

LEADER'S GUIDE
THE GOSPEL FOR THE PERSON WHO HAS EVERYTHING

Prepared by the Department of Adult Ministries and Administration
of the former

Division of Church Education
Educational Ministries
American Baptist Churches, U.S.A.
PO Box 851
Valley Forge PA 19482-0851

Distributed by Judson Press
National Ministries
American Baptist Churches, U.S.A.
PO Box 851
Valley Forge PA 19482-0851

SESSION ONE

TEXT: Preface, pages 3-4

OBJECTIVE : *To learn what is meant by the phrase the “person who has everything.”*

SESSION OVERVIEW

Today’s session will be spent exploring William H. Willimon’s intriguing title, The Gospel for the Person Who Has Everything. To what kind of person is he referring? Who is the person who has everything? Few of us would describe ourselves as such persons. The title has enough ambiguity to elicit several meanings.

CONDUCTING THE SESSION

GROUP BRAINSTORM: Ask the group to brainstorm, without having read the book, what Willimon might mean by his title. Write their comments on newsprint or chalkboard. Next, ask them to name or describe a person whom they feel has everything. Suppose they are reading the morning newspaper before coming to church. The headline reads, “The Person Who Has Everything,” and below is an article describing such a person. Whom would they guess the article to be describing?

CASE STUDIES: Divide your group into three smaller groups. Each sub-group will examine one case study and respond to the question, “In what way does this describe a person who has everything? What seems lacking?”

Case Study #1: Frank is a respected community leader. He is active in more civic projects than most business executives. He lives in a very comfortable home in an elegant suburb. His children, now grown, all have successful careers. Frank is a warm, engaging, successful, enthusiastic, and determined person. In earlier years he was active in his church, mainly as a trustee. Recently his interest in church has waned. His participation is much less than it used to be. Frank now travels a great deal. He is building a winter cottage in Florida and plans more time for relaxation. He realizes that he has had to push himself too hard. Now that he’s approaching sixty, he intends to take life easier.

Case Study #2: Joyce is one of the most respected persons in her city. She has been elected Outstanding Woman of the Year. She is a creative thinker and an innovative genius. Nearly everything she attempts turns out to have a profound impact on others. Joyce is a person of faith, but she never feels enough “space” for her creativity within the local church. She leads in many ecumenical events. She has many friends who are not church members or Christians. She is able to appreciate and dialogue with persons coming from almost any direction. Most people consider her to be a “step ahead” of her own generation.

Case Study #3: Read Psalm 8:3-8 in two modern translations. The groups should report their findings. Encourage the three groups to interact with one another as they come closer to a definition of a person who has everything.

DISCUSSION: Read aloud the first two paragraphs of the preface. How do these descriptions compare to your thoughts about a person who has everything? Consider and interact with the last two sentences of the third paragraph on page three, and the first five sentences of the third paragraph on page four.

LEADER INPUT: The most useful definition for the person who has everything is the broadest one. Many persons of the so-called “Middle America” qualify. A person who has everything is one who has the resources within to meet

everyday problems and situations. Life is a joy for such persons rather than a trauma. They are secure and stable persons. Such persons would have many of these resources: success, money, position or status, respect of others, inner maturity, talent, personal energy, goals and ambitions, physical health, good judgment and common sense. When you compare yourselves with those who are handicapped or ill, or those who struggle against starvation, many of your class participants will fit. The term does not connote perfection. It should include those persons who are “arriving,” those on the way toward achieving desirable life goals. Persons filled with despair, for whom survival is a struggle, insecure and frustrated persons, complacent and dull persons, persons out of touch with reality, persons in a destructive life-style, these are persons who don’t have everything.

The book’s central questions are: “What is the appeal of the Gospel to relatively strong, mature, and healthy persons? What in the Gospel would attract them?” This is an evangelistic book. How can we speak the evangelistic message to persons such as these?

SCRIPTURAL REFLECTION: Describe the characteristics of Apostle Peter to your class: He was married. Peter and his brother Andrew were respected partners in a fishing business. Throughout Jesus’ ministry, Peter was the outstanding member of the disciples. He was a vigorous individual and often spoke for the group. He was the key leader of the early church. He preached and spoke with powerful appeal. Even with his faults, Peter was a person who had everything, even before he met Jesus. Read Luke 5:1-11. Discuss the appeal the Gospel might have had for Peter. Will that attraction be the same for persons today who likewise “have everything”?

ASSIGNMENT

Read chapter one.

SESSION TWO

TEXT: Chapter One

OBJECTIVE: *To determine what is an honest faith testimony.*

REVIEW

The central point of the book can be found on the top two complete paragraphs on page 13. Read these to your class, and ask them, “What are we to do with the strong ones?” This will review last week’s session.

CONDUCTING THE SESSION

LEADER INPUT: Willimon begins this chapter by expressing his dissatisfaction with testimonies and the traditional way that we present the Gospel. He maintains that this traditional message, “I was miserable – until I met Jesus,” does not apply to the strong because they are not miserable without Jesus. It is an inappropriate evangelistic presentation to persons of maturity and strength. “You have a problem. . . Christ is the answer” presumes that each person sees his/her life as a problem. Willimon rightly points out that many outside the church do not see their lives in this way. Is God unable to speak to those who have not yet reached an appropriate level of misery? Willimon cites four theological problems that he has with this traditional message: (1) His own personal experience, and that of many others, does not fit the presuppositions of that message (they were not miserable before they met Christ). (2) It promotes religious self-righteousness. Christians compete to see who can tell the best story about what a radical conversion occurred in their lives. “Look how terrible I was before. Look how smart I am now.” (3) It makes of Christianity a payoff, a reward for my faithfulness. (4) It emphasizes the bad life you are leaving rather than the good life you have found.

You might want to read the indented testimony on page nine and ask your class to evaluate it against the four criticisms above. Does the class agree with Willimon?

GROUP DISCUSSION: Throughout the book, Willimon has an assumption that is subtly mentioned on page 13: “To become strong is not our sickness but our salvation. Down deep I think we know that these strong ones are not far from the kind of humanity we all would like to have.” Ask your class to define what “self-reliance” means. A person who has everything is probably self-reliant. Is it a quality of Christian maturity to be self-reliant? The traditional message stresses dependency upon God. Which side does your class emphasize: self-reliance or dependency upon God? Must self-reliant people give up that trait and become dependent upon God in order to mature as Christians? Is it true that the more self-reliant you become, the less likely you are to need God? If that is true, does that mean that strong persons will have less need of God than more dependent types?

