

Encounter: *Come As You Are*

Purpose

This five-session resource is designed to help youth, ages 15–18, experience Jesus' acceptance and thereby grow in self-acceptance through God's grace. The 60 minute sessions can be used in the course of a week, for example for a week of Vacation Bible School, as a regularly weekly study course, or for a weekend retreat.

General Outline

Each 60 minute session includes the following components and sections:

- **Theme**
- **Scripture list** with focus (⇒) and supplemental (») texts
- **Educational Goals or Learning Objectives** for the session
- **Commentary** that summarizes or gives background on the Scripture texts
- **Devotional Preparation** for leaders
- **Session Preparation**
- **Session Outline** with step by step instructions

Session Outline

Each session is divided into the following parts:

- I. **Welcome** (*15 minutes*)
- II. **Bible Study** (*20 minutes*)
- III. **Reflection and/or Discussion Time** (*15 minutes*)
- IV. **Closing** (*10 minutes*)

Supplemental Pieces

The following supplemental pieces are provided in the appendix:

- A Group Guidelines Covenant helps lay ground rules for interaction.
- The Group Dynamics Supplement provides insight on the life of a small group.
- Additional Activities help in adapting this study for other venues.

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Materials List

- Bibles
- pens or pencils
- white board and markers or chalkboard and chalk
- markers
- crayons
- poster board
- masking tape
- note cards
- blank paper
- newsprint
- varied colors of construction paper strips (Session 5)
- scissors
- journals or paper and pens for writing responses: It might be a good way to start the study by giving each participant a journal and a special pen.
- pitcher or other water carrying vessel (Sessions 1 and 5)
- bell or whistle (Session 1)
- small stones (Session 2)

Session One

Theme: Come as You Are!

Scripture Texts

⇒ JOHN 4:1–7A

» 1 Samuel 17:31–40

» Psalm 139:1–24

» Luke 19:1–10

Educational Goals—participants will:

- see connections between themselves and people in the Bible stories
- experience acceptance by leaders and within the group
- recognize that Jesus encounters them exactly as they are

Commentary

John 4:1–7a: It is mid-day, at the Well of Jacob. The sun is blazing and Jesus is tired from his long cross-country walk, so we find him sitting at the base of the well. Surprisingly, a woman comes to draw water in the middle of the day instead of early in the morning when all the other people would come. The text says that Jesus “had to” go through Samaria. There were other routes Jesus could have taken. While going through Samaria may have been a more direct route between Judea and Galilee, many Jews would travel other routes in order to avoid Samaria.

1 Samuel 17:31–40: This may be a familiar story, but it is a good reminder that like David, we can only be ourselves. In verse 38, Saul is trying to help David, to prepare and protect him now that David has volunteered to fight Goliath. In the end, David simply goes as he is comfortable. It is good that others may work to prepare and protect us, but sometimes we can only offer ourselves, just as we are to “Go, and may the Lord be with you!”

Psalm 139:1–24: This Psalm affirms that God knows each of us completely and encounters wherever we are. The phrase “you hem me in” is describing something similar to a fence around your yard. God’s presence encircles us

completely. And God's presence is with us even in the difficult times of life. The psalmist even goes so far to say that those hard times are like light to God. Psalm 139 praises God not only for the act of creation, but also for the intimate knowledge and involvement God has in our lives. The psalmist celebrates the gift of life that God has given, recognizing the wonderful miracle each of us is simply because we came from God's hand. The Psalm also affirms and beckons God to reveal God's purpose: "lead me in the way everlasting."

Luke 19:1-10: We know from the story that Zacchaeus was short in stature—both physically and in the eyes of the community. Because of how others perceived him, Zacchaeus didn't feel good about himself. Many of us can relate to that. Zacchaeus feels unworthy, but he is also curious. He simply wants to see Jesus, perhaps to know more about Jesus. As Jesus calls to Zacchaeus, he calls this "unworthy" one into relationship and accepts him just as he is.

Devotional Preparation

Find a quiet, peaceful space. Spend some time with your eyes closed, gently listening to your breathing so you can quiet your thoughts and begin to listen for God's voice.

Slowly read through Psalm 139:1-18 and then John 4:1-7a. As you read, take special note of any word, phrase or image that stands out to you. Spend a few moments focusing on those words, phrases or images.

The psalmist writes, "O Lord, you have searched me and known me..." How does it make you feel to be known that completely by God?

The woman came to the well to draw water. What are you thirsty for? She was alone because she was rejected by her community because of her life situation. When have you felt alone? When have you felt rejected? What choices have you made that you regret? Do you reject yourself or hide those parts of your life from others? What would it mean to feel completely accepted by God, who created you, just as you are?

Pray for your group and that you will be able to practice acceptance so they can experience grace through you.

Session Preparation:

- ⇒ Review the session and gather any necessary supplies.
- ⇒ Set up your space, posting “Group Guidelines Covenant” (Appendix 1).
- ⇒ Identify a volunteer to be the game leader for “Ice-breaker Conversations” and review the activity so he or she knows what to do.

Session Outline

I. Welcome (15 minutes)

Welcome everyone to the group and introduce yourself. Most participants may know you, but even if there is just one person who is new to the group, introduce yourself.

Review the Group Guidelines Covenant (Appendix 1).

Lead the following (or other) ice-breaker activity:

- You will need some space, so have everyone put their belongings out of the way.
- Have the participants (other than the pre-selected game leader) pair up facing each other.
- Create two large circles out of the pairs. One circle will be inside the other with the people on the inside circle facing their partners on the outside circle.
- Have the game leader position him or herself in the middle of the group.
- Explain: *You will be having one-minute conversations with each person speaking for 30 seconds. When you move to a new person, tell them your name and answer the question posed by the game leader. Listen carefully to the game leader and move according to his/her directive. When the whistle blows (or bell rings), that signals time to switch speakers.*
- The game leader then shouts out one question and one directive for moving. After 30 seconds, the game leader blows a whistle or rings a bell so they know to switch speakers.
- Movement directives are statements such as “Inner circle move two people to your left” or “Outer circle, move one person to your right.”

