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Spiritual Conversations

UNDERSTANDING

(for your preparation as a leader)

Pages 4 - 5

DISCUSSION

(to use with your group)

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: Why Bible Study

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. 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.

NOTES

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.

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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.

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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.

NOTES



Do Not Be Anxious About Anything

UNDERSTANDING

(for your preparation as a leader)
Pages 19 - 21

DISCUSSION

(to use with your group)
Pages 23 - 27

UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

Anxiety and Happiness

This second chapter of the Ignite Bible Study proposes to participants that God's providence is sufficient to quell all anxiety and is also a true and lasting source of happiness. So many people across so many generations struggle with relentless anxiety about their lives. We worry about our careers: Have I chosen the right path? What will it take to achieve the success I hope for? We worry about our finances: Do I have enough? What if something unexpected happens? We worry about our family and friends: Will he recover from this health crisis? Will she find her place in the world? Am I being a good friend, sibling, parent, etc.? And this is just to name a few areas of worry!

Huge questions plague men and women of all ages, especially when it comes to the plans for their lives and the task of securing what they may require to achieve happiness. This study hopes to unearth the relationship that exists in our hearts between anxiety and fearing being in need. Through the words of the Gospel, we will propose to members of the group that a relationship with Jesus is the surest guarantee of all that we need, and the fruit of such confidence in Him will lead to peace and happiness in our lives.

The conversation prompted as the chapter begins offers participants the chance to reflect on their experience of happiness and anxiety. We turn to the writing of Fr. Jacques Philippe to make the connection between anxiety and being in need clear:

"The most common reason for which we could lose our sense of peace is a fear caused by certain situations which touch us personally, and in which we feel threatened, apprehensions in the face of present or future difficulties, fear of lacking something important, of not succeeding in such and such a project, and so forth. The examples are infinite.... In fact, in each instance, it concerns a good [material, moral, spiritual] ... that we desire and are afraid to lose or not acquire, or which we in fact lack. And the restlessness generated by this lack causes us to lose our peace" (Searching for and Maintaining Peace, 23).

As Fr. Jacques Philippe puts it so succinctly, we fear being in want – whether that be now or in the future. We fear never securing what we hope to secure, and we fear losing whatever we have already secured sometime in the future.

As a remedy to this fear, the group will read Matthew 6:25-34. In this passage, Jesus explicitly invites (and even commands) us not to be anxious. But he doesn't expect us to simply stop being anxious of our own accord. He tells us not to be anxious about anything because he and his heavenly Father know what we need and will give it to us:

Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add one cubit to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more

clothe you, O men of little faith? Therefore, do not be anxious about anything, saying, "What shall we eat?" or "What shall we drink?" or "What shall we wear?" For the Gentiles seek all these things; and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well. Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Let the day's own trouble be sufficient for the day.

In the discussion that follows, we want to draw out the fact that if fear of being in want leads to anxiety, then the antidote to our fear and anxiety will be in having our needs met. But unlike other philosophies or self-help strategies, Jesus isn't asking us to provide for ourselves. He, rather, is promising to provide for all our needs. Provision will bring about peace in our lives. But receiving God's providence requires that we trust, in faith, that God sees us and our needs and that He both can and wants to provide for us. This is a difficult task! And requires that we become "little", like children.

In fact, this kind of trust resembles the trust a child has in a good parent. Rather than working ever more to meet our needs, we are invited to adopt the disposition of children who rest happily and peacefully, expecting the provision of their parents to be sufficient to keep them safe, nurtured, and fulfilled.

You have the option of closing in prayer by reading Matthew 11:28-30 to the group, inviting them to rest in the Lord, whose yoke is easy and burden is light.

NOTES

UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

1. Launching Question: What is the happiest moment you have ever experienced? What was it like?
a. Optional: Or have you ever experienced complete happiness?
Allow group to discuss.
2. Do you find happiness now in the same ways or places that you once did?
Allow group to discuss.
3. What things do you imagine you would need to have or need to do to be totally happy in the future?
Allow group to discuss.
4. What kinds of things would threaten your happiness, or could take it away?
Allow group to discuss.
5. How much anxiety in your life would you say is related to a fear of losing the good things you have or, instead, a fear of never obtaining the good things you long for?
Allow group to discuss.

