YOUTH STRESS

BIBLICAL TEXT MESSAGES FOR STRESSED YOUNG SOULS

By Dr. Russ Moulds

OVERVIEW

Is our young people's world a high-demand, high-expectations, high-stress world, or is it a world of distractions, escape, and extended childhood? As we listen to them, one kid reports considerable anxiety about the requirements, expectations, and crazy schedule she has to manage. Another kid reports that his life in and out of school consists mainly of snacks and videos. So what goes on in the stress life of kids?

The Gospel is that good news which this world could never devise on its own and that God had to import into this world by the flesh and blood and word of His Son. And it addresses the entire human condition including our stress and anxiety. In Mattew 11:28, Jesus says, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest." In I Peter 5:7, Peter says, "Cast all your anxieties on him, for he cares about you." This four part Bible study series takes a look at stress in the life of our kids. It does not assume that stress is an all-consuming problem for kids, nor does it assume that stress for them is negligible. Like most things in life, the situations for stress and kids vary a lot. This series offers four ways and four Biblical texts that can help us and kids think about the role of stress in our lives and what God's word says about it.

These four studies cover four contexts of potential stress for kids: the social scene, the academic scene, the competitive scene, and the future scene. These are not the only settings in which kids experience stress but they are common to most kids. The study does not explore family conflict, serious disorders or dysfunctions, or the circumstances of tragedy, disasters, or prolonged illness and disability. The study does provide a variety of opportunities to explore the daily hassles and anxieties that kids (and all of us) live with and ways that God's promises speak to our lives.

The Biblical texts for each study are not the "obvious" sorts of selections. Books like Psalms and Proverbs include content with direct psychological language about emotions and responses related to stress. But these texts are so general that they are often difficult for many kids to access. Instead, the studies use texts that are more situational. The kids will have to work to understand the situation, but they should be able to transfer the context and content to their own experiences. The texts are deliberately selected not to be the same old Bible stories some learned as children, yet are somewhat familiar in name, author, or principal character.

The series assumes the leader is reasonably well informed with Scripture, doctrine, and the stories used here. The discussion content is notched up rather than down. It does not merely rehash the surface features of the readings with closed-ended questions. But both senior high and junior high youth can delve deeply into issues of faith and life if the leader does good preparation, anticipates those issues, and facilities the discussion.

GOALS AND THEMES

The Bible is not a psychology textbook, and we should exercise caution not merely to psychologize the things of faith. But the Bible does contains countless psychological portraits. Consider, for example, the Psalms, Paul's descriptive language, and many of the Old Testament narratives. This Bible study addresses stress, but stress is a psychological term, not a Biblical term. The psych textbooks define stress as not just a stimulus or response but the process by which we appraise and cope with challenges and threats from the environment—something we have to do every day. (If you've got a general psychology textbook around, page through the chapter on stress.)

The goal of these Bible studies is that students will recognize that stress is a continuing part of life, that stress is not bad in itself (some degree of stress is needed for our motivation); that it can have both positive and negative effects; and that the Gospel gives us God's promises, assurance, and hope both when life and its stress is good and when life and its stress is bad. The studies are composed in a way that allows the user and presenter to select among several related topics and themes. Among those themes, consider for emphasis some of the following:

- God's word does not call us to remove ourselves from the social, academic, competitive, and future scenes. Christians practice no special piety within any of these contexts. Christians in all life's settings give an account of the hope in us and seek to live according to that hope (I Peter 3:15).
- The kids to whom we minister are working out their salvation and how to give an account of their hope in the midst of important developmental changes.
- Kids are tuning their radar to social distinctions, discriminations, boundaries, divisions, classes, groups, and preferential behavior. The Gospel of Jesus Christ dismisses all distinctions except the only one that matters: those saved and those not saved.
- The world creates merit systems as readily as it creates idols. Help kids detect the merit and measuring systems at work in their lives. Help them consider how much importance they want to attach to these systems, bearing in mind that though we are not to be of the world, we are still to be in the world. (I Corinthians 9:19 is instructive here.)
- Competition is often a bit of a puzzle for Christians, particularly in light of texts such as Philippians 2:1-11 and Luke 14:1-14. Be ready to help kids think about competition in a critical, non-simplistic way and examine it as a stressor for them.
- The kids we work with are all over the charts when it comes to goals, objectives, time horizons, and plans for the future. Some are very goal-oriented. Some respond only to instant gratification. Either condition can be the source of a lot of stress for kids.

Other themes will emerge as you study and prepare your materials.

PREPARATION TIPS

1. Each of the four studies can stand alone and be used by itself. Yet each is also integrated with the others and can be used as a four week series. Alternatively, there is enough background information for each stress topic and for the accompanying Bible text so that the user can extend a single study out to two or more weeks. A creative user could probably plan a four week unit for each study by adding a bit more content.
2. Plenty of content is available in the studies, but they are not lesson plans. Decide what you want to accomplish with the materials and arrange the parts and pieces in an effective sequence. The user will have to plan and structure the lessons carefully in advance. Prepare any necessary maps, time lines, etc.
3. Preview all four of the profiles to consider similarities and differences and to anticipate issues and concerns.
4. Pre-read the Biblical texts and the lesson in the study a few days before presenting the content.
5. Read through any of your study Bible's footnotes and textual notes for these chapters and verses.
6. Do some background reading on the historical context of this event using your Bible's introduction to that book, a Bible handbook, and any commentaries available to you.
7. The discussion questions are usually open-ended and suggestive. Revise or take these in any direction that seems best for your kids.
8. Each profile has a few activity ideas for student participation. These can be used as introductions, discussion starters, or closure. You may be able to think of better ones for your kids.
9. The typical illustration for stress is a rubber band: too little tension and it can't do its job; too much tension and it breaks. A standard illustration is an inexpensive toy balsa wood airplane with a rubber band windup propeller available at toy stores and variety stores.

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: Sherrah Behrens.

PROFILES IN YOUTH STRESS

THE SOCIAL SCENE

THE CONTEXT

Cliques, popularity, isolation, a place to sit in the lunch room, games, dances, parties, youth group activities, school hallways, someone to be with on the servant event, retreat, or field trip—all these are familiar social settings for young people. The social demands on young people are considerable and important, but the social scene changes in qualitative ways from middle school to the senior year in high school. In fact, so much changes and so much is different for junior high kids and high school seniors that we cannot address them in the same ways.

So when exploring the social demands and stressors of adolescents, it's no good merely to target a setting like the school lunch room (critical for junior high kids but not so much for older senior high kids) or weekend gatherings (important for older senior high kids but still largely irrelevant for early junior high kids). For Bible study discussion, rather than create a hypothetical social setting meaningful for some kids but not for others, we do better to select a Biblical text that speaks to several contexts and let the kids identify the usual suspects and scenes. Our chief text for the social scene is James 2:1-13 on favoritism.

Implicated in the increasing social demands, expectations, and stresses that kids experience are some key social development changes that occur across the span of adolescence. The five factors below are conspicuous. Younger kids still close to childhood are largely unaware of these characteristics.

Older kids can recognize them and can often describe them in colorful and hilarious ways, though they don't entirely understand them. Keep them in mind, ask about them, or expand on them when discussing the Biblical text. And as you review these, give some thought to what direction these changes may take young people: toward increased self-reliance? into greater social dependence or interdependence? on to stronger discipleship within Christian community?

