

SESSION 1: KEEPING YOUR PROMISES

BIBLE REFERENCES

QUESTIONS

1. What qualifies something as a promise?
2. What promises have you made in your life? How much did you think about them before you said them?
3. The Bible tells us how God has fulfilled His promises to His people throughout history. What are some of those promises, and in what ways does God's faithfulness to His people inspire you to keep your promises to Him?
4. What helped Peter to eventually keep His promises to God? What helps you keep your promises?
5. What promises have you made to God? How do you daily live out those promises?
6. What makes it hard for you to keep the promises you have made to God? Has fear ever caused you to back out of a promise? If so, what could have helped you to affirm your promise and overcome your fear?
7. Have you ever felt ridiculed or put down for speaking about Christ? Can you share your experience?
8. Do you consider your congregation a community of support? How could you contribute more to such a community?

SESSION 2: WILLINGNESS TO SERVE

Watch the video or read the script together as a group; then discuss the following questions. Keep in mind the questions are meant to prompt conversation, so don't feel the need to use or discuss every question.

BIBLE REFERENCES

Acts 6:7, Acts 9, Acts 16:13-15,
Acts 18:24-28

QUESTIONS

1. How does one's willingness to serve demonstrate one's faithfulness to Christ?
2. Like the seven men who cared for the widows in the first example from the video, what could you do to support your ministers so they have more time to devote to preaching God's Word?
3. In the past month, can you think of a time when you have been moved to action because of God's Word? Share with your group.
4. Do you see any similarities between the story of Apollos and what takes place in a small group? How can we edify and equip each other to fulfill God's calling for our lives?
5. What kind of things cause us to hold back from serving even when we feel called to do what is needed?
6. How can someone find the courage to serve in a situation that is uncertain and possibly dangerous?
7. Followers of Jesus have a continuous thirst to grow in their understanding of God. How does knowing more about God help us to faithfully serve Him?
8. Can a person grow in their willingness to serve? If so, how?

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

SESSION 3: FOLLOW HIS EXAMPLE

Watch the video or read the script together as a group; then discuss the following questions. Keep in mind the questions are meant to prompt conversation, so don't feel the need to use or discuss every question.

BIBLE REFERENCES

Acts 10, Matthew 28:18-20,
1 Corinthians 15:31

QUESTIONS

1. In what ways are you following Jesus' example in your serving?
2. How does renewing our minds help us to follow Christ's example? Use the story of Peter and Cornelius to help answer this question.
3. What activities or experiences can you open yourself to in order to face your prejudices? How can learning from Jesus' example help us to move past prejudices?
4. The mission of our church begins with "reaching out to all people." In what ways did Jesus reach out to all people during His ministry? What do His actions teach us?
5. Do you have any interactions with people "not deemed worthy by society"? If no, why not? How can you change that?
6. What does it mean to be accepted? What healing can take place when someone that was left out feels accepted?
7. PERSONAL TAKE-HOME: We've talked a lot about prejudices today, and that can be a difficult topic to be honest about with ourselves. Take a few moments to think of a person you might have a prejudice towards. Acknowledge that prejudice. Put a face on the person. Picture them with their family. Now, consider Peter's words: *In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality.* How can you take steps to see that person the way that God sees them? What is it that is holding you back? Can you put a name to it? Is it founded in truth?

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SCRIPT & ADDITIONAL CONTEXT

SESSION 1: KEEPING YOUR PROMISES

This month, we will further explore the theme that our Chief Apostle gave us for 2018, “Faithful to Christ.” In this first session, we’ll discover what it means to be faithful to Christ by keeping our promises. We’ll look at examples from the first apostles and the first church to understand what it means to keep our promises, and some of the challenges we face in doing so.

Let’s use Peter as our first example. In Luke 22:33, after celebrating the Last Supper with Jesus, Peter says, *Lord, I am ready to go with You, both to prison and to death.* It was a powerful declaration and promise that showed Peter’s love and devotion to Jesus. After Jesus was arrested, Peter followed from a distance where he was questioned by various people about his connection to Jesus. Each time, Peter denied knowing Jesus (Luke 22:56-60). His fear caused him to deny Jesus, forgetting his promise and declaration from just hours before.

We make a promise and a declaration at baptism, sealing, and confirmation. On our confirmation day, we proclaim: *I renounce Satan and all his work and ways, and surrender myself to You, O triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in belief, obedience, and the earnest resolution to remain faithful to You until my end.* Like Peter, our promise is based on love and devotion; we promise our faithfulness until our end. We fulfill our promise when we denounce what is wrong and stand up for what is right, through our words and actions. Yet sometimes fear fills our hearts and we shy away from keeping our promise. We might be afraid of losing a friend, isolating ourselves, or being ridiculed if we display our love for Jesus and proclaim His glory. How do we overcome our fears?

