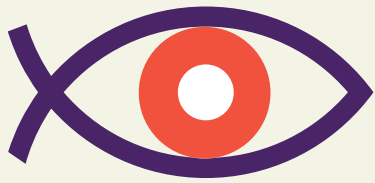


**SEEING
THROUGH
THE EYES OF
JESUS**

**YOUTH
CURRICULUM
SESSION 8**

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SEEING THROUGH THE EYES OF JESUS

Calling us back to
the central focus of
our Christian faith:
The Risen and
Living Jesus!

SESSION AUTHOR:
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SESSION 8: SEEING JESUS: TRANSFORMING CONGREGATIONS

SCRIPTURE:

Matthew 14:22-33
1 Corinthians 12:12-27
2 Corinthians 5:16-21

MAIN POINT:

When we see the world through the eyes of Jesus, we begin to see our kinship to all people and all things. Through local congregations, our lives become more “we-focused” rather than “me-focused.”



INTRODUCTION:

Chester and Grace met in college. Their love story could make a great Hallmark movie. Chester, the rustic quiet farmer, and Grace, the kind and energetic equestrian. They dated for a few months, and it became obvious that they were meant for one another. It was fun to watch their love grow over time. One day, Chester proposed marriage. As fate would have it, Grace said “yes!” They started planning their futures together. So far, so good. Many love stories begin like this one. But often there is a twist.

Chester and Grace came to me as their pastor for premarital counseling. We met for three sessions in the months leading up to their wedding day. Each session of counseling had a particular theme. In session one, we discussed a theological and spiritual definition of marriage. In session two, we discussed some of the practical challenges to marriage, such as differences in families of origin, finances, starting a family and managing careers and stress all while trying to keep Jesus a top priority. In the

third and final session, we met to plan the wedding ceremony and to pray for God’s blessings upon them. All along the way, I recommended books and articles for them to read. I supplied them with personality tests and a “love language” questionnaire. They completed each suggested assignment with enthusiasm, mutual respect and sincerity. They learned much about each other during this process. They were excited, and with good reason. They were buoyed by their hopes and dreams for one another. They were living in a season of unfettered optimism.

During the second session of the premarital counseling, I share with this couple some personal wisdom. I told them that marriage is really hard work. I told them that marriage would require of more grace, more patience, more love than they ever thought they were capable of. I knew that one day they would come to understand this statement for themselves. All married couples do.

Their wedding day was spectacular. We ate, we danced and we celebrated their love. And Chester and Grace made promises to each other before God and their church family. In their vows, they promised to be faithful, loving and caring through every possible challenge that would come their way. It didn't take them long to learn that marriage—while wonderful—can be incredibly challenging. No book, article or personality inventory can fully prepare one for the depths, the width or the intensity of married life together. I jokingly told them that I would “tie their knot tight.” Little did I know that in just over a year, they would face their greatest challenge yet.

Several months into their marriage, Chester and Grace came to visit me at church. I could tell by the looks on their faces that something was wrong. They wanted to start a family. They had been trying to get pregnant for months. But after several consultations with their doctor, they received the devastating news that they would likely never conceive a child. “Help us make sense of this, pastor. We want to be parents,” they said. I could sense the depths of their grief as I tried to comfort them. Not long ago, this couple was all smiles and cheers. What could I say to them to bring them comfort and peace?

Together, we prayed for God's wisdom and discernment in the way forward. Just a few months after the excitement and bliss of their wedding day, they found themselves in the throes of a devastating season of emotional and spiritual pain. And I was reminded of what I told them months previously in premarital counseling. I had told them that marriage is hard work, requiring more grace, more patience, more love than they ever thought they were capable of.

But I left something really important out of that statement. And thanks be to God, I remembered it on that heavy day when they came to me with their souls burdened with grief. I told them that they were not alone. They had a church family and they had the love of God to guide them. I wanted them to know that there were people close by who would comfort them, help them and guide them on the path ahead. In the face of such grief and pain, they sensed that they were outmatched. They needed a beloved community.

Chester and Grace reached out to other couples in the church who had similar struggles. In their great pain, they found an incredibly nurturing community. Over time, they discerned

the way forward. After much prayer and tears, they agreed to adopt a child.

Months later, they received the call that would forever change their lives. Their hearts filled with angst, excitement and pure joy. In four months, they would become parents to a little girl. They agreed to name her Lila Grace.

In the weeks leading up to Lila Grace's birth, they prepped the nursery, assembled a crib, purchased diapers and formula, and leaned into hope. Finally, the day arrived. Lila Grace arrived as a healthy baby. They brought her home and showered her with love and affection. Chester and Grace were natural parents. Their love for this baby girl and for each other grew to depths they'd never known.

