sufferings, indeed his manner of being and speaking - is Revelation of the Father" (CCC 516). Therefore, if we want to know what God is like, we need to know what Jesus is like.

Please read aloud: In the Gospel of John, Jesus makes several "I am" statements. 1 These statements are Jesus' way of telling us Who He is, and thus, Who God is. Here is the list of statements¹:

- I am the Bread of Life (John 6:35)
- I am the Light of the World (John 8:12)
- I am the Door (John 10:9)
- I am the Good Shepherd (John 10:11,14)

¹ The revelation of the ineffable name "I AM WHO AM" contains then the truth that God alone IS. The Greek Septuagint translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, and following it the Church's Tradition, understood the divine name in this sense: God is the fullness of Being and of every perfection, without origin and without end. All creatures receive all that they are and have from him; but he alone is his very being, and he is of himself everything that he is (CCC 213).

Discussion / Who Is God?

- I am the Resurrection and the Life (John 11:25)
 - I am the Way and the Truth and the Life (John 14:6)
 - I am the Vine (John 15:1,5)
5. What do you think it might mean to “walk in darkness” and where do you see this in the world today?

Allow the group to discuss. Answer: We all walk in darkness in many ways. It doesn't take much work to look around the world and see that humanity is desperately broken. Indeed, many are wandering in great darkness, unsure of where to go, what to do, who to follow, or how to live the life of joy and happiness they so eagerly desire but find so difficult to achieve.

6. What do you think Jesus means by “the light of life?”

Allow the group to discuss. Note to the leader: You do not need to fully answer the question until after the next question.

Please read aloud: Here is some additional Biblical background about light: Light is a key theme throughout the Scriptures. Perhaps the most pertinent image of light in this context, however, is God's lighting of His people's way in the book of Exodus. As the Israelites journeyed from Egypt to the Promised Land through the wilderness, God provided a pillar of fire that gave them light for their journey, allowing travel even in the dark of night (Ex 13:21). The Israelites were called by God to freedom in a new land, but they could not arrive there on their own. They needed the light of the pillar of fire to reach their promised destination.

This background is key to understanding Jesus' words. He says, “I am the light of the world,” during the feast of Tabernacles. As part of the celebration, golden candelabras were lit with fire, symbolizing the fire

that led the people in the wilderness.² Thus, when Jesus says, “I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness,” He is specifically referencing this Old Testament image.

7. Given this background, what might it mean to have the “light of life?”

Allow the group to discuss. Answer: Just as the pillar of fire led the people of Israel to freedom in the promised land, Jesus is the “light of the world” guiding us through this earthly life (see Jn 1:9). We are like the Israelites in the wilderness, totally dependent on God’s light for our journey. Only with the light of Christ, we will be able to travel the path to freedom, life, and eternal joy.³

8. What does all this tell us about God? And how do we find this “light of life?”

Allow the group to discuss. Answer: First, it tells us that God sees the darkness in our lives and wants to bring His light to those places. He also provides the solution, Himself, the Light, to illumine for us a path to true life.

It is important to recognize, however, that the “light of life” that God wishes to give requires a commitment. Indeed, Jesus says, “he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (Jn 8:12). The light of life is available to us. We must follow Him to find it.

Please read aloud: Let’s read one more of Jesus’ “I am” statements:

Read John 10:11-15

² Ignatius Catholic study Bible New Testament note on John 8:12.

³ The Church uses this same imagery in the Easter Vigil liturgy today. The Easter (or Paschal) candle is lit from a fire stationed outside the Church in the dark of night. The candle is then processed into the Church with the words “the light of Christ.” The light of Christ leads us through the darkness. It is also from this light that the congregation will light their own individual candles as symbols of their enlightenment in Christ, which they have received in Baptism.

9. What does a good shepherd do and how is that different from what a bad shepherd does? How is Jesus a “Good Shepherd” and what does this tell us about God?