1. **Adolescent Egocentrism:** Somewhere around puberty, cognition begins to become more abstract and sophisticated, but it also becomes more reflexive, turning inward and egocentric. David Elkind, author of books like *The Hurried Child* and *All Grown Up and No Place to Go*, describes this inward turn for the younger adolescent in this way: "I see you seeing me. I see the me I think you see." This internalization of the outer social scene is characterized by three features. First, the imaginary audience is that set of observers both real and imagined (which makes this phenomenon complicated!), now internalized, who are always observing and critiquing the poor kid. Second, the personal fable is the first-person narrative the kid begins to recite and rehearse about her or his life story, for better or worse. Third, the idealistic reformer is the young "prophet" who is newly cognizant of the injustices he or she experiences in an unfair world but also increasingly sensitized to the injustices that others endure. Adolescent egocentrism is pretty intense from early to middle adolescence (12 to 16 years old) but diminishes in later adolescence. Some researchers and comedians question whether it ever disappears entirely.
2. **Perspective-Taking:** Younger adolescents still have pretty simple perspective-taking skills: you have ideas, I have ideas, and these ideas may or may not be the same. As kids get older, their abilities at role-taking and understanding other perspectives become more practiced and objective. Many (but not all) kids in high school can take on an alternate perspective to the point where they believe they genuinely understand the other's point of view, even to the point of simplistic "mindreading." However, they do not realize that they still largely lack the complex affect and regard for consequences that go with that role or perspective (such as for a parent, teacher, or youth worker). Younger kids are short on perspective-taking but can certainly respond with authentic sympathy for others. Older adolescents may (or may not yet) become better skilled at taking the other's perspective and responding with both sympathy and some empathy and will, we hope, eventually lose the ability to read minds.
3. **Peer Influence:** Because the need to belong (first with the family and then with others) is powerful for most of us, peer pressure is generally strong and influential with younger adolescents who are expanding their sense of belonging beyond the family borders. Susceptibility to direct peer pressure decreases in later adolescence but regard for social influence does not and should not disappear entirely. Our capacity to detect and assess social influence and the expectations of others should increase and become more judicious as we get older.

4. **Group Dependence:** The group or clique serves several social functions, one of which is to induct the young person into the demands and challenges of the larger social world. The group weans the adolescent away from childhood dependency on parents and family and toward the independence and self-reliance of young adulthood. Eventually, the older adolescent or young adult will separate from the clique just as she or he previously separated from the family, taking with them the "human capital" (skills, knowledge, experience, values, convictions, commitments) they gained from both and contributing these to new and now interdependent, productive relationships in their adult community. (Some theorists like to argue whether this process is different with females and males, and that males develop through "individuation" while females develop through "affiliation." Kids find this discussion interesting. If you conduct it, consider studying I Corinthians 12, one body, many members, along with it.)
5. **Emotional Autonomy:** As young people move through social development, learning more and more how to meet the high-needs, high-demands conditions of their increasingly complex social world, they learn to stand more and more on their own feet, decreasing their childhood dependency on others. This development is especially important for emotions and emotional management, for surely the emotional life of a twenty-five-year-old ought not to be the emotional life of a five-year-old. But autonomy does not mean abandonment. It means that one's emotional well-being is no longer dependent on the immediate sustenance of others (family and later the group, and perhaps then the boyfriend or girlfriend), and that one's sense of well-being comes from reliance on an entirely other source. One hundred fifty years ago, Ralph Waldo Emerson promoted rugged individualism as the proper source. In its own way our therapeutic society today still recommends that source. The Christian knows another, different Source.

THE TEXT — JAMES 2:1-13

James is an antilegomena book of the New Testament, not immediately recognized by all the early church as part of the canon. The reasons usually cited are that it mentions Jesus only twice (1:1 and 2:1), and it appears to emphasize the law rather than letting the Gospel predominate. Luther famously called it "an epistle of straw" for its apparent lack of Gospel, though his appreciation for this letter seems to have grown in his later years, just as the church eventually saw fit to include it as an authoritative text. This pattern of "later recognition" may fit well with the nature of the letter, assuming it was written not to new Christians (such as those at Galatia) but to seasoned disciples already well versed in the Gospel.

The letter addresses several areas of Christian behavior in what at first looks like a haphazard series of thoughts as they occur to the writer. But a more careful reading reveals a set of themes that link James' concerns together: trials and tests of faith (1:2, 1:12, 1:26, 2:8. 2:18, etc.), wisdom vs. doublemindedness (1:8, 2:14, 3:13, 4:11, 5:12, etc.), and special regard for the oppressed and those in need (1:27, 2:5, 2:15, 5:4, 5:13, etc.). For James, the Gospel is mostly unstated given that he compels his readers to consider his letter as a practical discussion of how to "work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for God is at work in you both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Philippians 2:12- 13, a concept Paul and James may well have discussed in Paul's several visits to Jerusalem).

The area of Christian behavior addressed in our text, 2:1-13, is favoritism (NIV) or partiality (RSV), a topic that—helloooo!—kids will eagerly pursue. As they struggle to negotiate their increasingly complex social world, trying to manage the expectations of others as well as their own self-imposed demands, they readily recognize the discriminations and distinctions at large in the social scene. Whether these demands, expectations, and unwritten social rules are authoritative, helpful, useful, reliable, optional, dispensable, trivial, or just downright evil is well worth a conversation. James sets up that discussion for us.

"My brethren, do not hold faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, together with discrimination between people," is a more literal translation of 2:1 ("don't show favoritism") and an example of the double-mindedness that James condemns in 1:8. Double-mindedness was a common concern in the Jewish literature of James' time. The rabbi-commentators regarded doublemindedness as contrary to the Shema, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is one" (Dt 6:4). God is one and not divided. Israel is one and should not be divided. James is employing this theme to remind us that our oneness in Christ is not divided by worldly distinctions and that these distinctions should not infect our behavior and witness. It's likely that James' concern for unity was connected to the Jew/Gentile tension in the early church (see Galatians 2 and Ephesians 2).

Of course, young people live in, with, and under all sorts of distinctions every day. They experience them in

how they and their siblings are treated, how teachers who are coaches favor their players, in conflict within and between cliques, how schools create honor roles and societies, how teams compete for championships, how peers compete for popularity, and how standardized tests institutionalize partialities for colleges, scholarships, and personal futures. Their world consists of and exists for distinctions. Schools especially are notorious for teaching their students the world's social, athletic, academic, and economic merit systems. No doubt, these distinctions carry over into youth group and Bible study as well, just as they spilled into the lives of the Christians to whom James was writing.

James does not indicate whether the setting for this favoritism is public worship or some social gathering. In the early church, these were usually one in the same (see I Corinthians 11:17ff). The distinctions that James particularly addresses here are economic and social. Membership in the early church was drawn largely from the working class, though members of all social strata increasingly joined the church. The gold ring and fine clothes in James 2:2 may indicate members of what was the equestrian class, that level in the Roman social system of those wealthy enough to own horses who had connections to government offices and access to trade opportunities. (Cf. 4:13 - 5:6.) James is concerned that Christians are importing worldly distinctions into the church whose glory is a crucified carpenter (2:1). Note also that James was highly respected among both Christians and non-Christians in Jerusalem for his piety and simple, non-ostentatious living.