Please read aloud: There seems to be some kind of connection, even if we don't often explicitly realize it, between happiness and having enough or being secure and anxiety and the fear of not having enough or not being secure. A wonderful French monk, named Fr. Jacques Philippe, writes about it in this way:

"The most common reason for which we could lose our sense of peace is a fear caused by certain situations which touch us personally, and in which we feel threatened, apprehensions in the face of present or future difficulties, fear of lacking something important, of not succeeding in such and such a project, and so forth. The examples are infinite.... In fact, in each instance, it concerns a good [material, moral, spiritual] ... that we desire and are afraid to lose or not acquire, or which we in fact lack. And the restlessness generated by this lack causes us to lose our peace" (Searching for and Maintaining Peace, 23).

6. How have you experienced this fear of lacking what you need or perhaps how do you experience it even right now? What is scary about lacking what we think we need?

Allow group to discuss.

7. What kinds of things do you do, or do people around you do, to try to calm this fear?

Allow group to discuss.

Please read aloud: We could work our whole lives trying to obtain everything we desire; many (if not most!) people do. Some people achieve that and more – but does that guarantee happiness? Is happiness found in possessing enough? God actually has something to say explicitly about just this. Through Jesus's words in Matthew's Gospel we can hear God directly speak to us.

Read Matthew 6:25-34

8. What is your first reaction when Jesus tells you not to be anxious about anything?

Allow group to discuss.

9. How do Jesus's words about anxiety comfort or challenge you?

Allow group to discuss.

10. Why does Jesus tell us not to be anxious? How is Jesus's approach to anxiety different than other things you have heard?

Allow group to discuss.

Answer: The Christian perspective on happiness and anxiety is unlike other religions or philosophies. The goal is not to empty ourselves of desire (like Buddhism) or master all of our emotions so we are in control of everything, unmoved by negative experiences or emotions (like Stoicism). Rather we believe that happiness comes from fulfilling relationships and security (which crowds out anxiety) comes from the ways in which those relationships provide for our needs. Our relationship with God is ultimately the place of the deepest possible security and fulfillment.

Please read aloud (or share something similar): In this short snippet of Matthew's Gospel, I hope you can get a taste of the provision or "providence" that God promises for you. Sometimes many people may find they were happiest as children, when they had few worries – often due to the reality that someone (like their parents) was taking care of them and providing for them; they had few things to be anxious about then. Even if our childhood was not like this, we can live in this child-like peace today when we have confidence in the Fatherhood of God, who provides for us in all things. In future bible studies, we will

study the ways God has provided for humanity throughout history and continues to through the saving mission of Jesus Christ.

11. Jesus says our heavenly Father does “much more” for us than He does for the birds of the air or lilies of the field, who “neither sow nor reap nor gather” and yet plenty is provided for them. What would life be like if we believed and trusted that we have a good Father who “sees all these things” that we need? Do you trust God provides for you?

Allow group to discuss.

12. How do you walk away today knowing that the words straight from Jesus's mouth to you are ones of consolation and the promise of having enough? What impression of Him does that leave you with?

Allow group to discuss.

Please read aloud: The life of a Christian often demands regaining characteristics we naturally possessed as children. This is hard work! And life as a fully grown person is demanding, filled with many duties and worries. But Jesus speaks to us in this space, in our anxiety or in our weariness, and invites us to draw near. My invitation is that you might draw near and learn more about who he is through bible study this year.

For now, we'll close in prayer.

Optional: But as we leave here today, let's close with one more passage from St. Matthew's Gospel.

Read Matthew 11:28-30, leaving some time for quiet meditation, then close the group in a prayer.