When Lila Grace was nine months old, she was dedicated to God in the sanctuary of our church. The front two pews were filled with Chester and Grace's coworkers, aunts, uncles, grandparents. I refer to these pews as the “paparazzi” because everyone's phones were out snapping dozens of pictures.

Lila Grace was dressed in a gorgeous white dress. She was beyond cute. And on that day, the same family and friends who gathered at Chester and Grace's wedding ceremony were there for this baby girl's dedication. And in that room, Chester and Grace's hearts grew. The congregations' hearts grew. We made space for this precious child in our community. Together, with God's help, we dedicated Lila Grace's life to God. I held Lila Grace and blessed her. And the church family promised to always love and support her in the ways of the Christian faith. As I handed Lila Grace back to her mother and the dedication ceremony came to a close, I whispered to Grace: “See. You're not alone. Your church family is with you. God is with you.”

Lila Grace is now a bouncy, rambunctious toddler growing up in her church. I'm no longer a pastor at that church, but from time to time, I see pictures of Lila Grace at church picnics and Vacation Bible School. I see evidence of a church family who is keeping their promises to a young couple. Chester and Grace have now adopted a second child—a boy named Dexter. He too was dedicated to God in that same church family.

This is how our local congregations make a difference in our lives. As scripture reminds us, our church family is the body of

Christ. Put another way, our churches are where we meet Jesus in our time. Here, faith takes on “flesh” and becomes a real, living, breathing organism. At church, “I” becomes “we.” We are a community of faith, bound together by our mutual love and commitment to Jesus. We’re not all the same. We don’t all look the same. We don’t all vote the same way. We don’t all pull for the same sports teams. We’re different. But Jesus is at the center of our common life together. And because we take Jesus seriously, our lives are more meaningful, more purposeful, more grace-filled. Local churches are the headquarters for amazing, life-sustaining transformation for people and entire communities.

The local church is a gift from God. It’s here that we find hope, inner peace and support for the challenges that life presents us. Just think of the struggles of our time: the Covid pandemic,

social and political division, widespread injustice, anger/hatred/discrimination, gun violence. The local church is not immune to these divisive forces. But there in plain sight within hurting communities, the local church exists to shine Jesus’ light, to distribute hope, and to call people towards God’s grace and redemption. Our local churches matter; they make a difference.

How has your local church been the presence of Jesus in your community? How has local your church made a difference in the lives of your community? How has your local church made a difference in your life? Take a moment to give thanks for your local church family.

Let’s turn to the pages of scripture to see how Paul encouraged the early church in Corinth.



SCRIPTURE INTERPRETATION:

Imagine the challenges that the first century church faced in ancient Corinth. Early Corinthian history was riddled by political and military conflict and natural disasters. Time and again, this ancient city witnessed political upheaval, earthquakes, floods and aggressive regime changes. Yet this ancient city thrived as a cultural and economic hub during the first century when Paul arrived as a Christian missionary.

Paul had a powerful story to tell. His own life had been turned upside down by Jesus—in a good way. However, early Christianity struggled to take root in this cosmopolitan port city that was a Roman-occupied center. The teachings of Jesus were not-so-welcomed in Corinth at first. The Apostle Paul faced serious challenges in his attempt to unite early Christian leaders in the Corinthian church. This led Paul to develop a powerful metaphor to showcase the needed unity in the early church. The metaphor Paul used in his first letter to the Corinthians was that of the human body.

In the 12th chapter of 1 Corinthians, Paul makes his case: “Christ is just like the human body—a body is a unit and has many parts; and all the parts of the body are one body, even though there are many. We were all baptized by one Spirit into one body, whether Jew or Greek, or slave or free, and we

all were given one Spirit to drink. Certainly, the body isn’t one part but many.”

These verses show the Apostle Paul’s leadership genius. This metaphor works. The human body is composed of many different parts, and each part has an important job to do. The feet allow the body to walk. The ears allow the body to hear. The eyes allow the body to see. Each part is important and integral. And the sum of these various parts creates something so much more impressive—a living, breathing, moving human body.

Just think of all the complicated, amazing, creative things that a human body is capable of. It’s mind-boggling. Our bodies were created by God to appreciate beauty, to move with grace and precision, and to taste and see and smell and touch and hear the amazing wonders of our world. Individually, our body parts are remarkable perceptive instruments. Our eyes are filled with rods and cones that take in light and color. Our fingertips are covered with sensitive nerves that can feel the velvety softness of a fleece blanket. Our tongues are covered with tiny taste buds that can tell the difference between sweet strawberries and sour apples. And to top it all off, our incredible brains serve as an amazing

sensory and perception hub—processing millions of synapses every minute. Wow! The discoveries of modern science and medicine are proving that the human body is an immensely complicated, well-orchestrated array of bones, tissues and cells. And all of this was created in the image of God—by love, for love, in love.

