

Zapping Zip-Code Christianity

Jesus as Barrier-Buster: A Bible Study

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Purpose of This Study

The purpose of this study is to help participants better understand and appreciate how Jesus reached out to people of various demographics during his ministry on earth, breaking down barriers and ignoring “demographically correct” expectations in order to share his healing love and forgiving grace with *everyone* in need. As stated in the introduction (see below), “Our goal is to grow in our understanding and appreciation of Christ’s love for *all* people, and to learn from Jesus how to model this love in our own personal lives and relationships and in our joint efforts to be ‘barrier-busters’ for Christ.”

Sessions and Primary Bible Texts

Session One: Breaking Through the Culture Barrier (John 4:1-29)

Session Two: Reaching Across Social and Economic Barriers (John 5:1-17)

Session Three: Bridging the Generational Barrier (Assorted Texts)

Session Four: Confronting Lifestyle Barriers (Luke 7:36-50)

Leader’s Guide

Three vital keys to leading any Bible study effectively (with the help of God’s Spirit) are prayer, preparation and personalization.

Don’t skip the first one or take it for granted: PRAY! Pray for yourself—that God will give you the insight, confidence, and sensitivity you need to help participants grasp the amazing, life-changing truths of God’s Word that this study seeks to convey. Pray for participants before, during, and after the study, that God would open their hearts and minds to grasp these truths by the power of his Spirit and be challenged and transformed by them. Pray for members of your congregation, that they too would be impacted by the witness of the young people participating in this study as they catch the vision of what it means to be “barrier-busters” for Christ. Also pray for the people in your community who, by God’s grace, may be touched by this study as participants and congregational members are moved by God’s Spirit to reach out with renewed zeal to various demographic groups in your area and beyond.

Don’t skip the second key either, or take it for granted: PREPARE! Each of the studies contains quite a bit of helpful background and commentary on the Bible passages under discussion, but it is assumed that the leader will spend time reading and reflecting on these texts beforehand with the help of additional resources (such as a Concordia Self-Study Bible and/or other commentaries). Several of the studies contain “Bible quizzes” on the primary Scripture texts. In most cases, the answers are fairly obvious, but they are also provided at the end of the session. Based on your own study of the primary and secondary texts, you will want to be ready to offer additional insights

and to answer questions (as best you can) that may arise in class. Try not to get bogged down in tangential details, however; keep the focus on the primary purpose of the study, which is to show how determined Jesus was to share his love and care with people of various (and very different!) demographic groups.

Last but not least, don't be afraid to PERSONALIZE these studies. You know much better than the writer of this study the specific needs, background, and knowledge of those who will be participating, and how the truths this study seeks to convey might best be applied in the context of your own group, congregation and/or community. Each session contains more material than can probably be handled comfortably and meaningfully in a time slot of 50-60 minutes. As you work through each session beforehand, therefore, highlight points, sections and Bible passages that are most meaningful to you personally and that you think would be most meaningful to the group. You may choose not to look up all the Bible passages listed in a given section, but instead to focus on one or two that seem especially pertinent to issues most relevant to your group, congregation or community. The same is true for suggestions related to "extra-curricular" assignments or activities. You may well have ideas of your own that would be better than those suggested in your study for applying certain truths in practical ways where you live, work and worship. Be creative in adapting this study to the needs and interest of those who will be participating in it.

Since not all young people may be familiar with the term or concept of "demographics," an "Introduction" has been provided to help participants get a feel for what this study is all about. It is strongly suggested that this Introduction be used as a part of the Bible study itself, either as a lead-in to Session One or as an introductory session of its own. If you have access to the internet in the location where the study takes place, consider spending some time as a group browsing the site referred to in the Introduction (and/or similar sites) for information about the specific demographics of your community. (This information could also be downloaded beforehand and distributed to the group.) This will not only help members of the group get a better grasp of what "demographics" is all about, it will also help them understand how the truths shared later in the study apply to the particular community in which they live. End each study the way you started—in prayer. Ask God to help those involved in the study to grasp more fully and deeply the seeking and welcoming love of Christ for them and for all people, and to reflect that love in their own lives and witness for Christ.

Introduction: Birds of a Feather Flock Together (But is That a Good Thing?)

Try Clicking Your Zip!

Sit down at your computer. Log on to MelissaDATA.com. Click on “ZIP demographics.” Punch in your zip code. What pops up on the screen? Just about everything you’d ever want to know (and probably more!) about the kind of people who live in your neighborhood.

My zip code, for example (in a semi-rural area of southeastern Missouri), has a total population of 13,864. 6,856 are males and 7,008 are females (good news, I guess, for single guys). In case anybody’s interested (and somebody is—keep reading), there are 345 people between the ages of 15 and 17. 82 of the people running around in my neck of the woods (but probably not running too fast) are between the ages of 80 and 84. There are 468 females under the age of 5, and 39 males over the age of 85. Most folks are white, but there is a smattering of diversity—including 153 African-Americans, 121 Latinos or Hispanics, 30 American Indians, 20 Asians, and 4 Pacific Islanders.

The average family size in my zip is 3.10 people (although rarely do you see that 1/10th of a person walking around anywhere). 71% of folks own their own home; 29% pay rent. The average income is \$38,450. In households within the city limits of the largest town, 339 women are raising a family without a husband, 164 couples are living together outside of marriage, and 220 people have settled into “group quarters” (I’m not sure what that means—and I’m not sure I want to know).

