

A Four-Part Conversational Bible Study That's All About Family

By Rev. Dr. Mark Meehl
Concordia University Nebraska

Lesson 1:
The Family

Lesson 2:
Honor Your Father and Mother

Lesson 3:
The Real Story of Family and
Relationships

Lesson 4:
So What?

How to Use this Study:

The author has composed this study in a conversational tone, lacking the typical “student handout” or “leader’s guide.” Hence, the study can be used in a conversational Bible class setting, or even in personal devotion and study. Use the left column as the “Monologue” of the author, either read it verbatim or use it to develop your own talk as the teacher of the class. Whenever the author makes a direct reference to scripture, consider leading students to open the Word and do likewise. The right hand column provides “Asides” to the primary monologue, interesting tidbits as if the author were seated next to you during his own lecture, sharing added insights.

Enjoy this unique study from thESource.

Lesson 1: The Family

continued

These bonds of love and trust often bring about a strong sense of commitment to the family. Family honor, family pride, and “the family takes care of its own” are some phrases that come to mind. Even family love requires commitment in order to survive. We may not always like the members of our family, but we love them...and this love pulls us through the hard times when liking them is difficult or impossible. When our little brother becomes that consummate pain in the rear; when our parents don’t understand and are too rigid and unyielding. Not only do families thrive on the natural unconditional love inherent in most family relationships, but families also thrive on a committed love. Both loves make the family an incredibly solid unit, a place of safety and forgiveness, a place where mistakes are expected and remedied, a place where the healing of hurt can occur. This is all well and good for our ideal ESource world, but the Real World and Real Families are often quite different, as many of you know from personal experience. We’ll talk more about that in the third part of this study.

ASIDE ...

[Skim the book of Ruth. You will find an excellent example of a committed family love in Ruth’s relationship with Naomi. Ruth, a non-Israelite Moabite, married Naomi’s son, who died prematurely. Naomi herself was an Israelite widow from the tribe of Judah. In Old Testament times men were the breadwinners and women ran the household and family. No husband, no won bread. Women who lost their husbands could not go out and pick up some hours at Walmart to make ends meet, but had to rely on their families to provide for them. Ruth’s family and support was in Moab, Naomi’s back in Judah. However, Ruth opts to stick with her aging mother-in-law, seeing her vow of commitment to her departed husband as a vow of commitment to his family, that is, his mother. Both women would have to rely on family charity and each other to survive. Ruth accompanied Naomi back to her extended family in Bethlehem where the family safety net sprang into action. Because of Ruth’s loyalty and commitment to Naomi, she was taken care of by Naomi’s family and married Boaz, a relative of Naomi. We find the committed love of family relationships as well as the safety net for hurting family members in this story. Note how Ruth’s book ends – Ruth 4:18-22 – as well as Matthew 1:1, 5.]

Lesson 1: The Family

continued

Families are not merely groups of people going around unconditionally loving each other, but are also places of structure and roles. Parents are given certain roles regarding their children, as are children in terms of their parents. Siblings have roles in terms of caring for each other, as do the parents. These roles and structure assist in making the family a functioning unit of loving well-supported people. Many times we see structure as limiting, as bad, something to be ignored. Yet structure makes complicated systems work. Take for example our traffic system. While not perfect, the rules of this system help traffic flow smoothly from Here to There on a daily basis. The Bible lays out many rules of the road for families. The cornerstone is the Fourth Commandment (the first one with a promise attached, as Paul notes in Eph. 6:2) – “Honor your father and mother” (Ex. 20:12). We’ll talk more about the Fourth Commandment in the next section of this study. But for now, realize that God gives children to parents as a gift (not a right!) to be treasured, treated, and raised with good judgment, love, and the belief in God central. Children have parents as a gift from God (not a right!) and should treat them with respect, being full of trust and obedience. Easy, right? Always the case, right? Kind of like always going the speed limit, or fully stopping at every stop sign (no matter how empty the streets are), or never stepping on it when the light turns yellow. These things are not easy to do, yet they provide the structure that makes the system work. God knows the importance of structure. Divinely-imposed structure and boundaries, which dominate the creation account in Genesis 1, result in the perfect world. Easy to see there. A bit harder to grasp and implement are the guidelines for family structure that God provides throughout the Bible. They’re more personal! They involve me! Nevertheless, the guidelines for family structure provide the blueprint for the building of an effective, God-centered loving family.

