

# Leader's Guide - HOW TO BELIEVE

## Shoring Up or Starting Up Your Walk with God

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### Session 1 – Do You Feel the Need?

#### Starting Questions

(10 minutes)

What is the purpose of this discussion-based study? It may be to “shore up” your faith. It may be to “start up” your faith. That’s a broad purpose. But that’s what the journey of faith is like. It’s possible to be a believer in Jesus for one hour and have more certainty in life than a lifetime follower of Christ. Why? Even though a lifetime follower of Jesus gains knowledge, perspective, and experience, the events of life can easily throw that person for a loop. At times like that, the big questions surface again: “God, what are you doing?” “God, do you care about me?” “God, where is my life going?” God, what next?”

On the other hand, you may be wandering in the philosophies, practices, and media pitches of the world. In this swirl of ever-changing values and messages, you may think, “I need an anchor. I need something certain, something lasting, something true.” Then you see someone who seems to have that. Suddenly, you want it too. But how do you get there? Even if you WANT to believe, how do you actually do it?

This study will take you on a journey with God Himself. If you’re just looking for knowledge, facts, or information about religion, you may be missing the point of who God is. His primary goal is not to give you information. It is to work transformation—life change!

Brace yourself for the ride of your life!

- As a group, try to come up with a definition of being a follower of Jesus.
- You know that a number of people don’t bother with God in their lives. What causes people to start getting interested in God (discuss life events AND feelings/attitudes)?

#### Searching the Scriptures

(15 minutes)

A parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. In other words, Jesus talked about common and familiar events, but packed a deeper spiritual punch inside. This

entire study series will be based on stories that Jesus told. Instead of making your list of facts about God, you will get to see life through God's eyes.

**Read** Luke 12:16-21

- Why did Jesus tell this parable (check out the context)?
- Discuss what you think the main point of this parable is.
- Talk about how this story resembles life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.
- Why are God's words in verse 20 so surprising?
- What does verse 21 mean?

## **Speaking about the Issues**

(20 minutes)

The beauty of parables is that they raise big issues of truth in life. Jesus digs deeply into what life is all about. Discuss these issues as a group.

- Is there more to life than the here and now? How do you know? Why is there a yearning for this afterlife? (Luke 12:20)
- What foundational needs do human beings have in life, and how does the prospect of God meet any of those needs? (Luke 12:22-23)
- Does faith happen on an intellectual level or emotional level (or a combination of both)? (Luke 12:25-31)
- How does the definition of God affect the kind of belief a person has (contrast world religions and faith in Jesus)? (Galatians 4:7-9)
- What distracts people or "numbs" them when it comes to the interest in and pursuit of God? (Ecclesiastes 1:2-8; Romans 3:10-12)

## **Setting the Course**

(10 minutes)

One danger of shoring up or starting up a walk with God is that you may feel hypocritical. You feel like you're going through the motions because you may not be fully committed or convinced. When baseball player, Pete Rose, was asked about his amazing success, he said, "I practice what I'm not good at. Most folks practice what they're good at." This simple principle applies to your journey with God. It's best to practice what you're NOT good at. If you feel awkward in a relationship with God, the best thing to do is to practice being with Him and getting to know Him.

- Talk about what this practice might involve this week.

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### Session 2 – What Do You Expect?

#### Starting Questions

(10 minutes)

Last week you talked about the need that human beings have for something more than this life gives.

- Take a few minutes to discuss what this need, this emptiness, really is (what would you call it and how do people experience it?).
- Discuss how this need, once realized by people, may condition them to be open to God.

If a person is led to take a chance on God, to explore a journey with Him, what can that person expect? Is a life of faith one of prosperity and complete happiness? Is it a life of ignoring reality?

- Talk about what reasonable life-expectations a person can have when he or she lives as one who trusts in God.

#### Searching the Scriptures

(20 minutes)

Read Matthew 7:24-29

- Why did Jesus tell this parable (check out the context)?
- Discuss what you think the main point of this parable is.
- Talk about how this story resembles life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.
- Discuss what the first half of verse 25 is saying about the life of one who is “built upon the rock,” Jesus Christ.
- Now discuss what the second half of the verse says about that person’s life.

- What is the difference between the life of the person described in verses 24-25 and the life of the person described in verses 26-27?
- What are verses 28-29 saying about Jesus' words?

## **Speaking about the Issues**

(15 minutes)

A parable brings out deep questions and relevant issues. Discuss the issues below as a group.

