

Unlocking the Bible

A resource devised by Roy Dorey

Beginning as a Christian

Themes from the Bible

What it felt like to be there

Re-writing the Parables

How I learn best

What the Church looks like to those outside it

Questions you would like to ask Jesus

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What is Unlock?

Unlock, by various names, has been around for over 30 years trying to help (mainly) urban Christians to understand and share their faith appropriately. We are especially concerned with communication in a traditional tabloid (non-book) culture. As well as maintaining our team of workers, we publish a variety of resources and can provide training for group leaders.

Our approach is to take people's own experience and/or context as the 'text'. Everyone can speak with authority about their own experience or context. These texts are already 'stored' in their, or their community's, memory. They do not have to be learned, they are already familiar. But they can be explored, compared to other 'texts' like in the Bible, critiqued, and learning drawn from them, which can be applied.

In other words, we can learn about our faith simply by:

1. sharing stories from our own everyday experience and
2. relating them to the stories in the Bible and
3. deciding what to do about it
4. then taking action and
5. sharing stories of the actions we have taken and so on

Our life experience matters; our stories; our joys and sorrows. The Bible has plenty to say - more than we'll ever know - about our lives if we know how to read it and apply it...if we know how to UNLOCK it!

How to use this material:

There are seven sessions in this course, each building from the previous one. The hope is that as a group works through each one, trust and confidence will be built to enable them, as individuals and together, to rise to the increasing challenges each session will present. This could be anything from just being in a room with other people, to reading or praying aloud, to leading parts of the session.

Ground rules for participants:

The first session should set out some "ground rules" for the discussions, to let people know what will happen and how they are expected to contribute. Decide these together so everyone can have a sense of ownership as to how the group is run. Some examples are as follows:

- * Everyone will contribute as much or as little of their personal stories that they are comfortable with.*
- * Everything said during these evenings will stay within the group and be treated as confidential, whether it's someone's personal story or opinion.*
- * People can opt out of exercises, without having to give a reason for it.*
- * Most discussions will be "unfinished" and be interrupted after short periods of time. This is as it should be, since the aim is to start discussions, not finish them.*
- * There are no "right" or "wrong" answers or opinions, and those who perhaps have more in-depth knowledge of the Bible should feel free to contribute to the discussions with "facts" provided they know that those comments are not more valid than other opinions expressed in the group.*

The traditional method of Bible study

The majority of bible studies start with a text.

“There was once a man..”



And moves onto an analysis of the text and the deduction of general principles.

“The good Samaritan helped his neighbour...”



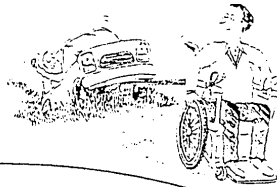
Finally, there is encouragement to apply this to life.

“We must help others.”

This style provides a framework, within which the person can store the information in his/her mind, in note form or on disc for retrieval when it is needed. This requires a way of thinking and communicating that is based on book and lecture methods of learning; it is not the appropriate method for a vast number of people.

Unlock's method of Bible study

Unlocking real life stories of urban people
Unlock's methods begin with a group of people sharing their real life experiences. Unlock's materials suggest different things that will help this to happen - for example, a few questions, a game or a video clip.



... leading to more experiences to be unlocked!

Revealing Good News of the Down to Earth Christ
These real life stories are compared with similar situations in the Bible. Unlock materials provide Bible passages on individual pages, that can be photocopied for use with a group.



Releasing life changing skills and confidence
Change happens as a result of linking real life experiences with the Bible -
“We learn it now and we learn it for life.”
The individuals and groups involved change, and there is often action among those around them.





Unlocking the Bible

Beginning as a Christian

The aim of this study is to look at the way in which the Bible describes the experience of becoming and growing as Christians. It recognises both the commitment of the individual and the context people come from and become part of. Preparation needs to be done in searching out references in the Bible that open up the differences of experience to be found in the church. The following are a few:

Come follow me – Matthew 4 verses 18-22

Acknowledging the Father – Matthew 6 verses 9-13

Hearing and practicing – Matthew 7 verses 24-27

Witnessing the miraculous – Matthew 9 verses 1-8

Impressed by Jesus – Luke 4 verses 14-22

God has come to help – Luke 7 verses 11-17

Being found by God – Luke 15 verses 1-7

From cradle to commitment – Luke 18 verses 18-30

Meeting up with Jesus – Luke 24 verses 25-32

Born again - John 3 verses 5-7

Someone else told me about Jesus – John 4 verses 39-42

Holding on to teaching – John 8 verses 31-32

Seeing and believing - John 20 verses 20-29

Your way of working is:

