

MAN WITH LEPROSY

Scripture References: Mark 1:40-45; 1 Peter 2:9; Jeremiah 20:9; Matthew 12:3-42

Suggested Themes:

- Evangelism
- Excitement
- Passion
- Experiencing Christ

Lead-In:

Who's Story?

Jesus did something amazing for this man. He healed him of a horrible disease that made everyone else avoid him. He begged Jesus to help him on his knees, but after Jesus healed him, he went and disobeyed the direct command Jesus gave him and made things harder for Jesus while he was going around doing his ministry.

Discussion:

Do your parents ever embarrass you? What ways?

List some of the things your parents have done and still do for you?

Do you think you ever embarrass them? (As baby crying in restaurant or worship; as toddler throwing fit in Wal-Mart; having to fix your mistakes, like taking back candy stolen from a convenience store)

Your parents bend over backward for you and have put up with you in countless ways. Do you have a right to be embarrassed by them?

THE STORY

Read Mark 1:40-45.

This man lived a horrible life. Not only did he have a very bad disease, but he was an outcast in his society. He wasn't allowed in places where other people were. He had to stay outside of homes, of stores, of towns. He wasn't even allowed to go to the place where they worshiped. He had obviously heard about Jesus and had heard the Jesus could heal people, so he went up to Jesus and begged him - on his knees which show just how desperate he was - to heal him.

Jesus not only heals him, he reaches out and touches him. Normal, everyday people - family, friends, everyone - kept their distance, but the son of God, the perfect savior of mankind reached out and touched him. And he was changed. He became clean. That same amazing experience changes us, too.

Then Jesus gives this man a command. He told the man not to tell anyone. (You might ask them why they think Jesus would have told him that). We get a clue as to why in the next verse. The man can't follow this command of Jesus. It is simply too hard for him. There doesn't seem to be much time between when this happens and when he starts telling people. He disregards it completely and starts spreading the news. In verse 45, we are told that as a result, Jesus could not enter the towns anymore because of the people wanting to see him and be healed by him. This man in his zeal had a negative effect on what Jesus did while here on the earth.

1 Peter 2:9, "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light."

Jeremiah 20:9, "But if I say, 'I will not mention him or speak any more in his name,' his word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot.

Discussion:

Might know the song "to come into the presence of the Lord is to be changed" (change me Lord) The stories in the Bible are about normal, everyday people who experienced the extraordinary, who heard or saw God, Jesus and the Spirit working in amazing ways. They didn't just view it from a distance, they experienced it. This man didn't just see Jesus once. That would have been amazing in and of itself, but this man felt the hand of the son of God on him. Because of it, he was changed, he was healed and couldn't keep it to himself if he wanted to. We have come into contact with the love of God and as such we can't help but be changed. A part of that change is the passion that cultivates inside us for what God has done for us.

What commands are too hard for us? To do something wrong? This man couldn't help doing what we are told to do. It doesn't excuse his disobedience to Christ, but it should humble us. Sometimes we might feel like we can't help but do wrong. Temptation is just too strong. If we are truly "touched" by Christ, we will change into people who can't help but do right, people who can't help but spread the news of our wonderful, marvelous, amazing, perfect savior.

Activity/Application:

Read Matthew 12:38-42. Nineveh was known for their evil and cruelty. Jesus tells the Pharisees - known for their goodness and religion - that the evil Ninevites will one day judge them because they at least responded once to God's call to repentance. The Pharisees were ignoring Jesus. The Queen who came to visit Solomon was from Africa. She was not a Jew or an Israelite. But she would judge them because she wanted to hear the wisdom God gave Solomon. The Pharisees were ignoring wisdom straight from the very Son of God.

In earlier discussion, I asked about being embarrassed about parents. I once knew a kid in school who was horrible. Got into all kinds of trouble. He got into fights, disobeyed teachers, skipped school, ran around doing things he shouldn't like stealing. But if anyone made fun of his mama, he would stand for her. If you are embarrassed by your parents, that kid can still sit in judgment on you because he at least stood up for his mom. Even he knew better than that. Will the leper stand in judgment on you? How can you be embarrassed by someone who has done as much for you as Jesus has?

(You can play out a court scene with a judge, lawyers, witnesses and a defendant.)

Prosecutor to the accused: Is it true that you didn't share the good news about Jesus with anyone?

Call witness - the leper whom Jesus healed.

Prosecutor to leper: You disobeyed Jesus who gave you command face to face. You made things difficult for him. Even when Jesus told you not to, you still told everyone you knew about him. What do you think about this guy who Jesus died for who won't tell anyone?

THE BLIND BEGGAR

The "here's mud in your eye" blind guy

Scripture Reference: John 9

Suggested Themes:

- Being used by God
- Realizing the power of God in your life •
- Wisdom of God vs. human intelligence
- Finding God in the unexpected places

Background:

- Don't know how old he is but he's considered an adult with parents still living so he's young to middle-aged. The prime of his life if not for that little vision thing
- He was a beggar, so he was considered dirt—and sinful dirt at that since God must be punishing him.
- Even his own parents aren't taking care of him. He's an orphaned adult. Maybe they were just too poor to provide for him.