- Is a Christian life a "better" life than a non-Christian life? Explain your opinion. (Philippians 3:8-9)
- Jesus made it clear that suffering will always be a part of our lives. How can a believer explain its existence? (2 Peter 3:3-4, 9)
- How do you build your life on the rock and how might your life be built on the sand? (Psalm 18:2)
- What does it mean to put the words of God into practice? (James 1:22)

## **Setting the Course**

(10 minutes)

In every pursuit there are "trade-offs." If you buy a new car, your trade-off for reliable transportation may be a car payment. The trade-off of taking a vacation is, perhaps, falling behind in other work.

- Talk about the trade-offs involved in being a follower of Christ AND in deciding NOT to follow Christ (what do you gain and what might you lose in each case?).

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### Session 3 – Jesus

#### Starting Questions

(10 minutes)

The central focus of this study is Jesus. Before “Christianity” existed, Jesus was creating relationships with people. Walking with God does not mean that you direct your belief to Christianity. It means that you direct your belief to Jesus. Faith is not an organizational system. It is a relationship between God and you.

- Start this session by having a few folks share one way they have seen Jesus work in their lives.
- Talk about why you think Jesus is unique in this world of many religions, faith systems, and philosophies.

Of course, as we talk about Jesus, we need to make sure we’re clear on the historical fact of His existence. The Bible and historical literature give overwhelming evidence of the facts of Jesus’ life—including His death AND resurrection!

- As a group, summarize what you know about the life of Jesus.
- Share your collective knowledge of books you’ve read or other things you’ve seen or heard that reinforce the fact that Jesus existed in history.

#### Searching the Scriptures

(20 minutes)

Read Matthew 13:44-46

- Why did Jesus tell this parable (check out the context)?
- Discuss what you think “the kingdom of heaven” is. (Leader’s hint: it’s not a place—it’s the “reign of God,” His way of operating in our lives and in this world.)
- What are the “treasure” and the “valuable pearl” in our lives today?
- What would it mean for you to “sell everything you had” to buy this field or pearl?

- Notice that verse 44 equates the kingdom of heaven to a treasure and verse 45 equates the kingdom of heaven to a merchant. What different teachings do these two verses give? (Leader's hint: The treasure is the value of God's reign in our lives—His saving grace that prevails through Christ. The merchant is the One who seeks us as HIS treasure, giving up all He has—Jesus—for our salvation. That's what the Kingdom of Heaven—God's way of ruling—is like.)
- These parables address the importance of God's work in your life. Talk about whether or not you agree with this assessment and why.

## Speaking about the Issues

(15 minutes)

A parable brings out deep questions and relevant issues. Discuss the issues below as a group.

- Why Jesus instead of Muhammad, Buddha, the world of many spirits, or life on your own? (Acts 4:12)
- Jesus called Himself “the bread of life,” “the gate,” and “the way, the truth and the life,” and “the vine.” Take a look at the verses and talk about what these show Jesus to mean for your life. (John 6:35, John 10:9, John 14:6, John 15:5)
- The central action of Jesus was to die on the cross and rise from the dead. Why is that important for you? (Romans 6:4-5)

## Setting the Course

(10 minutes)

Knowing ABOUT Jesus and getting to know Jesus are two different things.

- Talk about how you get to know Jesus better (Philippians 3:10).

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### Session 4 – A Simple Approach

#### Starting Questions

(10 minutes)

Last week you focused on Jesus. Remembering that a life of faith is all about Jesus is not always an easy thing to do. The default mode of sinful humans (sinful, meaning “separated from God,” “in a condition of brokenness,” “being prone to do the wrong things, *doing* the wrong things, not doing the right things”), is to drift away from Jesus. You may drift into church busyness. You may drift into “organized religion” as your number one priority. You may slide into the pursuit of knowledge as your sole faith goal. Or you may decide to live life under your own power, not seeking a relationship with Jesus at all. A life of hope and meaning, however, is founded on Jesus Christ. A life that lasts forever is founded on the Savior Jesus.

- Talk about the significance and importance of the forgiveness of sins in life (see John 3:16 and Romans 3:23-24).

Once you get focused on a relationship with Jesus, questions come up. How do you connect with Him? How do you live a life that interacts with Jesus? What does it mean to live in relationship with Christ?

- Discuss what the difference is between the life of a believer in Jesus and the life of an unbeliever.
- Have faith veterans in the group describe the most effective ways they have experienced to live in relationship with Jesus.