ASIDE ...

[Read Luther’s explanations of the Fourth Commandment in the Small and Large Catechisms to whet your appetite for the next study.]

Lesson 1: The Family

continued

Many of us belong not only to earthly families, but also to a heavenly one as well. God is the perfect parent role model, while Jesus provides the perfect role model of child. Every aspect of God as father is perfect and knows no bounds – his love, his protection, his forgiveness, his omnipresence, his caring. Every aspect of Jesus as son is perfect and knows no bounds – his love, his obedience, his trust of his father. Of course we cannot hope to attain their standards, but with the help of the Holy Spirit we can try, and try, and try. When we fail, God is there to forgive when we ask, so that we can start trying all over again. Not only that, but we can also obtain all the benefits of being children of God through faith in his saving acts. All those benefits Jesus received as God's son, including resurrection and eternal life, become ours, through faith (Romans 8:9ff)!

ASIDE...

[To see an interesting example of God's love and forgiveness, read the first three chapters of Hosea. The prophet is commanded to love a prostitute, as her husband give her everything she is trying to get by selling her body, and then forgive her and take her back after she returns to a life of prostitution, after she throws his love back in his face, i.e., dumps him. Hosea even has to pay money to get her back. Most of us know how it feels to be dumped by someone we care for deeply. How can anyone love someone so much that such a hurt can be forgiven? Impossible! No one can do that! Exactly the point – no human can, but God does. How does Hosea act like God, and we like Gomer?]

[This double family life – earthly and eternal – is reflected in an episode in the life of Jesus found in Luke 2:41-51. Events from the childhood of Jesus are rare in the Gospels, and appear only in Luke. Jesus, in Jerusalem for the pilgrimage Feast of Unleavened Bread and Passover, was placed in the awkward position of having to choose between honoring Joseph, his earthly father, or God, his heavenly one. Jesus set the pace for us and honored God. Do situations where we receive contradicting guidance from our parents and God occur in real life? Do parents command what God prohibits, or prohibit what God commands? Come up with some examples. How can parents, who are gifts from God, error in this way? What should be our guide in such cases? Another example of Jesus' relationship with his earthly and heavenly family is found in Mark 3:31-35.]

Lesson 2: Honor Your Father & Mother

Here we go again, with more of this Old Testament stuff. A commandment no less. What does this have to do with us modern (or post-modern) New Testament/saved by faith not works/Gospel-oriented citizens of the twenty-first century? Sure, we may want to stick them in courthouses and other public buildings, but the commandments... Jesus came to free us from the Law, after all. But as we've seen in the previous study, we gain important tips for living as people (children) of God in all of God's Word, including the Old Testament. We are provided with guidelines for leading God-pleasing lives there; we see how high God's expectations of us are; we see our failures; we see our need for a Savior; we see how Jesus meets the criteria laid out in the Old Testament for a savior. We can take a meaningful look at the Old Testament and reflect on our own lives as we, like the people of the Old Testament, struggle with temptations and what it means to live as a man or woman of God in the middle of a sinful world.

So...who is our father and mother? Who is buried in Grant's Tomb? The answer is obvious in both cases – our parents, by birth, marriage, or adoption, and some guy named Grant (Ulysses S. Grant, to be precise. Who is he? Google him and find out.). Parents are a gift from God. Their job is to provide a Christ-centered home and upbringing, to provide a safe, nurturing environment for their children to grow into God-fearing adults. They are placed in positions of authority over children to provide the necessary discipline, guidance, and protection that kids need as they grow up. Parents provide a safe haven for children to learn about Jesus and mature as Christians. This process starts with baptism and continues through confirmation. Parents help their children combat the urges of original sin found in all of us, moving them into the path of God. When parents carry out these functions, God is pleased. And, as we've seen already, God provides the model for what a good parent is and how parents should act toward their offspring.