Much of this info (called *demographics*) is available for free at places like MelissaDATA.com. But businesses and marketing gurus pay big bucks for even more detailed data about the habits and hobbies, likes and dislikes, tastes and tendencies of people in a given community. As one expert explains:

“Marketers use demographic ‘cluster systems’ to reach new customers, choose new business locations, target direct mail, and do other tasks.” Cluster systems “are based on the premise that birds of a feather tend to flock together. Look at your own neighborhood. The homes and cars are probably of similar size and value. If you could look inside the mailboxes and cupboards, you would probably find many of the same magazines and cereals” (Susan Mitchell, “Birds of a Feather,” *American Demographics* February 1995). Churches, too, often find demographic data useful—not for “targeting consumers” in the same way businesses do, but for learning more about the make-up of the communities they serve, and how they can most effectively reach out to the people who live in those communities.

Can a Zip Become a Clique?

It’s pretty natural for people with similar backgrounds, tastes, and goals to “hang out” together and even to settle into certain kinds of communities. Birds of a feather simply do flock together. That’s just the way it is, and there’s nothing wrong with that...or is there? It’s not wrong to form attachments to people who are like us and share our interests. It *is* wrong to slip into a “group mentality” that (whether deliberately or not) looks down on others who are not part of “our crowd” and excludes them from the “inner circle” of people who are privileged to receive our attention, concern and affection. But that’s not something that *we* do...or is it?

As Christians, we have a special, God-given responsibility (and a special, Spirit-given ability) to share God's love equally with all people, no matter what "zip code" they belong to. Speaking to Christians who were inclined to give "special treatment" to the well-dressed and wealthy in their community, James says: "My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes...have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?" "If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, 'Love your neighbor as yourself,' you are doing right. But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers." (James 2:1; 3-4; 8-9; cf. 1 Tim. 5:21)

The truth is that by James' standards—and by God's standards—we are all "discriminators" and "lawbreakers." We have all shown favoritism to others based on outward appearances and our own personal preferences (and we still do). The good news is that God, in sending his Son, showed absolutely no favoritism at all. Jesus came to save and forgive *everyone*: Asians, Caucasians, and Iranians; homeless hobos and Hollywood hotshots; jocks, computer nerds, and red necks; single dads and waitress moms; teenagers with headphones, toddlers with xylophones, and teachers with hearing aids. Scripture says plainly and repeatedly: "God does not show favoritism, but accepts people from every nation who fear him and do what is right" (Acts 10:34-35; see also Rom. 2:11 and Eph. 6:9).

With the help of God's Spirit, and armed with the assurance that we are saved by God's grace in Christ alone, we too can "do what is right" in God's eyes. Jesus forgives our sins of favoritism, and he himself shows us how to "zap zip-code Christianity" by reaching out with God's love and God's care to all people. "The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost"—and that includes *everyone* (Luke 19:10; ESV). Jesus "came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God" (John 1:11-12; ESV). "When I am lifted up from the earth," said Jesus, I "will draw *all people* to myself" (John 12:32; ESV). The Gospels portray Jesus not only as a loving Lord and compassionate Savior, but also as a bold and courageous Barrier-Breaker and "Cluster-Buster"—one who refused to abide by the stifling and demeaning "demographic correctness" of his day. In this Bible Study, we'll look at four different ways that Jesus broke through the demographic borders and boundaries of his day to share God's love with others. Our goal is to grow in our understanding and appreciation of Christ's love for *all* people, and to learn from Jesus how to model this love in our own personal lives and relationships and in our joint efforts to be "barrier-busters" for Christ.

Session One: Breaking Through the Culture Barrier

The Woman from *Where?*

Let's start this session by going straight to Scripture. Read John's account of Jesus' encounter with a Samaritan woman in John 4:1-29. (Since this story is rather lengthy, you might want to take turns reading.)

In this story we see Jesus breaking through several demographic barriers of his day. First, the person he chats with here is (horror of horrors!) a *woman*. As strange as it may sound to our 21st century American ears, it was considered shameful and inappropriate for a Jewish man in Jesus' day to carry on a conversation with a woman in public. Because women were considered inferior to men, Jewish rabbis insisted that "he who talks with a woman brings evil upon himself." Men were not even supposed to greet a woman in public. (In some Middle Eastern countries today, this is still pretty much standard practice.) Look again at John 4:27. How did the disciples react to Jesus' encounter with this woman?

Second, the woman Jesus speaks with in John 4 is a woman of questionable moral and spiritual character. What do we learn from Jesus' words about her past history and present lifestyle? (See John 4:17-18; we'll talk more about this issue in Session Four.)

All this is bad enough—and we haven't even gotten to the main "stumbling block" singled out by John in this story. Jesus' conversation partner in John 4 is a *woman*—STRIKE ONE! She is a *sinful* woman—STRIKE TWO! But the third (and fatal) strike against her is that she is a *Samaritan* woman—someone belonging to an entirely different (and to most Jews of Jesus' day, totally unacceptable) cultural and religious "demographic." What do we learn from John 4:9 about the relationship between Jews and Samaritans?

So What's the Big Problem?

The Bible doesn't tell us a whole lot about *why* the Jews so deeply despised the Samaritans (and vice-versa), but there are a few facts that we can glean from Scripture and from history. Choose what you think are the right answers from the list below. (See the end of this session for the correct answers—don't peek!)

- 1) Unlike the Jews, the Samaritans accepted only the first five books of the Old Testament as their Bible.
- 2) The Samaritans spoke with a strange and annoying Southern drawl.
- 3) A hundred years or so ago, the Jews had burned down the temple that the Samaritans worked so hard and long to build.
- 4) The Samaritans were a "mixed race" made up of people from a variety of ethnic backgrounds.
- 5) The Samaritans had short legs, long toes, and pointy ears.

- 6) The Samaritans didn't wear the right kind of sandals.
- 7) The Samaritans didn't wear the right brand of deodorant.
- 8) The Samaritans refused to worship at the Jewish capital of Jerusalem but insisted on worshipping at their own "holy mountain."
- 9) The Samaritans mixed way too much garlic with their olive oil.
- 10) The Samaritans claimed to worship the same God as the Jews, but didn't follow many of the Jewish laws and customs (like laws about inter-marriage and "cleanliness" rituals).