#### Searching the Scriptures

(20 minutes)

**Read** Luke 18:1-8

- Why did Jesus tell this parable (check out the context)?
- What is prayer?
- What function does prayer serve in the life of a believer?
- Verse one assumes that you will experience times when you feel like giving up because God seems unreal or far away. Talk about what makes you feel that way.
- Jesus shows that even an evil person, when bothered long enough, will respond. Talk about how this radical comparison helps you get to know the character of God.

- Verses 6 and 7 reinforce Jesus' point about who God is. They also describe a natural course of action for us, His people. Talk about what this action is and what causes it to happen. (Leader Note: We cry out to God day and night. This may be manifested in believers through prayer. It may be manifested in unbelievers as they ask questions like: "Why did God cause this tragedy to happen?" "What is my purpose here on earth?" etc.)
- Verse 8 is the "gotcha!" verse of this parable. What message is Jesus giving with His final question? (Leader Note: Jesus' question about faith reverses the issue of who is faithful. The parable shows that God is good and faithful. The question is: will people continue to seek Him, cry out to Him, and follow Him as times on earth get more and more challenging.)

## Speaking about the Issues

(15 minutes)

A parable brings out deep questions and relevant issues. Discuss the issues below as a group.

- Sometimes people get stumped when it comes to the issue of connecting with God and understanding His work in their lives better. Jesus makes it very simple. He calls you to keep bothering God with your troubles, thoughts, and thanks. Talk about why God desires this action and what it does in your relationship with Him. (Psalm 50:15; Philippians 4:6-7; 1Thessalonians 5:17; 1 Timothy 2:1)
- A life of faith, many times, means sticking with God no matter what. In the Old Testament, Jacob did this when he wrestled with God. He refused to let go without first being blessed. Discuss how you have wrestled with God and how He has come through for you during challenging times in life. (Genesis 32:24-29)
- Sometimes people say, "I don't have to go to church to worship God." Talk about how worship and fellowship play a part in keeping a vital connection with God through life. (Hebrews 10:25)

## Setting the Course

(10 minutes)

- Discuss ways that that you can increase your daily connection with God.

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### Session 5 – The Bible, part 1

#### Starting Questions

(10 minutes)

Last week you explored being persistent in your approach to God—making sure that you stay “in the game” with Him. One key way of connecting with God and discovering His will for your life is by reading the Bible, God’s Word.

- Discuss what the Bible is (see these verses to help your conversation: John 5:39; 2 Timothy 3:16-17; 2 Peter 1:20-21).
- As a group, share specific Bible passages that have been important to you in your life. Explain why they’ve been special to you and how they’ve helped you.

#### Searching the Scriptures

(20 minutes)

**Read** Luke 15:1-32

- Why did Jesus tell these parables?
- What truths about God’s character and the way He operates does the parable of the lost sheep communicate?
- Who is the one lost sheep in the parable? Who is it today?
- Verses 7 and 10 talk about a party in heaven! What does this talk of a celebration tell you about God?
- The parable of the “prodigal son” is one of the most well known of Jesus’ stories. In it there are many application points to our lives. As a group, try to discover as many points of application as possible as you go through the parable.

- Talk about what the central message of the Bible is and how these parables express that message.
- Take a look at John 6:38-40. These words of Jesus articulate the heart of God's will for your life. What is God's will for you and how does the Bible help accomplish that will?

## **Speaking about the Issues**

(15 minutes)

A parable brings out deep questions and relevant issues. Discuss the issues below as a group.

- Some people say that the Bible is a history book. Others say it's a book of rules from God. Still others view the Bible as a book of information about God. Look at Genesis 3:8-9 and Luke 19:10. How do these verses help define the ONE MESSAGE of the Bible? (see John 20:31 for help!)
- Two main teachings of the Bible are called Law and Gospel. The Law shows our sin; the Gospel shows our Savior. Discuss the Law and the Gospel that you find in the parables in Luke 15.
- Sometimes people think that the Old Testament is "all law," an outdated section of the Bible that doesn't apply to us these days. Look at the following verses and talk about how they connect with God's will and with the main purpose of the Bible: Genesis 12:1-3; Deuteronomy 18:15; Isaiah 9:6-7.

## **Setting the Course**

(10 minutes)

- Talk about how your understanding of the Bible's main purpose, its ONE MESSAGE, can help you read and understand the Bible.

