

youthESource Bible Study

Who is Jesus? Who are We? Lessons for Growing & Walking with Christ

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These seven lessons follow Christ's life, with each study based on a theme of Jesus's character or ministry, focusing on how that aspect relates to our Christian lives today. These lessons are geared to a range of middle and high school audiences, but can of course be adapted and enhanced for more specific age groups. Use the studies as a seven-week series or as part of a retreat.

Part One: The Word Made Flesh

Bible Focus: Christ's life: fully divine and fully man

Student application: We are served by a God who walked and suffered as we did, sacrificing for our sake and fully capable of empathy and care with and for us.

Lesson Opener: What do you know about the Son of God?

In pairs or groups (depending on size of the group), have students work to come up with all that they know about Jesus. Have them create a list as well as a drawn picture of what they imagine He looked like. If students are slow to start, provide some suggestions of subjects (how old was Jesus when He began teaching? Where did He live? Who were His parents? What did He eat?) Allow enough time for them to come up with a solid list, and then discuss and compare the lists and drawings.

Lesson and Verses

The focus of this lesson has to do with Christ's humanity. We are well familiarized with many Biblically-confirmed facts about His life...born to the virgin Mary, turned water into wine, suffered and died...these are actually amazing details, yet somehow we manage to make them mundane. These miraculous happenings remind us that Jesus was GOD. But how about some lesser known life facts? For example...

- No one really knows when Jesus was born (time of year).
- Jesus likely had siblings, cousins or other family members.
- Jesus and John the Baptists were second cousins, about six months apart.
- Jesus made His living as a carpenter. His earthly ministry only lasted about three years.
- Jesus ate, drank, slept, cried and even pooped! (He was human after all!!!)

So why did He do it? What is the significance of Christ's humanity? Using sword drill speed tactics for motivation, help students look up (and discuss) the following passages:

Philippians 2:5-8:

⁵In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

⁶Who, being in very nature God,

did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;

⁷rather, he made himself nothing

by taking the very nature of a servant,

being made in human likeness.

⁸And being found in appearance as a man,

he humbled himself

*by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!*

Jesus was God. He did not have to become human. But God made Himself one of us in an act of complete humility, so that we could be raised up and made like HIM. He became human so that He could take on our pain and ultimately pay for it. We are nothing without God, and nothing without Christ's humanity AND His divinity. He owed us nothing and yet gave us everything.

Hebrews 2:14-18:

¹⁴ Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil— ¹⁵ and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. ¹⁶ For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham's descendants. ¹⁷ For this reason he had to be made like them, ^[k] fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. ¹⁸ Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.

Hebrews 4:14-15:

¹⁴ Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. ¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. ¹⁶ Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

1 Corinthians 15:22:

²² For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.

Jesus Experienced Genuine Human Emotions:

Mark 1:35:

Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.

Christ needed alone time.

Matthew 12:12-13:

¹² Jesus entered the temple courts and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves. ¹³ "It is written," he said to them, "'My house will be called a house of prayer,' but you are making it 'a den of robbers.'"

He got angry.

John 11:35:

Jesus wept.

He got sad.

Since we know Jesus did not sin, it might seem like He was above all humanity. Indeed He was perfect and perfectly divine. But He felt. He loved and lived. Having feelings is not sinful. God knows our feelings all the more because He chose to go through them Himself!

Follow-up Questions

- Why was it necessary for God to become truly human?
Since the wages of sin are death (Romans 6:23), someone had to atone for the sins of humanity. God allowed His son/Himself to become human in order to take on our guilt and pay for it. He received our sins and we receive His righteousness (1 Corinthians 15:22)

- How do we know that God was fully human?
The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us (John 1:14), taking on the likeness of a man (Philippians 2:7). Jesus grew in wisdom and stature (Luke 2:52), just as one of us.
- Was Jesus still fully God?
Yes; while He was completely human He did not forfeit any of His divinity either.
- What else would you want to know about the life of Jesus?
Answers may vary; details surrounding childhood, family, etc...
- Why do we not know much about Christ's early years?
We have been given the information we need to know. Knowing about the developing Jesus is not necessary to understanding how He provides salvation or who He is as God.

Weekly Challenge: Practice humility.

When God took on human form, it was the ultimate act of humility. Jesus took on humble human flesh to reconcile us to Him. This week, look for a way you can be humble. Maybe this means apologizing to someone you have been feeling a grudge towards. Or perhaps it is just asking for help with something you've been trying to do on your own. Pray about it and decide what would help you practice humility. Also, take time this week to pray and truly *listen* to God. Practice stillness and silence with God's Word to open your heart to the Gospel in a new way. God speaks to us through His Word, so read and listen to what He is saying. After doing so, open yourself to sharing that Gospel with others, perhaps someone who has not heard it before or someone you have struggled with in the past.

Part Two: A River, a Voice and a Dove

Bible Focus: Baptism and Trinity; meaning of the Holy Spirit

Student application: We recognize what Christ was willing to do for us and He fills us with the Holy Spirit and His grace.

Lesson Opener: Play a round of “hot potato threes...”

Have students sit or stand in a circle with a ball (or bean bag, etc). Start with a category (songs, candy, toothpaste varieties) and have kids take turns naming three things in that category before coming up with a new category and passing it to someone new. After a few rounds, take a “lightning round” by telling students to each come up with something that comes in threes. See how many you can come up with (tricycle wheels, Goldilocks and the three bears, three little pigs, etc.).