Sample Questions:

1. What is your all-time favorite TV show and why?
2. What is your favorite “goof off” activity?
3. Does your name or nickname have a special story?
4. What has happened to you recently that made you feel really good?
5. What are 2 things you really like about your hometown?

II. Bible Study (20 minutes)

Read aloud Psalm 139:1–12. Say to the group: *God knows us completely and meets us just as we are!*

Divide into three groups, assigning each one of the three passages: Luke 19:1–10, John 4:1–7a, or 1 Samuel 17:31–40. Ask them to read their assigned passage and then discuss the following questions:

1. How does the main character encounter God or Jesus, just as they are?
2. Do you relate (or not) to the person in the story?

Ask the participants to work together to prepare a summary of their assigned story to share with the group. After a few minutes, reconvene to share their summaries.

III. Reflection and/or Discussion Time (15 minutes)

Distribute journals (or paper) and pens, and invite participants to complete the following sentences:

- I am participating in this study because . . .
- three things I hope to experience during this study are . . .
- One thing I am curious about or “thirsty” for in my spiritual life is . . .
- Right now I am feeling . . .

After a few minutes, reconvene and invite sharing of how they completed one of the sentences. Remind them that all answers are acceptable, as is the choice not to share.

Continue by explaining: *John 4 tells the story of a woman who came to the well carrying a pitcher—and a lot of other personal baggage—like fear, shame, and*

mistakes. She also carried good things, like the courage to tell others about Jesus. All of these things make her the person Jesus chose to speak to that day.

Distribute strips of paper and pencils. Invite the participants to write on their paper some of the emotions, hopes, fears, expectations and abilities that they carry with them. Place the pitcher (or other vessel) on a table and invite them to put their papers into it. Lift the paper-filled pitcher and say:

This pitcher holds some of the things that make you who you are. God loves you just as you are! The woman came to the well expecting to draw water—instead she had an encounter with Jesus. We have come here with many different expectations—no matter what we carry with us, Jesus welcomes us.

IV. Closing (5 minutes)

Invite the participants to join in a circle for a closing prayer. As they bow their heads, walk around the circle to each participant and rest a hand on his or her shoulder and pray: *Thank you God for creating [name the person]. Thank you for accepting him/her exactly as he/she is. Help us to open ourselves up to the wonderful things he/she brings to this group. Amen.*

Session Two

Theme: Face to Face

Scripture Texts

- ⇒ John 4:7–91
- » Genesis 32:22–31
- » Exodus 3:1–6
- » 1 Kings 19:11–18
- » Luke 9:28–36
- » Luke 13:10–17
- » John 20:1–18

Educational Goals—participants will:

- explore diverse biblical encounters with God
- consider things that might get in the way of encountering God
- reflect on their own encounters with God

Commentary

John 4:7–9: A life-changing encounter with God is just beginning. The Samaritan woman has come to perform the ordinary task of drawing water from a well. From our story in Session 1, we already know she came during the hottest time of day, presumably to avoid others. We also know that Jesus went out of his way to meet her there. Jesus breaks the ice with a simple request, “give me a drink” that breaks down the barriers of the day—a Jewish man speaking to an outcast Samaritan woman. Women were not supposed to talk with men they don’t know; Samaritans and Jews didn’t have anything to do with each other. Is she open to the moment to what Jesus has to offer her?

Genesis 32:22–31: At this point in Jacob’s story, he has gotten out from under his father-in-law’s service and is traveling to his own land. He is about to encounter his brother, Esau, whom he has not seen since he tricked him out of his inheritance. He separates himself from his family and spends the night on the shore of the Jabbok river, where he wrestles with a “man” until daybreak. The Jabbok represents a spiritual divide for Jacob—between his young and

adult self, between his doubt and faith in his calling from God. In this encounter with God, several significant things occur—Jacob is wounded; Jacob refuses to let go until he is offered a blessing; and he is given a new name—Israel (which means “one who strives with God”). This encounter redefines who he is. No longer the trickster who uses any means to get what he wants, he now has a God-given purpose and identity. Like most of life’s important lessons, this new sense of self came at a price symbolized by Jacob’s wounded hip. With the morning light, it “dawns” on Jacob that he has seen God “face to face” and lived.

Exodus 3:1–6: Exodus 2 records that Moses had fled Egypt after killing an Egyptian who beat a Hebrew slave. He settles in the land of Midian where he marries and in Exodus 3, we find Moses tending his father-in-law’s sheep on Mt. Horeb. There he comes upon a blazing bush that is not consumed. The text then goes on to say, “when the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him . . .” God then asks Moses to remove his shoes because he is standing on holy ground. In ancient culture, shoes served several purposes—to protect the feet, to symbolize status for one who could afford them, and to secure land (by placing one’s shoes on a piece of unclaimed land, one could claim it).

1 Kings 19:11–18: Elijah is a prophet on the run from Jezebel, King Ahab’s wife, who seeks his life for his actions against the prophets of Ba’al. He journeys to Mt. Horeb and confesses in his exhaustion and desperation that he feels utterly alone and that his work seems fruitless—the people have forsaken God’s covenant in spite of his prophecy. He is told to stand on the mountain and wait for God to pass by. But unlike other powerful displays of God’s presence, here God was known in the “sound of sheer silence.” He is asked for the second time what he is doing there (v. 9b) and he again shares his discouragement. God promises that there will be a remnant of faithful people.