NOTES



Something More¹

UNDERSTANDING

(for your preparation as a leader)

Pages 29 - 36

DISCUSSION

(to use with your group)

Pages 38 - 44



UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

Each of us, if we are honest with ourselves, recognizes that somewhere deep in our hearts, we have profound longings that remain unfulfilled. Even if we are generally at peace and content, the human heart cries out for something more. This is because, as human beings, made in the image and likeness of God, we were made for God himself: “The desire for God is written in the human heart, because man is created by God and for God...Only in God will he find the truth and happiness he never stops searching for” (CCC 27). And while this desire will never be totally satisfied this side of heaven, God comes to meet us, even now.

In the biblical passage we’ll look at today, Jesus has a conversation with a woman from Samaria. As we witness their encounter, we’ll discover Jesus’ response to her desire (and ours) for something more.

Give Me a Drink (John 4:5-9)

So he came to a city of Samaria, called Sychar, near the field that Jacob gave to his son Joseph. Jacob’s well was there, and so Jesus, wearied as he was with his journey, sat down beside the well. It was about the sixth hour [noon]. There came a woman of Samaria to draw water. Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink.” For his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food. The Samaritan woman said

to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.

The Gospel of John tells of a woman who, like many people today, was searching for something more in life.

The fact that Jesus spoke to this woman from Samaria would have been shocking in the first-century Jewish world. Jews and Samaritans did not get along. Imagine a big, ugly family feud, carried out over the course of dozens of generations and hundreds of years. The gist of the falling-out was this: The Samaritans and Jews both used to be part of the one Kingdom of Israel, but through civil war and exile, they were separated. As a result, they hated each other and tried not to interact with one another. Samaritans also intermarried with pagan nations and started worshiping pagan gods (2 Kgs 17:24–31). As a result, they were viewed with disdain by the Jews.

Living Water (John 4:10-15)

Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." The woman said to him, "Sir, you have nothing to draw with, and the well is deep; where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well, and drank from it himself, and his sons, and his cattle?"

Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst; the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, that I may not thirst, nor come here to draw."

The woman is looking for water from the well — i.e., ordinary water for drinking. She is understandably puzzled about how Jesus could provide the water from the well since he has "nothing to draw with, and the well is deep" (Jn 4:11). She seems a bit suspicious of his claim to be able to provide her with water.

As the conversation moves on, however, she becomes more curious, intrigued that Jesus somehow might be able to provide her a never-ending water source. She says, "Sir, give me this water..." — but she still thinks of this water as merely drinking water from the well: "...that I may not thirst, nor come here to draw" (Jn 4:15).

In the Bible, water is a symbol of new life, spiritual life and God coming to bring healing and forgiveness of sins. In Ezekiel 47, for example, waters pour out of the temple to bring life and healing to trees, fruit and fish of every kind (Ez 47:7–12). In other passages, God himself is described as a fountain of living water (Jer 2:13; 17:13). When Jesus describes himself offering "living water," he's portraying himself as the living water of God: the water that brings life, healing and forgiveness. Jesus is the one who quenches our deepest thirsts, which nothing in this world can fulfill — thirsts that ultimately are for God.

People today are thirsting for meaning and purpose. They long to be known. They yearn for acceptance, respect, friendship and love. Ultimately, even if they don't realize it, they desire a happiness which can only be found in God. To satisfy their thirsts, however, people try turning to things like success, wealth, status or sex, which can never bring lasting happiness. They ignore the deeper longings of their hearts, distracting themselves with incessant noise, activity, busyness and entertainment. They amuse themselves with social media, shows and screens. They do everything they can to avoid being alone in the silence of their hearts and the stillness of their souls. But none of

these approaches can satisfy the deepest thirsts of the human heart, which only leave us with emptiness, restlessness and a yearning for something more. As St. Augustine once said, “You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”²

“I Have No Husband” (John 4:16-19)

Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come here.” The woman answered him, “I have no husband.” Jesus said to her, “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’; for you have had five husbands, and he whom you now have is not your husband; this you said truly.” The woman said to him, “Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet.”