Let’s go back to Peter and the apostles. Before His ascension to heaven, Jesus gave Peter and the apostles the Great Commission: *Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age* (Matthew 28:19-20). After Pentecost, Peter and the apostles accepted this mission in earnest and once again encountered much opposition.

We read in Acts 5:12-40 that the apostles made many signs and wonders among the people, and believers were increasingly added. Then the high priest had them put in prison. An angel came at night and opened the doors and said, *“Go, stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this life.” And when they heard that, they entered the temple early in the morning and taught* (Acts 5:20-21). Already, we can see a change in Peter – he is not afraid to fulfill his promise and commission.

But Peter and the apostles are arrested again. The high council called for the apostles, had them beaten, and commanded that they should not speak the name of Jesus. After these events we read, *So they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name. And daily in the temple, and in every house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ* (Acts 5:41-42). At this point, Peter and the apostles knew that they risked danger and punishment, but that didn’t deter them from fulfilling their mission and promise. The fear that had paralyzed Peter at Christ’s arrest was replaced with joy, even in suffering for Jesus. In the name of Jesus, Peter was willing to confront whatever happened. What strength he must have received from Christ’s resurrection, the promise of the Great Commission, and the power received at Pentecost. These experiences gave him the conviction to fulfill his promise and commission, even in difficult times.

When we truly believe that Jesus is with us every day, we can find the strength and joy to fulfill our promises. We may come across difficult situations where it would seem easier to deny our faith and put aside our promises, but we can draw strength from the knowledge that the One that overcame sin and death lives in us. We also have received the Holy Spirit who compels us to live our life of faith boldly, just as the first Christians.

The first Christian church made great sacrifices in order to follow Jesus and keep their promises. They faced harm, ridicule, punishment, persecution, and death because they would not deny Christ. How did they persevere in the face of such challenges? We read in Acts 2:44-47: *Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold*

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SCRIPT & ADDITIONAL CONTEXT

SESSION 2: WILLINGNESS TO SERVE

Welcome back! We will continue looking into the aspects of the theme, "Faithful to Christ." Last week we focused on being faithful to Christ by keeping our promises. In this session, we will explore what it means to be faithful to Christ by being willing to serve. Using five examples from the book of Acts, we'll see how a willingness to serve helped the early Christian church to grow.

We find our first example in Acts 6. A number of Greek-speaking Jews had responded to the gospel, but due to a language barrier, a considerable amount of care was needed to support these new believers. The additional resource restraint led to a neglect of some of the widows, so helpers were needed in order to care for this new and welcomed problem. The apostles reached out to the Greek-speaking community to find seven helpers who would be willing to serve these widows, so that the apostles could continue preaching the Word. The group selected seven who took up this mundane and perhaps undesirable task. In verse 7, we see the result of their willingness: *Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly...* Because these seven men were willing to serve and care for the needs of the widows, it was possible for the apostles to open the way for the Word of God to reach new believers. There may be times when we hesitate to serve because a task we're being asked to do doesn't appeal to us. Keep in mind that the One we serve and are faithful to is God. Whatever He calls us to do serves a purpose greater than we may know at the time.

Our next example in Acts 9 intertwines the calling of Saul (the Apostle Paul) with a disciple named Ananias. While Saul was travelling on a road to Damascus, where he was planning to persecute Christians, Jesus appeared to him and revealed a new call for his life. He was to find a disciple named Ananias, who would then give him details of his new mission to be God's messenger to the Gentiles. In the meantime, the Lord appeared in a vision to Ananias and instructed him to go and meet Saul, a man who was coming with the authority to persecute him, and communicate God's intentions for him. Ananias' initial response to the Lord is simple, "Here I am, Lord." But when Ananias is given additional details about his task, he becomes apprehensive. The Lord

then assures him of his task. Ananias set out to find Saul, and everything happened just as the Lord had told them. In this example, both Saul and Ananias had to be willing to serve. For Saul, this meant a complete life change. For Ananias, it meant trusting in God in an uncertain and potentially dangerous situation. Our willingness to serve sometimes requires the courage to change our life and to fully trust in the Lord.

In Acts 16, we are introduced to a woman named Lydia. In verses 13-15, Luke writes, *And on the Sabbath day we went out to the city to the riverside, where prayer was customarily made; and we sat down and spoke to the women who met there. Now a certain woman named Lydia heard us. She was a seller of purple from the city of Thyatira, who worshiped God. The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul. And when she and her household were baptized, she begged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay."* So she persuaded us. The Lord opened Lydia's heart so that she didn't only hear the words of God's message, but also allowed them to have a transforming impact upon her. She then had the desire to open her home and serve those who carried the news of Jesus from place to place. Listening to and reading the word of God inspires our willingness to serve Him. The impact of God's word on Lydia and her family resulted in their desire to serve. How have you been impacted by God's Word? How has it transformed your life? How has it affected your willingness to serve?