When he suggests that those Christians who give special consideration to the social elite are acting like "judges with evil thoughts," James implies that they are toadies, lackeys, and upwardly mobile social climbers. We call them brown-nosers. Ouch. His allusion is to low-level magistrates who grant legal favors in return for social acceptance and judges who take payoffs from plaintiffs. These are barbed accusations intended to sting.

Does God have a preferential regard for the poor? We tend to say that God does not play favorites, a theme related to this text. Clearly, some Biblical figures like Abraham in the Old Testament and Lydia in the New Testament were materially well off. But texts like 2:5 prompt us to pause and consider similar passages such as Luke 1:51-53 and Luke 4:16-20 along with the Isaiah 61 text that here Jesus deliberately selects to read as the inaugural message for his public ministry. Perhaps James inverts the favoritism situation he is addressing in 2:1-2 in order to get readers to reflect more deeply on their assumptions about who deserves special treatment. Certainly by 2:6-7 he has them wondering.

In 2:8-13, James prescribes the royal law (2:8) as the antidote to the favoritism that is poisoning the Christian community. He cites the Second Great Commandment as Jesus invokes it from Leviticus 19:18 in Matthew 22:39. (See also Galatians 6:2 and Romans 8:2.) James has already referred to this law in 1:25 as "the perfect law, the law of liberty," and will assert it once more in 2:12. Fully understanding this reference to law requires an important exegetical study of how the word "law" is used in different ways in the New Testament. Such a study is beyond our scope here but involves more that just reciting the threes uses of the Law and should include a careful reading of Romans 6-8 and Galatians 2-5. Luther's Commentary on Galatians is helpful on this topic. For now, it is enough to note that James replaces "Here's a good seat for you," and "You stand there," and "Sit on the fl oor by my feet" (2:3, NIV) with "Love your neighbor as yourself " (2:8, NIV). So much for giving special treatment to the already socially and economically advantaged.

But James does not close these thoughts with law. In 2:12-13, he seems to compile several words from Christ, such as from Matthew 6:14-15, 7:1-5 and 8-12 along with Luke 6:37-38, into a succinct statement of justification and sanctification. That is, he summarizes the Christian life as one that is already judged and forgiven on the cross—"judged by the law that gives freedom" (Luther sometimes referred to the Gospel as "the law against the Law")—and now freed to share and practice that forgiveness with others—"because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful." Inversely, of course, those who have been shown mercy in Christ are transformed to show that same mercy to fellow sinners. They recognize that the judgment we want to pronounce upon others is the same judgment God has pronounced on us in Christ: not guilty.

Thus, in 2:13 James can proclaim one of the most powerful Gospel statements in all of Scripture: "Mercy triumphs over judgment!" The Greek word for triumph is *katakachato* which literally means "boasting about a victory" or what we would call bragging rights. Evidently, God does show partiality. He shows partiality and favoritism to sinners, though he makes no distinctions among sinners. It's those who are without sin who have cause for concern. (Cf Acts 10:34-35 and Luke 18:9-14.) See what your young people think about this sort of favoritism and what they think is worth bragging about.

THE ACTIVITIES - THE SOCIAL SCENE

1. The word "clique" comes from a French word that means to make a noise. Cliques are those groups that make noises about themselves in ways that we can identify them. Compose a clique list of who's who in the social scene. (A way to do this without blatantly asking for the cliques is to ask, "How do kids go about identifying or grouping other kids?" This exercise is actually pretty amusing, but don't be too mean-spirited about it!) Then brainstorm some ways that we might make good, practical use of cliques for doing ministry. Consider outreach, evangelism, servant projects, the National Youth Gathering, etc.
2. Re-write or re-verbalize this part of James' letter for your circumstances today. Which group, clique, or social class did you select and target right away? Why them? Next, revise your re-write with another group in mind. Now revise it once more with yourself or your own group in mind. Close this exercise by reading Jesus' "re-write" in Matthew 9:9-13.
3. The social scene can go well for us. It can also be a source of real annoyance and sometimes stress. Think of stress like a rubber band: too little and too much are both bad. Stress—too much and too little—has been studied thoroughly for fifty years now, and whether it has to do with the social scene, the family, athletics, academics, or any other source, we know three things that really do help:
   - Relaxation and prayer when our stress level spikes;
   - A daily practice of deliberately replacing negative thoughts with positive, task-focused ideas and beliefs purposely aimed at changing behavior, not just attitudes; and
   - Staying involved in a faith community.

   (The researchers remain fascinated at how these factors are so closely related to religion!)

   Design one or two stress reduction plans that use all three of these strategies. The strategies work differently with different people so try some different combinations. To maintain a Gospel emphasis and not turn these programs into the legalism of spiritual self-justification projects, select several promises in Scripture to help with strategy #2. (Check the back of your Bible or one of the Bible promise books for ideas.)

THE ACADEMIC SCENE

THE CONTEXT

Academics is a very mixed bag for adolescents. For many, it is a stressful part of what for them is a high-demands, high-expectations environment fostered by parents, teachers, colleges, and careers. But this high-demands, high-expectations environment is a sub-culture, not our entire culture. For many, academics is just part of the background noise, and they don't pay much attention to tests, grades, and college admission other than doing just enough to get by. And many others are somewhere in the middle, doing the best they can to juggle academics with lots of other interests—including church youth group. What's more, the role and context of academics differs for kids depending on whether they are entering middle school, exiting high school, or are somewhere in between. As in the social scene, generalizations have some use in the academic scene, but be careful about over-generalizations.

By the time kids reach adolescence (and no doubt before), they are being inducted into several overlapping self-worth measuring systems. James alerted us to socio-economic measures in Part One, and we have considered cliques and groups as an application for junior and senior high school. Athletic involvement and performance is certainly another measure. Academics is the most structured, calculated, and documented of these systems, and kids are acculturated (and indoctrinated?) into it at an early age. By adolescence, they are to some extent either subscribing to it or dropping out of it.

As a society, we generate a lot of mixed messages about academics and its measure of our value as persons. Education textbooks insist that grades are only a measure of learning, that is, the knowledge the student acquires in the cognitive, affective, and skills domains. But the rest of us know that these grades are used to allocate limited resources such as scholarship money, admission to schools with enrollment caps, and access to professions and careers. Thus, grades are used to apportion rewards and punishments by parents and teachers. An A is good, an F is bad. And now we have moved beyond the cognitive, affective, and skills domains and entered the ethical-spiritual domain.

Ponder here Paul's reminder that it is not against flesh and blood that we content but against the spiritual principalities, powers, and world rulers of this present darkness. See Ephesians 6:12ff, Galatians 4:3, and II Corinthians 10:3-4. These powers and principalities gain access to our spiritual lives through the things of this world just as the serpent used the tree in the garden. Luther develops this insight in his explanation to the First Commandment in the Large Catechism. This is not to say that trees or academics are evil but to remember the Reformation insight that the spiritual is not above the material and the material is not above the spiritual.

