

Introduction

The Bible is primarily a God-centered story. It is not designed to be a “Book of Virtues” but a book that tells us who God is and what he has done. The Bible, in other words, is a story that begins with the dysfunction of the early chapters of Genesis, moves to God’s dealings with a particular group of people—his chosen people, the Israelites—and then culminates in what God did through Jesus of Nazareth.

Who Jesus is and what he did are central to the Christian faith. That is why this curriculum begins with teaching children about Jesus. Of course, much of who Jesus is and what he did is rooted in the Old Testament, and we will certainly get to that—but in due time. It is good to remember that the first followers of Jesus were likely far less familiar with the Old Testament than we might think. There were no printed books back then. Peter and the others, when they were called by Jesus to follow him, did not have their Bibles open and may not even have been all that familiar with the Scripture’s content.

When Jesus came on the scene he did not say, “OK, before I begin talking, please open up your Bibles and let me show you how all of this fits together.” Rather, he came on the scene and just started being Jesus. And the point was made well enough.

So we will follow this pattern: beginning this curriculum by acquainting children with Jesus first and then letting the rest of the Bible fall into place. We are intentionally avoiding the “Bible story” approach, which starts with creation, Adam and Eve, the Flood, etc., as the basis of moral lessons. We are beginning at the culmination of the story, to see how all of this ends up—acquainting children with the most central truths of the Scripture before we go back to fill in the many interesting details.

A much fuller explanation of the methods behind this program is found in the core text for this series, *Telling God's Story: A Parents' Guide to Teaching the Bible*.

Organization

The lessons for Year One are centered on understanding Jesus: who he was, what he did, and what he taught. The lessons organize the Gospel story into nine categories:

- Stories Jesus Told
- Miracles Jesus Did
- Teachings of Jesus
- The Sermon on the Mount
- Jesus' Early Life
- Jesus' Disciples
- Opposition to Jesus
- The End of Jesus' Life
- The Rest of the Story

Aim to complete one lesson per week. This book is designed to be used along with *Telling God's Story, Year One Activity Book: Student Guide and Activity Pages*, which contains pictures, projects and other activities. You may wish to read the scripted lesson to the child on the first day as he or she colors the picture, and then to complete projects on the second and third days. Alternately, you may read the scripted lesson on the first day, complete the coloring picture on the second, and complete a chosen project on the third. In a group setting that meets once a week, plan to read the scripted lesson as the students color and then to conclude the day's study with one of the projects or games especially designed for group use.

Each of these categories will have four or five lessons, which means that you will spend four or five weeks on each category. (The last category has only three lessons.) The order is not unalterable, but neither is it random. We start with the stories Jesus told (parables) because this is one way that Jesus introduced himself to the people of his day. He also introduced himself to them through miracles and his various teachings, which are second and third on the list. These are the ways the people of Jesus' world got to know him, and it is a good way to introduce Jesus to your children, too.

The fourth category is the Sermon on the Mount, which is really a subset of the previous category (“Teachings of Jesus”). The Sermon on the Mount is so rich and well known, however, that it deserves a separate treatment. So the first four categories have one thing in common: they all pertain to what Jesus did and said to the people of his day. These were the ways people got to know him.

The next five categories are more biographical. Here the lessons will focus more on Jesus’ life, beginning with his birth, then moving to his relationship with his disciples, the opposition he faced toward the end of his earthly ministry, and culminating in his death and resurrection. These categories are also important for children to get to know Jesus. Young students are often not taught the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ life in a way that shows just how interesting and challenging the biblical message is. These last five categories will question some preconceptions, and therefore deepen our understanding of who Jesus is.

Even though the order of the lessons is intentional, parents should feel free to alter the order to suit their own purposes. For example, you might decide to work through “Jesus’ Early Life” during the Christmas season and “The End of Jesus’ Life” during Easter. The only strong suggestion I make is that each category be completed before moving onto another so that the lessons have a stronger sense of continuity (“next we are going to look at the miracles for Jesus for five weeks”).

The purpose of this curriculum is to get to know Jesus better. In fact, it is very likely that as a parent or teacher, you may find yourself reintroduced to Jesus in a fresh way. This is why each lesson opens with a brief word of explanation to the parent; this will help you in helping your children process the content of the lessons.

Toward that end, you should spend a few moments reading the parent section (“What the Parent Should Know”) the night before the lesson so you can ponder a bit, or if you prefer, read it right before the lesson so it is fresh in your mind—whatever works for you. The important thing is that you spend some time becoming familiar with the information so you can be of more help to your children. The purpose of these parent sections is to orient you to the biblical passage for that day. The parent sections are more detailed and complex than the scripted lessons; this will give you a broader handle on the issues surrounding the passage. It will also give you a greater vantage point from which to look at the lesson itself and, perhaps, to address questions that might come up.

All scriptural excerpts are drawn from the New International Version.

Scope

Jesus is the primary subject of this curriculum for the first four years. We want to encourage parents and teachers not to feel as if the child's biblical education is being truncated by focusing on Jesus. Rather, *Telling God's Story* allows young students to get to know the central figure of the Christian faith in a way that conventional curricula do not do.

But this curriculum can't possibly cover all the parables of Jesus, or all the events of his life, or even all the events of Passion Week, in a single year. We assume that this curriculum is not your child's only exposure to the Bible. Your local church should provide your child's foundational education in the Gospel and Scripture. We are partnering with parents, teachers, and churches to teach the Gospel message; this gives us the freedom to approach the curriculum the way we do.

During each year of the elementary curriculum, the lessons repeat the nine categories, each year introducing new material and covering it in more depth. This means that a relatively short amount of time each year is spent on the pivotal events of Passion Week, Jesus' death, and the resurrection. We assume that your local church will play a major part in telling these stories and explaining their importance. However, it may seem a bit abrupt to end each year without looking in more detail at the crucifixion, the resurrection, and post-resurrection appearances of Jesus. So we also offer a supplemental unit to make sure those topics are adequately covered during each year of grades 1–4.