Explain that today we will talk about something else that deals with the number three: the Holy Trinity! What do we know about the Trinity and what does it mean? Can something truly be three and at the same time be one?

Lesson and Verses

Part of the significance of certain events in Christ's life deals with how they reveal who He truly is. One such event proclaims Him as the true Son of God: His Baptism in the Jordan River. The Baptism of Jesus is a story of *preparation*. Here Jesus is beginning His earthly ministry. Prior to Christ came John (second cousin of Jesus), who came beforehand to announce the Messiah, and then baptized Him in order to prepare Him for His ministry. Who was John and how did he know his place? Like Jesus, John the Baptist was born under miraculous and specific circumstances and lived a unique life.

Matthew 3:1-3 (referencing Isaiah 40:3):

In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea² and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”³ This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah:

*“A voice of one calling in the wilderness,
‘Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.’”*

John knew, though, that he was appointed to make way for Jesus. When questioned about who he was, John made sure to point the way towards Christ, the true Messiah:

Matthew 3:11:

“I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”

Jesus knew that He should first be baptized to set the stage for His earthly work and to “fulfill all righteousness” (Matthew 3:15). He submitted to John's baptism (which was for sinners) in order to affirm His identity with sinners. It sets the stage for everything He does as the Christ and points to His death on the cross. In addition, through the event of His baptism, we see all three elements of the trinity in one place.

Matthew 3:13-17:

¹³Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. ¹⁴But John tried to deter him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”

¹⁵Jesus replied, “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.” Then John consented.

¹⁶As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”

In a wild (and admittedly confusing) moment, we see Christ the Son in flesh, in the water. His Father, God, speaks as the Spirit, in the form of a dove, descends. We know that the three persons of the Trinity are “co-eternal and co-equal” (Athanasian Creed). We cannot separate the parts into three distinct lords or put one above another. Here, though, we have all elements of the Trinity coming together to verify and show the significance of who Jesus was. This scene is also the culminating act and purpose of John the Baptist, who declared why he came and how he knew Jesus is Messiah.

John 1:29-34:

²⁹The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! ³⁰This is the one I meant when I said, ‘A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.’ ³¹I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel.”

³²Then John gave this testimony: “I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. ³³And I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, ‘The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.’ ³⁴I have seen and I testify that this is God’s Chosen One.”

John's mission in life all along was to proclaim and prepare for the Messiah. Having seen and baptized Jesus, he knew that Jesus was the one. Through the Word of God and His amazing work within us we know that Christ is the only way to salvation. Whether or not we can entirely wrap our heads around every facet of the Trinity, our faith simply believes in Christ and trusts His Word that He is the way, the truth and the life.

Follow-up Questions

- Why was it important for Jesus to be baptized?

The baptism of Jesus completes His taking on the role of humanity. When He died on the cross, He did so in place of us, to suffer and take on our sins. Baptism is similar in that although He was not sinful, He became washed as a sinner would, allowing our Baptism to have meaning. Martin Luther wrote, “[Christ] accepted [baptism] from John for the reason that He was entering into our stead, indeed, our person, that is, becoming a sinner for us, taking upon Himself the sins which he had not committed, and wiping them out and drowning them in his holy baptism” (Luther’s Works 51:315).

- Is it important for us to be baptized? Why? What does it mean?

Our Baptism is essential and significant in allowing God’s grace to reign supreme in our lives. Luther writes in the Small Catechism: “Baptism works forgiveness of sins, rescues from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe.”

According to Christ’s Great Commission (Matthew 28:19), we are to make believers and baptize them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. When we are baptized, it is not an act that we do but it is what God has done for us. Without our faith and God’s work, it is a meaningless ritual (Luther’s Large Catechism). We may as well take a shower. Baptizing is God’s work of salvation to and for us.

- Do we ever try to turn away an invitation of Christ, like John did?

Of course we do, probably without even realizing it in some cases. John tried to refuse Christ, deeming himself “unworthy,” when truly Jesus was blessing John by making him worthy.

- How can we, like the Baptist, tell others boldly of who Jesus is?

We can live as ambassadors and proclaimers of Christ, unashamed and fearless to declare that He is God. We do this in casual conversation with others as well as bold personal statements when appropriate. As we live out our faith, we will find ourselves in contexts to share the gospel. In these times, we cannot be nervous about consequences of our faith; however, it is also critical to remember that we are called to love. Whenever telling someone about Jesus, we ought to bear in mind an attitude of love and consideration, rather than a purely judgmental condemnation.

- Who is the Holy Spirit and what does it do for us?
The Holy Spirit is the living breathing element of Trinity that works through Word and Sacrament and bestows Christ's gifts on us. It is helpful to look at Luther's explanation of the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed in the Small Catechism: "The Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith. In the same way He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith."
- What elements of the Trinity are hard to wrap our heads around? How can we trust God to fill in those gaps of understanding in our faith?
In our humanity there are always components of God's nature that we will have difficulty understanding fully. Through the Holy Spirit and through trusting God's providence, we know that regardless of our feeble minds He is real and true and Holy. We know the Bible is unerring and that we can believe its words always.

Weekly Challenge: Making changes...