How does Luke 6:20-26 correlate to your discussion? Does not this passage seem to imply judgment upon the strong and blessings on the weak? The most telling verse is “How blest are you who are in need; the kingdom of God is yours” (Luke 6:20b NEB). There should be a great diversity of opinion as your class confronts these perplexing questions.

CLASS EXERCISE: Willimon closes the chapter with his testimony. He has attempted to write an authentic account of how he came to faith. Your class might want to think of their own honest faith testimony. Provide long strips of paper upon which each person can record a “timeline” of her/his testimony by recording under the following three headings the important events that helped share his/her own faith.

The Faith of My Father
and Mother

The New Direction of
My Faith During
Adolescence and Young
Adulthood

My Faith Today

SCRIPTURAL REFLECTION: Read the entire New Testament book of Philemon. It is only twenty-five verses long! It is an exceedingly interesting story about Paul pleading with Philemon to accept back his slave, Onesimus, as a Christian brother. After you have read it aloud, ask the class what kind of testimony of faith it offers. Consider the two verses: “Onesimus, once so little use to you, but now useful indeed, both to you and to me” (v. 11), and “you have him back for good, no longer as a slave, but as more than a slave – as a dear brother, very dear indeed to me and how much dearer to you, both as a man and as Christian” (v. 16). If Paul is offering a testimony of the faith of Onesimus in this short letter, is it a testimony this is authentic and honest by Willimon’s standards? Or is it too traditional? Philemon is a strong man. Would such a testimony have any impact upon a person of strength? Why or why not?

A FINAL CONSIDERATION: Another subtle message in chapter one is Willimon’s complaint that we offer the same “medicine” to everybody. We don’t present the Gospel message uniquely to each person. It is too mass produced. If your class has had difficulty with any of the preceding exercises, they might like to discuss this question: Should the church proclaim “answers” until it has heard the questions and needs of persons?

ASSIGNMENT

Read chapter two by next week.

SESSION THREE

TEXT: Chapter two, pages 17-23

OBJECTIVE: *To understand what is meant by the “old motif” and what is wrong with the motivation of guilt.*

SESSION OVERVIEW

The old motif (the traditional way the Gospel is presented) is, “You have a problem. Christ is the answer. Repent and be saved.” The old motif is penetrated with guilt, according to Willimon. The old motif subtly criticizes strong personality traits. It asks strong persons to set aside their God-given attributes in order to accept the Gospel. Willimon’s point is that the old motif is only effective if people feel guilty. You must first realize you have a serious problem, feel guilt for that problem, turn to Christ, repent, and then be saved.

The only problem with this motif is that guilt rarely motivates a real and lasting repentance. Guilt might motivate some personal changes, but it rarely every brings on honest conversion or a determined changing of the direction of one’s life. He uses the Greek work, metanoia (meta-NOY-ya), for the English word, repentance. It means to change one’s way to being. Read and discuss the first complete paragraph on the top of page 20. Discuss the role that guilt plays in our lives, in our faith, and in our church. How “caught up” in guilt is the church?

CONDUCTING THE SESSION

CLASS EXERCISE: There are some positive contributions that guilt makes in our lives as well as negative ones. Not long ago a young unmarried woman of seventeen in my church became pregnant. She came to me six months pregnant and nonchalantly admitted her condition. She and her boyfriend were casual, almost flippant about their situation. They had no guilt or remorse whatsoever about what they had done. I found in my counseling with them that we could not begin to deal creatively or positively with their situation until they realized the gravity of what they had done and felt guilt for having done it. Only then could we realistically look at the options and challenges that stood ahead of them.

On the other hand, many Christians simply bask in guilt. Everything they do or think is yet another reason to feel more guilt. The guilt becomes an obstacle to new growth. Ask your class to consider the good that guilt offers and the bad that guilt offers in our lives. You can hand out a sheet, or write on newsprint or chalkboard the following design to facilitate this exercise:

THE GOOD THAT GUILT OFFERS | *THE BAD THAT GUILT OFFERS*

Ask your group to complete examples and ideas under both headings. Perhaps this could be done in groups of two or three, and then findings could be shared with the total group.

PRESENTATION: Repentance based on feelings of regret is motivated by and fed by guilt. The repentance holds only so long as the feeling of guilt holds. In other words, “We repent just enough to get back into God’s favor.” Read to your class the first complete paragraph on page 23. How does the class respond to Barth’s statement? Willimon’s quote might be helpful here, “The church provides Good Chidings rather than Good Tidings.”

There are times when it is convenient and comfortable to feel guilty! Many of us unconsciously want to feel guilty because it means we don’t have to face up to the painful task of changing ourselves and, therefore, affecting the reason we felt the guilt in the first place. For example, I try to jog several times a week. I often fail. Rather than create a system of accountability that would not let me off the hook (such as joining a group or asking my wife to help in keeping a record), I choose to feel guilty about it. As long as I am “punishing” myself with guilt, I feel no reason to improve my performance.

Guilt can be a crutch. The punishment of guilt is our just reward. Guilt disenfranchises us. We don't have to take responsibility when we feel guilty. Usually guilt combines with a feeling of inferiority. Guilt plus inferiority equals impotency. What's the best way to deal with guilt? How's a mature person to deal with his/her own guilt?

DISCUSS: Guilt is the opposite motivation from grace. To be motivated by guilt is to live by a "works righteousness." It functions like this: "I have done something that I didn't want to do (or, I didn't do something I wanted to do.) I have feelings of guilt because of it. I feel estranged from God because I have disappointed God. In order to get back into God's good graces, I try to improve myself, I try to achieve a good status with God on my own." Such an example is all too typical and Willimon is correct in saying that this is the opposite of the New Testament faith. You may call this "The Gospel of Achievement." Hand out a sheet with this typed on it:

THE GOSPEL OF ACHIEVEMENT (We love in order to gain status with God.)

- Motivation: obligation
- You act in order to get results, to be successful or victorious.
- You serve in order to gain love and acceptance.
- It is a "works righteousness."
- You aim toward doing the minimum.
- Repentance here is a feeling created by guilt to spur you to try harder and to do better.

Discuss the reasons why this Gospel is not in line with the New Testament. Would some class members argue with this judgment?