Luke 9:28–36: This passage tells of Jesus pausing in his ministry to retreat to a mountain, taking the disciples Peter, John, and James with him. Jesus’ transfiguration occurs while he is praying and is described as an immediate and apparent change in his appearance with his clothes “dazzling” white. Though

the transfiguration story is told in both Matthew and Mark, Luke is the only gospel to provide the substance of the conversation among Jesus, Moses, and Elijah—they speak of his approaching death in Jerusalem. This is the first time Luke mentions Jesus' fate. That the law (Moses) and the prophets (Elijah) testify to Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection is an important affirmation of Jesus as the promised Messiah of Israel. Peter reveals through his request that they stay on the mountain both a fear of the immediate future and a longing to remain in that amazing moment. However, life must go on and disciples are called from their mountaintop encounters with God back into the "valley of service." But the disciples do not tell anyone what they saw—indeed, encounters with God can be impossible to describe with words.

Luke 13:10–17: In this encounter, the woman did not approach Jesus but rather he saw her and called out to her in the synagogue. The leader of the synagogue is indignant at healing on the Sabbath and his objection reflects the teachings of the Pharisees based on the Law of Moses. Jesus turns the topic of discussion from healing to setting people free. In this case, the woman was "bent over" for 18 years, a condition that limited her participation in both society and the religion of Judaism.

John 20:1–18: In this post-resurrection encounter, Mary Magdalene, the disciple and benefactress of Jesus' ministry, sees her risen Lord for the first time. At first she doesn't recognize him—he is not the same teacher she had spent so much time with. He is now more; he is the one who conquered death. It is only when Jesus utters her name that she can see who is before her. Only in hearing him call her name, as we can presume he had done on many occasions, is Mary's heart opened to recognizing him. He tells her not to hold onto him because he has not yet ascended. We can only guess why John includes this detail. Jesus sends her to tell others what she has seen and she becomes the first one to share the good news of the resurrection.

Devotional Preparation

Find a quiet, peaceful space. Spend some time with your eyes closed, gently listening to your breathing so you can quiet your thoughts and begin to listen for God in the silence.

Read John 4:7–9. Take special note of anything that captures your attention and be open to the possibility that God has something to say to you through this story. When you are done reading, make a note of your thoughts, questions, and feelings.

Put yourself in the place of the woman. At this point in the story, the encounter is just beginning. It starts with all that the world would do to prevent it—she is someone whom Jesus should have nothing to do with. What do you see, hear, and feel? What barriers are there in your life that might have interfered with your relationship with Jesus?

Spend time in prayer for your group, for your church and for your leadership. You may want to use the prayer below:

O God of holy encounter, open me this day to experience you as you would come to me. Help me find you in the faces of the people I meet. Calm my spirit of distraction and make your way through whatever barriers exist so that I can sense your presence and be open to your call. Amen.

Session Preparation

- ⇒ Review the session ahead of time and select 3 of the 6 passages to focus on in the session.
- ⇒ Prepare newsprint with questions for the Bible study and individual sheets with the specific questions for the passages you select.
- ⇒ For “Reflection and/or Discussion Time,” create a mock up of the page for them to follow, using newsprint or white/chalkboard. Divide a page into six squares and make the squares as follows:
 - *Space one*: a symbol representing where/when you feel close to God.
 - *Space two*: the name of a person who helps you experience the love of Christ.
 - *Space three*: barriers in your life or in culture that inhibit encounter with God.
 - *Space four*: a symbol or phrase describing an encounter you’ve had with God.
 - *Space five*: a symbol or phrase representing a change you desire.
 - *Space six*: a symbol or phrase representing the future you believe God is calling you to.
- ⇒ Gather materials, including small stones for the closing.

Session Outline

I. Welcome (15 minutes)

Welcome everyone and share how much you value their participation.

Pass out slips of paper and invite everyone to put their name on the paper and list one positive (e.g. “I make people laugh”) and one negative and (e.g. “I procrastinate”) attribute they have. Explain that these will be read aloud. Collect the papers and mix them up. Randomly take a paper to read and have everyone guess whose it is. Continue until all papers have been read.

Afterward, note how the way we see ourselves differs from the way others see us. Note that in this session, you will be talking about encounters with God that bypass all the barriers that we think we have.

Transition to the Bible study by explaining in the story of the woman at the well, Jesus saw the woman differently than she saw herself. It wasn't a problem to him that she was a woman and a Samaritan and he was a Jewish man; Jesus cut through all the external stuff to have an encounter with her.

II. Bible Study (20 minutes)

Divide into 3 small groups and assign each group one of the 3 passages you chose from the selection of stories. Point out the questions on the newsprint and distribute the questions specific to each of the passages. Explain that the task is to read the story and answer both the newsprint questions and their specific questions.

Newsprint questions:

1. Who initiates the encounter?
2. Were there any barriers that were overcome for the encounter to occur?
3. What is the effect of the encounter—how does the character change?
4. What is God seeking in the encounter?
5. What response does God require?
6. How might others be affected by the character's encounter with God?

Story Questions:

Genesis 32:22–31

- In what ways do we “wrestle” with God?
- If you changed your name to reflect how God has changed you, what name would you choose?

Luke 13:10–17

- Was the woman’s healing merely physical or were there other effects? What habits, fears, attitudes, or situations would you like to be freed from?

Exodus 3:1–6

- What things in life keep us distracted from encounters with God?
- What is “holy ground” for you—where have you felt the presence of God?

1 Kings 19:11–18

- What impact have you noticed that silence has on people?
- Do you think our world’s lack of silence may interfere with hearing God?

Luke 9:28–36

- Why is it difficult sometimes to tell others about your spiritual life?
- Do we, like Peter, ever misunderstand God’s intentions and expectations?

John 20:1–18

- How has your understanding of Jesus changed over the years?
- What ways can we share the story of the resurrection to make it new today?

After 20 minutes, bring the group back together to share their answers.

III. Reflection and/or Discussion Time (15 minutes)

Introduce this time by explaining that you now want them to consider their own experiences with God. Ask them to draw lines on a page in their journals (or on a piece of paper) to create 6 squares to write in. Show them the mockup you prepared and ask them to fill in each square as outlined. Assure them that they will not be asked to share what they come up with and encourage them to be honest. They can use words or symbols to represent any reality that is true for them.