Unit 1

Stories Jesus Told

For the Parent: Jesus was a master storyteller and preferred to use stories to introduce himself to his listeners. But this does not mean that the stories were easy to understand or that their meanings were self-evident. In fact, in one or two places, Jesus seems determined to obscure his message to those not prepared to hear it (Mark 4:11–12), probably because the secret of the kingdom is revealed only to those who responded to Jesus and followed him—to “insiders,” so to speak. The parables are indeed a diverse group of passages that offer occasional interpretive challenges. But they are also concrete and show up everywhere in the Gospels. Jesus liked talking in parables, and this is why we begin with them as we introduce our children to his life.

Lesson

1

Luke 15:8–10

God Is Joyful over You

What the Parent Should Know: This parable is about the joy that God feels when a lost sinner is found. The child should understand that God is not indifferent or judgmental toward him—his response to God makes God himself joyful.

The joy in heaven over one sinner's repentance is compared by Jesus to a woman's joy at finding a lost silver coin. This coin is a Greek drachma, roughly equal to a day's wage. The losing of this coin was not merely an inconvenience. It was important to the woman's daily survival, and so she was understandably persistent in finding it. When we read that she lit a lamp to find the coin, we should not think of flicking on a light in the living room. Houses back then were dark and relatively windowless. A more appropriate modern analogy might be sweating in a crawl space with a flashlight in your mouth. And sweeping the house was not a matter of tidying up or running a vacuum cleaner, but rooting through the straw flooring that functioned as comfort and warmth. This woman was expending tremendous effort.

Jesus' parables are sometimes hard to understand. It is not always clear how the parts of the parable correspond to the lesson. This parable is a good example. For example, note that the coin represents a repentant sinner, which is a bit unexpected if you stop to think about it for a minute. Did the coin at first not want to be found, and then finally "repent" and present itself to the peasant woman? Of course not. Likewise, the woman who rejoiced seems to represent the angels in heaven who rejoice. But the woman rejoiced because she looked for and found the coin. There is no indication that the angels were ever looking for the repentant person.

It is important to realize that parables are not meant to have a one-to-one correspondence between each element of the story and each element of reality. Rather they are intended to create a vivid picture in our minds that is more than just the sum of its parts—a picture in which one particular truth stands out.

So the heart of this parable is the joy of the woman and the joy of angels in heaven. Just as for the woman the coin meant a lot, so, too, for the angels in heaven the repentant sinner means a lot. Our focus here is on that sense of joy.

Although God is not specifically mentioned in this parable, it is not at all a stretch, especially with a lesson geared toward first graders, to "inject" his presence, for his own joy is clearly presumed. Repentance is not something that God looks on begrudgingly. Rather, it gives him joy, a point that is emphasized in the very next parable of the Prodigal Son (see Luke 15:20–32 and how the father responds to the son's return).

Begin the lesson by reading aloud:

Many of the people in Jesus' time were very poor. To help them understand more about God, Jesus told stories that they would really understand—like this one.

Suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Does she not light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, "Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin." In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.

This poor woman lived in a small house that was very dark. She didn't even have windows. She had to light oil lamps when she wanted light. And there were no wooden floors or carpets either, just the ground covered with straw to keep things a bit warm and comfortable.

She had ten silver coins. That was a lot of money for her. One coin allowed her to buy food and oil for her lamp each day. So losing even just one silver coin meant that she would have no money for that day—no money for food or the oil she needed. That is why she looked for it desperately.

The house was dark, so she had to light an oil lamp so she could see, even though the oil cost money, too. She looked in every corner of her little house to find it. Imagine yourself in the darkest part of your house, maybe an attic or part of your basement. Imagine that all the lights went out and you had only a flashlight to find things. That is what it was like for this woman looking for her one little coin.

She even swept the floor so she could find the coin hidden in all that straw. Sometimes you drop something small on the floor, like a bead or a tiny Lego piece, or maybe a piece of a model you are gluing together. You get on your hands and knees, but it is so hard to find. It blends right in with the carpet, or maybe it rolled under a sofa. Imagine if your whole house had straw on the floor instead of carpets or wood or linoleum. It would take you forever to find anything.

It was very slow work, but the woman kept looking until she found the coin. And when she did, she was so happy she went and told her friends and neighbors.

This woman felt the way you would feel if you lost something important to you. Imagine getting ready to go on a long vacation with your family. Right before you leave, and everyone is getting into the car, you realize that you can't find your favorite toy or book or stuffed animal—the one you take with you everywhere. There is NO WAY you are getting into that car until you find it! So you and your family go back inside and go through the whole house looking until you find it. And when you do, you feel filled with joy and relief.

God wants us to love him and to know him. And when we do, God feels the same kind of joy this woman had when she found that precious coin. The coin was something she *longed* to have. And God longs for us in the same way. God is full of joy about us.

Lesson

2

Luke 18:1–8

Don't Give Up When You Pray

What the Parent Should Know: This parable is about God wanting us to keep bringing our concerns to him. No explanation of the different elements in this parable is given—other than that God will not lose patience or become annoyed, like the judge in this parable.

In Jesus' times, judges were figures of authority whose responsibility it was to make sure that justice was carried out. Injustice, in the form of taking advantage of the poor and others (like the widow in this story) who had no social clout, was rampant. The judge in this story had no compulsion to be just, since he "neither feared God nor cared about men." This put people like the widow of the story in a position of oppression from which there was no means of escape, no higher court of appeal. She had no choice but to be persistent in making her appeal in the hope that the judge would change his mind.

Jesus' point here is that even such an unjust judge will eventually be worn down by a widow's persistence. And if this can be expected with an unjust judge, how much more reliable is God, the supremely just judge? The answer may not come immediately; even with God, persistence is a virtue. But unlike with the unjust judge, the one who appeals to God can rest assured that the prayer is indeed being heard from the very beginning.