Lead-In:

Blind man's bluff. Blind-fold some students to have them experience the helplessness of the character to be studied.

THE STORY

The blind man is a used person. The disciples want to pin the sin that caused the blindness on someone. Jesus says it was to create an opportunity for God to show his power. John 9:2

Yuck! God spit! He's desperate enough to let God lead him on an unlikely path to freedom. John 9:6

The blind man had a simple faith. The leaders keep asking again and again how he was healed. They can't accept the facts that are right before their eyes. He on the other hand is the only one who isn't blind. "Come on guys, it's not that hard. Try to follow the dots: (1) he made mud, (2) stuck it on my eyes, (3) told me to wash, and (4) now I see." John 9:15

What's your opinion? We don't want it. The Pharisees are divided on whether Jesus can be from God since he healed the man on the Sabbath so they ask the blind man his opinion. But since he doesn't give the answer they wanted to hear they resort to attacking the messenger. They accuse him of being a fraud. He wasn't really the man that was blind. They finally get confirmation from his parents that he was indeed blind. So now the Pharisees are stuck with the fact that this Jesus actually did heal him. They aren't about to accept that it was by the power of God so AGAIN they ask the man how it happened.

They state that since Jesus is obviously a sinner how did he do it then?

I love the man's response. "Why do you keep on asking? Are you that eager to become his disciples too?" I doubt he was so dense as to think that they wanted to accept Jesus. Rather, he was a street wise, frustrated man who had witnessed the so called leaders neglect the work of God's mercy for years and he finally had a chance to vent with a little sarcasm.

When they make the statement that "we don't even know where this man (Jesus) comes from" the blind man lays full force into his sarcasm. "Now that's remarkable... after all he's done you can't figure out where he comes from! You guys are supposed to be the bible experts! I may not be a smart man but ...DUH!!!"

It cost him though. His parents were already too afraid to stand up with him. (He's of age. Ask him.) So he was on his own. And for his sarcastic remarks he is thrown out of the church which ironically is where Jesus was.

Seeing is believing. When Jesus finds the man he has no idea who Jesus was. The blind man asks to be introduced to Jesus so that "I may believe in Him." Obviously he already does. But still longs to see the God who rescued him face to face. He wasn't satisfied with the knowing he was rescued he wanted to KNOW his rescuer.

Jesus gave sight to this blind man because he longed to see even if it took God spit. Jesus brought only judgment for those who pretended to know it all and not desire to truly see.

"There is a way that seems right to a man,
but in the end it leads to death." Pr. 14:12

Application:

Role play: Have students act out scenarios where they must defend their beliefs. For example, how do you explain to your friend who is not a Christian why you choose going to Bible camp over going to basketball camp? How do you handle a science teacher who belittles you for believing in a creator while and tries shoving evolution down your throat?

THOMAS

Scripture References: John 11, 14, 20

Suggested Theme: The Power of Resurrection.

The enormity of it. For three years he had watched and listened as Jesus explained Himself. In cryptic stories, quiet asides, sometimes unexpected, straightforward statements, Jesus declared Himself to be the Messiah that Thomas was waiting for. The Messiah, in fact, who Thomas probably hadn't given much thought to until that day.

Now that he knew that Jesus was dead, there was no returning from this, the end of Thomas' odd walk with, well, what? Clearly Jesus was something special. He healed the sick, raised the dead, made wine from water. He was no madman- He explained God's law with such insight He stymied the lawyers with humiliating ease. But then He died, put to death by the very people He'd previously outwitted at every turn. Who was this man?

Lead-In: Who was the apostle Thomas?

Discussion: What do you know about Thomas? [There isn't much to know about the apostle, but you might see what the students can come up with.]

Thomas is one of the apostles about whom we know most. That, however, doesn't mean we know very much. Compared to Bartholomew or Thaddeus, Thomas is an open book to us, but still he appears in fewer than a dozen verses. Not as outspoken as Peter, perhaps not as close to the Lord as John, Thomas' few appearances do tell us something about this man whose one recorded moment of doubt unfortunately colors our view of him forever.

THE STORY

I Thomas the Resigned...or Committed? (John 11:16)

When Jesus' close friend Lazarus was on his deathbed, Jesus was prevented from going to him. This, of course, was part of God's plan, but to Lazarus' sister Mary it seemed to result in Lazarus' death. To the apostles it seemed to result in Jesus continuing life.

Bethany, where Mary, Martha, and Lazarus lived, was far too close to Jerusalem and the conniving Jews. The desire within the Jewish leadership to have Jesus killed was no secret, and the apostles were content for Jesus to keep away from their murderous intentions. Jesus had different plans.

