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Many Faces of Wisdom
ADULT LEADER’S GUIDE • JUNE, JULY, AUGUST 2020

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About the Quarter

In this quarter, God is experienced as Wisdom in both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament. In these lessons, we explore the many facets of wisdom as recorded in the book of Proverbs, in the Gospels, and in the letter written by James.

Unit I, “Wisdom in Proverbs,” in four sessions, explores the nature of God’s wisdom as found in the book of Proverbs. These sessions describe how Wisdom calls to us, the value of Wisdom, and the gifts she offers.

Unit II, “Wisdom in the Gospels,” offers four sessions, one session from each of the four Gospels that examines the wisdom of God seen in the teachings and life of Jesus.

Unit III, “Faith and Wisdom in James,” offers a five-session study of wisdom as seen in the Letter of James. These sessions explore the interaction of faith and wisdom, including practical advice regarding faith in action and taming the tongue.

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1-800-458-3766; www.judsonpress.com

Vol. 32 No. 4

ADULT LEADER’S GUIDE (ISSN 0898-0691) is published quarterly as part of Judson Bible Journeys for Adults for $9.99 by the American Baptist Home Mission Societies at 1075 First Avenue, King of Prussia, PA 19406. Periodicals postage paid at Savage, MD 20763. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Customer Service, ADULT LEADER’S GUIDE, Judson Press, 1075 First Avenue, King of Prussia, PA 19406.

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The Call to Wisdom

Introducing the Scripture

King Solomon, who inherited the throne in Israel after his father David’s death, composed some three-thousand proverbs. The *Book of Proverbs* contains some proverbs not written by Solomon, but the vast majority of its contents is either inspired or composed by the sagacious king. These proverbs are compiled to offer the people of Israel wisdom, instruction, and insight. Wisdom is guidance that leads to effective action in life. Throughout *Proverbs*, Solomon declares that wisdom will make the hearer successful, healthy, smart, respected by others, trusted, happy, and affirmed by God.

The story of Solomon gaining wisdom is recounted in 1 Kings 3. God asks the new King Solomon what the Almighty can do for him. Rather than ask for riches, power, or pleasure, Solomon responds, “Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people” (1 Kings 3:9a). The biblical historian comments that Solomon’s request pleased the Lord, who replied, “I now do according to your word. Indeed I give you a wise and discerning mind; no one like you has been before you and no one like you shall arise after you” (1 Kings 3:12).

1 Kings 4:29-31 reports that God kept the divine promise to Solomon:

> 29 God gave Solomon very great wisdom, discernment, and breadth of understanding as vast as the sand on the seashore, so that Solomon’s wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east, and all the wisdom of Egypt. 31 He was wiser than anyone else . . . . He composed three thousand proverbs, and his songs numbered a thousand and five. . . . People came from all the nations to hear the wisdom of Solomon; they came from all the kings of the earth who had heard of his wisdom (1 Kings 4:29-31a, 32, 34).

Examining the Scripture

**PROVERBS 1:1-2.** The author of the *Book of Proverbs* offers wisdom and instruction to help the people of Israel understand the insight contained in the book. Readers should go beyond merely learning the words of the proverbs. They should apply their insights to daily life.

Proverbs is filled with descriptions of reality and consistently encourages the readers to live in harmony with the way things are. To do otherwise puts one on a collision course with deeply ingrained patterns of behavior and the moral laws of the cosmos. For example, *Proverbs* 27:14 says, “Whoever blesses a neighbor with a loud voice, rising early in the morning, will be counted as cursing.” Anyone who has lived with a boisterous “morning person” knows the truth of that saying. The verse does not advocate that people should curse their noisy early risers but simply notes that when people are very cheerful and expressive early in the morning, their neighbors will not be happy about their salutations.

Instruction is often translated as “discipline” or “chastisement.” It refers to efforts to help people repent of their destructive behavior and follow the ways of God.

**PROVERBS 1:3.** Instruction in wise dealing refers to the practical side of Solomon’s proverbs. When heeded, godly wisdom directs people in making good
decisions in business, family management, community relationships, and personal growth.

Proverbs further offers instruction in righteousness, justice, and equity. Solomon’s guidance is not merely for the success of individuals. He includes direction for how to live ethically with others, create righteous communities before God, and treat people with dignity and equality.

**PROVERBS 1:4.** Solomon is especially interested in helping the “simple” and the “young.” Both groups lack experience. “Simple” does not refer to people who lack intellectual ability but to people who are naïve and lack life skills. The same words could be used to describe the young. Often educated beyond the level of their elders, the young lack real-world experience. Solomon promises to teach prudence and discretion to the simple and young. If applied, the lessons can prevent the young and simple from repeating the mistakes of those who have “learned the hard way” in life. By following the wise guidance of Scripture, they can choose wisely and avoid the pain that those who reject Solomon’s wisdom endure.

**PROVERBS 1:7.** Fear of the Lord is an attitude of awe and reverence for the truth and power of God. Solomon does not teach his readers to fear God like they fear an ogre or enemy. Instead he advocates that they obey God out of a fear of the consequences of disobedience. 1 John 4:18 says that perfect love casts out fear. If human beings had perfect love for God, there would be no need for what Solomon calls fear. Humans are sinners, however, so they must face the somber consequences of ignoring God’s teachings, consequences that bring unnecessary pain in life. Solomon argues that when people become deeply aware of the consequences of disregarding God’s wisdom, they are on their way to knowledge. In contrast, “fools” think there is no risk in going against God’s wisdom. They don’t believe that Solomon’s wisdom accurately depicts the ways things are and therefore are convinced they can reject what Solomon offers without loss or pain.

**PROVERBS 1:8-9.** Solomon commends parents in helping to ingrain wisdom in their children. He pleads with the people of Israel to obey the guidance of their mothers and fathers because parental instruction provides success in life. Solomon says obedient children wear their parents’ guidance like garlands on their heads and pendants around their necks. Both metaphors refer to the awards of victory given at athletic competitions. The wisdom dispensed by parents can help children triumph over the challenges of life.

**PROVERBS 1:10.** In contrast to the benefits of parental guidance, wayward friends can lead youth into the pitfalls of malicious or foolish behavior. Solomon warns the inexperienced not to fall for the enticing but destructive invitations of those who find joy in bullying the innocent.

**PROVERBS 1:20-21.** Wisdom is personified as a woman walking the streets of a town, calling out lifesaving instruction to all citizens. She cries at the city gates, at the busiest intersections, and in the village square. No one in town can claim ignorance of her teachings because her words reach all sectors of the community.

**PROVERBS 1:22.** Wisdom battles resistance found in the hearts and minds of the people of Israel. Some love naiveté and cling to their ignorance. Others pride themselves in being smarter than Wisdom and scoff at her teachings. Fools hold a wholehearted hatred for instruction. All those who reject Wisdom’s guidance have one trait in common: they do not want to change their ways.

**PROVERBS 1:32-33.** Those who reject Wisdom’s instruction reject the way things are. When they live in violation of reality, they suffer. Solomon says the wayward make choices that cost them their lives. The complacent are met with destruction. In light of these facts, Solomon pleads with his readers to listen to Wisdom so they can find security, ease, and a life without dread.

**Applying the Scripture**

People who cheat on their spouses suffer the loss of trust, affection, respect, and relationships with people they love. Employees who lie to their boss’s face demotion, career derailment, and possible dismissal. Children who reject the guidance of their parents often have to learn their lessons the hard way. People who build their lives solely around material possessions often end up feeling there is a spiritual void in their lives.

Wisdom tells Solomon’s readers about these realities and leaves it up to them to either adjust their behavior or live in violation of all that Wisdom offers. Wisdom doesn’t talk about what might be true, could be true, or
even what should be true. Wisdom cries: “This is the way things are. Believe me and live without the dread of disaster. Scoff at me, cling to the complacency of fools, and suffer the awful consequences.”

Christians live in a complex world with many sources of avowed brilliance, intellect, and knowledge. Enticements to reject the teachings of Scripture are prevalent. Believers can get lost in the morass of options and make destructive decisions. Wisdom offers Christians time-tested, clear-sighted observations. Sometimes her voice is affirmed by other authorities in society, and sometimes her voice is contradicted. We need help in choosing the way of Wisdom over the temptations that abound.

This lesson paints a striking picture of the difference in effective living between those who heed the teachings of Wisdom and those who reject them. When obeyed, Wisdom helps Christians build healthy families, thriving businesses, growing churches, and just communities. Relationships of all types become happier, healthier, and more equitable when Wisdom is obeyed. People make better decisions on practical matters when the words of Wisdom are implemented.

Mothers and fathers receive encouragement from Solomon to fulfill the responsibilities that come with having children (Proverbs 1:8). The teachings that parents have to offer their children are sometimes the difference between mastery and misery. Although children are prone to dismiss the guidance of parents, Solomon reminds parents to keep offering the wisdom gleaned from their experiences and faith. Children might come to see the faithful guidance of parents as a significant reason they are able to succeed in life.

Adults get set in their ways. When challenged to grow, repent, humble themselves, avoid excesses, and refrain from temptation, adults often refuse to modify their behavior. Solomon reminds them that a stubborn rejection of Scripture’s wisdom can lead adults to destruction and even death.

Most believers desire a life that is secure, at ease, and free of dread. This passage teaches Christians that when they change according to the guidance of Wisdom, they can obtain such a life. And, because of their relationship with Christ as Lord and Savior, they have the power to make such changes. Paul put it clearly: So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! (2 Corinthians 5:17). Christians can thank God they have the Spirit of Christ to help them repent of their sinful ways, reject “the complacency of fools,” and walk in the ways of the Lord.

Session Plans

These lesson plans are given as suggestions. The words AND, OR, or AND/OR between activities indicate alternative activities. Choose activities best suited for your particular group and time schedule. Feel free to adapt the suggestions to meet the needs and interests of your group.

GETTING READY FOR THE SESSION

- **Read Proverbs 1**, focusing on verses 1-4, 7-10, 20-22, 32-33, and session 1 in Journeys, and this leader’s guide.
- **Have** available paper, pencils, a chalkboard and chalk, and dry erase board and markers or newsprint and markers.
- **For the activity “Signs of the Times,” write** the following notices on separate pieces of paper: “Wet Paint,” “Bridges Ice Up Before Roads,” “Curves Ahead,” “Flammable,” “Oversized Load,” and “Blind Driveway.” **Attach** the sheets to a prominent wall in the classroom.
- **For the activity “What Do You Mean?” print** the following four interpretations on one piece of paper:
  1. Fear the Lord because the Lord can lose the divine temper and punish us without mercy.
  2. Fear the Lord for the Lord is mean-spirited and takes pleasure in hurting human beings.
  3. Fear the Lord because God’s warnings can keep us from suffering the consequences of foolish actions.
  4. “Fear the Lord” is an old saying that has no meaning to those who believe in a God of love.
- **Make** enough copies of this sheet so that every four participants have access to one.
- **If you choose to do the activity “Your Point of View,” select** four volunteers to play the skydivers in the skit. **Make** five copies of the skit “Your Point of View”—(Handout 1) on p. 7 of this leader’s guide. **Give** each volunteer a copy of the skit before the session begins. **Prepare** to read the role of instructor yourself.

BEGINNING THE SESSION

(10 MINUTES)

**Signs of the Times**

- **Ask** each participant to read “Not an Opinion” on p. 3 of Journeys.
- **Direct** the attention of all participants to the signs you made and placed on the wall in “Getting Ready for the Session.”
• Ask the following questions:
  º “What do the signs tell the reader to do?”
  º “What would a wise person do in response to each sign?”
  º “What would a foolish person do in response to each sign?”
• Point out that many of the proverbs of Solomon don’t actually tell us to do anything. They simply describe the way things are and leave it to us to respond with either obedience or defiance.
• Pray that this session will help everyone heed the voice of Wisdom and modify their behavior accordingly.

DEVELOPING THE SESSION
(35-40 MINUTES)
Read, Listen, and Record (10 min.)
• Appoint a participant to record large-group insights on a board or newsprint. Give that person a marker.
• Read aloud Proverbs 1:1-4 and “The Way Things Are” from pp. 3-5 in Journeys. Ask those who hear an insight about the definition of wisdom to raise their hands. Call on them to share their insight and have the recorder write it on the board.
• Ask for volunteers to use the combined insights of the group to define wisdom as presented in the book of Proverbs. Ask the recorder to write the definitions as offered.

AND

What Do You Mean? (10 min.)
• Ask participants to gather in groups of three or four and read Proverbs 1:7-10 and “Fear and Fools” on pp. 5-7 in Journeys.
• Give each group a copy of the sheet you prepared for this activity in “Getting Ready for the Session.”
• Ask the groups to discuss which of the four printed interpretations best captures the meaning of “fear the Lord” and why?
• Invite each group to share their discoveries with the larger group.

OR

Your Point of View (10 min.)
• Ask participants to read Proverbs 1:7-10 and “Fear and Fools” on pp. 5-7 in Journeys.
• Present the skit “Your Point of View” (Handout 1) as prepared in “Getting Ready for the Session.”
• Ask the following questions:
  º How is Wisdom like the instructor?
  º How are we sometimes like the foolish skydivers?
  º What made the fourth skydiver wear the parachute?
• Ask participants to get in groups of three or four.
• Give each group a copy of the sheet you prepared for this activity in “Getting Ready for the Session.”
• Ask the groups to discuss which of the four printed interpretations best captures the meaning of “fear the Lord” and why?
• Invite each group to share their discoveries with the larger group.

AND

What Would Your Parents Say? (10 min.)
• Give each participant a pencil and piece of paper.
• Instruct them to make two columns on the sheet of paper. In column one, have them write the names of the people their parents said were good influences on them when they were children or teenagers. In column two, have them write the names of the people their parents said were bad influences.
• After a few minutes, ask: “Did you agree with your parents at the time? Do you agree with them now?”
• Ask which people or sources of news or entertainment would their parents say are currently good or bad influences in their lives? Would you agree with them? Why or why not?

AND

Need a Plan (10 min.)
• Ask for a volunteer to read aloud Proverbs 1:20-22 and 32-33 on p. 7 of Journeys.
• Give a brief explanation of the contents of “Dealing with Ourselves” on pp. 8-9 in Journeys.
• Give each participant two sheets of paper.
• Suggest that rarely do we make necessary changes in our lives without a plan. Have them start a plan by listing changes that Wisdom tells them to make. Then have them go back and write how they plan to implement the changes.

CLOSING THE SESSION
(5 MINUTES)
• Read 2 Corinthians 5:17 and remind participants that we have the power of Christ to help us make necessary changes in our lives.
• Invite participants to share any changes they will seek Christ’s help within the coming days.
• Pray for Christ’s help concerning each request.
Your Point of View

Tell participants they are going to observe four newly trained skydivers as they make their first jumps. The instructor has just opened the side door of the plane.

**INSTRUCTOR:** “Jump!”

**First Skydiver:** “This parachute is too restrictive. I should be free to jump without this burden. Requiring this parachute is an unfair policy and I refuse to comply.”

**INSTRUCTOR:** “Okay. I completely understand your point of view, but I must tell you if you jump without your parachute, you will die.”

**First Skydiver** “I refuse to submit to such oppressive rules. I jump as a free spirit.” (Pretend to jump.)

**Second Skydiver:** “I know you think I too will die, but I’m not sure that falling to one’s death always happens when a person jumps out of an airplane. That has been your experience, but it might not be mine. A bird could catch me or an angel sent from above. I could fall into a hay stack or even land on my feet if I turn just right. Just because your experience tells you to wear a parachute doesn’t mean that I should.”

**INSTRUCTOR** “Okay. I completely understand your point of view, but I must tell you, if you jump without your parachute, you will die.”

**Second Skydiver:** “I refuse to be governed by another person’s experience.” (Pretend to jump.)

**Third Skydiver:** “You’re just trying to scare us into doing things your way. You don’t want us to experience the freedom and fun of free falling. You can’t scare me. I’m going to live it up out there.”

**INSTRUCTOR:** “Okay. I completely understand your point of view, but I must tell you, if you jump without your parachute, you will die.”

**Third Skydiver:** “Baloney!” (Pretend to jump.)

**Fourth Skydiver:** “Thanks for all the training you’ve provided and for the good equipment. I’m grateful for this parachute and will use it exactly as you have taught us.” (Pretend to jump.)

**INSTRUCTOR:** “Okay, I completely understand your point of view. See you on the ground.”
The Value of Wisdom

SCRIPTURE: Proverbs 2:1-11

KEY VERSE: For the Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding. —Proverbs 2:6

SESSION OBJECTIVES:
• to evaluate our level of interest in the wisdom of God;
• to describe the role of faith in seeking wisdom;
• to contrast human information with God’s wisdom; and
• to identify blessings brought by God’s wisdom.

Introducing the Scripture

After issuing a call to heed the voice of Wisdom, Solomon provides ample reasons why his children, and by extension all the people of Israel, should follow that call. Knowing that his readers might not accept his advice without a convincing argument, Solomon lays out the many reasons why his children and the entire nation of Israel should embrace wisdom.

Throughout the book of Proverbs, the reader has a recurring challenge. In most of chapters one and two, the voice speaking in the passage is Solomon’s. However, sometimes the voice becomes Wisdom’s, as in Proverbs 1:22-30. This passage hyperbolically personifies Wisdom’s reaction when sagacious counsel is not heeded, suggesting that unwise decisions can possibly reap negative results. For example, in Proverbs 1:26, Wisdom says: “I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when panic strikes you” (Proverbs 1:26). Nonetheless, laughing and mocking is not how a healthy parent would respond to a child nor a king to his subjects. Hence the interpreter must be careful to attribute the proverbs and guidance in this book to the right source.

Examining the Scripture

PROVERBS 2:1. Solomon directs these teachings to his child; however, the king knows that all the people of Israel will receive his words. The advice he gives to those he loves most will also benefit anyone who listens.

The Inclusive Bible adds the word heartily before accept to underscore the passion one needs for wisdom. Wisdom refers to one storing up or treasuring up the proffered sagacity. An analogy one might consider would be the act of harvesting—like a farmer labors to gather and store grain, wisdom needs to be gathered in and for the future just as grain is piled up to feed the family in future days.

PROVERBS 2:2. Solomon says the inexperienced in this world need to purposefully direct their minds toward wisdom. Using imperative commands, Solomon advises those he loves to make their ears attentive and to incline their hearts to understanding. A casual, passive interest in wisdom is not sufficient. People must direct their hearts and minds away from other distractions and false sources of guidance to focus fully on the wisdom of God.

PROVERBS 2:3. The third illustration Solomon uses to indicate the devotion needed to find wisdom is that of a child crying for the attention of a parent. Like a baby seeking his mother or father’s comfort, people should cry out and raise their voices until Wisdom yields the guidance they need.

PROVERBS 2:4. Solomon also recommends that his children and the people of Israel should seek wisdom like a fortune hunter searches for silver and hidden treasure. Wisdom and insight is so valuable that it merits singular passion.

PROVERBS 2:5. After stating the conditions required to obtain wisdom, Solomon describes the pay off. If people seek wisdom with their whole hearts, they will understand the “fear of the L ORD”
and “the knowledge of God.” The first phrase refers to a conviction that disregarding the wisdom of God leads to painful consequences. “Fear of the Lord” does not mean disciples should live in terror of an angry or capricious God. Instead it reminds believers that defiance of God’s wisdom brings unnecessary suffering to their lives. Aversion to that suffering should help disciples obey God’s commands. The second phrase means to truly know God. It refers to an intimate, firsthand knowledge of God rather than an intellectual awareness. The phrase is captured by Job when he confesses: “I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you” (Job 42:5).

PROVERBS 2:6-8. This interlude precedes a fuller description of the benefits of seeking God’s wisdom wholeheartedly. Before Solomon enumerates the blessings of heeding God’s wisdom, the king assures his listeners that God’s wisdom is available (the Lord gives wisdom), accessible (the Lord stores up wisdom for the upright), and effective (the Lord is a shield that guards the path and preserves the way of the faithful ones).

Seekers of God’s wisdom have full assurance that their efforts will be rewarded with the instruction of the Lord. However, Solomon makes no such promises to those who don’t intend to follow the ways of God once they are made known. God’s guidance is given solely to “the upright,” “those who walk blamelessly,” those who walk the “paths of justice,” and the “faithful ones.”

PROVERBS 2:9. Solomon specifies the blessings of following wisdom. The first is the creation of a just and equitable community. Wisdom helps citizens live in a right relationship with God and one another. She teaches how to create just laws that assure that all the people of Israel are treated equally. Under Wisdom’s direction, the poor and rich, old and young, native born and immigrant are all treated the same.

The implementation of Wisdom’s teachings on communal life puts the people of Israel on a “good path.” Wisdom’s instruction helps create societies in which people follow the command of the prophet Micah, who taught: “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8).

PROVERBS 2:10. The second blessing Wisdom brings is the changed nature of the adherent. Solomon promises that when people embrace God’s guidance, “wisdom will come into your heart” and “knowledge will be pleasant to your soul.” Although human beings often first obey God out of fear of the consequences of disobedience, once they try the ways of God, they find the Lord’s ways are truly better than all alternatives. Once their experience confirms Solomon’s claims of the benefits of wisdom, the motivation to obey God’s direction becomes internal, ingrained in the heart and soul. The Psalmist understood this process when he wrote “O taste and see that the Lord is good; happy are those who take refuge in him” (Psalm 34:8).

PROVERBS 2:11. Another of wisdom’s blessings is protection. The practical guidance Wisdom provides preserves people from destructive choices and foolish impulses, watching and guarding the faithful.

Applying the Scripture
Adults spend a lot of time seeking and managing information. When that information is necessary for career success, academic achievement, or financial prosperity, adults pursue this information with great diligence. The same cannot always be said for the wisdom of God. Sometimes adults overlook, avoid, or are half-hearted about the study of God’s instruction. Disciples benefit from self-evaluation concerning their attentiveness to the wisdom of God.

Solomon teaches that God requires wholehearted dedication to the pursuit of wisdom before the Lord shares the riches of divine knowledge. Adults who mourn a lack of God’s clear guidance in their lives can be called back to recommit to listen and apply the wisdom of God.
In this Internet age, information can be corrupted, lost, denied, or deceptive. Disciples have to use discernment in deciding what information is trustworthy and what is manipulative, dangerous, or misleading. God’s wisdom is always trustworthy. It is never corrupted with false ideas, never destructive to our hearts and minds, never stolen, and never lost. The instruction of the Lord is always available, accessible, and useful to the one seeking God’s wisdom with faith and obedience.