Persistence, therefore, is not a futile banging of one's head against the wall. It is, for whatever reason, a dimension of prayer. Prayer is an exercise in persistence. So to paraphrase Jesus' point, when in praying there is no answer immediately forthcoming, do not picture in your mind an unjust God who has turned a deaf ear. Picture instead a listening and responsive God.

Now, what Jesus does not answer is why such persistence in prayer has to happen in the first place. Why, after all, does God not show how completely different he is from the unjust judge by answering swiftly? Jesus does not address that here, but we can presume that persistence is valued by him

knew that if people saw his power, they would want to be around him just so that they could get things from him.

Jesus knew that if people started wanting to be around him *just* because he could do miracles, they might not listen to what he had to teach them about God. So he didn't tell anyone what he was doing. Only the disciples and a few servants saw that Jesus turned the water into wine. Jesus kept the miracle secret from everyone else at the wedding.

When the disciples saw the miracle, they began to understand that Jesus really had power from God to do things no one else could do. He could change water to wine. Later, after he had spent some time teaching the people, Jesus would do other miracles. He would heal people who were sick and feed thousands of people with just a little food.

These miracles showed that Jesus had power over everything created on earth—just like God. God is the Creator. He made everything and has power over it. And the miracles of Jesus, beginning with the water turned into wine, showed that Jesus too had power over all of creation.

Lesson

7

Matthew 8:23–27

Jesus Controls the Weather

What the Parent Should Know: This is one of the better-known miracles of Jesus, and for good reason: Jesus begins to control the weather, to the amazement of his disciples. Up to now, his ministry has been characterized by some healings (which are enough to make one take notice) and some powerful and challenging speeches. But this act of calming the storm is different, for it shows Jesus' ability to control the elements of the created order.

When wind and water are put back in their place, so to speak, we should be reminded of the parting of the Red Sea by Moses. Here, too, God's people are saved from a watery threat. The miracle also calls to mind the story of Noah, where another watery threat comes to naught. And ultimately, the controlling of the elements of creation takes us back to Genesis 1, where God brought order by controlling the swirling, chaotic, primeval waters (called "the deep" in some English translations of Genesis 1:2).

Jesus' miracle here makes very clear that Jesus' ministry is a redemptive event, following the pattern of these other big redemptive events in the Old

Testament. The miracle also sets Jesus apart as one who truly has the right to be heard: he does things that only God can be said to do, hence the disciples' reaction "What kind of man is this?" Even though the disciples already know that they had to turn to Jesus for help ("Lord, save us!"), they are now beginning to understand that he is more than they might have thought—a napping, drowsy messiah at one moment, who can roll out of bed, so to speak, and control nature by the words of his mouth.

As we saw in Lesson 6, this display of Jesus' power over creation is only revealed to his disciples. One can imagine the "media circus" that would have ensued had such displays been the center of Jesus' public ministry. What Jesus was about was not the miracles themselves. Rather, the miracles served a larger purpose—they confirmed the divine authority of his words and deeds.

Begin by reading aloud:

Before I read you the passage we're going to learn about today, let me tell you what comes just before it. Jesus had been talking to crowds of people. There was a lot of confusion around Jesus—the crowd had begun to push and shove to see him—and Jesus wanted to teach something to only the disciples. So he told the disciples that they should all take fishing boats (many of the disciples had been fishermen before they began to follow Jesus, so they knew all about boats) and cross over to the other side of the lake (the Sea of Galilee).

Then he got into the boat and his disciples followed him. Without warning, a furious storm came up on the lake, so that the waves swept over the boat. But Jesus was sleeping. The disciples went and woke him, saying, "Lord, save us! We're going to drown!"

He replied, "You of little faith, why are you so afraid?" Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm.

The men were amazed and asked, "What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!"

It is really disappointing to have a nice day planned only to have it ruined by the weather. Maybe you have a picnic planned, or you are going to the fair, or you have a soccer or baseball game to play. And then it rains, and everything is ruined.

You might wish that you could just make the rain stop, but of course you can't. When it rains it rains, and there isn't anything you can do

about it. You might just as well jump over the moon as make the rain stop. You simply have to wait.

That's why this is such an amazing story. Jesus and his disciples are on a boat crossing the Sea of Galilee. All of a sudden a big storm comes and tosses the boat back and forth. The storm is so bad that the disciples are afraid they will drown. If you have ever been outside in a really bad storm—not even in a boat, but just out in the open, in a big field or at the shore—you know how frightening it can be.

But the storm didn't frighten Jesus at all. In fact, he was taking a nap!

When Jesus controls the storm, he is showing the disciples that he has God's power. God is the only one who has the power to make creation do what he wants. Jesus can control the weather because he is God's son.

This story doesn't mean that every time something bad happens, Jesus will make it better right away. Instead, it shows us that Jesus has God's power.

Lesson

8

Luke 9:10–17

Five Loaves and Two Fish

What the Parent Should Know: Jesus and the disciples had intended to take a bit of a break in the town of Bethsaida (on the Sea of Galilee), but a crowd followed them nonetheless. So Jesus spent the better part of a day talking to them about the kingdom he was building, the kingdom of God (v. 11). The news that Jesus came to build this kingdom is called the Gospel or “good news” (see Luke 9:6).

The crowd numbered about 5,000 men, many more if you included women and children. They refused to leave, and the disciples were apparently concerned that they would not have enough for them to eat. They told Jesus to send them away, but he had something different in mind: “You give them something to eat.” But with only five loaves and two fish, the disciples' only option as far as they could see, was to go to town and do some shopping. That option was ridiculous from a financial point of view, and one wonders if there is even a hint of sarcasm in the disciples' voices.