Lazarus' death was a milestone in Jesus' ministry. Jesus had raised the dead before, but He had never returned someone literally from the grave. The delay in His visit to Bethany to see his sick friend was for the purpose of allowing Jesus to show His mastery over death. Of course, the apostles weren't aware of God's plan, so their focus was on Jesus' safety as he neared Jerusalem. Unable to persuade Him to stay away, Thomas speaks for Christ's followers when he says, "Let us also go, that we may die with Him." As far as we know, none of the apostles stayed behind—they all took the trip that they knew could end with their demise—but Thomas was the one whose statement of commitment will be remembered throughout history.

II. Thomas the Unknowing...or Seeking? (John 14:5)

Jesus so often spoke in parables that the apostles had become used to not understanding Him at times. In the upper room at supper Jesus spoke openly about His nearing departure. We can relate to the apostles' lack of understanding. Sometimes Jesus was so mysterious in His speech that the apostles were afraid to conjecture out loud about what He meant. At supper, though, the situation seems to have changed. Perhaps because the time of Christ's crucifixion was nearing the apostles felt freer to question His statements. Thus, when Jesus announces to them that they already know the way to where He is going, Thomas can ask, if they don't know the destination, how they can know the direction. This question spawns one of the greatest, most memorable sayings of Jesus' ministry.

Perhaps it's easy to see Thomas' question as a lack of faith; we're primed to look at Thomas that way already. We can hear the frustration in his voice as he asks for some kind of explanation, tired of hearing and never understanding. If, indeed, he had a poor attitude in this instance we ought to be able to relate. We, too, often suffer from incomplete answers, and we're all too familiar with self-consciousness that arises from uncertainty.

At the same time, we ought to consider the possibility that Thomas was simply looking for an answer to a very real question. Jesus had just stated as fact that Thomas knew something he didn't know. It would have been easy to let this slip past—everyone else seems to have been willing to—but Thomas apparently felt that this time he couldn't. So he asked. And Jesus uses this occasion to make His uniqueness, His supremacy, explicit. Seeking, Thomas asks the question that results in the answer that we all need: Jesus is the one and only way.

III. Thomas the Doubter...or Believer? (John 20:24-28)

Likely the most common response to the lesson's first question, who is Thomas, has to do with his doubt. Certainly there is something to this as even Jesus points to Thomas' reluctance to believe the word of the other apostles when they tell him that Jesus is alive again. We should be willing to forgive Thomas, however, for his skepticism; how many of us would be willing to accept such an unbelievable story? For all the grief that Thomas gets for his unbelief, we ought not forget that he was still with the apostles even after Christ's death. Oh, maybe not on the occasion of Jesus' first appearance to them as a group, but apparently as a matter of course. After all, the apostles are able to tell him that they've seen Jesus, so he must have been with them at some time, and when Jesus appears to them again—when Thomas gets to see the risen savior for himself—Thomas is right there. Doubt may have been part of his mindset, but Thomas had not given up. All he asked for was proof that the Lord lived again.

When Thomas is face-to-face with the living Messiah we see the overwhelming power of the resurrection. Jesus invites Thomas to touch the wounds that Thomas seemed to believe would prove Christ's victory over death. Thomas, however, doesn't need to. Thomas' only response to Jesus is, "My Lord and my God!" In that moment, faced with the undeniable proof of the resurrection, Thomas makes a claim about Jesus that no one else is ever recorded as having done in His presence. He says that Jesus is God. Doubt gone, unbelief dead, Thomas acknowledges what no one else had ever said before.

"Stop doubting and believe," Jesus said. Thomas obeyed immediately and completely. He forgot the doubting to declare Christ's deity. Perhaps we should, too.

IV. The Rest is His-Story

Like most of the other apostles, Thomas is seen only once after this. Once Jesus returns to the Father the remaining eleven apostles stay together secluded from the outside world. After the church forms and the work of Jesus' followers begins in earnest we lose track of most of His disciples. Thomas is never mentioned after the first of Acts. Secular history suggests that he may have gone on to preach the word as far away as India and there is a strain of thought that finds him in China in later years. How God used "doubting Thomas" is probably unknowable, but that God used him is unquestionable. Thomas was the among those most affected by the power of the resurrection, an event that changed him from doubter to one of the boldest believers that the Bible has to offer.

It's interesting that what changed Thomas' mind about who he should be following wasn't getting to know the Christ. He knew the savior, intimately, for three years before he came to the stunning conclusion that Jesus was deity. What it took to make the ultimate change in Thomas was knowing the risen Christ. More than merely a walking commentary on God's will or a teacher with divine knowledge, Jesus was to Thomas, finally, God in the flesh.

Perhaps that's something that needs to impact us and our students, too. Maybe it's easy to follow the dictates of a leader who refers to Himself as a gentle shepherd and says that His burden is light. Maybe only when we recognize Him as both Lord and God can we truly appreciate what we're getting into as disciples. The task for us all is find whatever it is that can take us from being those who know about the man Jesus to those who know God.

BARNABAS: SON OF ENCOURAGEMENT

Scripture References: Acts 4, 9-15; 2 Timothy 4:9-11; 1 Thessalonians 2:11-12; 5:11-14.