Like some people today, this particular woman has been seeking to fulfill her deepest desires, her thirsts, in a series of failed romantic relationships. Jesus already knows her heart-wrenching story of going from one man to the next; he also points out that the man she’s with now is not truly committed to her either: “He whom you now have is not your husband” (Jn 4:18).

Having her life story told to her by Jesus, the woman starts to see something more in him. She realizes Jesus is no ordinary man. He is the prophet sent from God (Dt 18:15).

It’s likely that this woman already was an outcast in her community. The fact that she comes to the well at “the sixth hour” (Jn 4:6) — which is noon, according to the ancient Jewish way of keeping time — is telling. This is not the normal time for women to be dragging their jugs to the well to fill them with water; that would normally be done in the early morning or evening when it was cooler. At those times, the women of the village would come together and socialize. The fact that this particular woman comes to the well at high noon, in the heat of

the day, suggests that she has been ostracized by her community and that she is too ashamed to come out when others are there.

As a result, she probably felt very alone, forgotten and abandoned. Then, think about how she might have felt to have Jesus bring her sad life out into the open. That might have only added to her feelings of embarrassment, guilt, shame, despair and worthlessness. But that’s not what happens. Jesus doesn’t condemn her. He wants to offer her a fresh start in life. He gently points out her misdirected desires and lovingly offers her a better way. His point is this: God is the only one who can fill our need for love, even though we often chase other things to fill this void. Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman symbolizes this dynamic. Jesus is revealed as the one who will fulfill the deepest thirst of our hearts: our thirst for God.

In the end, the woman seems to feel loved and cared for by Jesus. She perceives Jesus is the great prophet sent by God (Dt 18:15). And, as we will see next, she goes on to joyously tell others about Jesus.

Leaving the Jar Behind (John 4:25-30)

The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ); when he comes, he will show us all things.” Jesus said to her, “I who speak to you am he.” Just then his disciples came. They marveled that he was talking with a woman, but none said, “What do you wish?” or, “Why are you talking with her?” So the woman left her water jar, and went away into the city, and said to the people, “Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?”

Christians throughout the centuries have seen profound symbolism in the woman leaving her jar behind. She came to the well with her jar, hoping to fill it with water from the well. She leaves the well with

² Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. John K. Ryan (New York: Image, 1960), I.i.1.

something so much greater, having encountered Jesus Christ, the living water who fulfills our deepest thirsts. Leaving her jar behind symbolizes that she is giving up her old life and her pursuit of earthly things to fulfill her heart's desires.

(Optional) Supplemental Resource: Additional Background

Symbolism of the Well (Jn 4:5-6)

In the Bible, the well is a place where many of Israel's ancient leaders found their wives: Isaac's wife Rebecca (Gen 24:11); Jacob's wife Rachel (Gen 29:2) and Moses' wife Zipporah (Ex 2:15). Now Jesus meets a Samaritan woman at the well. However, instead of marriage as we usually think of it, Jesus is setting the stage for a relationship with him that is even more profound.

Symbolism of the Five Husbands (Jn 4:16-19)

The fact that the woman has been married to five men is very significant.

The Samaritans intermarried with five foreign nations. These nations introduced their own gods; the main one was Baal, which, in Hebrew, can mean "lord" or even "husband." When the Samaritans intermarried, they also accepted these foreign gods of the pagan nations around them, spurning their relationship with the one true God himself, their true husband.

Throughout the Old Testament, when the Israelites worship foreign gods, it is considered an act of covenant infidelity. The prophets even compared it to adultery. This was a fitting description because "God's relationship with Israel was likened to the kind of intimate union that exists between a husband and a wife: God was the bridegroom and Israel was the Bride. The Samaritans' unfaithfulness to the covenant

and their worshiping of other gods was, according to the prophets, similar to the infidelity of a spouse."³

But the prophets foretold that, one day, God would come back to Samaria as a bridegroom. Despite Samaria's infidelities, the Lord, the divine bridegroom, would come to his spouse again, speak to her in love and call her back into relationship. God foretold this in the Book of Hosea: "I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her ... For I will remove the names of the Ba'als from her mouth, and they shall be mentioned no more. And I will make for you a covenant ... And I will betroth you to me forever" (Hos 2:14, 17-20).