Of course, Jesus had other ideas. Once again, the feeding of the 5,000 is more than just a show of power on Jesus' part: Jesus's miracle is patterned

If this man didn't take care of his responsibilities, the rest of his family would be angry with him. The neighbors would gossip about what a bad son he was. They might ignore him when they met him in the street, or refuse to come to his house for dinner. Even though following Jesus would be the best thing this man could possibly do, it would make others angry and ruin his comfortable life.

This is what Jesus wanted his followers to understand. Being the fan of a famous person is fun—and easy, because you really don't have to do anything. But following Jesus is entirely different. Jesus is telling the people that if they want to become his disciples, their lives will not always be easy.

Lesson

14

Matthew 11:28–30

Jesus Gives Rest to the Weary

What the Parent Should Know: This passage is one that is prone to some misunderstanding. It suggests a picture of Jesus who is warm, welcoming, and kind. This is all true, but the full impact of that picture can best be seen when we understand this passage is also a fierce criticism of the Pharisees, the religious leaders of the day.

Note how the passage is set up by vv. 25–27: “At that time Jesus said, ‘I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure. All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.’”

Jesus is the conduit between God and humanity: only the Son knows the Father, and it is only through the Son that the Father can be known. So, knowing God is something that can only be done through knowing the Son.

This can only be fully understood if we remember that in Jesus' day it was through the study of Torah (the law given to Moses) that God's people would acquire wisdom and godliness. The “yoke” is a metaphor for the Law. It is something to be subject to, as a literal yoke was used to bind one ox to another for pulling a heavy load.

From an Old Testament perspective, this is certainly correct. The Law required a disciplined and determined lifestyle, but one that would reap great benefits for God's people (one need only skim the 176 verses of Psalm 119 to see this in action). But Jesus is saying, "I am now the yoke." He is replacing the Law as the means by which God's people know him; the people are now to learn from him, not teachers of the Law. To those who are burdened with the Law, namely those whose yoke is made excessive by the Pharisees, Jesus says "come to me . . . my yoke is easy . . . my burden is light." Jesus is gentle and humble, the very characteristics that will flourish in those who take his yoke upon them.

A yoke still implies a submission to something. Jesus' yoke is not a free ride, as if the actions of his followers don't matter ("Hey, get rid of the Law and follow me, we'll have a good time"). Rather it is a yoke of getting to know Jesus more and more, not the pressure of trying to be good enough for God.

This story complements the message of our last lesson. In that, Jesus was saying, "Don't think that following me is all fun and games." That message remains true, but we need to understand this aspect of following Jesus as well: Becoming his disciple also lifts a huge burden that is impossible for any of us to carry.

Begin by reading aloud:

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

Have you ever gone hiking or taken a long, long walk? Sometimes families like to go camping, and that usually involves a good bit of walking and carrying heavy backpacks.

That can be tiring. You wake up early in the morning, maybe before the sun even is up. You pack everything up—the tent, the food, the sleeping bags, bug spray, cooking pots, and who knows what else. And then, when you have put everything on your back and you begin walking, it doesn't take too long before you are exhausted.

In Jesus' day, many people were carrying around something else that was very heavy. But it wasn't a backpack.

Many people thought that, for God to love them, they had to be very careful to do all sorts of things *perfectly* so that God would not be angry. In Jesus' day, the way that the Jews learned about God was by studying the Law in the Old Testament. Sometimes this was just called "the Law."

Other times it was called “the Law of Moses.” Another word you might have heard is “Torah.” They all mean the same thing. The Law told the people what God is like and how to obey him. But following the Law was very hard work. And no one could do it completely right all the time.

In Jesus’ day, the men who were supposed to teach people how to obey the Law were called Pharisees. But the Pharisees did not just teach their followers about the Law. They were so worried to make sure people kept the Law that they added extra laws. For example, the Old Testament says that you should not work on the Sabbath because that is a day of rest. But the Pharisees were afraid that people might work by accident and break the Law without knowing it. So they made all sorts of extra laws to keep people from even getting *close* to working on the Sabbath. They said that you couldn’t carry anything on a journey, in case that might be working. They said that you couldn’t gather food from a field if you were hungry. They even got angry with Jesus for healing someone on the Sabbath. Healing is a good thing to do, but the Pharisees said, “No, that is too much like work. We can’t allow it.”

It was hard to keep track of all that the Pharisees wanted the people to do. And it was even harder to do it right. Keeping track of all of the laws and following them all was like carrying a heavy burden on your back all the time. The word Jesus uses to describe this burden is “yoke.” A yoke is a heavy wooden frame that joins together two animals so they can pull a heavy load, like two oxen pulling a wagon.

For the Jews of Jesus’ time, studying the Law and obeying it was like having a yoke on you. Now, a yoke is not a bad thing at all. It keeps the oxen in line, working together, to get the job done. Having the Law as a “yoke” helped the people know how to live and know God. But Jesus was saying that the Pharisees made the yoke and the load they were pulling far, far too heavy by piling all those extra laws in the wagon. That heavy weight actually made it *harder* for the people to know God.

That is why Jesus tells the people to come to him. They are “weary” and “burdened” by this heavy weight placed on them by the Pharisees. But Jesus says they do not need to pull that burden. The only yoke they need is following Jesus and listening to him. That is why Jesus says, “Take *my yoke* upon you and learn from me.” Jesus has a yoke, too, but his yoke will actually give the people *rest* from the heavy burden the Pharisees put on them.

Knowing God is not about having to keep a lot of laws in just the right way. Jesus is saying that knowing God is about following Jesus and listening to what he says.

Jesus understands this, but he wants his people to do something that is very different, and also difficult. If someone grabs a toy out of your hand, instead of yelling and fighting, give him *another* toy. Or if someone barges in and changes the channel on the TV, say, “OK, let’s watch what you want to watch.”