SESSION FOUR

TEXT: Chapters two and three (pages 23ff)

OBJECTIVE: *To understand what is meant by the “new motif” and the motivation of grace.*

SESSION OVERVIEW

The most important pages in the book are these. To understand “grace” is to understand the pivotal message for the person who has everything. An interesting quote to open discussion comes on page 25: “Just when we expect to get clobbered for our guilt, we get clobbered by grace.” Ask the group to respond to this. What does Willimon mean? What does it mean in your own personal experience? Theologically, Willimon is stating that for our faith to be in proper balance, grace must be accepted first. Grace is the first reality that a Christian must realize.

CONDUCTING THE SESSION

SCRIPTURE STUDY: Willimon says that accepting a gift can be one of the hardest things we are ever asked to do (p. 26). Ask for persons to give life illustrations of this. If persons are having trouble with this statement, ask them to replace the word “gift” with “praise”. Accepting praise is often much more difficult than giving praise to others. “It may be more blessed to give than to receive. But it is usually more difficult to receive than to give. Especially when the gift can’t be repaid. That’s what bothers us about the grace (gift) of God’s love” (p. 26).

Working in pairs, ask half of the group to work on one passage of scripture and the other half to work on the second passage:

Ephesians 2:8 and 9 – Questions: 1) How does this passage compare with the “Ethics of Achievement” from last week? 2) What are the subtler messages this passage teaches about grace? 3) What kinds of problems might the Christians who receive this message be having?

Hebrews 12:15a – Questions: 1) What does this warning mean? 2) What are the temptations in wanting to turn back from the grace of God? 3) What happens when we turn toward the grace of God?

PRESENTATION: Willimon states the new motif of grace.

1. Christ is the answer.
2. You have a problem.
3. Repent and be saved.

He has simply reversed the order of the old motif. What he actually means is this:

1. God accepts you just as you are (awareness of grace).
2. Life outside of grace cannot be as full as within it (awareness of human limitation).
3. Receive God’s acceptance of you and be changed! (repentance)

The new motif is radically different because we give up trying to impress God. We accept the fact that God is already impressed! God was impressed with us before our first diaper was changed. Accept God’s unconditional acceptance! That’s grace, and grace comes first. That is righteousness (or salvation) by grace, rather than righteousness (or salvation) by works or achievement.

Encourage your class to share: How do you try to earn God's love? What activities are you engaged in to deserve "your place in the kingdom"? There are some excellent related quotes from the third and fourth paragraphs on page 30 which will be good discussion "teasers."

More discussion: Willimon is suggesting a new evangelistic process. He's saying the old plan of salvation is backwards. The new process of salvation is stated as "An awareness of grace precedes repentance and change" (p. 32). What has Willimon's new motif to do with the person who has everything? Why might the new motif be more appealing to a strong person than the old motif? Did grace come first in your own faith journey? Did it, or would it, have made a difference?

DISTRIBUTE: Hand out a sheet with the following format:

THE GOSPEL OF GRACE (We love because God first loved us.)

- Motivation: gratitude (internally motivated).
- You act regardless of whether you win or lose.
- It is righteousness by grace.
- You serve because you know that you are loved and accepted.
- You aim toward doing the maximum.
- Repentance is a decision to change the direction of one's life toward the Source of Life.

Compare this sheet with last week's handout. Ask for response. The Seven Simple Words of Grace are "We love, because Christ first loved us." I used to dislike that scripture verse. I fought that as a kind of cheap love. Why must we be loved before we will love others? Why must we first be rewarded? But my arguments only symbolized how difficult grace has been for me to accept. Grace goes against everything I have been taught and much of what I believe in. Ask you class if they concur with any of these "work righteousness" statements.

- If you are faithful, God will reward you.
- You get what you deserve in life.
- If you want to be loved, first you must love.
- There is nothing free in life.
- God loves those best who serve God best.
- God will be faithful to you if you are faithful to God.

Close this section with the Bultmann quote on page 69. Simple theological truths – truths of grace!

ASSIGNMENT

Your class is probably not accustomed to having homework assignments to be done during the week. I would, however, recommend that you assign the following task with the real expectation that members can find the time to do it. (Don't use guilt as a motivation!) When the class comes back next week, members may share with a partner their written responses to the following questions:

1. In your own words, what is "grace"?
2. In your own experience, how have you felt the reality of grace?
3. Was the acceptance of grace the first step in your faith journey?
4. What aspect of grace is hardest for you to accept today?
5. In what way would the Christian Gospel be reduced if there were no concept of grace?

SESSION FIVE

TEXT: Chapter three, continued

OBJECTIVE: *To recognize that the Christian faith is a gracious gift from God.*

CONDUCTING THE SESSION

INTRODUCTION: “Important Gifts . . . Bring an illustration from your own life about an important personal gift that you have received from another person. Ask the class members to cite important gifts that they have received from others. After you have given opportunity to share, present these ideas: The reasons that some gifts are more important to us than others are (1) the giver – the person who gave it was special in some way; (2) the sacrifice or cost – it was significant; (3) the occasion of receiving it – the occasion was important or memorable; (4) the fit – how the gift fits into your own desires, needs or likes.

The central idea of Christianity is a gift called grace. Ask you class:

1. Who is the giver?
2. What is the sacrifice required of the giver?
3. What is the occasion of our receiving it?
4. How does the fit affect our needs, desires or likes?

Willimon says that Christians tend to distort the free gift of grace in two ways:

- 1) Either we refuse to accept God’s grace, and instead try to earn status with God by our works;
- 2) Or we accept God’s free grace, become lazy and complacent and refuse to accept any of the “demands” or claims of the Gospel.

HOMEWORK REPORTING: Ask those participants who have written responses to the home assignment to exchange notes with another person and respond to each other. Ask the others who have not done so to pair with one person and discuss responses to the questions.

SCRIPTURAL REFLECTION: “A Discussion of Parables” – Divide the group into three smaller discussion groups. Distribute the following printed directions and ask persons to respond to them verbally within their groups. A reporter could be appointed in each group to share briefly with the total group the story of their parable and the group’s reaction to it. Allow enough time to close the session with those reports.

GROUP #1: First, read the parable found in Luke 15:11-32. What is the message of this parable?

Compare the parable to these Willimon quotations.

“Show me a child who spends his life trying to earn his parent’s love, and I’ll show you a child who has a lot to learn about the nature of parental love. There is nothing a child can do to make his parents love him more. Their love comes as a gift” (p. 27).

