



Building
CHARACTER:

A BIBLE STUDY FOR ADOLESCENTS AND TEENS

Study Prepared by Mona Lindeman and Susan Ward

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[Based on the Book *Character Matters*, by John and Susan Yates]

“Enjoy them while they’re little, because when they hit the teen years, watch out!” “Teenage brain—there’s nothing you can do with all those hormones raging!” “We just dropped off our last one at college—Phew! We survived!!” If you are a parent in American culture, it’s difficult to avoid hearing such remarks as the adolescence of your children approaches. Perhaps you have bought into such thinking yourself and look ahead with a sense of foreboding. Perhaps you have seen friends or family members struggle through challenges with their teens and you taste apprehension as you wonder about what might lie ahead for your own children. Perhaps, like us, you haven’t succumbed to the negative “conventional wisdom” about parenting teens, but the teenage years are on the horizon for your children and you too are looking to soak up all the parenting wisdom you can get.

Part of our soaking came through a parenting course led by John and Susan Yates, based on their book *Character Matters*. At the conclusion of the course, we invited some friends to continue meeting so that we could share and learn about parenting together. Two excellent books come to mind about this stage of parenting. In *Like Dew Your Youth*, Eugene Peterson observes that, “adolescence is not only the process designed by the Creator to bring children to adulthood, it is also designed by the Creator to bring something essential for parents during correspondingly critical years in their lives. . . adolescence is a gift, God’s gift, and it must not be squandered in complaints or stoic resistance.” Peterson describes adolescence as “an experience to be entered into” by parents, and cautions against “any approach that reduces adolescence to a problem that must be solved.” In a similar vein, in his book, *Age of Opportunity*, Paul David Tripp views the season of parenting adolescents and teens as an opportunity for us as parents to confront our own idols and grow in holiness as we deepen our relationships with our children and learn and grow along with them. It was in the spirit of these two authors that our group met to gain wisdom about parenting teens. We used Tripp’s book as the basis of our adult group study.

Our plan was to meet twice a month on Sunday evenings working together through Tripp’s book. Our group consisted of four couples, collectively the parents of six adolescents. We wanted our pre-teens to get to know one another better and to enjoy playing together, but we also desired their times of fellowship to include opportunities for discipleship and growth. With that in mind, we developed this study for them using the Yates’ book *Character Matters*.

Each week the children studied a different character trait. The studies were designed to help the children define the trait, develop an understanding of the trait through Scripture and consider how the trait was or could be more a part of their own lives. The studies use a variety of methods to teach the traits, ranging from the children creating artwork to participating in role plays.

The children took turns leading the study, although no one was required to lead. In advance of every meeting, we e-mailed each family a copy of the study for that week so the person leading could read through the material. This also gave participants who were not as comfortable in a group study setting the opportunity to read through the study ahead of time. Because the kids were responsible for their own time together, some weeks the studies went more smoothly than others. But each week provided occasions to learn about the challenges of leading a group discussion and how to work together.

When we began, each child knew someone in the group but not necessarily everyone. In addition to studying character traits, we hoped our pre-teens would develop or deepen friendships. To that end, every Sunday get-together included time for fun as well as study. The order of study, play and watching a movie or Andy Griffith Show reruns varied each week, but we adults always smiled when we heard the inevitable raucous laughter at some point emanating from the yard or basement.

At the end of each evening, our kids rejoined us adults and shared a little about what they had learned. We ended our time together in prayer, sometimes with the children praying and sometimes the adults.

In school, sports and church, our children are often grouped by age and gender; this group study provided a wonderful occasion for three fifth-graders and three seventh-graders, boys and girls to come together, share challenges and insights, learn from one another, work out differences, and simply have fun together. When we began our study, our primary purpose was for the parents to have the opportunity to experience such things. Through the children's study, all four families were given a valuable and somewhat unexpected gift: without exception, the children loved our Sunday gatherings. A seventh-grade girl said, "It was a lot of fun, but we learned as well. We learned more about God. The study made me change the way I look at each of the character qualities, like understanding the difference between happiness and joy." Another seventh-grader said, "It was a really fun study. The way it was written was helpful because I could relate to a lot of the examples. It was great doing the study with friends because you get to hear what they think and it makes it really fun. We laughed so much." And a fifth-grade boy said, "I was inspired to become a better man of character and I enjoyed the time with friends that it gave me. I'm really glad we did this."