ASIDE...

[Peruse Luther's comments on the Fourth Commandment in either the Small Catechism or the Large Catechism to gain a comprehensive picture what this commandment means for Christians]

ASIDE...

[Read the following passages on families: Eph. 6:1-4; Col 3:21; Prov. 22:6, 22:15.]

[The ideas of love, respect, and nurturing that are to be found in the home exist not only between parents and children, but are to be found between husband and wife, and between siblings. Examples of a supportive spouse can be found in the story of Hosea and Gomer (Hosea 1-3), but not in those of Solomon and his 700 wives and 300 concubines (1 Kgs. 11:1-4) or Samson and Delilah (Judges 16). What went wrong with the marriages of Solomon and Samson? Perhaps Prov. 31:30 and 26:11 (a favorite of Peter, too – 1 Peter 2:22) may help.]

Lesson 2: Honor Your Father & Mother

Continued

Parents keep us from hurting ourselves at times when we may not know any better, or when our instincts take hold. Don't grab the pot of boiling water on the stove, even though it sure looks fascinating. Looks good to the kid, but the parent knows better and guides/limits the choices of the child (one of the responsibilities of a parent is to know better than the child!). Child does not grab pot, fighting instinct but listening to wise parent, and is not burned. Obedience and trust at work, for the benefit of the child. Parents are thus in a position of power over their children, but must exercise their authority carefully so as not to harm children, but only help them. Parents, after all, are sinful humans too, and will make mistakes. You know this about your parents. They probably do a fine job most of the time, but every once in a while...or maybe more often than every once in a while, problems occur and they fail as parents, as you may fail as a respectful obedient child. Any arguments there? Parents are placed in the tricky position of having authority and great responsibility, but must combat the temptation to abuse that authority.

The Bible expands the definition of parent to include all who are in authority over us. Luther goes so far as to say that all other authority derives from the authority of parents. Teachers, policemen, government officials, elders within our community, all serve as parents, of sorts, carrying out the protection/guidance and other functions for us and society much as a mother or father does in a family (Rom. 13:1-7). Likewise the institutions those in authority run should provide the safe structure within which the Gospel can be proclaimed. We owe the same loyalty, obedience, and support to those in authority as we do to our parents. An interesting concept, no?

ASIDE...

[God's ideal for the family is to have a father and a mother, two parents. God created Adam and Eve in Eden, not Adam and Eve and Rachel, or Adam and Jacob and Eve, or just Adam or merely Eve. Can single parents do the job? Of course! We live in a world where the consequences of sin result in numerous single-parent households. What does the Bible have to say about them? There are several references to single parents in the Bible, and all of them seem to be doing just fine. In particular see 1 Kgs. 17:8-24 and Luke 7:11-17. The task is very hard – ask any single parent, or the children of a single parent – but can be and is many times accomplished in a God-pleasing way.]

[The book of Proverbs contains many gems that pertain to families and the relationships within them. Collections of proverbs were found throughout the ancient Near East, and were typically cast as words of wisdom passed from a father and mother (king and queen) to their son (the crown prince who will follow them as ruler). This convention is preserved in the book of Proverbs and can be seen in Prov. 1:8, 4:1ff, 6:20ff, for example. The importance of a mother's teaching is not to be underestimated (Prov. 31:1, 31:26)!]

[Read 2 Kgs. 2:23-25 and figure out how the Fourth Commandment applies. NEVER mock an old bald man, especially in the presence of wild hungry carnivores.]