Baptism is a re-birth, a formal proclamation of salvation. Consider taking an attitude of daily re-birth and re-dedication, constantly submitting to God and recognizing that HE works through us in all things. Maybe there are elements of faith that you feel are "yours," that somehow your actions and words secure salvation. Sometimes we get the attitude that "Christianity is in the bag" and we stray from God. Examine your heart to find areas where you struggle in this. Seek to uncover an aspect of faith that may be more difficult for you to comprehend and pray about it. Trust that God knows your need and that He will care for you no matter what.

Part Three: Dedication through the Desert

Bible Focus: Temptation of Christ; meaning and importance of Lent

Student application: Jesus suffered in order to prepare for His ministry; although we can never comprehend what He did for us, we celebrate that He overcame temptation and clung to God's Word in the face of it.

Lesson Opener: It is so tempting...

Start the lesson with an example of the natural enticement of forbidden items...bring an unassuming box filled with donuts, and place in the center of the group. First, tell students to make sure that whatever they do, they must not look at the box. Don't think about it or talk about it. Begin talking; use this time to share some announcements or to introduce the lesson. Throughout the discussion, glance back at the box or walk near it, but scold anyone looking towards it. Then, at last, tell students they may look in it, but they cannot touch what is inside. Pass the box around, sniff deeply of the tempting sugary goodness, but do not pick up or eat the donuts. Suffer through the temptation a bit before allowing students a donut (or perhaps wait until the end of the lesson just to up the patience factor). Explain that today's lesson is about the *temptation* of Jesus.

Lesson and Verses

In this lesson, we will look at the struggle and preparation our Lord endured as He began His earthly ministry.

Matthew 4:1-3:

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ²After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. ³The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread."

Note that this passage states Jesus was LED to be tempted. It was no accident that He wandered into the desert. After His Baptism, the Spirit led Him into a period of trial. This time was by no means easy for Jesus as a human, but it was further proof of His oneness with the Father and confirmation that He could withstand the Devil. It is certainly no joke that just as the Holy Spirit is present, Satan is a real force and will try his best to thwart God's plan. He does this in part by tempting God's people to sin. This he did in the Garden of Eden and succeeded. With Jesus, though, we have opportunity for a new story. "For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive" (1 Corinthians 15:22). Adam and Eve had all they could possibly ask for and yet it somehow was not enough. They were created to be perfect but fell to the idea that they could somehow be God. They sinned and destroyed opportunity for complete communion. On the other hand, Jesus was also born perfect, blameless. He was, in fact, God, yet "did not consider equality with God something to be grasped" (Philippians 2:6) and came to earth in order to undo the effects of the Fall. In the desert, we see Jesus lacking in everything a human needs for survival, yet successfully enduring and resisting Satan's attacks, on three distinct accounts.

The devil tried to prey upon Christ's humanity by first appealing to His natural physical needs. In some ways, verse two of this passage is almost laughable. After forty days of fasting He was hungry...DUH! What human wouldn't be? In fact, Jesus could not have survived without being God. Satan first attacks His physical weakness, inviting Him to just eat something. Look at how Jesus responds in verse 4:

Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'

Jesus uses Scripture, the words of His father, to stand up against the devil. He knows that food is not the only thing that sustains life and that it is more important for Him to be one with the Father. So Satan tries another approach...he uses a quote right back at the Messiah, asking Him to prove His God-hood:

Matthew 4:5-7:

⁵Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. ⁶"If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written:

"He will command his angels concerning you,
and they will lift you up in their hands,
so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'^[a]"

⁷Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'^[a]"

Once again, Jesus uses Scripture to repel temptation, directly asserting that He is not going to provide tricks to show who He is. He knows He does not need to. So in one last effort, the devil tries to convince Him to just give up and switch teams. He advises Him to take the easy way out. He doesn't have to go through with the horrible gruesome death awaiting Him; just bow to the devil...

⁸Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. ⁹"All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me."

¹⁰Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'^[a]"

¹¹Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.

Satan is a trickster. Throughout the Bible we witness His ability to influence and infect people (Eve, Jezebel, Herod, Saul, Ananias and Sapphira, Judas...just to name a few). But he cannot overcome the power of God. Jesus, being Himself God, passed the test. He knew what He came to do and withstood Satan's schemes and lies. Now, since Christ took on flesh, this temptation (just as His violent crucifixion later) doubtless was no easy task. This makes it all the more significant. Jesus can comprehend our difficulty and aid us when tempted. We know He is reliable because He suffered, as well.

Hebrews 4:15:

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.

Ever have the feeling that teachers should do their own assignments so they understand the torture they put their students through? Well, Jesus did the ultimate assignment first. He has been there. He knows and understands and is ready when we need Him. And because Christ overcame temptation, we can take comfort even when we fail.

1 Corinthians 10:13:

*No **temptation** has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.*

Yes, God provides a way out but as fallen creatures we do not always take it. We still fall to temptation, but our Savior did not. His defeat of Satan is the reason we can take hope and relief in what He did.

Follow-up Questions

- Why is it important that Jesus was tempted?
It is significant that Jesus was tempted because we see a reversal from the original story of the fall. He clung to God and overcame Satan, which solidified His role as Savior and ability to take our place and take on our sins. Jesus came to make right what humans mess up. He did not give in and can provide us a way out of bondage to temptation.
- What kinds of things are tempting to us?
Pride, vanity, selfish ambition, worldly pleasures, success, distraction...just to start.