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### Session 6 – The Bible, part 2

#### Starting Questions

(10 minutes)

The Bible is an amazing book. It has one key message: God came to seek His lost people, and, because of Jesus' death and resurrection, He comes to carry them home!

The Bible is also one, long story. It begins with the creation of all things. Disruption takes place when human beings choose self-interest and control over God. The rest of the Bible tells how God reached out to bring people back to Himself. He did this because He loves us. The high point of the story is the death and resurrection of Jesus. From that point, the story makes its way toward its next high point—one yet to happen, the return of Jesus.

Can you be sure about the Bible's accuracy? Definitely! The Bible is THE most well-documented piece of literature in ancient history. Its content is not only trustworthy; it has been tested by secular and sacred scholars alike.

But there's more! The Bible has power. Take a look at the brief discussion below:

- Read Hebrews 4:12. Talk about what this verse says about the Bible and what it means for you as you read God's Word.
- Read Psalm 119:105. How does this verse communicate the value of God's Word in our day and age?

#### Searching the Scriptures

(20 minutes)

Read Matthew 13:1-8, 18-23; 31-32

- Why did Jesus tell these parables?
- What impact do you think this "farming" story had on Jesus' listeners?
- What does Jesus' method teach you about God's personality and about how to talk about your faith?

- Take a look at verse 19. What does this verse mean and how do we experience this hazard today?
- Read verses 20-21. How do you experience this in your life?
- Read verse 22. Talk about how this verse is real as you try to read and listen to God's Word.
- Read verse 23. What is "good soil" and what is the "crop" that is produced from God's Word?

## **Speaking about the Issues**

(15 minutes)

A parable brings out deep questions and relevant issues. Discuss the issues below as a group.

- Some people say that religion is a psychological "crutch" for people who can't handle life. Talk about how Matthew 13:31-32 speaks to that assertion?
- Often you will notice debates between scientific thinkers and religious thinkers. At times, tension exists between those two mindsets. As you take a look at 1 Corinthians 2:4-16, talk about how knowledge based on observation (science) and knowledge based on revelation (God's Word) work together. Can a thinking, scientific person, also be a person who trusts God's Word?
- At the beginning of this session, you looked at Hebrews 4:12. Now read 2 Samuel 22:31. After reading these two verses, talk about why the Bible is unlike any other book and how it works in people's lives.

## **Setting the Course**

(10 minutes)

- **READING** the Bible is the most important thing to do with it. Talk with the group about some ways you have approached your personal Bible reading. Share what works well with each other.

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### Session 7 – Questions and Crises

#### Starting Questions

(10 minutes)

The journey of faith brings some wonderful certainty. God has responded to our greatest need. He sent His Son to die and rise for us. He gives us His certain Word of truth and life. He wants to be involved in our lives.

But what about the big issues that cause doubt? What about the questions that go unanswered? How does a life of faith stand up to the ultimate tests that the world offers?

- What are the major questions people ask when it comes to God and faith?
- How do you deal with those questions—either personally or with people you're talking to?

#### Searching the Scriptures

(20 minutes)

Read Matthew 13:24-30, 36-42

- This parable is sandwiched in between the two parables you read last session. Notice that Jesus waited to explain the parable. Talk about why you think He waited.
- What is the main point of this parable?
- What questions and crises does this parable address when it comes to living a life of faith?
- How does this parable explain the existence/cause of evil in the world?
- How does this parable explain why God lets evil things happen?

- How does this parable explain God's work in the lives of people who are suffering?
- How does this parable explain injustice and righteousness, and how God's plan works in the middle of those conflicting forces in our world?

## **Speaking about the Issues**

(15 minutes)

A parable brings out deep questions and relevant issues. Discuss the issues below as a group.

- Is it wrong to "question" God? (remember Jacob in Genesis 32)
- When crises hit, people may get very angry at God. They may not want to go to church or even pray. Is it okay to be mad at God? (Psalm 13:1-2)
- Some people say that if a loving God exists, He wouldn't allow suffering and pain in the world. Talk about how God would respond to that statement and how you can talk to others about that deep and heart-rending issue. (Lamentations 3:31-33)

## **Setting the Course**

(10 minutes)

- Talk about how you can be prepared for questions and crises in your walk with God. What will help you manage the suffering you see and experience?

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### Session 8 – A Connection with God

#### Starting Questions

(10 minutes)

You may be familiar with the story of Job. Job was a man whose life was going well. His business, family, and social life were hitting on all cylinders. He was respected by the community and he was faithful to God. Then disaster struck. After some freak accidents and fluke events, Job lost his possessions, his children, and his social standing. Grief turned to derision and confusion. Job became a broken man.