Suggested Theme: The Power of Encouragement.

Lead-In: The Importance of a Name

Discussion: Do you have a nickname? [Talk about different nicknames]

Nicknames often tell us something about the person. Ever known someone who was simply called "Doc"? Or "Coach"? These aren't the names your parents give you at birth— these are names given because they are descriptive of a person's character.

Today we want to look at a person in Scripture who is best known for his nickname. Let me give you some hints: His real name is Joseph. He was from the tribe of Levi. He was from the isle of Cyprus. Think you know who he is?

THE STORY

I His Name.

The first time we read about him is in the book of Acts. Acts 4:34-36.

We know him best as Barnabas—but that's not his name, that's his nickname, which means, "Son of Encouragement."

What did Joseph do to earn that name? 4:37. The first time we see him, he is selling some land he owned and giving it to the apostles, so it can be distributed to those who had needs. So we see from the very first time we meet him that Barnabas is concerned about others. We are going to see this characteristic time and again in the life of Barnabas.

II Barnabas and Saul (Acts 9)

Saul was a Jew from Tarsus who led the way in persecuting those who followed Jesus. [Summarize the story of Saul's conversion (Acts 9:1-25)]

Saul went to Jerusalem to join the disciples there, but they didn't want to have anything to do with him. Why? 9:26. [They thought this was a trick so Saul could find out who the leaders were among the disciples.]

What would have been the safe thing to do? [Wait awhile to see if Saul had truly changed]

But Barnabas wasn't interested in safe. 9:27. Barnabas took a big risk in standing up for Saul. And his risk was rewarded. 9:28.

Notice what happened? Barnabas encouraged Saul, and Saul in turn encouraged others. This is the Barnabas principle: Encouragement leads to more encouragement. It's a chain reaction. The power of encouragement multiplies.

III Antioch (Acts 11)

This didn't stop the persecution. In Acts 11, the persecution continued, and the disciples were scattered all over the area. But as they went, they spread the good news about Jesus. They didn't just tell the Jews, they told Gentiles as well, and a large number of Gentiles started turning to the Lord.

When the church in Jerusalem heard about this, they sent Barnabas to investigate. What did Barnabas do? 11:22-24. True to his name, Barnabas encouraged the disciples in Antioch.

But something wasn't quite right. Remember Saul? He had gone back to Tarsus, and had been staying there, apparently not doing much. Notice what Barnabas did: Barnabas wanted Saul to see this great work that God was doing, so Barnabas left Antioch and went to Tarsus, where we found Saul, and brought him back to Antioch. 11:25-26.

This highlights another principle of encouragers: Encouragers don't just encourage someone, then forget about them, but they continue to encourage them. You encourage someone, but they don't step up to the challenge like you think they should, it's tempting to just move on. But true encouragers don't give up so easily. Barnabas didn't have to go get Saul, but he wanted Saul to see this great work that God was doing. Consequently, Barnabas and Saul were there among some of the first Gentile converts, and where the followers of Jesus were first called Christians.

But a prophet named Agabus came and said that a severe famine would spread throughout the Roman empire. What would you do if you knew a famine was coming? [Start stockpiling food? Saving up some money?] Notice what the disciples in Antioch did. 11:29-30. They took advantage of this opportunity to encourage others by taking up a collection and sending it to Judea with Barnabas and Saul. Once again, we see the Barnabas principle at work: when you encourage others, they will in turn encourage others.

IV. Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13)

Barnabas and Saul are back in Antioch, but the Good News is too good to keep to oneself. 13:1-4. They traveled to the isle of Cyprus, where Barnabas was from, then up to Perga, where John Mark left them and returned to Jerusalem. Eventually to Pisidian Antioch. They entered the synagogue, and Saul preached a powerful message, only now he is going by the name of Paul. 13:42-44.

Many people are encouraged. In fact, so many Gentiles wanted to hear about Jesus that some of the Jews became jealous, and drove Paul and Barnabas out of town.

Notice that it is no longer Barnabas and Paul, but Paul and Barnabas. Which brings up another principle of encouragers: Encouragers are not concerned about their own glory, but the good of others.

Paul was now getting top billing. And he will throughout the rest of the book of Acts. Barnabas could have said, "Wait a minute, I'm the reason this guy is in ministry!" But that's not Barnabas' style. You see, when you are concerned about others, you're not concerned who gets the credit.

V. Lystra and Derbe (Acts 14) (Optional)

Paul and Barnabas are driven out of town, so they travel on to Iconium, then Lystra and Derbe. At Lystra there was a man who had been lame from birth—he had never walked in his life. But Paul called out, "Stand up on your feet!" The man jumped up and began to walk. The people are so amazed, they start calling Paul and Barnabas gods. 14:11-12. They brought bulls and wreaths to sacrifice to Paul and Barnabas, but of course Paul and Barnabas would have none of that. They explained that they were just men, who were there to deliver a message about God.

They returned back to Iconium and Antioch, 14:22.