The academic systems we participate in, promote, and administer preach a certain sort of news about who we are as persons and about our self-worth. The self-esteem movement is in part a response to the academic valuation of persons. It is an effort to offset the merit system of academics and re-locate ones worth intrinsically in the self. Christians are ambivalent about this movement because, while it asserts the value of every person, it neglects the reality of sin. Meanwhile, to the extent that schools include self-esteem programs in formal education, kids get mixed messages about academics.

One more indication of our mixed reactions to academics is our almost universal contempt for standardized tests like achievement tests, the ACT, and the SAT. Countless well-educated, test-taking people maintain that these tests are meaningless and measure nothing about, well, anything! Yet these same folks would never employ the services of a surgeon who didn't pass the medical board exam, a lawyer who didn't pass the bar exam, or an airline pilot who didn't pass the ground school exam. The point here is not that standardized tests are legitimate or bogus. The point is that we just don't know quite what to think about academics. And neither do our kids.

So, is academics a modern Pharisaism by which we achieve some form of self-justification? Is academics a new kind of indulgences by which we use a merit system to gain the approval, acceptance, and self-worth we crave? Is academics the latest inquisition that separates the modern secular faithful from the modern secular heretics and sends the heretics into the purgatory of bonehead English and general math class?

Lutherans might say that academics is part of our civil righteousness by which we live out our vocation in this world in service to our neighbors, both Christians and non-Christians. Academics belongs to the kingdom of this world and doesn't really measure our value in the kingdom of heaven—only Jesus' intercession for us there counts for a passing grade. But young people won't figure this out on their own. We can help.

Yet even when they figure out this distinction, they then have to wonder whether the Gospel really makes any difference in this present world of grades, cliques, activities, and money. It's not easy to avoid turning the Gospel into legalistic sanctimony ("I have to get good grades because I owe it to God.") or libertine antinomianism ("I can coast or even cheat because God will forgive me anyway.") or any number of variations on these two. (Re-read Matthew 7:13-14.) Our text for the academic scene as a stressor for youth is Acts 12:20-25 and the death of Herod Agrippa. Agrippa is a success-and-disaster case study in upward mobility whose life suggests lots of questions about going to the right schools, hanging with the right people, making the right moves, cutting corners, and getting ahead.

Our saving faith is certainly personal, but it is just as certainly not other-worldly or merely interior and private. In I Corinthians 1:23, Paul calls the Gospel a "scandal" (skandalon, stumbling block) for a reason. The Gospel intrudes into our lives and this world's systems to revalue both them and us. As the Gospel certifies our well-being with God and our triumph (James 2:13, Romans 8:37) over sin, time, and death, it also draws us into confl ict with the present order of the world (see Acts 14:19-22). And, by doing so, it changes our projects and our goals in this world. So your young people may find the Gospel an even greater offense than the merit systems of this world!

THE TEXT — ACTS 12:20-25

In 40 A.D., after 34 years of rule by Roman officials such as Pontius Pilate, the Roman emperor Claudius added Jerusalem and all Judea to the realm of his Jewish friend, Herod Agrippa, who had been appointed king over most of Palestine three years earlier. Of the several Herods in the New Testament account, Agrippa is the Herod of our text. (Check a Bible dictionary for the family tree ranging from Herod the Great in the Christmas story to Herod Agrippa II who heard Paul's testimony in Acts 26.)

In many ways, Agrippa was an informed, savvy, and effective king who completed several public works projects among his Gentile cities and generally supported Jewish interests and the temple worship in Jerusalem. But in other ways, Agrippa was an imposter who misrepresented himself for his own worldly gain and took possession of what did not truly belong to him. In short, he was a cheat.

For example, at the Feast of Tabernacles in October, 41 A.D., he read Deuteronomy aloud at the temple as prescribed in Deuteronomy 31:10 but, despite a throne that was provided, he remained standing through his entire reading. At one point in the reading, he even burst into tears as a show of piety. However, Agrippa was not a sincere and religious Jew. He was merely a good politician who knew how to play to the crowd. His gestures endeared him to both the Jewish authorities and the Jewish population, a people not easy to govern.

As a grandson of Herod the Great, Agrippa was not strictly of Jewish lineage (though he did have a Jewish grandmother) and certainly wasn't from David's family. The Herods came from Idumea, outside of Israel, and were appointed by Rome as overlords of the Jews. They were usurpers and not Biblically qualified kings. Following a series of Roman miliary governors like Pilate, Agrippa had inveigled his way into power through school and family connections. But unlike his grandfather, Agrippa's brief rule until his death in 44 A.D. was popular with the Jews and accepted by the Gentiles and definitely preferable to the military governors.

Agrippa was no friend of the young Christian church in Jerusalem. The circumstantial evidence indicates that as more Gentiles became Christians (see Acts 10), the Jewish religious authorities communicated to Agrippa their concern that this growing religious movement would increasingly compromise Jewish teachings, practice, and worship (consider the problems discussed in Acts 15). As recorded by Luke in Acts 12:1-3, "Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church. He killed James the brother of John with the sword [not James the Just who wrote the Letter of James], and when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also." (Become familiar with the content of the whole chapter because Luke sets up Herod's death throughout the story.)

After his failed and frustrating episode with Peter (Acts 12:3-19, an amusing story in itself, especially vv 14-16), Agrippa traveled down to the coastal Roman city of Caesarea, probably for that city's celebration of the Emperor Claudius' birthday. He was met there by diplomatic parties in large numbers from his regions up the coast around Tyre and Sidon. The year before, Agrippa had severely punished some young non-Jewish lads who had placed a statue of the emperor inside a Jewish synagogue in that area—a very politically incorrect move. The population in this Gentile region angrily protested the boys' punishment (probably a scourging—recall Mel Gibson's movie, "The Passion") and relations soured between Agrippa and his subjects in that part of his kingdom. But that region depended on food supplies from other areas of the kingdom, so these ambassadors had come to reconcile their differences with Agrippa. Agrippa, always the politician, was happy to accommodate them.

Josephus, a Jewish historian in that period, reports the event of Agrippa's death in this way. At daybreak on the second day of the festival games, Agrippa, wearing robes of silver thread, went to the amphitheater to address the crowds. As the morning sun reflected off his robes, he made a speech which the diplomatic parties applauded enthusiastically. Luke quotes them as shouting, "The voice of a god and not a man!" Both Josephus and Luke note that Agrippa was at that very moment struck with illness because he did not renounce these acclaims of his divinity as he should have done according to both Caesar in Rome and the Jews and Christians in Jerusalem. (Compare Acts 14:8-18.) Agrippa died five days later.

So what does all this have to do with the academic scene for our kids? Agrippa is one of history's great get-ahead guys. The Herod family had political ties with Rome who had appointed the first Herod (Herod the Great) as their client king over Israel back in 37 B.C. Following the death of his grandfather and father, Agrippa arrived in Rome at age fi ve with his mother who had connections with the imperial family. She brought him there to receive an imperial education, the best in the world, where he was raised within the emperor's household. And Agrippa excelled in all ways. Education and connections–what more could you ask for? Agrippa's answer to that was partying. He squandered a fortune on good times in Rome, used his connections with the imperial court to borrow more money, and spent it all on more good times.