In addition to struggling with the issues—as you looked at last session, Job did something else. In the middle of his struggle he prayed. He talked to God.

God may not give all the answers. We may never fully understand His ways. But He has given us the opportunity to talk with Him. We can pour out our hearts, bring up the issues, ask for help, say thank you, and compliment God on His work. Like a friend talking to a friend, we can talk to God. We can pray.

- Read Psalm 50:15. Sometimes people feel guilty for praying when they're in trouble. Talk about how this verse speaks to that feeling and why the verse says what it says.
- Read Philippians 4:6-7. What promises does God give about prayer?
- Have some people share the value and benefits they have experienced because of prayer.

#### Searching the Scriptures

(20 minutes)

**Read** Luke 11:1-13

- These verses contain the response of Jesus to His disciples' question about prayer. Why do you think Jesus gave such a comprehensive reply?
- What does verse one tell you about the way Jesus looked at prayer?

- Verses 2-4 are known as “The Lord’s Prayer.” Talk about the components of the prayer that Jesus gave to His disciples and why you think He emphasized those elements.
- What is Jesus telling us about God and about prayer in verses 5-13?
- Verses 9 and 10 sound like Jesus is saying that you’ll get anything you ask for in prayer. We know from experience that that is not true. How does God respond to prayer?
- Talk about what Jesus was expressing as His desire for your life of prayer.
- Verse 13 is a culmination of this section. Jesus tells us what God will give us—the Holy Spirit. What does that mean and what benefit is the Holy Spirit in our lives? (see John 14:25-27 and Acts 2:38-39 for some help)

## **Speaking about the Issues**

(15 minutes)

Jesus’ talk about prayer brings up some big questions and issues:

- Does God answer all prayers? (James 4:1-3)
- As a group talk about how to pray. (Ephesians 6:18)
- If God knows everything, does prayer have any impact at all? (Genesis 18:22-33. Luke 18:1-8)

## **Setting the Course**

(10 minutes)

- Sum up your time together by discussing why prayer is important, why you should pray, and how you can build prayer into your daily life (reflect on 1 Thessalonians 5:17).

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### Session 9 – Action for God: Worship

#### Starting Questions

(10 minutes)

Prayer tends to make sense to a new or veteran believer. Talking to the Creator of the Universe, the Almighty God who can handle all things, is a constructive exercise of faith. There is comfort in knowing that God eagerly listens to you.

Worship may be another story. While we are accustomed to having conversations with close friends or speaking with a counselor (parallels to prayer in our lives), it's not as easy for us to draw life-parallels to worship.

- As a group, give your opinions and input about what worship is and what value it has.
- Read each of the following verses and discuss what unique aspects of worship are mentioned:
  - John 4:23-24
  - Romans 12:1-2
  - Colossians 3:15-17
  - Hebrews 10:24-25
- Having read the verses above, talk about what it means to live a life of worship inside and outside a church service.

#### Searching the Scriptures

(20 minutes)

Read Matthew 25:1-13

- Identify who the characters of this parable point to: Who is the bridegroom (see Revelation 19:7)? Who are the wise wedding attendants (virgins)? Who are the foolish attendants?
- Why did Jesus tell this parable?
- How does worship function like oil for the lamps?

- Talk about how life may put us to “sleep” over the long haul of our existence.
- What does worship do to keep you “awake” (no sermon jokes please 😊)?
- In the parable the bridegroom said, “I don’t know you” to the attendants who weren’t prepared (vs.12). How does worship help you and the heavenly bridegroom to know each other better?
- Discuss what Jesus means in verse 13. How are worship gatherings samples of what we will experience on “the day” and “hour” that Jesus refers to?

## **Speaking about the Issues**

(15 minutes)

A parable brings out deep questions and relevant issues. Discuss the issues below as a group.

- Do you really “have” to go to church? (check out Hebrews 23-25 again)
- A primary area of discussion when it comes to worship these days is worship style. Talk about how various styles fit with the Biblical goals for and descriptions of worship. (see John 4:23-24 again; also see Psalm 150)
- Discuss what it would mean to live a life of worship.

## **Setting the Course**

(10 minutes)

- When God’s Word is proclaimed, the Holy Spirit is doing His work in a worship setting. In order to experience His work in a worship service there must be a cooperative effort between the worshippers and worship leaders. Talk about how you can draw the most benefit from your time in a worship service, AND how you can contribute the most to your worship experience with others.