This study is designed to be led by pre-teens or teens in a group on their own. It would work equally well with an adult leading, or to undertake as a family. We pray you and your family will be blessed by this study.

Mona Lindeman and Susan Ward



Building Character

Week 1: Introduction

Materials Needed: Bibles

Over the next eight weeks, you will explore together what it means to be a person of character. During this time, you will find out what God has to say about certain character traits and think about how you might build those traits into your own character. A *“trait”* is a *feature of your personality that tells people about the person you are*. **As followers of Christ, we want to be like Jesus.** We know that He consistently demonstrated strong moral character. But we also know that we cannot become like Jesus based on our own efforts. We must rely on the Holy Spirit to transform us into the image of Christ. Using God’s word, you can open your heart to His transforming influence in your life.

Discussion Question:

Who is a person that you admire? Share some of the traits you admire in that person.

These traits describe the person’s character. A good overall definition of character is:

Character is the inner quality (or qualities) of an individual which determine whether a person will behave in an honorable way or a dishonorable way.

Discussion Question:

Considering that definition of character, do you think character matters to God? Why or why not?

Discussion Question:

Read Micah 6:8. Does this passage affirm or change your answer to the question above? What three character traits does God describe in this passage? Can you name three other traits that God might also describe?

Overview of the Next Eight Weeks:

During the next eight weeks, you will look at one character quality each week. The eight qualities you will discuss are:

- Integrity
- A Teachable Spirit
- Self-Discipline
- Compassion
- A Servant's Heart
- Courage
- Faith
- Joy

Scriptures:

Who knows the story of Jonah? Choose one person to read aloud the summary below of the Old Testament Book of Jonah.

God sent Jonah to Ninevah. Nineveh was an enemy of Jonah's country, Israel. So, Jonah did not want to go to Nineveh.

Jonah tried to escape God. He tried to travel elsewhere, by ship. But there was a terrible storm. Jonah knew that God had caused the storm. So, he asked the sailors to throw him into the sea. But Jonah did not drown, because God sent a whale (large fish) to swallow Jonah. Then, Jonah prayed to God again. He thanked God, who had rescued him (Jonah 2). And God caused the fish to return Jonah to the dry land.

This time, Jonah went to Nineveh. He warned the people that they must confess their evil deeds to God. Otherwise, God would destroy their nation. The people obeyed Jonah. So, God forgave the people in Nineveh. God did not destroy Nineveh at this time.

But Jonah was sad, because Nineveh was his enemy. Jonah wanted God to destroy Nineveh. But God told Jonah that God cares about the people from every nation.

Discussion Question:

Which of the eight qualities did Jonah still need to learn?

Who knows the story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego? Have someone read aloud the summary below of the Old Testament Book of Daniel.

After Nebuchadnezzar conquered Judah, he took captive several youths and deported them back to Babylon to serve in his government. Among these

were Daniel and his three friends, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, (Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego). They first refused to defile themselves with the king's food and successfully negotiated an alternative. Daniel also mentions that God blessed all four with wisdom that far surpassed the rest of the king's advisors.

Nebuchadnezzar then decided to build a giant golden statue and ordered everyone to bow and worship it. If anyone refused, they were to be thrown into a fiery furnace. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego boldly professed faith in God's ability to protect them. Whether the king tossed them in the fire or not, they would not bow. Nebuchadnezzar was angry and ordered them into the fire after heating it seven times hotter. But to his amazement, there were now four people in the fire, walking around unharmed. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were ordered out and examined by the king's servants. They were not singed and did not even smell like smoke. Nebuchadnezzar decreed that anyone who spoke against the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego would be killed, because "...there is no other God who is able to deliver in this way." (Daniel 3:29)

Discussion Question:

Which of the eight qualities did Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego demonstrate?

Whether we are 14 or 40, 10 or 70 years old, we are all still developing God-like character as we trust him and make choices in line with His will. You can be sure that your mom and dad are still works-in-progress too for developing God-like character. Take another look at the eight qualities.

Discussion Question:

Which of the qualities comes easier to you? Which would you like God's help with so that you could demonstrate them more fully?