“Only he who is already loved can love; only he who has been trusted can trust; only he who has been an object of devotion can give himself” (p. 69).

Compare the parable to this scripture passage: “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1). If you have time, look up the context.

GROUP #2: First read the story found in Luke 18:18-27. What's the message of this story? Does this passage seem to be advocating salvation by works? How is this to be interpreted within a gospel of grace?

Compare the story to these Willimon quotations:

"Until we first sense the grace of God in Christ, we will be unable to see that our real problem lies in our anxious posturing self-depreciation, and self-justification with which we are trying to earn what we already have as a gift" (p. 31).

"Many persons of strength who have been successful in earning material things of life assume that work must be the way to achieve the spiritual things as well" (p. 30).

"We do not have to give or say or pay anything. In Christ it has all been given, said, and paid for us. We do not have to make any kind of deal with God. In Christ, love has been dealt our way" (p. 25).

GROUP #3: First, read the parable found in Matthew 20:1-15. What is the message of this parable? Why is this parable so difficult to accept? Is grace just and fair?

Compare the parable to these Willimon quotations:

"You can't work to earn the right to be your father and mother's child. You already are that child. The realization that you are a child of God, that this is a gift and not an achievement, is the point where conversion starts" (p. 30).

"It bothers us to know that first and finally . . . there is nothing you have to do, nothing you have to do, nothing you have to do to be in God's good graces" (p. 26).

SESSION SIX

OBJECTIVE: *To describe the three ways that we are motivated and their relationship to grace.*

SESSION OVERVIEW

We leave the text for this week to explore the important matter of human motivation. We have done a great deal of discussion and group scriptural study up to this point. Today, since the ideas have not been presented in the book, you will be presenting most of the information and ideas yourself. We will be examining how two avenues of human motivation belong to the “world of grace,” while one belongs to the “world of guilt.”

CONDUCTING THE SESSION

INTRODUCTION: I was reading 2 Corinthians 9:7 in Today’s English Version of the Bible several years ago, when a most familiar verse communicated an entirely new meaning to me. The verse is translated, “Each one should give, then, as he has decided, not with regret or out of a sense of duty; for God loves the one who gives gladly.” We hear that verse frequently in stewardship sermons. Write the verse, in the above translation (TEV) on newsprint or chalkboard and urge the class to brainstorm all the possible teachings that this one verse has to offer. What are its subtle and obvious teachings? My insight from this verse is one perhaps your class has recognized as well. The verse says, “Each one should give as he has decided . . .”. Giving, therefore should be intentional. It should be a part of your own personal goals and decision. The verse also says that regret or duty are inappropriate motivations for deciding to give. In other words, don’t give because you feel you have to give. The motivation is as important, perhaps more so than the gift.

Surely this is also the teaching of Jesus’ story of the widow’s mite. It wasn’t only that the widow gave a larger percentage of her income than the respected elders. But it was also her motivation in giving that Jesus recognized. She was giving without expecting gain or recognition or praise. The important teaching: The motivation is as important as the gift. And what is the correct motivation? Give either because you have decided that it is important (willful giving), or give because you can do so cheerfully and gladly (cheerful giving). That is the only satisfactory motivation that the scripture verse offers. And that, in my mind, is motivation enough.

Ask your class to discuss, perhaps in smaller groups, this question: Is doing something out of a sense of duty or obligation a necessary part of life?

PRESENTATION: NEEDING, OUGHTING, WANTING – A STUDY IN HUMAN MOTIVATION. Present the following ideas in your own words to your class. Some will understand what you are presenting immediately, while others will need more time, or others will disagree. Allow the class members to dialogue together and then come to their own conclusion. You should close this session with a most lively discussion!

We are motivated for three general reasons. Two, I believe are healthy motivations and one is unhealthy.

OUGHTING: THE UNHEALTHY MOTIVATION

The motivation here is doing things out of duty: I ought to do this; I have to do this; I should do this. “I hate my job. I’m only going to work today because I have to go.” The motivation is entirely external. The expectation of others is the motivating factor. What will others think? What do they expect? What must I do to gain acceptance? Often the real motivation is guilt. Those who live by “oughting,” live under a spell of guilt.

“I don’t want to sit with grandma tonight. Someone has to. And I guess that someone’s me. I’ll feel guilty if she were to stay alone.”

This is motivation the Corinthian verse urges us to follow: “Do not act with regret or out of a sense of duty.”

WANTING: THE EASY MOTIVATION

The second type of motivation is the easiest to understand and to follow. I do something because I want to do it.

“One of the things I most look forward to each week is my night to sit with grandma. She is a wonderful and wise person. I really want to be with her on these special nights.”

The motivation to “wanting” is internal and reflects my desires and tastes. It is a healthy motivation. This is what the Corinthian verse talks of when it says that “God loves the one who gives gladly.” While the motivation here is the easiest, it cannot be the only motivation. A person who does things only because he/she wants to, is basically a very self-centered person. On the other hand, persons who punish themselves because they will not allow themselves to do anything simply because they want to, are joyless persons. We should do as much as we can by “wanting,” but neither can it stand alone.

NEEDING: THE NECESSARY MOTIVATION

The third type of motivation is also healthy and necessary. This motivation sounds like this:

“I don’t necessarily want to sit with grandma. In fact, I might even dread it. But because grandma is an important person to me, and because the task is an important one, I need to sit with grandma tonight.”

There is an important, yet subtle difference in the motivation of needing. Again, as in wanting, the motivation is internal. My motivating factor is based upon my personal priorities, values, and convictions.

There are times in life when we need to do things that we do not want to do. But these occasions need not be times of guilt. It isn’t necessary that these feelings or occasions be a burden. The scripture verse that spoke of needing, stated, “each one should give, then, as he has decided.” The key to needing is intentionality.

CONCLUSION: The problem with most of us is that we are caught between the motivation of obligation (oughting) and desire (wanting). And that is a tough bind to be caught between. If I do things I want to do, I feel guilty because I’m not doing things I ought to do. If I’m only doing things I ought to do, then I lack joy. Most of us overlook the motivation of needing.

ASSIGNMENT

Read chapter four.