- Is temptation a sin? When does it become one?
Temptation itself is not a sin, as we know that Jesus did not sin and yet was tempted. When we make the choice to act upon temptation and follow through with what we know is not in God's plan, temptation is realized and becomes sin.
- When have you felt like you were in a "desert" period? How did God guide you through?
Answers may vary according to personal experience. Emphasis ought to point to God's ability to uphold us as we trust in His unfailing love and power.
- Is hardship necessary to Godly living?
Challenge and difficulty are part of living in a fallen world. We need not seek them out but neither can we avoid suffering. However, we "glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; ⁴perseverance, character; and character, hope. ⁵And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us." (Romans 5:3-5)

Weekly Challenge: Adding on.

A lot of times, and especially in light of the wilderness temptation, we think of Lent as a time of sacrifice, which it can be. However, giving things up is not the only way to honor God and celebrate His actions. This week, instead of concentrating on what you want to give up, identify something (or some things) you can add to your spiritual life. Maybe you need to spend more time in prayer. Maybe you can add a few minutes to your Bible study. Perhaps you want to start a journal. Or you could sign up for a service activity. One meaningful discipline in particular involves reflecting on the Gospels. There is nothing wrong with giving up chocolate for forty days. But perhaps a more meaningful act would be reading through Christ's life in order to notice new things. Keep track of things you may not have realized or recognized previously, as well as questions about His character. Pay special attention to how the life of Jesus ultimately points to the cross and facilitates our salvation.

Part Four: Following the Leader

Bible Focus: The call and submission of the disciples

Student application: Jesus calls us to abandon everything and serve HIM; disciples were just regular people but did amazing things.

Lesson Opener: Blindfolded trust: an exercise in following instructions.

Explain to students that they will complete a basic and simple task: construction of a peanut butter and jelly sandwich! Easy enough, except for one factor: each student will be blindfolded while making the treat. One at a time, have teens put on a blindfold and listen as another (sighted) student guides them through the activity. The “eyes” cannot touch the sandwich maker but must use description to lead them through the sticky and gooey mass of edible delight.

Explain to students that they will discuss how to follow someone, and how to know who to follow. What makes someone a credible leader? What makes someone a credible friend?

Lesson and Verses

What does it mean to follow someone? We follow friends (and/or celebrities) on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or blogs. What does it mean to be a follower, though—a disciple? What is the difference between just casually being someone’s fan and really giving up everything to follow and learn? We can look to the actions and words of Jesus to learn what it truly means to be a follower. Christ calls every one of us to be His disciples and follow Him. In the gospels, we see how He called His top twelve...

Luke 6:12-16:

¹²One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God. ¹³When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them, whom he also designated apostles: ¹⁴Simon (whom he named Peter), his brother Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, ¹⁵Matthew, Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, Simon who was called the Zealot, ¹⁶Judas son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor.

Who were these men? What do we know about them? For one thing, we know there is nothing particularly special or remarkable about the twelve disciples. Jesus chose them from various walks of life, but all were *willing* to follow Him. The church leaders and people who claimed to await a Messiah and study Scripture were too busy focusing on laws and specifics to recognize when the Savior arrived. They were distracted by their work. They were puffed up with self-righteous pride or ambition. On the other hand, lowly workers and even sinners found Him.

Matthew 4:18-22

¹⁸As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. ¹⁹“Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will send you out to fish for people.” ²⁰At once they left their nets and followed him.

²¹Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them, ²²and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

These “main men” in disciple classification were fishermen by trade. They made a living catching fish, and seeing as how they were close to water, it was seasonally a decent (but challenging and rigorous) job. These sets of brothers were probably buff. They were tanned. They didn’t smell great. They had families to support. But look at how they follow: “at once...” “immediately...” They left all that they had, abandoned their fish, quit their jobs. They knew there was something significant about this man and were willing to risk it all to find out what that was. There is no doubt that the Holy Spirit was at work here. Men do not ordinarily abandon careers to

follow a total stranger. Jesus did not pull a rabbit from a hat or holler from a distance. The called disciples were led, upon initial contact with the Messiah and continual interaction with Him.

John 1:43-51:

⁴³ The next day Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. Finding Philip, he said to him, "Follow me."

⁴⁴ Philip, like Andrew and Peter, was from the town of Bethsaida. ⁴⁵ Philip found Nathanael and told him, "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph."

⁴⁶ "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" Nathanael asked.

"Come and see," said Philip.

⁴⁷ When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, "Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit."

⁴⁸ "How do you know me?" Nathanael asked.

Jesus answered, "I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you."

⁴⁹ Then Nathanael declared, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel."

⁵⁰ Jesus said, "You believe^[a] because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You will see greater things than that." ⁵¹ He then added, "Very truly I tell you,^[b]you^[c] will see 'heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on'^[d] the Son of Man."

Here it may seem that Christ did a little "telepathy trick" to impress Nathanael and convince him of His credentials, but hardly was it necessary. Nathanael may have had some doubts alleviated by experiencing the Savior's omniscience but there was more occurring than a mere moment of acknowledgement. Philip and Nathanael were able to recognize in Jesus something special because of Jesus. This was not random selection; it was God's plan at work (even with Judas). Jesus did not always choose the most apparently righteous candidates.