Yes, sometimes you need to tell your parents or teacher when people are unkind or harm you in some way. When you are a child and someone does something unkind to you, it’s often a very good thing to tell a teacher or parent what is going on. Jesus is saying that when people do mean things to us, we should not fight back *ourselves*. It takes two people to fight, two people to get into an argument, two people to yell at each other. Jesus is saying “Be the person who walks away from a fight—and does something kind instead.”

Lesson 19

Matthew 6:25–34

One Day at a Time

What the Parent Should Know: It is hard to think of a more timely teaching of Jesus for contemporary Western society. As I write this, the world is in the midst of a severe economic downturn. Unemployment is up, people are losing their houses, the future is uncertain, and people are afraid.

Jesus’ words here, however, are not an easy remedy. If you stop to think about it, saying that we should “not worry” about basic necessities by saying “look at the birds and lilies” is nonsensical. Birds and lilies have nothing to worry about: one is an animal without the capacity for abstract thought, and the other a fully non-thinking plant. By definition they HAVE nothing to worry about. A more relevant comparison might have been with the faithful neighbor down the street who does not worry, for God supplies all his needs. “God will take care of you, too,” would be understandable.

But don’t be fooled. Jesus’ choice of object lessons is penetrating and disarming. The fact that birds and plants have, by definition, nothing to worry about is precisely Jesus’ point. To those who have learned that their true treasure is in heaven, that they actually cannot serve two masters (vv. 19–24), worry is out of the question. For these people, worry is as impossible for them as it is for birds and plants. It simply doesn’t exist.

It is those who do not trust God, the “pagans” of v. 32, who run after these things. But for followers of Christ, we are to “seek first his kingdom and his righteousness.” This does not mean having your head in the clouds, waiting for heaven and blissful existence. It means living each day, not thinking about food and clothing, but where your first priority is living in such a way that reflects the teaching of Jesus, the kingdom he is building, his righteousness.

Six-year-olds do not have the same capacity for worry about basic necessities as adults. They can, however, begin to develop a mental picture of what it means to follow Jesus: we trust God to supply our needs so our energies can be devoted to kingdom living, i.e., acting and thinking in ways that suit a follower of Jesus.

Begin by reading aloud:

“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?

“And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

“Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.”

Are you wearing clothes right now? Of course you are! (What a silly question.) Did you eat something today? You probably did. If you didn’t yet, you probably will very soon.

Who gave you your clothes? Probably a grown-up gave them to you or bought them from a store. How did all that food get into your house? Probably an adult went to the grocery store and bought it for you.

When you are out playing or watching TV, you don't think to yourself, "Oh no! Where am I going to get some clothes to wear when I wake up tomorrow?" or "I have no idea how I am going to eat breakfast when I get up tomorrow!" You don't worry about those things because they will all be right there waiting for you. Someone else takes care of it for you every day.

In this story, Jesus is saying something just like that. He is telling his followers that it is not their job to worry constantly about whether they will have enough food or clothing in the future. Instead, it is their job to think about how they can continue to follow him.

This is hard for grown-ups to do—and when you get older, you will probably find it hard to do as well. But right now, you can understand what Jesus means by this teaching, probably better than the grown-ups around you. You can think about what it means to be kind to those who do unkind things to you, without worrying about whether you'll get any dinner. You can work, every day, on speaking the truth, instead of concentrating on finding clothes to wear tomorrow.

This is what Jesus is saying to his people. He is saying, "Put your energy where it belongs. Work hard to understand what it means to follow me—instead of worrying constantly about what the future will bring." Often, when Jesus is teaching, he tells his followers that they should "be like children." This is one of the times when children find it easier to understand what Jesus means than grown-ups do!

Lesson 20

Matthew 7:7-12

You Can Ask God Anything

What the Parent Should Know: This passage can be thought of in two parts, vv. 7-11 and v. 12. It may look like v. 12 (the "Golden Rule") is just tacked on, but that is not the case.

As for the first part, Jesus is making a point in a way that he employs elsewhere: "If even x is true, how much more do you think y is true?" Incidentally, this type of argumentation is a common one among rabbis, and is called in Hebrew "qal va-homer," or in English "easy and hard." If the hard things can be done, how much more can the easy things be done? (In contemporary

Unit 5

Jesus' Early Life

For the Parent: There are essentially three phases to Jesus' life as presented in the Gospels: the early years before his ministry begins (which is the topic of this unit), his ministry years (where there is a steady movement from general acceptance to rejection of Jesus' message), and the end of his life (Passion Week). The stories of Jesus' early life are much more involved than our Christmas pageants might suggest. They are theologically loaded statements about who Jesus is, connecting him to Israel's story in the Old Testament (as can be seen most clearly in the genealogies of Matthew and Luke), and foreshadowing much of what is to follow in the Gospels. In other words, they are not a sort of picture album of Jesus' boyhood ("Oh, and here's the time the little guy wandered away from his parents.") They are setting up the story of Jesus, and so demand our attention.

Like the other units dealing with Jesus' life, this one does not try to cover every detail. Instead, certain themes are highlighted. The assumption is that this curriculum is not the student's only exposure to the basic outline of Jesus' life and ministry.

What the Parent Should Know: The story of Jesus' birth is well known to even casual readers of the Bible. Joseph and Mary are pledged to be married. This is anything but a casual relationship! Before their marriage, Joseph finds Mary to be pregnant, and so has "in mind to divorce her quietly" (Matthew 1:19). The pledged relationship was so binding that a legal divorce was required to sever it. Joseph's motive for doing this quietly was to avoid the penalty of stoning for Mary.

But Joseph found out through angelic visitation that Mary was pregnant by the Holy Spirit (note that only Luke describes the angelic announcement to Mary; Luke 1:26–38). This episode, which receives very little elaboration, is the moment of the incarnation, the conception of the God-man (the Latin root means "to make flesh"). The incarnation is perhaps the single most difficult concept for any Christian to grasp. In fact, the early church did not reach a general agreement on how to think of the incarnation until the Council of Chalcedon in A.D. 451, and even afterward the history of the church is marked by arguments over different ways to explain this most mysterious of Christian doctrines.