End in Prayer:

Pray together Psalm 139:23-24

*Search me, God, and know my heart;
test me and know my anxious thoughts.*

*See if there is any offensive way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.*

Amen.

BUILDING CHARACTER

Week 2: Integrity

Materials Needed: Bibles, Poster board for each participant, Markers

Introduction:

Remember from last week that a “trait” is a feature of your personality that tells people about the person you are. This week you’ll be thinking about the character trait of integrity. The word “integrity” stems from the Latin adjective *integer* (whole, complete.) In this context, integrity is inner “wholeness” deriving from qualities such as *honesty* and *consistency of character*. To be a person of integrity is to be a genuine person, the same through and through, at all times, and in all situations. A person of integrity is not false. Because we live in a fallen world, we do not always live with integrity. But God, especially through the Holy Spirit, can help each of us to be people of integrity.

Discussion Question:

Describe how a person of integrity lives. How does a person without integrity live? Which type of person, one with integrity or one without, would you want on your soccer or track team? Which type of person would you want as the principal of your school? Which type of person would you want as President of the United States? Which type of person would you want as a friend? Why?

Perhaps you answered “the person of integrity” to each of these questions. One reason we want a person of integrity as a friend or a teammate or a leader is because a person of integrity displays *trustworthiness*. You know that with *humility* they will do their best to consistently live to the highest standard. You can count on the person of integrity.

Discussion Question:

Look back over the information above and identify four qualities that are the foundation for being a person of integrity. (Hint: the qualities are in italics and underlined.)

Although you could find many verses in the Bible about these four qualities that form the foundation for integrity, one verse about each is referenced below. Take turns reading the following verses:

- **Trustworthiness**—**Luke 19:17**
- **Humility**—**Philippians 2:3**
- **Consistency of Character**—**James 5:12b**
- **Honesty**—**Proverbs 12:22**

Exercise:

There are many ways to think about these qualities that contribute to integrity and about the overall concept of integrity. Take a few minutes and using markers and poster board illustrate what integrity means to you. One friend suggested that integrity was like a solid, immovable mountain where the qualities that contribute to integrity were the peaks of the mountain. Another idea might be a flower where the qualities that comprise integrity are the roots, stems, leaves and petals. Come up with your own picture of integrity and include the four qualities that we have discussed that result in being a person of integrity. After you have completed your illustration, share with the group what you drew and how it represents integrity to you.

Discussion Question:

Take another look at the four qualities that make up integrity. Which of the qualities is more easily a part of who you are? For which would you like God's help so that you could demonstrate them more fully?

Personal Exercise:

Take a few minutes in silence. Think if there has been a time when you have not been a person of integrity. If there has been such a time, remember that God will forgive you and give you a new start. In such a time, read 1 John 1:9 and Lamentations 3:22-23. Pray for forgiveness, and ask the Holy Spirit to use this experience to teach you and help you become a person of integrity. You do not need to share this with the group.

End in Prayer:

Pray together Psalm 86:11-13

Teach me your way, LORD,

that I may rely on your faithfulness;

give me an undivided heart,

that I may fear your name.

I will praise you, Lord my God, with all my heart;

I will glorify your name forever.

For great is your love toward me;

you have delivered me from the depths,

from the realm of the dead.

Amen.

BUILDING CHARACTER

Week 3: A Teachable Spirit

Materials Needed: Bibles

Introduction:

Remember from your previous studies that a “trait” is a feature of your personality that tells people about the person you are. Last time you met, you studied about the character trait of integrity. We defined a person of integrity as a genuine person, the same through and through, at all times, and in all situations. A person of integrity is not false.

This week you will learn about a second character trait, possessing “a teachable spirit.” When we think about someone with a “teachable spirit” we think of someone who wants to learn, to grow, to get better at what they do.

Exercise:

Pretend you are the coach of your favorite sports team or the director of a dance or theatre company. Before being a coach or director, you were one of the best athletes, dancers or actors in your chosen area. You have much to share and teach the athletes, dancers or actors who work with you. Describe what it would be like to work with someone who:

Is very confident, has already won lots of awards in his/her field, often interrupts your instruction because they already have an idea of what to do, makes quick decisions without listening to your advice or the advice of others, doesn't listen to the ideas of those on the team or in the company because those people are less experienced or aren't as good or are younger and don't know too much, gets angry when he/she is corrected or when his/her mistake is pointed out, hungers for the spotlight, is happier as long as he/she has won acclaim, regardless of how the team or company has been regarded.