Now, centuries later, Jesus comes to this woman of Samaria and fulfills this prophecy. He is the divine bridegroom coming to reunite the Samaritan people to himself. Two facts support this: First, Jesus is explicitly called the "bridegroom" by John the Baptist (Jn 3:29-30). Second, Jesus meets her at a well, which in Scripture has important marital symbolism. Now Jesus, who already is called the "bridegroom," meets a Samaritan woman not in any ordinary location but specifically at a well.

"As we listen to their conversation, we discover that the Samaritan woman has had a heart-wrenching life—one that actually embodies the disastrous history of her nation. She has suffered through the misery of marital infidelity. Like Samaria, she had been an adulterous wife; she yoked herself to five different men, just as Samaria had yoked itself to five foreign nations and their idolatrous practices (2 Kings 17:29-34). Her life, therefore, is an icon of the covenant infidelity of Israel that Hosea had condemned.

³ Curtis Martin and Edward Sri, *The Real Story: Understanding the Big Picture of the Bible* (Hebron, KY: Dynamic Catholic, 2012), 139.

But now, Jesus tenderly approaches her as the divine bridegroom seeking out unfaithful Samaria to woo her back into covenant union, just as Hosea prophesied. He speaks gently to her and extends his loving mercy. As the ever-faithful husband, Jesus does not reject her but invites her to return to God's kingdom."⁴

God's point is this: He is the only one who can fill our need for love, yet we continue to chase other things to fill this void. Jesus and the Samaritan woman symbolize this dynamic. Jesus comes as the true husband to this Samaritan woman, the Samaritan people — and the world.

⁴ Ibid., 141 – 42.

NOTES

DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

Passages: John 4:5-19, 25-29

1. (Optional) Launching Question: Have you ever had high expectations for something – a new purchase, an event, an achievement – that ended up being less than what you hoped it would be? What was it like feeling that disappointment?

Allow the group to discuss.

2. Launching Question: Have you ever thought something would make you happy and found that it didn't? What was it and how did you respond?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud: Each of us, if we are honest with ourselves, recognizes that somewhere deep in our hearts, we have profound longings that remain unfulfilled. Even if we are generally at peace and content, the human heart cries out for something more. In the biblical passage we'll look at today, Jesus has a conversation with a woman from Samaria. As we witness their encounter, we'll discover Jesus' response to her desire (and ours) for something more.

Give Me a Drink

Read John 4:5-9

3. This biblical passage draws attention to Jesus talking to a woman of Samaria. Why do you think this is significant?

Allow the group to discuss. Answer: The fact that Jesus spoke to this woman from Samaria would have been shocking in the first-century Jewish world. Jews and Samaritans did not get along. Imagine a big, ugly family feud, carried out over the course of dozens of generations and hundreds of years. The gist of the falling-out was this: The Samaritans and Jews both used to be part of the one Kingdom of Israel, but through civil war and exile, they were separated. As a result, they hated each other and tried not to interact with one another. Samaritans also intermarried with pagan nations and started worshipping pagan gods (2 Kgs 17:24–31). As a result, they were viewed with disdain by the Jews.

Living Water

Read John 4:10-15

4. Both Jesus and the woman use the word “water,” but they seem to be talking about two different kinds of water. What kind of water is the woman looking for? What do you think Jesus might be talking about when he speaks of “living water”?

Allow the group to discuss. Answer: The woman is looking for water from the well — i.e., ordinary water for drinking. When Jesus describes himself offering “living water,” he’s portraying himself as the living water of God: the water that brings life, healing and forgiveness. Jesus

is the one who quenches our deepest thirsts, which nothing in this world can fulfill — thirsts that ultimately are for God.