IV. Closing (5 minutes)

Have everyone gather in a circle and hand out the rocks. Explain that in Old Testament times, people often marked the places they had encounters with God

with a pile of stones, called “cairns” and these piles symbolized that something significant had happened in a given place.

Invite the participants to make a cairn together, signifying your group’s encounter with God’s Word today. Ask them to place the rocks one by one and as they do let the rock represent something they are thankful for, something they would like to change in their lives, or a hope they have for their future.

Close with a prayer offering thanks for the many wonderful and diverse ways God encounters us and the wonderful and different ways we respond.

Session Three

Theme: Important Questions, Important Choices

Scripture Texts

⇒ John: 4:10–15

» Matthew 16:13–16

» Luke 7:36–50

» John 5:2–9

Educational Goals—participants will:

- explore feelings related to making commitments
- experience and retell stories of Jesus' encounters
- answer key questions about their relationship with Jesus

Commentary

John 4:10–15: The Samaritan woman hears Jesus' words, but her mind is set on the daily task of collecting water for physical needs. She may still be unclear on what Jesus is really talking about and even though she may not fully understand, she still asks for the living water. She is thirsty, curious, engaged, and open to what Jesus says next. Sometimes in our own commitments of faith, we do not fully understand or completely know what God is saying to us, yet we can still be open to God's leading and thirsty for what God has in store for us.

Matthew 16:13–16: This story tells of a turning point in the disciples' journey with Jesus. They are talking about what others think about Jesus, and Jesus asks "what are people saying about me?" This question sets the stage for the crucial question of his followers: "Who do you say that I am?" Simon's answer is a proclamation of faith in Jesus as the Messiah, a concept that was loaded with meaning for him and his culture. Jesus is asking us the same question, "Who do you say that I am?" As we answer, let us consider what terminology may best communicate Jesus to our culture.

Luke 7:36–50: Imagine the courage it took for the woman in this story to walk into the home of a Pharisee, to reach out and serve Jesus—in the midst of a

judging eyes of this group. Jesus models grace and love. The woman models courage, humility, thankfulness and love. This is a story of commitment. The woman is making a statement of faith by her actions.

John 5:2–9: Many people believed that when the water at the “pool of healing” was stirred up, it had healing qualities. This man had been waiting for a long time by the pool with no one to help him into the water. Jesus, the Living Water, easily, instantly healed him with the words, “Stand up, take your mat and walk.” But first, Jesus asked a vital question, “Do you want to be made well?” This man’s world was his mat next to the pool. He had been there, waiting, hoping for healing for 38 years. Unable to get up, he must have relied on others for any food he ate, or any of his needs to be met. This was the life he knew. Imagine how his life would change when he stood up, took his mat, and walked.

Devotional Preparation

Find a quiet space and sit for some time with your eyes closed, listening to the sounds around you, allowing yourself to relax and listen for God’s voice.

How are you feeling? Physically? Emotionally? Spiritually? Hold onto those feelings in a few moments of silence. When you are ready, read John: 4:10–15, allowing a word, phrase or image to find you as you read.

What is it that you need from Jesus? What do you thirst for in your life? Are there things that you read in God’s Word that don’t quite make sense to you?

Spend time in prayer asking for the courage to step out where God is leading you even when you don’t completely understand. Spend time in prayer for your group, for your church and for your leadership. You may want to use the prayer below to end your quiet time.

God, I am thirsty. It has been a long journey already and I still have a long way to go. Help me to be nurtured by your Living Water. May I feel those places deep in my heart where you have planted the seed of your Word and your Spirit. Help me to listen for your voice. I know you are calling me and I want to respond but don’t always know how. Open me up to love you more

deeply with my whole being and show me how to give you everything I am and through that open me up to love others. Amen.

Session Preparation

- ⇒ Review the day's session.
- ⇒ Gather props for the commercial and Scripture tableaux.
- ⇒ Prepare newsprint or chalk/whiteboard with the journal questions from "Reflection and/or Discussion Time."
- ⇒ Decide on what choices you want to offer in the "Here I Stand" game.
- ⇒ Place a line of masking tape on the center of the floor, and a plus sign on one side of the room and a minus sign on the other.

Session Outline

I. Welcome (15 minutes)

Welcome everyone and lead them in the "Here I Stand" game (as a leader, it is critical that you act neutral in this activity):

Say something like:

We make choices and commitments every day. Sometimes those choices are easy; sometimes they are hard. I'm going to read some statements and you have three options: go to the plus side if you agree, to the minus side if you disagree, or to the middle if you aren't sure or if it doesn't matter to you. Our purpose is not to discuss, argue or judge others' choices, just to make our choices and let others make theirs.

Start with easy issues and move to the more difficult ones. Here are some suggested statements:

1. My favorite color is blue.
2. Dogs are better than cats.
3. If I had superpowers I would like to fly.
4. If I had superpowers I would like to be invisible.
5. I believe children should be led in prayer in public school.

Add others that are pertinent to your group, but that are not overly contentious.

After the game, spend some time discussing their experiences offering questions such as: What did it feel like to make your choices public? What did it feel like to see that someone in the group disagree with you?

II. Bible Study (20 minutes)

Divide into 4 groups and assign each group one of the following activities:

- 1) Read John: 4:10–15 and create a 30 second commercial for a refreshing drink called “Living Water.”
- 2) Create 3 tableaux of John 5:2–9.
- 3) Create 3 tableaux of Luke 7:36–50.
- 4) Prepare a mini-drama of Matthew 16:13–16.

(Explain that tableau is a way of doing drama with frozen images—in a way like pausing a video image and seeing a moment frozen in time. As a narrator reads the Scripture passage, the rest of the group will create images of the story, similar to photographs. When presenting, the audience is asked to close their eyes whenever a narrator says “curtain down” (the tableau is changed at this time) and open their eyes when he or she says “curtain up.”)

After the groups have had a several minutes to prepare, invite them to offer their presentations.