Answer: A shepherd would be responsible for fending off the wolf and keeping the sheep safe. Jesus, however, goes even further. He says that what makes Him a good shepherd is that He is willing to give up his own life for the lives of His sheep. Unlike a bad shepherd, Jesus is willing to lay His life down for His sheep. But Jesus isn't merely speaking about animals; He is speaking about us. We are His sheep, and He is willing to give His life for us. This is perfectly accomplished by His death on the cross.

One thing it tells us is that God wants do something for us, not merely demand something from us. Too often, however, we get it backwards. Instead of thinking that He wants to save us and bring us new life, we convince ourselves that He wants to impose His rules upon us.

10. Many people today view God as distant, uninterested, and uninvolved in their lives. How does this image of the Good Shepherd present a different picture of God?

Answer: You can imagine the closeness and proximity of a shepherd to his sheep. He is always with them, leading them, guiding them, and keeping them out of danger. God wants this same sort of closeness with us. Rather than being distant, uninterested, and uninvolved, God is radically attentive and present in our lives.

Note to Leader: You may omit this last "I AM" statement if you don't have sufficient time.

(Optional) Please read out loud: Okay let's discuss on more "I AM" statement from Jesus:

Read John 14:1-6

11. This is a bold statement. What do you think Jesus means when He says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life?"

Allow the group to discuss.

12. Sometimes Christianity is reduced to merely a moral code that guides us in being kind to one another. And, so the thinking goes, basically all God is asking of us is to be a good person. While there is some truth in this idea, what is it missing?

Answer: Behind this be-a-good-person proposal is a misconception about God. The be-a-good-person God is not the God of Christianity; He is the cosmic pushover. He has no real standards, no great dream for humanity, no passionate love.

13. If God isn't *only* looking for us to be good and kind to one another, what does he want for us? And what does that tell us about God?

Answer: The answer is simple: Himself. God is the way, the truth, and the life. Therefore, His deepest desire is for us to know Him. He wants this for our sakes, not His own. For it is only in God that we find the best path for our lives, the deepest truths of our existence, and the joy of living for which we so ardently long.

(Optional) Wrap-Up:

Please read aloud: In this study, we learned about who God is by examining Jesus' "I AM" statements. You could spend your whole life learning more about Who God is. Therefore, consider continuing to come to Bible study so that we can continue this journey together. Thank you for being here.

Extra Optional Material – Moralistic Therapeutic Deism

Please read aloud: The Catholic sociologist, Christian Smith, examined the *de facto* beliefs of many young people. He found that while many claimed to believe in their particular religious tradition, many overwhelmingly adopted what he termed "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism." This set of beliefs was what young people *actually* believed about God, even if they claimed affiliation with a particular tradition. While the tenets of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism have elements of truth in them, they generally fall short of a full picture of God and Christianity. Here's how Smith summarized the beliefs of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism:

- A God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth.
- God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
- The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
- God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when he is needed to resolve a problem.
- Good people go to heaven when they die.⁴

⁴ Smith, Christian. On 'Moralistic Therapeutic Deism' as U.S. Teenagers' Actual, Tacit, De Facto Religious Faith. Accessed at <https://www.catholiceducation.org/en/controversy/common-misconceptions/on-moralistic-therapeutic-deism-as-u-s-teenagers-actual-tacit-de-facto-religious-faith.html> May 6, 2024.

14. How does this set of beliefs align or fall short of a proper understanding of God and Christianity?

Allow the group to discuss.



The Call of Matthew

UNDERSTANDING

(for your preparation as a leader)

Pages 54 - 65

DISCUSSION

(to use with your group)

Pages 66 - 78



UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

Matthew the Tax Collector (Matthew 9:9-13)

As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax office; and he said to him, "Follow me." And he rose and followed him. And as he sat at table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and sat down with Jesus and his disciples. And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" But when he heard it, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."

Consider the apostle Matthew. In the passage above, he doesn't begin very well—at least He doesn't appear to be someone we'd initially describe as a model disciple. Scripture tells us that he was "sitting at the tax office." Later, we read specifically that he was a "tax collector" (Mt 10:3). Collecting taxes wasn't simply another profession in the time of Jesus. Tax collectors were responsible for extracting money from people, and they often did so without mercy. They stole from the people, increasing tax rates and pocketing the extra money for themselves.