1. Have to hand the references you have looked up and are confident to explore with the group. It is helpful to prepare sheets for group members with four or five (no more!) different references printed out in full, but *not* with explanatory notes.
2. Ask the group how they became Christians, or involved with the church, or group. Write all the comments on a large sheet of paper and keep visible for everyone to see.
3. Spend time affirming the validity of the experiences, and discussing the variety.
4. Give out the sheets with the references and texts on, and divide the group into threes or fours. Ask each group to try and match their experiences with the Scriptures. Acknowledge that some experiences may not be described in the Scriptures.
5. Ask each group to consider the kind of support they feel they need in their Christian life, in view of how they came into the church.
6. With the full group give time for discussion about their findings, and then, with a large sheet of paper, with someone recording the comments look at:
 - a) How these findings reflect the way in which their local church explains becoming a Christian.
 - b) How we might take account of these findings in our presentation of the Good News in Christ.

References from the Bible

Come follow me – Matthew 4 verses 18-22

As Jesus walked along the shore of Lake Galilee, he saw two brothers who were fishermen, Simon (called Peter) and his brother Andrew, catching fish in the lake with a net. Jesus said to them, “Come with me, and I will teach you to catch people.” At once they left their nets and went with him.

He went on and saw two other brothers, James and John, the sons of Zebedee. They were in their boat with their father Zebedee, getting their nets ready. Jesus called them and at once they left the boat and their father, and went with him



Acknowledging the Father – Matthew 6 verses 9-13

This, then, is how you should pray:

‘Our Father in heaven:

May your holy name be honoured;

may your Kingdom come;

may your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us today the food we need.

Forgive us the wrongs we have done, as we forgive the wrongs that others have done to us.

Do not bring us to hard testing, but keep us safe from the Evil One.

For yours is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory for ever. Amen

Hearing and practicing – Matthew 7 verses 24-27

“So then, anyone who hears these words of mine and obeys them is like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain poured down, the rivers overflowed, and the wind blew hard against that house. But it did not fall, because it was built on rock.

“But anyone who hears these words of mine and does not obey them is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain poured down, the rivers overflowed, the wind blew hard against that house, and it fell. And what a terrible fall that was!”



Witnessing the miraculous – Matthew 9 verses 1-8

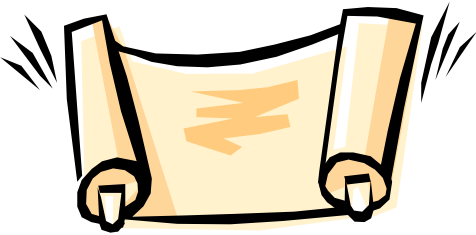
Jesus got into the boat and went back across the lake to his own town of Capernaum where some people brought to him a paralysed man, lying on a bed. When Jesus saw how much faith they had, he said to the paralysed man, “Courage, my son! Your sins are forgiven.”

Then some teachers of the Law said to themselves, “This man is speaking blasphemy!” Jesus perceived what they were thinking, so he said, “Why are you thinking such evil things? Is it easier to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up and walk’? I will prove to you, then, that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.” So he said to the paralysed man, “Get up, pick up your bed, and go home!”

The man got up and went home. When the people saw it, they were afraid, and praised God for giving such authority to people.

Impressed by Jesus – Luke 4 verses 14-22

Then Jesus returned to Galilee, and the power of the Holy Spirit was with him. The news about him spread throughout all that territory. He taught in the synagogues and was praised by everyone.



Then Jesus went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath he went as usual to the synagogue. He stood up to read the Scriptures and was handed the book of the prophet Isaiah. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it is written:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has chosen me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind; to set free the

oppressed and announce that the time has come when the Lord will save his people.” Jesus rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. All the people in the synagogue had their eyes fixed on him, as he said to them, “This passage of scripture has come true today, as you heard it being read.”

They were all well impressed with him and marvelled at the eloquent words that he spoke. They said, “Isn’t he the son of Joseph?”