All adults are susceptible to rebellion and doubt. Human beings have difficulty accepting advice as true unless they try it out themselves. Christian adults may have to experience the consequences of disobedience and the goodness of heeding the wisdom of God before they fully internalize the ways of God. Christian maturity comes about when believers learn firsthand how much better the ways of God are in comparison to all other alternatives. Then, desire to know and follow the teachings of God motivates such people more than the fear of the consequences of disobedience.

Healthy communities are built on Wisdom’s tenets. Greed, discrimination, bias, and exclusion create societies of violence, suffering, injustice, and impoverishment. Wisdom, in contrast, helps believers build communities of justice, equality, and personal fulfillment. When societies are structured according to the ways of God, all people find the “good path” intended by the Lord.

Session Plans
These lesson plans are given as suggestions. The words AND, OR, or AND/OR between activities indicate alternative activities. Choose activities best suited for your particular group and time schedule. Feel free to adapt the suggestions to meet the needs and interests of your group.

GETTING READY FOR THE SESSION
• Read Proverbs 2:1-11, session 2 in Journeys, and this leader’s guide.
• Gather pencils, sheets of paper, and a copy of Journeys for each participant.
• Gather one Bible for every three or four participants.
• Have available a chalkboard and chalk, dry erase board and markers, or newsprint and markers.
• For the activity “It’s Like This,” write one of the following descriptions on four separate sheets of paper:
  1. “It’s like this: wisdom should be sought with the same tenacity that a farmer gathers a harvest. Disciples should glean every bit of guidance God provides and store it in their hearts and minds.”
  2. “It’s like this: disciples should seek wisdom by purposefully turning their hearts and minds from other distractions and sources of guidance to the instruction of the Lord.
• For the activity “See a Pattern?” make one list of the following verses for every four participants. Don’t print the whole verses, just the references.
  1. Romans 10:9
  2. Luke 6:38
  3. 1 John 1:9
  4. 2 Chronicles 7:14
  5. Matthew 6:14
  6. Matthew 6:33
  7. Mark 11:24
  9. 2 Corinthians 5:17
  10. Philippians 4:6-7
  11. Ephesians 6:11
  12. James 1:5-8
  13. Proverbs 2:4-5
• For the activity “Consider the Source,” print each of the following case studies on separate pieces of paper.
  Case Study 1. Alberta is looking for guidance in how to raise her children. She has done a variety of Internet searches and found opinions from many self-proclaimed authorities. She is more confused than ever. She doesn’t know whether to punish her children more severely, let them do anything they want, or send them off to boarding school. How is God’s wisdom better than her Internet search?
Case Study 2. Christoph has a deep desire to find a woman to share his life. He downloaded a video from a men’s magazine on how to choose the right partner. The video advises that he seek a woman who looks like a model, makes a lot of money, and knows how to have a good time. How is God’s wisdom better than the video?

Case Study 3. Joseph needed help with his finances. When he typed “help with managing money” into his search engine, a site came up that promised to multiply his investment by 400 percent. Joseph sent the company an initial deposit of $500. Not only did the company steal his money; they also used information he gave to take money from his bank account and commit credit card fraud on his account. How is God’s wisdom better than this site?

Case Study 4. Kendra spent three weeks compiling information for a lecture she was asked to give on “How to Find Happiness in Life.” She made a PowerPoint presentation that had quotes from celebrities about happiness, stories about happy people, poems about happiness, and song lyrics that promoted happy feelings. The day of her lecture, she opened her file only to find that everything she prepared was gone. Either she or her computer malfunctioned. How is God’s wisdom better than this?

- For the activity “You’ll See,” write the word “obligation” in large letters on one sheet of paper and “privilege” on another. Attach the sheets about ten feet apart on a prominent wall in your classroom.
- Make copies of the hymn “Count Your Many Blessings” or provide hymnals for each participant.
- Arrange to have an accompanist or a recorded version of “Count Your Many Blessings” or prepare to sing a verse of the hymn without accompaniment.

BEGINNING THE SESSION (10 MINUTES)
- Ask each participant to read “Treasure Chest” on p. 10 of Journeys.
- Ask the following questions to the large group of participants: 1. “Are you tempted to seek this hidden treasure? 2. What discovery would be worth the expenditure of your time, energy, and money?”
- Share this nugget: Wisdom claims her instruction is as valuable as a hidden treasure. She promises if we pursue her with the enthusiasm of a fortune hunter, we will be rewarded with the best in life.
- Pray that this session will help participants learn the true value of the wisdom of God.

DEVELOPING THE SESSION (40 MINUTES)

It’s Like This (10 min.)
- Ask participants to gather in groups of three or four.
- Read aloud Proverbs 2:1-5.
- Appoint one person in each group to read aloud “Seek and Ye Shall Find” on pp. 11-12 in Journeys to their group.
- Give each group one of the descriptions prepared for this activity in “Getting Ready for the Session.”
- Ask each group to discuss how the pursuit of God’s wisdom is like the description given them.
- Ask participants to reflect on whether they seek God’s wisdom as avidly as the description says they should. Then ask them to give themselves a rating of 1 to 5, with one being “almost no interest in God’s wisdom” to 5 being “totally dedicated to seeking God’s wisdom.”
- Invite volunteers to share their ratings with the larger group.

AND

See a Pattern (10 min.)
- Ask participants to stay in their groups of three or four.
- Give each group a Bible, a sheet of paper, a pencil, and the list of verses prepared for this activity in “Getting Ready for the Session.”
- Assign each group a different four verses from the list but assign every group verse 13 as well.
- Share with them that there is a pattern found in each of these verses. The verse first states something the disciple must do by faith and then it states what God will do in response to that faith.
- Ask each group to read their assigned verses and write down the act of faith required and God’s promised response to that faith for each verse.
- Ask each small group to share their discoveries with the large group.
- Share with them that throughout the Bible, God asks disciples to act on faith. Those actions are rewarded with specific responses from God. God promises that if disciples wholeheartedly seek wisdom in faith, trust will be rewarded with divine words of instruction.

AND

Consider the Source (10 min.)
- Ask “Have you ever received an ‘insufficient funds,’ ‘access denied,’ or ‘suspected credit card fraud’ message?
What emotions did you feel when you received the message?’

- **Ask** for a volunteer to read Proverbs 2:6-8 aloud to the group.
- **Give** a brief lecture on the material found in section “No Disappointment” on pp. 13-14 in *Journeys*.
- **Give** each of the case studies prepared for this activity in “Getting Ready for the Session” to four volunteers.
- **Ask** each volunteer to read the assigned case study and invite comment from the large group.
- **Invite** participants to name ways in which God’s wisdom is superior to human sources of information. **Write** the ways on the board or newsprint.
- **Share this nugget:** Unlike human information, no force can steal, corrupt, or delete the wisdom of God from our lives.

**AND**

**Read, Listen, and Record** *(10 min)*

- **Appoint** a participant to record large-group insights on a board or newsprint. Give that person a marker.
- **Say,** “I am going to read aloud Proverbs 2:9-11 and section “You’ll See” from pp. 14-15 in *Journeys*. When anyone hears a blessing provided by Wisdom, raise your hand. I will call on you to share your insight, and our recorder will write it down on the board.”
- **Ask** for a volunteer to stand in front of the word “obligation” prepared and put into place in “Getting Ready for the Session.” **Tell** the volunteer that other instructions will follow.
- **Read** aloud Proverbs 2:9-11 and “You’ll See” from pp. 14-15 in *Journeys*. **Call** on each person who raises his or her hand and make sure the insight is recorded on the newsprint or board.
- Each time a blessing is identified, **ask** the volunteer to take one step toward the “privilege” sign.
- After all blessings are identified, **share with them** that although we might begin following God’s wisdom as an obligation, as we experience the blessings of obedience first hand, we see that following God’s guidance is a privilege.
- **Ask** for volunteers to share personal stories about the blessings that God’s wisdom has brought to their lives.
- **Give** each participant the copy of “Count Your Many Blessings” you prepared in “Getting Ready for the Session.” **Lead** participants in singing one verse of “Count Your Many Blessings.”

**CLOSING THE SESSION** *(5 MINUTES)*

- **Read** “Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” (Romans 7:24).
- **Invite** participants to share where they struggle to trust in the wisdom of God.
- **Share this thought:** When Paul wrote about his “body of death,” he was drawing attention to the ways that we are naturally inclined to indulge our desires and ignore wisdom. However, unlike the people in Solomon’s day, we have the power of the Holy Spirit and the internal dwelling of Christ to help us deny our sinful desires and trust in the wisdom of God.
- **Read** “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Romans 7:25).
- **Pray** that all participants will recognize the true value of God’s wisdom and rely on the power of Christ to help them live by God’s guidance.

**NOTE**

The Gifts of Wisdom

SCRIPTURE: Proverbs 8:8-14, 17-21

KEY VERSE: Take my instruction instead of silver, and knowledge rather than choice gold; for wisdom is better than jewels, and all that you may desire cannot compare with her. —Proverbs 8:10-11

SESSION OBJECTIVES:
• to compare the gifts of wisdom with the gifts of material wealth;
• to discern when hate is appropriate in the disciple’s life;
• to discover proverbs that guide disciples towards financial security; and
• to testify to what it means to love wisdom.

Introducing the Scripture

The first seven chapters of Proverbs are filled with advice from King Solomon to his children. The advice he shares with those he loves most is also directed to the people of Israel as well as to the modern reader.

In chapter eight, Solomon introduces Wisdom and then lets her speak for herself: “Does not wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice? On the heights, beside the way, at the crossroads she takes her stand; beside the gates in front of the town, at the entrance of the portals she cries out: ‘To you, O people, I call, and my cry is to all that live’” (Proverbs 8:1-4). Wisdom, not Solomon, speaks throughout the remainder of chapter 8.

Rather than allowing Solomon to speak about Wisdom’s treasures, the female personification of Wisdom describes her own gifts. The Greeks translated the word for Wisdom as “Sophia.”

Instead of speaking only to Solomon’s children, Wisdom addresses “all that live.” Her knowledge benefits all of humanity. Although first written to the people of Israel, the whole world is treated to a first-person description of Wisdom’s precious instruction.

Examining the Scripture

PROVERBS 8:8. Unlike the seducers Solomon describes in Proverbs 7 and 8, Wisdom does not twist the truth or speak deceptively to lure the naive into traps of sin. All that comes from her mouth is righteous. Her speech is approved by God and guides listeners into right relationships with God and other people.

PROVERBS 8:9. The word straight refers to guidance that is honest, filled with integrity, and capable of leading one directly to God. Matthew says of John the Baptist that he was “the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight’” (Matthew 3:3). John was an honest man of impeccable integrity and, by calling the people to repentance, led them directly to God.

The King James Version of Matthew 7:13-14 reads: “Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.” Recent translations have substituted “narrow” or “hard” for the word strait but the meaning is the same. The narrow path provides a “straight” pathway to God. The wide road winds through many temptations and leads to destruction. Wisdom promises that her words give reliable, effective direction in the ways of God.

PROVERBS 8:10-11. In a world in which currency and coinage were rare, gold, silver, and precious jewels were the standard of secure wealth. For that reason, they were highly sought after and prized. Wisdom does not contend that precious metals and rare jewels

The whole world is treated to a first-person description of Wisdom’s precious instruction.
are without value; she simply states her
guidance is even more valuable.

In fact, Wisdom declares that her
knowledge and instruction are more
valuable than anything else a person
could desire. She makes her case that
people should spend their time and en-
ergy seeking to understand her wise guid-
ance rather than to accumulate material
wealth, power, or prestige.

**PROVERBS 8:12.** Wisdom declares
that she has developed prudence. This
word refers to a practical ability to make
good choices in life. She is not touting esoteric, theo-
retical, or philosophic knowledge. Rather, she speaks
about the ability to make effective daily decisions. She
also claims to have discretion, a word that carries a moral
connotation. Wisdom knows how to avoid even the ap-
pearance of evil and to stay away from moral and ethical
mistakes that can ruin a person’s life.

**PROVERBS 8:13.** Once again wisdom commends
“the fear of the L ORD.” This refers to apprehension of
the consequences of living in defiance of God’s instruc-
tion. God’s advice keeps believers from suffering the pain
involved with sin. To neglect this counsel is to put one-
self in the pathway of avoidable agony. When believers
fear that agony, they are quick to listen and grasp God’s
wisdom.

Those who fear the Lord hate all manner of evil. For
evil is a destructive power that takes people away from
the good will of God. Those who love wisdom also detest the powers of tem-
ptation, deception, and selfishness that lure people into destructive behaviors.

Wisdom says she specifically abhors “pride and arrogance” and “perverted
speech.” No other attitudes have the same power to block the grace and guid-
ance of God from a person’s life. Those who believe they already know it all or
have greater intelligence than Wisdom experience immense suffering. The mas-
ters of perverted or deceptive speech convince many young and inexperienced
people (as well as more than a few older ones) to reject the lifesaving instruction
of God. For those reasons, Wisdom hates all three attitudes and behaviors.

**PROVERBS 8:14.** Wisdom prom-
ises she has good gifts to offer believers.
“Good advice,” “sound wisdom,” and
“insight” take disciples in righteous and
healthy directions in life. “Strength” re-
fers to the power Wisdom offers to all
who walk in her ways. She not only tells
disciples the right way to go, she enables
them to do so.

**PROVERBS 8:17.** Wisdom is not
grace-filled like God. Jesus said, “But I say to you, Love
your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so
that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for
he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and
sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous”
(Matthew 5:44-45). Psalm 103:8 avows “The L ORD is
merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding
in steadfast love.” Wisdom has no mercy, nor does she
shower her benefits on the righteous and the unrighteous.

If disciples go against her teachings, they will suffer,
and Wisdom will not temper the consequences. She will
not share her insight with those who do not cherish her
guidance. Wisdom will, however, love those who love
her. She will faithfully give instruction to anyone who
seeks her with a whole heart.

**PROVERBS 8:18-19.** Once again Wisdom claims that
her instruction is better than the finest gold or silver.
She promises that her advice will pro-
vide “riches and honor” and “endur-
ing wealth and prosperity.” Although
Wisdom might increase the financial well-being of those who listen to her, her
greater value is to provide the spiritual riches of integrity, honor, security, peace,
trust, faith, and communion with God
to all who follow her ways.

**PROVERBS 8:20.** Wisdom’s gifts in-
clude the well-being of the community
as well as the success of individual
believers.
trustworthiness, and compassion for the vulnerable. They also make just decisions in economic and legal manners.

**PROVERBS 8:21.** Many of the proverbs of Solomon provide helpful financial guidance. The people of Israel were told to work hard, save for the future, avoid impulse purchases, resist the lure of materialism, make fair trades, and show compassion to the poor—among many other tips for financial freedom. Wisdom assures those who obey these principles that they will have full treasuries. Although her primary meaning is that her wisdom brings spiritual wealth, she offers practical guidance to develop economically secure households as well.

**Applying the Scripture**

Adults constantly face pressure to distort the truth for career, political, or relationship reasons. To compete against less scrupulous people in sales, management, government, or dating, adults often spin the truth to get a desired outcome. This lesson reminds adults to value “straight talk,” honesty, and integrity. Wisdom manifests these traits in all her dealings, and adults who aspire to live righteously should do the same.

Regardless of how many times adults read it, hear it preached, or agree to its truthfulness, they struggle to trust in God rather than money. The prevailing culture bombards adults with messages that they have to buy expensive products, attain specialized health care, travel to exotic destinations, look like a million bucks, and own the latest technology to be happy. Experience teaches adults, however, that many situations in life cannot be healed, helped, or reconciled by money. This lesson provides an opportunity for adults to identify the types of crisis in which God’s guidance is far more valuable than material wealth.

Tolerance is usually an admirable attribute. The church teaches kindness and compassion toward those with whom we disagree. Jesus taught us not to hate anyone, including our enemies. Confusion occurs, however, when we apply tolerance to influences as well as people. Some influences imperil not only our spiritual growth but even our survival, as well as the survival of those whom we love.

This passage teaches that Wisdom hates such pernicious influences and so should believers. The abuse of drugs (both illicit and prescribed), addictive habits of pornography or gambling, ideologies that espouse hate and abuse, arrogance that makes people unteachable, bullying and intimidation, and lying as a way of life should all be hated. These are not choices to be tolerated with a “to each his own” nonchalance but evils to be detested.

Adults frequently have trouble managing their money. The lure of impulse buying and credit-card purchasing power, the illusion of getting something for nothing, the devaluing of work, and the difficulty of saving sometimes lead adults into financial difficulties. Although wisdom’s primary gifts are spiritual riches, many of her proverbs make adults better stewards of what God has given them.

**Session Plans**

These lesson plans are given as suggestions. The words AND, OR, or AND/OR between activities indicate alternative activities. Choose activities best suited for your particular group and time schedule. Feel free to adapt the suggestions to meet the needs and interests of your group.

**GETTING READY FOR THE SESSION**

- Read Proverbs 8:8-14, 17-21, session 3 in Journeys, and this leader’s guide.
- Gather pencils, sheets of paper, and a copy of Journeys for each participant.
- Gather one Bible for each four participants.
- Have available a chalkboard and chalk, dry erase board and markers, or newsprint and markers.
- If you choose to do the alternate activity, “Judge for Yourself,” obtain a computer with a screen large enough to be seen by your class. Preview the interview found at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L-U1MMa0SHw and prepare to show the video to your class.
- For the activity “Which Envelope?” gather 10 envelopes. Write “Cash” on five envelopes and “Wisdom” on the other five. Write the following scenarios in large letters on a board or newsprint.
  1. Your daughter is rebelling against your guidance in dangerous ways.
  2. Your spouse admits a loss of affection for you.
  3. Your mother died of cancer last month.
4. You’ve been diagnosed with the early stages of Alzheimer’s.
5. Your boss says someone in your department has to be let go.

- **Place** the board or newsprint in a prominent place in your classroom. **Cut** sheets of paper into thirty 8½” by 2” strips.
- For the activity “Steadfast Opposition,” **print** one of the following case studies on four separate sheets of paper:
  - **Case Study 1:** Brenda leads a weekly Bible study at a homeless shelter. One woman in Brenda’s study recently professed Christ as Lord and Savior. Last night a former boyfriend showed up, got the new convert high, and took her away in the night.
  - **Case Study 2:** Carla’s son Jackson is majoring in chemistry. The head of the chemistry department does not believe in God. He has told Jackson that he has a bright future in science if he can outgrow his juvenile dependence on religion. Jackson has stopped going to church.
  - **Case Study 3:** Carson loves the First Baptist Church, where he has been a member for thirty years. The church has a new pastor who believes he understands the Bible and God better than anyone in the congregation. He has disbanded the personnel committee and told the deacons to either support his views or leave. Church attendance has plummeted.
  - **Case Study 4:** Margaret went on Facebook last night and discovered that her former boyfriend, Gary, was posting all sorts of lies about her. He claims they broke up because of her infidelity and that he is concerned about her “drinking problem.” Neither accusation is true.
- For the activity “That’s Good Advice,” **gather** one set of blank Post-it notes for every four participants.
- For the activity “My Story,” **prepare** a three-minute testimony about a time God’s guidance brought you through a crisis. Or **invite** someone who has such a story to share it with your class.

**BEGINNING THE SESSION (10 MINUTES)**

**What do you think? (10 min.)**
- Ask participants to read “No Comparison” on p. 16 of *Journeys*.
- Ask the “Question for Reflection” at the end of “No Comparison” on p. 16 of *Journeys*.
- **Pray** that this session will help all participants gain a greater appreciation for the gifts of wisdom.

**OR**

**Judge for Yourself (10 min.)**
- Show the video you previewed in “Getting Ready for the Session.”
- Ask participants how they feel about the business practices of Martin Shkreli.
- Ask the “Question for Reflection” at the end of “No Comparison” on p. 16 of *Journeys*.
- **Pray** that this session will help all participants gain a greater appreciation for the gifts of wisdom.

**DEVELOPING THE SESSION (35-40 MINUTES)**

**Which Envelope? (10 min.)**
- Ask participants to gather in groups of three or four.
- **Give** one of the envelopes you prepared in “Getting Ready for the Session” marked “Cash” and one marked “Wisdom” to each group. If you do not have five groups, give more than one envelope to each group.
- **Distribute** pencils and six of the strips of paper you prepared in “Getting Ready for the Session” to each group.
- Assign one of the scenarios you wrote on a board or newsprint in “Getting Ready for the Session” to each group.
- **Choose** one person to read your assigned scenario aloud. Brainstorm ways that cash could help in that situation. Write three of those ways on three of the strips of paper and put them in the envelope marked “Cash.” Next, brainstorm ways that wisdom could help in that situation. Write three of those ways on the strips of paper and put them in the envelope marked “Wisdom.”
- **Invite** each group to share the contents of each envelope. After each group shares, ask, “If you had to choose only one envelope to address the scenario assigned to you, which envelope would you choose and why?”
- **Share this nugget:** Although money can be helpful in many situations, some crises in life cannot be resolved with material wealth. Only God’s wisdom and love can get us through such times. That is why Wisdom claims to be of far greater value than financial wealth.
Steadfast Opposition (10 min.)

- Ask for a volunteer to read aloud Proverbs 8:12-14.
- Give a short lecture on the material in “Steadfast Opposition to Hate” on pp. 19-20 of Journeys and the corresponding section of “Examining the Scripture” in this leader’s Guide. Emphasize the meaning of “the fear of the Lord” and the difference between hating a person and hating the destructive influences of that person.
- Distribute each of the four case studies prepared in “Getting Ready for the Session” to four volunteers.
- Ask a volunteer to read a case study and then ask participants to identify both what is to hate in the case study and what is not to be an object of hatred.
- Repeat this process for each case study.
- Ask “Why doesn’t Wisdom tell us to hate the person who refuses to fear the Lord and engages in arrogance, pride, and perverted speech? How can we demonstrate our hatred for the influences that take people, including ourselves, away from God?”

That’s Good Advice (10 min.)