Now describe what it would be like to work with someone who:

Is very confident, has already won lots of awards in his/her field, listens carefully to instruction you provide, makes decisions thoughtfully after considering many factors, seeks your advice, values and seeks the perspective and suggestions of others on his/her team or in the dance or theatre company, accepts correction and tries to improve, is happiest when the team or company receives acclaim.

As you considered this, perhaps you thought about how frustrating or difficult it might be to work with the first type of person and what fun it might be to work with the second type of person. Perhaps you could envision how a team with a teachable member like the second person described would be the kind of team others would want to join and the kind of team where everyone would be valued and encouraged to do their best.

Whether we are the coach or the team member, the director or the dancer, the chef or the sous chef, a parent or a child, we want to be like the second person, with a teachable spirit that encourages growth and positive change in ourselves and in others.

Discussion Question:

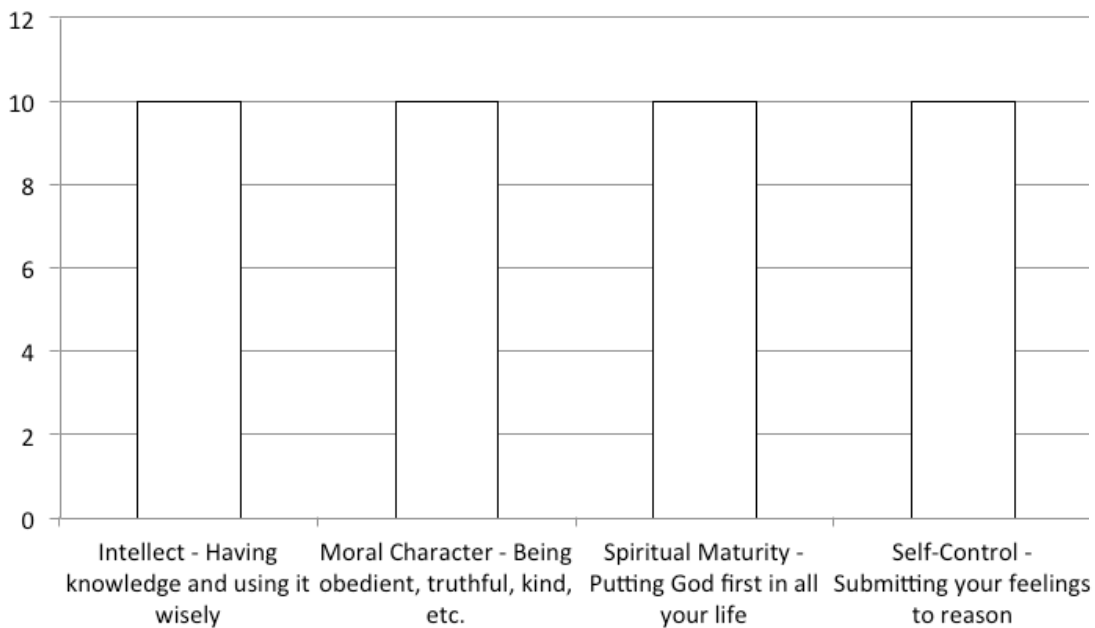
What are some ways it would benefit a team, dance company, classroom or family to have a member who is teachable?

Discussion Question:

Think of a setting in which you spend time (e.g., on a team, in school, as a member of a club, in your family). We have already talked about how you being teachable would benefit those around you. What are some ways it would benefit you to be teachable in that setting?

Personal Exercise:

A teachable spirit begins with the realization that each of us is incomplete. If ten on the chart below represent someone who is complete with nothing left to learn in an area, how would you fill-in the graph to describe yourself?



If we're honest with ourselves and others, we will recognize that we aren't complete in any area. And if we're teachable, we will want to grow, be open to learning from anyone, and try to learn from our mistakes and shortcomings.

A person with a teachable spirit will

- Value others
- Utilize discernment
- Be willing to listen and appreciate other perspectives (especially God's)
- See criticism and failures as opportunities to learn
- Hunger to grow

Scriptures:

Take turns looking up the verses that explain these attributes.