SESSION SEVEN

TEXT: Chapter four, pages 37-45

OBJECTIVE: *To explore what makes a faith immature.*

SESSION OVERVIEW

In this session we will be exploring what immature faith means. Sometimes we can best understand immature faith by looking back on our own faith journey. Each one of us can cite examples of our own immature faith which we have grown beyond. Our ideas of God deepen, our beliefs broaden as they “bump” up against life’s experiences, our responses to God’s claims exhibit more wisdom, our prayers become more humble, our life-style gains more integrity. You could ask you class members for examples from their lives of immature faith. You may discuss: “How can a person know when one’s faith is immature? Is an immature faith different from one person to the next? Are we able to determine objectively when faith is immature? Willimon makes the claim on page 38, “What bothers me is that the church, far from helping people grow up, too often babies people and perpetuates their childishness.” Does your class agree? Does this describe your church?

CONDUCTING THE SESSION

PRESENTATION: this chapter is a controversial one, particularly as Willimon cites his “Marks of Immature Faith.” Unfortunately, rather than describing a coherent list of immature qualities of faith, he uses labels such as “fundamentalist” and names such as Rev. Sun Myung Moon or Oral Roberts and groups such as Campus Crusade to caricature his points. Regardless of whether he is right or wrong, his technique obscures his message. It tends to camouflage three central points that he wants to make:

1. Fundamentalism is immature when it refuses to see the positive role that doubt can play in shaping a mature faith; when it claims to have an exclusive access to the truth which no one else possesses; and when its fanaticism on the surface is really covering up an insecurity within.
2. Attempting to identify a contemporary messiah is another sign of immaturity. Perhaps this point may best be described as idol-making. We create idols to worship, rather than worship the true God. Any allegiance to a lesser “god” is an example of this.
3. The “utilitarian approach” is a faith built upon rewards. “You will be rewarded if you are faithful.” Another way to describe this trait is with the attitude: “If it works, if it is successful, if it delivers, then it must be God’s will.”

GROUP EXERCISES:

- A. My hunch is that even if your class members agree with Willimon’s characterizations on pages 40-44, they might find his list of qualities of immature faith to be lacking. Encourage them, in groups of 3-5, to skim through these five pages and make a list of qualities of immature faith, which Willimon offers, and rate them as to whether they agree or disagree with what he is saying. This book, like any other, is not infallible. Give your class members permission to their own thinking. This is what Willimon advocates!
- B. From this point, urge your small groups to make up their own lists of qualities of immature faith. Their lists could fit the following format: “Immature faith is _____ rather than _____.” Collect the lists on newsprint or chalkboard. See how much diversity of opinion there is. What is immature to one group, might not be to another. Develop these points of dialogue.

C. I have provided the following list of qualities which I feel describe an immature faith. Prepare a handout using this list, and suggest that the class members read through it and rate themselves accordingly. They could discuss their ratings with a partner at the conclusion. You could also compare this list to the lists which your class prepared in the exercise above.

QUALITIES OF IMMATURE FAITH

My Faith May Be Characterized By . . .	Definitely Yes	Definitely No
A. <u>too strong a need for certainty</u> (Not all questions can be answered; the word “faith” implies that you cannot know everything; mature faith can live comfortably with some uncertainty.)	7-----6-----5-----4-----3-----2-----1	
B. <u>too small a view of God</u> (No one can know everything about God, or always know God’s expectations for one’s life; often ideas of God are too small, too limiting, too self-serving.)	7-----6-----5-----4-----3-----2-----1	
C. <u>self-centeredness</u> (Seeking only a reward for myself; centering too exclusively upon my own personal needs.)	7-----6-----5-----4-----3-----2-----1	
D. <u>it being used as a crutch, an excuse, a comfort</u> (In all such cases, faith is in the way of personal growth and development.)	7-----6-----5-----4-----3-----2-----1	
E. <u>a lack of surprises or challenges</u> (Vibrant faith often makes surprising demands upon us; it confronts us where we least expect it.)	7-----6-----5-----4-----3-----2-----1	
F. <u>a one-time faith decision rather than a lifelong journey</u> (Immature faith lets the believer think that she/he has “made it”; that he/she is on the inside while others are on the outside; it refuses to see faith as a lifelong series of decisions and stages.)	7-----6-----5-----4-----3-----2-----1	
G. <u>a structure of beliefs rather than a responsiveness of faith</u> (A person holds fast to a set of theological beliefs, and thinks of faith as a collection of carefully selected convictions; rather than seeing faith as more fluid and dynamic, more responsive to the divine relationship.)	7-----6-----5-----4-----3-----2-----1	
H. <u>a privatized faith rather than a personalized faith</u> (A private faith has no interests in being shared with others; a personalized faith is deeply personal but it is also shared in relationships.)	7-----6-----5-----4-----3-----2-----1	
I. <u>an institutional faith rather than a corporate faith</u> (A faith that has given ultimate allegiance to a faith institution, i.e. a church, as opposed to a faith that is ultimately seen as an extension of a corporate body of believers.)	7-----6-----5-----4-----3-----2-----1	

SESSION EIGHT

OBJECTIVE: *To explore what makes a faith mature.*

CONDUCTING THE SESSION

SCRIPTURE STUDY: Ask the group to move into four small groups for the scripture study. Hand out a sheet of paper on which the five following passages of scripture are typed out. Leave an inch of white space under each passage for writing notation. The passages are: 1 Corinthians 3:1-3a; Luke 18:16-17; 1 Corinthians 14:20; Mark 9:33-37; and 1 Corinthians 13:11.

Type the passage from a modern translation. The passages purposely do not say the same thing. Do not tell the groups this before you give them their instructions. Ask the groups to “boil down” the central point of each passage, and then compare the messages. Do these passages harmonize? What do they seem to be teaching about maturity? Briefly report each group’s findings to the total class. You might also choose to present Willimon’s related ideas from page 37.

GROUP EXERCISE: In the same small groups, ask the participants to determine, “What are the signs of maturity?” On separate slips of paper, give each group its instructions.

Group #1: Look up the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3-9) and record the sign of maturity which you find.

Group #2: Here are current issues of three magazines, Time, Sports Illustrated, and Good Housekeeping. Browse through these and record what they seem to be advocating as modern signs of maturity.

Group #3: We want your own personal opinion: What are signs of personal maturity today?

Group #4: Look in Willimon’s book at his signs of mature faith. You will find six signs in all, from the bottom of page 45 to the bottom of page 48. What does he say are the signs of mature faith?