Lesson 2: Honor Your Father & Mother

Continued

What does honoring mean? Again, we can go to the biblical models to determine what exactly honoring a parent means. Isaac honored his father Abraham, trusting and obeying him to the point of death (Gen. 22). Jesus trusted and obeyed his father, and it killed him. When children submit to their parents, they please God and contribute to the smooth functioning of the family, to the creation of that safe environment where all can grow as Christians. Honoring your parents, listening to and obeying them, will form you into a better person. The Gospel is to be the center of how a parent raises a child, and at the core of how a child behaves within the family. Parents are a gift from God, and are to be respected and valued accordingly, as you would with any treasured gift.

Everything said above about our earthly families and roles applies to our relationship with our heavenly father. He provides us with so much, asking only for our faith in return. Through our faith will come submission, obedience, and trust in a parent that will never be absent, never let us down, never abuse his authority over us. Through our faith in God we become members of a much larger family and become children of God (Luke 8:19-21). Through our submission by faith, we are made heirs of the kingdom of God (Rom. 8:14-17).

When all parties are doing their job in the family, the family is a safe place where unconditional love and forgiveness abound. What keeps us from fulfilling our roles as parent or child? Why do families often not work? Stay tuned for study three.

ASIDE...

[Read Dt. 21:18-21. This passage emphasizes the serious nature of honoring father and mother. Break any commandment and you die (Rom. 6:23). All of us, at one time or another, have broken this or other commandments. All of us deserve to die. However, the forgiveness of God, the new clean slate, the repeated chances to do better, to try again, are all part of the deep covenant love that God extends to us continuously. An example of how all have sinned and fallen short of God's expectations (Rom. 3:23) and deserve to die is found in John 8:1-11. Note that the old men understand what Jesus is saying before the younger ones. As a sidenote, these verses of John have an interesting history as part of his book. Consult the footnotes in a study Bible or your church teachers or leaders for the real story.]

Lesson 3: The Real Story of Family & Relationships

We've painted a nice ideal portrait of the functional loving family – cell phones, mini-vans, 2.3 children, soccer moms, chocolate chip cookies and milk, apple pie – surely the family we all have and experience on a daily basis, right? So why the disparity between the ideal the real? Obviously, we can blame sin...and would be right to do so. We can recognize certain traits of broken/disfunctional relationships and work to counter or at least hold in check the extremely basic desires/drives/human tendencies that destroy relationships. Let's take a look at some examples.

The story of Adam and Eve is an interesting study of basic human nature. God created the perfect world and placed Adam and Eve in it. Gen. 1-2 presents the picture of life as God intended. God's boundaries were established and he remained at the center of all activity in the garden. One rule was in place – don't eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Life there must have been amazing – perfect communication between Adam and Eve (absolutely no misunderstandings); no barriers between them, nothing in their pasts to hide; certain knowledge of God and daily personal communication with him (no doubting his existence); no fears of carnivores (they were able to play with the tigers!). And yet the one thing denied them was the one thing they wanted the most – the fruit of the forbidden tree, which would mean disobeying God. That was Satan's leverage, the chink in our human armor – whatever is denied we want the most (Gen. 3). Eve made her choice based on her human perceptions, ignoring God's instructions, the words of her divine parent. Read Gen. 3:6 and find out why she wanted the fruit – sounds good, no? The quick fix, right? As soon as they ate the fruit, all of their relationships changed. They hid from each other, from God, and had to fight tooth and nail with creation in order to survive (Gen. 3:7, 8, 17-19). What a change from Gen. 2! All because of what Eve and Adam wanted for themselves.

Lesson 3: The Real Story of Family & Relationships *Continued*

Consider Cain and Abel, two brothers, a story of sibling rivalry and fratricide (Gen. 4:1-16). Cain, the older brought an offering of some of his crops, nothing special. Abel, the younger, brought an offering of the first-born of his flock with the fat parts (the best of the best in the ancient world, showing complete the faithfulness and dedication of the offerer; Hebrews 11:4). God accepted Abel's sacrifice, and rejected that of Cain. Cain was jealous of his little brother..."I want my offering to be accepted. Now God likes him more than me even though I'm the first-born"...and so he killed his brother, assuring his primacy within the family, world, and in God's eyes. Or so he thought.