Luke 5:27-28

²⁷ After this, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector by the name of Levi sitting at his tax booth. "Follow me," Jesus said to him, ²⁸ and Levi got up, left everything and followed him.

Matthew (sometimes called Levi) was a tax collector...not the most popular figure in Jewish eyes. A tax collector was basically a servant of the Roman government who in essence stole by charging ridiculous taxes and keeping much of the money. This being the case, Matthew was pretty well off financially. He was also considered a sinner by the church folk of the day. But Jesus walked right up to him, called him, and without another thought Matthew left his money and obeyed.

What trends do we see here? Instant acceptance. Sacrifice. Full surrender to whatever Jesus would have His followers do. We also see imperfection and human error, redeemed only through the power and grace of Christ. The original twelve were all too human. They argued in pride over who was to be called "greatest." They often faltered in understanding who He was and had to be reminded again and again in a variety of ways. In spite of boastful promises to follow Jesus to the bitter end, all of them fell asleep in His darkest hour. Peter denied Him three times. Thomas refused to believe in His resurrection without proof. Yet God used them. These men were founders of the church, empowered by faith. They dedicated their lives to the Messiah, traveling and spreading the Gospel, telling others everywhere of the Christ. Ultimately almost all were martyred for their faith. But this was only possible through the Holy Spirit. Jesus promised to be with them always (Matthew 28:20) and sent the Spirit to speak through them (Acts 4:31). The disciples knew they would face trials and would have to make sacrifices, but they also trusted the power of Jesus and allowed Him to work in and through them.

The invitation does not stop at those twelve men. Jesus invites us, calls us, challenges us to leave our other fears and cares behind and serve Him with our whole hearts. Does this mean an idle abandonment of career or family attachment? Certainly not. We can follow Jesus during and through dedication to other people and to our vocational efforts. What surrender to Christ means is that in all things we first think of honoring Him. It means recognizing His total and ultimate control, and thanking Him for covering our blemishes in spite of trips and blunders.

Follow-up Questions

- What do you need to surrender in order to completely follow Jesus?
Answers may vary...it could be harmful habits or even thought patterns that go against faith. Perhaps certain relationships should be examined for potential distractions. Maybe through sin of volition or omission we have neglected full dedication to Christ. Through prayerful devotion we can ask that He work in and through us.
- What does it practically look like to serve Jesus today?
There are many ways that we can serve, but our faith must also be more than mere actions. Yes, we can commit to volunteering in church or community and seek to selflessly give our time and talents. But above all we recognize that no work on our part will lead us or anyone else to salvation. We may initiate others or point them to Christ, but the Holy Spirit does the work. With that in mind, we serve Jesus by daily dedicating to Him all of our thoughts and actions, praying that He would take them captive to God's work. God does not need us; we need God. Without Him we are nothing. With Him we are everything.
- Why do you think Peter was the "leader" of disciples? What does leadership take?
True leadership involves humility and servant attitude as well as bold dedication. Peter was at times impetuous and careless, but willing to be humbled. He was at times rebuked by Christ but learned from his mistakes. After Christ's ascension the Holy Spirit worked through Peter to continue spreading the Gospel. If we desire to be used by Christ, we make ourselves nothing and understand that HE is everything. We continually recognize and acknowledge that His work is what enables ours.
- Why did Jesus have disciples? How did he choose them?
Being God, it is not as though Jesus needed attendants or fans. He chose followers to leave a record of His life on earth and a mode of spreading His word after His earthly ministry was done. Through spiritual empowerment these men carried on the work of Christ and through that same spirit we also can follow and know more of Him. God chose the twelve disciples and made them ripe and receptive to Christ's teaching in order to fulfill His ultimate plan.
- What do you think attracted those initial followers to Jesus?
As we see in the example of Philip and Nathanael (as well as John's recognition), there was something about Jesus that those early followers were able to recognize. Several of them were likely aided by previous study of Scripture, but academic knowledge did not accomplish the call. It was the work of the Holy Spirit that drew them to the Messiah.
- What is the difference between being a true follower and just one of the crowd?
Jesus had plenty of fans—people who listened to His teaching, followed Him, observed His miracles, or sat at His feet. We can easily wear our Christian slogan T-shirts or attend church and act the same way. Following Him means that we change our life and mindset to focus on Him.

Weekly Challenge: Destroy the idols.

What do you follow and worship? We normally think of idols in terms of images or statues that we might worship or bow to. Yet ultimately worship is whatever takes up the bulk of our mental space. We might not worship stone idols or demons, but we make the mistake of straying from God when we focus on anything other than

Him. We follow cliques and peer pressure. We look to media and popularity for significance. We worry and fret and spend time on ourselves or pleasures rather than God. This week, think hard about what gets in the way of following Jesus. Make a list (or just write one or two that are key) of idols in your life, and seal it in an envelope. Pray for God to take the place of these idols, and then tear, shred, burn or otherwise destroy your list. Consider taking a habit or item that may be distracting and replacing it with focus on prayer or Scripture (perhaps continuing last week's Gospel meditation).

Part Five: Ministry and Miracles

Bible Focus: The work Jesus did during His years of ministry, emphasizing unique messages.

Student application: With faith Jesus can do anything; Christ emphasized love and went against typical expectations.

Lesson Opener: Expect the unexpected...going against the grain.