- Ask participants to form groups of three or four.
- Give each group a pack of Post-it notes.
- Ask for someone in each group to read aloud Proverbs 8:17-21.
- Ask each group to read “This and More” on pp. 20-21 in Journeys and look for proverbs that teach good financial advice. Ask them to write each piece of advice on a Post-it note.
- Give each group a Bible.
- Ask the groups to skim through the book of Proverbs to find other examples of good financial advice and write that advice on post it notes.
- Invite each group to share the advice discovered with the larger group.
- Invite each participant to take a Post-it Note with advice, fold it, and put it in his or her billfold or purse. Encourage all participants to read the advice several times in the coming week.

My Story (10 min.)

- Share your testimony on how God’s guidance helped you through a crisis that you prepared in “Getting Ready for the Session” or invite the recruited participant to share his or her testimony.
- Suggest that experiences like this one teach us to love wisdom and all she provides to our lives.
- Invite participants to share brief testimonies of experiences that helped them love the wisdom of God.

CLOSING THE SESSION (5 MINUTES)

- Ask participants to think of gifts wisdom provides disciples.
- Share with the class that you are going to lead in a prayer, thanking God for the gifts of wisdom and then pause. At the pause, have them call out gifts that wisdom provides. Then close the prayer.
Invitation to Wisdom

**SCRIPTURE:** Proverbs 9:1-6, 8-10, 13-18

**KEY VERSE:** Lay aside immaturity, and live, and walk in the way of insight. —Proverbs 9:6

**SESSION OBJECTIVES:**
- to appreciate the spiritual value of commitment;
- to identify wisdom’s assets;
- to examine hearts for signs of immaturity; and
- to warn one another about the dangers of listening to Folly’s voice.

**Introducing the Scripture**

In Proverbs 9, Solomon backtracks to pick up a theme he developed in Proverbs 7. In that chapter, Solomon describes the plight of those who listen to the wrong voice in life. The wise king says the gullible and inexperienced young men of his kingdom turn away from wisdom and enter into the lair of the seductress. Solomon describes the deception of the foolish guide vividly. The seductress says:

“Come, let us take our fill of love until morning; let us delight ourselves with love. For my husband is not at home; he has gone on a long journey. He took a bag of money with him; he will not come home until full moon.” With much seductive speech she persuades him; with her smooth talk she compels him. Right away he follows her, and goes like an ox to the slaughter... He is like a bird rushing into a snare, not knowing that it will cost him his life.”

—Proverbs 7:18-23

Although the king is warning all of Israel about the dangers of having sex with prostitutes in Proverbs 7, his major point is about fidelity to God. In this passage, adultery is a metaphor for unfaithfulness to God, as is the case throughout Scripture (see the entire book of Hosea for one example). The seductress represents the voices in Jewish society that entice people away from the truth of God and ensnare them with the lies of the evil one.

In Proverbs 9, Solomon again refers to the voice of the seductress as a misleading guide for life. To help his readers make the right choices in life, the king describes in greater detail the assets of wisdom and the dangers of listening to the voice of Folly.

**Examining the Scripture**

**PROVERBS 9:1.** Solomon says Wisdom and Folly offer competing invitations to the inexperienced in society. Both invite seekers into their homes to dine with them. Jesus uses similar language in Revelation 3:20 where he says, “Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.” Rather than invite believers to enter Jesus’ house, the Lord waits to be invited into the “home” of the seeker’s heart.

Solomon verifies that Wisdom has built a solid home on “seven pillars.” Although the meaning of this phrase may seem obscure, the number seven is linked with perfection in the Hebrew Scriptures, which indicates that Wisdom built her home on a “perfect” foundation.

In Matthew 7:24-27, Jesus said the wise build their houses on the rock and not the shifting sand. Wisdom does likewise.

**PROVERBS 9:2.** In her home of stability, Wisdom has set a table of rich delights. She has prepared her main dish, mixed her wine, and set the table exquisitely. In Song of Solomon 2:4, the poet writes: “He brought me to the banqueting house, and his intention toward me was love.” Wisdom is offering the same kind of banquet to all who accept her invitation.

**PROVERBS 9:3.** When all is ready, Wisdom sends her servants to call people to feast at her table. In Matthew 22:1-14, Jesus tells a parable about one who
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prepared a great wedding banquet and then sent his servants to tell his guests to come and eat. In that parable, the guests turned down the invitation. The invited guests might turn down Wisdom’s invitation as well.

No one can claim they did not hear Wisdom’s invitation, since the servants broadcast Wisdom’s hospitality from “the highest places in town.” In most towns, the highest place was the top of the city walls where messengers and criers often stood to proclaim urgent news.

**PROVERBS 9:4-5.** Wisdom’s servants call out to the “simple” or the inexperienced. The “simple” do not lack intelligence but have not lived enough to recognize good advice from bad. They are gullible and susceptible to crafty lies. Wisdom wants the simple to come into her home where she can tutor them with wise counsel. The counsel is represented by a dinner where Wisdom’s bread and wine are consumed. During Solomon’s time, the exchange of information and the teaching of truth often took place over a meal.

**PROVERBS 9:6.** Parents and teachers in ancient Jewish society raised children from immaturity to competency through repeated lessons on wise choices. Rebellious children refused to learn the lessons and held on to their childish ways. Parents called such children to “lay aside immaturity” and walk in the ways of good counsel. Wisdom applies this teaching pattern to her attempts to guide adults. She knows that regardless of their age, adults can become rebellious to her guidance and cling to their childish or adolescent ways. Wisdom wants them to heed her voice so they can grow up and leave their childish ways behind. The apostle Paul claimed this transformation when he wrote: “When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways” (1 Corinthians 13:11).

**PROVERBS 9:8.** Solomon says that one can easily tell the difference between those stuck in adolescent rebellion and those growing in maturity. The scoffer resents all guidance and sees the voice of Wisdom as an unwelcomed intrusion in life. The wise and mature, in contrast, appreciate Wisdom’s guidance even when that instruction comes as rebuke.

**PROVERBS 9:9.** Wise people are receptive to wisdom of any kind. The wise are happy for Wisdom to correct their course and put them back on the road to spiritual growth. Wise people are lifetime learners, leaving pride and arrogance behind and embracing the guidance offered.

**PROVERBS 9:10.** The fear of the Lord is a healthy dread of the consequences of disobeying the Lord. This “fear” or reverence is necessary to avoid the mistakes of the arrogant who lack respect for God’s ways. When adults fear the consequences of violating God’s teachings, they grow in their knowledge of the Holy One.

**PROVERBS 9:13.** Solomon contrasts the source of wisdom with the source of temptation, arrogance, and ignorance. He calls this second source the “foolish woman.” The New International Version calls her “Folly.” As opposed to Wisdom, who has great insight, Folly “knows nothing.” Her ignorance does not quiet her voice, however. She blasts her foolish advice all over town.

**PROVERBS 9:14.** Like Wisdom, Folly also has a house. Rather than send servants out to call the simple to spend time with her, she sits in front of her home and climbs the city walls to extend her invitation firsthand. Proverbs 7:10 describes Folly as being “decked out like a prostitute.” In Proverbs 7:16-17, Folly adds, “I have decked my couch with coverings, colored spreads of Egyptian linen; I have perfumed my bed with myrrh, aloes, and cinnamon.” Wisdom trusts her teachings to speak for themselves. Folly relies on seductive clothing and perfume to coax people to hear her words.

**PROVERBS 9:15-16.** Folly targets those who “are going straight on their way.” Straight refers to pathways of

The “simple” do not lack intelligence but have not lived enough to recognize good advice from bad.

The wise are happy for Wisdom to correct their course.
honesty, obedience, and integrity that lead directly to God. Folly is the foolish woman who wants to distract “the simple” from devotion to God before they make full commitments to follow the Lord. Folly invites the same people Wisdom pursues. She promises that the inexperienced will grow sophisticated by yielding to her temptations. She claims they can leave their naivété behind and experience the full range of forbidden pleasures.

PROVERBS 9:17. This is probably a saying popular in Israel at the time. Folly offers a banquet of stolen bread and water rather than the meat, bread, and wine supplied at Wisdom’s table. Stolen bread and water refers to those forbidden experiences that promise pleasure but deliver painful consequences. Although the original saying probably alluded to adultery or immoral sexual activity, Solomon expands the meaning to pertain to those who reject God’s guidance for the temptations of the evil one.

PROVERBS 9:18. Folly promises that her guidance will give people thrills and the “sweetest” pleasures of life—pleasures, by implication, that Wisdom can never produce. In reality, Folly’s house is a place of the dead. Sheol is a Hebrew word that refers to a holding place for the dead. Folly’s guidance turns the banquet hall of life into a morgue of death.

Applying the Scripture
Adults face a complicated set of decisions as they leave childhood and adolescence behind. As they age, the pressure mounts to live life to the fullest before it’s over.

Young adults want to experience the pleasures of their more carefree days before they “settle down” with families and careers. Middle adults want to make sure their life choices haven’t deprived them of the benefits of other relationships, value systems, and lifestyles. Senior adults seek to enjoy the active years they have left.

All these desires make adults susceptible to the seductive claims of voices that reject the Lordship of Jesus Christ. These voices can lead young adults to behaviors that entrap them in addictions, toxic relationships, and financial hardship. Middle adults can foolishly abandon loving relationships and productive work, turning instead to affairs and a “second adolescence” of immaturity. Senior adults can leave meaningful places of service and their roles as mentors and elders to chase after irresponsible lifestyles that leave them empty and depressed.

The wisdom of God can keep such mistakes from depriving adults of the abundant life God intends. By “feeding” on the sound guidance of God on matters of faithfulness, love, integrity, trust, service, and sacrifice, adults can save themselves a great deal of heartache.

Solomon reminds believers they are always susceptible to the temptations of this world. Folly, or the evil one as Jesus named the source of temptation, is constantly trying to persuade Christians to leave the path of faith, love, and integrity and seek after stolen water and forbidden bread. The temptations that mislead adults are loud, prominent, ubiquitous, seductive, and deceptive. This lesson can anchor adults in the wisdom of God and protect them from the lies that lead to the depths of depression and despair.

Adults grow spiritually when they commit to lifelong learning. When adults stubbornly refuse to change their minds, learn new skills, or adapt to a changing world, they stagnate as human beings and impede the transformational process God began with their salvation. This passage reminds adults to choose the path of the wise and receive new information, challenges, and even Godly rebukes as welcomed counsel to embrace rather than annoyances to reject.

Some young adults are hesitant to make commitments for fear they will miss out on better options that might come their way at a later date. This “cell-phone age” phenomenon may keep them from agreeing to attend Bible studies, worship, and ministry opportunities.
They worry that if they commit to any of the ministries or programs of the church, someone might text them with another invitation they won’t want to miss, so they keep their options open.

In larger ways this causes many young adults to be leery of committing to relationships or even jobs. They do not want to get stuck in a commitment and then miss out on a happier relationship or more fulfilling job that might be coming their way.

Whereas there is wisdom in considering options carefully before making a decision, this tendency to postpone commitments can keep young adults from devoting themselves to Christ. As they avoid full allegiance to the reign of God, they become susceptible to the seduction of destructive influences.

Solomon reminds readers that they must choose between the wisdom of God and the appeals of detrimental forces that pretend to offer guidance but in reality lead adults to unnecessary pain.

Session Plans
These lesson plans are given as suggestions. The words AND, OR, or AND/OR between activities indicate alternative activities. Choose activities best suited for your particular group and time schedule. Feel free to adapt the suggestions to meet the needs and interests of your group.

**GETTING READY FOR THE SESSION**

- Read Proverbs 9:1-6, 8-10, 13-18, session 4 in Journeys, and this leader’s guide.
- Gather pencils, sheets of paper, and a copy of Journeys for each participant.
- Gather one Bible for each four participants.
- Have available a chalkboard and chalk, dry erase board and markers, or newsprint and markers.
- For the activity “FOBO” write “FOBO” in large letters on a sheet of newsprint and place it on a prominent wall.
- For the activity “This or That” make two columns on the chalkboard or piece of newsprint. At the top of one column, write “This”. Write “That” at the top of the second column. Ask three participants in advance to prepare stories about commitments they have made in life. Participant 1 should tell about accepting a marriage proposal. Participant 2 should tell about accepting a job offer. Participant 3 should tell about deciding to join your church.

- For the activity “Let's Make a Choice” write or type “Make a Choice” across the top of an 8½ by 11” sheet of paper. Under that heading write or type the following three directions. Leave space for writing between each direction:
  1. Gather the Evidence.
  2. Check Your Heart.
  3. Consider the Dangers.
- Make a copy of this sheet for every participant in your class.
- If you choose to do alternate activity “Make the Pitch,” obtain a computer with a screen large enough to be seen by your class. Cue up two advertisements or sales pitches from YouTube that extol the assets of a product.
- For the activity “Thanks, I Needed That” write “Thanks I Needed That” on an 8 x 5 in. piece of cardboard or poster board. On a second 8 x 5 in. piece of cardboard or poster board, write “Bug Off.” Place the signs on a prominent table in the classroom.
- For the activity “Danger, Danger” write each of the following scenarios on a separate note card:
  - Scenario 1. “I'm bored in my marriage. Someone at work flirts with me all day long. I think an affair might add a little excitement to my life.”
  - Scenario 2. “I usually stop at a sport’s bar after work for a couple of beers. Last night this guy, who seems to always be having a good time, had a pill he promised would give me a thrill. I think I might take it.”
  - Scenario 3. “My neighbor does online gambling and raves about how much fun it is. My wife would kill me if she knew I was doing it, but lately I’ve gambled a bit online. No big deal.”
  - Scenario 4. “My daughter really wants to go to a prestigious college. I read her application essay and it isn’t very good. I could write a far better one for her and she would be happy for me to do it.”

**BEGINNING THE SESSION**

(FOBO 10 min.)
- Ask participants to guess the phrase or title the acronym “FOBO” represents.
- Read “RSVP” on p. 22 of Journeys.
- Ask the “Questions for Reflection” at the end of “RSVP” on p. 22 of Journeys.
- Pray that this session will help all participants make healthy choices with the many options in their lives.
DEVELOPING THE SESSION
(35-40 MINUTES)

This or That? (10 min.)
- Ask a participant to read Proverbs 9:1-6 aloud.
- Say, “Throughout Scripture, people are confronted with decisions in which they must choose one option and reject another. When people make these hard choices, they grow spiritually. When they postpone them, they often fall into temptation.”
- Ask participants to form groups of three or four.
- Give each group a Bible.
- Have them read their assigned passage and determine the choices set before the reader.
- Invite each group to report on the choices they found in their passage. As they state the choices, write one option under “This” and the other under “That” in the columns prepared in “Getting Ready for the Session.”
- Suggest that Wisdom is also asking her hearers to make a choice. However, some of her listeners aren’t quite ready to decide.
- Invite the three volunteers you recruited in “Getting Ready for the Session” to share their stories with the large group.
- When they finish, ask each volunteer: 1. What other options did you have when you made your decision? 2. What caused you to make the commitment that you made? 3. What would have happened if you had postponed the decision further? 4. Are you glad you made the commitment?
- Ask participants to name some benefits of making commitments to worthwhile choices.

AND

Make the Pitch (10 min.)
- Give each participant the “Make a Choice” sheets you prepared in “Getting Ready for the Session.”
- Let them know that in the remainder of this session, they are going to gather information that will help them fill in this sheet. By the end of the session, they will have a plan to help them all choose between the invitation of Wisdom and the invitation of Folly.
- Ask participants to read “Grow Up” on pp. 23-24 in Journeys and identify the assets of Wisdom.
- Show the YouTube video advertisements or sales pitches you reviewed in “Getting Ready for the Session” on the computer and screen you obtained.
- Ask participants to form groups of three or four.
- Ask each group to write an ad or public service announcement that extols the assets of Wisdom.
- Invite each group to share their creation.

Check Your Heart (10 min.)
- Ask participants to listen for important guidance as you read Proverbs 9:8-10.
- Invite participants to share aloud what they heard.
- Ask participants to read “The Role of the Listener” on pp. 24-26 of Journeys.
- Show participants the two pieces of poster board you prepared in “Getting Ready for this Session.”
- Share “I’m going to offer some advice that Wisdom might offer. As I do, check your heart. Do you feel like saying “Thanks I Needed That” or “Bug Off.”
  1. You need to watch less TV and spend that time reading the Bible.
  2. You need to put more emphasis on teaching your children to love the Lord.
  3. You need to spend less on entertainment and unnecessary clothing and more on spreading the gospel to those who have never heard it.
  4. You need to invite your neighbors to dinner so you can get better acquainted. God has put you next door to them for a reason.
  5. You need to show greater honor to your parents by calling them more often.
- Invite participants to write what this exercise taught them about the condition of their hearts on the “Make a Choice” worksheet under “Check your Heart.”
Danger, Danger (10 min.)

- Ask participants to read Proverbs 9:13-18 and section “Fools Rush In” on pp. 26-27 in Journeys and identify the dangers of listening to the voice of Folly.
- Ask participants to write the dangers identified under “Consider the Dangers” on the “Make a Choice” worksheet.
- Invite participants to share the dangers they identified.
- Ask four volunteers to read the scenarios prepared in “Getting Ready for the Session.” After each scenario is read, ask participants to warn the reader of the dangers of making the wrong choice in their scenario.

CLOSING THE SESSION (5 MINUTES)

- Invite participants to share what they have learned about the invitations of Wisdom and Folly.
- Invite participants to share prayer requests for what they need to make good choices when both Wisdom and Folly are trying to influence them.
- Pray for the participants and their requests.

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Dates and Events Coming this Fall
(SEPTEMBER–NOVEMBER 2020)

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<td>Hispanic Heritage Month</td>
<td>Pastor Appreciation Month,</td>
<td>1 Daylight Savings Time Ends</td>
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<td>(Sept. 15–Oct. 15)</td>
<td>World Mission Offering Month,</td>
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<td>7 Labor Day</td>
<td>National Disability Employment Awareness Month, and Domestic Violence Awareness Month</td>
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<td>20 American Baptist Women’s Ministry Sunday</td>
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<td>25 Native American/First Nations Day</td>
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<td>17-29 National Observance of Children’s Sabbath</td>
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<td>25 Campus Ministry Sunday</td>
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Introducing the Scripture

John the Baptist recognized Jesus as the Messiah while he and Jesus were still in the wombs of their mothers (Luke 1:44). John also witnessed God’s affirmation of Christ as the Messiah on the day he baptized Jesus (Matthew 3:13-17). Yet doubts arose about his affirmation that Jesus was the Messiah when John was thrown into King Herod’s dungeon.

Herod had John arrested and imprisoned because John publicly criticized Herod’s marriage to Herodias, the wife of Herod’s brother Phillip. Herod’s sinful act is described in Matthew 14:3-5: “For Herod had arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife, because John had been telling him, ‘It is not lawful for you to have her.’ Though Herod wanted to put him to death, he feared the crowd, because they regarded him as a prophet.”

Matthew 4:12 reports when Jesus heard John was arrested, Jesus withdrew to Galilee. Matthew 11 begins with the comment that Jesus was travelling throughout Galilee preaching and teaching. Perhaps John felt abandoned by Jesus in his time of need. Perhaps he felt it was unfair for Jesus to freely travel from town to town while he was locked in a dungeon. Perhaps he had hoped his arrest would spur Jesus into some act of insurrection rather than continuing his ministry of instruction. All we know for sure is as he languished in Herod’s dungeon, John began to doubt whether Jesus was the Messiah. In his faith crisis, John sent some of his disciples to ask Jesus if he was the true Messiah or if they should look for someone else.

Jesus told John’s disciples: “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me” (Matthew 11:4-6). Jesus’ answer drew from the imagery of Isaiah 61, which describes the work of a figure called the “Messianic Servant,” who proclaims good news to the poor and binds up the brokenhearted (Isaiah 61:1a). However, Jesus did not repeat the portion that says the Servant will “proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners” (Isaiah 61:1b). Although much of Jesus’ answer is from Isaiah 61, Jesus did not repeat the portion that says the Servant will “proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners” (Isaiah 61:1b). It is possible that he did not want John to think he would act to deliver him from his cell and impending doom.

Jesus wanted John to look at his miraculous deeds and mighty works for evidence of his true Messiahship. As John’s disciples returned to the imprisoned prophet with Christ’s message, Jesus took the opportunity to tell the people of Galilee how great John the Baptist truly was (Matthew 11:7-15).

Examining the Scripture

MATTHEW 11:7. To prompt the crowd’s consideration of John’s attributes, Jesus asks them why they went to
the wilderness to hear John. Did they travel to the remote area to see “a reed shaken by the wind?” This question could be interpreted in one of two ways. One is as a humorous aside approaching sarcasm. Jesus may have been saying, “Did you go to the wilderness to see something as common and everyday as a “reed shaken in the wind.” The implied answer would have been “of course not.”

Another interpretation speaks to John’s character. Some politicians have to check the way the wind is blowing before stating their opinions because they are too spineless to stand up for what is right in the face of opposition. Jesus might have been asking the crowd if they saw John the Baptist as that kind of easily intimidated, cowardly spokesman. Again the presumed answer would have been “of course not.”

MATTHEW 11:8. Jesus continues to ask absurd questions to highlight John’s true character. “Did you expect to see someone dressed in the soft robes of royalty and privilege?” Again, the answer is no. John dressed in camel’s hair, and the only time he went to a palace was as a prisoner.

MATTHEW 11:9. With his third question, Jesus indicates he is drawing closer to the true purpose of John’s ministry. John was not a reed shaken in the wind nor was he was dressed in the soft robes of earthy rulers, but he was a prophet. In fact, Jesus says John was more than a prophet.

MATTHEW 11:10. John the Baptist was more than a prophet because he was the messenger sent by God to prepare the way for the Messiah. Jesus quotes from Malachi 3:1 to support his claim that John was the forerunner to the Messiah.

MATTHEW 11:11. Jesus accomplishes two purposes with this verse. First, he commends John as one of the greatest men who ever lived. Second, Jesus exalts the superior value of the Kingdom of God in comparison to earthly kingdoms. The least person in the Kingdom of God had greater faith, love, and power than John the Baptist.