The family of Isaac and Rebekah was another one torn apart by rivalries (read Gen. 25:21-28:5). Isaac and Rebekah, with the help of God, had twins, two boys, Esau (the older) and Jacob. When Rebekah was pregnant she found out from God that, in spite of the birth order, Jacob would one day be the head of the household, and not Esau, the first-born (Gen. 25:22-23). Rather than wait for this to play out over time in God's way, Rebekah had Jacob cheat Esau out of his blessing by deceiving the elderly blind Isaac, and even lying to his father's face. "I want this for my son immediately"..."God's timing? I want the blessing for me right away, in my time. Now." As for Esau, he believed the blessing was his by custom and birth order, and not subject to Rebekah's alleged communications with God. Selfishness and deceit ripped the family apart; their actions were based on their own needs and wants. Note the results – Esau swore he would kill Jacob if he ever caught him (Gen. 27:41). Jacob, knowing Esau was a superb hunter (Gen. 25:27), found this an opportune time to look for a wife several hundred miles from his brother and headed for the tent of Uncle Laban.

ASIDE...

[In Gen. 27 Isaac is portrayed as an old blind man who is about to die...at least that's how he feels (Gen. 27:2). His apparent imminent death lends a sense of urgency to the giving of the blessing to the proper son. However, he was still alive when Jacob returned from his time with Laban (Gen. 35:27-29). How many years later was that? See Gen. 31:38 for a clue.]

Lesson 3: The Real Story of Family & Relationships *Continued*

What disrupts all of these relationships? Me, I, ego, self, looking out for number one - that's what dooms the ties between all these people. Selfishness, putting self before all else, is one of the root causes of broken relationships and sin. Take example number one, Eve. Eve decides what is best for her, in spite of God having told her otherwise. She makes the decision based on what she thinks. The fruit is given three desirable characteristics, which in the Old Testament indicates that it represents the totality of desire. The fruit was good for food, a delight to the eyes, and would make her wise – everything she wanted! Instantly! So she ate. No discussion with Adam, no discussion with God. Looks good to me, I want, I eat. I make the decision based on what I, a fallen flawed finite creature want. The advice and guidance of the all-knowing eternal Creator of the Universe/Divine Parent can be ignored for now.

ASIDE...

[Temptation always looks good, which is why actions are so tempting to us! Satan promises great things as he tempts, and he often delivers. But he never tells the whole story. Notice with Eve, Satan did not lie. She did not die; she became like God and knew good from evil (Gen. 3:4ff). The immediate consequences are pleasing, but the long-term damage is nearly irreparable. Later, when he tempted Jesus, Satan even quoted the Old Testament (Mt. 4:5-6)! Satan's goal is to get us to focus on ourselves, make ourselves our top priority, and not God. If Satan accomplishes that, he has won.]

[How did selfishness play a role in hurting the other relationships described? How could each situation, including Eve's, have been saved?]

Lesson 3: The Real Story of Family & Relationships *Continued*

This promotion of self, selfishness, is the antithesis of love. As we've stated before, the family structure is founded on love, a complete sacrifice of self for the good of the family. Love is selfless and giving, not selfish and taking. Of course the ultimate model for selfless love is Jesus, the complete sacrifice of self for those he loves – all humanity. God asks the same from us in return, in our relationship with him (Rom 12:1). Our lives should be theocentric (God-centered), not egocentric (self-centered). Selflessness should guide our relationships with others as well. Notice what mends the relationships that we've talked about above. Jacob is reconciled with his father when Isaac realizes that God's wishes in the question of the blessing and inheritance, and not his own, are the most important (Gen. 28:1ff). Jacob's submission and obedience to God (he stopped saying no to God), encouraged by his wives and life circumstances, opened the door for God to mend their relationship (Gen. 31:3, 14-16). Sacrifice of selfish desires on the behalf of Jacob and Esau allowed their relationship to heal (Gen. 33:9-12).