Demonstrate and discuss several historical figures who have defied expectations or social customs, especially in the interest of others (examples may include Thomas Edison, Abraham Lincoln, Sitting Bull, Mahatma Gandhi, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther, Susan B. Anthony, Rosa Parks, etc.). Discuss the similarities among these characters: most of them were not too popular at their time and went up against leaders and norms of what most people took for granted. Well, Jesus was actually quite similar. Not everyone accepted and believed Him. Many opposed Him, and He had a tendency to stir things up. We know that Jesus did many amazing miracles and gave important lessons, but those acts had a purpose of pointing people back to God. He did not merely put on a show. He didn't mix up status quo to be obstinate. He came to seek and save the lost, and He challenged leadership to point out dissonance with God's plan. In our lives, we seek discernment to know what is truly Christ and what is opposed to Him.

Lesson and Verses

There is so much we can learn from the earthly actions and teachings of Jesus. What do we know already about what He did? Allow time for students to brainstorm what they think of as highlights of Jesus' ministry. Think about well-known parables, miracles, conversations and actions. Together, make a list of all you can come up with. There are many very well-known stories and acts of Christ, but this lesson is going to take a look at why He did what He did and how His ministry and actions fulfilled God's ultimate plan. For one thing, Jesus did not always see eye to eye with religious gurus of the day. Let's take a look at how Jesus interacted with church leaders of His time...they were often none too pleased with Him.

Luke 5:21:

²¹ The Pharisees and the teachers of the law began thinking to themselves, "Who is this fellow who speaks blasphemy? Who can forgive sins but God alone?"

The church leaders, who should have been the ones most receptive to Jesus and His teachings, didn't even recognize who He was or what He was doing. They instead criticized Him and complained about how He acted. They constantly sought ways to trick and trap Him.

Mark 3:1-6:

Another time Jesus went into the synagogue, and a man with a shriveled hand was there. ² Some of them were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal him on the Sabbath. ³ Jesus said to the man with the shriveled hand, "Stand up in front of everyone."

⁴ Then Jesus asked them, "Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" But they remained silent.

⁵ He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored. ⁶ Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.

Jesus is performing a miracle. He is healing people and proving His nature as God. Yet it is as if the Pharisees ignore that completely, choosing to focus on the letter of the law that "work" was done on the Sabbath, rather than the amazing event taking place. They are more concerned with following their established routines and rules than with recognizing a supernatural event.

Luke 5:30-32:

³⁰ But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belonged to their sect complained to his disciples, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?"

³¹ Jesus answered them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.³² I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."

Just like we sometimes do, the Pharisees had in mind how a Messiah would look and behave, and that certainly did not include associating with sinners or "lesser" people. Again, they were overly anxious about appearances, focusing on social standards and dining companions while ignoring and neglecting why Christ chose what He did. Jesus does not discriminate. He came to heal the sick and call the sinners. He often defied social norms, yes, but with a specific purpose. Jesus changed people. He changed Matthew from a tax collector to a disciple. He dined with Zacchaeus and changed His heart. The Pharisees did not want change. They wanted someone who would fulfill their expectations and fit their mold. They missed the savior they sought by neglecting to appreciate what Jesus did and why.

Matthew 15:3-9:

³ Jesus replied, "And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition? ⁴ For God said, 'Honor your father and mother'^[a] and 'Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death.'^[b] ⁵ But you say that if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is 'devoted to God,' ⁶ they are not to 'honor their father or mother' with it. Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition. ⁷ You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you:

⁸ "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.

⁹ They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules."^[c]"

The Messiah, so hassled and critiqued for His actions, does not hesitate to call out the hypocrites for their flaws. The Pharisees were so caught up in rules and traditions that they completely missed who Jesus truly was. He was passionate not just to slander church leaders but to demonstrate His Godhood and call them to belief. But He knew they would likely remain unmoved.

Matthew 23:33-38:

³³ "You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell? ³⁴ Therefore I am sending you prophets and sages and teachers. Some of them you will kill and crucify; others you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town. ³⁵ And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. ³⁶ Truly I tell you, all this will come on this generation.

³⁷ "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing. ³⁸ Look, your house is left to you desolate. ³⁹ For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'^[c]"

These are not minced words. Jesus came to save all. Yet those who were "His own" did not receive Him but rejected and rebuked him. Christ admits here that He longed for them, but they were so blind that they completely ignored what they had long awaited and wanted. In hindsight we may denounce their mistakes, but we are not faultless to similar habits. Sometimes we are so distracted by our own ambitions and goals that we miss what God is doing in our lives. Sometimes we cling so rigidly to our ideals and standards that we judge or ignore God's people and miss opportunities to serve Him. We look at how Christ dealt with people to receive understanding of His work and example of discernment. At times He defied authority but this does not mean we must do likewise. Indeed, we are to "submit to governing authority" (1 Peter 2:13), but not when that authority

goes against God. We are to maintain an attitude of love and weigh our interactions upon Christ's example and nature ultimately.