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### Session 10 – Action for God: Serving

#### Starting Questions

(10 minutes)

Many older churches were built with stained glass windows. The windows showed scenes from the Bible—the great leaders of the Old Testament, the life of Jesus, the mission journeys of Paul. The stained glass artistry was meant to teach, to comfort, and to inspire.

These days you don't find as many stained glass windows in churches. In addition to the barriers of a prohibitive cost and the dwindling number of artists, some church designers have omitted stained glass windows to emphasize the church's reach into the world. Clear glass, designers noted, emphasized the fluid relationship between the church and the world. People move from the world into the church building and they always have in view the mission field before them.

Faith in Jesus means that kind of "clear glass" action. Faith is not the spiritual equivalent of "comfort food"—something soothing for people who live in a rough world. While life and strength from Jesus provides tremendous comfort, faith in Jesus is meant to transform lives. Faith is action.

- Talk about how inaction or improper action by the church has hurt the cause of Christ in history.
- Read John 13:34-35 and James 2:14-17. Talk about how faith and action are related to each other, and how faith and action fit into God's plan for every believer.

#### Searching the Scriptures

(20 minutes)

**Read** Luke 10:25-37

- The reason Jesus told this parable is explained in detail. Talk about what the expert in the law was trying to do and ways that you may fall into this trap, too.
- Verse 27 is called the Great Commandment. Many churches use this as a foundational point in their mission statements. Talk about what a church that follows the Great Commandment looks like.
- What outreach barriers are packed into verse 29 (i.e. personal attitudes, scope of mission and vision)?

- This parable has “shock value.” Samaritans were despised by Jews. What is Jesus doing by comparing a priest and a Levite to a Samaritan?
- What message do verses 30-35 give the church today?
- Jesus pulled off a twist in His teaching. Instead of answering the question “Who is my neighbor?” He answered the question “How can you be a neighbor?”. Why did He do this and how does this impact your life as a follower of Christ?
- What key characteristic of faith does verse 37 lay out for believers?

## **Speaking about the Issues**

(15 minutes)

A parable brings out deep questions and relevant issues. Discuss the issues below as a group.

- Unfortunately, the word “guilt” has been associated with life in the church. Talk about what the Samaritan’s motivation was and what a believer’s motivation for service to others really is. (2 Corinthians 5:17-21)
- Discuss what service God really wants you to do. Does loving each other mean you have to sign up for mission service in Africa? Where and how does showing Christ’s love begin? (Colossians 3:12-20)
- Talk about how you can be a servant of Jesus and His people in your day-to-day schedule—not needing to sign up for extra activities.

## **Setting the Course**

(10 minutes)

- Share one way you can cheerfully serve Jesus and His people this week. Talk about a longer-term service goal that God might be leading you to.

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### Session 11 – Are you too comfortable or uncomfortable?

#### Starting Questions

(10 minutes)

You've trusted Christ with your life. You've celebrated the blessing of forgiveness through Jesus' death on the cross and resurrection from the grave. You have a leader, helper, and friend in Christ. You're learning more about God through His Word. You're even serving Him each day. Wow! What can go wrong with that?

The wrench in the works of faith can be spelled Y-O-U.

Don't worry. It's not *just* you. It's all of us as sinners. As you follow in the footsteps of Jesus, there are two wrong turns that you might be tempted to take. One is self-righteousness and the other is self-loathing.

- Read Romans 7:15-25. (Whew!) Talk about what was driving Paul to express himself in this tongue-twisting way.
- As a group discuss what it means to be self-righteous. How might this be expressed in your lives?
- As a group discuss what it means to be self-loathing. How might this show itself in your lives?

#### Searching the Scriptures

(20 minutes)

**Read** Luke 18:9-14

- Verse 9 lays out the purpose for Jesus' teaching. How does a person fall into the trap of self-righteousness?
- Talk about how the Pharisee's quote in verses 11-12 might sound today (with 21<sup>st</sup> century elements).
- What is most likely to lead *you* into the trap of self-righteousness (we all have our weaknesses!)?