Ask the groups to record their findings on newsprint. After sufficient time, ask the groups to tape their newsprint up, side by side, so that the class can compare. Ask each group to report by describing its assignment and then its conclusions.

After all four groups have reported, compare their findings. Are they similar? Do the signs conflict with one another? Why or why not?

Ask the group members to cite illustrations from their own lives that relate to the comparisons. You can close by discussing: Are the biblical signs of maturity out of date? Would they ever work? Is there any hope of persons truly living by them? Do we seem to be getting closer or farther from the “Beatitudes style of living” in our modern society? Is your church operating according to that level of maturity?

ASSIGNMENT

Read chapter five.

SESSION NINE

TEXT: Chapter five.

OBJECTIVE: *To define more clearly “the person who has everything.”*

SESSION OVERVIEW

We’re back now to the central concern of the book. It is articulated best in the first sentence of the fifth paragraph on page 52. Read the sentence to your class. Now that you’ve been through four chapters of the book together, how would the class respond to that question? Do the members have more ideas now? The goal of this chapter is to consolidate the earlier chapters into a gospel for the person who has everything.

CONDUCTING THE SESSION

GROUP EXERCISE: Ask your class to break up into small working groups and give them the following two questions and case studies to explore:

Case Study #1: Margaret is a well-known star of a ballet company in her city. She has won recognition for her creative and innovative style. She is 38 years old, never married, and surrounded by a close community of friends. She lives in an older community of the city in a house that she has redecorated herself. She volunteers in her neighborhood at a senior citizens’ center. She is a disciplined person, spending several hours every day rehearsing and practicing. Margaret is a kind, sensitive, and well-liked person. She came from a fine Christian home. Yet today, she does not profess to be a Christian, nor does she have any involvement with a church. What would be a theology that would enhance this strong person’s life? What would be a message of evangelism that might appeal to this person of strength?

Case Study #2: Russ is the head of an anti-poverty agency in the city. He took over the agency after its former director was indicted for graft and many of its employees were dismissed because of the wastefulness of the agency. Russ has had to work long and hard to rebuild the agency and its public image. Today, five years later, it is a model for other agencies. Its organization is efficient and lean, and delivers many services to persons in need. Russ is a committed public servant, and he believes in what he is doing.

Russ is also a family man. He has two bright children, both now in junior high. Russ says he never has had much of an interest in religion. He says he believes that there is a God, but he has never felt an urge to develop an interest beyond that point. What would be a theology that would enhance this strong person’s life? What would be a message of evangelism that might appeal to this person of strength?

After the groups have reported their findings, read them Willimon’s quote: “Let us speak to persons of strength with a challenge which shakes them to the core with its boldness” (p. 59). Have your statements which you have just prepared been statements of boldness?

PRESENTATION: Review and discuss Willimon’s “Theology that Speaks to the Strong” (pages 55-59). Ask them why these ideas have appeal to the strong.

A theology that speaks to the strong will: 1) See gratitude as the foundation of our response to God. 2) Emphasize our sins of self-righteousness, or of complacency, or of pretensions of being self-sufficient, or of failure to empathize with the weak. 3) Challenge us to live beyond the narrow confines of our lives and faith. 4) Show that real strength is in selflessness.

DISCUSSION IDEAS

In this chapter there are many excellent quotes and ideas on pages 57, 58, and 59 that can be discussed if time allows.

GROUP EXERCISE: PERSONAL STRENGTHS – In the Christian’s mind there is a vast difference when we see our strengths as gifts, rather than as “earned achievements.” To see personal strengths as gifts causes one to experience “humbling gratitude” (p. 58). Also, “To be gifted. . . is to be held responsible for the use of those gifts. ‘To whom much is given, of him (her) shall much be required’” (p. 58).

Hand out a sheet of Personal Gifts:

WHAT ARE MY STRENGTHS? (list 6 that come to mind)	HOW DOES THIS STRENGTH CHANGE WHEN I SEE IT AS A GIFT?
--	---

- | | |
|----|----|
| 1. | 1. |
| 2. | 2. |
| 3. | 3. |
| 4. | 4. |
| 5. | 5. |
| 6. | 6. |

Participants could share responses in smaller groups.

SCRIPTURAL STUDY: Read Luke 12:13-21, The Parable of the Rich Fool. Ask the class, “What does it mean to be “rich in God’s sight” as opposed to being rich for yourself?”

Why was the rich man called a fool? How was his strength limiting him? What was the sin of the rich fool?

Next, read Romans 12:3. How does this verse speak to the predicament of the rich fool? How does it speak to persons of strength today?

CLOSURE

Close your session reading aloud to your class the quote about Bonhoeffer’s life on pages 59 and 60. It is a fitting close.

ASSIGNMENT

Read chapter six.

SESSION TEN

TEXT: Chapter six.

OBJECTIVE: *To explore how worship can appeal to the person who has everything.*

CONDUCTING THE SESSION

PRESENTATION/DISCUSSION: Begin your study by reading aloud pages 61 and 62, using the example from the third century church. After it has been read, ask the class:

- 1) How does this description of worship differ from our worship tradition?
- 2) Does this style of worship seem outmoded and unworkable today?
- 3) What are the most appealing ingredients of this third-century worship?

Willimon does not attempt to share the point of this chapter. Thus, it is important to lift it up: If worship is restored, then persons who are strong and mature will be drawn to it and fed by it. Much of our current worship styles in Protestant Christianity are too weak to meet the needs of “the person who has everything.”

GROUP SHARING: In a group discussion, ask the class to share with others a worship service that was truly worshipful for them. What made the experience so significant? Was there a key ingredient that made the service so inspiring, or was it the person’s mood or receptiveness? Or was it both? Take some time to discuss these most significant worship experiences.

PRESENTATION: Present the ideas on page 64, redrawing the diagrams on newsprint or chalkboard. Gain the responses from your class to Willimon’s ideas on worship.

SCRIPTURAL STUDY: What does the New Testament say about worship? Ask your class members to look up these passages and report what they teach about worship.

Matthew 18:20
Mark 12:28-40
John 4:16-26
Matthew 4:8-10

Acts 2:42-47
1 Corinthians 14:26
Acts 20:7-12
1 Timothy 2:1,8

Ask someone to read Psalms 149 and 150 to gain an Old Testament perspective on worship.