What Was Jesus *Thinking* (and Doing)?

Let's focus in on just a few details of this story. Who begins the conversation in John 4—Jesus or the woman? (See John 4:7)

Why do you think Jesus was so determined to talk with this woman, despite the risk of being judged, misunderstood or looked down upon by his fellow-Jews? (See John 4:10, 13, 26)

What happened as a result of Jesus' willingness to break through this demographic barrier and show concern for this woman's spiritual welfare? (See John 4:28-30)

Can you think of other examples from the Gospels when Jesus broke through cultural barriers to show and share the truth of God's love for all people? (See, e.g., Matt. 15:21-28; Luke 7: 1-10; Luke 10:25-37; John 12:20-26)

What Am *I* Thinking (and Doing)?

Now it's time for some honest conversation of your own. Are there kids in your school or on your block or in your neighborhood with whom you don't normally associate—in part because they belong to a different ethnic or cultural "group" than you do? Would it be risky for you to break through the cultural barrier by seeking to befriend someone from one these groups—and if so, in what ways?

Now share at least one positive encounter you've had with someone of a different cultural or ethnic background. How did it happen? What did you learn from it? Do you think the other person learned anything from it? Was there an opportunity to talk about similar or different religious beliefs?

What do the following passages teach us about the need to show love and respect for *all* people, despite whatever cultural, racial or ethnic differences may exist?

Leviticus 19:33-34

Acts 17:24-28

Galatians 6:10

1 Peter 2:17

How Do Things Look Where You Live and Worship?

The cultural demographics of cities and communities throughout our country are undergoing significant changes. In some places, new ethnic communities are taking shape where they had never existed before. Do you see these kinds of changes taking place in your community? From your perspective, how is your community reacting to these changes? Is your congregation reacting to these changes—and if so, how?

If Jesus had come to save, love, and forgive only those belonging to his own (Jewish) ethnic and cultural circle, where would that leave those of us who are non-Jews (Gentiles)? What Good News does Scripture have for us in this regard? (See John 1:10-13; John 3:16-17) What do the following passages teach us about God’s love for all people in Christ: Rom. 3:22-24; Acts 10:34-38; 1 Tim. 2:3-4. What does 2 Cor. 5:16-19 say about the awesome responsibility we have as those who have been reconciled to God through faith in Christ? According to the book of Revelation, how culturally diverse will heaven be? (See Rev. 7:9)

As a group, do an informal and unscientific demographic analysis of your congregation from an ethnic and cultural perspective. How culturally diverse is your congregation? How closely do the cultural demographics of your congregation reflect the demographics of your community? What could your congregation do to reach out more effectively and specifically to cultural groups in your community that are not well-represented in your congregation? What could *you* do—as individuals and as a group—to be better “ambassadors for Christ” to those outside of your own ethnic, cultural, or religious demographic?

Calling All Barrier-Busters

Using the thought-starters offered below, develop a list of possible action plans for sharing God’s love in Christ with others by breaking through cultural barriers that exist in your own community and beyond.

1. Make it a point to have lunch with someone at school whom you don’t know very well and who belongs to a different ethnic or cultural demographic than you do. Report back and share your experience with the group. Was it a positive or negative experience? In what way(s)?
2. Talk to your parents about the possibility of hosting an exchange student for a year or summer or month. Would they be open to this experience? Would *you* be willing to make some sacrifices to make this possible?
3. Talk with your teacher or youth group leader about the possibility of participating in a cross-cultural servant event or mission trip. Would you be willing to help raise support to make this happen?
4. Invite your pastor to meet with your group to talk about what your congregation is doing (or

could be doing) to respond to the challenges and opportunities that exist within your own community for cross-cultural mission and ministry. Ask: how can *we* help support or even spearhead such an effort?

5. Ask your teacher or youth group leader to search for resources or Bible studies (check out www.cph.org) that deal with the differences between the Christian faith and another world religion like Islam or Buddhism. Consider spending several weeks learning more about one of these religions (especially one that has adherents in your community) and talking about possible ways to witness to people who belong to this religious demographic.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.
9. (Keep the list going—and follow through on it!)

Answers to Quiz on “So What’s the Big Problem:” 1, 3, 4, 8 and 10 are correct; the others are not!

Session Two: Reaching Across Social and Economic Barriers

Castes, Cliques and Classes

Some countries and cultures around the world (e.g., Hinduism in India) still operate on the basis of a “caste system.” This is a rigid division of society into separate groups based on differences in wealth, inherited rank or privilege, occupation, and so on. A person does not choose which caste they want to belong to; he or she is simply born into it. And it is virtually impossible to move from one caste to another—you are “stuck” with whatever social and economic status you inherited, and this is passed on down from one generation to the next. Raise your hand high if you would like to live in a caste society (keep those hands up there!). What if you could belong to the richest, most privileged and advantaged group in the system—would you go for it under those circumstances?

Even though we do not live in a country that functions on the basis of a caste system, most of us are surrounded by people from a wide variety of social “classes” and economic levels. Whether deliberately or not, we often create (or at least tolerate) our own kind of social “castes” or “cliques” based on how people dress or where they live or what kind of car they drive. Most people look for opportunities to move *up* the social ladder—few of us would pass up the chance to mingle with the “rich and famous” in our world! On the other hand, we tend to ignore or exclude those who are considered to be socially and economically inferior to us—after all, there’s nothing to “gain” from such relationships, and there may be a whole lot to lose (like our reputation and our own social standing).