Ask the participants to return to their groups and review their texts, making a list of the choices they see being made in the story by each of the characters (including Jesus) in the story. After a few minutes, invite the groups to share the choices they identified.

III. Reflection and/or Discussion Time (15 minutes)

Note the following questions from today’s stories:

- Where do I get the Living Water?
- Do you want to get well?
- Who is this who even forgives sins?
- Who do you say that I am?

Invite participants to respond the following questions in their journals:

- 1) Where do you find living water—what person, place, or activity helps you experience God’s love?
- 2) Is there anything that hinders your walk with Jesus? If so, what would changing that mean for you? Is there any reason you might not want to experience that change or are afraid of such a change?
- 3) If someone were to ask you who Jesus is to you, how would you respond without using “churchy language” but instead using language that has meaning for you and would be understood by people outside the church.

IV. Closing (5 minutes)

Ask the participants to think about what they believe about Jesus. Tell them that for the closing, they will be invited to share one thing that they believe and it can be anything that they believe about Jesus.

Gather in a circle and Invite the participants to share whenever they feel comfortable, saying “I believe . . .” and filling in the blank with one statement. Do not force anyone to share, but after a couple minutes, ask them to join you in prayer as follows:

God, give us the strength to live according to what we believe. When we are thirsty, help us to find refreshment in Jesus. When we are ashamed, remind us that we are forgiven. When we struggle, help us to find strength and healing in you. And when others ask us who Jesus is, give us words that communicate the truth of his love for all. For it is in his name that we pray. Amen.

Session Four

Theme: Face to Face

Scripture Texts

⇒ John 4:16–26

» Luke 5:1–11

» Matthew 5:43–48

» Colossians 3:12–17

Educational Goals—participants will:

- explore the “real me” and affirm God’s love for them
- envision the positive future that God calls them to
- consider some of the expectations for those who choose to follow Jesus

Commentary

John 4:16–26: Having met at the well, broken through the barriers, and offered the woman living water (which she accepts), Jesus goes on to explore what it means to drink of this “living water” and be one of his followers. Here the truth comes out about her life. We do not know why she had five husbands—it could be that they abandoned her or died and per custom she was given as a wife to the next brother. We do not know what her current relationship is about either. We do know, however, that she did not try to hide anything from Jesus. She offers no excuses but states plainly what is true and Jesus affirms her for this. Jesus rewards her with a deeper understanding of who he is. She saw him as a prophet (v. 19) but as their conversation concludes, he reveals himself as the Messiah. This part of the story demonstrates the healing and transformative nature of an encounter with Jesus. From here the woman is given what no one else could give her—a purpose. She is open to this moment and accepts that she can indeed be more than she is now. Sharing her story with her community, she no longer stands on the fringes of the world but becomes an integral part of the salvation story. *Things* had not changed, but *she* had.

Luke 5:1–11: In the story of the calling of Simon (Peter) and James and John, Jesus calls on them to push out “into the deep.” Are we ready to move beyond a superficial relationship with Jesus to a deeper one? It begins with trust. When Jesus asks him to put down the nets, Peter trusts him and after the miracle of the great catch of fish, Peter is humbled and confesses his sense of inadequacy in the presence of Jesus. The disciple’s choice to follow Jesus required nothing less than “leaving everything behind” to accept this new vocation of discipleship.

Matthew 5:43–48: This passage comes as part of a wider discourse that begins with the “Beatitudes.” Here Jesus charges his disciples to love their enemies. It is a call for his followers to be more than is expected. That we love our own and despise those against us is a human trait found across time and across cultures. God’s radically unconditional love is the guiding principle for Christian righteousness. The call to perfection here suggests integrity and purity of heart.

Colossians 3:12–17: This passage sets forth a thorough understanding of Christian behavior and attitude. The list of attributes of God’s “chosen ones” is punctuated by two overarching principles. First is love: “above all clothe yourselves with love.” We are able to love because God loved us first. Second is gratitude: “whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God.” Disciples are Christ-centered and live out of a genuine gratitude for the blessing of renewed relationship with God through Jesus.

Devotional Preparation

Find a quiet space. Spend some time with your eyes closed, focusing on your breathing. Allow yourself to relax and your mind to become quiet enough to listen for God’s voice.

Review the passages for today. Consider these questions:

- Are there ways in which Jesus is calling you deeper into your relationship with him?
- Where are your “growing edges” or areas that need attention in your life?

Review and follow the guided meditation on the next below:

The Real You: A Guided Meditation

Take a few deep breaths. Let your mind empty and feel your body relax. Inhale slowly through your nose then exhale through your mouth. Imagine your favorite peaceful place. It could be somewhere you've been or a place in your imagination. See it, hear the sounds, smell the smells.

After a while, imagine a figure coming toward you. As he gets closer, you realize it is Jesus. With a warm smile, he asks how you are and he sits beside you. In his hands he has a book. It is the story of your life.

As he turns the pages, you see the story of your birth, your childhood and all your firsts. As he turns the pages, you see chapter titles like friends, family, special moments, sad times, challenges, accomplishments . . . Sit quietly as you watch Jesus flip through the pages of your life.

Jesus says, "Come and let's talk about these things. What do you want to ask me?" Take some time to ask Jesus your questions and listen for the answers. If none come, trust that in the days ahead, you will come to understand what Jesus wants to tell you.

Jesus hands you a different book and says, "Here is a new book, the story yet to be written. It will not be perfect and every chapter will not necessarily have a happy ending. But I will be with you as you fill in the pages. Go in peace—you are a child of God and you will change the world."

Sit quietly and spend peaceful time with Jesus. When you are ready, become aware again of your surroundings, take a few deep breaths and open your eyes.

Spend some time in prayer for your group and your leadership. You may want to use the prayer below:

O God, I have answered your call to discipleship but sometimes find myself wondering how to go deeper in my journey with you. Open me to new possibilities. Help me to let go of old ways of being, to release old grudges or resentments, and to forgive myself and others for the sake of a new way of life. As you encountered the disciples by the lakeshore, meet me in this place. Amen.