Follow-up Questions

- What kinds of things distract us from the true message of Jesus?
Again, answers may vary but should focus on things that can take our focus away from Christ, whether relational, habit, lifestyle, or thought patterns.
- When have you been (or are you) too focused on the law?
Think of "rituals" we may fall into or routines that become too routine. Brainstorm times when church politics may become dangerously distracting or when attitude looks to rules instead of Jesus.
- Are there certain people you judge or avoid?
Be honest in thinking about potential types of people that we may judge based on money, lifestyle, actions or appearance. Sometimes we cannot help impressions we receive, but we can pray to change our hearts and recognize that all people are God's image-bearers.
- Are there ever times when it is okay to challenge authority or rules?
If the rules contradict the law of God, we must prayerfully consider acting otherwise. Going against the grain is not an adventure ride but only occasional necessity as it impacts following Christ.
- How did Jesus most commonly communicate and reach people? What does that mean for us and how we witness to others?
Jesus taught publicly, but He also spoke with individuals. He went to peoples' homes and ate with them. His impact was relational. We can serve and proclaim in many ways, but genuine love and devotion will have much more impact than handing out a tract or hassling someone.

Weekly Challenge: Adopting the mindset of Christ...

In this week's Gospel meditation, watch carefully how He interacted with people and what we can do to follow His example. Thank God for His work on earth and through His current work through the Holy Spirit. Ask for ways that we may love and care for other people, fulfilling the great Commission right where we are.

Part Six: Passion and Crucifixion

Notes: This lesson is a bit longer in length and quite detailed. Feel free to choose elements of focus or break up into chunks, if possible. Also, most passages reference the book of Mark, as it tends to have the most details of Christ's final week. However, all gospels can be used to share the events of the crucifixion and resurrection.

Bible Focus: Holy Week, including the crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus

Student application: Jesus is the culmination and fulfillment of God's plan...the crucifixion is the crux (pun intended) of the Bible! Never grow immune to the wonder of resurrection.

Lesson Opener: Tools of torment...

Begin with a few pictures (shown via projection or passed around papers, as available tools allow)...show students several methods of execution and ask what words, thoughts and emotions come up when they see them. Show pictures of a noose, a guillotine, electric chair, and even ancient torture devices like the rack or prison chambers. Ask youth how they would feel about wearing one of those as a charm on a necklace or bracelet. Then display a picture of the cross and perhaps a crown of thorns to go with it. What does this represent? We certainly feel different about the cross due to the new meaning that Christ's death and resurrection has given it. What else do we know about the death of Jesus? Why is it so important and critical to our Christian faith? How do we know the truth of the story?

Lesson and Verses

If possible, continue using pictures with this story as you go step by step through the elements of the Messiah's last night on earth. Explain the historical background in this way, but emphasize the significance of *why* Christ died so painfully and how His resurrection gives us hope today.

Begin with a quick review of Holy Week events, beginning with Palm Sunday and the triumphal entry. (*Share picture of donkey and/or Palm branches*) Explain that Jesus came into Jerusalem this way in fulfillment of another Old Testament prophecy:

Zechariah 9:9:

Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion!

Shout, Daughter Jerusalem!

See, your king comes to you,

righteous and victorious,

lowly and riding on a donkey,

on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

After this initial victorious and celebrated introduction into town, the Savior encountered some challenges in His final few days of life. (*Show picture of temple and/or whip.*) Remind students of the clearing of the temple, and why Jesus did it. Mention that this action, too, hearkens back to a prophecy:

Isaiah 56:7:

These I will bring to my holy mountain

and give them joy in my house of prayer.

Their burnt offerings and sacrifices

will be accepted on my altar;

for my house will be called

a house of prayer for all nations."

Coming down to the last night of the Messiah's life, discuss what happened during the Last Supper. (*Feel free to show a picture of the classic "Last Supper" painting or a more historically accurate depiction of upper room*

arrangements). Walk through some of the actions and conversations Jesus had with His disciples. Why did He wash their feet? Discuss the prediction of Peter's denial and the dismissal of Judas. Bear particular importance on Communion.

Mark 14:22-24:

² While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take it; this is my body."

²³ Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, and they all drank from it.

²⁴ "This is my blood of the [\[a\]](#) covenant, which is poured out for many," he said to them.

(Show pictures of olive trees and location of Gethsemane). Upon leaving the house, Jesus prayed in Gethsemane, wishing that somehow things could be fulfilled differently, but knowing that the Father's will would be fulfilled. It is following this prayer (and the disciples' subsequent snooze) that Jesus is arrested and the ultimate trials begin. Field from students what details they know already about the long night of crucifixion. Walk through the various encounters of His trials:

- Jesus is brought before the Sanhedrin for questioning; at this time Peter denies knowledge of Him. (Mark 14: 53-72)
- Jesus is brought before Pilate for questioning. Pilate would rather not have anything to do with Jewish drama, so He tries to appease the situation but the crowd demands Christ's crucifixion. (Mark 15:1-14)
- Jesus is flogged and handed to soldiers, who mock and beat Him. (Mark 15:15-20)
- Jesus carries His cross to Golgotha, with the help of a man named Simon. It may be that He was too weak and tired to carry it Himself. (Mark 15:21-22)
- Jesus cries out to God and dies. (Mark 15:33-37)
- Joseph of Arimathea embalms the body and Jesus is buried. (Mark 15:42-46)

Obviously, this is a devastating turn of events. Good Friday commemorates the darkest hour in history. Jesus suffered and died a criminal's anguishing execution. But fortunately, we know that is not the end of the story. What happens next? Easter Morning comes, finishing God's final plan and fulfilling Christ's destiny and reason for coming. The tomb is empty. Hope is realized. Jesus defeated death. He is risen; Hallelujah!