The world that Jesus lived in was also marked by clear social and economic boundaries and barriers. The rich and respectable in society normally did not associate with those who were poor, disabled, or disadvantaged. Many believed that such people were actually cursed by God—that they were being punished by him for some personal or family sin. In this session we’re going to take a look at one of many stories in the Bible that show Jesus’ determination to break through the social and economic barriers of his day and reach out in love and mercy to the disadvantaged and underprivileged. Our primary Scripture lesson for this study is John 5:1-17. Begin by reading this moving and fascinating story of the healing at the pool of Bethesda.

Touched By an Angel? (Or By Someone Even Greater?)

In Jesus’ day, people who were chronically ill, severely impaired, or permanently disabled were among the most marginalized in society. They generally lived in horrible, hopeless poverty and were excluded and isolated from the rest of society. Look again at verse 5—how long had this man been in this disabled condition? Do you know anyone who has had to deal with this kind of long-term illness or disability? How well are they coping with this challenge? Is there anything you could do (or have done) to ease their burden or lift their spirits?

Do the math (38 years x 365 days x 24 hours x 60 minutes): for 13,870 days, or 332,880 hours, or nearly 20 *million* minutes, this man had been lying by this pool that supposedly offered some slim hope for healing—waiting, hoping, praying, and possibly cursing his rotten luck and miserable

fate. Bible scholars are unanimous in their judgment that verse 4 of this chapter was not originally a part of John's Gospel, but it does provide some interesting historical information. Apparently, the popular belief among people living at this time was that the pool of Bethesda was occasionally visited by an angel. The angel would come and stir the waters of the pool, and the first one into the wavy water was the lucky winner—he or she (it was believed) would be instantly and miraculously healed. (We have no way of knowing if there was any factual basis for this popular belief, or if it was just a silly superstition). Judging from this man's comment in verse 7, how many friends did he have to help him in the hope of making this dream a reality? Can you imagine life without even a single friend to help and encourage you in a time of need? Look up Prov. 18:24. Who comes first to your mind when you read about the "friend" described in this verse?

As in last week's story of the Samaritan woman, who is it that initiates the conversation in John 5? (See verse 6) Why did you think Jesus chose to talk to this man and get involved in his life? (See if you can come up with more than one answer based on your reading of this story as a whole.) What risks was Jesus taking in reaching out to this man and helping him with his problem?

What Did I Do to Deserve *This Awful Thing*?

As noted earlier, one reason many Jews of Jesus' day avoided those who were sick and disabled is that they believed that these people were "cursed" by God. Take a look at John 9:1-5. What does Jesus have to say about this common belief that sickness or suffering was God's way of punishing sin? When the healed blind man in John 9 tries to witness to the Pharisees, how do they react (see John 9:34)?

Now look again at John 5:14. Taking into account what Jesus says in John 9:1-5, do you think he is suggesting in John 5:14 that this former invalid was being punished by God for his past sins? If not, what *is* Jesus trying to tell this man? (Note that John has said nothing up to this point about this man repenting and believing in Jesus.) What is the "worst thing" that can happen to anyone—even worse than a crippling illness or accident? What do you think Jesus has in mind when he tells this man to "stop sinning?" (See Rom. 6:1-4.)

What Did I Do to Deserve *This Wonderful Thing*?

Jesus freely and frequently associated with people from all levels of society, from the rich young ruler (Luke 18:18-30; cf. Matt. 19:16-30) to the poor widow of Nain (Luke 7:11-17), from high-ranking religious leaders like Nicodemus (John 3:1-21) to despicable scoundrels like Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10), from powerful military leaders (Luke 7:1-10) to pitiful lepers (Luke 17:11-19). As you read through the Gospels, however, you can't help but notice that Jesus made a special effort to reach out to the most marginalized members of society: the sick, the poor, the needy, the disabled and the downtrodden. Why do you think Jesus so often went out of his way to reach out to people in this particular demographic? Is there anything we can learn from this about the nature of God's love for us in Christ? (See, e.g., Matt. 11:4-6; Luke 4:18-19; 6:17-26; 14:12-14.)

Do Take This Personally

The “word on the street” is that students at an area high school are inevitably “tagged” (whether they like it or not) as members of a specific group (sort of like a Hindu “caste”). Depending on your activities, friends, values, personality, popularity (etc.), you might get tossed in with the jocks, the preps (“preppies”), the hicks, the juvies (juvenile delinquents), the freaks, the dorks, or the fundies (those with clear moral standards and/or religious convictions). (There are other groups that can’t be named on the pages of Christian Bible Study!) Apparently it’s almost impossible to avoid being identified with one of these groups, and those who try are usually tossed in with the fundies or the dorks.

Do you feel pressure in your school or in your circle of friends to conform to the expectations of others when it comes to how you talk and act, what you wear and watch and listen to, and what kinds of relationships you form? What does Romans 12:1-2 say about conforming to these kinds of expectations? Where do we find the strength and courage to resist this kind of pressure and seek to please God rather than others? (See Rom. 12:1; Rom. 8:31, 37)

All Visitors Are Welcome! (Or Are They?)

Read the story “His Name is John” printed below. (Some of you may have seen this story before—the original author is unknown.)

His Name Is John

His name is John. He has wild hair, wears a T-shirt with holes in it, jeans and no shoes. This was literally his wardrobe for his entire four years of college. His is kind, somewhat esoteric, and very, very bright. He became a Christian while attending college.

Across the street from the campus is a well-dressed, very conservative church. They want to develop a ministry to the students, but are not sure how to go about it.

One day John decides to go there. He walks in with no shoes, jeans, his T-shirt, and wild hair. The service has already started and so John starts down the aisle looking for a seat. The church is completely packed and he can’t find a seat. By now, people are looking a bit uncomfortable, but no one says anything. John gets closer and closer and closer to the pulpit and when he realizes there are no seats, he just squats down right on the carpet. (Although perfectly acceptable behavior at a college fellowship, trust me, this had never happened in this church before!) By now the people are really uptight, and the tension in the air is thick.