Session Preparation

- ⇒ Review the day's session.
- ⇒ Print a copy of *The Real You: a Guided Meditation* above and practice reading it aloud as you will be leading the group in it.
- ⇒ Print out the references and questions on pieces of paper for the Bible study.
- ⇒ If you choose the optional Bible study activity, *The Peace of Christ*, mark spaces and prepare words for it.

Session Outline

I. Welcome (15 minutes)

Welcome the participants and lead them in one of the activities below.

Option 1: What do you know?—Give each person an index card and ask them to write the numbers 1–5. Have them record their answers to each question below. Then mix up the cards and pass them out again and see if they can guess whose card they received.

1. What is one word your best friend might use to describe you?
2. What is one word your family members might use to describe you?
3. What is one of your bad habits?
4. What's the best thing you've ever done for someone else?
5. If a movie were made about you, would you be an action hero, an inventor, a hermit, or an artist?

Option 2: Two & One—Go around the group and have each person tell two things about themselves that are true and one that is not true. Have the group try to figure out which statement is not true.

II. Bible Study (20 minutes)

Divide into 3 groups and give each group a piece of paper with one of the following passages and sets of questions:

Luke 5:1–11

- What did Jesus mean by “fishers of people?”
- What sorts of things do we need to leave behind in order to follow Jesus?

Matthew 5:43–48

- What makes a person an enemy?
- What does it mean to love your enemies?

Colossians 3:12–17

- What does it mean to let the “peace of Christ rule in your hearts?”
- Which of the principles in the text is the most difficult for you and why?

After 10 minutes, come back together and invite sharing. Ask them to develop a definition of a disciple by writing on a piece of newsprint words and phrases from their passages. Give them time to look at the definition of discipleship they created. After a few minutes discuss the following questions:

1. What isn't on the list that you think belongs there?
2. What is on the list that surprises you?
3. If non-Christians were watching church people, would they be able to guess what discipleship is?

Optional Activity: *The Peace of Christ*

Preparation:

- Mark 10 spaces about a foot apart on the floor in a straight line, either with paper or masking tape.
- Print each word on a separate piece of paper:
LET/THE/PEACE/OF/CHRIST/ RULE/IN/YOUR/HEARTS.

Leading the activity:

- Line up 9 people in spaces 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10, leaving # 5 empty. If you have more than 9 people in your group, you can add opening and closing quotation marks and the period at the end. “Extras” can also act as coaches, helping guide the movements. If you have less than 9, shorten the phrase to “The peace of Christ.”
- Distribute one piece of paper with a word on it to each person. Explain that they need to reconstruct the phrase: “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts,” following the rules for moving below:
 1. They can only move forward.

2. They can only move one space at a time or “jump” one occupied space at a time, as in checkers.
3. They can never jump more than one other person in a single move.
4. Only one person can occupy a space at a time.

When they are done, note that it takes focus and mutual support to let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts—and it takes prayer.

III. Reflection and/or Discussion Time (15 minutes)

Ask for a volunteer to read John 4:16–19.

Explain:

Now we are going to share in a meditation exercise designed to help us experience Jesus’ presence and acceptance of us.

Ask them to sit comfortably, far enough away from one another so that they can focus inward. Lead them through *The Real You: a Guided Meditation*.

After the meditation, give them some time to write in their journals about their experience.

IV. Closing (5 minutes)

Close by passing the peace of Christ. Explain that this is an ancient ritual of the church and they say to one another “The peace of Christ be with you” and the other responds, “And also with you.” Turn to the person beside you in the circle and begin the passing of the peace. Once “the peace” has gone around the circle and come back to you, close with a simple prayer, such as:

Christ, may your peace come to us and rule in our hearts, and flow through us to our world. Amen.”

Session Five

Theme: Change Your World!

Scripture Texts

⇒ John 4:28–30, 39–42

» John 1:35–46

» 1 Timothy 4:1–16

Educational Goals—participants will:

- identify how they would like to change the world
- experience closure and celebrate what they've learned in this study

Commentary

John 4:28–30, 39–42: Because of what took place in the encounter at the well, the Samaritan woman's life was transformed. She opened herself to receive the Living Water, allowing it to touch even the places of struggle in her life. She leaves behind her jar (and her reservations) and focuses on what matters—carrying the message to her village. Because of her testimony, many people believed in Jesus and many more were able to hear his word because they, Samaritans all, invited Jesus to stay with them. The profundity of this invitation must not be lost on us—a Jewish man is a guest among Samaritans. Presumably Jesus' entourage—all Jewish—sojourned in this “enemy territory” with him. What a difference this woman's testimony made in her world.

John 1:35–46: Jesus' words, “Come and see,” are a simple invitation for the people who are curious about Jesus and wish to learn more. After some time with Jesus, they run to tell their friends, “We have found the Messiah!” The excitement is contagious. Philip tells Nathanael that they have found the promised one. Nathanael, hearing that Jesus is a common man from the tiny backwater village of Nazareth asks, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Jesus' own words are repeated by Phillip when he says, “Come and see!”

1 Timothy 4:11–16: The Apostle Paul was a mentor to Timothy, who was young in age and young in the faith. Paul was more than a teacher to Timothy; he was

like an older brother or a father figure. This passage serves as a prayer of blessing and encouragement. If 1 Corinthians 13 is the “love chapter” then perhaps 1 Timothy 4 is the “youth chapter.” a great summary and benediction/blessing for your group as you end your study and sent out to change your world.

Devotional Preparation

Find a quiet space. Spend some time with your eyes closed, focusing on your breathing. Allow yourself to relax and your mind to become quiet enough to listen for God’s voice.

Consider what you have experienced during this study in your group and in yourself. How are you feeling about God, your leadership, and this study ending? Make note of both your challenges and triumphs and how you’ve seen God at work.