God has come to help – Luke 7 verses 11-17

Soon afterwards; Jesus went to a town called Nain, accompanied by his disciples and a large crowd. Just as he arrived at the gate of the town, a funeral procession was coming out. The dead man was the only son of a woman who was a widow, and a large crowd from the town was with her. When the Lord saw her, his heart was filled with pity for her, and he said to her, “Don’t cry.” Then he walked over and touched the coffin, and the men carrying it stopped. Jesus said, “Young man! Get up, I tell you!” The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother.

They all were filled with fear and praised God. “A great prophet has appeared among us!” they said; “God has come to save his people!”

This news about Jesus went out through all the country and the surrounding territory.

Being found by God – Luke 15 verses 1-7

One day when many tax collectors and other outcasts came to listen to Jesus, the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law started grumbling, “This man welcomes outcasts and even eats with them!” So Jesus told them this parable:

“Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them — what do you do? You leave the other ninety-nine sheep in the pasture and go looking for the one that got lost until you find it. When you find it, you are so happy that you put it on your shoulders and carry it back home. Then you call your friends and neighbours together and say to them, ‘I am so happy I found my lost sheep. Let us celebrate!’ In the same way, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine respectable people who do not need to repent.



From cradle to commitment – Luke 18 verses 18-30

A Jewish leader asked Jesus, “Good Teacher, what must I do to receive eternal life?”

“Why do you call me good?” Jesus asked him. “No one is good except God alone. You know the commandments: ‘Do not commit adultery; do not commit murder; do not steal; do not accuse anyone falsely; respect your father and your mother.’ ”

The man replied, “Ever since I was young, I have obeyed all these commandments.”

When Jesus heard this, he said to him, “There is still one more thing you need to do. Sell all you have and give the money to the poor, and you will have riches in heaven; then come and follow me.” But when the man heard this, he became very sad, because he was very rich. Jesus saw that he was sad and said, “How hard it is for rich people to enter the Kingdom of God! It is much harder for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle.”

The people who heard him asked, “Who, then, can be saved?”

Jesus answered, “What is humanly impossible is possible for God.”

Then Peter said, “Look! We have left our homes to follow you.”

“Yes,” Jesus said to them, “and I assure you that anyone who leaves home or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the Kingdom of God will receive much more in this present age and eternal life in the age to come.”

Meeting up with Jesus – Luke 24 verses 25-32

Then Jesus said to them, “How foolish you are, how slow you are to believe everything the prophets said! Was it not necessary for the Messiah to suffer these things and then to enter his glory?” And Jesus explained to them what was said about himself in all the Scriptures, beginning with the books of Moses and the writings of all the prophets.

As they came near the village to which they were going, Jesus acted as if he were going farther; but they held him back, saying, “Stay with us; the day is almost over and it is getting dark.” So he went in to stay with them. He sat down to eat with them, took the bread, and said the blessing; then he broke the bread and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, but he disappeared from their sight. They said to each other, “Wasn't it like a fire burning in us when he talked to us on the road and explained the Scriptures to us?”



Born again - John 3 verses 5-7

“I am telling you the truth,” replied Jesus. “No one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit. A person is born physically of human parents, but is born spiritually of the Spirit. Do not be surprised because I tell you that you must all be born again”.

Someone else told me about Jesus – John 4 verses 39-42

Many of the Samaritans in that town believed in Jesus because the woman had said, “He told me everything I have ever done.” So when the Samaritans came to him, they begged him to stay with them, and Jesus stayed there two days.

Many more believed because of his message, and they said to the woman, “We believe now, not because of what you said, but because we ourselves have heard him, and we know that he really is the Saviour of the world.”

Holding on to teaching – John 8 verses 31-32

So Jesus said to those who believed in him, “If you obey my teaching, you are really my disciples; you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.

Seeing and believing - John 20 verses 20-29

After saying this, he showed them his hands and his side. The disciples were filled with joy at seeing the Lord. Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so I send you.” Then he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive people's sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”

One of the twelve disciples, Thomas (called the Twin), was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord!”

Thomas said to them, “Unless I see the scars of the nails in his hands and put my finger on those scars and my hand in his side, I will not believe.”

A week later the disciples were together again indoors, and Thomas was with them. The doors were locked, but Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here, and look at my hands; then stretch out your hand and put it in my side. Stop your doubting, and believe!”

Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!”