About this time, the minister realizes that from way at the back of the church, a deacon is slowly making his way toward John. Now, the deacon is in his eighties, has silver-gray hair, a three-piece suit, and a pocket watch. A godly man, very elegant, very dignified, very courtly. He walks with a cane and as he starts walking toward this boy, everyone is saying to themselves, “You can’t blame him for what he’s going to do. How can you expect a man of his age and of his background to understand some college kid on the floor?”

It takes a long time for the man to reach the boy. The church is utterly silent except for the clicking of the man's cane. All eyes are focused on him. You can't even hear anyone breathing. The people are thinking, "The minister can't even preach the sermon until the deacon does what he has to do."

And now they see this elderly man drop his cane on the floor. With great difficulty he lowers himself and sits down next to John and worships with him so he won't be alone. Everyone chokes up with emotion. When the minister gains control he says, "What I'm about to preach, you will never remember. What you have just seen, you will never forget."

How do you think your congregation would react if someone like "John" walked in and sat down? Has anything like this ever happened in your congregation? On a scale of one to ten, how welcoming do you feel your congregation is toward those who may appear to be of a different social or economic "class" than most regular worshippers?

Read James 2:1-5. Do you think there may be people in your community who would hesitate to visit your church because they don't have nice enough clothes or enough money to put in the offering plate, or because they're afraid they just wouldn't "fit in" socially? How could your congregation do a better job of making it clear that *all* people really are welcome to visit and worship and learn more about Jesus, regardless of their social or economic standing? What does James say in verse 5 about the poor? Can you think of any poor people in the Bible who are singled out for their great faith and heroic example? (See, e.g., Luke 16:19-31; 18:1-8; 21:1-4) How does Paul describe the saving work of Christ on our behalf in 2 Cor. 8:9?

Reaching Out to Those in Need

Transformed and renewed by God's forgiving and welcoming love in Christ for "poor, miserable sinners" like us, we seek to reach out to all those in need, including (and especially!) those who find themselves in difficult social and economic situations. Look up the following passages and identify the specific socioeconomic group or groups that are mentioned as special "targets" of God's love and of the care of God's people. Spend a few minutes talking about specific ways that your group, family, or congregation (or you as an individual) could reach out to people in this social group or situation with God's love and care.

Leviticus 19:9-10

Hebrews 13:3

Deuteronomy 10:17-19

James 1:27

Romans 12:13; 16

Luke 14:12-14

1 John 3:16-18

Did You Know...?

Bethesda Lutheran Homes and Services is an organization supported by our church body that seeks to share Christ's love by providing support and services to people with developmental disabilities. The organization takes its name from the story in John 5 about the man healed by Jesus at the pool of Bethesda. On your own or as a group, visit the web site of Bethesda (www.blhs.org) and learn more about this organization. Is your congregation directly involved in supporting this ministry in any way? Is there some way that you could become more involved in supporting it as individuals or as a group?

Session Three: Bridging the Generation Barrier

Labeled—or Libeled?

For whatever reason, “age labeling” has become quite faddish in recent years among sociologists and culture-watchers. It probably started with the “baby boomers,” the tag given to those born in the years following World War II. During these years (around 1946-1964), there was a noticeable surge (“boom”) in the newborn population. Then came “Generation X,” the label given to those born between the years 1965-1975. (Experts with lots of time on their hands argue about the exact dates, where the label “X” came from, and what it’s supposed to mean.) Other names for “Gen X-ers” are “Thirteeners” (the 13th generation since the founding of the United States), the “Baby Busters” (because of the relatively *low* birthrates during these years), and “Slackers” (you can probably figure that one out yourself—whether deserved or not).

After “Generation X” comes “Generation Y” (those sociologists are real creative with titles, don’t you think?). These are folks born after 1978 or so, and are typically characterized as tech-savvy, media-saturated, and multi-taskers. Y-ers are also sometimes known as nexters, Echo boomers, Bull Market Babies, and Millennial Gens (do your own research—go to www.wordspy.com for these and other “hip” terms and their definitions.) (P.S.: I realize that “hip” is probably not a “hip” term these days. But what do I know—I’m an aging, tech-unsavvy, media-illiterate baby boomer!)

Duck—Here Comes a Boomeranger!

To find out how savvy you are when it comes to some of the more recent generational labels (you probably won’t find these in a dictionary!), try matching the following terms on the left with their correct definition on the right. [Note to editor(s): As proof that I am not a member of the “tech-savvy” Generation Y, I couldn’t figure out the best way to mix up these terms and their definitions in columns using the formatting tools on my computer. I’d appreciate it if you could do that for me and then provide the “answer key” at the end of this session (see below). Below are the terms followed by their correct definitions. If you think there are too many here, feel free to omit some.]

Boomeranger: An adult child who returns home to live with his or her baby-boomer parents.

Grey Nomad: A retired person who travels extensively, especially in an RV.

Generation Lap: The tendency for young people to be more technically savvy than their parents or elders.

Sandwich Generation: People who must care for both their children and their parents.

Skipped Generation: Children who are raised primarily by their grandparents rather than their parents.

Beanpole Family: A family whose living members come from many generations, but with few members in each generation.

N-Gen: The Generation born since the advent of the personal computer.

Supercentenarian: A person who is at least 110 years old.

Boomeritis: The chronic condition of “jockish” Baby Boomers who refuse to act their age and keep hurting themselves in the process.

Generation D: They say: Everything’s digital, baby—and we love it!

Geezer Glut: The large number of seniors that will result as Baby Boomers get older.