5. Jesus is using the image of water to describe our deep human thirsts. What do you think people are thirsting for today? And what do people often turn toward to try to satisfy this thirst?

Allow the group to discuss.

6. How about you? What are you searching for right now? Are you longing for something? Do you have a deep desire that remains unfulfilled?

Allow the group to discuss.

“I Have No Husband”

Read John 4:16-19

7. Discuss: How has the woman been seeking to quench her deep thirst? How's that been going for her?

Answer: Like some people today, this particular woman has been seeking to fulfill her deepest desires, her thirsts, in a series of failed romantic relationships. Jesus already knows her heart-wrenching story of going from one man to the next; he also points out that the man she's with now is not truly committed to her either: “He whom you now have is not your husband” (Jn 4:18).

8. What do you think it's like to be this Samaritan woman? What do you think she's thinking and feeling at this moment?

Allow the group to discuss. Answer: It's likely that this woman already was an outcast in her community. The fact that she comes to the well at “the sixth hour” (Jn 4:6) — which is noon, according to the ancient Jewish way of keeping time — is telling. This is not the normal time for women to be dragging their jugs to the well to fill them with water; that would normally be done in the early morning or evening when it was cooler. At those times, the women of the village would come together and socialize. The fact that this particular woman comes to the well at high noon, in the heat of the day, suggests that she has been ostracized by her community and that she is too ashamed to come out when others are there. As a result, she probably felt very alone, forgotten and abandoned. Then, think about how she might have felt to have Jesus bring her sad life out into the open. That might have only added to her feelings of embarrassment, guilt, shame, despair and worthlessness.

Please read aloud: But this isn't where this woman's story ends.

Leaving the Jar Behind

Read John 4:25-26

9. Jesus reveals himself as the Messiah, God's promised savior. How is Jesus the answer to this woman's thirsts?

Allow the group to discuss. Answer: As human beings, made in the image and likeness of God, we were made for God himself: “The desire for God is written in the human heart, because man is created by God and for God...Only in God will he find the truth and happiness he never stops searching for” (CCC 27). And while this desire will never be totally satisfied this side of heaven, Jesus comes to meet us, even now, as the Living Water, Who satisfies our thirsts.

10. St. Augustine once said, “You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”⁵ Do you believe Jesus is the answer to the deep thirsts in your life? Why or why not?

Allow the group to discuss.

Please read aloud: Let’s read how the Samaritan woman’s story concludes.

Read John 4:27-29

Please read aloud: Christians throughout the centuries have seen profound symbolism in the woman leaving her jar behind. She came to the well with her jar, hoping to fill it with water from the well. She leaves the well with something so much greater, having encountered Jesus Christ, the living water who fulfills our deepest thirsts. Leaving her jar behind symbolizes that she is giving up her old life and her pursuit of earthly things to fulfill her heart’s desires.

11. Put yourself in the shoes of the Samaritan woman. What “water jugs” do you think God wants you to leave behind to make more room for those things which truly satisfy?

Allow the group to discuss.

(Optional) Supplemental Resource: Additional Background

Symbolism of the Well (Jn 4:5-6)

In the Bible, the well is a place where many of Israel’s ancient leaders found their wives: Isaac’s wife Rebecca (Gen 24:11); Jacob’s wife Rachel (Gen 29:2) and Moses’ wife Zipporah (Ex 2:15). Now Jesus meets a Samaritan woman at the well. However, instead of marriage as we

⁵ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. John K. Ryan (New York: Image, 1960), I.i.1.

usually think of it, Jesus is setting the stage for a relationship with him that is even more profound.

Symbolism of the Five Husbands (Jn 4:16–19)

The fact that the woman has been married to five men is very significant.

The Samaritans intermarried with five foreign nations. These nations introduced their own gods; the main one was Baal, which, in Hebrew, can mean “lord” or even “husband.” When the Samaritans intermarried, they also accepted these foreign gods of the pagan nations around them, spurning their relationship with the one true God himself, their true husband.