By the age of 33 he had to leave town to escape his debts and went back to Palestine. Agrippa's sister, Herodias, who had married their uncle, Herod Antipas (the Herod of Jesus' trial), had long since dispatched John the Baptist when John imprudently condemned that marriage, and she was still infl uential. She arranged for an offi cial position for Agrippa in the city of Tiberias on the Sea of Galilee. (Are you following all this?) But Agrippa antagonized the other local Roman offi cials with his manipulating ways and had to leave that town, too. He managed to borrow more money, returned to Rome, paid off his old debts with the new debts, and cozied up to the imperial family, renewing his good connections there. The guy was an operator.

Agrippa was smart in his formal education and smart in the school of life. We would say he had book smarts and street smarts. His character fl aws could get him into trouble, its true. When he returned to Rome, he was later imprisoned for six months for making an ill-considered remark about the current emperor, Tiberius. But he could maneuver his way through life's twists and turns. And isn't that what it's all about? See what your young people think about this colorful character, his ways of making the grade, and what happens to him in the end.

THE ACTIVITIES

1. School practices like honor role, awards assemblies, and National Honor Society always make for a lively exchange. Conduct a discussion about these practices beginning with Acts 12:21-23. Then include Jesus' instruction in Luke 17:7-10. (This is also a good time to recite the confession of sin we use in the liturgy on Sunday morning with particular attention to what we actually deserve.) Add in Paul's words in Philippians 2:1-11. Now turn to Matthew 25:14-23 (and the rest of this parable if time permits) and apply this content to the discussion. Pull the pieces together and draw a Biblically informed conclusion about the place of academics in the life of a Christian disciple.
2. Herod's is not the only death recorded in this chapter. Read the earlier story of Peter's imprisonment and escape, and what happened to the sentries who were guarding Peter. Consider how consequential and costly the Gospel is both for those who believe in Jesus and those who don't. Generate a collection of Biblical examples of disturbingly bad things that happen in connection with this "good news" ("Gospel" literally means "good news"). Finish by somebody present spelling out plainly what is finally at stake in this good news.

3. Achievement motivation has been studied for a long time, and people seem to have one of three orientations to achievement, whether academic, financial, athletic, professional or sorts: underachievers, over-achievers, and high achievers. Under-achievers set either low goals that are easy to attain or unrealistically high goals for which they cannot be faulted when missed. They then give themselves low expectations so they avoid responsibility. Over-achievers set high goals bordering on impossible and then persist to the exclusion of other activities in life. Their persistence often brings success but at the expense of other goals and relationships. High achievers set reasonably high goals and attain them through the work of developing the needed knowledge and skills plus the work of persistence. They sustain their persistence through a balanced life of varied interests and relationships rather than blunt force. Poll your group to see how well these achievement profiles describe the participant. Consider each of these profiles to see whether each fits with living under the Law or under the Gospel.

THE COMPETITIVE SCENE

THE CONTEXT

It is tempting to focus this youth stress section on athletics, but young people struggle with high and low expectations in other competitive activities besides sports. The band geeks can stress out about first chair competition just like the jocks can about starter positions. In some schools, intramural sports are more vicious than interscholastics. While art shows are not especially cutthroat competition, racing the clock to finish a production can be stressful on young creators. Academics are also part of the competitive scene for some of our kids who strive for slots in National Honor Society, scholarships, and graduation honors. And, as we have considered, the social scene can be the source for plenty of competitive stress. So can the family setting.

If you want to start an argument, just make a claim about the nature of competition—it all goes back to sibling rivalry; it started in the Garden with Adam and Eve; it's our evolutionary survival-of-the-fittest nature; it always comes down to misperceptions about imagined differences—and notice that the argument you've got is itself competitive! Whatever its nature may be, competition is part of kids' lives and their development. Most kids for the most part handle it fairly well, but how they understand competition and manage it has some important implications for their identity, their sense of competency, and what they may believe down deep about justification.

Identity, perhaps the central developmental task for adolescents, is both internal and external. The young person must gain an increasingly consistent inner sense of self, but that subjective identity must be compared with and confirmed by others. What others say about us does matter because for identity to solidify, I must not only be the same as or like I was yesterday but also the same as or like these others also. Even in indivualistic societies such as ours, identity is found in the interplay of self and community. Now consider the way we "do adolescence." Unless we're home-schooling (and this is not a case for or against home-schooling), we move them all in together for hours each day to let them rummage among themselves for parts and pieces of identity. But none of these parts and pieces is holding still, so it's bound to get a little messy and competitive.

Much of one's identity comes from gaining a sense of competency. We are to some extent what we can do. Kids, of course, haven't yet entirely figured out what they can and can't do well. Proverbs 27:17 reminds us that iron sharpens iron. But iron can also flatten iron. On the court, at the piano, on the dance floor, and in icebreakers at the retreat, adolescents are sharpening and flattening each other as they test their physical, verbal, sexual, cognitive, and social skills against one another. Sometimes their explorations for competency complement each other, sometimes they conflict. Both kinds of experiences can yield friendships and respect, but they can also include competition for better and worse.

We know some things about competition. For example, competition leads to more negative outcomes when both parties can threaten each other (no big surprise here); mere freedom and access to communicate does not reduce competitive conflict (somewhat surprising); but third party assistance with communication does reduce competitive conflict, especially if it includes encouragement to be reasonable (interesting!). What's more, constructive communication after a conflict yields positive results more quickly than before a conflict. And the higher the stakes, the more difficult it is to keep competition from leading to negative outcomes. (See Morton Deutsch, Distributive Justice, Yale University Press, 1985.)

But what we especially know about competition is that when it exists within community, that is, where the competitors already share a mutual set of values, beliefs, and convictions, competition can be very constructive as team members cooperate and teams compete within a shared culture: thus, iron sharpens iron. But when competition occurs outside community between parties that do not share a mutual world view, or where there simply is no community, it is inevitably destructive. It becomes a non-zero-sum game that creates what is called a "social trap," a situation in which the conflicting parties, by rationally pursuing their own self-interest, become caught in mutually destructive behavior. This stuff is worth teaching kids. (See Activity 3 in this study and any chapter or textbook on social psychology for "The Prisoner's Dilemma.")

One more thing to keep in mind about the stress of competition is that the kid's search for competency, when unguided, can easily become the sinner's self-justification project. The Pharisees whom Jesus confronted in the Gospels are conspicuous examples of self-justification as they sought to use their scrupulous adherence to the law to become righteous, worthwhile, and acceptable. That was their measuring system. We use different

measuring systems for our self-justification projects today such as GPAs, scoreboards, National Honor Societies, team cuts, and popularity, and financial net worth.

Now, perhaps we tell them that these criteria have nothing to do with whether God loves them. But they also seem to keep hearing from many of us that "God is in control," so they've at least got to wonder why they succeed or fail in their various efforts. In their search for significance, they must find some way to verify that significance. That verification, we know, is nailed on the cross. But they don't especially know that, and the old Eve and the old Adam will seek their significance and justification everywhere but the cross. And competitive activity is one of the world's primary ways for testing competency, validating significance, and justifying one's existence.