Reset Generation: Young people who, when a job or situation becomes difficult, quit and start over in a different situation.

Grandboomer: A Baby Boomer whose kids have kids.

Floridization: A rapid rise in the population of senior citizens in a given area.

Elder Orphan: An older person whose family can’t or won’t care for them.

Therapy Generation: Folks who have grown up in a culture that depends on and is comfortable with counseling and medication to solve personal problems.

Screenager: A young person who spends lots of time in front of some kind of “screen” (TV, computer, video device, cell phone).

Freshman 15: The average amount of weight gained by someone in their first year away at college (watch out for that starchy stuff!)

Question number one: How did you do? (Check the answers at the end of the session.) Question number two: How do you feel about this tendency toward “age labeling” and generational stereotyping? Do you think it’s fair? Do you think it’s accurate? Do you think labels like these have any affect (positive or negative) on how people from different generations view each other and relate to one another?

Obviously, God loves people of all ages and generations—and he loves them all equally. He also wants them to love one another the same way He loves them in his Son, Jesus Christ. In this session, we’re going to take a look at some passages of Scripture that show how Jesus bridged the generation barrier by reaching out to those of all ages and age groups. We’re also going to talk about the challenges and opportunities that God sets before us (as individuals, as a group, and as a congregation) to “zap the generation gap” by reaching out with God’s love and care to people of all ages.

God Just *Loves* Babies—Do You?

Martin Luther was absolutely enthralled by a Scriptural story that most of us probably take for granted—the story of “the Word becoming flesh” (John 1:14) on Christmas day. Read Luke’s familiar account of the Christmas story in Luke 2:1-20, and spend a few minutes discussing it.

were Mary, the shepherds, and the wise men (cf. Matthew 2) so amazed and overwhelmed by this event? *Why* did the almighty, everlasting God come into our world as a little baby? (See Gal. 4:4) *How* was it possible for him to do this? (See Luke 1:37) Read (or if you dare, sing!) together the following verses from Luther's famous Christmas hymn, "From Heaven Above:"

O Lord, you have created all!
 How did you come to be so small?
 To sweetly sleep in manger bed
 Where lowly cattle lately fed?

This blessing which the Father planned
 The Son holds in his infant hand
 That in his kingdom, bright and fair
 You may with us his glory share. (LW 38:2; 37:4)

We know that God loves babies because he *became* a baby in his Son, Jesus Christ. Many of us first received God's loving grace and forgiveness when we were little babies. When and how did this happen? (See Matt. 28:19; Acts 2:38-39; Titus 3:5-7)

What does Luke 18:15-17 tell us about Jesus' attitude toward babies and little children? What do you think Jesus means when he says that we must "become like little children?" What can we learn from babies about what it means to be God's children? (See, for example, Psalm 131:1-2)

God *became* a baby. Jesus *died* for babies (and all people). God's Spirit *claims* babies as his own in Holy Baptism. Jesus instructs us all to *become* like little children. So what about you? How do you feel about babies and little children? Do you enjoy spending time with them, or do you consider it a bit "uncool" and irritating to spend time hanging around with dirty-diaper-wearers and slobbery-thumb-suckers? In view of what the Bible says, could you use an "attitude adjustment" in this regard? What specific opportunities exist in your life, family, and/or congregation to reach out in love to the little children who are so precious in God's sight? As a group, list as many of these opportunities as you can think of—and then *act* on as many as you possibly can.

Defending the Defenseless

In what ways are babies and little children at risk in our world today? With the help of your teacher, youth group leader or pastor, research the position of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod on issues like abortion and stem-cell research involving the destruction of embryos. What does the Bible say about God's concern for and involvement in human life from its earliest stages of development? (See Psalm 139:13-17) Discuss ways that you and your congregation could become more involved in helping to protect these most vulnerable members of our society from the violence that is allowed and tolerated in our sinful world. How can we reach out in love to those who may be considering abortion, as well as those who may be suffering from great guilt and pain because of a wrong or uninformed choice they made in the past? _

God Gets Gushy about Geezers—Do You?

Sociologists talk a lot these days about the “graying” of American society as a result of the aging baby boom generation. Back in 1946, for example, there were 11 million people aged 65 or older in the United States. By the time the first “boomers” turn 65 in 2011, there will be *40 million* people over the age of 65, and that number will probably jump to around *70 million* when the last of the boomers head into their “golden years” around the year 2029. Due to improvements in health care and greater attention to the importance of healthy lifestyles, many of these “geezers” (as a graying baby boomer, I use the term affectionately!) are quite active in the life of the church and community—or are at least *open* to opportunities to serve and be involved.

Even as a little baby, Jesus “reached out and touched” the lives of those who were well advanced in years. Read the story of Simeon in Luke 2:25-35. We are not told Simeon’s age, but what clues does this text give us that he was probably quite old? (See verses 25-26; 29) Luke immediately goes on to relate the story of Anna in verses 36-38—read this brief account as well. Can you name an older person in your family or congregation whom you look up to (like Anna or Simeon) as a model of Christian faith and fidelity? How well do you know this person? As an “extra-curricular” assignment, consider having each member of the group “interview” one older person in their family or congregation, asking them questions about their history and journey of faith. Share these interviews the following week, or post them in the classroom for everyone to read and enjoy.

Gulp!!! (I Guess God is Serious About This!)

Read the shocking story in 2 Kings 2:23-24. What does this story teach us about the seriousness of God’s command to honor and respect our elders? Since we undoubtedly all have sins to confess in this regard, this story also reminds us of our serious need for God’s grace and forgiveness, and the greatness of that grace in Jesus Christ. Read 1 John 1:8-9, rejoice in God’s forgiveness, and call on God’s Spirit to help you to show proper honor, love and respect for those whom God has blessed with an abundance of years, wisdom and experience. What do the following passages say regarding this issue?