It is also curious that only Matthew and Luke mention the moment of incarnation. The other Gospels are silent, as is the rest of the New Testament. Matthew's decision to highlight the unique nature of Jesus' birth is no doubt connected to his Jewish audience. Matthew, who presents Jesus to his readers as Israel's messiah, is consistent in making connections between the story of Jesus and the Old Testament.

In 1:22–23, Matthew cites Isaiah 7:14 to connect Jesus' birth with Israel's story. A glance at the context: Isaiah is referring to an attack on Jerusalem, ruled by King Ahaz of Judah, by a coalition of hostile forces. Isaiah assures King Ahaz that God will side with Jerusalem and Judah, and God gives him a sign. A child will be born, and before that child is old enough to "choose the right and reject the wrong" the coalition will be dissolved and "laid waste" (see especially Isaiah 7:16–17). This child will be called, symbolically, "Immanuel," which means "God with us," which is exactly what happened in Ahaz's day: God was with Judah, and the particular child born during the time of Ahaz was the sign.

But Matthew, as he often does, is arguing that the ultimate fulfillment of the Old Testament is actually far beyond what the Old Testament prophets themselves understood. The full significance of their words would not be understood until Jesus himself came. The “child” as a sign of “God with us” receives its fullest expression in Jesus’ birth.

The incarnation is difficult to explain, even for experienced theologians—and it is doubly difficult to explain to children. For this reason, this lesson will focus not on the conception or other complexities of this passage, but on the purpose of Jesus’ birth: this was God’s way of being with his people.

Begin by reading aloud:

Before we read today’s story, I want to explain two words to you. “Christ” and “messiah” are two words that both mean “anointed one.” An “anointed one” is specially chosen by God. In the Old Testament, when God chose a man to be king, that man was “anointed”—he had special oil poured on his head to show that God had picked him for a particular job. You will hear “Christ” and “messiah” both used to describe Jesus.

Now listen to this story:

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel”—which means, “God with us.”

When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

At the beginning of this story, Joseph and Mary were not yet married. Couples were only supposed to have children *after* they were married—so Joseph was surprised and disappointed to find out that Mary was going to have a baby. The law at that time said that Joseph could call

off the marriage. Today, it is only a married couple that gets a divorce. But back then, being engaged was a serious promise to get married. You couldn't just break up; the law said that you had to get a divorce to call off the wedding.

The law also said that if a woman who was not yet married became pregnant, she could be stoned to death. But Joseph was a good man. He wanted to divorce Mary quietly so that she would not be punished.

Joseph did not yet understand that Mary had not done anything wrong. Mary was going to have a baby because of a miracle God did. Mary was going to have the baby—but the child came from God.

Why did God do this? Because he wanted to live on earth like us, to be with us. That is what the word “Immanuel” means: God with us.

God knows what it is like to be you or me. God *made* us, but he also knows what it is like to *be* us. He did this because he loves us.

We sometimes think of God with a white beard, sitting far away up in heaven. That is just make-believe. No one can describe what God is like. That's why he became a man, Jesus, so people could see face to face what God is like. Jesus came to explain to us who God is.

Imagine that you are promised a bicycle for your birthday. You are excited, and you ask your parents what it looks like. They describe it to you, and you can sort of imagine it, but it's just not real to you. You're disappointed, because you are excited but the bicycle is only something in your mind. Then your parents say, “Tell you what. Rather than describing the bike, what if we just *show* it to you?” They wheel it out from the garage and you see it—with all its colors, shiny chrome, gears, and brakes. That's better than just thinking about it. Now you really *know* what the bike is like.

God came to earth to be like us so that we would really *know* what he was like. But there is a second purpose in God's coming to earth. Because God became human, he knows, just like you do, how it feels to be happy, sad, afraid, lonely, sick, and every other way we might feel. When he tells us things like “love your enemy” he knows how hard it can be to do that. When he says “obey your mother and father” he understands that sometimes you may be frustrated and not want to obey. When he says “do not be afraid,” he understands just what it means to be afraid—really afraid.

God became a person to show us that he loves us—and that is who Jesus is.

Philip and Nathanael

What the Parent Should Know: In Lesson 25 we looked at the first disciples Jesus called: Andrew, Simon, James, and John. The calling of Philip and Nathanael is told only in John's Gospel (John does not mention James and John). Like the first four men, Philip responds immediately.

But Nathanael is incredulous at the messiah coming from Nazareth. The town was of no significance (see Lesson 24). When Nathanael expresses his doubts, Philip gets him to come see Jesus for himself (see also 1:39). As Nathanael approaches, Jesus comments at how there is nothing "false" in Nathanael, which simply means that he is a good, decent fellow who is straight up and direct, as we see in his honest comment to Philip in v. 46.

The heart of this passage is in how Jesus knew Nathanael before Nathanael ever made the effort to come to know him. Jesus saw him sitting under the fig tree before Nathanael ever thought to "come and see." This is one of the great paradoxes of the faith: we come to Jesus only to realize that Jesus knows us before we know him.

This realization brought Nathanael to confess Jesus as rabbi (authoritative teacher) and Son of God/King of Israel. These latter two titles are interchangeable in this context. "Son of God" can mean several things in the Old Testament, including humanity in general, but it also refers to the ideal king, David (2 Samuel 7:14; Psalm 2:7; 89:27). Nathanael is not making a declaration of Jesus' divinity but of his kingship.

Jesus rewards Nathanael's faith by assuring him that he will see even greater things, namely "heaven open and the angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man." "Son of Man" is a favorite term Jesus uses to designate himself. Although the term typically simply means "human" (or more simply, "I"), in this context Jesus likely has Daniel 7:13–14 in mind, which was understood in his day to refer to a messianic figure. The ascending/descending issue refers to Jacob's ladder (Genesis 28:12). By alluding to this Old Testament episode, Jesus is saying two things: that he is the new Jacob—or better, the new Israel (since Jacob's name was Israel), and that his disciples will come to see plainly that heaven itself will bear witness to that.