Jesus said to him, “Do you believe because you see me? How happy are those who believe without seeing me!”





Unlocking the Bible

Themes from the Bible

The aim of this study is to extend the understanding of those present, drawing on what they already know and believe. This approach draws specifically upon how members of the group already understand Christian teaching on a wide range of subjects. You need to select a theme for the study, and ask them what they understand by it. It is possible to use this approach for a wide range of themes, but it is probably best not to repeat it for more than three sessions in succession.

The themes can be as varied as: *Talking with God, Forgiveness, Greed, Jesus*. It's good to start with one that you feel is not too complicated, so for example you may choose the theme of *Talking with God*. While *Talking with God* is a possible example, in some groups it may be more appropriate to begin with something more experience based

Your way of working is:

1. Prepare for yourself one or two passages from the Bible on prayer, for instance the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6 verses 9-15), the parable of the neighbour asking for bread (Luke 11 verses 5-13), parts of the letter of James (James 1 verses 2-8, James 5 verses 13-16). Either have Bibles for everyone, but preferably print out the passage(s) so that each person has a copy.
2. Ask the group what they know about prayer. The comments of the group should be written on a large sheet of paper.
3. Ask the group where that understanding came from. Answers are written on another sheet of large paper. Responses to this are likely to be more limited in range; from parents, grandparents, school, Sunday School. When this is completed put the sheet alongside the first one.
4. Give out sheets with the chosen passages on to two or three volunteers in advance and ask them to read these to the group. You may find it helpful to choose the Lord's Prayer, as it is known to most people.
5. Ask the group to look at the text and see if it confirms what they are saying about prayer. With a different colour pen try to tick those words on the large sheet that are the same as, or close to, the words in the Lord's prayer.
6. Ask the group if there are, for them, any new things about prayer in the text. Again using a different colour pen write in between the lines on the piece of paper what those new things are.
7. Give some time for people to discuss the affirmations and the new things, and then ask if think there are ways this might influence how they pray.
8. To end the session, ask the group to draw, write or illustrate (possibly using bits cut out of magazines and pasted into a collage), a prayer that takes account of one new thing learnt. They may like to display these at their church.

Matthew 6 verses 9-15

This, then, is how you should pray:

'Our Father in heaven:

May your holy name be honoured;

may your Kingdom come;

may your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us today the food we need.

Forgive us the wrongs we have done, as we forgive the wrongs that others have done to us.

Do not bring us to hard testing, but keep us safe from the Evil One.

For yours is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory for ever. Amen

"If you forgive others the wrongs they have done to you, your Father in heaven will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive the wrongs you have done.

Luke 11 verses 5-13

And Jesus said to his disciples, "Suppose one of you should go to a friend's house at midnight and say, 'Friend, let me borrow three loaves of bread. A friend of mine who is on a journey has just come to my house, and I haven't got any food for him!' And suppose your friend should answer from inside, 'Don't bother me! The door is already locked, and my children and I are in bed. I can't get up and give you anything.' Well, what then? I

tell you that even if he will not get up and give you the bread because you are his friend, yet he will get up and give you everything you need because you are not ashamed to keep on asking.

"And so I say to you: ask, and you will receive; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you. For all those who ask will receive, and those who seek will find, and the door will be opened to anyone who knocks. Would any of you who are fathers give your son a snake when he asks for fish? Or would you give him a scorpion when he asks for an egg? Bad as you are, you know how to give good things to your children. How much more, then, will the Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!



James 1 verses 2-8

My brothers and sisters, consider yourselves fortunate when all kinds of trials come your way, for you know that when your faith succeeds in facing such trials, the result is the ability to endure. Make sure that your endurance carries you all the way without failing, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing. But if any of you lack wisdom, you should pray to God, who will give it to you; because God gives generously and graciously to all. But when you pray, you must believe and not doubt at all. Whoever doubts is like a wave in the sea that is driven and blown about by the wind. People like that, unable to make up their minds and undecided in all they do, must not think that they will receive anything from the Lord.

James 5 verses 13-16

Are any of you in trouble? You should pray. Are any of you happy? You should sing praises. Are any of you ill? You should send for the church elders, who will pray for them and rub olive oil on them in the name of the Lord.

This prayer made in faith will heal the sick; the Lord will restore them to health, and the sins they have committed will be forgiven. So then, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, so that you will be healed. The prayer of a good person has a powerful effect.