WORSHIP EVALUATION: In small groups, ask for responses to these questions:

- 1) What do we attempt to accomplish when we worship in our church?
- 2) In what ways does worship in our church excel?
- 3) In what ways could our worship be made more meaningful?
- 4) Willimon claims that there is one true test or criteria for worship and that is the question: “What does our worship say to and about God?” How does our church’s worship respond to this question?

Share responses with the total group after the small groups have had time for reflection.

CLOSING THE SESSION

For your closing today, you'll be asking each person to make a contribution to a group litany. Hand out a sheet of paper on which this is printed:

To worship means not to _____ but to _____.

It means to come expecting to _____ and to leave expecting to _____.

Give each person time to respond to the incomplete sentences. When they are ready, explain that each person will be asked to share a phrase about worship. After each person shares, the entire group will speak in unison the following prayer: "Lord, teach us to worship You in Spirit and Truth." After each person has shared and the class has repeated the prayer statement each time, you may close the class with your own personal prayer.

ASSIGNMENT

Read chapter seven.

SESSION ELEVEN

TEXT: Chapter seven.

OBJECTIVE: *To explore Christian stewardship for the person who has everything.*

SESSION OVERVIEW

The person who has everything is a person with resources. . . a person who has something to give. Christ expects much from the person who has been given much. And so we turn to the expectations of the strong, and we call this the concern of stewardship. The strong person is called to be a good steward of the resources he/she has been given.

In this chapter “The person of strength will be urged to ask, ‘What is God asking of me in light of my God-given talents and abilities and in the light of my neighbor’s needs?’” (p. 73).

CONDUCTING THE SESSION

SCRIPTURAL STUDY: There are many excellent biblical resources for this study. A good way to study these resources is to use a new approach to Bible study, and that is to see yourself in the story. After you read the passage, ask yourself: What is the story attempting to say to me? If I were in the story, which character or role would I most likely be?

For example, as I ponder Mark 12:38-42 (the story of the widow’s mite), and I ask the question, “What is this story saying to me?” (or what is God attempting to say to me through this story?), I realize that I play the character of the Teachers of the Law. I enjoy being respected by others. I thrive on having a position upon which others look with admiration. I need the approval of other people. Several days ago a young man named Donald came to my office. He had a terrific odor. He was dirty and ragged and had been living on the streets. He was only four to five years younger than I, and I thought to myself, “How much better I am. I do not stink. I live in a nice house. I have myself ‘together’. I am strong and mature, when compared with Donald.” As I read this passage, I realize how much above other people I put myself. The passage seems to be condemning that attitude. After I spoke with Donald, who had come to me asking for some help in interpreting a difficult Bible verse, I realized that there was a person that God created in that young man named Donald. I had judged him on outward appearance.

You might choose to personalize a passage of scripture in much the same way, so that your participants know what you are asking them to do, and also so that they feel free to do so.

Then ask them to find a partner to discuss and share these biblical passages: Mark 12:28-34; Matthew 19:23-24; Luke 19:11-26; Luke 19:1-10; Matthew 26:6-13; Mathew 19:16-22; Luke 6:20-21.

GROUP DISCUSSION: Read aloud Willimon’s second complete paragraph on page 73. Ask your class to respond to some of these controversial, yet biblical ideas. Do you think what he is saying is truly biblical? What implications does this have?

GROUP EXERCISE: Read the case study of Joe and Matilda and ask the class to respond with their own ideas to this dilemma.

Case Study, Joe and Matilda: Joe and Matilda are active members of First Baptist Church. They are in their mid-thirties with three children. Matilda had not been employed for several years while the children were young. Now that they are all in school, she has gone job hunting. Her degree and past experience in business matched a large corporation’s need to place women in management positions. She was offered a position that will more than double

the family's income. The family is reaching the stage where they enjoy doing things together, and camping has become a favorite activity. They recently went camping with close friends and used their friend's recreational vehicle. It was a great family experience. Joe and Matilda were greatly impressed with the versatility of the vehicle. One that would meet the needs of their family would cost \$9,100.

At church the next week they heard an agricultural missionary from India speak. He was a creative and innovative man who had invented a new method of drilling wells for his area in India. This area had suffered greatly from lack of well water for crops and human consumption. He spoke of children starving and of land that was suitable for irrigation, standing side by side. Children starving. Land suitable for irrigation. His mission board promised him they would supply the money for a well in two years, as soon as they could solve some short-term financial problems. Each well costs \$8,900 to build and place in operable condition. The missionary seemed sad as he said that the two-year wait for the well would translate into the loss of 170 human lives. He visited the church, not to ask for money, but simply to interpret his ministry.

That evening, Joe and Matilda disagreed on the response. One of them felt they should forget the recreational vehicle and give the man \$8,900 (which they had already set aside). The other thought that this was overreacting. "After all, we're not wealthy. God also wants us to be good parents and to enjoy ourselves as a family. That's not sinful." How would *you* deal with these issues?

ASSIGNMENT

Read chapter eight.

SESSION TWELVE

TEXT: Chapter eight.

OBJECTIVE: *To recognize that Christian faith is always expressed in community.*

CONDUCTING THE SESSION

Read this statement to your class: “Living a religious life would be an easy task were it not for the troublesome presence of other people. The woman who says that she feels more religious when she stays at home on Sunday morning watching Oral Roberts on television, the man who claims to have a more uplifting experience on the golf course than in church, the young person who receives ‘better vibrations’ in twenty minutes of ‘transcendental meditation’ than in sixty minutes of morning worship are all simply stating what is true: It is easier to feel ‘religious’ in such individual, solitary, comfortable circumstances. Whether it is possible to be *Christian* in such circumstances is another matter!” (p. 78).

Discuss the reasons people give for not participating in church. How does your class react to the reasons stated? How have they experienced the “troublesome presence” of the church in their lives?

On newsprint or chalkboard, write the following:

FEELING RELIGIOUS

BEING RELIGIOUS

Under each column, ask the class to brainstorm descriptions of these two categories. What is the difference between *being* religious and *feeling* religious, as quoted in the paragraph from Willimon?

DEBATE: Divide your class in half (men vs. women; number off; or A-M, N-Z). Give these separate instructions to the two groups:

Group #1: You will be engaged in a debate. The central question of the debate is, “Is it necessary for a Christian to belong to the church?” You will be arguing (regardless of your personal opinion) that indeed it is absolutely necessary for a Christian to belong to a church. Your argument is that you cannot be a Christian apart from the church. You will have a few minutes to develop your arguments as a group, before the debate begins. Each group should elect a spokesperson to present its opening arguments. You will have three minutes for this. Then the other group presents the opposing case. Then we will open it up for general class debate.