- Tax collectors (who were Jewish people “employed” by the Roman government) were considered traitors who were unclean, corrupt, and unholy. In verse 13 Jesus uses a tax collector as an example of one who is exalted by God. What radical statement is Jesus making in this verse about self-righteousness and about the character of God?
- Discuss what Jesus’ principle in verse 14 means in the context of the parable and what it means for your life.
- Humility can morph into unhealthy self-loathing. Christian monks used to exercise extreme self-denial and self-punishment in order to get closer to a Holy God. While this ascetic monasticism has faded away, there are believers who fall into the trap of feeling as if whatever they do is never good enough. Read Galatians 5:14 and talk about what it means to love your neighbor “*as yourself.*”
- Discuss how healthy self-esteem, using gifts and talents, and receiving affirmation from others fits into the life of a believer.

## **Speaking about the Issues**

(15 minutes)

A parable brings out deep questions and relevant issues. Discuss the issues below as a group.

- One trap believers can fall into is legalism. It’s the view that there is only one way to live as a believer—whether it’s the way you dress, the worship style you prefer, or the Bible study habits you choose. Talk about how self-righteousness can fuel legalism, and how legalism (and religious snobbery) can be avoided without compromising the fundamental teachings of the Bible. (Galatians 3:1-5)
- Read 1 Corinthians 6:15, 19-20. Discuss how these verses, while written in the context of sexual purity, speak to caring for yourself and fighting the temptation of unhealthy self-criticism.

## **Setting the Course**

(10 minutes)

- Talk about the key to living a life that is balanced with love for God, self, and others.

# HOW TO BELIEVE

## Shoring Up or Starting Up Your Walk with God

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### Session 12 – When will life be better?

#### Starting Questions

(10 minutes)

One thing you may hear as you walk in faith with Jesus is that faith will make your life better. Some people even say that you'll get richer, healthier, and more popular (prosperity theology). While this message appeals to many, it is not what God promises in the Bible. In fact, the journey of faith in Jesus may be a very difficult one. As you hold on to the blessings of the forgiveness of sins, the comfort of life in Jesus, and the certainty of a home in heaven, you may find yourself struggling, lonely, ill, and sad.

The fact is, God is not a prosperity-only God, and life this side of heaven has no guarantees of smooth sailing.

- Read Matthew 16:24-25. Talk about what Jesus meant in these verses and how this relates to the "prosperity theology" that some people proclaim.
- Read Matthew 7:13-14. Talk about how these words of Jesus describe a realistic picture of a believer's life.
- Discuss what the appeal of prosperity theology is. What truth and fiction does this teaching contain?

#### Searching the Scriptures

(20 minutes)

Read Mark 12:1-12

- Verses one and two set up the reader for a certain kind of ending. Logically, how would you expect this story to end?
- What is shocking about the way the parable develops and concludes?
- Who were the listeners to this parable (see 11:27)?
- When you read verse twelve you see that this parable hit home for the listeners. Discuss the message(s) Jesus was giving in this parable.

- Of course, this parable hones in on the life of Jesus. Go through each verse and talk about how the parable compares to Jesus' identity, purpose, and experiences.
- The vineyard planter expected that his servants and son would have good lives. What didn't he take into account and how does this factor impact our lives?
- Living a life of faith means that you live through ups and downs. Faith is meant to be the stabilizing factor during those highs and lows, the good times and bad times you experience. God gave certain tools to keep us stable during life's roller coaster ride. We call them "means of grace." These are tangible tools that God uses to steady the ups and downs we experience. One means of grace is the Bible. The other two means of grace are baptism and communion. Talk about how these visible tools of hope and forgiveness bring stability to life this side of heaven.

## **Speaking about the Issues**

(15 minutes)

A parable brings out deep questions and relevant issues. Discuss the issues below as a group.

- While a life of faith brings some amazing blessings (forgiveness, comfort, strength, insight, eternal life!), it also brings challenges, suffering, and sacrifice. Talk about the world's perception of being "religious" and contrast that with the reality of what it means to be a believer who lives in this broken world. (2 Corinthians 4:8-9)
- Life has natural ups and downs. These "seasons" include times of health and times of illness, times of feeling great and times of feeling blue, etc. Discuss what you as a believer can reasonably expect (from God and from life) during your journey of life. Get input from some life-veterans who have seen how faith and life have worked together over the years. (Philippians 1:21)

## **Setting the Course**

(10 minutes)

- Discuss practical ways that you can faithfully meet the ups and downs that come your way in the days, weeks, and years ahead.