Unlocking the Bible

What it felt like to be there

This approach aims at affirming how people feel in different situations and that the feelings they have are a valid part of how God is dealing with them in their lives. It is a counter-balance to the way in which the Christian faith is often presented only as ideas or propositions that we are to accept. It is also being honest about feelings which we are not always able to be honest about.

A passage from the Bible is identified with a range of people involved who would be likely to have different feelings about what is happening. The study encourages people not just to know the facts of the story, but 'what it felt like to be there.'

Any passage from the Bible that includes actions, feelings and a handful of different characters can be used in this way but here are some starter ideas:

Jesus and the two on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24 verses 13-32)

The widow of Nain and her dead son (Luke 7 verses 11-17)

The Letter to Philemon. *We will take the Letter to Philemon as an example.*

Your way of working is:

1. Each person to have the Bible passage and a piece of plain paper.
2. With the group identify the people in the story: Paul, Onesimus, Philemon, possibly other slaves in the household, and other people from the church Philemon attended. You may need to study further about house-churches and slavery before the session so that you can be informed if any questions are asked.
3. Split the group into threes or fours, allotting to each group one of the individuals, or groups of people, in the story already identified. The group needs to allocate a character to each member of the group, and as the leader reads the passage aloud, those representing each of the characters in the story move around in silence and adopt positions that reflect the action in the story. This will help people engage with the feelings of the characters i.e. help them work together on what it felt like to be either Paul, Philemon receiving the letter, Onesimus, or another slave in the household .
4. Then encourage the groups to share their feelings about what is happening and what Paul is asking, and to look at ways of making the return of Onesimus positive for everyone.
5. Help them to identify the different ways in which people are powerful in different situations.
6. Invite the group to identify situations of conflict that they are involved in, and ask if the study may help them to find a way through.

Luke 24 verses 13-32

Jesus and the two on the road to Emmaus

On that same day two of Jesus' followers were going to a village named Emmaus, about 11 kilometres from Jerusalem, and they were talking to each other about all the things that had happened. As they talked and discussed, Jesus himself drew near and walked along with them; they saw him, but somehow did not recognize him. Jesus said to them, "What are you talking about to each other, as you walk along?"

They stood still, with sad faces. One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, "Are you the only visitor in Jerusalem who doesn't know the things that have been happening there these last few days?"

"What things?" he asked.

"The things that happened to Jesus of Nazareth," they answered. "This man was a prophet and was considered by God and by all the people to be powerful in everything he said and did. Our chief priests and rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and he was crucified. And we had hoped that he would be the one who was going to set Israel free! Besides all that, this is now the third day since it happened. Some of the women of our group surprised us; they went at dawn to the tomb, but could not find his body. They came back saying they had seen a vision of angels who told them that he is alive. Some of our group went to the tomb and found it exactly as the women had said, but they did not see him."

Then Jesus said to them, "How foolish you are, how slow you are to believe everything the prophets said! Was it not necessary for the Messiah to suffer these things and then to enter his glory?" And Jesus explained to them what was said about himself in all the Scriptures, beginning with the books of Moses and the writings of all the prophets.

As they came near the village to which they were going, Jesus acted as if he were going farther; but they held him back, saying, "Stay with us; the day is almost over and it is getting dark." So he went in to stay with them. He sat down to eat with them, took the bread, and said the blessing; then he broke the bread and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, but he disappeared from their sight. They said to each other, "Wasn't it like a fire burning in us when he talked to us on the road and explained the Scriptures to us?"



Luke 7 verses 11-17

Jesus Raises a Widow's Son

Soon afterwards Jesus went to a town called Nain, accompanied by his disciples and a large crowd. Just as he arrived at the gate of the town, a funeral procession was coming out. The dead man was the only son of a woman who was a widow, and a large crowd from the town was with her. When the Lord saw her, his heart was filled with pity for her, and he said to her, "Don't cry." Then he walked over and touched the coffin, and the men carrying it stopped. Jesus said, "Young man! Get up, I tell you!" The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother.

They all were filled with fear and praised God. "A great prophet has appeared among us!" they said; "God has come to save his people!"

This news about Jesus went out through all the country and the surrounding territory.