This is a packed passage. Jesus is Rabbi, King, and Israel all wrapped up into one. And he also saw Nathanael before Nathanael knew him. For

the purposes of introducing this story to young children, we will focus on this last part.

Begin by reading aloud:

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

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

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

"Come and see," said Philip.

When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, "Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false."

"How do you know me?" Nathanael asked.

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

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

Jesus said, "You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You shall see greater things than that." He then added, "I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."

In this story, Jesus calls another disciple to follow him—Philip. Philip then runs to tell his friend Nathanael that he has met the messiah—the anointed one, the king that the prophets said would come. But Nathanael doesn't believe him. Someone as important as the messiah would not come from such a little town as Nazareth. Important people come from important places.

But Nathanael went to meet Jesus anyway. Can you imagine his surprise when he met Jesus and learned that Jesus already knew him, before Nathanael ever came to meet him?

Think about that for a second. Nathanael goes with his friend to see this Jesus, to check him out to see if he is as important as Philip says. I don't think Nathanael was expecting to find anyone all that interesting. So as he is coming, Jesus says, "Ah, I see that you are a good man." Nathanael wonders how in the world this man Jesus could know anything about him. But Jesus says more. He tells Nathanael that even before

Philip came to get him, Jesus already knew who he was. Nathanael is astonished by this! He says, “Jesus, you really are the great teacher and the great king, and I will follow you and be your disciple.”

Jesus knew Nathanael before Nathanael met Jesus. And the great thing is that Jesus knows not just Nathanael but all of his followers like that. That includes you, too. You know Jesus, but do you realize that he knew you long before you even thought of him? Jesus has been thinking of you and bringing you to himself all along.

Lesson 28

Luke 10:38–42

A Story of Two Sisters

What the Parent Should Know: This short story about Martha and Mary seems like a random episode, just thrown in at some point in Luke’s Gospel (it does not appear in the other Gospels). It is, however, another story about discipleship and what it means to follow Jesus. Note how this story is sandwiched between the parable of the Good Samaritan and Jesus’ teaching about prayer, both of which challenge Jesus’ audience to move beyond conventional ways of thinking. There is more to this episode than meets the eye.

In this story, we find Jesus at the house of Martha and Mary, having been invited by the former while Jesus and his disciples were in town (Bethany; see John 12:1–3). Martha prepares a meal for her guests, an honorable activity, particularly in the ancient world where hospitality was highly valued. But she is not too happy that her sister Mary is sitting around listening to Jesus rather than helping.

On one level, Martha is correct to have some feelings about this. It is Mary’s house, too, and it is her obligation, particularly as a woman in the ancient world, to serve the guests. One could certainly envision the man of the household going off in deep conversation with his male guests while others took care of the meal, but we would not expect a woman to do the same thing. In Jesus’ day, women were not particularly worthy of “sitting in on classes,” so to speak. They did not receive instruction from religious teachers.

But here we have a woman sitting at Jesus feet. This may be a bit subtle for our contemporary sensibilities, but we see here a woman so eager to hear Jesus that she obliterates custom—and Jesus commends her for it.

Matthew 13:53–58

Jesus' Hometown Does Not Accept Him

What the Parent Should Know: Opposition to Jesus did not come just from the Roman government or Jewish leadership. It came from those who knew him best. They saw the boy grow up as a carpenter's son. They knew his family. And here he is, walking into the synagogue and teaching. This is not something the working class does—only the educated, those who have studied with the rabbis.

Still, what Jesus taught amazed the people, and they couldn't get their heads around it. "How can someone like us teach this way?"

It is ironic that the Jewish leadership rejected Jesus because he wasn't one of them, whereas Jesus' town folk rejected him because he was. As Jesus says in Matthew 8:20, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to rest his head."

Children should learn that Jesus lived a life of rejection. Even his closest disciples turned from him at the end. Often, Jesus was unpopular and unwelcome.

Our own lives, children's included, are sometimes marked by similar times of isolation in our Christian journeys. During those times it is helpful for us to know that we are following in the master's footsteps.

Begin by reading aloud:

When Jesus had finished these parables, he moved on from there.

Coming to his hometown, he began teaching the people in their synagogue, and they were amazed. "Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers?" they asked. "Isn't this the carpenter's son? Isn't his mother's name Mary, and aren't his brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas? Aren't all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things?" And they took offense at him.

But Jesus said to them, "Only in his hometown and in his own house is a prophet without honor."

And he did not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith.

Jesus was not always welcomed by others. He was not always popular. He was famous, and people knew who he was. But many times, he

was not accepted or even liked. Sometimes it seemed like everyone was against him, even the people who knew him best.

Jesus grew up in the town of Nazareth. People knew him. They had watched him grow up. They knew his mother, Mary, and his father, Joseph. They knew his brothers and sisters.

As a grown man, Jesus came back to his hometown and began teaching in the synagogue. Remember, a synagogue is where the Jews of Jesus' day went to study and learn about God. (Synagogues still exist today all over the world.)

But this surprised the people of his hometown. They knew Jesus as Joseph's son, the son of a carpenter. In those days, carpenters did not go to school to learn how to teach the Bible, and they certainly did not teach in a synagogue. Teaching was something that only rabbis did. They were the only teachers who were trained in school to read the Bible and explain it. The people of Nazareth felt that Jesus had no business doing what he did. It bothered them that Jesus was teaching them about God, and so they did not want to listen.

In this story, we see that although Jesus came to tell people about God, people were not always open to listening to him. Everywhere Jesus went, there were people against him. Sometimes the Roman government was against him. Sometimes the leaders of the synagogues fought with him. And here even the people of his hometown turned against him.