Group #2: You will be engaged in a debate. The central question of the debate is, “Is it necessary for a Christian to belong to the church?” You will be arguing (regardless of your personal opinion) that it is *NOT* necessary for a Christian to belong to a church. Your argument is that it is possible to be a Christian and not belong to a church. You will have a few minutes to develop your arguments as a group before the debate begins. Each group should elect a spokesperson to present its opening arguments. You will have three minutes for this. Your group will present its case after the other group. Then we will open it up for general class debate.

The arguments will undoubtedly include how to define the church and how to define “belonging.” This is not a formal debate. Allow everyone to participate in the general debate, and then bring this to a close, so that persons can discuss their roles and their arguments, sharing their real views on the subject.

DISCUSS: John Wesley said, “There is no such thing as a ‘solitary Christian.’ The faith must be shared in order to be kept. Christianity is a social religion” (p. 78). Does Willimon’s perspective mesh with that of your members?

PRESENTATION: Willimon says that the greatest heresy in American cultic faith is the idea that religion is a private affair between the believer and God. He calls it the “individualistic heresy,” which manifests itself in three ways:

- 1) The “me and Jesus” heresy; faith has no corporate aspect.
- 2) The “do your own thing” heresy; look for truth only by disengaging from all external commitments and search within one’s own unconscious.
- 3) The “Lone Ranger” heresy; I can do good and live the Christian life, working alone.

Ask your class to respond to these three “surrogate ideas of faith.” Can they think of other heretical ideas in current vogue that build up faith in God but put down Christ’s church?

DISCUSS: Discuss with your class what the church demands of people. Does your class think the church asks too much? There are three potent Willimon quotes to respond to (pages 82-83): “The church asks people to grow. It assumes that Christians are made, not born.” And, “Stay in the church long enough, and there is a good chance that it will demand your time, your money, your love, maybe even your life. And it will make no apologies for its nagging demands.” And finally, “The person who says that he or she dislikes the church because it is full of sinners and hypocrites makes the erroneous assumption that we in the church are embarrassed by our clientele. We are not any more embarrassed over our collection of sinners than a hospital is ashamed of its sick people.”

CLOSING: Willimon, again says: “The main difference between the sinners inside the church and those on the outside is that the ones on the inside are free to admit to some of their sinfulness because they have received the freedom of forgiveness.” In closing, pray for that freedom in your church.

ASSIGNMENT

Read chapter nine.

SESSION THIRTEEN

TEXT: Chapter Nine

OBJECTIVE: *To realize that the Christian faith requires our most mature perceptions and responses*

CONDUCTING THE SESSION

DIALOGUE: Write on newsprint or chalkboard the words, “FAITH IS . . .” Ask your class members to brainstorm their responses to the incomplete sentence and record them on newsprint or chalkboard. After this exercise, point out that Willimon does this very same thing in his last chapter. He completes the sentence by saying, “Faith is . . .”

- . . . only for adults (spiritual adults of any age).
- . . . certitude in the midst of doubt.
- . . . a journey that points in the right direction.
- . . . a process and not a possession.

How do his statements compare to those of your class? The people will surely have some reaction to Willimon’s statement on page 89: “Jesus was not ‘nice’ to people.” Discuss their responses. The rest of that paragraph at the top of the page deserves class attention.

Willimon’s point is that only the most mature, intelligent, and daring expression of faith will attract the person who has everything. This is the evangelistic message which they need to hear, and are not hearing. You might choose to discuss how such a message may be shared with such persons who are now outside the church. You might encourage your class members to get specific and follow up on their own suggestions. They might choose to meet with the deacons, the pastors, the evangelism committee or others as they attempt to address these crucial issues.

EVALUATE: We have not assumed, throughout this study, that everyone will agree with all of Willimon’s ideas. Doubtless, each person will have “sticky points” in reaction to some of Willimon’s thoughts. They are usually challenging and radical. As a way to evaluate one’s own thinking through this course, provide a handout sheet that could first be filled out individually, then shared with a small group, and then responded to as a total group. It follows:

EVALUATION “THE GOSPEL FOR THE PERSON WHO HAS EVERYTHING”

PERSONAL REACTION TO THE BOOK’S MAIN THEMES	AGREE	NOT CERTAIN	DISAGREE
Not everyone will be attracted to Christianity because of how miserable their life has been.			
The church as difficulty reaching mature, integrated, strong individuals who can meet most of their own personal needs.			
A great deal of preaching attempts to induce guilt, to make people feel badly about themselves.			
Too much Christian preaching speaks of an obligation which must be met to receive a gift, whereas the real message of the New Testament is about a gift which then leads to an obligation.			
For a Christian, grace (God’s free, undeserved love) must always come first.			
There is absolutely nothing you can do to earn God’s favor.			
Our chief sin is not pride, but our own inner sense of unworthiness.			

An awareness of grace (God's free love) precedes repentance and change.			
We too often think we do not deserve God's love, therefore refuse it.			
Christianity requires that a person constantly grown in maturity. You do not have the choice of remaining childish.			
Immature faith is marked by an aversion to honest doubt, an incessant need to be right, an extremist need to identify a contemporary messiah, and a need to require of God rewards in return for our faithfulness.			
Mature faith involves freedom, risk, selflessness, broadmindedness, maturity, and objectivity.			
To appeal to strong persons, our theology must speak of gratitude to God for our strengths and of a challenge to live for others.			
Strength, when misdirected, is actually weakness. True strength comes from God-given confidence of knowing our secure place in the heart of God.			
Christians do not love their neighbors because they deserve it. Christians love in response to the love God has for them.			
Love, in the Bible, is an activity, not a feeling.			
The stronger and more resourceful a person, the more responsibility God is expecting from her/him.			
Christianity cannot be practiced in a solitary way. It is a shared faith.			
The church is a major corrective to an individual's faith.			
People in the church don't claim to be any less sinful than others. But they are more able to admit their sinfulness and receive forgiveness.			
Christianity is only for adults - - spiritual adults of any age.			
We have designed worship on the basis of what it will do for us, rather than upon our relationship with God.			

CLOSE: Close your quarter's study by reading page 91 and 92, the last example Willimon uses. In other words, let Willimon have the "last word," as you close your time together.