MATTHEW 11:12. One credible understanding of this verse is that Jesus was referring to the false messiahs and violent revolutionaries who vowed to “take” or institute the Kingdom of God by force. Many people in Jesus’ day claimed to be messiahs and called the people to join their movement to overthrow the Roman government through violent insurrection. Jesus referred to such leaders in John 10:8 when he said, “All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them.” Christ taught that God brought the Kingdom into individual lives as people freely chose to repent of their sins and accept him as Lord. Jesus taught that faith had to be freely chosen, not forced upon unwilling disciples. He also knew that there were those who continuously opposed the reign of God, and often with force. John the Baptist was beheaded, Jesus was crucified, Peter and Paul imprisoned, and James killed by sword. All of these persecutions would have happened by the time the book of Matthew was written. Matthew might have been using a quote from Jesus to tell his readers that violent opposition to the reign of God started at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry and continued up to the present moment.

MATTHEW 11:13-15. Jesus reinforces John’s special role in announcing the coming kingdom. Jesus refers to Malachi 4:5 to explain that John the Baptist was the new Elijah, the one prophesied to come before the Messiah: “Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes.” Before John, the prophets and the Law of Moses prepared the people for the coming of the Messiah. John announced that the Messiah had arrived and his name was Jesus.

MATTHEW 11:16-19. Jesus used a popular children’s game of the first century to criticize his listeners for their refusal to follow either John or him. Children in Jesus’ day played a game similar to Simon Says. Instead of a leader saying “Simon Says” to get participants
to follow or disregard the leader’s orders, the leader in this game used pantomime. If the leader pretended to play a flute, all the children had to dance. If the leader mimicked someone wailing, the children had to pretend to mourn. If a child danced when the leader wailed or mourned when the leader played the flute, the child was out of the game.

Jesus said the people of his day dismissed John because he would not eat or drink (i.e., he mourned when they called for dancing). In similar ways they rejected Jesus because he ate and drank (he danced when they called for mourning). Jesus saw there was no way to meet the expectations of the Galileans. Then he offered a better test for the validity of a prophet. Quoting a popular proverb, Jesus said, “Wisdom is vindicated by her deeds” (v. 13). Jesus’ words according to Luke were: “Wisdom is vindicated by all her children” (Luke 7:35). Both translations mean the same thing. Rather than evaluate the truthfulness of prophets by superficial standards of lifestyle preferences, Jesus called on the people of Galilee to look at the prophets’ deeds or what they “birthed” or produced in life. If they healed the sick, raised the dead, made the deaf to hear and the blind to see, if they preached good news to the poor, then they had the wisdom of God. If they produced hatred, injustice, greed, violence, and corruption, they did not possess the wisdom of God.

Applying the Scripture

In this age of the Internet and cable TV, adults are bombarded with opinions from those who claim to know the truth. Adults must filter through this barrage of talking heads, politicians, gurus, and religious broadcasters to determine who is telling the truth and who is not.

Criteria is needed to help adults discern the truth in the competing sources of “wisdom.” Does the prosperity of the spokesperson prove that his or her point of view is correct? Do opinion polls and ratings provide the evidence needed to trust the source? What about claims that one speaks for God? Does the profession of self-endorsed prophets or the frenzy of mesmerized followers validate a person’s message?

Adults need help in examining the fruit of a spokesperson’s life to determine trustworthiness. Prosperity, popularity, or claims to prophetic calling can provide a false positive to a test for godly wisdom. However, righteous deeds that produce peace, justice, faith, hope, salvation, and healthy fellowships prove that the doer of such deeds has wisdom to offer.

Christians struggle with faith when bad things happen in their lives. Sick children, broken marriages, damaging accidents, untimely deaths, financial problems, and chronic illness can cause faithful adults to wonder if Christ is with them. When such trouble arises, Christian adults might even doubt whether they have put their faith in the right Savior.

John the Baptist endured such doubt when suffering came his way. His experience reaffirms the biblical teaching that hard times do not indicate a lack of power or love on the part of the Lord. Jesus admired and loved John the Baptist, yet when he was imprisoned, Jesus did not intervene to secure his release. Jesus loves all disciples and has proven that love through his death and resurrection. Yet even though his love is real, Christian adults still sometimes suffer. This lesson can help adults focus on all that Christ has done as evidence of his Messiahship and not allow individual trials to cause them to doubt the Lord’s identity.

Christian leaders are never perfect. All pastors and lay leaders have flaws. Critical congregations can always find something to complain about with their leaders. They don’t preach well enough, visit the sick often enough, counsel with enough skill, or raise enough money for the church. In addition, fault can be found in the lifestyles of the leaders. She drives too nice a car. He spends too much time watching sports. She could help us more if she had a family of her own. He spends so much time with his wife and kids that he doesn’t prioritize us. He’s too young to offer us any wisdom. She’s too old to relate to our young people. These and a million other criticisms can undermine a leader’s ministry and rob him or her of the joy that can be found in serving the Lord. This lesson reminds us to evaluate leaders on the depth of their deeds, not on superficial lifestyle practices. No leader can make everybody happy, but all leaders can seek to do ministry in their community. If they do, they please the Lord, and congregations ought to be pleased as well.
Session Plans
These lesson plans are given as suggestions. The words AND, OR, or AND/OR between activities indicate alternative activities. Choose activities best suited for your particular group and time schedule. Feel free to adapt the suggestions to meet the needs and interests of your group.

GETTING READY FOR THE SESSION
• Read Matthew 11:1-19, session 5 in Journeys, and this leader’s guide.
• Gather pencils and sheets of paper for each participant.
• Gather one Bible for each four participants.
• Affix four pieces of newsprint on prominent walls in your classroom. Place two markers at the site of each piece of newsprint. Write one of the following headings at the top of each piece of newsprint: Parenting. Marriage. Happiness. Health.
• Prepare enough copies of the following case studies so every group of four participants can have two case studies.
  Case Study 1. Janice is a financial advisor for a major investment firm. She has followed her own financial advice and amassed a fortune. Her financial success is displayed in the car she drives, the clothes she wears, the trips she takes, and the house in which she lives. Would you take her financial advice? Would her success make her a good spiritual advisor?
  Case Study 2. First Fellowship Baptist is interviewing Rev. Smith, a new pastoral candidate for the church. Rev. Smith arrived for the interview in a luxury vehicle, wearing a tailor-made suit and a very expensive-looking watch. Some on the committee feel his evident prosperity means he must be a good pastor. Do you agree?
  Case Study 3. The Nominating Committee for First Blessing Baptist Church is searching for a new finance committee chairperson. They have three people in mind: Barbara, a very successful real-estate attorney; Kendra, a schoolteacher in an under-resourced part of town; Bobby, a high school coach who is always trying to get the church to do more mission work. Most of the committee thinks they should choose Barbara because she is so successful in her business. What other considerations might need to go into choosing the next chair?
  Case Study 4. Lilly and Raymond are Christians who are trying to decide where to invest their money for retirement. One mutual fund invests in anything that makes money and has performed far above average. Another has not done so well but refuses to invest in alcohol, tobacco, companies with ties to casinos, and industries that harm the environment. Where should they put their money and why?
• Print one copy of the following “Prophetic Résumé.”
  Prophetic Résumé
  Polls show the majority of people trust the prophet.
  1. The prophet gets very emotional when preaching.
  2. The prophet knows the Scripture.
  3. The prophet graduated from the finest academic institutions.
  4. The prophet is rumored to have worked miracles.
  5. The prophet claims to hear directly from God.
  6. The prophet is a person of genuine prayer.
  The prophet creates division and chaos in every congregation of believers.
  7. The prophet’s words have helped people grow closer to Christ.
  8. The prophet’s teachings lead believers to forgive one another, feed the hungry, and work for justice in the community.
• If you choose to do the exercise “Simon Says,” brush up on the rules and practice leading the game.
• Write the following passages on newsprint or a marker board: Ruth 1:16-17, 2:17-18; Genesis 41:15-27; 2 Corinthians 7:8-16; Acts 4:32-35.

BEGINNING THE SESSION
(5-10 MINUTES)
What Have You Heard
• Ask participants to read “I Wish I Knew” on p. 28 of Journeys.
• Share that we live in a world where there is more information than we can handle. Have participants go to each sheet of newsprint and write down “what you have heard” from family, the Internet, TV, books, and magazines about each topic. Do not have them evaluate the messages—just write them on the sheets.
• Ask participants to say which messages have been proven true in their lives and which have not.
• Share with them that this session will give them spiritual direction in how to evaluate the many sources of information in our world and choose the sources that are truly from God.
• Pray “Dear Lord, help us to hear your voice above all others as we look for reliable guidance in our lives. Amen.”
DEVELOPING THE SESSION
(35-40 MINUTES)

By the Numbers (10 min.)
- Ask participants to get in groups of four.
- Read aloud Matthew 11:7-8.
- Ask participants to read the section “Prosperity” on pp. 29-30 of Journeys.
- Distribute two of the case studies you prepared in “Getting Ready for the Session” to each group.
- Ask each group to read their case studies and discuss their answers to the questions.
- Invite each group to share their answers with the large group.
- Share with them that although prosperity is often a good indication of someone’s financial wisdom, it does not necessarily mean the person has godly wisdom to share about spiritual matters.

Prophets for Hire (10 min.)
- Invite a participant to read aloud Matthew 11:9-15.
- Give a brief lecture on the material found in “Prophecy?” on pp. 31-32 of Journeys and the corresponding sections of “Examining the Scripture” in this leader’s guide.
- Ask the group the “Questions for Reflection” found at the end of section “Prophecy?”.
- Read each statement from the “Prophetic Résumé” you prepared in “Getting Ready Reading for the Session” to the large group.
- Invite them to say whether each statement is reliable evidence that the prophet is from God or not.
- Share with them that God has certainly used prophets to share divine messages throughout history. John the Baptist was such a prophet, but not all self-proclaimed prophets are trustworthy. Other criteria must be used to determine the veracity of the prophetic word.

Playing Games (10 min.)
- Read aloud Matthew 11:16-19.
- Ask participants to read “Popular Opinion” on pp. 33-34 of Journeys and be ready to explain the children’s game on which Jesus comments were based.
- Lead the group in a few rounds of the “Simon Says” game you brushed up on in “Getting Ready for the Session.”
- Lead the group in a version of the game Jesus described in the text. Pantomime play the flute, and wail to make the group dance or mourn.
- Share with them that Jesus and John the Baptist taught the Word of God when it was popular with their culture and when it was not. The most popular opinion about any subject is not necessarily the godliest.
- Ask “What happens to God’s prophetic word when preachers make personal popularity their goal?”

CLOSING THE SESSION
(5-10 MIN.)
- Ask participants to name one weakness of relying on prosperity, prophecy, or popularity to vindicate a person’s guidance.
- Share this nugget: “Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.” (Matthew 11:19d).
- Pray for participants to evaluate carefully the information they receive on matters of importance and rely on only that which comes from God.
The Boy Jesus

**SCRIPTURE:** Ecclesiastes 3:1, 7b; Luke 2:39-52

**KEY VERSE:** The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him. —Luke 2:40

**SESSION OBJECTIVES:**
- to chart the stages of Jesus’ development through childhood and adolescence;
- to compare and contrast Jesus’ boyhood development with the development of most children;
- to describe Mary and Joseph’s struggle to parent the boy Jesus; and
- to develop criteria for when to speak and when to keep silent.

**Introducing the Scripture**

Luke 2 tells the story of Jesus’ birth and early life. Many aspects of Jesus’ birth and childhood reveal the uniqueness of Jesus. In other ways, however, Jesus was raised like any other boy from a devout Jewish family.

Several spurious accounts of Jesus’ early life depict Jesus as a “miracle boy.” The *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* states that at the age of five, Jesus made some birds out of mud on the Sabbath. Here’s the text that follows: “When Joseph came to the place and saw what had happened, he cried out to him, ‘Why are you doing what is forbidden on the Sabbath?’ But Jesus clapped his hands and cried to the sparrows, ‘Be gone!’ And the sparrows took flight and went off, chirping. When the Jews saw this they were amazed; and they went away and reported to their leaders what they had seen Jesus do.” However, this “miracle boy” picture of Jesus that we get from the Gospel of Thomas stands in contrast to the canonical Gospels’ accounts of Jesus’ development.

Instead of writing about a miracle boy, Luke 2:21-38 describes Jesus’ earliest days as a mixture of normal human development and divine blessing. On the eighth day of his life, Jesus was circumcised as the Jewish law required. Leviticus 12:1-8 states that after a woman gives birth to a son, she is ceremonially unclean for seven days and then must go through thirty-three days of purification before she can worship in the temple again. Once her days of purification come to an end, Leviticus requires the mother and father to bring an offering to the priest to complete the religious duties surrounding childbirth. The prescribed offering was a lamb unless the family was poor, in which case they could sacrifice two turtledoves or pigeons instead. Joseph and Mary could not afford a lamb, so they brought birds to the priest to meet the requirements of the Law of Moses when Mary’s days of purification were completed.

While making their sacrifice, Mary and Joseph were told by Simeon and Anna that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah. After receiving this holy confirmation, Mary and Joseph took Jesus home and raised him just like any other Jewish boy. Jesus grew intellectually, physically, socially, and spiritually. Luke 2:39 implies that Jesus and his family kept silent about his identity as God’s Son throughout his childhood.

**Examining the Scripture**

**ECClesiastes 3:1.** This wisdom is almost universally accepted as true. Jesus had a keen ability to know God’s timing “for every matter under heaven” throughout his life.

**ECClesiastes 3:7b.** Jesus knew there was a time to reveal his identity and a time to keep silent about who he really was. Specifically, his childhood was the time to keep silent. When he became a man at age twelve according to Jewish law, it was time to let others know that he was God’s Son.
LUKE 2:39. After Joseph and Mary finished offering sacrifices for Mary’s purification as required in Leviticus 12:1-8, the family returned to their home in Nazareth.

LUKE 2:40. Jesus grew just like any other child. He became physically strong, intellectually competent, and socially mature. Although the favor of God is on all children, Jesus had a special portion of God’s blessing.

LUKE 2:41-45. Joseph and Mary journeyed from Nazareth to Jerusalem every Passover as was the expectation of their faith. They were devout and obedient in their practice. Before a boy celebrated Passover, he was viewed as a child even though he might have already turned twelve. As the Jewish families journeyed to Passover in Jerusalem, the women usually traveled with the children and the men walked together as a separate group. Jesus would have still been viewed as a child on his way up to Jerusalem and therefore traveled with the women.

Once a twelve-year-old boy celebrated Passover, he was considered a man. This meant that Jesus should have journeyed home with the men. Mary and Joseph probably first looked in places they felt would attract a twelve-year-old’s interests. They never considered that Jesus was not with the men. Not until night, when individual families bedded down together, would Mary and Joseph realize that Jesus was not in their caravan at all. Like any parents with missing children, Joseph and Mary immediately returned to the city to search for Jesus.

LUKE 2:46. Mary and Joseph had already spent one day traveling toward their home. They returned to Jerusalem the next day to look for Jesus. They spent a third day looking for him in the city. Mary and Joseph probably first looked in places they felt would attract a twelve-year-old’s interests. They never considered that their son would be hanging out in the temple. When they finally looked there, they found Jesus listening to the elders and asking questions about Scripture and the Jewish law.

LUKE 2:47. The elders were surprised and impressed by Jesus’ comprehension of their beliefs and by the quality and depth of his questions.

LUKE 2:48. Joseph and Mary were astonished and somewhat annoyed that Jesus had stayed in Jerusalem without telling them. They were also amazed that he would choose to spend his time in the big city in the temple with the elders. That choice affirmed that Jesus was indeed different from other boys his age. Mary exhibited her anxiety by scolding Jesus. She addresses him as a child even though by then he would have qualified as a man. (It is worth noting that many translations say “son,” but the Greek word teknon can also be translated as “child.”) She told Jesus his behavior had greatly worried his father and her.

LUKE 2:49. Jesus seemed surprised by his parent’s lack of understanding. They had heard from angels, shepherds, magi, prophets, and prophetesses that Jesus was the Messiah and the Son of God. Why would they not know that, now that he was considered an adult, it was time to begin his ministry? Why would they not recognize it was time to speak of his identity? Why would they not know he would be in his heavenly Father’s house beginning his advanced studies? An alternate translation reads, “Did you not know that I must be about my father’s business” (NKJV). Both translations emphasize that Jesus’ mission was not only to be a good son to Joseph and Mary but to be increasingly engaged in the business of God.

LUKE 2:50-51. Even though they had been told about Jesus’ unique identity, neither Joseph nor Mary understood the full nature and calling of their son. They tried to restore order in their family by taking Jesus back home to Nazareth and continuing their lives there. Jesus resumed his role as dutiful son and was obedient to them. Mary, however, knew the experience in Jerusalem was a clear sign of her son’s unique relationship with God. As she did the night Jesus was born ( Luke 2:19), Mary pondered the meaning of her son’s life and cherished the mysteries of his development in her heart.

LUKE 2:52. This appears to be a restatement of Luke 2:40. The only addition is that Jesus grew in favor with human beings as well as God. In some ways his
development was the same as any other Jewish boy. In other ways, Jesus’ unique wisdom increased as he matured, and he found favor with God and with all who knew him.

**Applying the Scripture**

Christian parents aspire to raise their children with wisdom, discipline, love, and understanding. They hope to see their children grow physically, intellectually, socially, and spiritually. Challenges arise throughout a child’s development, however. Parents struggle to know when to speak and when to keep silent, when to discipline and when to give greater freedom, when to encourage their children to achieve more and when to assure them they have done enough.

Mary and Joseph must have had the same aspirations for Jesus. And they faced the same challenges that all parents face. In addition, they were raising the Messiah and the Son of God. They had all the challenges inherent in raising any child plus unique challenges in guiding their future Lord and Savior.

If Jesus had been a miracle boy, capable of superhuman feats as a child, then Christian parents would have little if anything to learn from his relationship to his parents. However, since Jesus developed in way similar to all children, Christian parents can identify and learn from the parenting struggles of Joseph and Mary.

Like Mary and Joseph, Christian parents can participate in their church’s rituals and ceremonies for marking key developments in the lives of their children. Baby dedications, promotions in Sunday school, advancements in biblical knowledge, baptisms, discipleship courses, and entrance into the youth group of a church are all important moments to honor in the life of a child.

Like Joseph and Mary, Christian parents sometimes make mistakes in evaluating the development of their children. When does a child stop being a child and become a teenager or even an adult? When do they need more privacy and less intrusion in their lives? When do they need more supervision and less free time? How does a parent recognize and honor the uniqueness of each child? How do parents express their legitimate worries with their children without thwarting a child’s growth? Jesus’ childhood can provide material for discussing all these questions.

Mary and Joseph did not always understand when Jesus moved from one level of maturity to another. In addition, they did not honor his unique gifts and calling at all times. And, like all parents, they worried about their son and tried to create a safe environment in which he could grow up and flourish.

Adults grapple with knowing when to speak and when to remain silent. Whether the issues that need addressing arise in the workplace, at home, in friendships, or in the church, adults need help in deciding whether or not to speak up. Recognizing the right time and place for important conversations is a necessary skill of maturity. Jesus demonstrated throughout his life that he had mastered this skill, and his wisdom can help adults improve their timing on matters of importance.

**Session Plans**

These lesson plans are given as suggestions. The words **AND**, **OR**, or **AND/OR** between activities indicate alternative activities. Choose activities best suited for your particular group and time schedule. Feel free to adapt the suggestions to meet the needs and interests of your group.

**GETTING READY FOR THE SESSION**

- **Read** Ecclesiastes 3:1, 7b and Luke 2:39-52, the lesson in *Journeys*, and in this leader’s guide.
- **Gather** pencils, sheets of paper, and felt-tipped markers for each participant.
- **Gather** one Bible for every four participants.
- **Make** one copy of the following questions for every four participants:
  1. When is it not a good time to laugh?
  2. When is it not a good time to sleep?
  3. When is it not a good time to tell a joke?
  4. When is it not a good time to demand absolute quiet?
  5. When is it not a good time to watch TV?
  6. When is it not a good time to plan a trip?
  7. When is it not a good time to ask a person on a date?
- **Write** the following headings on three separate sheets of newsprint: “Infancy,” “Childhood,” “Adolescence.” Attach the pieces of newsprint to a prominent wall in the classroom.
• If you choose to do alternate activity “It’s Not Easy,” set up a computer and screen to play the following YouTube video https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v_nI-AhHNNQ.
• If you choose to do the exercise “Family Therapy,” prepare the following assignments for a role play:
  1. You are a family therapist meeting with Joseph and Mary to discuss how to do a better job of raising Jesus.
  2. You are Mary attending a family therapy session to talk about the problems you are having raising Jesus.
  3. You are Joseph attending a family therapy session to talk about the problems you are having raising Jesus.
  4. You are Jesus attending a family therapy session with Joseph and Mary to discuss why they don’t understand you.
• Prepare the following case studies. You will only need one copy of each.
  Case Study 1. Your daughter has come home smelling of marijuana. Is it time to speak to her about this or keep silent to give her the privacy she needs and to demonstrate that you trust her?
  Case Study 2. Your wife just lost a major client at her Accounting firm. A mistake she made caused the client to move her business to another firm. She is home now and looking very dejected. Is it time to talk about her feelings with her or give her privacy to let her process this herself?
  Case Study 3. Your pastor seems to be stuck on one topic. Every Sunday he rails against politicians he disagrees with. His sermons are alienating many in the congregation for no clear purpose. Do you speak to him about this or just let the Holy Spirit move him on to other subjects as God sees fit?
  Case Study 4. Your mother keeps giving your phone number to “nice young men” she thinks would be perfect partners for you. You try to politely rebuff the young men when they call, but it is always awkward. Is it time to talk to your mom about her habit or just keep rejecting the men when they call?

DEVELOPING THE SESSION
(35-40 MINUTES)

Not a Good Time (10 min.)
• Read aloud Ecclesiastes 3:1 and 3:7b.
• Have participants get in groups of four.
• Ask them to read “Timing is Everything” on p. 36 in Journeys.
• Give each group the questions you prepared in “Getting Ready for the Session.”
• Ask them to brainstorm answers to each question.
• Invite each group to share their answers.
• Ask each group to go back to the questions and say when it is a good time to do each activity.
• Invite each group to share their answers.
• Share that almost every culture agrees that there is a proper time and place for most actions as long as the actions are not sinful or destructive. Jesus had to learn when it was time to reveal his identity. We have to learn when to speak and when to keep silent in all our relationships.