Does this work in the outside-the-Bible world? Think of a time when you have been upset with a family member or friend. "I'm not going to apologize...I always apologize first...they hurt me...it's their fault. Let them make the first move" Be selfless, forgiving, and apologize. Sacrifice ego and self. Relationship mended? Mended when the others put the good or existence of the relationship over pride (selfish to selfless) and apologized to you? This sacrifice of self doesn't work in every case, but provides a great chance to repair broken relationships. It may be like a country western song played backwards – you get your job back, your spouse returns and never cheats on you again, your dog comes home, and your pick-up truck gets fixed. This works with God and us also. We believe the Gospel, sacrifice our selfish wants, needs, and desires

ASIDE ...

[We sometimes find ourselves in unhealthy relationships. This sacrifice of self should be done only in relationships where the other party is working for your good and returns that same healthy unconditional love that you extend. The same rule that we laid down for life in the family extends to relationships outside the family. Do only what God commands, and avoid what God prohibits. If a person asks you to do what God says not to, or stops you from doing what God commands, the relationship needs some serious re-evaluation and may prove unhealthy for you.]

Lesson 3:
The Real Story of Family &
Relationships *Continued*

to live as God wants us to, as his children, as the Holy Spirit works in us. The forgiveness of sins washes over us and the perfection of Jesus become ours. This relationship, the most important in our lives, restored by the Creator of the Universe!

Lesson 4: So What?

Okay...we've gone on for three lessons looking at various aspects of the family. Should be a place of unconditional love and security, but often is not. Parents and children are gifts from God and have their unique roles in the family. Selfishness hurts relationships. God and Jesus are our role models in almost everything. If I'm a ticked off elder, I can summon, in righteous anger, omnivorous predators who will rend my enemies limb from limb. We know all these things but have a lot of trouble taking them to heart, applying them.

The hardest concept to grasp but also the most simple, oddly enough, concerns the power of the Gospel. The saving message of Jesus Christ changes lives and relationships. As the Gospel works within us, we are transformed from self-centered creatures to God-centered selfless creatures (Rom. 12:1-2). Priorities are rearranged. "What can they do for me?" becomes "What can I do for them?" This selfless love empowered by the Gospel shapes all of our relationships. As parents, we act for the best of our children, even though the best course for the child may be the hardest course for the parent. Disciplining children is hard, takes a lot of work, and often is painful to the discipliner as well as the disciplinee (Prov. 22:6, 15). But this discipline is necessary to make a stronger better more mature child. God does this with us as his children, imposing spiritual discipline on us that is often painful – to God and to us! – but which strengthens our faith and reliance on God.

ASIDE ...

[Paul went through a tremendous amount of suffering in the self-sacrifice of his life on behalf of the Gospel. Read 2 Cor. 11:23-33 and list some of his tribulations. Through all these hardships, Paul kept two things foremost in his mind. First, in the grand scheme of things, people hearing the Gospel is much more important than his personal comfort (Rom. 8:18, 10:14-17; 2 Tim. 2:8-10). Second, the hardships that he went through on behalf of the Gospel made him a stronger more faithful Christian, were spiritual discipline (Rom. 5:3-5; 2 Cor. 1:8-9, 12:10). Traumas in life are the result of sin in our fallen world. While incredibly painful at the time, they often bring us spiritual maturity and reliance on God (read the story of Joseph in Gen. 37, 39ff). We realize that we can't handle the grief, the pain, and the suffering ourselves, and are forced to lean on God for strength and comfort. Suffering then is also a form of spiritual discipline, unwanted and unasked for, but in the long term beneficial for our lives as Christians.]

Lesson 4: So What?