Our last example is found in Acts 18, in the story of a man named Apollos. We learn in verses 24-28 that Apollos was a Jewish man who was "mighty" in the Scriptures and a teacher in the synagogue. *Apollos spoke accurately the things of the Lord, though he knew only the baptism of John.* We can infer that he may have not known of Jesus' death and resurrection, or the command to baptize all nations. So when the disciples of Jesus heard him, they pulled him aside to expand his understanding of God. Once he had received the message from the disciples, Apollos began preaching to the Jews that Jesus is the Christ. Apollos was already willing to serve God by teaching others from Scripture, but he wasn't fully equipped for God's purposes. He had to pause

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SCRIPT & ADDITIONAL CONTEXT

SESSION 3: FOLLOW HIS EXAMPLE

This month we have explored the 2018 theme, “Faithful to Christ.” Each session so far has focused on an aspect that Chief Apostle Schneider shared: keeping our promises and having a willingness to serve. To dive deeper into what it means to be faithful to Christ, our last session will examine how Peter followed Jesus’ example in his experience with Cornelius, found in Acts 10.

The story we find in Acts 10 is about overcoming prejudices; a story of renewing our minds to see others the way God sees them. Cornelius was a faithful man who had a personal relationship with God, and he desired to hear God’s word from one of Christ’s followers. But Cornelius was also a Gentile, and Jewish people – including Christ’s apostles – were not supposed to associate with them. Yet, when Cornelius was visited in a vision by an angel of God, he sent servants to find Apostle Peter to request that he come and preach to him and his family (Acts 10:7-8).

Right before Cornelius’ servants arrive, Peter also has a vision. In the vision, he sees different sorts of wild animals and then hears a voice telling him to kill and eat them. Peter responds that he cannot eat them because these animals are common or unclean (Acts 10:10-14). At this time, and even still today, the Jewish people were only allowed to eat certain species of animals that were deemed clean by the guidelines laid out in the Mosaic Law. To eat something that did not follow these rules was inconceivable. But the voice in Peter’s vision said to him, *What God has cleansed you must not call common* (Acts 10:15). “Common,” in Greek, means something ceremonially impure, and, in Hebrew, means something that is profane or unholy.

With this vision still fresh in his head, Peter is summoned to Cornelius’ house, and with the Spirit’s urging, he agrees to go. When he meets Cornelius, Peter reminds him that it is unlawful for a Jewish man to speak with a Gentile. But after hearing how Cornelius was called to seek him through an angel’s visit, Peter’s heart is opened to a new understanding of the vision God gave him. He then says, *In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality. But in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him* (Acts 10:34-35).

Judgment so often clouds our thoughts that it can be hard to recognize that, as humans, we do show partiality, unlike God. It wasn’t enough for Jesus to tell Peter in the Great Commission to “go and make disciples of all the nations” (Matthew 28:18-20). Because of the culture of the time, a barrier remained in Peter’s mind that prevented him from really going to *all the nations*. God had to guide Peter, through a vision, to speak to Cornelius and his family, and truly be a witness of Jesus. This is how strong, and subliminal, Peter’s judgments were against the Gentiles; it felt normal to disassociate with an entire group of people.

What is it like for us today? Is it *normal* that we don’t tend to associate with people who look different than us? Is it *normal* that we act unwelcoming, or reject people of different cultures or with different traditions? Prejudices become a part of our nature. But being a follower of Christ means that we work to kill our old nature so that *His* nature can grow in us (1 Corinthians 15:31). Being His disciple means we have to change. When we desire to follow Christ’s example, our minds and our perspectives expand, just as Peter’s did. Our views, and even how we define ourselves, are challenged by Christ’s expectations of us when we declare ourselves as His. Tension is created when we see things one way, but He shows us the truth of how things really are.

In this moment of Peter’s life, and perhaps even in our own lives, we can see how judgment and prejudice affect our witnessing of Christ. As disciples of Christ who are commanded to love one another, it is our responsibility to overcome the prejudiced part of our nature and believe that everyone is worthy of hearing the gospel. God believed that we were worthy of hearing the gospel, and He allowed us to come and accept Him. Because of this, we must understand that everyone has the chance to turn to Christ. Jesus exemplified this in His ministry: He healed social outcasts, allowed women and children into His presence, and gathered and ate meals with sinners. He spent much of His time with people who were not deemed worthy by society. He approached them with a gentle and open demeanor, and when someone’s sin was revealed, He lovingly but boldly called them to repentance. It took time for Peter to learn to follow Jesus’ example, and to work past the

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