THE TEXT — I SAMUEL 18:1-16

At this point in the long and complex Saul-and-David story, David has already been identified as the next king after Saul (though how widely this is known is not clear, I Samuel 16:1-13) and has disposed of Goliath. He is becoming a national military figure as the tribes of Israel continue their struggle against other city-states to secure their own presence as a nation in the land of Canaan. Presently, the Israelites control the inland hill country while the Philistines, their chief foes, occupy a string of cities along the Mediterranean coast. The war is for permanent status in the land and who will manage and benefit from the major trade routes that pass through these areas. In terms of salvation history, the issue is preserving God's people, Israel, from whom will come the Messiah. The family of the Messiah, as we know, will be David's. But he doesn't know that yet.

Chapter 18 begins with the unlikely friendship of David and Jonathan, Saul's son and heir-apparent as the next king. David was known to Saul and his family (16:14-23) but evidently only as an occasional visitor at their home. (There was no court or palace at this time. The king seemed to function chiefly as military leader for the combined tribes.) The exchange that Jonathan monitors between David and Saul was probably longer than what 17:58 includes and, whatever was said, Jonathan was powerfully impressed by David. We know from later episodes that Jonathan is neither wimp nor whipping boy (I Samuel 14, 20, and 31). Yet the combination of David's action against Goliath (which neither he nor his father were willing to undertake) plus this unrecorded conversation persuaded Jonathan that David was God's chosen man. Only this conclusion can explain 18:4. (Perhaps Jonathan had also talked to Samuel or David's brothers—I Samuel 16:13—but this is impossible to confirm.)

Given the media portrayals today, you may need to address the homosexuality notions about David and Jonathan that some recent commentators have attached to 18:1-3. The simple way to respond to this insinuation is with the purity laws of Leviticus 18-20, esp 18:22 and 20:13. Israel was a nation of covenant laws with God, and the people knew these laws. They certainly did not always keep them, but the text gives us no content to read beyond this anything other than genuine friendship, whereas other texts in I Sam clearly spell out instances of sin (cf I Samuel 13:1-15). And the Bible definitely is not coy about instances of sexual sin but instead reports them graphically (cf II Samuel 11-12).

The competition and running feud between Saul and David sets in at 18:7. As your study Bible may indicate, the womens' song was probably innocent enough, merely using the typical poetic parallelism of following one illustration with an expanded illustration for emphasis. Since Saul was in fact the king, they would have to cite his exploits first. However, Saul does not hear it this way. Saul had some optional perceptions to choose from. He could have dismissed the victory songs as the usual crowd reaction and just ignored it as beneath his concern. He could have taken the posture of the senior commander who knew how to pick good lieutenants. He could have carried himself as the wise king, ultimately in charge of all outcomes, taking credit for all successes. He could have played the magnanimous ruler, drawing attention to himself by generously acknowledging David. But instead he takes the weak position of jealousy and competition that will ultimately lead to the undoing of his kingship.

What are we to make of the problematic information in 18:10 about "an evil spirit from God" coming upon Saul? This is not an easy text. It is also the second such report, similar to I Samuel 16:14. The interpreters and commentators are not sure what to do with these statements. Consider the following:

- Josephus, the 1st Century A.D. Jewish historian, offers this explanation: "But as for Saul, some strange and demonic disorders came upon him and brought upon him such suffocations as were ready to choke him" (Antiquities, 6.8.2).

- A curious passage that could be related to this phenomenon is in I Kings 20:13-28 where Micaiah, a true prophet, is competing with Zedikiah, a false prophet, and describes a spirit sent by God to entice the false prophets of Israel (now the Northern Kingdom) to speak lies.
- Some commentators suggest that this evil spirit was a condition of discontent that God imposed on Saul due to Saul's continued disobedience.
- Many today read evidence of clinical depression or bipolar disorder in this description and throughout Saul's story. (Psychologizing about spiritual activity makes some Christians nervous. Other Christians note that all activity, human and otherwise, remains under God's purview.)
- A somewhat Law-and-Gospel slant might combine Jesus' description of the Holy Spirit's ministry in John 16:8-9, convincing or convicting the world concerning sin, with the affliction of God's Word of Law. Thus, the Holy Spirit uses the Law to condemn Saul and evoke from him a response of spiritual anxiety to move him toward repentance and trust in God's promises. If we hesitate about God's involvement in "evil" (18:10) in so active and direct a way, we might review the first two chapters of Job and also Isaiah's perspective in Isa 45:7, an important text for Luther. (But this view makes questionable assumptions about the work of the Holy Spirit prior to the incarnation of Christ.)

In any event, I Samuel 16:14 and 18:10 are difficult texts about which thoughtful Christians may disagree. Young, serious readers of the Bible should be made aware of these issues. Saul's solution to this rivalry is found in 18:13 where he evidently hopes David will be overwhelmed and killed in battle (see 18:17-25). The plan fails, the competition and rivalry continue, and David ascends to greatness while Saul descends into greater distress and finally death. But the results of this competition may not end with Saul. We have to wonder: is Saul's scheme the source of David's later idea for doing away with Bathsheba's husband, Uriah? (II Samuel 11:14ff) See what your young people think about this conflict between David and Saul and how their behavior so long ago is also so "today" and not just "so last week."

THE ACTIVITIES

1. Create a list of different competitive situations in which many or any of us find ourselves. Some will be obvious, some will not. Next, try to mark each one according to whether we are in that situation by choice or by circumstance. Some will be obvious, some will not. Then choose some examples from the list and, as with Saul in I Samuel 18:8-9, consider what options we have for responding to and dealing with these situations.
2. Competition seems to be about winning or losing. Winning or losing seems to be about being recognized and accepted or being ignored and neglected. Being accepted or neglected seems to be about being good or bad. Good or bad seems to be about being saved or lost. Put these either/or's up on poster paper or a marker board and consider whether they connect in this way or not really.
    - Whether there is agreement about any connections or not, next read and add these standard Gospel texts to the wall or marker board (you could prepare enlarged photocopies or handouts):
    - Rom 3:23—For all have sinned [literally "missed the target or goal"] and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by his grace as a gift.
    - Eph 2:8-10—For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.
    - II Cor 5:21—God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.
    - Gal 1:6-9—I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!

Now conduct an informal debate about competition as a way people try to achieve their own value, significance, and righteousness (justification) and whether it is one of the different, false gospels that Paul warns about in Gal 1:9-9.

3. "The Social Trap Game" (sometimes called "The Prisoners' Dilemma") has been the topic of hundreds of research studies. It demonstrates the dilemma of a "social trap," a situation in which two persons or groups end in mutually destructive conflict by otherwise sensibly pursuing their own maximum self-interest.

   You will need two $5 bills and two $20 bills for a total of $50 in the cash pool. When finished, the most you will be out is $20. This much cash makes the demonstration interesting, though you can use a lesser amount. You will also need two handouts (you may want enough handouts for the whole group and also an overhead transparency), each with the following instructions:

   Points = dollars from the $50 cash pool. You will receive a dollar for each positive point you have received at the end of the demonstration.

   A. If you show a thumbs up and the other person shows a thumbs up, you each receive 5 points (+5).

   B. If you show a thumbs up but the other person shows a thumbs down, then you will lose 20 points (-20) and the other person will receive 20 points (+20).

   C. If you show a thumbs down but the other person shows a thumbs up, then you will receive 20 points (20+) and the other person will lose 20 points (-20).