Continued

As children, the power of the Gospel empowers us to be trusting and obedient to our parents. To believe that our parents may know what is best for us even though they seem so out of touch and just plain ignorant of what and why things are important to us is hard to do. These same problems pop up in our relationship with our divine parent – why does God say no to things that seem so natural, that everyone else is doing without hurting anyone, that really push us to the limits of obedience? The key factor of trust must be there. Do you trust that there is a reason God commands certain things and prohibits others? Do you trust that, even though you may not see it, there is some rhyme and reason behind God’s instructions to us about life, that the creator of light (particle and wave!) may know something that we don’t about the human condition? God asks us to trust him, and then in turn to trust the parents that he has given us so that we may not hurt ourselves, and may grow to be healthy Christ-centered adults. After all, it’s not about what I want to do (egocentric), but what God wants me to do (selfless self-sacrifice).

Now comes the hard part...many of us are running around in the throes of the dating life, trying, in a certain way, to start our own family (or at least put in place the foundation for one). The topic of dating goes way beyond the scope of this wrap-up study, but needs to be mentioned at least in passing. As we read over and over again in Scripture, the cornerstone of a healthy family is a marriage firmly rooted in the Gospel. How do we get there? Maybe you don’t want to go there yet! There is quite a leap between dating in high school and college and a long-term committed relationship, but certain principles regarding each deserve mention. A lot of dating is driven by physical attraction (not a bad factor, but not the only factor). Since we are human it is only natural that we tend to be affected most deeply by what we see and hear. However, what we see and hear can mislead, may not be a true picture of what a person is like. Also, what attracts you physically in a person

ASIDE ...

[Skim the book of Job, focusing on chapters 1-2 and 38-42. Job had a great deal of adversity in life, and in fact may be the world’s most famous sufferer. He was once the richest, most blessed family man around, but in a series of incredible catastrophes, he lost everything, keeping only his wife and his life. After chapters of theological discussion with his friends, Job eventually challenged God, wondering how God could have the nerve to deal with him in this way. “Why me? I’m a believer, but my life stinks. Why did you do this to me, God?” God answered Job and reoriented Job’s thinking. Job had approached his situation from the egocentric point of view. God stated quite clearly that the universe does not revolve around Job, but around God. If Job could know what God knows, the universe and his situation would make sense. The problem is that Job would never be able to understand much of God’s creation, let alone the entity that made everything! Trust in the all-knowing creator of the universe becomes the key point.]

ASIDE ...

[The choice of Saul and then David as king of Israel provides an excellent example of choosing based on physical appearance. Saul was chosen by God to be king because he was what the people would have chosen for themselves. He is picked to be king because he looked like one (1 Sam. 9:1-2). However, as the story plays out, we see that Saul was unfit to be king based on factors that were not apparent in a physical appraisal of him – spiritual and mental unworthiness (1 Sam. 13, 15, and 18:10-11). But he sure looked good as king! David, on the other hand, was not physically impressive, but had some deep spiritual component that, in spite of his many missteps in life, made him a solid man of God and a worthy king (1 Sam. 16:7; 13:14). Choose wisely!]

Lesson 4: So What?

Continued

today will not be there tomorrow. Physically people change a great deal over time – the buff in-shape hottie of today may be the bloated potato chip crunching beer swilling couch potato of tomorrow. When the physical beauty goes, so will the relationship if based only on the physical. The trick is to take into account physical appearance as well as the personality and deeper values that a person holds, the parts of a person that will not change over time – in particular, their faith in God (Prov. 31:30).

Here again we run into the easy way out and the harder way of God. It's easy to be attracted to good-looking people. That certain look of someone's body or face can knock us out, drive us crazy, obsess us so that we write their name over and over in our notebooks or diaries, or think about them constantly. Physical attraction is powerful stuff, no doubt. Being with someone physically attractive also is good for our ego..."This gorgeous person is with me!" But...God cautions us about this... acting purely on feelings or ego can lead to disaster. Again, God asks us to take the hard road, to not give in to pure physical wants or egotistical needs, but to go beyond these and consider who the person is and what they stand for. What will be there when the physical fades? This is hard to do, especially when everything (songs, movies, TV) around us says to go for it, the physical clicking is all you need. That is love. God's view of love is quite different, and requires the commitment that will get you through the times when you don't like each other, that will take you beyond the years when bodies and faces grow old.