The Apostle Paul encouraged the ancient Corinthian church to see itself as a human body. Not everybody can be the eyes. Not everybody can be the ears (and so on). The church is made up of different people with different skills and gifts to share. It is our diversity of gifts and skills that is our greatest attribute. The church thrives when everyone pools together their resources, working together in accomplishing their common goal, all while keeping Jesus as the center of their common life together. In this way, Jesus is the heartbeat of the Christian body. And we're invited to take our place in this beautiful, amazing, mysterious body. One of our life's greatest callings is to discern where we fit into the life and vitality of this body of Christ-followers.

Ask yourself: Where do I fit in the body of Christ? What gifts, talents and resources do I bring? In what ways do I need others to support me as I grow to embody Jesus' teachings?

As the local church, we are called to embody Jesus in our daily lives. When we do this with boldness and faithfulness, we become a "new creation" (2 Corinthians 5:17). How is God at work in your life, making you into a new creation? How can you offer hope, peace and love to the body of Christ?

What Paul teaches us in his letters to the Corinthians is that we're all needed. There is a place for all of us in the body of Christ. Something beautiful, mysterious and amazing happens when followers of Jesus join together in a vibrant community. There is a powerful synergism that takes place, making the sum of us greater than our individual lives.

But pooling our gifts and resources and skills is not without its challenges. When we take our focus off of Jesus, we've learned that the body of Christ can go astray. Division, greed, selfishness and jealousy can infect the body of Christ like a virus. When we quibble and argue about nitpicky things, it can disrupt the functionality of the body. So, the all-important question remains: How can we stay united in our efforts to be the living, breathing, loving body of Christ in our time? How we answer this question will determine our success in cultivating our churches into nourishing communities of faith. It will take all of us to answer this question with bold faithfulness.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. As you read Paul's letters to the Corinthians, think about his metaphor of the human body. How is your local church like a body? In what ways is this body healthy and vibrant? In what ways is this body in need of medicine or therapy?
2. What is a healthy human body capable of? What are some of the most impressive feats of human achievement that you have ever witnessed?
3. How are local churches like the body of Christ in today's world? What is required of these local churches in order for them to reflect the teachings of Jesus? What happens when local congregations take their focus off of Jesus?
4. What does the local church offer to your community that is not available anywhere else? What needs are met in local churches that are not met in other places in your community?
5. How is God calling you to contribute to your local church? What spiritual gifts has God given you to share with your local congregation?
6. How can the body of Christ reach our generation most effectively? How can we ensure the future health and vitality of "the body of Christ?"



ACTIVITY:

One of the best feelings available to us humans is that feeling we get when we BELONG. To belong is to be included, to be valued, to be seen and appreciated. Likewise, one of the most damaging and hurtful social powers that we humans possess is to exclude someone as a way to leverage our influence to cause a person that we don't like great harm. Theologian Miroslav Volf wrote a compelling book about this power; his book is entitled Exclusion and Embrace. Think about these two words for a moment: 1) Exclusion. 2) Embrace. What's a simple definition for each of these words?

Now think about these words in the context of your faith community. In what ways does your church exclude others? How is this social power to exclude communicated to others? Over time, how has this power to exclude persisted?

Now, think of the ways that your church embraces others. How is this social power of embracing others communicated in your faith community?

Take a moment to reflect on this question: which is easier—exclusion or embrace? Excluding others causes harm and it's antithetical to the gospel of Jesus. When exclusion exists within a community of faith, then it shows where some sincere, soul-searching work must be done.

Now it's time to do a little research. What's your church's purpose or mission statement? Does your church have a covenant? Look at your church's website. How does your church communicate with the world that it's an inclusive, embracing community of Jesus followers? Note the ways that your church communicates how wide a welcome it offers to others.

Likewise—are there ways that your church communicates that it's an exclusive community for a select few? Make some suggestions to your pastor, deacons or church leadership on how your church can better communicate a warm, hospitable welcome to your surrounding community. How can your church offer a welcome as wide as Jesus'?



SENDING FORTH:

This week, be on the lookout for invitations to follow Jesus into mission in your daily life. Participate in the life of your local church. Discover the ways that your local church is the body of Christ to you, your family and your community.

Go forth into this week knowing that God is at work in your local church. There is a dream in the heart of God of a world made whole—redeemed, forgiven and alive with God's love. Go and be a part of that dream this week. In Christ, through Christ, and with Christ. Amen.