1 Peter 5:5

Leviticus 19:32

Proverbs 16:31

Proverbs 23:22-23

Hebrews 13:7

Joel 2:28-29

Psalms 148:9-13

Building Bridges in Your Congregation

In what specific ways does your congregation seek to utilize the gifts, time, experience, willingness and wisdom of older folks? Can you think of ways that the gifts of these dear people of God could be put to even greater use?

Many congregations plan regular events and activities that are specifically designed to give young people an opportunity to interact with and serve older people in the congregation. Here are some activities I have encountered in the past:

- The youth host an annual Valentine's Day dinner and dance for folks aged 65 and over in the congregation. The young people prepare the food, wait on tables, *and* provide the entertainment.
- Before Christmas, the young people go caroling at the homes of older members, also bringing Christmas treats.
- At least once a year, the youth group visits a local nursing home to play games, sing songs, and participate in various activities.
- Each candidate for confirmation is paired with an older person in the congregation, who serves as a "sponsor" or "mentor" for the student. Regular assignments and activities are planned as a part of this aspect of confirmation instruction.
- In the spring, summer, or fall, special "work days" are planned when young people visit the homes of older folks to help with chores like lawn-mowing, leaf-raking, cleaning, and painting.

Are activities like this in place as a regular part of your congregation's ministry? Can you think of additional activities that would help to "zap the generation gap" in your congregation and give both young and old a chance to share Christ's love with each other?

God Prizes Parents—Do You?

Unfortunately, the greatest "generation gap" in the lives of many young people is the gap that exists in their relationship with the people who love them the most—their parents. Why do you think that this is so often the case? The Bible does not include many details about Jesus' day-to-day relationship with his parents, but the stories it does contain are quite fascinating. Read the story of the boy Jesus in Luke 2:41-52. How does this story reflect Jesus' need to be honest with his parents, his desire to be obedient to them, and their need and desire to grow in their own understanding of God's purpose for Jesus' life? Now read John 2:1-11. How does Jesus succeed in both pleasing his mother and also reminding her that he was sent by God for a greater mission than the one that was of immediate concern to her? How does Jesus demonstrate his love and concern for his mother while he is dying on the cross? (See John 19:25-27)

Write a letter to your parents that captures both the deep affection and the openness and honesty that is reflected in these Scriptural stories about Jesus' relationship with his parents. Thank them for their love and concern for you, and express your appreciation for all they have done for you and continue to do for you every day. Honestly share your feelings about ways in which you think your relationship with them could be improved. Assure them that you want to keep the lines of communication open, and that maintaining and building a close relationship with them is very important to you. If you decide to share your letter with them, be open to their perspective and honest feedback as part of an ongoing process by which God's Spirit can work to help overcome harmful or unnecessary barriers in your relationship.

Session Four: Confronting Lifestyle Barriers

Psssttt... Among those who were regarded as the most religious and respectable people of his day, Jesus had a reputation—and it wasn't a good one. According to Luke 15:1-2, what scandalous behavior blackened Jesus' name in the eyes of the religious leaders of his day? How does Jesus expose the hypocrisy of this criticism in Luke 7:31-34? Discuss: Was Jesus really “a glutton and a drunkard?” Did he approve of this kind of behavior? Was he guilty of the charge (leveled at him by his enemies) that he was “a friend of sinners?”

One of the great challenges for the church of every age is to reach out to those who are caught up in sinful lifestyles and behavior without giving the impression that this behavior is “OK.” Do you think it's possible for Christians and Christian churches to become more concerned with maintaining and protecting their reputation than with reaching out to those in their community whose lives are terribly messed up by sin? Do you think it's possible for Christians and Christian churches to become so concerned about offending people or appearing “unloving” that they fail to speak truthfully about behavior that is clearly contrary to God's Word and will? Which of these do you think is the bigger problem in the church today? In your own congregation?

In this session, we're going to take a look at one very emotional and revealing encounter between Jesus and a first-century “woman of ill repute.” Read the account of Jesus being anointed by a “sinful woman” in Luke 7:36-50 and spend some time discussing it using the multiple choice quiz provided below.

Pop Quiz (Don't Worry—It's Open Book!)

1. Considering what Luke tells us elsewhere about the attitude of the Pharisees toward Jesus, it seems likely that Simon invited Jesus to dinner:
 - a) Because he wanted Jesus to try his new spinach soufflé.
 - b) Because he hoped that Jesus would put on a little “magic show” for his friends.
 - c) Because he wanted to trap Jesus into saying or doing something that might get him into trouble.
 - d) Because he was sincerely interested in hearing what Jesus had to say about the kingdom of God.

2. When Luke says that this woman “had lived a sinful life,” he probably means:
 - a) She was a Lutheran.
 - b) She was a non-Lutheran.
 - c) She cheated on her taxes.
 - d) She used to make a living as a prostitute.

3. This woman brought perfume in an alabaster jar, which probably means it was quite expensive. Jewish women usually carried perfume around:
 - a) By tying the jars with a cord and hanging them around their neck.
 - b) In the back pocket of their jeans.
 - c) By balancing them on their heads.
 - d) In their purses with all their other stuff (where else?)

4. It's clear from the story that this woman was crying because:
 - a) She couldn't stop thinking about how expensive the perfume was.
 - b) She was offended by Jesus' "holier than thou" preaching and teaching.
 - c) She couldn't stand being in the house of a Pharisee.
 - d) She was truly and deeply sorry for her sins and overcome with gratitude at Jesus' message of forgiveness.