Valuing others—Philippians 2:3-4

Utilizing discernment—Hebrews 4:12

Listening and appreciating other perspectives—Proverbs 11:14

Viewing criticism and failure as opportunities to learn—Proverbs 19:20

Hungering to grow—Matthew 5:6

Discussion Question:

A humble heart allows us to value others, be discerning, appreciate different perspectives, accept constructive feedback and failure, and hunger to grow. How would a proud person view others? Utilize discernment? Consider different perspective? React to failure or criticism? Think about growth? Now read Proverbs 29:23 and Proverbs 11:2.

Discussion Question:

Take a look at the five qualities that make up a teachable spirit. Which of the qualities is more easily a part of who you are? For which would you like God's help so that you could demonstrate them more fully?

End in Prayer:

Pray together Psalm 25: 4-15

Show me your ways, LORD, teach me your paths.

Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long.

Remember, LORD, your great mercy and love, for they are from of old.

Do not remember the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways;
according to your love remember me, for you, LORD, are good.

Good and upright is the LORD; therefore he instructs sinners in his ways.

He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way.

All the ways of the LORD are loving and faithful toward those who keep the demands of his covenant.

For the sake of your name, LORD, forgive my iniquity, though it is great.

Who, then, are those who fear the LORD? He will instruct them in the ways they should choose.

They will spend their days in prosperity, and their descendants will inherit the land.

The LORD confides in those who fear him; he makes his covenant known to them.

My eyes are ever on the LORD.

Amen



BUILDING CHARACTER

Week 4: Self-Discipline

Materials Needed: Bibles

Introduction:

Remember from your previous studies that a “trait” is a feature of your personality that tells people about the person you are. Last time you met, you studied about the character trait of a teachable spirit. We defined a person with a teachable spirit as someone who wants to learn, to grow, to get better at what they do.

This week you will learn about a third character trait, self-discipline. When we describe someone as possessing self-discipline, we mean they have the ability to act out of what is right rather than their feelings in the moment. People who are self-disciplined show the following characteristics:

- *Dependability/Trustworthiness*—the ability to keep commitments and do your duty even when it is difficult; being someone that others can rely on, someone who keeps promises
- *Responsibility*—Doing what you ought to do
- *Obedience*—to the law and to God
- *Perseverance/Determination*—the ability to keep trying, stick to a goal, not give up, even when it’s hard
- *Self-Control*—of your temper, of your tongue, of your hands, managing your time

Discussion Question:

Can you think of a well-known person, either living or dead, who demonstrates self-discipline? What about them shows that they have this character trait? How about someone who shows a lack of self-discipline? How can you tell this about them? Which type of person do you admire? Which type of person would you want as your friend, classmate, on your sports team or in your scout troop? Why?

Scriptures:

Take turns looking up the following scriptures and reading them aloud:

1 Corinthians 9:24-27—What can we learn from athletes about self-discipline?

Titus 2:2-6 and 11-14—At what age is self-discipline important?

2 Peter 1:5-9—Is self-control important to God? What do self-control and similar qualities do for you as a Christian?

Galatians 5:22-25—Who helps us develop self-control? Do we have to muster it up on our own?

2 Timothy 1:5-7—What is your part in developing self-control? What is your parents’ part in developing self-control? What is God’s part?

Proverbs 25:28—What happens when we don’t have self-discipline?

Discussion Question:

What are some types of self-discipline that are important for people your age to have or be developing? Brainstorm as a group and make a list. You will find hints to get you started in the list of characteristics of self-disciplined people in italics above.

Role Play:

Can you remember a situation in which you decided to do what is right even though it was difficult rather than take the easy way out?

Choose one of the examples that you came up with and get volunteers to act it out. Do the role-play twice: once with the person taking the easy way and not using self-discipline, and the second time demonstrating self-discipline. What did you learn from this?

If you have time, pick another situation and do another role-play.

Discussion Question:

Give one example of how your parents have tried to teach you self-discipline. How have you seen the fruits of their efforts in your life?

What is one area that you think you need to grow in self-discipline?

End in Prayer:

Pray for one another in the areas that you have said you need to grow.

Pray together Psalm 141:1-4

O Lord, I call upon you; hasten to me!

Give ear to my voice when I call to you

Let my prayer be counted as incense before you,
and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice!

Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth;

keep watch over the door of my lips!

Do not let my heart incline to any evil,

to busy myself with wicked deeds

in company with men who work iniquity,

and let me not eat of their delicacies!

BUILDING CHARACTER

Week 5: Compassion

Materials Needed: Bibles, photographs (select photographs from the Internet that show scenes of people in need, perhaps pictures of homelessness, hunger, sickness, etc.)

Introduction:

Throughout this study, you have been learning about different “traits” or features of your personality that tell people about the person you are. So far, you have studied the character traits of integrity, possessing a teachable spirit, and self-discipline. This week you will study the character trait of compassion.

Before we define compassion, let’s look at some pictures. Describe what you see in the picture. What do you think the person in the picture is feeling? How do you feel when you see the picture? Have you ever been in the position of the person in the picture? If so, how did you feel then? How did you want people to respond to you? Do you know someone who has been in the position of the person in the picture? How do you think that person would have wanted others to respond to them?

Now let’s define compassion. One good definition is that compassion is “concern that acts.” In other words, compassion is not just feeling sympathy or empathy toward someone but it is feeling sympathy for another and doing something about it.

Discussion Question:

Can you think of times that Jesus displayed compassion, that is, He had concern for people and he acted on that concern?

Discussion Question:

Read aloud the following scriptures. For each one, describe what problem or hurt Jesus saw that gave rise to his compassion.

Matthew 14:14

Matthew 9:35-36

Matthew 20:33-34

Mark 8:1-3

Four simple attitudes can help us have a tender heart toward others. For each of these attitudes, read the related verse.

- Attitude 1 – Remember what God is like! *Psalm 145:8*
- Attitude 2 – Remember that it could be me! *Mark 12:30-32*
- Attitude 3 – Remember that each of us can act to make things better! *Micah 6:8*
- Attitude 4 – Remember that it could be Jesus! *Mark 9:37*

Often when people feel compassion they take big steps of action. For example, Charlie Simpson, a seven-year old in England wanted to raise money for earthquake relief for families in Haiti. He hoped to raise \$500 by riding his bicycle five miles around a local park. As more and more people heard about Charlie's goal, more and more people sponsored his ride. In the end, Charlie raised over \$240,000 for the victims of the earthquake. In God's eyes, small acts of compassion are equally important. Read Matthew 25:31-40.

Discussion Question:

Share with the group something in our world that makes your heart feel compassion, for example, hunger, poverty, homelessness, abuse, injured soldiers, sickness, etc. Can you think of how as a group of kids who love God you might be able to make a small difference in one of these areas?

End in Prayer:

Pray for God to show you how to respond with compassion in the week ahead to situations He brings to your attention.

Pray together Psalm 103:1-18

Praise the LORD, my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name. Praise the LORD, my soul, and forget not all his benefits— who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion, who satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's. The LORD works righteousness and justice for all the oppressed. He made known his ways to Moses, his deeds to the people of Israel: The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever; he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust. The life of mortals is like grass, they flourish like a flower of the field; the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more. But from everlasting to everlasting the LORD's love is with those who fear him, and his righteousness with their children's children— with those who keep his covenant and remember to obey his precepts.

Amen

BUILDING CHARACTER

Week 6: A Servant's Heart

Materials Needed: Bibles

Introduction:

Last time you met, you added the character trait of compassion to those you had already studied: integrity, possessing a teachable spirit and self-discipline. This week you will study what it means to have a servant's heart. As you consider all these traits together, you can begin to see the person you are as a follower of Christ. And if we're honest, we know we can't be that person on our own; we need Jesus living in us through his Holy Spirit to be the person He means us to be.

Discussion Question:

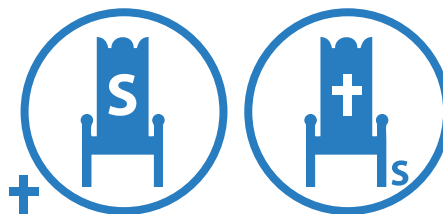
Describe someone you know with a servant's heart. How does that person demonstrate a servant's heart?

To possess a servant's heart, we must continually seek to reach out and care for others. But this outward focus doesn't always come naturally. Because of our sinful nature, our natural tendency is to satisfy self, serve self or feel sorry for self. But Jesus calls us to deny ourselves.