VI. Parting Ways (Acts 15)

In Acts 15, Paul and Barnabas take part in the council at Jerusalem where they told the rest of the disciples about all the converts they were making among the Gentiles. Then Paul and Barnabas decide to return to all the churches they had planted on their journey. 15:36.

But there's a problem: Barnabas wanted to take John Mark with them, while Paul didn't think he should go along. 15:37-38.

This highlights another principle of encouragers: Encouragers don't give up on those who are having difficulties, but continue to encourage them. Barnabas didn't give up on Paul when others opposed him, and he wasn't about to give up on John Mark now.

So these two long-time friends, Paul and Barnabas, split up. Barnabas took John Mark, and Paul took Silas. If it ended there, it would be a sad ending to their relationship. Fortunately, it doesn't end there. We don't know what happened between Paul and Barnabas, but I think we get a clue in one of Paul's letters.

VII. Paul's Lesson

Years later, Paul is getting old. He is in prison, and he writes his final letter. 2 Timothy 4:9-11. I like to think that Paul learned a lesson from the way Barnabas refused to give up on John Mark, and now Paul recognizes that John Mark is helpful in his ministry, and he wants to see him again. You see, Paul learned the importance of encouragement from Barnabas—the Son of Encouragement. 1 Thes. 2:11-12.

Sometimes we use the word encouragement as a synonym for compliments or flattery. But encouragement in the biblical sense is not complimenting someone on their clothes. It's not just a cheerful greeting, like "Have a nice day." Those are good and fine, but it's not how the word is used in Scripture. In the NT, the word is always used of believers for believers.

Larry Crabb says, "Encouragement is the kind of expression that helps someone want to be a better Christian, even when life is rough."

1 Thes. 5:11. We all like to be encouraged—but we must never forget that we have the responsibility to encourage others. What would it be like if every person thought, "Today I am going to encourage someone"? Paul continues. 1 Thes 5:14.

William Barclay wrote, "One of the highest of human duties is the duty of encouragement. . . . It is easy to laugh at the ideals of others; it is easy to pour cold water on their enthusiasm; it is easy to discourage others. The world is full of discouragers. We have a Christian duty to encourage one another. Many a time a word of praise or thanks or appreciation or cheer has kept someone on their feet. Blessed are those who speak such a word."

Barnabas is just one man. But sometimes I wonder: what would have happened if he hadn't stood up for Saul when those in Jerusalem wouldn't receive him? What would have happened if Barnabas hadn't gone to Tarsus to find Saul and bring him to Antioch? What if he had just given up on John Mark? How would history have been different? Consider the difference that one person can make—when that person is an encourager.

Don't wait to be encouraged—be an encourager to others, and you will be blessed.

Activity/Application

Find opportunities for the kids to encourage someone. For example, have them write notes of encouragement.

THE ETHIOPIAN EUNUCH

Scripture Reference: Acts 8; Hebrews 10:19-22; Ephesians 2:11-22

Suggested Themes:

- Service
- Loyalty
- Life's struggles
- God is available to everyone

Background:

A man who was a slave, but not just a slave, he had been operated upon because his masters were paranoid and it took away any chance he might have had to have a family. This surgery also prevented him from ever being able to go before the temple and worship God. Still, every year, he would travel hundreds of miles just to get as close as he could. He wasn't very good at understanding the Bible, but he read it anyway. When he was told about Jesus, he went home, and his country became one of the places where Christianity was strongest.

Lead-In:

Do something unfair that singles out some in the class, maybe to get class started in connection with the discussion questions. For example, tell everyone that is wearing green that they have to go sit outside the circle where everyone else is. Or maybe they have to turn their chair around and not look at the teacher or other kids in class. Then give candy to everyone but them or do an activity with everyone but them. You probably don't want to carry it on too long, but let them begin to feel uncomfortable.

Ask them how they felt, how fair it was, if they would want to be a part of a church where it was that way all the time because of something that they couldn't help.

Discussion:

Would you be part of a religion where you could never be fully accepted?

Would you be resentful?

Would you give up your faith and go find something else to do?

THE STORY

Read Acts 8:26-39

This man likely didn't grow up believing in God. He was from a different country and a different culture. Somewhere along the line, he was exposed to the God of the Israelites, found it interesting and eventually developed enough commitment to the Jewish faith that he was willing to take the trip to Jerusalem for what was likely one of their feast days. He was a slave, but he was a high ranking slave, a personal steward over the things of the queen.

Because he was in the service of the queen, he had been made into a eunuch (removal of his sexual organs). Ancient cultures could often be cruel (we're cruel in different ways). Being a eunuch made it impossible for this man to ever fully become a Jew (Deuteronomy 23:1). It wasn't his choice, but it kept him from ever being able to fully worship the God he had come to believe in. There were walls and signs around the temple that read, "this far a gentile can come, but no farther". Being eunuch from another country kept him from ever

being close to the Temple where he wanted to worship. But he still believed and he still came. His faith was much stronger than any right he might have had to be resentful.