   D. If you show a thumbs down and the other person shows a thumbs down, then you will each lose 5 points (-5).

   Select two volunteers in some quick, simple manner and sit them back-to-back so they cannot observe each other's response. Display the cash pool so that all can see that the money is real and available for the two volunteers. Then give each of them the instructions handout and talk them through it. When ready, allow them just five to fifteen seconds to make their thumbs-up or thumbsdown decision–any longer and they forfeit their opportunity to another player.

   After the demonstration, pay off one, both, or neither of the volunteers and ask the group or class to analyze what happened and why. As we ponder the game, we realize that the two volunteers are caught in a competitive dilemma. If they both choose A, they both benefit by receiving $5 but not $20. If they choose B, they act against their own interest, receiving nothing (though they benefit the other person). If they choose C, they act for their own interest but against the other person's interest. And if they choose D, they act against their own and the other person's interest. (When conducting this activity with kids, any of the options could occur including D if they both get silly.)

   On any single run of the demonstration, you serve your own best interest by choosing C: you can't lose anything and you might gain $20. But the same is true for the other person, so if you both pursue your own best interest and choose C, you both end up with nothing. Yet this "social trap" is the usual outcome. Had both people opted for A, both would be $5 ahead.

   We get caught in social traps when competition is not tempered by some amount of cooperation such as shared information (like knowing the results of over-fishing the Grand Banks or the whale population which ruined both markets); or by not moderating our own self-interest (such as with the golden rule). Another example is the Federal Reserve Board's regulation of banks and its legal ability to declare "bank holidays." The Fed can do this to prevent a run on the banks when too many customers try to withdraw all their money (good for the saver in the short run), precipitating an economic recession (bad for the saver and everyone in the long run).

   Social traps occur for young people when arguments escalate (verbal competition) or groupthink escalates when planning a prank ("top this" competition). We may be seeing social traps in athletics when some combination of players, coaches, offi cials, and/or fans begin taking competitive actions that seem in the interest of one party but cancel out the best interests of all.

   Explore this phenomenon with kids and whether it is part of the competitive scene and a cause for stress and problems in their lives. It may or may not be. Try applying some Law / Gospel analysis on it.

PROFILES IN YOUTH STRESS

THE FUTURE SCENE

THE CONTEXT

The future scene for kids entering adolescence is not the same as it is for those exiting adolescence. And the scene varies a lot in between. Consider the time horizon for some young people you know. None are planning their retirement. But some are thinking career while others won't even think about homework. We work with all these kids.

As a society, we're entirely inconsistent about kids taking ownership for goals and their future. We teach and promote democratic principles but our practices in high schools are probably counterproductive—reflect a moment on how meaningful student government is. We encourage kids to think for themselves but program their lives for them with structured activities from school to athletics to youth group. We tell kids to grow up but persist in treating them like kids. And we have no idea even how to define what it is to be an adult (an exercise included in the activity section of this Bible study on the future scene).

What's more, developmental psychologists and educators don't help us much on this topic. Some argue that we've truncated childhood and rush our children into adult experiences, pressures, and problems, creating confused, dysfunctional adults. Others maintain that we have become a youth-oriented society, extending adolescence into the late twenties and creating adults adrift in life with no direction. Despite all this ambiguity, most kids do pretty well at moving into the future. The research literature consistently reports that four out of five kids move through adolescence and into young adulthood without major problems (though, inversely, that says one out of five do not).

Given the developmental range in adolescence, this fourth YouthStress Bible study on goals and the future uses a general rather than specific text (I Corinthians 3:5-22, building on the foundation of Christ) that keeps the focus on the Gospel but can be adapted to different ages. Below are two alternate yet complementary sets of generalized goals for adolescents. These may help you think about where your kids are in their orientation to the future and to middle- and long-range goals, and how they may respond to the Biblical text. Consider both sets critically, looking for insights but also for conceptual and practical shortcomings. Neither is overtly religious. Would you "translate" or reformat these or other goals into more deliberate faith language and aims?

The Significant Seven (Glenn, 1988): This set of goals suggest three beliefs we can help young people internalize and four skills we can help them acquire. As you examine them, notice how they are interlinked with each other. For example, the belief that one has the power to influence reinforces the skills at dialogue and meaningful exchange, and vice versa. Also consider whether beliefs lead to skills or skills create beliefs? Ponder these seven goals and how they may inform your work with early, middle, or later adolescents.

Three Beliefs

1. I'm capable.
2. I'm significant.
3. I have the power to influence.

Four Skills

1. Self-discipline, self-control
2. Dialog and meaningful exchange
3. Responsibility, dealing with consequences, managing cause-and-effect
4. Judgment, analyzing situations, and decision making

Six Goals for Young People (Moulds, 2001): These goals have a psychological slant with a social and community emphasis. They characterize our work with young people in terms of relationships. Those who adopt or adapt them tend to view kids as developing their capacity and competency for meaningful personal and community relationships. Would you sequence them differently or web them in some particular way?

1. To be reality-oriented
2. To become appropriately independent
3. To develop independence and interdependence in the context of community
4. To interpret their own behavior

5. To recognize, identify, set, and respect boundaries
6. To begin to integrate the parts and pieces of their lives into a Biblically coherent belief system

Discussions with young people about the future invariably raise questions about, "What is God's will for my life?" That topic is too big and too typically convoluted to adequately address here. (See "The Call and God's Will," R. Moulds, in Lutheran Education Journal, Fall, 2005, for a Law/Gospel, Hidden God / Revealed God perspective on this topic.) The brief answer is that God wills us to "be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth" (I Timothy 2:4 and to love God and love our neighbor as oneself (Matthew 22:34-40). Meanwhile our kids, like us, will have to work out their salvation in fear and trembling (Philippians 2:12) as they explore the abilities God has given them and discover the opportunities He presents to them.

THE TEXT: I CORINTHIANS 3:5-22

I Corinthians is one of at least three letters Paul sent to the Christians at Corinth (I Corinthians 5:9). In this letter he first affirms their saving faith (I Corinthians 1:4-9) and then addresses several specific difficulties their congregation is experiencing. Paul himself founded this particular congregation (Acts 18:1ff, I Corinthians 4:15) and worked hard to establish and preserve it. Early in this letter, he reproves them for persisting in a childish faith (I Corinthians 3:1-2) and labors to move them from remaining "babes in Christ" to a stronger, more informed spirituality by which they can address their difficulties with "the mind of Christ" (I Corinthians 2:14-16).

In chapter 3 Paul discusses the growth and future he–and more importantly, God–has in mind for his Corinthians. And this section gives us an opportunity to help our young people reflect on their future, their pursuits, and their goals. In 3:5-9, Paul uses the standard agricultural metaphor for growth. In several ways, he endorses the work of planting and watering given to him and Apollos by God (3:5). But in the same breath, he eclipses their work, crediting God with all good outcomes.

Though he does not reference the image here, Paul may have in mind Jesus' illustration of the vine and the branches (John 15:1ff) with which he flatly declares, "Apart from me you can do nothing" (15:5). Jesus doesn't say we can do some, or a little without him. He says we can do nothing. While this truth has implications for all activity (Psalm 24:1, Romans 4:17, Acts 17:28), the point that Paul echoes has to do with our activity as disciples for God's kingdom.