Discussion Question:

Read Jesus' words in Matthew 16:24. Why do you think it is necessary to deny ourselves in order to be disciples of Jesus?

Picture your heart as a throne. If we live following our own will, who is seated on the throne of our hearts? If we deny ourselves and live for Jesus, who is seated on the throne of our hearts? Can we be Jesus' disciples (followers of Jesus) if we live for ourselves?



Read Mark 10:45. In this passage we see that Jesus' own mission in coming to earth was to serve. If this is the mission of our Lord then we know it is ours as well.

A Recipe for a Servant's Heart

Combine equal parts of the following ingredients:

(Match the ingredient with the correct passage)

Kindness

Appreciation

Respect

Generosity

Prayer

1 Peter 2:17

2 Corinthians 9:10-12

Galatians 5:22

Ephesians 6:18

Ephesians 4:29

Discussion Question:

Think of three specific steps you can take to serve a parent, a sibling or a friend this week. Share with the others in your group one of the steps you plan to take.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

End in Prayer:

Use this adaptation of 1 Peter 4: 8-11

Heavenly Father,

Help us to love deeply those you have put in our lives and to offer hospitality to others without grumbling. Father you have given each of us different gifts so that we might serve others. Help us to be faithful stewards of your grace through these gifts. As we serve, let it be through the strength you provide so that in all things You may be praised.

Amen.

BUILDING CHARACTER

Week 7: Courage

Materials: Bibles, Stop sign cards (*See Appendix A at the end of the study.*)

Introduction:

Congratulations! You're more than half-way through studying the traits that determine a person's character. This week you will study courage. When we think of courage we most often think of someone who risks his or her life for someone else, like a Navy Seal making a daring rescue of hostages. But courage is much more than saving someone's life. Courage happens in big and small ways everywhere, everyday.

Discussion Question:

Which of these situations demonstrates courage?

- You want to give up cleaning the bathroom because it is super dirty and disgusting but you keep at it.
- You go into the next room in order to walk away from a video game your friends are playing because it seems very violent.
- When the other kids on the playground refuse to include the smallest kids in the football game, you ask those kids to join you in a game of tag on the other side of the playground, even though you really want to play football.
- You try the triple black diamond for the first time.
- Your friend suggests that if you were really her friend, you'd let her look over your shoulder during the math test. You tell her no even though she says she won't be your friend anymore.

Every one of these situations demonstrates courage. Courage happens when we stick to a mundane job even when we want to quit. And, courage happens when we are determined to do right regardless of the consequences.

Discussion Question:

Do you know anyone who is courageous? How would you describe him/her? Have you ever had the opportunity to be courageous? Can you tell your friends about your experience?

Some people believe that a courageous person is a person who is not afraid. That is not necessarily true. A courageous person acts in spite of being afraid. Another way of thinking about courage and fear is described in this often-quoted statement: *Courage is not the absence of fear, but rather the judgment that something else is more important than fear.*

Discussion Question:

Throughout the Bible we see examples of people who were afraid and throughout the Bible we gain an understanding of how God can help us when we are afraid. What was David afraid of in Psalm 56:1-4 and how did he address his fears? What perspective does Jesus suggest his followers should have so that they would not give in to their worries and fears? See Matthew 6:25-34.

Certainly if David was afraid and if Jesus talked to people about their fears, it's not surprising that at times we too are afraid. But God doesn't want us to stay in the place of fear. He has another plan. The antidote for fear can be found in Philippians 4:4-7. Read this passage and see the pattern for changing our thinking from fear to peace.

Step 1—ACKNOWLEDGE the thought (in this case, the fear), remind yourself that a thought is not the same as the truth or as an action, and gently redirect your thinking (e.g., this is the kind of situation or thought that makes me scared, but that doesn't mean my fear is real or needs to be dwelt on).

Step 2—REJOICE in the Lord.

Step 3—Be GENTLE with others and yourself.

Step 4—REMEMBER the Lord is near.

Step 5—PRAY.

Step 6—Be THANKFUL.

The Outcome—PEACE in our hearts and minds instead of fear.

Discussion Question:

Every one of us experiences fears of some kind at some times. One of the authors of this study remembers when she was thirteen being really afraid of some older girls at her school who seemed mean. Think of those things that make you fearful and share one with the others in the group.