ASIDE ...

[Most of the marriages in the Old Testament were arranged by families or their representatives on behalf of the spouses. No dating. List some pros and cons of arranged marriages. Trust in family members to make decisions in your best interests was key in this system! Read Gen. 24. Isaac and Rebekah had an arranged marriage that lasted until they died. Why do you think their marriage lasted? The servant of Abraham took ten camel loads of goods with him as he began his bride search. The wealth carried by the camels represented the bride price, which would go to the bride when she consented to marry this guy Isaac sight unseen. The wealth indicated that Isaac was serious about the marriage, that he could take care of a wife and children, and served as an insurance policy for the bride. If Isaac backed out of the deal or died, the camels and goods would stay with Rebekah. The bride price custom continues to be followed in many countries of the Middle East today.]

ASIDE ...

[Read 2 Sam. 13:1-29. An excellent example of someone being misled by powerful real feelings is found in the story of Amnon and Tamar. Amnon undoubtedly was being twisted around by very real feelings for Tamar, but were those feelings love? What were they? Once his physical needs were met, Amnon feelings left him. How could Amnon have figured out if his feelings were love or not? We can find ourselves in the same position of feeling strongly about someone. Are our feelings selfish (what can they do for me?) or selfless (what can I do for them?)? How can we figure out what our feelings mean?]

[C.S. Lewis, in his typically engaging manner, writes about committed love and Christian marriage in Book III, chapter 6 of Mere Christianity. I highly recommend reading this section and indeed the whole book.]

Lesson 4: So What?

Continued

In spite of what is said here and in your Bible study, we will date because we find someone physically attractive. We'll go out with people we don't expect to marry (and that's okay), we'll wrestle both with what God wants us to do and what we want to do with our physical and emotional needs and desires. But as we do this, take the time to step back and ask yourself "Is this someone I could spend the rest of my life with, through thick and thin, as a bloated couch potato?" If no, why not? If yes, why? Find out what you are looking for in a spouse and then look for that as you date. And, as always, do the hard thing and present your bodies, no matter where you are or what you may want to be doing, as living sacrifices to God...this is your act of spiritual worship (Rom. 12:1-2). Your body is not yours, but God's, bought for a price (1 Cor. 6:19-20). Difficult to keep in mind when on a hot date? Of course. But necessary for us as children of God, living a disciplined selfless, not selfish, life. Thank God that he is a forgiving God!

The ultimate goal is for the Gospel to transform all of our relationships into ones founded on selfless committed love, modeled on the love Jesus showed for us and for God the Father. As the Gospel works its way into all the nooks and crannies of our lives, we begin acting as God's children without even thinking WWJD. The Gospel so permeates our lives and becomes such an essential part of who we are that we don't even know we are living it out. Read Matthew 25:31-46, where the sheep are separated from the goats on judgment day. When Jesus confronts the sheep and goats with their God-pleasing acts of selflessness or the lack thereof, both sheep and goats give the same answer! The Gospel so permeated the lives of the sheep that they had no idea they were acting in any special, unique godly way. They lived the Gospel unconsciously. The goats were looking to the law to save them..."If we would have been told what we were supposed to do, we would have done it." The Gospel had not transformed them. Spend time in the Word, in prayer, in fellowship, in Bible Study, in worship. Give the Holy Spirit the

chance to transform your life into one permeated by the Gospel, where relationships are selfless, where your actions radiate the light of Jesus (Is. 58:7-8, 60:1-3; Mt. 5:14-16), where you will be a model child of God and member of your earthly family.

thESource is published on the Web by LCMS District and Congregational Services/Youth Ministry. The Lutheran Church/Missouri Synod, 1333 S. Kirkwood Road, St. Louis, MO 63122-7295; 1-800-248-1930; www.lcms.org. Editor: Gretchen M. Jameson. This study may be reproduced.