5. Jesus tells Simon the parable about the moneylender because:
 - a) As true God, he knew exactly what Simon was thinking and what Simon needed to hear.
 - b) As a polite guest, he felt the need to provide some "story-time" entertainment.
 - c) He was embarrassed by the woman's actions and wanted to divert attention elsewhere.
 - d) Jesus owed Simon some money, and Jesus thought this might be a savvy way to try to get out from under the debt.

6. The main point of the parable is that:
 - a) We should go out and sin as much as we can, so we will love God even more for forgiving us.
 - b) It's bad to be in debt.
 - c) The more we recognize the greatness of our sin and the greatness of God's forgiveness, the more love and gratitude we will have toward God.
 - d) If we love God enough, he will always forgive us.

7. The thing every person needs the most is:
 - a) To know that God loves them and has forgiven them in Christ.
 - b) To know that they have the power within themselves to turn their life around.
 - c) To know that their friends will never let them down.
 - d) To have lots and lots of money.

8. Before a person can truly understand and accept God's forgiveness in Christ by the power of God's Spirit, that person must:
 - a) Change his or her sinful ways.
 - b) Go through confirmation class.
 - c) Promise to come to church every Sunday.
 - d) Admit that he or she is a poor, miserable sinner and that God is the only one who is able to help and save them.

9. When Jesus assured the woman that her sins were forgiven, the other guests were:
 - a) Thrilled that this woman could begin a new, guilt-free life.
 - b) Wondering when Simon would get around to serving dessert.
 - c) Anxious to hear more about what this forgiveness meant for their lives.
 - d) Deeply offended that Jesus would claim an authority reserved for God alone.

10. When Jesus tells this woman to “go in peace,” he means:
- That she can feel free to return to her former lifestyle without feeling guilty about it.
 - That because of God’s forgiveness she was now at peace with God, and could live a new life of willing obedience to his gracious will.
 - She should get out of Simon’s house without making a scene.
 - She didn’t have to worry about a thing as long as she never committed another sin.

God’s Grace and Forgiveness: For Sinners Only

Luke’s Gospel is filled to overflowing with stories and statements about Jesus’ desire to search out and save those who are NOT good enough to save themselves. Look up the following passages, fill in the blanks, and then ask: “How does this passage apply to me? To the members of my church? To people in my family, school or community who don’t know Jesus as their Savior?”

Luke 19:10 (ESV): “For the Son of Man [Jesus] came to seek and to save the _____.”

Luke 5:32: “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the _____.”

Luke 15:10: “There will be more rejoicing in heaven over one _____ who _____
_ than over ninety-nine persons who do not need to _____.

In Luke 15, Jesus tells the parables of the lost _____, the lost _____, and the lost _____. Why do you think he spends so much time talking about the “lost?” Judging from these parables of Jesus, what do you think the number one priority of Jesus’ followers should be? Are you aware of specific efforts that your congregation is making to seek the lost in your community?

No One Said It Would Be Easy

One of the purposes of a youth group is to enjoy fellowship with Christian friends who share your faith and convictions and want to grow in their faith through the study of God’s Word. That’s a good thing—a *very* good thing! In view of today’s Bible study, do you think that one of the purposes of a youth group should also be to reach out to other young people outside of the group who don’t know Jesus as their Savior—including those who may be caught up in sinful habits and practices that are obviously contrary to God’s Word? What are some of the things that make this such a challenging task? (See below...)

One of the challenges that Christians sometimes encounter when trying to reach out to “sinners” in today’s world is that many people in today’s world have no concept of “sin” and therefore see no need for God’s forgiveness. Look up Gal. 5:19-21, 1 Cor. 6:9-11, and 2 Tim. 3:1-4. Before we can help others deal with the sin that is harming their lives and their relationship with God and others, we need to be sure *we* understand what God regards as sinful behavior. How do you talk to people about sin when they act or talk as though they believe that there is no such thing as “sin?”

Another challenge in seeking to form relationships with those caught up in sinful lifestyles is the very real danger of being lured into some of these same sinful practices ourselves. What advice does St. Paul have to offer in Gal. 6:1 as we seek to help others who are sinning? Now look at James 4:4. What do you think James means by “friendship with the world?” How can we be a “friend to sinners” (like Jesus was) without being “friends with the world?”

Another challenge is the temptation to “preach” to people in a self-righteous way, without showing true compassion and making it clear that Christians believe that all people are sinners, equally in need of God’s help and God’s grace. Read Ephesians 4:15 and 29 and 1 Peter 3:15-16. What do these passages teach us about how to speak God’s truth to others?

Yet another challenge is the risk of having your own reputation questioned (maybe even by other Christians!) because of your attempt to form a relationship with someone of “ill repute” who desperately needs a Christian friend. Has anything like this ever happened to you? How did you deal with this situation? Look at 1 Peter 4:13-16, 19. What encouragement does this passage give to those who may find themselves in a situation like this?

A Very Personal Prayer List

On a piece of paper, write down the names of one or two people (in your school, your neighborhood, or in your family) who desperately need to be rescued—with God’s help—from bondage to a sinful lifestyle. If appropriate, keep these names private and confidential—between you and God. Commit yourself to praying for them on a daily basis, and ask God to use you in whatever ways possible to reach out to them with true Christian love and compassion. Pray for courage to “speak the truth in love” to them when and if God gives you the opportunity. If you are comfortable doing so, share with the group in the weeks ahead specific ways (either big or small) that God seems to be answering your prayers. Close this final session with a group prayer, asking God to motivate, bless and empower all members of your group, all members of your church, and all Christians everywhere to reach out with the love of Christ to “sinners” everywhere who (like all of us) need the peace, joy and forgiveness that only Jesus can give.

“Pop Quiz” Answers: 1: c; 2: d; 3: a; 4: d; 5: a; 6: c; 7: a; 8: d; 9: d; 10: b.