Growing Up (10 min.)
• Ask participants to stay in their small groups.
• Point to the three sheets of newsprint you prepared and mounted on a prominent wall in “Getting Ready for the Session.”
• Share that throughout today’s session they will find evidence of Jesus as an infant, a child, and an adolescent. Tell them they will be directed to write the discoveries from each stage of life on the sheets of newsprint.
• Give each group a pencil and paper.
• Share that “Luke 2:21-40 has several descriptions of Jesus as an infant and child. Write down the
characteristics of Jesus' infancy and childhood that you discover in these readings.”

- **Invite** each group to enter their discoveries on the newsprint labeled “Infancy” and “Childhood.”
- **Make** sure they place words like “normal,” “quiet,” “circumcised,” “dedicated,” “protected by his parents,” and “declared to be the Messiah” on the Infancy sheet and “growing physically,” “growing intellectually,” and “finding great favor with God” on the Childhood sheet.
- **Ask** “Which of these characteristics are true of most children? Which were unique to Jesus?”

### AND

#### New Developments (10 min.)

- **Invite** a participant to read Luke 2:41-45 aloud to the class.
- **Ask** participants to read “What Time is It?” on pp. 38-39 in *Journeys* and look for the characteristics Jesus displayed as an early adolescent.
- **Invite** participants to write the characteristics they discovered on the newsprint with the heading “Adolescence.”
- **Read Luke 2:46-52** aloud to the class.
- **Ask** participants to name other characteristics of Jesus' early adolescence as depicted in the passage.
- **Invite** participants to add the additional characteristics to the newsprint with the heading “Adolescence.”
- **Ask** “Which of these teenage characteristics are true of most teenagers? Which are unique to Jesus?”

#### Hard to Parent

- **Ask** participants to read “Whose Son Is This?” on pp. 40-41 of *Journeys*.
- **Invite** participants to describe the struggles Joseph and Mary had raising Jesus.
- **Ask** which of those struggles are common to all parents? Which struggles were unique to the parents of Jesus?

#### OR

#### It’s Not Easy (10 min.)

- **Ask** participants to read “Whose Son Is This?” on pp. 40-41 of *Journeys*.
- **Play** the YouTube video you prepared in “Getting Ready for the Session.”
- **Invite** participants to describe the struggles Joseph and Mary had raising Jesus.
- **Ask** which of those struggles are common to all parents? Which struggles were unique to the parents of Jesus?

#### CLOSING THE SESSION (5-10 MINUTES)

- **Share** that throughout his life, Jesus had to discern when it was time to reveal his identity and when it was necessary to keep his identity hidden. In his childhood, he never spoke of being the Son of God, but when he reached the age of twelve, he identified God as his Father and began to grow in his knowledge and understanding of his purpose. We too have to know when to speak and when to remain silent.
- **Read** each of the “Case Studies” you prepared in “Getting Ready for the Session” and invite participants to give their opinions in response.
- **Invite** them to share any criteria they used to determine when to speak and when to remain silent.
- **Pray** “Lord, help us to follow Jesus’ example and listen carefully to your voice so that we will know when to speak and when to remain silent. Amen.”

### NOTE

The Wisdom of Jesus

Introducing the Scripture

Mark 4 and 5 describe Jesus’ many acts of power along the shores of the Sea of Galilee. Although each location is not specified, Mark relates that Jesus quiets a storm on the sea, exorcizes demons from a man on the northeast side of the sea, cures a woman of a disease thought to be incurable on the northwest shore of the sea, and raises a man’s daughter from the dead in the same vicinity.

These miracles solidify Jesus’ reputation as a great teacher, healer, and deliverer. His power appears to be unlimited and superior to the powers of evil in every way. His crowds grow, his fame expands, and his ministry impacts every community he enters.

Jesus then decides to go to his hometown of Nazareth, thirty miles southwest of the Sea of Galilee. The reader might anticipate even greater manifestations of power since he is going back to his roots, back to his family and the people who have known him all his life. But Mark says Jesus experienced a completely different reception among the Nazarenes.

Exchanging the Scripture

MARK 6:1. Jesus left the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee and traveled about thirty miles southwest to his hometown of Nazareth. Although Jesus was born in Bethlehem and lived much of his adult life in Capernaum, his childhood home was the very small town of Nazareth. Mark tells his readers that the disciples followed Jesus, which was his way of saying there were living witnesses at the time he wrote his Gospel who could validate the events he described.

MARK 6:2. Jesus’ normal practice was to teach in the synagogues of the cities to which he traveled. He follows that pattern in Nazareth. The people who heard him were astonished at his level of insight and power because he had not studied with any rabbi nor attended the schools the famous rabbis attended. Mark says Jesus received a similar reception in Capernaum at the beginning of his ministry.

In Mark 1:22 the evangelist writes that the people of Capernaum “were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.” Later in the text, Mark reports the people of Capernaum “were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, ‘What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.’ At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee” (Mark 1:27-28).

Rabbis in the first century normally buttressed their teachings by quoting other notable rabbis. Jesus did not follow this method. He simply spoke on his own authority. His listeners, both in Capernaum and Nazareth, were not used to such directness. They questioned...
his credentials, wanted to know where he studied, and investigated his miracles for authenticity. In Matthew 11:19b, Jesus said that “wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.” Many in the crowd wanted to make sure Jesus had deeds to back up his words.

Mark says the people of Nazareth were “astounded” at Jesus’ ability. Amazement, however, is not the same as faith or discipleship. Most people in Jesus’ day were astounded by his many deeds, but that astonishment soon wore off without any transformation of their lives.

**MARK 6:3.** Whereas the people of Capernaum seemed to be impressed by Jesus’ wondrous abilities, the citizens of his hometown reacted negatively. They saw him as a local boy who was pretending to be more than he really was. They knew his trade and his family, and neither provided evidence that Jesus was called to be the Messiah.

Mark quotes the townspeople as asking: “Is not this the carpenter?” Matthew 13:55 says the people asked: “Is not this the carpenter’s son?” Both questions are meant to diminish Jesus. Either he was a common tradesman or the son of one. In either case, Jesus did not qualify as a spiritual leader for Israel.

By calling Jesus the “son of Mary,” the people of Nazareth might have been insulting him. Normally people were referred to by their father’s name. Possibly the people were implying that the identity of his father was in doubt. The report that Mary was pregnant before getting married might have put into doubt the legitimacy of her child. In John 8:19 the Pharisees asked Jesus: “Where is your Father?” Jesus answered, “You know neither me nor my Father. If you knew me, you would know my Father also.” Later in John 8:41, the Pharisees said they were not illegitimate children. Both references suggest Jesus’ parentage was scandalous. That same point might be behind the reference to Jesus as “son of Mary.”

The term “took offense at him” refers to mistrusting Jesus’ claims, being insulted by his call to repentance, and judging him negatively for presuming to be a spokesperson for God when they all knew he was just a hometown boy. Matthew writes that John the Baptist struggled with some of these thoughts when he was imprisoned by Herod (Matthew 11:1-5). In response to John’s doubts, Jesus said, “Blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me” (Matthew 11:6). Jesus loved even those who took offense at him, but he would not exercise his power in the face of such unbelief.

**MARK 6:4.** Jesus quoted a common saying to rebuke the people of his hometown. He said that prophets are honored everywhere but in their own hometown and among their own family. The Gospel of Luke says Jesus was dishonored by the people of his hometown. Luke 4:28-30 says that while preaching in Nazareth, Jesus claimed that on occasion God blessed foreigners instead of Jewish citizens because the faith of the foreigners exceeded that of the local Jewish community. Not only did the crowd dishonor Jesus for his message, they took Jesus to a precipice where they intended to cast him to his death. Jesus escaped the violence by the protection of God.

**MARK 6:5.** The unbelief of Jesus’ friends and family prevented him from doing the kinds of powerful deeds he had been able to perform in northern Galilee. Yet, Mark documents, even in the face of doubt and hostility, Jesus was still able to heal.

**MARK 6:6.** The level of unbelief of Jesus’ family and hometown folks amazed him. Although Jesus is said to have been amazed at people’s belief in other passages, this is the only time he was quoted as being “amazed” at someone’s lack of faith.

**Applying the Scripture**

Christians sometimes have a hard time going home. They might avoid home because their pride prevents them from revealing their problems to those who live there. Or they might not want to impose their problems on those who live at home. Some dread going home because of the conflict they expect to encounter once there. Others stay away from home because their home is filled with miserable people who impose their misery on others. Even those who love to go home have to prepare themselves to be seen differently by their family and hometown friends than they are seen in their normal environments.

Adults might be treated as children by their parents when they return home. Older siblings might boss them around or younger siblings might idolize them. Old
rivalries might resume. Former teachers, coaches, neighbors and pastors might relate to them as if they had not matured or grown from the days when they lived back home.

Jesus’ experience in Nazareth can encourage Christian adults to understand such treatment even if they wish the treatment was different. If Jesus struggled with the way his hometown responded to him, Christian adults should expect no less when they venture home. Human nature and family systems make it difficult for returning adults to be seen as they truly are.

Christians need to investigate men and women who claim to speak for God. The questions asked by the people in Nazareth are good questions. If someone says they know what God wants others to do, Christians should inquire as to where they received the message and whether or not their deeds indicate they can be trusted. Blind faith in charismatic people has caused disciples great harm and embarrassment. Jesus’ life and ministry could stand up to scrutiny, not all others can.

Jesus’ sermon astounded and offended the people of his hometown. When preachers and speakers are from God, they sometimes offend Christians today. “Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account” (Hebrews 4:12-13). These words acknowledge the word of God convicts and reveals the sin in the lives of all people. When men and women speak the truth from God in love, they sometimes make their listeners uneasy and even angry to have to face their sins.

Christian adults need to be ready to hear and heed prophetic words based on the Scripture even when those words challenge their way of life. In addition, believers should be ready to defend any speaker relating the true word of God from the angry responses of his or her listeners.

Followers of Christ often have a hard time hearing the word of God from people within their own community. Like the people of Nazareth while listening to Jesus, congregations today can be tempted to reject the words of a local man or woman because they are so familiar with the person. The old gibe that an expert is “anyone from out of town with a briefcase” is sometimes proven true in the church. If a person comes from far away and preaches, the church might hang on every word. If a teenager in the church calls for a new ministry in the fellowship, the church might ignore the voice.

God is constantly at work in the lives of believers. Although some local men and women might have demonstrated immaturity, inconsistency and a lack of discernment in the past, God might have transformed them into reliable spokespersons for the Lord by now. When congregations dismiss people’s ideas because they are so familiar with their former behavior, the church misses out on powerful guidance from God.

Session Plans
These lesson plans are given as suggestions. The words AND, OR, or AND/OR between activities indicate alternative activities. Choose activities best suited for your particular group and time schedule. Feel free to adapt the suggestions to meet the needs and interests of your group.

GETTING READY FOR THE SESSION
- Read Mark 6:1-6 and session 7 in Journeys and this leader’s guide.
- Gather pencils, sheets of paper, a marker board, chalkboard or newsprint, and erasable markers, chalk, or felt-tipped markers for each participant.
- Gather one Bible for every four participants.
- Write the following fill-in-the-blank statement on newsprint or chalkboard and display prominently in the classroom: “____ is where, when ____ have to go there, ____ have to take you in.”
- Prepare a three-minute story about either a negative or positive experience you had when going to your home of origin.
- Write “amazement” and “discipleship” on separate three-by-five cards. Make enough copies so each group of four participants has their own set of both cards.
- Write each of the following references on separate strips of paper:
  2. John 8:1-11
  4. Mark 11:15-18
- Create a “Who’s Offended” sheet of paper with the following questions:
  1. What was said that offended?
  2. Who was offended?
  3. What was the response of the offended?
  4. Were they justified in being offended?
5. Was Jesus justified in offending them?
6. Would the same words offend people today?

- If you decide to do the exercise “Not That Person,” write the following role-play assignments on separate strips of paper:
  1. “Teenager”
  2. “Elder”
  3. “Person in Recovery”
  4. “Immigrant”
  5. “Response to Teenager”
  6. “Response to Elder”
  7. “Response to Person in Recovery”
  8. “Response to Immigrant.”

BEGINNING THE SESSION
(10 MINUTES)

- Ask participants to read the section “Didn’t See It Coming” on p. 42 in Journeys.
- Ask the large group the “Questions for Reflection” at the end of this section.
- Share that sometimes the word of the Lord offends and sometimes it soothes. Jesus was a master of preaching both kinds of messages.
- Pray “Lord help us to listen carefully to the messages you send us today, whether they comfort us or offend us. Amen.”

DEVELOPING THE SESSION
(35-40 MINUTES)

Have to Go Home (10 min.)

- Read Mark 6:1 to the large group.
- Share the story of going home that you prepared in “Getting Ready for the Session.”
- Ask participants to read “Going Home Again” on p. 43 of Journeys and look for the powerful miracles Jesus performed along the shores of the Sea of Galilee.
- Invite participants to share their discoveries and write them on a marker board.
- Ask “What do you wish the folks back home knew about who you are today?”
- Point to the fill-in-the-blank statement you prepared in “Getting Ready for the Session.” Read the quote from the Robert Frost poem found in Journeys on p. 43.
- Lead participants to fill in the blanks as if Jesus were making the statement. “Nazareth is where, when Jesus had to go home, his family and hometown folks had to take him in.”

- Invite participants to fill in the blanks for their own story of going home.
- Invite participants to tell brief stories of going home and whether the trips were positive or negative experiences.
- Share that sometimes we find great joy in going home, and sometimes we run into difficulty. Jesus had a hard time going home because the people there did not receive him with faith or honor.

AND

Wow! (10 min.)

- Ask participants to get in groups of four.
- Ask each group to read Mark 6:2 and the section “Very Impressive” on pp. 43-44 of Journeys and discuss the “Questions for Reflection” at the end of the section.
- Distribute the “Amazement” and “Discipleship” cards you prepared in “Getting Ready for the Session” to each group.
- Read each of the following Case Studies to the large group. After each reading, invite the groups to decide whether the response described is amazement or discipleship and hold up the corresponding card.
  
  **Case Study 1.** First Believers Baptist Church held a retreat for young married couples in a beautiful resort. The couples could swim, hike, or visit the spa. Each night the couples gathered to watch a video on making Christian marriages better. When the couples returned home, they went on and on about the fantastic food, beautiful scenery, and wonderful rooms they had.
  
  **Case Study 2.** Big City Baptist Church just sponsored a weekend on “Growing in Discipleship.” A nationally known speaker on discipleship was the featured speaker. The woman was clever, insightful, and very funny. When the weekend was over, some participants repeated all the speaker’s jokes for those who could not attend. Others asked the pastor if they could form an ongoing group to implement the speaker’s teachings.
  
  **Case Study 3.** Hometown Baptist Church recently invited one of their former members to deliver the Sunday sermon. The preacher grew up in the church, was called into the ministry, finished seminary, and started a church in the inner city of Chicago. After the service, most of the long-time members left commenting on how stunned they were at how much the young man had grown since leaving home. Others made a commitment to raise money for a mission
trip to lead Vacation Bible School in the preacher’s community.

- **Share** that amazement leads to momentary interest that often quickly diminishes. Discipleship requires reflection, examination over time, and obedience.

**I’m Offended (10 min.)**

- **Read** Mark 6:3 aloud to the large group.
- **Give** a brief lecture on the material in “Hometown Boy” on pp. 45-46 of *Journeys* and on the corresponding material in “Examining the Scriptures” in this leader’s guide.
- **Invite** a volunteer to read Hebrews 4:12-13 to the large group.
- **Ask** participants to get in groups of four.
- **Give** each group a Bible.
- **Give** each group one of the Scripture references you prepared in “Getting Ready for the Session.”
- **Also give** each group one of the “Who’s Offended?” sheets you prepared in “Getting Ready for the Session.”
- **Ask** each group to read their assigned passage and answer the questions on the sheet.
- **Invite** each group to share their answers with the larger group.
- **Share this nugget:** “Although it is never comfortable to be faced with truth that offends, sometimes it is necessary for our own spiritual growth.”

**Who Is This? (10 min.)**

- **Invite** a volunteer to read Mark 6:6.
- **Ask** participants to read section “No Respect” on p. 47 of *Journeys*.
- **Ask** the following questions to the large group:
  - “What might be the response of many in the church to a teenager who suggests a brand-new ministry for the church to do?”
  - “What might be the response of many in the church to a senior citizen who called for a new ministry?”
  - “What might be the response of many in the church to a person in recovery who called for a new ministry?”
  - “What might be the response of many in the church to an immigrant who called for a new ministry?”
  - “What did the people of Nazareth miss out on by rejecting Jesus as a messenger from God?”
  - “If the church rejected any of the people just described, what would the church miss?”
- **Share** that we should help one another pay attention to every voice in the congregation, whether or not we are familiar with them or are hearing them for the first time.

**Not That Person (10 min.)**

- **Invite** a volunteer to read Mark 6:6.
- **Ask** participants to read section “No Respect” on p. 47 of *Journeys*.
- **Ask** for eight volunteers to do a short role play.
- **Give** each volunteer one of the roles assignments you prepared in “Getting Ready for the Session.”
- **Share** that in “No Respect” four scenarios are presented in which the church might have trouble hearing the voice of God from one of its own members. Have them look through the section and find the scenario that corresponds to their assignment. Have them take a few moments to imagine how their role might speak to the church. After a few moments, begin with the “teenager” and the “response to the teenager.” Have them play their assigned role, and if they get stuck, have the rest of the group give them ideas of what to say. Then they will continue with the other scenarios.
- **Start** the role play.
- **Ask:**
  - “What did the people of Nazareth miss out on by rejecting Jesus as a messenger from God?”
  - “If the church ignored any of the people represented in the role play, what would the church miss?”
- **Suggest** that we should help one another pay attention to every voice in the congregation, whether or not we are familiar with them or are hearing them for the first time.

**CLOSING THE SESSION (5 MINUTES)**

- **Request** that participants reflect silently on messages from God that they might have rejected because they were offensive or because they came from someone so familiar.
- **Pray** “Lord speak to us through our family, our neighbor, and the stranger. Help us to love your Word, whether it comforts us or offends us. Amen.”
Wisdom: The Way, Truth, and Life

**SESSION OBJECTIVES:**
- to give testimonies of the comfort found in Jesus’ promises for life after death;
- to formulate a viewpoint concerning the ability of non-Christians to find their way to God;
- to explain how Christians can share their faith in a religiously diverse world; and
- to give examples of the right and wrong way to interpret Jesus’ phrase “in my name.”

**SCRIPTURE:** John 14:1-14

**KEY VERSE:** The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” —John 14:6

In **John 13**, Jesus begins what is often called his farewell discourse. He starts with lessons on love and humility demonstrated by his willingness to wash the feet of the disciples. Then Jesus speaks of his upcoming betrayal and imminent departure from the disciples. Jesus says, “I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, ‘Where I am going you cannot come’” (John 13:33).

Peter responds to these words with protest. Peter said to him, “Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you.” Jesus answered, “Will you lay down your life for me? Very truly, I tell you, before the cock crows, you will have denied me three times” (John 13:37-38).

When Jesus spoke of leaving the disciples behind on a journey to an undisclosed destination and of betrayal by his closest followers, his words unnerved the disciples. Many questions must have been on their minds: “Where was Jesus going?” “What would happen to them in his absence?” “Would they ever see him again?”

In **John 14**, Jesus addresses the concerns he knew were on the disciples’ minds. These same concerns are on the minds of modern-day disciples as well.

**Examining the Scripture**

**JOHN 14:1-3.** Jesus did not want his words to disturb the disciples. To comfort them, he assures them that they have the power to fend off fear and anxiety about his departure by anchoring their faith in his reliable promises. Jesus claims intimacy with God and encourages the disciples to trust his words just as they trust God’s assurances.

Ray Vander Laan, a Christian Reformed minister and frequent lecturer on ancient Israel, writes that when a man became engaged to a woman in first-century Judea, he could not marry her until he had built on enough rooms to his parents’ home to house his new bride. Only when his father agreed that he had constructed sufficient space to raise a family could a wedding take place. After the wedding, the groom would bring his new bride back to the home he had prepared for her.

Jesus might have been using that common practice as a backdrop to his teaching on what would happen when he left his followers on earth. Jesus promises that after a time away in which he will prepare their eternal home, he will return to take them to God. He vows that he would never lie to them or give them false hope. He will be true to his word.

Jesus quieted the anxiety in the hearts of the disciples by promising to return for them and take them to live with him...
eternally (v. 3). He would not leave them as orphans in this world.

**JOHN 14:4-7.** Whether Jesus thought the disciples knew where he was going or whether he was testing their knowledge is not clear. His statement that they knew where he was going is met with objections from Thomas (v. 5). As always, Thomas is exceptionally honest about what he believes and does not believe. He speaks on behalf of all the disciples to say that they don’t know where Jesus is going, much less how to get there.

Jesus answers Thomas’ uncertainty with a clear claim. He says that he is the way, the truth, and the life (v. 6). The disciples are to find their way to God through Jesus. In fact, the Lord adds that no one can get to the Father except through faith in him.

Jesus professes to be the Incarnation and revelation of God (v. 7). If the disciples know him, they know God. God and Jesus are the same revelation. By knowing Jesus, the disciples come to know God. That is the way.

**JOHN 14:8-11.** Philip thinks Jesus is a teacher about God, not the Incarnation of God on earth. He believes Jesus can show them God, either through wisdom or action, but not that God and Jesus are one.

In what sounds like exasperation, Jesus questions why Philip has not yet understood that Jesus and God were one. “How can you say” (v. 9) expresses incredulity that Philip has not yet reached a level of faith and knowledge that enables him to see Jesus as the Father’s Incarnation.

Jesus had taught his disciples that he and God were one (v. 10). Since he knew he had given them this information, the fact that Philip did not yet understand revealed a lack of faith on Philip’s part. All of Jesus’ words and works were the words and works of God.

Jesus prefers that Philip and the other disciples trust his words enough to believe what he says (v. 11). But if they can’t or won’t, then Jesus tells them to examine his works. Once again Jesus echoes his words in Matthew 11:19, “Wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.” His words here are also similar to what he says to Thomas in John 20:29, after his resurrection: “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

**JOHN 14:12-14.** Jesus promises that his followers will do even greater works of ministry than he had done. Jesus meant that since his time was limited on earth, his followers, over time, would accomplish more than he had been able to achieve in his short ministry. This promise does not mean that individual Christians will do greater things than Jesus did.