Then, on the way back from Jerusalem, while reading, still wanting to know more about God, he met Philip. His desire to follow God is seen in one of the great statements in the book of Acts. After Philip explains to him about Jesus, the Ethiopian asks, "there's water, what prevents me from being baptized?" Philip didn't ask him, he asked Philip. He was eager to do what he needed to do for God. He wasn't going to sit there until Philip brought it up, he took the initiative.

We can't know what a character in the Bible was thinking unless the scripture explicitly tells us, but because he was a eunuch, it may have been a very serious question the Eunuch was asking, not just a rhetorical one that we read it to be. He might have been thinking, "What prevents me from becoming a Christian? Is it the same thing that prevents me from being a Jew? I was only allowed limited access to God before, now that I know about Christ, is it still going to be limited access? Is there still going to be a wall that says you can know about God, you can know about Christ, but you can't be fully a part of him? The answer was loud and clear when they stopped the chariot, got down and went into the water.

Imagine the relief. Finally he was fully part of something. A cruelty done to him a long time ago was no longer going to be something that kept him at arms length away from his God. No wonder he went on his way rejoicing. As he learned more about Jesus, think of how he would have felt to hear Jesus' words from John 4:21-24. "Mountain, Temple, places don't matter anymore, its your heart, your spirit, your truthfulness." The eunuch had always had those, but wasn't allowed before the temple. In Christ, he could now stand before the very throne of God without blemish, without shame. (Hebrews 10:19-22).

See Ephesians 2:11-22 (emphasis on 2:14).

Application:

Are there people that you don't want to be around? People you don't even like to see at church? Everyone is welcome, but does everyone feel welcome? One of the biggest problems that the early church faced was the tension between the Jews and Gentiles. There was longstanding animosity between them and it came through in the church. Jesus tore down that wall of separation.

Think of the one person you know who you dislike the most (don't share it out loud, just think). Do you dislike them because of something they can help? Whether you do or don't, they are invited into God's kingdom. There is nothing that keeps a person away from Christ other than their own decision.

Their clothes, their personal hygiene, their mental or physical condition, their annoying habits, their race or social standing. They all are asking, "what prevents me?" What is our answer: "You need to change first before you will really be welcome here" or "Come in, there is nothing keeping you out"?

"Jesus paid much to high a price for us to pick and choose who should come"

(Casting Crowns "If we are the Body" - the whole song could apply to this point)

TIMOTHY

Scripture References: Acts 16; 1 Timothy 4:12.

Suggested Theme: The Power of (the) Youth.

Background:

That we should know relatively little about Timothy seems odd since two New Testament books are named for him. What we do know about him, though, can be of great encouragement to our young people.

Timothy was very young to have been a traveling companion of the apostle Paul. Years before Paul told him that no one should look down on him because of his youth Timothy left his family to join Paul on his travels; Timothy may well have been the age of some of our campers when he began his career as an evangelist and minister. He has much in common with many of our young people: he apparently came from a household with only one believing parent; he was timid and sometimes self-conscious as he tried to do the Lord's work; he was a hard worker with passion and ambition accompanied by a need for more training and understanding. So like our children today, Timothy is one of the great examples of what our youth can be for the kingdom of God.

Timothy likely begins his Bible story as a teenager. When Paul meets him at Lystra, however, Timothy's reputation is already well established for miles around. That's quite a feat in a day when information traveled on foot. Today, some of our teens are known state-wide, largely because of their exploits at camp. Timothy is highly regarded by those in a neighboring city as some of our young people are highly regarded by some who have heard about them. When Paul hears of Timothy's devotion to the Lord at such a young age he takes seriously Timothy's potential and invites the young man to take part in an amazing adventure for the kingdom.

Timothy's commitment is such that he subjects himself to circumcision so that he can more effectively join the mission. We often rue the lack of devotion our young people show, but undoubtedly Timothy was not typical of people his age at the time. What we see in Timothy's life should be for us not only an encouragement regarding the potential of youth, but a sign that we need to look carefully to see where God's spirit dwells.

THE STORY

I A Tough Beginning (Acts 16:1)

Discussion: How was Paul's missionary partner Timothy like you?

[Hopefully the class knows things about Timothy's life that they can see in their own.

Otherwise, offer them some ideas.]

Timothy's youth was much like some of our own. We can see from his circumcision (Acts 16:3) that Timothy hadn't started life as a Jewish believer. His father was Greek and only his mother is stated to have become a believer; in terms of religion he seems to have come from a one-parent family. Yet his fervor can be seen from the fact that this young man is known by the church not only in Lystra, where he lives, but also in nearby Iconium. By the time the apostle arrives Timothy has already made quite a name for himself.