As a Jewish tax collector, Matthew would have been viewed as even worse. Roman rule was a serious problem for the Jews. God had given them the Promised Land, and they were supposed to have their own king, not a Roman emperor. Rome was the enemy, and anyone who stood with Rome was an outcast, a friend of the enemy. That's Matthew.

Like Matthew, we too don't always begin from a place of strength and confidence. All of us have lives filled with things of which we aren't exactly proud: bad decisions, old wounds, or a nagging sense of inadequacy, weakness, or failure. Yet, we can learn from Matthew's story. No matter how far away we might seem, nor how hopeless we might feel, nor even how irredeemable we might think ourselves to be, God is willing to approach us. It was this way for Matthew, and it can be the same for us. No matter how seriously we have sinned, we are never beyond the reach of God. Therefore, we should never give up hope. God sees more than our sins and He desires to meet us where we are.

Inner Conflict (v. 9)

We shouldn't miss how dramatic this moment is in Matthew's life. He isn't a hollow character. He is a real man, with a real life and real problems. He's a thief and a traitor. He's given in to the allure of wealth and of power. Therefore, when Jesus says to Matthew, "Follow me," you can imagine the inner conflict that must have unfolded inside of him:

On the one hand, he's probably thinking about the opportunity in front of him. The thought of no longer being a tax collector, being ashamed of himself, and feeling like a traitor must be enticing. Surely, he eagerly desires the new life that might be possible for him.

On the other hand, you can also imagine his hesitations: “Can I really give it up? What about my money, my career? Can I really change? Do I even want to change? Do I even know this man? What happens if I follow him? What’s it going to cost?” Matthew had probably developed a comfortable life, materially speaking. Being a tax collector gave him wealth, power, and likely some sort of peace with the Romans. The decision to follow Jesus wasn’t going to come without a cost. Should he give up his career and his money for the possibility of a new life or should he hold on to these earthly comforts and remain as he is?

Like Matthew, we too might feel this tension. Maybe we’re not sure following Jesus is a good decision. Maybe we sense God calling us to something, but we’re afraid of what it might cost. Maybe we’ve done some bad things in the past and don’t think we can change. This inner conflict is normal. God sees it and understands it. At the same time, God is not content to leave us there. He meets us in our turmoil and invites us deeper.

Jesus Christ, Friend of Sinners

Jesus enters right into the midst of Matthew’s precarious situation. We shouldn’t underestimate the significance of Jesus’ action. Not only does he invite Matthew to “Follow me” while Matthew is still sitting at his post as a tax collector, but He also took the opportunity to have a meal with Matthew afterward—and not just with him, but with “many tax collectors and sinners” (v. 10). Such actions would have been considered scandalous at the time of Jesus. For the Jewish people of this time, meals were an incredibly intimate time. Not only this, but the Pharisees would have considered Matthew and his fellow sinners unclean. For Jesus to be in their presence for a meal would have been a radical break from the social conventions of the day. But Jesus was willing to overcome the perceptions of the people around him in

order to reach out to Matthew. He loved Matthew so much that He was willing to endure the scorn of others so that Matthew could be saved.

Jesus is willing to do the same in our lives as well. He comes to meet us in our sinfulness, and he isn't deterred by our weaknesses and failures. Too often, it is we ourselves who exclude ourselves from the Church or from God. Because of our sins, we feel like we don't belong, like people will judge us or that God would never want anything to do with us. We might even come up with creative excuses—it's just not my thing; I'm busy; I don't know anyone; they're judging me—and the like. But these are our excuses, not God's reasons.

We learn something very different from Jesus. He says explicitly, "I came not to call the righteous, but sinners" (v. 13). Later in the Gospel, he is referred to as a "friend of tax collectors and sinners" (Mt 11:19). Jesus' mission was not merely to gather a bunch of good people together to make them better. Rather, he chose to enter into the very worst of our human experience and redeem it. The people that Jesus wants to be with are sinners like us, sinners who can be saved by His redeeming love.