But we should not limit this activity to conspicuously pious and "spiritual" conduct like worship and Bible reading. Paul spends most of his letter addressing decisions and conduct about ordinary matters like going to court (ch 6), buying food in the market place (chs 8-10), and hair styles (ch 11). Throughout the letter, he does not lay down new rules and laws for their activities but instead teaches them sound principles for living and acting under God's grace. This is the sort of growth and future he has in mind for the Corinthians as he helps them consider their goals. For a full and balanced summary for applying these Gospel principles see I Corinthians 10:23-33. (By the way, I Corinthians is a great letter for an extended study with kids, especially older high school youth. It provokes nearly all the important questions they should be asking and answering for themselves.)

At the end of 3:9, Paul switches metaphors from growing to building. In doing so he makes a gradual shift in emphasis from his and Apollos' work to the work, projects, goals, and outcomes of his readers (3:10, "Let each man take care how he builds…"). For his readers, Paul limits the foundation on which we build our lives to just one—Jesus Christ—but, of course, Christians and non-Christians alike could use any of a number of other foundations for life. Paul gives his readers credit for at least understanding no other foundation can even be considered. But this could make a good discussion with kids. They have many to choose from, and friends all around them are making other choices or having those choices made for them.

Despite the many goofy things these Corinthian Christians are doing (gross sexual immorality, 6:12-20, gross abuse of the Lord's Supper, 11:17-24, and other things for which you and I would be roundly condemned), Paul does not challenge their saving faith because they at least have the foundation of Christ in place. (Can we agree with Paul, given their behavior?) But at 3:12 he begins a severe challenge to what they are building on the foundation. His materials list from gold to straw is not random but quite deliberate.

Walk your kids through this list. Note that some of these building materials will last and stand the test of fire (3:13) while other materials will perish. The illustration Paul implies goes something like this: "Imagine

spending a lifetime building your life's work with shoddy material. Imagine all that sweat, time, and effort. And then imagine how it all comes to nothing in the end. You went to all that trouble, thinking what you were doing was worthwhile. You build something you thought had lasting value. And in the end it turns out to be a waste. It all goes up in smoke. It didn't count. Fifty years of effort shot to pieces." Share this with the kids. And then ask them, "So what do you want to do with your life? You want to spend the next fifty years building a house of playing cards or, as Paul says, of hay or straw?"

Another question the kids will raise: Are there levels in heaven? Do we build ourselves a nicer, higher room in God's house (John 14:2-3), maybe even a penthouse, by what we do with what God has entrusted to us in this life? The Bible is mostly nondescript when it comes to heaven, though we do get some images such as Revelations 21:1-4, Revelations 22:1-5, and a fascinating Old Testament version in Isaiah 65:17-25. But the Bible doesn't offer much evidence for levels in heaven, and Paul doesn't explain the reward promised in I Corinthians 3:14. Perhaps it is best linked to Jesus' parable of the talents in Mt 25:14ff, and the reward we hope for is simply to hear Jesus say to us, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

Paul says clearly that whatever the outcome of our work and effort, our salvation is certain (3:15). But he just as clearly says that a loss of some sort is possible. The text gives us no content to believe that this loss is anything other than our own dismay that we wasted a lifetime on trivial pursuit and have nothing to offer for the kingdom in the end. This is not to say that such an offering is required. It is to say that God invites us to join him in his work, his fi eld, his building, and he joyfully enables, increases and receives our contribution (Matthew 9:37-38).

Following his building metaphor and the real possibilities of reward and loss, Paul defines his imagery further by evoking the temple. It's surprising that kids today continue to value our being compared to a (or the) temple, but they still do. In 3:16-17, Paul intends to provoke some anxiety, but it is a godly anxiety (cf II Corinthians 7:10). The image and warning are vivid, and kids will often talk about them. But Paul does not close his discussion here with law. In 3:22, he finishes his theme of building a life by building on the foundation with a great promise. Luther often cited this verse as a comprehensive summary of the Gospel and its power for bold Christian living.

See what your kids think this rich, colorful text says to any stress they may be experiencing about their life's future, goals, and purpose.

THE ACTIVITIES

1. Bring in some packs of playing cards. As a demo, build a small house of cards ahead of time or as you introduce this Bible study or this activity. Decide on a way to work in I Corinthians 3:12 and any needed context. Distribute the cards and have participants spend a little time building some card houses. Then explore the analogy, noting points such as being so careful about building a worthless structure, how time-consuming it is, how fragile and perishable the structure is, using the wrong material for an important project, wasting time on mindless diversions and distractions, and so forth. (You might consider Paul's tent analogy also in II Corinthians 4:16 - 5:10. A small pop-up tent makes a good object lesson for a chapel or youth worship talk.)
2. Christians of different denominations, spiritual traditions, and points of view may read the sanctification content of I Corinthians 3:10-15 as more of a justification text, mixing our works with God's grace. Try your own informal survey of ideas by collecting some assorted views on this text (no need to include names or specific congregations) or having the kids collect some views. Consider cordially asking some local pastors, other colleagues, some assorted adults, some young people, etc. If you have the kids do this, you may need to coach them on how to do this in a gentle, inquiring, non-confrontational, "we're-just-trying-to-figure-this-out" way. (Kids often enjoy doing these person-on-the-street interviews if they have a specific, concrete task.) Use the responses to compare and contrast different approaches to life goals, directions, and aims.
3. Over the past twenty years, much research has been done on how young people develop a practical or impractical approach to their goals, achievement, and future. Generally, a young person takes on one of three styles that characterize her or his approach to life:

   mastery orientation: an outlook from which persons focus on the task rather than their current

abilities. They have a generally positive attitude, and generate solution-oriented strategies that improves their abilities and overall performance. They are not always successful, but often are. They are actively engaged in life activities.

helpless orientation: an outlook from which persons focus on their lack of ability, information, and experience. They attribute their struggles, difficulty, and problems to their own personal inadequacies and have a generally negative or woe-is-me attitude (that includes boredom and apathy). They are not always unsuccessful, but often are. They display a non-adaptive approach to tasks and a constricted set of skills and interests. They tend to be passive in life, being the observer or consumer (movies, TV, etc.) of others' activities.

performance orientation: an outlook from which persons focus on the success/failure and win/lose performance outcome of the situation rather than the long-term net gain of experience and mastery. They assign worth and self worth according to various ways of scoring life, and their attitude and sense of success varies with the score, not with quality or purpose in life. They select activities according to whether the outcome can be measured or scored in immediate or short-term intervals.

To help kids reflect on these orientations, involve them in a moderately challenging game or task. For instance, bring in some 100 piece puzzles but put each set of pieces in its own bag without the puzzle's name or the box with the its picture. Have the kids individually or in groups of two or three try to assemble the puzzle. Listen for what kind of things they say and watch for how they go about the process of assembling the puzzle without any idea of what it is. Consider timing them and maybe adding a prize to heighten any performance orientation. When done, share with them the three orientations above and ask them to relate these orientations to the I Corinthians 3:5-22 text. You might also conduct a matching exercise between these three orientations and Galatians 5:16-24, the works of the flesh and the fruit of the Spirit.