Even for those in the church, youth can be a struggle. Aside from the normal temptations and frustrations laid on our young people by the world, in light of broken homes, disposable families, the drive to achieve, and the age-old problem of the generation gap, striving to be what the Lord calls them to be can seem daunting. Timothy undoubtedly faced some of those same difficulties. He grew up in a home where Jesus hadn't always been the center of attention and there were likely differences between Timothy and his non-believing father even by the time of Paul's arrival. Timothy's decision to leave his family to travel with Paul couldn't have been made easily. Many of us can relate to the devoted Christian with an important but non-Christian influence in his life. How much more difficult must it have been for Timothy to devote himself to the work of the Lord if he lacked the support of his father. Today's Christian youth should find courage in the example of Timothy who faced some of the same problems they do.

II. A Devoted Middle (Acts 16:3)

Paul's first meeting with Timothy impressed Paul so much that he determined to take Timothy with him on his continuing journey. It must have impressed Timothy a very great deal, too; he agreed to be circumcised (for more information on the joys of circumcision look at Genesis 34). Such was Timothy's devotion to working for the kingdom that he was willing to undergo an enormously painful ritual that he already knew was not necessary. He left his family, probably the only life he had ever known, and the comfort of a Greek (non-Jewish) upbringing because his greatest desire was to serve the Lord.

The campers in your classes this summer have also given up some of the comforts of home because of their devotion to the Lord. Undoubtedly LDYC's cabins are not as comfortable as their beds at home. The food, while always quite tasty, just isn't what they're used to. Away from the security and closeness of the families with whom they've grown up, the friends they've spent the last year or years with, the convenience of the store just down the street, the campers are living in much more Spartan surroundings and they probably don't even consider it. We, and they, should be encouraged by the fact that they willingly, even excitedly, give up the ease of everyday life to "rough it" at camp. That's the same attitude that Timothy took on when he agreed to make whatever changes were necessary to follow God's leading and Paul's tutelage.

III. No End in Sight (Acts and the Pauline epistles)

From Lystra Paul and Timothy moved on and preached the gospel in many places. When the church hurried Paul away from Jewish agitators at Berea he left Timothy and Silas to carry on the work there. Afterwards Timothy and Silas caught up with Paul, but when he felt the need to send workers ahead of him it was again Timothy and a partner who were given the responsibility.

Paul's trust in Timothy was such that when a job needed done it was Timothy who went. Paul included Timothy as a "fellow worker" in his mission work in his letter to Rome. It was Timothy that Paul sent to the beleaguered church at Corinth in response to the disunity that occasioned the writing of I Corinthians (I Cor. 4:17). After completing his work in Corinth, Timothy rejoined Paul while on his way through Macedonia where Paul writes another letter to the Corinthians. The greeting this time is from Paul and Timothy specifically (II Cor. 1:1), once again highlighting Timothy's special place in the apostle's ministry. Paul even names Timothy as one of the three who had preached the word that converted those who

began the Corinthian church (II Cor. 1:19). Paul adds Timothy to the names of those writing a number of other epistles (Philippians, Colossians, both Thessalonian letters). He sends Timothy to do special work in Thessalonica and Philippi when Paul himself isn't available.

Finally, Paul sent Timothy to help oversee the work in Ephesus where Timothy receives (perhaps) the two letters that bear his name. Over and over Paul shows his trust in Timothy's ability to effectively carry on the work of the Lord even though Timothy is so young. We can rest assured that youth didn't stop God's plan for Timothy.

IV The Rest is His-Story (and Their-Story) (I & II Timothy)

Although at Ephesus Timothy had enormous responsibility, we can see in Paul's writing to him that Timothy also had some of the same difficulties that our young men and women face today. Just as young people in the church today struggle with what can be a fine line between confidence and arrogance, Paul warns Timothy against disrespect toward the brothers. In the same way that laziness seems so frequently to overcome us, Timothy perhaps was tempted sometimes to avoid opportunity so Paul warns him to continue to do what he has been called to. Fear and inadequacy have always plagued younger people; Paul encourages Timothy to live a life so worthy of respect that no one can disregard him for his youth.

It's too easy to overlook the young. Jesus says that a prophet doesn't have the respect of those from his hometown. That's due, at least in part, to the fact that the people he grew up around know something of his shortcomings. It can be difficult to see the enormous potential of someone whose life has been full of the very same things that make the rest of us mortal. The truth is, God changes lives. Undoubtedly Timothy had a history that included most of the very same foibles that have plagued youth from the beginning of time. He was blessed by God to have met a follower of Jesus who looked beyond the mundane and accepted what Timothy could be through the power of the savior. Timothy, like our young people at camp, was surely impetuous, emotional, sometimes full of angst and poorly-placed passion, but his story wasn't those things. How can we, like Paul, lift up our youth to the places that God wants them to be? How can they use Timothy's story to find the strength to become what the power of Jesus made such a young man?

1 Timothy 4:12, "Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity."

AQUILA & PRISCILLA

Scripture References: Acts 18; Romans 16:3-6; 1 Corinthians 16:19, Titus 3:13.

Suggested Theme: The Power of Partnership.