Read John 4:28–30, 39–42 as a prayer.

Spend time in prayer for your group and for your leadership. You may want to use the following prayer:

Gracious God, I am thankful for the gifts of this study. Help us all to take away the lessons that you would have us keep in our hearts. Help me to nurture the faith of those you have blessed me to lead and by your grace, may we change this world. Amen.

Session Preparation

- ⇒ Review the day’s session.
- ⇒ Pray for guidance in your leadership and for your group members.
- ⇒ Place the pitcher or water vessel from Session One on a table in the room beneath a bulletin board or blank piece of newsprint for the closing ritual.
- ⇒ You may want to come up with your own closing ritual instead of the one provided in the session.

Session Outline

I. Welcome (15 minutes)

Welcome everyone and ask them to pair up and make an inner/outer circle as in Session One's icebreaker. This time you should act as the leader so all can participate in the sharing. Have everyone tell his or her partner one thing learned during this study or a favorite moment or activity, then ask the inner circle to move one person to the right to speak with a new partner. Keep them moving until the circle has moved around back to the beginning position. Then have two pairs join to create groups of four and sit down.

Explain that they are going to join in a prayer that begins with silence and moves on to personal reflection. After about 2 minutes of silence, ask them to think about the following:

I am grateful for... *(Pause for reflection.)*

I am struggling with... *(Pause for reflection.)*

I want to tell my friends and family about... *(Pause for reflection.)*

After a few additional moments silence, pray: *Lord, hear our prayers. Amen.*

II. Bible Study (20 minutes)

Ask for two volunteers, one to read aloud John 4:28–20, 39–42, and the other, John 1:35–46. Invite the participants to compare the two stories as a group, using questions, such as:

- Who is challenged by Jesus?
- Who is changed?
- What new beginnings do you see in the stories?
- How is the world changed because of the changes in them?

Divide into small groups and ask them to discuss what they would like to change in their world— in their families, in the community, in the nation or around the globe. Distribute slips of paper for them to print out one change they desire. Have them hold on to the slips of paper for your closing time.

III. Reflection and/or Discussion Time (15 minutes)

Invite the participants to respond to the following questions in their journals, using words and/or drawing images or symbols.

- Have you set anything down that you were carrying?
- If so, what? If not, would you like to?
- Are you carrying anything new?

IV. Closing (5 minutes)

Draw their attention to the pitcher (or water vessel) on the table. Explain that you are going to do a movement prayer in which each person walks to the table and prayerfully places the strip of paper with the thing they would like to change printed on it into the pitcher. Give them time to come forward and offer their papers as they feel comfortable.

Distribute strips of colored construction paper—use a variety of colors. Invite participants to write on the slip of paper one positive comment about their experience together during this study. Have them tape or pin their strips of paper on the piece of newsprint or bulletin board above the pitcher to create a “rainbow of gratitude.”

Explain that this is how life is: there are good things to celebrate and things we’d like to change. Hold up the pitcher and pray:

Jesus, our Living Water, You offered yourself to the woman at the well and changed her and through her witness, changed her village. We ask that you would change us and make it possible for us to help make the changes we hope for. Amen.

Form a circle and close with the following:

Get the word out. Teach all these things. And don't let anyone put you down because you're young. Teach believers with your life: by word, by demeanor, by love, by faith, by integrity. Stay at your post reading Scripture, giving counsel, teaching. . . . Cultivate these things. Immerse yourself in them. The people will all see you mature right before their eyes! Keep a firm grasp on both your character and your teaching. Don't be diverted. Just keep at it. Both you and those who hear you will experience salvation. —1 Timothy 4: 11–13, 15–16 (The Message)

Appendix: Supplemental Materials

Supplement One Group Guidelines Covenant

As a member of this group, I agree to adhere to the following guidelines:

1. Respect the rights and opinions of other persons.
2. Participate fully in the study, recognizing that participation does not mean I have to talk out loud.
3. Listen to others when they speak.
4. Speak openly, but allow time for others to speak.
5. Recognize that there are no “wrong” answers or “bad” questions—try to hear and understand each other.
6. Use “I language,” such as “I think differently about that” instead of “You’re wrong!”
7. Respect those who choose not to speak.
8. Respect others’ space and physical boundaries.
9. Report hurtful, destructive or dangerous behavior to the leader.

Supplement Two

Group Dynamics

The Forming Stage

Each person will enter the group experience with a certain set of skills, attitudes, feelings, and challenges. As you move ahead, you will start to discover what some of these are, but for now everything is new and everyone is in a new environment and situation, even if they have participated in youth gatherings before. Keeping things relaxed and yet enthusiastic will go a long way to getting your group off the ground. Your group's experience might include:

- A sense of uncertainty, awkwardness, tentativeness and even anxiety—the norms and standards of your group have not yet been established and so participants are trying to find out what is okay and not okay and may be unsure of what to do and how to act.
- Most people will be eager to fit in and will be cautious in presenting themselves.
- Some participants will jump right in from the start, while others will hang back and observe. It is important to respect how each member reacts during this time. To build trust and model acceptance, don't push too hard for interaction from someone who hesitates, but affirm their way of being there.
- Some initial friendships will begin to form as group members discover things they have in common. Your job is to maintain a healthy level of interaction within the entire group and encourage a whole group spirit.

The Developing Stage

As your group develops, members will feel freer to be themselves and may take more risks in asserting their personalities, wanting to feel a sense of individual influence on the group, searching for a “niche” and possibly sharing on a deeper level. However, as the group becomes closer, it can become a little unstable and conflict may arise. Your group’s experience might include:

- More cohesiveness, using language such as “our group” and “we.”
- Deeper interaction among some with others remaining or becoming increasingly detached in response
- Moments of tension or conflict; Some may be wondering, “Do I *want* to trust these people?”
- Shifting of friendships

It is important to affirm your group and to keep an eye on their—and your own—level of comfort in sharing and respond accordingly.