Throughout the Old Testament, when the Israelites worship foreign gods, it is considered an act of covenant infidelity. The prophets even compared it to adultery. This was a fitting description because “God’s relationship with Israel was likened to the kind of intimate union that exists between a husband and a wife: God was the bridegroom and Israel was the Bride. The Samaritans’ unfaithfulness to the covenant and their worshiping of other gods was, according to the prophets, similar to the infidelity of a spouse.”⁶

But the prophets foretold that, one day, God would come back to Samaria as a bridegroom. Despite Samaria’s infidelities, the Lord, the divine bridegroom, would come to his spouse again, speak to her in love and call her back into relationship. God foretold this in the Book of Hosea: “I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her ... For I will remove the names of the Ba’als from her mouth, and they shall be mentioned no more. And I will make for you a covenant ... And I will betroth you to me forever” (Hos 2:14, 17–20).

⁶ Curtis Martin and Edward Sri, *The Real Story: Understanding the Big Picture of the Bible* (Hebron, KY: Dynamic Catholic, 2012), 139.

Now, centuries later, Jesus comes to this woman of Samaria and fulfills this prophecy. He is the divine bridegroom coming to reunite the Samaritan people to himself. Two facts support this: First, Jesus is explicitly called the “bridegroom” by John the Baptist (Jn 3:29–30). Second, Jesus meets her at a well, which in Scripture has important marital symbolism. Now Jesus, who already is called the “bridegroom,” meets a Samaritan woman not in any ordinary location but specifically at a well.

“As we listen to their conversation, we discover that the Samaritan woman has had a heart-wrenching life—one that actually embodies the disastrous history of her nation. She has suffered through the misery of marital infidelity. Like Samaria, she had been an adulterous wife; she yoked herself to five different men, just as Samaria had yoked itself to five foreign nations and their idolatrous practices (2 Kings 17:29-34). Her life, therefore, is an icon of the covenant infidelity of Israel that Hosea had condemned.

But now, Jesus tenderly approaches her as the divine bridegroom seeking out unfaithful Samaria to woo her back into covenant union, just as Hosea prophesied. He speaks gently to her and extends his loving mercy. As the ever-faithful husband, Jesus does not reject her but invites her to return to God's kingdom."⁷

God's point is this: He is the only one who can fill our need for love, yet we continue to chase other things to fill this void. Jesus and the Samaritan woman symbolize this dynamic. Jesus comes as the true husband to this Samaritan woman, the Samaritan people — and the world

⁷ Ibid., 141 – 42.

NOTES



Who Is God?

UNDERSTANDING

(for your preparation as a leader)

Pages 47 - 56

DISCUSSION

(to use with your group)

Pages 58 - 65



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-Claus-like figure in the sky, or "a combination of Divine Butler and Cosmic Therapist" as one sociologist observed.¹ These misconceptions damage our faith, because they trick us

¹Smith, 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.

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)
- 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 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.

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.

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 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

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.

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 darknesses 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).

(Optional) Supplemental Resource: Moralistic Therapeutic Deism

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:

[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

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.

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.

NOTES

DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

Passages: John 14:8-11, 8:12, 10:11-15, 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.⁸ These statements are Jesus' way of telling us Who He is, and thus, Who God is. Here is the list of statements:

- 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)

⁸ 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).

- I am the Good Shepherd (John 10:11,14)
- 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.⁹ 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.¹⁰

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.

⁹ Ignatius Catholic Study Bible New Testament note on John 8:12.

¹⁰ 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.

Please read aloud: Let's read one more of Jesus' "I am" statements:

Read John 10:11-15

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 to 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 one 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.

(Optional) Supplemental Resource: 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 overwhelming 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.¹¹

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

Allow the group to discuss.

¹¹ 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.



The Call of Matthew

UNDERSTANDING

(for your preparation as a leader)

Pages 67 - 71

DISCUSSION

(to use with your group)

Pages 73 - 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 than 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.

NOTES

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