The question, at this point, is a very personal one: Are we willing to let Jesus into the broken places of our lives? As sinners, are we willing to approach God and ask for His mercy or will we be overcome by shame? Will we allow our past sins to ruin our future life, or will we present our sins to Jesus for forgiveness? He is willing to come to us. Will we respond?

Follow Me

Jesus' call to Matthew was a moment of restoration. Matthew was transformed from a sinful, traitorous, tax collector into one of Jesus'

closest followers. But Jesus didn't merely restore Matthew by having dinner with him and his friends. Rather, Jesus invited Matthew to "Follow me" (v. 9). This is very important for us to remember. Jesus comes to restore us, but this restoration requires that we choose to follow Jesus. It is only when we actively choose to follow Jesus that we experience the transformation that God wants to accomplish in our lives.

Further, following Jesus has a cost. Matthew had his job and his money. He couldn't stay sitting at his customs post and follow Jesus at the same time. He had to leave his old life behind. The same is true in our lives. Jesus invites us to follow him, but following Jesus requires change. Each of us has things in our lives that we don't want to give up, attachments to the things of this world that we struggle to let go of. Maybe, like Matthew, it's wealth. Maybe it's pleasure. Maybe it's a relationship that we know isn't good for us, but we just don't think we can live without. Or maybe it's the fear of leaving a life that is easy and comfortable. Will we love Jesus more these things? Or will our love for the things of the world prevent us from following Him?

Additionally, following Jesus is about much more than merely saying an occasional prayer and going to Mass on Sunday. Those things are essential, but they aren't enough. Nor can we merely say, "Yes" to Jesus once, and then move on. Following Jesus means being willing to walk with Him every step of our lives, to listen to His teachings, to accept His way of life, to go wherever He goes—in short, to have a deep, intimate friendship with him. This was His invitation to Matthew. He makes the same invitation to us.

DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

Passages: Matthew 9:9-13

Introduction

1. (Optional) Launching Question: Have you ever been invited to something (an event, activity, or social gathering) that you knew was going to be amazing, but that also made you incredibly hesitant? What was the invitation and what made you hesitate?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud: In this study, we are going to read about Jesus' call to one of His disciples, Matthew.

2. Launching Question: What do you think it would have been like to be invited by Jesus, in-person, to follow Him?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud: Let's take a minute to read Matthew's story and see what we can learn from his experience of being called by Jesus.

Read Matthew 9:9

3. What do we know about Matthew from this passage? And what does this tell us about who Matthew is?

Answer: Scripture tells us that Matthew was “sitting at the tax office” and thus, we learn that he is a tax collector.

4. What do you know about tax collectors at the time of Jesus, if anything?

Allow the group to discuss. Answer: Collecting taxes wasn't simply another profession in the time of Jesus. Tax collectors were responsible for extracting money from people, and they often did so without mercy. They stole from the people, increasing tax rates and pocketing the extra money for themselves.

As a Jewish tax collector, Matthew would have been viewed as even worse. Roman rule was a serious problem for the Jews. God had given them the Promised Land, and they were supposed to have their own king, not a Roman emperor. Rome was the enemy, and anyone who stood with Rome was an outcast, a friend of the enemy.

5. Matthew doesn't exactly begin his encounter with Jesus from a place of strength and confidence. Like Matthew, we too might not always begin well. What does Jesus' encounter with Matthew teach us about how God approaches us, even when we have things in our life of which we aren't exactly proud (i.e., a sinful past, old wounds, inadequacy, weaknesses, or failures)?

Answer: No matter how far away we might seem, nor how hopeless we might feel, nor even how irredeemable we might think ourselves to be, God is willing to approach us. It was this way for Matthew, and it can be the same for us. No matter how seriously we have sinned,

we are never beyond the reach of God. God sees more than our sins and He desires to meet us where we are.

Please read aloud: Let's take a moment to imagine what this encounter must have been like for Matthew.

On the one hand, he's probably thinking about the opportunity in front of him. The thought of no longer being a tax collector, being ashamed of himself, and feeling like a traitor must be enticing.