Unlocking the Bible

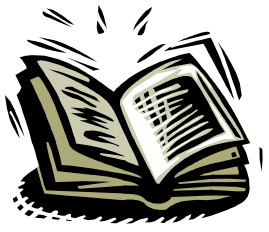
Re-writing the Parables

The aim of this study is to bring the stories Jesus told into the lives of the people in the group, in relation to their own stories.

Your way of working is:

1. Work on the text you are going to use, and decide the key words that open up the teaching of Jesus. Don't write out long notes, but have them available for your own use when leading the study. Joachim Jeremias considers that the best way into understanding parables is to identify one theme that it is dealing with. However as people have different experiences they may not focus on the same issues that you do. For instance, if you take the parable of The Good Samaritan, you can list: neighbourliness, social barriers, inclusiveness and exclusiveness, prejudice, racism, compassion and many others. If you take the parable of The Prodigal Son you can list: forgiveness, family life, despair, growing up, freedom from parents and many others. If you take the parable of The Vineyard Owner, you can list ownership responsibility, hierarchies, economic reward, punishment and many others.
2. Give each person a copy of the text and a blank piece of paper in case they wish to make notes. It might be useful to have some Bibles, in an accessible translation, available too (just in case any one wants to look up other references).
3. The comments of the group should be written up on a large piece of paper and record every comment.
4. Encourage the group to think of the themes (as you have done before), and list what is said. Affirm people's contributions, even if you do not see the links for yourself.
5. Ask for comments about how realistic the story is from their own experience. This is an important point for it begins to make links between what God is doing in their lives now and what Jesus' parables might be saying about it. Spend some time on this to build up the beginnings of people's stories.
6. Ask the group to split into smaller groups of three or four, and set them the task of writing the parable (i) in today's context, and (ii) in today's language. An example of this could be how a family copes with a dad who leaves a mum and two kids for five years to go to live with someone else, and then returns expecting to be accepted back into the family. Also, a boy from one gang helping an injured boy from another gang and making sure he is looked after. Both examples draw out the key issues of the two parables.
7. Return to the paper with the key words, and acknowledge the importance of the teaching for the people in the group. The group may want to spend some quiet time and/or in prayer thinking through what has been learnt.

Depending on the group they may want to present their re-written stories to their church.



Unlocking the Bible

How I learn best

The aim of this study is to look at the way Jesus taught His disciples and how He responded to questions. It also takes seriously the different ways in which people generally learn. In the Bible learning is not about ideas and theories, but about preparation for what we are and how we live.

There are many passages where Jesus taught His disciples. We will take the parable of the sower as an example.

Your way of working is:

1. Ask the group about the ways they learn most easily. Is it from what they do, from stories which are told, what they see happening, or from what they read. You may find that people will say 'it depends on what I am learning.' Help them to explain that further, affirming that there are different kinds of learning for different purposes.
2. Write the comments of the group on a large piece of paper. Record every comment.
3. Have copies of Luke 8 verses 4 – 15 printed out ready to give to each person. If you know there are confident readers in the group, and you have asked someone in advance, they can now to read it aloud for the group to hear, otherwise read it out yourself.
4. Ask the group what method Jesus is using to teach His disciples. Record their comments on another large sheet of paper. Give time to draw out that He tells a story, that it is about things familiar to them, and that He explains the story. Note that Jesus does not usually explain the parables He uses.
5. Ask the group to break up into threes and fours and invite them to try and work out two things: (i) What it is Jesus is teaching them and (ii) what He expected His hearers to do about it.
6. Ask each small group to share their thoughts, and identify the things which are the same and which are different.
7. As a last exercise invite the whole group to talk about how this parable applies to their own lives.

Luke 8 verses 4 – 15

The Parable of the Sower

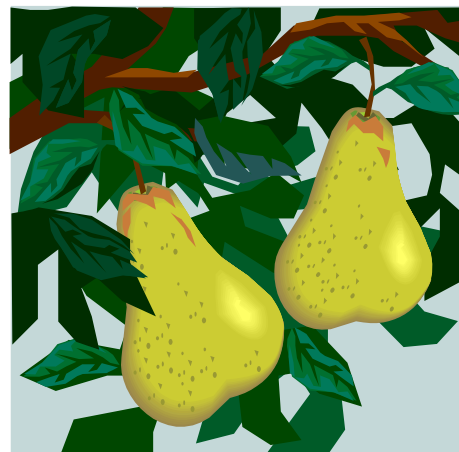
People kept coming to Jesus from one town after another; and when a great crowd gathered, Jesus told this parable: "Once there was a man who went out to sow corn. As he scattered the seed in the field, some of it fell along the path, where it was stepped on, and the birds ate it up. Some of it fell on rocky ground, and when the plants sprouted, they dried up because the soil had no moisture. Some of the seed fell among thorn bushes, which grew up with the plants and choked them. And some seeds fell in good soil; the plants grew and produced corn, a hundred grains each."