The phrase “in my name” (vv. 13 and 14) has been poorly interpreted by some. Christians are sometimes led to believe that if they add the phrase “in Jesus’ name” to any prayer, they will get what they want from God. This misinterpretation causes Christians grief when they include the phrase but do not get the outcome from God they seek.

“In my name” is not meant to serve as a magical incantation that forces God to answer the petitions of the faithful. The phrase means “according to my will” or “as my representative.” When Christians pray “in Jesus’ name,” they are saying “according to your will” or “your will be done.” When Christians pray for help in order to represent Jesus well in the world or to accomplish some aspect of God’s will, they can be assured the Lord will send that help.

**Applying the Scripture**

Most Christian adults have natural fears about death. Even though they believe Christ has provided salvation and eternal life to all who believe in him, they can still be uneasy about the prospect of death.

Movies and television shows have added to their fears by depicting death as filled with terror and uncertainty. Jesus’ promises assure believers that he has prepared an eternal home for them with God and will be there when they die to escort them into God’s presence.

The American spiritual, “Jesus Walked This Lonesome Valley,” is unhelpful when applied to death. Christians do not have to walk the lonesome
valley of death alone. Christ will meet believers when they die and take them into the presence of a loving God.

Because of the religious diversity present in our culture, adult Christians struggle with the exclusive claims of our faith. When Jesus claimed to be “the way, and the truth, and the life,” he did not leave much room for people of other faiths to enter into God’s presence. Christians often find this difficult to reconcile with people of other faiths who demonstrate devotion, love, and trust in God but do not claim Jesus as their Savior.

Adult disciples should reflect on the claims of Jesus in light of the claims of many other religions. Is it possible that people of genuine faith can encounter Christ as the Word of God under other names? Does God recognize the faith of devout Jews, Muslims, and other monotheistic religions, or does God reject those who do not trust Jesus as the way, the truth, and the life? Are people of other faiths in need of the Christian gospel? Christians often find this difficult to reconcile with people of other faiths who demonstrate devotion, love, and trust in God but do not claim Jesus as their Savior.

When Jesus claimed to be “the way, and the truth, and the life,” he did not leave much room for people of other faiths to enter into God’s presence. Christians often find this difficult to reconcile with people of other faiths who demonstrate devotion, love, and trust in God but do not claim Jesus as their Savior.

When “in my name” is interpreted as meaning “as my representative” or “according to my will,” then a slightly different teaching emerges. God promises to grant us help when we are trying to do his will or when we are acting as Christ’s representative in this world. That does not mean that followers of Jesus always get what they want or feel like they need. Even good things are denied the people of God for reasons we do not understand. However, believers can seek God’s help to do Christ’s will and accomplish Christ’s mission and know that God will provide what is needed to be faithful to God’s call.

Session Plans

These lesson plans are given as suggestions. The words AND, OR, or AND/OR between activities indicate alternative activities. Choose activities best suited for your particular group and time schedule. Feel free to adapt the suggestions to meet the needs and interests of your group.

GETTING READY FOR THE SESSION

- Read John 14:1-14 as well as session 8 in Journeys and this leader’s guide.
- Gather pencils, sheets of paper, and felt-tipped markers for each participant.
- Obtain a copy of the lyrics to “Jesus Walked This Lonesome Valley.”
- Write one of the following words or phrases on five separate sheets of paper: “Haughty,” “Grateful,” “Evangelistic,” “The Word,” “Leave It to God.”
- Make enough copies so that every group of four participants can have one word or phrase.
If you choose to do optional activity “What I Hear Is,” recruit four volunteers from the class. One person is to listen as a devout Jew, one as a devout Muslim, one as an ethical atheist, and one as a recently converted Christian.

Write the following testimonies on separate pieces of paper:

Testimony 1: “I accepted Christ as my personal Savior last month. The verse that brought me to repentance and faith was John 14:11: “Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves.” I realized that Jesus was the full revelation of God and I needed nothing else for my salvation. I could then see how silly the people who believe in other faiths are. They don’t know God at all because God is only known in Jesus.”

Testimony 2: “I am so happy that I recently responded to Christ’s love for me with repentance and faith in him. He has entered my life and given me greater peace than I have ever known. Daily he reveals more of the way, truth, life of God to me. I feel a little bad, however, that my new faith requires me to condemn people of all other faiths as being wrong. I have to tell them they’ve made a huge mistake by practicing their religion. This is going to make for some very uncomfortable conversations.”

Testimony 3: “I’ve been a believer in Jesus for a long time. I don’t ever speak of him anymore, however. Several of the people who work in my office and live in my neighborhood follow other faiths. I don’t want to offend them by talking about salvation in Jesus, so I always change the subject when religion comes up or they ask me about my beliefs.”

BEGINNING THE SESSION (5-10 MINUTES)

- Ask participants to read “Oars in the Water” on p. 48 of Journeys.
- Ask the “Questions for Reflection” to the class.
- Share that knowing that Christ will escort us into the presence of God when we die brings us great comfort. However, it might not take away all anxiety about our deaths. Even though Jesus will be there when we die, we still have to say goodbye to loved ones and leave our lives on earth. We still have to enter into the mysterious transition that is largely unknown to us. Some feelings of uneasiness about our deaths are normal, even for committed Christians.
- Pray for God to use this session to give the class greater clarity and peace about finding their way to God now and when they die.

DEVELOPING THE SESSION (35-40 MINUTES)

Peace for the Journey (10 min.)

- Read aloud John 14:1-3.
- Give each participant a piece of paper and pencil.
- Ask participants to read “Adding On” on p. 49 in Journeys.
- Ask them to write down the words and understandings from this section that provide comfort about their own deaths and the deaths of those they love.
- Invite participants to give short testimonies about the comfort they find in these teachings.
- Read the lyrics to “Jesus Walked This Lonesome Valley” that you obtained in “Getting Ready for the Session.”
- Ask how the teachings of Jesus differ from the words of this song.

State and Rate (10 min.)

- Ask participants to gather into groups of four.
- Ask each group to read John 14:4-7.
- Give one of the words you printed on sheets of paper in “Getting Ready for the Session” to each small group.
- Have them look through “Which Way to Where?” on pp. 50-51 in Journeys and find the interpretation of “Jesus is the way, and the truth, and the life” represented by the word each group has been given.
- Give each group a piece of paper and pencil.
- Tell them each group should prepare a summary of their assigned position so they can read it to the larger group.
- Give every participant a pencil and piece of paper.
- Request that as each group summarizes their assigned position on the meaning of “Jesus is the way, and the truth, and the life,” they write down a number to signify how much they agree with that position. One means “not at all,” and five means “I’m in complete agreement.”
- Invite each group to share their summary. After each group shares, ask for participants to show the
number they used to reflect their own agreement or disagreement.

- **Share** with them that, although you may not have provided all the answers to this complex question, you hope they feel a little clearer on their own beliefs.

**OR**

**What I Hear Is (10 min.)**

- **Ask** participants to gather into groups of four.
- **Ask** each group to read John 14:4-7.
- **Give** one of the words you printed on sheets of paper in “Getting Ready for the Session” to each small group.
- **Ask** them to look through “Which Way to Where?” on pp. 50-51 in *Journeys* and find the interpretation of “Jesus is the way, and the truth, and the life” represented by the word their group has been given.
- **Give** each group a piece of paper and pencil.
- **Suggest** each group prepare a summary of their assigned position that they can read to the larger group.
- **Invite** the four volunteers recruited in “Getting Ready for the Session” to sit in chairs in front of the class. **Identify** which volunteer is listening as a devout Jew, which as a devout Muslim, which as an ethical atheist, and which as a recently converted Christian.
- **Invite** each group to read their summaries.
- After each summary is read, **ask** each volunteer to respond to the summary in character. **Ask** how their religious beliefs influence the way they interpret “Jesus is the way, and the truth, and the life?”
- **Share** with them although you may not have provided all the answers to this complex question, hopefully they feel a little clearer on their own beliefs.

**And**

**Needn’t Say That (10 min.)**

- **Invite** a volunteer to read John 14:8-11 to the class.
- **Ask** participants to read “The Truth and the Life” on pp. 52-53 of *Journeys*.
- **Give** the three testimonies you prepared in “Getting Ready for the Session” to three volunteers in the class.
- **Ask** each volunteer to read their assigned testimony.
- **Ask** the larger group to affirm the parts of the testimony that needed to be said and question the parts that did not have to be said in order for the person to witness to their faith in Christ.
- **Share** with them that although we are called to be clear about our faith in Christ, we do not have to criticize other faiths in order to lift up Jesus as our Lord and Savior.

**Closing the Session (5 minutes)**

- **Invite** participants to share one way that Christ has been the way, the truth, and the life for them.
- **Give** a few minutes to allow participants to share any final thoughts.
- **Pray** “We thank you, dear Lord, for the grace you have given to show us that you are truly the way, the truth, and the life. Help us to follow you with love and devotion as we try to live our lives as your representatives in this world. In Jesus’ name, Amen.”

**Note**

Faith and Wisdom

SCRIPTURE: James 1:1-11

KEY VERSE: If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given to you. —James 1:5

SESSION OBJECTIVES:
• to explore the relationship between faith and wisdom;
• to reflect on the testing of faith and the cultivation of wisdom; and
• to examine inherited teachings about the nature of doubt and its relationship to faith and wisdom.

Introducing the Scripture

After the ascension of Jesus, the communities of his followers dispersed to the areas around Palestine. Each community struggled with keeping the tradition of Jesus alive, recalling his teachings in oral tradition, and observing the rituals of Jesus’ disciples. As each community grew and differentiated due to their various locations and contexts, problems inevitably arose. In times of trouble, communities would write to the teachers carrying on the Jesus tradition.

Some of the most well-known letters that Christians have preserved as part of the New Testament canon belong to the apostle Paul and were written in the second half of the first century. Though Paul’s letters were originally written to address specific issues in specific communities, over time much of Paul’s message has been extrapolated from that original context and is now applied to the concerns of all Christ-followers across time and place.

Paul’s pervasiveness in the epistles included in the New Testament resulted in other letters being read in light of Paul’s teachings. The epistle of James is one such example. Over time, church fathers, bishops, and popes have found significance in the letter of James, but it has been hard to extricate its teachings on wisdom, integrity, and works of faith from the shadow of Paul’s letters. For example, James 2:21-24 refers to the patriarch Abraham as an example of faith lived out through deeds. Paul also uses Abraham as an example, but only as an example of faith.

Many readers believe that Paul emphasizes faith above works, while James emphasizes works as a show of faith. This has led to a perceived tension between the letter of James and the writings of Paul. In addition, Biblical scholars Amy-Jill Levine and Warren Carter suggest that the meaning of “faith” and “works” shifted in the early Christian period, contributing to the varying views of the letter of James and Paul’s writings.

The letter of James is often held up as an example of what a life of Christian integrity looks like. The letter provided great comfort to those living in situations of persecution. Calling to mind Jesus’ sermon on the Mount, the beginning of the epistle is an exhortation to hope and patience, promising the rewards of endurance borne in faith. Other parts of the epistle concern the nature of wisdom and juxtapose the relationship of wisdom and justice. James is concerned that Christians live a life of integrity, both personally and communally. Most of this letter prophetically calls believers into a covenantal community that holds to certain moral standards.

In today’s Scripture passage, participants are introduced to the importance of wisdom very early. Though Bible scholars allow some latitude in speculating the exact audience of the epistle, this Scripture beckons to all who are looking for wisdom in challenging times. The passage invites readers to faith and provides encouragement against life-limiting doubt, focusing on community...
support while striving to live out God’s call to love and care for those on the margins of society.\(^2\)

Examining the Scripture

**JAMES 1:1.** Like most epistles, James starts by announcing the reason for writing. As we see in multiple books of the New Testament, the authors declare themselves and their role, and then address their audience. The name James traces its origin to the Hebrew word meaning “supplanter” or “follower.” In the Old Testament, the name is rendered from the Hebrew as “Jacob” and in the New Testament as “James.” In both testaments, the name can be read as a role one might assume—such as “I am a servant,” as well as a title received from God.\(^3\)

It is possible, therefore, that the name James is a symbolic name to show that the writing should be taken seriously because it was written by a devout believer (much like the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts, where Theophilus is literally translated “friend of God”). Traditionally, the author is presumed to be either James the apostle, who died in 44 CE in Rome, according to Acts 11, or James the brother of Jesus, who was killed in 62 CE, according to the Jewish historian Josephus.\(^4\)

Likewise, the audience for the letter is presumably Jewish believers. By addressing “the twelve tribes in the Diaspora,” the author is revealing a Jewish context surrounding the writing, calling upon the twelve tribes of Israel that are now dispersed all over the Middle East. However, the Diaspora could also be symbolic, addressing Christ-followers sojourning away from their original homes. The questions of authorship and audience matter for biblical scholars hoping to date the writing, which helps modern readers understand the book’s location within the development of early Christianity and provides a context for some of the theological statements within the text.

**JAMES 1:2-8.** In traditional sermonic style, the author begins by addressing the “brothers and sisters” in a spirit of encouragement. “Whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance” (James 1:2-3). Recalling Psalm 11:5, the author writes from a context of understanding God as testing the righteous for their own edification. This type of encouragement is typical of the Psalms, most of which were written in exilic and post-exilic communities after the trauma of being deported from their homeland and questioning their status as chosen children of God. Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5—7) and final teachings to the disciples in John 15 also contain encouragement for the Christ-following community living counterculturally within the context of the Roman Empire.

Modern readers can imagine that, in the decades following Jesus’ death, it was imperative for Christ-followers to continue the faith at a time when many were wondering when Jesus would return again. This section of the epistle of James encourages readers to “ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly,” particularly when they lack wisdom and do not feel “mature and complete” when their endurance for the present time wavers. Endurance is not resigning oneself to one’s status but rather actively waiting while refusing to accept unjust social relations as normative.\(^4\)

The model of God as gift-giver calls forth the image of God as the Creator, bestowing life and blessing upon the Creation. There is no partiality in God, according to the letter of James, but believers are to “ask in faith, never doubting,” as a sign of trusting in God’s justice and righteousness.

**James 1:6** describes the doubter as “one who . . . is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind.” Whereas believers who trust in God in times of hardship are firmly rooted, James’s image of an ocean wave symbolizes the opposite. The wave has no purpose but is “unstable” and wavers from side to side, not progressing and not possessing any firm constitution.

Thus, James says, “the doubter, being double-minded and unstable in every way, must not expect to receive anything from the Lord.” Doubt is portrayed here as a lack of trust, as doubters do not expect God to show up for them or come through for them. Being double-minded is an illustration of the lack of wholeness and completeness, as the doubter wavers between trust and
unbelief, James exhorts the audience to be of good faith and have integrity within themselves and their community, knowing their purpose and trusting in God to deliver them from whatever trials are at hand.

**JAMES 1:9-11.** Socio-economic illustrations appear often in James, leading some biblical scholars and theologians to consider James an important text for liberation theology. This theology is based on the idea that God is on the side of the oppressed, caring for all but particularly for those who have been exploited. In this part of chapter 1, James uplifts the poor so the “rich [are] brought low, because the rich will disappear like a flower in the field.” This recalls Mary’s Magnificat in Luke 1 or the Beatitudes in Luke 6 with their fiery concern for the reversal of the social order, a characteristic of God’s judgment and coming heavenly kingdom.

The environmental image of the sun scorching flowers further calls readers to question the extent to which some of the rich exploit the world around them. James is concerned with the practical aspects of how the covenantal law of caring for the poor is to be fulfilled in the time after Jesus’ ascension, as the early church is differentiating itself from its origins.

### Applying the Scripture

Today’s session will encourage participants to consider the sources of wisdom. In general, Western society considers age and educational achievement to be marks of wisdom, while experiential knowledge may not be. However, there are some movements throughout the Western world that do tend to elevate experiential and embodied knowledge to the level of intellectual wisdom. Class issues may also be raised in your session, as people may have preconceived notions about the intellectual capabilities of people of differing economic statuses. As you lead the discussion, keep in mind these subconscious biases, listening for where participants pass unfair judgment on what types of knowledge and wisdom are worth discussing.

Be aware, too, of different levels of academic achievement of participants in your class. This will inform the cohesion of your group, and your awareness will be important in preventing harm from being done. (For example, if someone has not graduated from high school, he or she may be hurt if others regard a college degree as a mark of wisdom.) It may be helpful to acknowledge verses 5 and 6 of this section, which show how asking for help or asking for wisdom from God are perfectly acceptable, and even encouraged. Perhaps part of wisdom is knowing when to ask for help and when to try something on your own.

*Faith, wisdom, and doubt* are all common themes touched upon in this lesson. As you prepare for this session, consider whether it may be beneficial to start by having participants give examples of each of these in regard to their faith walk. There are many ways to cultivate wisdom and to be stewards of your own and each other’s faith lives. Encourage participants to think broadly and expansively about the multitude of ways God empowers us to live in the world as people of faith.

There are many ways to be wise as well. Perhaps this is part of the gift of this section of Scripture: the wisdom inherent in this session includes allowing individuals to seek out the ways God is leading them to live out God’s purpose for them.

As you prepare to facilitate this session, be assured that you have the wisdom to lead. Do not be afraid to admit when you don’t know something or to respond to participants’ questions with other questions. You are one of the “brothers and sisters” to whom the author of James was writing, as he encouraged early Christians to be vigilant in developing their faith in our loving and generous God.

### Session Plans

These lesson plans are given as suggestions. The words AND, OR, or AND/OR between activities indicate alternative activities. Choose activities best suited for your particular group and time schedule. Feel free to adapt the suggestions to meet the needs and interests of your group.

#### GETTING READY FOR THE SESSION

- **Pray** for God’s guidance as you prepare for the session.
- **Reflect** on the meaning of *faith* and *wisdom*. Where do you see faith and wisdom active in the text? Where do you experience faith and wisdom in your life? How are they connected?
- **Read James 1:1-11** and the lesson in *Journeys* and in this leader’s guide.
- **Gather** Bibles, paper, pens or pencils, large sheets of newsprint or poster paper, and markers.

#### BEGINNING THE SESSION

**State Your Name** (15 min.)

- **Invite** participants to introduce themselves the way James does but with an extra dose of creativity and
description. Have them follow the pattern of stating their name (James...), their role (a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ....), and addressing their fellow participants (the twelve tribes in the Dispersion...).

- **Tell** them to try to describe the essence of their Christian character in the statements they use. Therefore, their descriptions may not be as simple as the one in the letter of James.
  1. What’s the best description of “Who they are?”
  2. What’s the most descriptive statement of their Christian character and “role?”
  3. And how would they creatively describe their fellow participants?

**OR**

**“What’s Your Faith Temperature” (20 min.)**

- **Invite** the participants to share the “temperature” of their faith, like on a thermometer. The “hotter” people are, the more passionate and fired up they are.
- **Ask:**
  - How hot are you? What raises your temperature? What excites you about your faith?
  - How cool are you? What lowers your temperature? What cools you off or causes distance?
  - For those in the comfortable range, what could move your temperature either up or down?
- **Facilitate** additional responses by naming different things related to church and ministry and have them respond to each according to their “temperature” for that particular topic.
- For example, **create** your own list including things like the following: Contemporary worship, hymns and anthems, feeding the homeless, advocating for the poor, ministry anniversary dinners, marching for just causes, visiting the sick and elderly, etc.
- **Use** their responses to talk about how diverse we all are in our passions as Christians, but how together we make up the body of Christ. **Explain** how God uses our passions to fuel our gifts and talents to the benefit of the church and ministry.

**DEVELOPING THE SESSION**

**“Background and Review” (15 min.)**

- Briefly **describe** the context of the book of James using information from the background provided in the leader’s guide.
- **Ask** a volunteer to read **James 1:1-11** on p. 55 in **Journeys**.
- **Ask** each participant to state one take-away they embraced from the advice in the lesson’s scripture.

**AND**

**“Wisdom and Faith” (20 min.)**

- Have the participants split into groups of four or five. **Give** each group a large sheet of paper and markers.
- **Direct** the groups to select a “scribe” to be the writer. Direct the scribes to draw two large circles, overlapping in a small place (a Venn diagram). Label one circle “Wisdom” and the other circle “Faith.”
- Have the groups take ten minutes to **discuss** the characteristics of Wisdom and record three to five points from their discussion in the “Wisdom” circle. Then do the same with the “Faith” circle.
- After the groups have discussed the two labeled circles, **direct** them to consider how wisdom and faith interact. Have the groups record their thoughts about the overlapping of wisdom and faith in the middle section of the Venn diagram.

**CLOSING THE SESSION**

**(15 MINUTES)**

**“Gathering the Nuggets” (15 min.)**

- **Give** each person a plain sheet of paper and a writing instrument. Direct each participant to split their paper in half by drawing a horizontal line. On the top section, direct each person to write three things they learned or considered during the session. Then direct them to write three questions they have on the bottom section. (5 Min.)
- **Ask** the participants to discuss the learnings and questions about wisdom that they have written on their papers. You may wish to record the learnings of the group on a large sheet of poster paper, keeping a tally of what the group repeated in their takeaways.

**NOTES**

4. Ibid.
**Introducing the Scripture**

Have you ever heard the phrase “speak truth in love”? This section of James addresses the concern that believers align both their speech and their behavior with God’s will. The exhortation to “be doers of the word” invites the faithful to engage in self-reflection and also community reflection, considering whether their community is living up to the claims it makes about its faith.

For individuals, this includes being mindful of behavior: listening before speaking, being considerate in their responses, not being hasty to draw conclusions and get angry, but aligning their own wills with God’s will for them to act in righteousness. True religion that is emblematic of God will be selfless and giving, caring for the needy in the community, and abiding by God’s will and shunning the ways of the world.

In our time of technological advancement and global connection, interactions happen so quickly and reactions are shared almost immediately on social media. James 1:19-27 invites readers to slow down, increase their mindfulness, and consider carefully what their speech and behavior say about the God who gives liberty to all. Religious people who are not considerate of others, especially the most needy among them, are fooling themselves and aligning their hearts with the world, not with God. This text cautions against reactionary behavior, being hasty to judge and to speak.