The Maturing Stage

A group that is at this phase will be considerably closer than when you first began. Members will have a sense of bonding and will take responsibility for each other in the group, expressing concern, support, and encouragement. Here are some things that may be part of your group’s experience:

- Some group members will show a high level of enthusiasm and eagerness to help you out in creating a positive experience.
- Sharing will be deeper and more meaningful yet some group members may feel uncomfortable with this increasing.
- A desire to spend time together outside group. This may be a good time to plan a meal or other unstructured time together.

The Performing Stage

As the study nears its end, most groups will be well into the performing phase, during which members are working well together and show concern that all members of the group are supported and contributing. Here are some things that might be a part of your group's experience:

- One or more of your group members may be ready to make significant commitments in their walk with Jesus. Find ways to celebrate those while being sensitive to others who may not be in the same place.
- Some friendships will continue to form while others may already be shifting as group members prepare for the end of the study. Care needs to be taken to keep them connected.

The Closure and Transference Stage

As the study draws to a close, some participants bring in personal issues sensing the opportunity soon to be passing. All feelings are valid as people bring experience and process endings differently. Powerful or intense emotions may arise. It is important to keep things from becoming over emotional. "Group-think" can come into play with people's emotions playing off each other. In the midst of closure, it is important to give sense that this is a beginning also. The study was designed to give them skills for the days ahead.

It would be helpful to give them an opportunity to anonymously give you feedback on the study and your teaching efforts. Also, consider ways you can do follow up with the members of the group.

Supplement Three

Additional Activities

I. Ice Breakers

Circle Talk: This activity provides the opportunity to quickly get to know many people. (Used in Session One of this study.)

Ask everyone to listen closely and review the instructions below:

- For this game we need space, so put your belongings outside the space.
- Form pairs and face each other.
- Create two large circles with the pairs. One circle will be inside the other with partners in different circles, facing each other.
- You will be engaging in one-minute conversations in which each person has 30 seconds to share.
- I will be blowing a whistle (or dinging a bell) once at 30 seconds to signal switching speakers.
- I will whistle (or ding) twice at 1 minute signaling time for the inner circle to move one person to the right.
- Then you begin with a new partner, starting by introducing yourself.

Once the two circles are formed, stand in the middle of the group so that you can be heard. Remind them to introduce themselves. Give the first question. Whistle or ding once after 30 seconds (remind them the first time to switch speakers). After a minute, signal twice (remind the inner circle the first time to moved one person to the right. Remind them to introduce themselves and than yell out a new question. Sample questions:

1. If you could have any job, what would it be?
2. If you could have any food available to you 24/7, what would it be?
3. If you could go anywhere in the world, where would it be?
4. If you could spend \$10,000 anyway you wanted, what would you do?
5. If you could have one super power, what would it be?
6. If you could meet anyone from history, who would it be?

Connections: This activity gets the group moving around. It requires touching, so be sure participants are comfortable with this before beginning. Invite participants to stand. Explain that you are going to call out two body parts and they need to run to find someone to connect with on that body part. For example, when you say “Shoulder to shoulder!” they need to touch shoulders with another participant. You can use combinations of different parts, such as foot to knee and let them work out who does which part. Call out 5 or 6 other combinations before asking everyone to return to their seats. If you have any persons with disabilities in the group, be sure to select body part connections that do not exclude them.

Pocket Fishing: Explain that the things we carry with us can tell us something about ourselves. Ask participants to “fish” in their pockets (or backpacks or handbags) for one thing that they can use to tell a story about themselves (e.g. a good luck charm, photo, or piece of gum). Explain that the items can be funny or serious, of sentimental value or no value at all—the point is to share about ourselves and sometimes props can help us come up with what to say.

II. Group Builders

Fishy Fishy: This group-building game requires that everyone participate, communicate, and move into a new kind of community. Introduce the game as outlined below, then ask for a volunteer to be “The Fish” and begin.

Imagine for a few moments that you are a fish all alone in a dark wide open sea of possibilities. What would you do? You would probably look for more fish! That is what this game is all about. Everyone stands in a group, closes his or her eyes, and starts wandering around trying to find the person who has been designated as “The Fish.” The Fish keeps his or her eyes open, but doesn’t talk. When you bump into someone, without opening your eyes, shake his or her hand and ask, “Fishy?” one time. If the other person asks “Fishy?” back, then you have not found The Fish. When someone bumps into The Fish and asks, “Fishy?” The Fish remains quiet. Ask “Fishy?” a second time, to make sure. If there is still no answer, you have found The Fish! Open your eyes and take his or her hand to make The Fish grow! When people bump into any part of The Fish, if you feel clasped hands, make your way to either end of The Fish to find a free hand to join.

Create a Group Covenant: This activity could be included after a Bible Study or during an opening session. The covenant can consist of a list of 3–5 simple, mutually agreed upon guidelines to help your group function better. These guidelines can be developed around

- *values* such as: everybody is accepted as they are or we choose to be cooperative and, therefore, do not engage in competition in our activities
- *practices* such as: listening to each other without interruption, honoring each person’s right to share or not to share; or reading the Bible in a variety of translations

III. Discussion Starter

So I Heard Improv

This skit will require some preparation and some improvisation. Select one person to be the new kid and begin by providing the following:

You are at your lockers in the hallway in small groups. The new kid walks down the hallway and people begin to talk about him or her—“Have you heard about the new kid?” “I heard” Then one person breaks from the small group and goes up to the new person and says, “Hey, I heard that you” The new person will respond with “No, that’s not true, but let me tell you a little more about myself.” The two will then have a short conversation. Then the one who stepped out will go back to the group and say: “I know him/her now, I am so glad I took the time to get to know him/her personally. Some of the things we thought about the new kid were not right. “Let me tell you about the real person.”

After the improv skit, invite the group to discuss the following:

- When a new person arrives at school, how do people treat them?
- Why do we often concern ourselves with rumors?
- What’s the best way to know the facts about someone