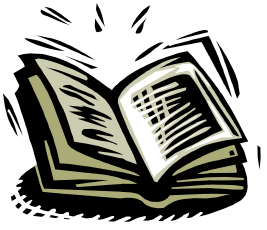
And Jesus concluded, "Listen, then, if you have ears!"



His disciples asked Jesus what this parable meant, and he answered, "The knowledge of the secrets of the Kingdom of God has been given to you, but to the rest it comes by means of parables, so that they may look but not see, and listen but not understand.

"This is what the parable means: the seed is the word of God. The seeds that fell along the path stand for those who hear; but the Devil comes and takes the message away from their hearts in order to keep them from believing and being saved. The seeds that fell on rocky ground stand for those who hear the message and receive it gladly. But it does not sink deep into them; they believe only for a while but when the time of testing comes, they fall away. The seeds that fell among thorn bushes stand for those who hear; but the worries and riches and pleasures of this life crowd in and choke them, and their fruit never ripens. The seeds that fell in good soil stand for those who hear the message and retain it in a good and obedient heart, and they persist until they bear fruit.





Unlocking the Bible

What the Church looks like to those outside it

This study is to help people to explore and compare what they think and feel about the church, with the way in which they consider those outside of the church view it. The aim is to find some authentic way of being the church in our kind of society. People within the church will probably have mixed feelings about it. There is a need to help people move on drawing on their experience from the church as an organisation, to being a living group of people in relationship with each other and society. The Bible passages suggested are: Matthew 25 verses 31-46, Luke 1 verses 46-55 and Luke 4 verses 16-21. Have these texts printed out ready to give to the group. Study these passages before you run the group session.

Your way of working is:

1. Ask the group to consider how their non Christian friends/families/neighbours may view the church. The comments of the group should be written up on a large sheet of paper. Record every comment. Give some time for discussion.
2. Ask the same question, but this time about how the media (newspapers, magazines, radio and television), portrays the church and clergy. Again, record their responses.
3. Ask if there are comments that they agree with. This *should* open up positives and negatives about their experiences.
4. Turn to the Bible passage in Matthew 25. Invite them, in groups of three or four, to draw out from it what the church should look like, and what its 'agenda' should be. How would they answer the question, 'What is the church for?' Give the groups around 20 minutes to discuss this.
5. Bring the groups back together and then encourage them to build up a picture of the ideal church from their different responses. Some may find it easier to explain their ideas using images, e.g. my ideal church is like a big happy family, or like a deep still lake.
6. Refer them to the Mary's prayer in Luke 1 and to Luke 4, stressing the preparation of God for His church, and Jesus' sense of calling.
7. To close suggest that each person considers something their church can do to change the image other people may have about it, in the light of the Bible passages. Ask them to feedback at a future session.

Matthew 25 verses 31-46

The Final Judgement

“When the Son of Man comes as King and all the angels with him, he will sit on his royal throne, and the people of all the nations will be gathered before him. Then he will divide them into two groups, just as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the righteous people on his right and the others on his left. Then the King will say to the people on his right, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father! Come and possess the kingdom which has been prepared for you ever since the creation of the world. I was hungry and you fed me, thirsty and you gave me a drink; I was a stranger and you received me in your homes, naked and you clothed me; I was sick and you took care of me, in prison and you visited me.’

“The righteous will then answer him, ‘When, Lord, did we ever see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you a drink? When did we ever see you a stranger and welcome you in our homes, or naked and clothe you? When did we ever see you sick or in prison, and visit you?’ The King will reply, ‘I tell you, whenever you did this for one of the least important of these members of my family, you did it for me!’

“Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Away from me, you that are under God's curse! Away to the eternal fire which has been prepared for the Devil and his angels! I was hungry but you would not feed me, thirsty but you would not give me a drink; I was a stranger but you would not welcome me in your homes, naked but you would not clothe me; I was sick and in prison but you would not take care of me.’