(Show pictures of first century tomb and burial techniques. If desired, emphasize story points with a video clip, either from a film on Jesus or even another tale with sacrificial elements. Recommended: Aslan's resurrection in *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*).

Follow-up Questions

- Why did Jesus have to die? (Basic, but critical question with regard to faith)
Jesus took on the guilt and sins of humanity. The wages of sin are death (Romans 6:23), and God gave His son to pay for those sins and allow us eternal life.
- Why is it so important that He rose from the dead?
Christ arose in fulfillment of the prophets and what God did. His resurrection defied and defeated death and Satan and bridged the gap between human sin and God, providing a pathway to Heaven and to hope.

- Why did Jesus wash the feet of the disciples?
Jesus was acting as servant, providing an example and emphasis that He came to lay down His life in every way and to serve.
- We may criticize Peter and the others for denying and fleeing Jesus, but how do we sometimes do the same?
We yield to peer pressure sometimes and deny Him ourselves, or we give in to gossip and ignore genuine prayer and devotion to God.
- Are we ever like Pilate, trying to just wash our hands of Christ and be done with it?
Sometimes it may seem easier or more "universal friendly" to abandon our faith or to allow for other beliefs and practices. But Christ is the way and the truth and the life. If we abandon Him, we abandon all hope truly.
- Why did Jesus cry out to God? Had God truly abandoned and forsaken His son?
This was the final desperate breath of Christ, echoing earlier prophecy and pleading as He had done in the garden. Ultimately God did not turn away from Jesus (just as He would not have given up in the garden), and was at that time still one in the same with Jesus.
- Who do you most identify with in this story?

Weekly Challenge: Explore the details...

Take some time this week to truly examine the events of Christ's crucifixion, in order to appreciate its meaning and significance. Read the story in all four Gospels to understand what we know. Take time to prayerfully consider and grasp Christ's sacrifice and what it means to us.

Bonus Epilogue: Post-resurrection appearances, ascension, and Acts

Bible Focus: What happened after Easter; Christ's appearances following resurrection

Student application: we are all called to follow the Great Commission, and to celebrate and serve.

Lesson Opener: Bubbling up...

Take an Alka-Seltzer tablet or two and drop them into a glass of water. Demonstrate the fizz and pop of the bubbles. After a minute the carbonation may appear to go down. Stir up the water and watch the bubbles fizz up again. Explain that after the ascension ("Rising up"), Christ instructed His disciples to spread the news of Him and what He came to do. When we do so, we have the power to "stir up" recognition and excitement about God and keep His kingdom "fizzing."

Lesson and Verses

Jesus died and rose again...but He didn't go straight to Heaven afterwards. He was actually on earth for forty days prior to His ascension, and during that time He appeared in various ways to people. It seems that He may have had different features at this state. The disciples did not always recognize Him immediately, and Christ seems to quickly appear and disappear. There are at least eleven instances listed in the Bible depicting how He came to His followers...some significant ones of note include:

- Appearance to Mary Magdalene, the "other Mary," and Peter on the day of resurrection (John 20:11-18; Luke 24:1-11 and 34).
- Appearance to the disciples on the road to Emmaus on the evening of resurrection (Luke 24:13-35). Note that here Jesus was not immediately recognized.
- Appearance to the disciples at Jerusalem, and again when Thomas was present with them (John 20:19-24; Mark 16:14-18). The significant elements here involve how Jesus proved who He was. He explained the Scripture and fulfillment of God's plan. He also made sure the disciples knew He was not just a ghost or vision—He ate with them, showed His wounds and allowed them to touch Him as living evidence.
- Visit to the fishing disciples at the heavenly fish fry (John 21:1-23). At this point, it seems Peter is officially reinstated and forgiven for his rejection on the night of crucifixion. Jesus instructs Him in no uncertain terms to follow and to tell others about Him.
- Farewell to the disciples prior to ascension (Acts 1:4-10). Here Jesus promises to send the Holy Spirit to comfort and guide them, and instructs them to go into all the world spreading the good news of who He is. This command is for us, too, as is the promise of the Holy Spirit's blessing and guidance.

The life, death and resurrection of Christ is the culmination and importance of the whole Bible. It demonstrates fulfillment of God's great plan and proves He keeps His promises. We know the Gospels to be true and with these witnesses to resurrection we know HE is true. What more can we do than follow the instructions of Jesus and bear witness?

Follow-up Questions:

- How do we miss Christ's appearance in our lives?
We burrow in our own concerns or our work, becoming distracted and often thinking we can make it on our own. We neglect to recognize that Christ is the vessel of our salvation and we can do nothing apart from Him.
- Why do you think people who witnessed the resurrected Savior were often afraid or shocked? Did they not trust who Jesus was or what He had said?

As ours often is, the faith of these early followers was likely lacking. They may have claimed to believe what Jesus said but did not grasp the fullness of it. Or again, they may have been too distracted to understand and when they did see Christ were terrified by the shock.

- How can we carry out Jesus's exhortations to spread His news?
We daily fulfill His commission by finding opportunities to love and serve others, and to set an example of humility and compassion in all we say, do or think. We can pray for others and pray that God will work in our lives to genuinely care for them.

Weekly Challenge: Share the love...

We don't need to necessarily be risking our lives in foreign countries to spread the good news of Christ. This week, make an effort to show kindness and love, whether through a smile, note, or just being present.