It is possible that the letter of James was written to people who had taken Paul’s idea of “faith alone” so literally that they were neglecting to practice the proper behavior for believers who want to honor God and follow the teachings of Christ. The “implanted word,” that is, the righteousness of God, empowers each of God’s followers to act with justice and kindness towards others.

As James 1:27 says: “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.” James was very concerned that believers care for “the least of these,” thereby representing God’s will on Earth, as well as continue to have faith in Christ for eternity.

**Examining the Scripture**

**JAMES 1:19-21.** The author of this epistle addresses the hearer as “my beloved,” a familiar and friendly greeting. The use of this greeting has been understood to show that the author was writing to a community or group with which they were familiar. This greeting, like “brothers and sisters,” was often used among the followers of Jesus Christ. This greeting could also signify that James considers the audience the beloved ones of God; this would mean it is not as much a letter written as an apologetic epistle to convince people to convert to Christianity, but rather to encourage and empower people who were already Christ-confessors to adapt their lifestyles and behaviors to ways representative of God.

This section of the text reveals a Greek understanding of God and the

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**The exhortation to “be doers of the word” invites the faithful to engage in self-reflection.**

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universe (cosmology) and a Jewish view of the Law. Classic Greek Platonic cosmology views the universe as being comprised of two parts: the divine heavenly part where God dwells, and the mundane plane of worldly human existence. God’s word and God’s righteousness are understood to be gifts.

JAMES 1:22-27. The exhortation to be “doers of the word” reveals a Jewish understanding of the law. “Word” is law in rabbinic Judaism, such that one should experience the reflection of God (the Source) in the law. The law should be emblematic of the One who is the Giver of the law. Jewish law is highly ethical and requires not only verbal confession of belief and faith but also practical compliance with the law’s regulations. One must respond to the gift of God’s law by doing, by living ethically and abiding by the law that allows liberty within God’s good creation.

Some scholars note the absence of Jesus Christ being explicitly named in this section. However, it is possible that for the letter of James to be circulated within Hellenistic communities in an era when Christianity was outlawed by the Roman Empire, the words “logos” (“Word”) and the seed metaphors in this section may surreptitiously equate the “word” with Christ, as in John 1:1.

Protestant Reformer Martin Luther famously disliked the letter of James, but he actually approved of James 1:19-27. The law of liberty mentioned supported Luther's opinion that “a Christian is a free lord, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant, subject to all.” Possessions are not to be hoarded but shared as the Christian serves other people. The “perfect law of liberty” is a rule for a life of salvation, that is, acting in love for one's neighbor every day. Instead of being double-minded, thinking that one can love the world and also love and serve God, the important ethic to live by is to make a choice to live for God right now. Salvation in James is not rooted in a long-awaited, someday-in-the-future event; it is a choice that Christians make every day to align their own thoughts, will, and actions with God's.

Applying the Scripture

The author of James knew that words create worlds, whether we like it or not. From the moment we speak, our words take on their own life, sometimes one far different from what we had intended. This section of James invites us to consider the truth that actions often speak louder than words. Our actions show the world what kind of people we are, how we understand what it means to live in community, and what we are willing to do for another person.

How we act in our personal and professional relationships adds layers of meaning to how we speak, either reinforcing or undercutting our willingness to show God’s love for others. What does our speech reveal about our inner lives of faith? What do our actions convey about the God we claim to love and live for?

The author of James was not concerned with explicating a detailed philosophical system or writing another gospel. Instead,

"James was a keen observer of human nature, and he paid close attention to the details of everyday living. He noticed the generous acts, the small gifts, the gestures and the words we use. He knew that such small acts are the nuts and bolts of everyday life, holding together the scaffold on which we build community and the social order."²

These small, seemingly mundane, observations about life in community have as much power to reveal our commitment to God as do the official statements we make "on the record." This doesn’t mean that we have to suppress our anger and be agreeable to everything all the time—that would be tiring and not entirely honest! What we must do is hold ourselves accountable.

Individually, we must reflect on what our outer lives are representing about our inner lives; communally, we must check in with each other about the virtues and vices that so often rule our speech and actions. We show that we love the God of righteousness by aligning our words, actions and wills with God’s will for us to practice neighborly love.

Session Plans

These lesson plans are given as suggestions. The words AND, OR, or AND/OR
between activities indicate alternative activities. Choose activities best suited for your particular group and time schedule. Feel free to adapt the suggestions to meet the needs and interests of your group.

GETTING READY FOR THE SESSION

- Pray for God’s guidance as you prepare for the session.
- Reflect on motivation. What motivates you to take action? Do you need to have a personal stake in something to get involved? What motivates people to get involved in the well-being of strangers?
- Read James 1:19-27 and Session 10 in Journeys and this leader’s guide.
- Gather Bibles, paper, pens or pencils, large sheets of newsprint, large poster paper, and markers.

BEGINNING THE SESSION

(15 MINUTES)

- Say: “The letter of James describes how the faithful should hear and do the word of God. Often, our words can take on lives of their own, intended or not intended.”
- Invite participants to list some effects that our words can have, using verbs such as enlighten, encourage, dismiss, put down, empower, invite, and so on.
- Once participants have compiled a list of words, invite them to gather in groups of two or three. Have each group choose two or three words to discuss.
- Instruct the groups to construct sentences that illustrate the words they have chosen. For example, a sentence that shows how words empower people would be: “You have the power to accomplish your dreams.”

DEVELOPING THE SESSION

(35-45 MINUTES)

Storytelling (25 min.)

- Invite participants to gather in pairs. Assign one person to be person A and the other to be person B. Instruct person A to tell a story about a time when he or she experienced anger. While person A speaks, person B should listen attentively. Give person A three minutes to speak. Then, instruct person B to speak reflectively back to person A about what he or she heard. The reflection should not pass judgment on anything person A said but should reflect the story they received so person A feels heard. After person B has had three minutes to reflect the story back to person A, switch partners and repeat this exercise.

- After person B has the opportunity to share, allow the groups five minutes to discuss the following questions:
  - What made you feel heard?
  - What could have helped you feel better heard?
  - How did sharing and listening create empathy between the speaker and the listener?

OR

People with Integrity (20 min.)

- Instruct participants to spend ten minutes writing or talking about someone they think has integrity. For participants who are internal processors and/or need to write quietly, allow them to do so. For participants who are verbal processors, invite them to pair up and chat with each other. After ten minutes, bring the class back together.
- Discussion Questions:
  - Where does righteousness come from? How do you know?
  - How does it feel in your body, in your mind, in your spirit, when you do something righteously?
  - Is an action righteous if it is in your self-interest? Why or why not?

AND

Word World Web (15 min.)

- Say: “One observation present in the letter of James is that words create worlds. Once something is said, it cannot be taken back. It is out in the world for others to receive in whatever way they choose. Sometimes the intention of our words and the impact of our words on others are different; the two do not align and do harm people. To better understand how words create worlds, we will explore the worlds that are created with the words from our Scripture passage today.”
- Invite participants to gather in groups of three to five people. Have one person in each group be a scribe. Distribute a poster paper to each group. Have the scribes write one word from the Scripture passage in the middle of the page. Then instruct the groups to take five minutes to draw a “word web” centering on the main word. These words should come up through free association. For example, “Bible” might suggest the words “book,” “Word of God,” “sacred,” “text,” “Gideons,” “NIV,” “KJV,” and so on.)
- Discussion Questions:
  - Were you surprised by the “world” created by the words? Why or why not?
Are the same “worlds” always conjured up by the same words? How does context inform the intention and impact of our words?

What do you do when the world created by a word you use is not what you intended?

CLOSING THE SESSION
(10 MINUTES)

Meditate on the Scripture
• Read James 1:19-27 aloud.
• Provide everyone with a pen and piece of paper. Tech-savvy participants may choose to text or write to themselves on their smart phones.
• Invite participants to be in quiet meditation with the Scripture passage for two to three minutes. Instruct participants to spend two to three minutes writing down two things they want to remember from this session.
• Invite the participants to pray with you. Before beginning, explain that in the middle of the prayer, you will allow some quiet so that other participants may pray out loud or silently.

Pray: “Holy God, we praise you that you have given us hearts and minds that can turn to you. Give us the courage to be people of integrity and to live your word all through our lives. When we are tempted to say one thing and do another, remind us that we must not deceive ourselves. When we don’t recognize the impact of our words, enlighten us so that we will learn to speak more carefully. When we deny the humanity of “the least of these” around and among us, remind us that true religion calls us to be in solidarity with them. We now speak other prayers for courage and faithfulness in our words and actions . . .

[Leave silence for participants to pray out loud or quietly.] “God of the Word Made Flesh, thank you that you dwell in our hearts. Call us to return to you, our steadfast God, and to remain in the love that your Son, Jesus, showed us. We offer all these prayers up to you. Amen.”

NOTES

Looking Ahead: FALL 2020

The Fall 2020 quarter, “Love for One Another,” will focus on various aspects of how we live out God’s command for us to love one another as God loves us. This quarter begins with a widely known story about Joseph, which deals with love within Jacob’s family. From the Joseph story we proceed with God’s laws requiring care and concern for the poor and needy, loving and embracing of the stranger, and the demands of love for one another in the teachings of Jesus in the Gospels. These sessions elaborate on themes of love for one another in the epistles of Paul and James and the expressions of love in the early formations of the church in Acts.

The Scriptures for this study are:

We welcome back Rev. Mark Hetrick as our solo writer for the fall quarter.
Faith Without Works is Dead

**SCRIPTURE:** James 2:14-26

**KEY VERSE:** So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

—James 1:22

**SESSION OBJECTIVES:**
- to reflect on the relationship of faith and action in the Bible and in one's own life;
- to explore how to discern authenticity from inauthenticity; and
- to prepare to share faith through action.

**Introducing the Scripture**

Faith and works, intention and action, beliefs and deeds: Protestant Reformer Martin Luther famously disliked this epistle, thinking there was too much focus on the actions of faith. In a time where many faith groups were seeking distance from the Catholic Church due to the corruption in the sales of “pardons” for sins, “by faith alone” (*sola fide*) became the mantra for Protestantism. Luther cautioned people against the letter of James because of verse 26, “faith without works is dead,” thinking this text encourages justification through good deeds.

In a way, it makes sense that Luther should be cautious about how religious documents and officials present the requirements for righteousness. Luther’s God was the source of all grace, and Christians needed only to receive God’s abundant grace to be justified. Keeping tabs on each sin and how it ought to be repaid was a distraction from God’s grace. But the history of the principle of *sola fide* has resulted, especially in the Western world, in an increasingly individualistic faith.

The letter of James weaves the integral connection between faith and action. In chapter 1, care for the orphans and widows—neediest in the community—is presented as the hallmark of true religion. In chapter 2, the hypocrisy of people who say they have faith and yet neglect to care for their neighbors is highlighted.

Christianity is not the only religion to encourage ethical action as a result of its faith in God. The letter of James itself illustrates this, as it draws clear connections to ethical actions within the history and sacred stories of Judaism. For Christians today, living in an increasingly globalized world with rising economic disparity, confessing belief in Christ is not the only responsibility of a person of faith. One must also care for the least among them, for works are to faith as the body is to the spirit.

**Examining the Scripture**

The epistle of James is probably not an apologetic letter that intended to convert non-Christians into Christ-followers since it does not directly reference the life and teachings of Jesus’ himself. However, the appeal to the examples of “our ancestor Abraham” and Rahab the prostitute enhances the probability that at least some of the intended audience was seemingly a Jewish community—whether they were Jews seeking to live in peace with newly converted Christians or Christ followers who sought to maintain their relationships within local synagogues.

Martin Luther, known to have been anti-Semitic, disliked the Jewishness of the epistle of James. Though scholars are divided on the extent to which the apostle Paul and the author of James had access to the same source material and oral tradition, Luther thought that the differences between the Pauline letters and the letter of James were irreconcilable. Luther, of course, sided with Paul, whose letters provided a theology in line with Luther’s own *sola fide* priorities, as in Galatians 5:6: “Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the
only thing that counts is faith working through love.”

**JAMES 2:14-18.** When considering how faith can save, the text is not as much concerned with eternal salvation as it is with how the “works of faith” reveal the beliefs and commitments of a person or community. The author of James cautions against hypocrisy with the example of the person who says the right things, offering a verbal blessing to the needy in their community. However, is the good intention really good if it is not matched by follow-through with material resources that can improve someone’s life conditions?

**JAMES 2:19** is an example of first-century sarcasm. At that time in Mesopotamia (where most of the biblical books were written), the unity of God was a standard part of the worldview. So the confession of the demons believing that “God is one” (recalling the Shema in Deuteronomy 6:4-5) is simple belief, not real faith. True faith has ramifications for behaviors and actions.

**JAMES 2:20-24.** As mentioned earlier, the audience of James’ letter is alluded to in this section, as the author refers to “our ancestor Abraham,” suggesting that this writing is addressed to Jews who are potential converts to Christianity and/or to Jewish believers in Christ (members of the earliest Christian communities beginning to differentiate themselves from Jewish faith and practice).

The story of the journey Abraham makes up the mountain to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice to God is legendary, but can be read in a variety of ways. Some find this story disturbing, as one of God’s most righteous servants almost kills his own long-awaited child. Others understand this sacrifice of Isaac to be a foreshadowing of Jesus’ crucifixion, thinking that the story shows here that God wouldn’t ask his servants to do anything God wouldn’t do himself. However, that train of thought isn’t normative in our modern time where child sacrifice is (not shockingly) illegal.

Instead, we can understand how the author of James is using Abraham as an example of true faith that was not passive but present in the actions of Abraham. The active uniting of the individual will with God’s will is how James communicates Abraham’s faith.

**JAMES 2:25-26.** The author of James also uses Rahab as an example of a faithful person. Rahab is one of five women mentioned in Matthew’s version of Jesus’ genealogy (alongside Tamar, Ruth, “Uriah’s wife” Bathsheba, and Mary the mother of Jesus according to Matthew 1). Rahab’s story is found in Joshua 2, where she helps Joshua’s spies hide from the king of Jericho, ultimately making it possible for the Israelites to occupy their Promised Land. The author of James understands Rahab’s deeds to have aligned with God’s will, providing safe passage for people accomplishing God’s plan in the world.

Some among your participants may agree with many biblical scholars in judging Rahab for her activities as a prostitute. However, her line of work provided the perfect cover for hiding Joshua’s spies in her home. Thus, she is presented alongside Abraham as a righteous person because of her faithful actions toward the Israelite spies.

**Applying the Scripture**

How do you spot authentic faith? Some think it is a personal matter, between an individual and God. Others think a community of people has a role in measuring the genuineness of one’s faith. What do you think? What we can know for sure is that God loves everyone and accompanies us throughout our whole lives.

The letter of James invites us to consider what authentic faith means to us and how we live out our authenticity through our behaviors and commitments. Many people have a personal code of ethics that outlines what they will and won’t do, how they will and won’t behave, and what kinds of treatment they will accept. However, any human who lives in the real world knows how challenging it can be to abide by any code of ethics 100 percent of the time.

As you prepare to lead the session, consider the following questions: What is the benefit of having community standards of behavior? How can a community work together to be accountable to each other and hold others accountable? How does a community determine what is authentic and inauthentic?

Discernment is a tool that communities can utilize when striving to understand authenticity and genuine action. Communities in the Quaker tradition form “clearness committees,” groups that help an individual or community discern the way forward in a particular
context. Each person on the committee brings his or her own lived experience and personal wisdom as they all seek a path forward. The committee doesn’t use discernment for their own self-aggrandizement or ego; it is something done in generosity and without hope of any remuneration. In Baptist traditions, we might talk about discerning the movement of the Holy Spirit within us as we open our hearts to God’s call for our lives.

Session Plans
These lesson plans are given as suggestions. The words AND, OR, or AND/OR between activities indicate alternative activities. Choose activities best suited for your particular group and time schedule. Feel free to adapt the suggestions to meet the needs and interests of your group.

GETTING READY FOR THE SESSION
- **Pray** for God’s guidance as you prepare for the session.
- **Reflect** on your faith, the faith of others close to you, and the faith that your congregation encourages. In what ways does your faith have integrity? How do your words and actions and prayers all align? In what areas of your faith do you need to be challenged to expand your understanding of faith and its relationship to deeds? In what ways do you intentionally live your faith on a day-to-day basis?
- **Read** James 2:14-26, Session 11 in Journeys, and this leader’s guide.
- **Gather** Bibles, paper, pens or pencils; a dictionary; a device for playing soft music; computer or phone to read a webpage; large sheets of newsprint or poster paper; markers; and sticky notes.
- **Read** the Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4-9).
- **Read** the story of Abraham and Isaac (Genesis 22:1-19).
- **Read** the story of Rahab (Joshua 2:1-24).

BEGINNING THE SESSION
(15 MINUTES)
**Defining Faith and Works (15 min.)**
- **Gather** supplies: dictionary, large plain poster paper, scissors, glue, crayons, sticky notes, index cards, pens, pencils, and markers.
- Before the session begins, **draw** a vertical line on the poster. On the top of the left side of write “Faith,” and on the top of the right half of the paper write “Works.”
- You may want to **play** some calm music in the background as you do this activity.

DEVELOPING THE SESSION
(40-50 MINUTES)
**Abraham’s Faith (15 min.)**
- **Split** participants into groups of three to five people. **Instruct** them to read Genesis 22:1-19 aloud in their small groups. **Have** students list the main characters and tell how each one put his faith into action in the story.

**Justified by Our Work (20 min.)**
- **Invite** participants to come to the poster and write down how they define these two words. Do this without talking. **Allow** five minutes for this activity.
- **Read** the dictionary definitions of these two words, and have one of the participants write the dictionary definitions on the poster.
- **Discussion Questions:**
  - What was it like defining these words?
  - Were you surprised by how the other participants defined the words? If so, why?
- **Get to Know the Scripture (15 min.)**
  - **Invite** one participant to read the Scripture passage aloud to the group. Afterwards allow thirty seconds or so of silence.
  - **Ask:** What is the gift of this passage to you? **Allow** two or three people to respond.
  - **Invite** a second participant to read the Scripture passage aloud to the group. Afterwards leave thirty seconds or so of silence.
  - **Ask:** What is the challenge of this passage to you? **Allow** two or three people to respond.
  - **Invite** a third participant to read the Scripture passage aloud to the group. Afterwards leave thirty seconds or so of silence.
  - **Ask:** What is this passage inviting you to do today? **Allow** two to three people to respond.
- **Pray:** “Holy God, thank you for the gift of this Scripture. We ask that you challenge us to think more expansively about your Word. Be with us in this time of fellowship and learning, that we might follow where you lead us today. Amen.”
• Have each person write down a task that they know how to do really well (anything from brushing teeth to feeding a pet to fixing a car).
• Put all sticky notes in the middle of the group face down (or collect them in a jar or basket) so that no one can see what the notes say.
• Then, instruct each person pick a sticky note and take two minutes to teach their group how to do what is on the sticky note.
• Then give the groups two minutes to reflect back to their teacher what it is they were just taught.
• Discussion Questions:
  ° What was easy and what was challenging about teaching the task on your sticky note?
  ° Was your teaching simple and straightforward, or complex?
  ° What was it like to teach a group how to do something you don’t know how to do?
  ° What was it like to be taught something that the “teacher” does not know how to do? Could you tell if the knowledge was authentic or inauthentic?

How Well Do We Know Each Other? (25 min.)
• Direct the group to split up into groups of four to five people. Give each person three notecards and a writing implement.
• Have each person write one true fact about themselves on each of the two notecards.
• On the third notecard, instruct each person to write one falsehood about themselves.
• Then instruct each person to read his or her cards out loud to the group.
• Have the groups guess which statements are true and which are false about each person.
• Discussion Questions:
  ° Which statements were easiest to guess, and which were hardest?
  ° What conditions made the guessing easier?
  ° Do individuals feel that their friends have a true read on them? If, not what changes might they consider to be seen as they are.

OR

The Righteous (25 min.)
• Give each participant a blank sheet of paper. Instruct them to draw a simple picture of someone they regard as being a “righteous” person whose faith and works are interconnected. They might also draw what this person does. Or they can write about the person if they prefer.
• Play some soft music while the participants draw or write about their choices.
• After the participants are done, invite them to share about their chosen “cloud of witnesses.”

CLOSING THE SESSION (20 MINUTES)

Next Steps (20 min.)
• Give each person writing implements, and give participants ten minutes to write or draw three next steps for how they plan to (or already do) integrate their faith and actions in the world.
• Invite participants to share their next steps with the whole group (ten minutes total).

OR

Story of an Activist (20 min.)
• Use the link below to learn about German student Sophie Scholl, who was an anti-Nazi activist in the 1940s. Summarize her story for the class.https://www.amightygirl.com/blog/?p=19179
• Refer to these questions:
  ° Does Sophie’s story remind you of any biblical stories? If so, which one(s) and why?
  ° Does Sophie’s activism remind you of any modern-day people? Who and why?
  ° How did Sophie’s faith inform her action, and vice versa? What was the relationship between righteousness and legality in Sophie’s context?
  ° Does the story of Sophie and the White Rose Society remind you of any twenty-first century activism? Why or why not? What can we learn from young adults and their political activism?
• Pray: “Holy God, you have blessed us with this precious life and the possibility of relationship with you. Lead us in our lives that we may go forward each day seeking the way of your justice. Turn our hearts to you so that our faith is strengthened. Empower us to live out our faith in our words, relationships, and actions. Amen.”
Taming the Tongue

SCRIPTURE: James 3:1-12

KEY VERSE: From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so.
—James 3:10

SESSION OBJECTIVES:
• to consider the role of speech in community;
• to explore practical ways to live wisely, including careful speech and integrity;
• to expand our understanding of how we are God’s partners in creation; and
• to discern accountability in words and behaviors in relation to each other and to God.

Introducing the Scripture

Leading this session is not for the faint of heart, with a Scripture passage that begins “not many of you should become teachers”! But do not be discouraged. This passage reminds us of the importance of using our position carefully, particularly when our privilege includes having influence over other people. Teachers, politicians, and community leaders have especially important and precarious positions, as they shape the norms and behaviors of our public life together.