“Then they will answer him, ‘When, Lord, did we ever see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and would not help you?’ The King will reply, ‘I tell you, whenever you refused to help one of these least important ones, you refused to help me.’ These, then, will be sent off to eternal punishment, but the righteous will go to eternal life.”



Luke 1 verses 46-55

Mary's Song of Praise

Mary said,
"My heart praises the Lord;
my soul is glad because of God my Saviour,
for he has remembered me, his lowly servant!
From now on all people will call me happy,
because of the great things the Mighty God has done for me.
His name is holy;
from one generation to another
he shows mercy to those who honour him.
He has stretched out his mighty arm
and scattered the proud with all their plans.
He has brought down mighty kings from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly.
He has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away with empty hands.
He has kept the promise he made to our ancestors,
and has come to the help of his servant Israel.
He has remembered to show mercy to Abraham
and to all his descendants for ever!"

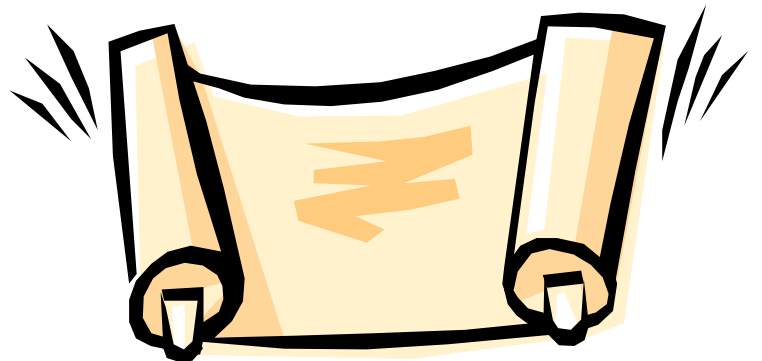
Luke 4 verses 16-21

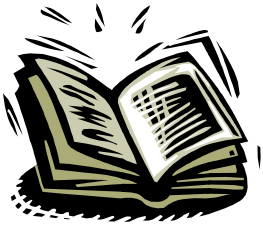
Jesus is Rejected at Nazareth

Then Jesus went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath he went as usual to the synagogue. He stood up to read the Scriptures and was handed the book of the prophet Isaiah. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it is written:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has chosen me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind; to set free the oppressed and announce that the time has come when the Lord will save his people."

Jesus rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. All the people in the synagogue had their eyes fixed on him, as he said to them, "This passage of scripture has come true today, as you heard it being read."





Unlocking the Bible

Questions you would like to ask Jesus

This study is for people who are beginning to be more confident about the Bible and what it has to say. Again it draws upon the experiences of the group as the starting point, however it makes demands upon you, as someone who is leading the group. Do not try to be the guru who knows the answer to everything, and be prepared to use the reply 'I don't know about that, but I will try to find out, and you can try to find out too.'

Remember that the context in which Jesus lived was very different from that of today, and that the Scriptures are God's gift to the Church across all time. Urban living, rural living, economics, housing, education, politics, technology, and world view are all substantially different, however human nature and how people relate to each other, and to God, are the same.

Your way of working is:

1. In preparation think through the kinds of questions people usually ask (like 'why does God allow') but recognise that some questions will be ones you have not heard before. When you have identified for yourself some questions, go to the Scriptures and see if you can draw upon particular stories, parables, incidents, etc. that can help towards an answer. Acknowledge that no answer is likely to be complete or to satisfy the person asking it.
2. Ask the group for the questions they would like to ask Jesus. The comments of the group should be written up on a large sheet of paper. Record every comment. Do not discuss them at first, but list them, and allow them to be heard.
3. When people have finished responding work with the group to identify the issues that are similar and different in the questions. This should begin the discussion.
4. Continue the discussion asking if anyone from the group can help to answer any of the questions listed. Ask for answers to be based in the Bible. Keep in mind that any answer is likely to be tentative.
5. From your preparation beforehand help the group to look at the questions that people asked Jesus in His day. Ask the group to think about if any of them are the same as those asked today. If not, discuss why not, and if circumstances have changed.
6. Help the group to identify questions that may not have an answer, and the reasons why answers are not possible.
7. As 'homework' ask each member of the group to choose a question to which they will try to find an answer, from the Bible, which they can bring to the next session.



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