On the other hand, you can also imagine his hesitations: "Can I really give it up? What about my money, my career? Can I really change? Do I even want to change?"

6. How do you think Matthew felt during this moment?

Allow the group to discuss.

7. Have you ever felt the tension between being called by God to something more while also being hesitant about what it might mean for your life? If so, what is your experience with this inner conflict?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud: Let's read a little more about Jesus' encounter with Matthew:

Read Matthew 9:10-13

8. What does Jesus do after Matthew begins to follow Him? Why was this action so significant and what does it tell us about Jesus?

Answer: Jesus enters right into the midst of Matthew's precarious situation. Not only does he invite Matthew to "Follow me" while Matthew is still sitting at his post as a tax collector, but He also took the opportunity to have a meal with Matthew afterward—and not just with him, but with "many tax collectors and sinners" (v. 10). Such actions would have been considered scandalous at the time of Jesus. For the Jewish people of this time, meals were an incredibly intimate time. Not only this, but the Pharisees would have considered Matthew and his fellow sinners unclean. For Jesus to be in their presence for a meal would have been a radical break from the social conventions of the day. But Jesus was willing to overcome the perceptions of the people around him in order to reach out to Matthew. He loved Matthew so much that He was willing to endure the scorn of others so that Matthew could be saved.

9. In the Gospels, Jesus is referred to as a "friend of tax collectors and sinners" (Mt 11:19, Lk 7:34). Too often, we are tempted to exclude ourselves from the Church or from God. Because of our sins, we feel like we don't belong, like people will judge us or that God would never want anything to do with us. We might even come up with creative excuses—it's just not my thing; I'm busy; I don't know anyone; they're judging me—and the like. What does Jesus' interaction with Matthew teach us about how to address these thoughts and feelings?

Answer: We learn that Jesus wants to meet us in our sinfulness. He even says explicitly, "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (v. 13). Jesus' mission was not merely to gather a bunch of good people together to make them better. Rather, he chose to enter into the very worst of our human experience and redeem it. The people that Jesus wants to be with are sinners like us, sinners who can be saved by His redeeming love.

10. The question, at this point, is a very personal one: How do you feel about Jesus meeting you in the broken places of your life? Are you willing to let God see your struggles? Why or why not? What hesitations do you have?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud: Jesus' call to Matthew was a moment of restoration. Matthew was transformed from a sinful, traitorous, tax collector into one of Jesus' closest followers. But Jesus didn't merely restore Matthew by having dinner with him and his friends. Rather, Jesus invited Matthew to "Follow me" (v. 9). This is very important for us to remember. Jesus comes to restore us, but this restoration requires that we choose to follow Jesus. It is only when we actively choose to follow Jesus that we experience the transformation that God wants to accomplish in our lives.

11. What do you think following Jesus cost Matthew? And what did he gain by choosing to follow Jesus?

Allow the group to discuss. Answer: Matthew had probably developed a comfortable life, materially speaking. Being a tax collector gave him wealth, power, and likely some sort of peace with the Romans. The decision to follow Jesus cost him his career and his money. At the same time, He gained the joy of being freed from his sins and living in friendship with Christ.

12. Following Jesus has a cost for us too. Matthew had his job and his money. He couldn't stay sitting at his customs post and follow Jesus at the same time. He had to leave his old life behind. What do you think would have to change in your life for you to follow Jesus (or follow Him more closely)? And what do you think you would gain by doing so?

Allow the group to discuss.

(Optional) Wrap-up: Please read aloud: Following Jesus is about much more than merely saying an occasional prayer and going to Mass on Sunday. Those things are essential, but they aren't enough. Nor can we merely say, "Yes" to Jesus once, and then move on. Following Jesus means being willing to walk with Him every step of our lives, to listen to His teachings, to accept His way of life, to go wherever He goes—in short, to have a deep, intimate friendship with Him. This was His invitation to Matthew. He makes the same invitation to us.

In this Bible study, we are going to continue to talk about what it means to follow Jesus and discuss together what that might look like in our lives. Thank you for being here and I look forward to learning more with you.