Lead-In:

Discussion: Who has heard of the Lone Ranger? Why was that character called The Lone Ranger? [If the class is familiar with the character, remind them that he had a faithful partner]

As the apostle Paul travels around Asia preaching and teaching, he comes across a married couple, two believers who are not very famous but whose contribution to the early church probably can't be overstated. What was the power behind Aquila and Priscilla's ministry? Perhaps that neither one is ever found without the other?

THE STORY

I. With Paul in Corinth (Acts 18:1-5)

The first time the Bible speaks of Aquila and Priscilla is when they meet the apostle Paul. Aquila and Priscilla were a Jewish Christian couple who at one time had lived in Rome. When the Roman emperor Claudius became nervous, possibly about having so many Christians about, he commanded that the Jews, for one, vacate the city. Aquila and Priscilla moved to the city of Corinth in Greece and began a new life there. They were tentmakers by trade, and it was partly because of their business that Paul, a tentmaker himself, chose to live and work with them. It appears that for awhile most of Paul's time was spent making tents with Aquila and Priscilla. We're told only that every Sabbath day he went to the synagogue to discuss Jesus. Perhaps his desire to spend so much time with Aquila and Priscilla says something about the encouragement he received from like-minded Christians; only after Silas and Timothy, Paul's fellow missionaries, arrived did Paul turn from tent-making to full-time evangelism.

II. With Paul in Ephesus (Acts 18:18-19)

After Paul had stayed in Corinth for some time, he determined to move on to other areas. He left Corinth for the city of Ephesus for the purpose of continuing his missionary work elsewhere. Interestingly, though he obviously valued Silas and Timothy as partners in the preaching of the Gospel, when he relocated to Ephesus the only people that the Bible tells us he took along were Aquila and Priscilla. Once again we're given a view of the impact of their friendship on Paul and his ministry.

We're told that upon their arrival Paul left the couple, but note that initially while Paul went to the synagogue and "reasoned with the Jews" Aquila and Priscilla apparently ministered in other ways. After Paul's departure, Aquila and Priscilla continued the work that Paul had been doing; it's in the synagogue that they discover Apollos and their impact on the early church increases.

III. With Apollos in Ephesus (Acts 18:24-25)

Apollos was an impressive preacher, well-versed in the scriptures and well able to defend the Way. He, too, came to Ephesus as a missionary and spent his time much as Paul did, speaking to Jews in the synagogue and showing the truth of Jesus' message from their own law.

He was energetic, courageous, and encouraging. He was also about one brick shy of a full Gospel. [Given the right group of students, a discussion of Apollos' lack of understanding might be quite interesting.] It was while he was debating the Jews in the synagogue that Aquila and Priscilla heard this impressive preacher and realized that his message was great but lacked a crucial piece. Apparently the husband and wife team had been spending time in the synagogue continuing the apostle's work since Paul left, so they were able to make contact with Apollos and to explain to him the missing bit that could change not only his message but his life.

How much easier can it be to reach out to someone when you are not alone. Aquila and Priscilla likely found comfort in the fact that neither was by himself in approaching Apollos. [What was the significance of Jesus sending His followers out in pairs?] Even though Apollos was an impressive figure, Aquila and Priscilla were able to speak to him, even to offer to help him see the truth more clearly. Such courage can be encouraged by knowing that you have someone by your side.

How much easier must it have been for Apollos not to hear from another teacher with his own version of the Gospel story and his unique views, but to get to spend time with a family. Apollos had been used to debating with the Jews the gospel of Christ in relation to the teachings with which they were familiar. It might have been very difficult for a single man or woman to get past Apollos' defenses to explain more fully what he was teaching. What Aquila and Priscilla offered him, though, was not more debate but a place in a partnership, an opportunity to enter a circle of friends. Not only was neither of them alone, Apollos didn't have to be. That warmth already established within the relationship between the tentmakers could only have encouraged Apollos to join them and be fed.

IV. With the Church in the New Testament (Rom. 16:3-6; I Cor. 16:19; Titus 3:13)

As Paul wrote to the churches that he had nurtured, or hoped to, he remembered some of those whose support, encouragement, and friendship had meant so much to him. At some point, Aquila and Priscilla moved back to Rome, and when Paul sends his letter to the Roman church he mentions the couple and notes that the church meets in their home. They hosted the church in their home in Ephesus, too. He remembers the blessing they were to him when they risked their very lives for him. Paul's fond memories are always recalled in light of the two of them.

Their contribution to the church through the ongoing work of Apollos can't be discounted, either. Apollos became so important a figure in the early church that when factions arose within the Corinthian church his name was mentioned alongside the apostle Peter and Paul, one of the founders of the church there. Paul asks for consideration to be shown Apollos as he continues in his service to the Lord. Where would Apollos have been without the work of Aquila and Priscilla?

The story of Aquila and Priscilla is one of partners doing the work that God called them to. Neither is ever mentioned without the other, a reminder for us that partnership can be a powerful force in the work of the kingdom. Their story is truly that, "Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work."

Activity/Application

Involve the students in a game where cooperation is essential to success. Perhaps teams of two could be pitted against individuals to show how in some situations two really are better than one.