Jesus lived a life of rejection. He was not always liked. In fact, there were some people who hated him. This can happen to us, too. Following Jesus sometimes means that others will not like us, and we might feel very alone. Jesus knows exactly how that feels.

Lesson

31

Matthew 12:38–42

Greater than Jonah and Solomon

What the Parent Should Know: Occasionally, Jesus' opponents wanted to see some proof that he was the messiah, some miraculous sign. Jesus was not in the habit of becoming a dog-and-pony show, and he took these moments as an opportunity to call out his opponents for their inability to recognize him (note he calls them a "wicked and adulterous generation" for asking for a sign, v. 39).

Jesus Is Alive Again

What the Parent Should Know: John reports that Mary Magdalene was the first to come to the tomb. (“Magdalene” likely means that she came from Magdala, a town along the Sea of Galilee.) Although John’s Gospel does not mention it, Mary was apparently coming back at the first opportunity after the Sabbath day ended to complete the burial preparation that had to be cut short on Friday (see John 19:42 and Mark 16:1). She came alone and saw that the stone had been removed, and so ran back to tell Peter and John (“the other disciple, the one Jesus loved,” v. 2). Mary clearly had no thought of resurrection, for she told the disciples that Jesus’ body had been “taken” and “we don’t know where they have put him” (v. 2).

Peter and John heard the news and ran for the tomb. John got there first, and Peter followed behind. Both saw the strips of linen on the ground, and Peter actually ventured in. The linen strips pertain to Jewish burial practices (19:40), where strips of linen were wrapped around the body that had been prepared with spices. Inside the tomb Peter saw the burial cloth “folded up” and placed apart from the linen (v. 7; the Greek word may simply mean “rolled up,” but the basic idea is the same). This seems like an unusual detail to mention, but the care with which the cloth had been left, not to mention the very fact that expensive linen was left behind, makes the case that neither grave robbers nor the disciples themselves were responsible for removing the body—either would have simply taken the body rather than taking the time to unwrap Jesus and then tidy up a bit.

After Peter viewed the scene, John came in and believed. John believed because he saw the empty tomb. Later, Thomas will insist on “seeing” before he believes (20:25), which seems reasonable, since that is what happens at the tomb with John. But Jesus will tell Thomas that believing without seeing is “blessed” (20:29). Why the difference? Because not everyone who believes can possibly have firsthand experience of the empty tomb. This was true for Thomas and would be true for all those coming after him who are reading the Gospel of John and learning about Jesus.

According to Luke 24:13–32, Jesus appeared first on the road to Emmaus and then to the disciples. It was here that he began clarifying the connection between Israel’s story and his resurrection. Jesus explained that his

resurrection was part of God's plan in the Old Testament (v. 25). It would be the apostle Paul who would do the most in clarifying the deep significance of it all. Jesus' resurrection is not a last-minute trick God pulled off to show how powerful he was. Rather, it is the heart and center of the Christian faith. The way Paul puts it is that Jesus is the "firstfruits" (1 Corinthians 15:20, 23) of the resurrection of believers. His resurrection is "phase one" of a grander plan of God to fully redeem his people from death. In other words, the resurrection of Jesus is an indication that the curse of death, the ancient enemy of the Garden, is defeated.

The resurrection of Jesus is like a thread that runs through the entire New Testament and draws it all together. As the student grows older, we will uncover more and more of the significance of the Resurrection. At this stage, however, it is sufficient that children be introduced to the Resurrection. The focus of this passage is on the fact of the empty tomb.

Begin the lesson by reading aloud:

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!"

So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, arrived and went into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen.

Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.)

Jesus was buried in a tomb after he was crucified. There was a certain way people were buried back then. Friends and relatives would wrap the body in strips of expensive linen cloth with spices to take some of the smell away. A cloth was also placed over the face of the dead person. Then the body was laid in a tomb, often a small cave carved out of a rock, and a large boulder was rolled over the front of the tomb. An important reason for using a large boulder was to keep grave robbers from coming in and taking the expensive linen or other things that the family might

have left in the tomb. (Grave robbers were common in the ancient world. For example, you have probably heard of grave robbers breaking into the pyramids to rob the graves of pharaohs in ancient Egypt.)

All of this preparation took a lot of time, and this was a problem for Jesus' followers. Jesus was crucified on Friday, and he died in the afternoon. Just a couple of hours later, the sun would go down. That was when the Jewish Sabbath began. The Sabbath lasted from sundown Friday until sundown Saturday—24 hours. During that time Jews were not allowed to do any work.

That is why the disciples could not finish on Friday all the preparation to bury Jesus. They had to wait until the Sabbath was over.

Mary came back early Sunday morning, when the Sabbath was over, to finish the work of preparing Jesus' body for burial. But instead she found that the stone in front of the tomb had been rolled away—and Jesus was gone. All Mary saw were strips of linen lying on the ground. She was completely surprised, and she thought someone had robbed the tomb. So she ran back and told Peter and John. (John's name is not mentioned but he is called here "the one Jesus loved." That doesn't mean Jesus did not love the other disciples, only that Jesus had an especially close relationship with John—maybe because John was younger than the other disciples.)

John and Peter ran to the tomb (John beat Peter there because he was younger), and they also saw the linen strips lying on the ground. They went into the tomb and saw the burial cloth that had covered Jesus' face neatly folded up. That meant that no one had robbed the tomb and taken Jesus' body. A robber would not have taken the time to fold up a cloth, and he wouldn't have left the expensive linen on the ground. He would have taken it away to sell it.

The tomb was empty because Jesus was alive. He had walked out of the tomb on his own!

Jesus had told his disciples this would happen, but they did not understand. They still thought that someone had taken Jesus' body. But very soon—later that day—Jesus would show himself to the disciples. Then they would understand. Jesus was dead, but not anymore. He is alive.