# HOW TO BELIEVE

## Shoring Up or Starting Up Your Walk with God

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### Session 13 – Living a Life that Makes a Difference

#### Starting Questions

(10 minutes)

What is your goal in this journey with Jesus? Why are you here? Take a look at the following verses and discuss the purpose of your life here on earth:

- Matthew 28:18-20
- Mark 16:15
- John 13:34-35

#### Searching the Scriptures

(20 minutes)

Read Matthew 25:14-30

- What is the context of this verse—what does “it” refer to in verse 14?
- The value of a “talent” (a measure of money equivalent to multiple years of pay) brings this trust of the master to the servants to a Bill Gates type of financial level. What does this tell you about how God values the talents (skills, spiritual gifts) you have?
- What did the master expect the servants to do with the money he put in their care?
- Describe the actions and attitudes of the first two servants. Who do you know like this?
- Try to explain the actions and attitudes of the third servant.
- Talk about how you and/or people in this world may be acting like the third servant.
- Give examples of talents that we have today. What does God want you to do with those talents? Explain why.

- There are two radically different endings for the servants. Talk about the contrast of these endings and how they apply to what God desires your life to be.
- Verse 24 is a reference to the acknowledgement that the master owns everything. Discuss what THE Master owns in your life—as many areas as you can think of, and determine some things He wants you to do in those areas.

## **Speaking about the Issues**

(15 minutes)

A parable brings out deep questions and relevant issues. Discuss the issues below as a group.

- One way of discovering what kind of life makes a positive and eternal difference to others is to reflect on what you would want God and others to say about you after you die. Take turns sharing what you would want God and others to say about you at your funeral. (Matthew 25:23)
- Share with the group some purposes you believe God has for your life and some purposes you hope God will use you for. (1 Corinthians 10:31)
- Read the lists of spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12:7-10, 27-28 and Romans 12:6-8. This is just a sampling of spiritual gifts that the Bible indicates. Talk about what gifts in the lists seem appealing to you—a good match with who you are. How can you use these gifts to make an eternal difference in the lives of others?
- One final issue that can ruffle feathers is money. How does the parable shape how money should be used and talked about in the church?

## **Setting the Course**

(10 minutes)

- Mention one way you can be a better servant of Christ with a person in your life.

# HOW TO BELIEVE

## Shoring Up or Starting Up Your Walk with God

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### Session 14 – What is Your Destination?

#### Starting Questions

(10 minutes)

During these weeks you have taken a close look at the journey of faith in Jesus. It's a journey that has ups and downs. It's a journey that brings great blessings along with serious challenges. It's a journey that transforms you and brings you new ways of living. But it's also a journey with a destination. That destination is heaven.

The teaching of heaven in the Bible is meant to encourage us and sustain us as we travel in this world. Take a look at the verses below and talk about how the references to heaven bring you encouragement and strength.

- John 14:1-6
- Revelation 7:13-17
- Revelation 22:1-5

#### Searching the Scriptures

(20 minutes)

**Read** Matthew 25:31-46

- What comfort do verses 31-40 give to believers?
- At first glance these verses may appear that Jesus welcomes us into heaven because of what we've done. What are these verses really saying?
- In verses 37-39 the believers seem shocked about what Jesus said they did. Why did they feel this way?
- The condemned "goats" go through the same dialog with Jesus. What is Jesus saying about the personal condition of the people on his left (vss.41-45)?
- Talk about how verse 46 impacts life today.

- Why was Jesus telling this parable?
- What happens to you when you forget that your life has a destination?
- How does the teaching of heaven in the Bible provide you with:
  - Motivation,
  - Encouragement,
  - Direction for your life?

## Speaking about the Issues

(15 minutes)

A parable brings out deep questions and relevant issues. Discuss the issues below as a group.

- Some people picture heaven as floating on a cloud while playing a harp. Will heaven be boring? (Revelation 7:15; 22:3)
- Talk about what questions you want to ask God when you get to heaven. (1 Corinthians 13:12)
- Recap in your discussion as a group how a person gets to heaven. (Ephesians 2:8-9; John 3:16; Romans 6:23)

## Setting the Course

(10 minutes)

- As you end this course, talk about how you want to keep growing as a follower of Jesus. If you would like to commit your life to Jesus—or simply reaffirm your faith, pray this prayer:

*“God, I recognize the truth about my life. I need help. I can’t do life on my own. Thank you for telling me the truth about my capabilities and about my needs. Today I ask that you help me. Be my Savior. I will take a chance on you. I believe that you sent Jesus to die for me, to bear my burdens, and to give me new life. I want that new life. Please give me this gift. I give my life to you.”*