This passage brings together situational context, thoughts, and action. The author’s desire for people in the early Christian community to be people of faithful integrity is illustrated in the quest for continuity of thoughts, speech, and action. During the time period of this letter’s authorship, early Christian communities were searching for ways to make themselves distinct from other communities of faith, of which there were many.

In a pluralistic world, where various sects of religions lived alongside each other, it was very important to watch how members of these communities spoke and whether their actions reflected their good intentions and spoken words. This historical context, while separated by time and space from most of the groups utilizing this study, is not too dissimilar from challenges that we face today.

So how do individuals and groups become wise? If everyone makes mistakes in speech and action, then how are we to correct ourselves and one another? This text calls for accountability in speech, especially when one is tempted to act recklessly. The author invites communities to discern what kind of speech will govern them, especially when double-speak and hypocrisy are running rampant.

Though this section of text systematically condemns loose speech and encourages speaking carefully, particularly for those who are privileged to lead, the author nonetheless uses language very playfully. The illustrations from the common world (forest fires, taming of animals, trees and vines, and saltwater and fresh water) invite us to consider how common it is to lose hold of the ways we speak.

Verse 10 in particular sheds light on a reality with which many Christians today are familiar: “With [the tongue] we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God.” Indeed, many non-Christians report that a top reason why they are disillusioned with the church and with Christians as a whole is the hypocrisy of people who profess to believe one thing and then act the opposite way. The question of hypocrisy is one that you and your group will have to wrestle with during this session.

A challenge of this text is that readers may be tempted to do exactly what the author is warning against: either petulantly dismissing the exhortation to careful speech or denying that the text may apply to them as well. Your job is to lead a mindful exploration of your group’s contexts and encourage every participant to integrate their thoughts, speech, and actions in faithful ways.

Examining the Scripture

JAMES 3:1. Right from the beginning of this chapter, the author is speaking truth. “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you...
know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.” The author was not only addressing teachers and other community leaders who spoke publicly, but also himself. As a writer, the author was saying he also needed to understand that the more publicly someone lives, the more they will be seen and judged for their speech and actions.

The judgment the author writes of is on a human plane, as humans are prone to observing and judging each other. (Divine judgment is a different ballgame entirely, though also impacted by human speech and action.) The familiar phrase, “my brothers and sisters,” was often used in close-knit communities of faith, suggesting that this letter might have been intended for various scattered small groups of Jewish believers.

Today we witness people who live public lives being observed and judged with every post, tweet, and activity. With great visibility comes great responsibility. People in the limelight must understand that their actions may have a ripple effect and will be watched, reacted to, and even emulated.

**JAMES 3:2-5a.** The author’s practicality shows here, as he acknowledges the humanity of his audience. People make mistakes, and no one is exempt from that, not even teachers or others in the public eye. However, there must be something that helps manage the impact of these mistakes, particularly those pertaining to the tongue. Speech is important and powerful, and must be practiced carefully.

The metaphors of a bridled horse and a ship’s rudder show the author’s Hellenistic influences; he probably lived as a Christ-confessing Jew within the oppressive Roman Empire. A bridle is as a small tool that governs the motion of a large horse, just like as a small rudder can control the direction of a ship. Similarly, the tongue, though it is a small part of the body, can have a greater impact than one might know.

**JAMES 3:5b-8.** Here the author continues the imagery as he vividly describes the potential harm the tongue can incite. The tongue has the power of a blazing forest fire that began as a small fire, and it must be tamed. The tongue is a “world of iniquity,” with great impact. Despite the intention of speech, the tongue can inflame everything around it. It is helpful to remember that the author was probably writing to many small communities of faith trying to find their way in a pluralistic world.

The speech of the community could have the power to draw others into the fold, or to give the community a bad reputation, even to the point of being persecuted by the Roman Empire. Thus, the dramatic impact of the situations shared in these realistic illustrations were not to be underestimated.

**JAMES 3:9-12.** The author’s point hits home in this section of the text: “From the same mouth come blessing and cursing.” Although possibly referring to the use of foul language and curse words as well as speaking kindly, the author is also referring to how people treat one another. People speak blessings and praises to God, but they also “curse those who are made in the likeness of God.” In traditional Jewish theology, which the author uses consistently throughout the epistle, all people were created in the *imago Dei*, the “image of God.”

The author goes on to explain that blessing and cursing with the same mouth is unnatural, as a spring does not give off two kinds of water and a grapevine can only grow grapes. The will of faithful believers must be matched with God’s will so that their speech and actions are consistent and that they will be people of integrity. This is a hard task, as shown back in verse 8: “no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison,” but the task is worthy because it has great impact on how individuals, their community, and their God are judged.

**Applying the Scripture**

For some people, speaking carefully is easy. Empathy is a tool that helps people regulate what they say and how they say it. But everyone can and does get upset at times and says something they later regret. As this passage of Scripture says, “all of us make many mistakes.” And we must understand that no matter how good our intentions or how righteous our frustration, our words can come to have their own lives, and their impact can far outweigh our knowing.

As Christians, we affirm that we can do nothing to earn or deserve God’s love. By grace, we are always already loved by our Creator. Even our meanest speech or hypocritical actions will not change that. However, God also calls us to be partners with God’s work in the world, to actually be the hands and feet (and maybe voice) of Christ to the world. With that great responsibility, we must know that each of us represents a part of God’s family and has the power to share God’s love with the world. So we must govern our speech, react with intentionality,
and keep our communities accountable to the image of God we want to portray to the world.

Tongues are small but mighty. And each individual is a small part of God’s family but still has a part to play. We must be cautious with our speech so as not to cut down others or start “fires” by gossiping. We must also be careful that our words match our actions and are rightfully reflecting the amazing and expansive love of our God. Hypocrisy is a danger, and one that continues to distance people from the church today. By uniting our will with God’s will for justice and mercy and hospitality, we can play a part in expanding the kingdom of God here on Earth.

Session Plans
These lesson plans are given as suggestions. The words AND, OR, or AND/OR between activities indicate alternative activities. Choose activities best suited for your particular group and time schedule. Feel free to adapt the suggestions to meet the needs and interests of your group.

GETTING READY FOR THE SESSION
- Read James 3:1-12 and session 12 in this Leader’s Guide and in Journeys.
- Pray that you may receive God’s wisdom as you facilitate this session, and that the speech shared by you and others may be edifying.
- Prepare a snack to share during the session. This is optional and can be determined by the participants of the session. Since James is a text focused on communal wisdom, you may choose to share the responsibility of providing snacks. Always consider food allergies when preparing snacks.
- Gather Bibles; paper; pens or pencils; device for playing soft music; large sheets of newsprint or poster paper; and markers.

BEGINNING THE SESSION
(10-20 MINUTES)

Biblical or Not? (20 min.)
- Tell participants you are going to read them phrases that may or may not be in the Bible. Direct them to raise a hand if they think the phrase is included in the Bible. Share the answers below after the participants have responded to the phrases.
- Read the following phrases and develop some of your own:
  - “Money is the root of all evil.” (NOT BIBLICAL: Timothy 6:10 says “The love of money is the root of all kinds of evil.”)
  - “This too shall pass.” (NOT BIBLICAL: The phrase “it came to pass” occurs multiple times not this phrase.)
  - “For everything there is a season.” (BIBLICAL: Ecclesiastes 3:1)
  - “Mind your own business.” (BIBLICAL: 1 Thessalonians 4:11, NIV)
  - “God helps those who help themselves.” (NOT BIBLICAL: This saying is more likely from Aesop’s fable “Hercules and the Waggoner,” and popularized by Benjamin Franklin and Poor Richard’s Almanac.¹
  - “A house divided against itself cannot stand.” (BIBLICAL: Matthew 12:35)
  - “Cleanliness is next to godliness.” (NOT BIBLICAL: This quote is actually from a sermon by John Wesley.)
  - “God works in mysterious ways.” (NOT BIBLICAL: Instead, Isaiah 55:8-9 tells us that God’s ways are different from ours, which may feel mysterious to us. But this quote is not from the Bible.)
  - “God will not give you more than you can handle.” (NOT BIBLICAL: This was probably said by some well-meaning person trying to help someone in a hard time. This phrase can actually hurt people more than help them. Some might say 1 Corinthians 10:13 expresses this sentiment, but this scripture is in reference to temptations—not the extent to which we will have hardships.
- Transition to the study of James 3:1-12 by asking: Who was surprised by some of the answers in this exercise?
- Say: Some of the sayings commonly attributed to the Bible are not biblical! We Christians must be careful with our speech so that we represent the Bible, and our God, accurately and honestly. It’s okay to use true sayings that are not in the Bible. We just don’t have to pretend that they are Biblical.

OR

Priestly Behavior in Word and Deed (10 min.)
- Invite the group to turn to 1 Peter 2:9-10 in their Bibles or phone apps. Have the group to read it aloud.
- Say: “As Protestants, we proclaim the priesthood of all believers. This means that all people have the responsibility for their own relationship with God,
without the mediation of a priest. And, as Baptists, we believe that our faith community should reflect the priesthood of all believers in how we set up our congregation and make our community’s decisions. That is why ordination is not a requirement for serving Communion (or even baptizing someone for some Baptist churches).

- Discussion Questions:
  - What responsibilities do we have as Christians and as Baptists for living out the priesthood of all believers?
  - How does this theology impact what we do and say in the world?

DEVELOPING THE SESSION
(40-50 MINUTES)

Lectio Divina (20 min.)

- Say: “Lectio divina is a method of reading Scripture by listening deeply. We will read the Scripture passage several times over, pausing in between readings for silence and a question.”
- Ask for one volunteer to read aloud James 3:1-12.
- Allow thirty seconds of silence. Then ask, “What is one word or image that stood out to you?”
- Ask for a second volunteer to read the passage again.
- Allow thirty seconds of silence. Then say, “Name a phrase or sentence that stuck out to you.”
- Ask for a third volunteer to read the passage again.
- Allow thirty seconds of silence. Then ask, “What does this passage tell us about God?”
- If time allows, ask for a fourth volunteer to read the passage one last time.
- Allow thirty seconds of silence. Then ask, “What is this passage calling you to do?”

Speech and Action (20 min.)

- Direct participants’ attention to Maurice Zundel’s excerpt on silence referenced by Dorothy Day (p. 76 in Journeys). Use the discussion questions in small groups of three to four people or in a large group.
- Questions for Reflection:
  - Describe a time when silence was beautiful to you.
  - In what way do you hear Christ most clearly? Through speech, silence, or something else?
  - How can you “yield yourself to the embrace of the Spirit”?
  - What does “action must be born in silence” mean to you? What are these words calling you to do?

AND/OR

Intentionality (30 min.)

- Direct participants to form small groups of three to five people. Have them read aloud from the “Intentional Speech” story on pp. 79-80 in Journeys. Use the discussion questions to guide conversation in small groups or the larger group, as desired.
- Questions for Reflection:
  - When did you speak with intentionality? What were the results? When did you speak without discernment? What were the results?
  - Is there one standard of speech that applies to everyone? Why or why not?
  - What does “speaking truth to power” mean to you? How can that activity be intentional and accomplish the intended goals?

CLOSING THE SESSION

Communal Prayer (5 min.)

- Invite the participants into silent prayer. You may wish to have some soft instrumental music playing in the background. Spend five minutes in silent prayer, offering the following prompts on the minute mark:
  - 1:00 “God, we pray that our will be united with yours.”
  - 2:00 “We pray for those who have harmed us with their words.”
  - 3:00 “We pray for those whom we have harmed with our words.”
  - 4:00 “Be with us as we seek to be agents of your will with our speech.”
  - 5:00 “Thank you for your blessings. Amen.”

NOTES

SESSION 13 • AUGUST 30, 2020

Two Kinds of Wisdom

SCRIPTURE: James 3:13-18; 5:7-12

KEY VERSE: But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.

—James 3:17

SESSION OBJECTIVES:
• to consider the motivations that lead people to take action, especially regarding issues of justice; and
• to respond to God’s call to solidarity with the poor, which puts people in right relationship with their neighbors and with God.

Introducing the Scripture

You are probably familiar with the song, “They’ll Know We Are Christians by Our Love.” This song is a beautifully positive call to Christians to act with love, kindness, mercy, and justice towards the world. Sadly, however, the reputation that Christianity has does not always match up with this song. Many non-Christians describe Christians as hypocritical, judgmental, and insular.

The phrases “if you’re going to talk the talk, you’ve got to walk the walk” and “practice what you preach” would resonate with the author of James if he were alive today. James 3:13-18 and James 5:7-12 focus on how personal behaviors display the theological and ethical convictions of the individual and affect the cohesiveness of the community. Discussions of wisdom in James often seem to apply to the individual person, but interpreting the Scripture in this tradition would be a disservice to the quality of community the author of James is encouraging.

Communal wisdom is developed through honesty, vulnerability, and direct communication about the issues that individuals are passionate about. “Disorder and wickedness” are the consequences of a community where envy, ambition, boasting, and grumbling are the norm. Though Christians and churches are to be known by their love, the institution of the church can be fraught with frustration, indecision, and roadblocks. Surely there have been times in your own ministry within your congregation when decisions are made at a glacial pace and people begin to grumble.

The author of James calls readers to live not by the logic of the world that is built on jealousy, competition, and privilege, but to use discernment about how to lead a peaceful and justice-filled life. The goal of this session is to carefully consider how individual participants, as well as the congregation as a whole, can embrace and reflect the vision of James for patience, accountability, and peace.

Examining the Scripture

JAMES 3:13. In the first verse of the selected Scripture, the author challenges those who are wise and understanding to be examples by how they live. This isn’t a “prove it” statement meant to be antagonistic. Instead, the author is inviting readers to understand how the convictions of their heart should be evident in their actions. Consistency is key to living a life of integrity.

JAMES 3:14-16. It is important to be aware of dualistic thinking, particularly in how contemporary Christians interpret the Bible. “Disorder and wickedness of every kind” are the result of jealousy and selfish ambition, not of wisdom and gentleness. When people give in to sin borne of jealousy and envy, it causes discord among the community. Another duality that is utilized in this passage is the “wisdom from above” and “earthly” wisdom. The “unspiritual” and “devilish” wisdom from the world is “envy” and “selfish ambition,”
sins that are self-focused and place the individual above the community.

Likewise, when someone is “boastful” and “false to the truth,” they are placing their own well-being above the community’s well-being, serving only their own ego and preserving their own image. Thus, the disordered community is full of self-serving people who attend only to their own needs.

**JAMES 3:17-18.** “Wisdom from above” is “pure, peaceable, and gentle.” There is no partiality or hypocrisy, so no individuals are placing their own ego and image above their concern for the community. Wisdom from above is “willing to yield,” which is a way that is “full of mercy,” as individuals practice a give-and-take attitude. As verse 18 says, peacemakers will reap what they sow. Churches today often interpret this concept as applying to individuals’ independent actions.

However, a communal reading of this passage seems to be closer to the author’s intention, as the community must live peaceably with one another as well as with external neighbors. The righteous actions of the community will result in a harvest returned to them.

**JAMES 5:9-11.** In these verses the author refers to the “endurance of Job” as a model for those trying to live righteously. Though Job’s family died and he became sick and all of his lands and possessions were taken away from him, Job did not lose faith in God. Job was angry at God, confused and despairing and depressed, yes, but Job remained aware of God’s presence with him.

Even through the judgments from his friends and their assumption of his grave sin, Job endures. Job did not turn against his friends, though he had every reason to. Instead, he prayed for them, seeking God’s help in the midst of despair. When God finally spoke to Job (Job 38-41), God judged Job’s friends (Job 42:7-9) and blessed Job (Job 42:10-17). Patience in the midst of suffering is not easy, but continuing to trust God is the path to endurance.

**JAMES 5:12.** The author of James exhorts readers to live with integrity, as Job did by continuing to seek God while living through many trials. In addition to patience and active collaboration with God, integrity for individuals and communities includes integrity of speech. “Let your ‘Yes’ be yes and your ‘No’ be no” means that people ought to say what they mean, and keep their word. This is not only to prevent condemnation (from other individuals, the community, or the government) but to attest to the compassionate care of God, such that trust can always be placed in God.

Patience rooted in trust in God’s continual love is what the readers of James should trust in rather than the oaths of individuals. Speech should not be deceptive but honest, encouraging
Applying the Scripture
As you prepare for the session today, consider what leading a Christian life means to you. Does a life of faith in Christ mean speaking boastfully and letting our ego rule because we are a people set apart by God? Or does it mean embracing the humility, patience, and morality of Christ in order to live fully in the world? The letter from James is a challenging call to a life of integrity for both individuals and faith communities.

People of integrity have vast capacities for doing good, justice-seeking work in the world, even for people they don’t know. One of the ways biblical authors write about this is discussing “friendship with the world” vs. “friendship with God.” We can consider Job and many other figures in the Bible to be friends of God because of the way they were united with God’s purpose.

You may have to encourage people to step out in faith in order to participate fully in the session. It is not always comfortable to look at how we as individuals act and what our actions say about our theology. Likewise, it can also be uncomfortable for communities to take an honest look at how well they are acting consistently with their theology and words.

And then, if the results of that inquiry are challenging, what do you do next? What are the opportunities for pushing through discomfort to a place where acknowledging the reality of pain and suffering in the world leads to being challenged to do something about it?

Relationships where there is open and honest communication take work. The author of James reminds us that the life of faith is no different. It takes work to change habits. It takes emotional energy to be self-reflective enough to understand when you might be giving in to hypocrisy. It takes attentive listening to discern the call of God to act for the good of strangers in the midst of an increasingly individualistic world.

Building this relationship between an individual and God, between a community of faith and God, is not something that is easily done. Trust must be built over time, and authentic love for justice must be cultivated. Honest speech is part of this trust-building.

During this session, you as a leader have the opportunity to model honest communication and to foster a space where people can be authentically themselves as they engage with Scripture and with one another. This is a gift, and the author of James offers an invitation to consider how a community can be motivated to act for the good of all people.

GETTING READY FOR THE SESSION

BEGINNING THE SESSION

Opening prayer (5 min.)

- Pray: “Holy God, you call us to love you with all our hearts, all our minds, and all our strength. You also call us to love our neighbor as ourselves. Be with us this day, O God, as we pursue your justice for all creation, knowing that you are on the side of the poor and oppressed. Empower us to treat each other with kindness and respect, speak with intention and care, and be quicker to listen to those who hurt than defend those who do the hurting. Grant us your peace to be your witness in this world. Amen.”

AND

Circle Read (10 min.)

- Instruct participants to form a circle. If there are more than ten, you may choose to divide the group into smaller circles.
- Make sure each participant has a copy of the Scripture for the day in Journeys, a Bible, or phone app.
- Have the group read today’s Scripture together, going around the circle so that each person reads one sentence.
- Encourage the readers to allow some silence between each sentence to reflect on its meaning.
DEVELOPING THE SESSION  
(40–50 MINUTES)

Planting Seeds (25 min.)
- Supplies: bag of potting soil, planting trough (at least 6” deep and 12” long per four people), seeds (mari-gold or cosmos suggested), water, trowel.
- Read James 3:18 and James 5:7-9 aloud as a group.
- Discussion Questions:
  - Define patience. How is it different from waiting? Does having a choice as to whether you wait matter?
  - What other metaphors besides gardening can you think of to illustrate patience? Which metaphors do you prefer and why?
- Gather the participants around the trough or troughs. Invite them to fill the planting trough with soil. Give each participant three or four seeds and instruct them to plant the seeds to the depth and spacing given on the seed packets.
- After the seeds are planted, Pray: “Holy God, bless these seeds and all living, growing things. Give them space, time, and nourishment to flourish. May they be a reminder to us, Lord, to be patient as we wait on you. We praise you that you are with us always. Amen.” OR

Comparison (15 mins.)
- Supplies: large sheets of newsprint, tape, and markers.
- Invite participants to get into pairs. Give each pair a sheet of large newsprint. Instruct participants to draw a line down the middle of the sheet. Direct the partners to read the Scripture for the day together aloud.
- Invite one partner to speak first, naming the values present in the Scripture passage. As the first person speaks, the other should write down the values named on the left side of the newsprint. Do this for two minutes. Then switch, writing the named values on the right side of the newsprint.
- Direct the pairs to look at their lists together, circle the values that are on both lists, and discuss their lists for five minutes.
- Invite each pair to share about the values they named with the large group AND

Worthy of Honor (20 min.)
- Invite two participants to read the biography of Edwin T. Dahlberg (printed on p. 84 of Journeys) aloud to the class.
- Together discuss the questions for reflection included in the Journeys with the biography:
  - In what realms of society was Rev. Dahlberg active? How might have the Baptist principle of separation of church and state informed his activism in multiple arenas?
  - Do you know someone who has been or is active in the areas of peace and justice? Pretend you are nominating them for the Dahlberg award. Who would you nominate and what would you say about them?
  - Consider the quotation from Rev. Dahlberg in the passage above. Where do the needs of the world and your talents meet?

CLOSING THE SESSION  
(15 MINUTES)
- Supplies: candles, matches or lighter. Copies of chosen song.
- Gather the participants into a circle and give each a candle.
- Invite each participant to speak a thought about what they are taking away from this session. Light the candle of the first one who begins to share.
- Have each participant light the next person’s candle as the sharing moves around the circle.
- Sing together “They’ll Know We Are Christians by Our Love” (or another song that is meaningful to your participants).
- Have each person add a sentence to a closing prayer and then together blow out the candles.
Evaluation Form
Judson Bible Journeys for Adults
JOURNEYS LEADER’S GUIDE • SUMMER 2020

At the end of this quarter, please take a few minutes to complete this form and return it to:
Journeys Editor, Judson Press, ABHMS, 1075 First Avenue, King of Prussia, PA 19406

If you wish, you may send your comments by e-mail to info@judsonpress.com, or by using the Feedback Form on

1. The leader’s guide helped me to understand and relate to the text in the following ways:

_______________________________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________________________

2. The leader’s guide could be improved by:

_______________________________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________________________

3. Some participants’ comments/evaluative remarks that would be helpful for you to know include:

_______________________________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________________________

4. Other comments/suggestions:

_______________________________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________________________

5. Please list other resources your church uses for Sunday school:

_______________________________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________________________

Age range of class_________________________ Average attendance ___________________________
Name ___________________________ E-mail ___________________________
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Thanks for sharing your ideas! Your comments may be used to promote Judson Bible Journeys for Adults.
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