Encourage one another by agreeing to pray and by sharing ideas about what type of courage would be needed to deal with a particular situation.

Personal Exercise:

To burst through fear barriers and become people of courage, we need three basic tools. Take a minute to read the Bible verse associated with each of these tools and picture yourself loading up your backpack with these tools to go on a possibly frightening adventure.

1. Personal Security—I know whose I am and that I'm loved: Romans 8:37-39
2. Clear Convictions—I know what I believe: Hebrews 11:1
3. A Sense of Destiny—I know I've been created for a special purpose that cannot be accomplished by anyone else in the world: Ephesians 2:10

When you look in your backpack, are all the tools there? Are each of your tools sharp and ready for action? If not, ask God to supply your needs, as he is the blacksmith who forges these tools for us.

Discussion Question:

From where does our courage come? Read the following verses to answer this question: Deuteronomy 31:6, Psalm 33:13-22, Joshua 1:9

End in Prayer:

Use this adaptation of 1 Corinthians 16: 13-14

Heavenly Father,

By your Spirit help us to be on guard, to stand firm in the faith, to be courageous, to be strong and to do everything in love.

Amen



BUILDING CHARACTER

Week 8: Faith

Materials: Bibles

Introduction:

Last week you studied the character trait of courage. This week, you will study the trait of faith. Courage and faith are interrelated. Without faith in something or someone greater than ourselves it is difficult to be courageous. Remember last week when we said that courage results from the judgment that something else is more important than fear. Our belief in a greater something or a greater someone propels us to act courageously. As Christians, our faith is in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior.

Discussion Question:

How would you define faith?

The Bible tells us that faith is the confidence that what we hope for will actually happen; it gives us assurance about things we cannot see. (Hebrews 11:11) In faith we are confident that the promises of God are true and will come to pass. In faith we are assured that the things we cannot see, like the heaven in which God now lives and the new heaven and new earth where all believers will live one day are real.

Discussion Question:

Do you think there are things you can do to help your faith grow? If so, what would those things be?

Think of your faith as if it were a muscle. To make a muscle stronger, you need to eat the right things and exercise. Sometimes it's encouraging to work out with others. Similarly, we can help our faith grow by eating right (studying God's word), exercising (praying) and working out with others (fellowship, vision and worship.)

1. Eating Right = Studying God's Word

God's word is powerful and practical but sometimes it can seem overwhelming. Where do you start when studying what the Bible says? There are many ways to approach God's word but by simply asking questions of the passages of Scripture, we can learn how relevant it is to our lives. Using the word S.P.A.C.E. we can gain deeper personal insights into Scripture.

Sins – Are there any sins described in this passage with which I need to deal?

Promises – Are there promises here from God to me?

Attitudes – Does this passage describe attitudes which I need to develop?

Commands – Are there commands here to be obeyed?

Examples – Are there any examples here to follow?

Discussion Question:

Using this approach, read Matthew 14:22-26 and share any thoughts you have in the S.P.A.C.E. categories. Was it helpful to have a format to use as you studied the passage? Have you used other formats in studying Scripture? If so, please share those ideas with your friends.

2. Exercising = Praying

Praying simply means talking with our heavenly Father. Of course, since we don't see God, sometimes this simple act can seem difficult or silly or maybe unimportant.

Discussion Question:

When do you find it easy to pray? When do you find it difficult to pray? Do you have any prayers you say that make it easier for you to pray? If so, share them with others in the group because those prayers might help your friends too.

Discussion Question:

Have you developed any habits that help you to pray (e.g., praying at specific times of the day, using devotional books, praying scripture verses, praying with other people, etc.) If so, share those with the others in the group in case these practices might help them, too.

We're all familiar with the prayer Jesus taught his disciples, The Lord's Prayer. In fact, the Bible is full of amazing prayers in the Old and New Testaments. Some prayers focus more on praising God and some prayers focus more on needs for which God's help is required. Read Hezekiah's prayer below and discuss the different parts of the prayer.

Hezekiah 19:14-19

Hezekiah received the letter from the messengers and read it. Then he went up to the temple of the LORD and spread it out before the LORD. And Hezekiah prayed to the LORD: "LORD, the God of Israel, enthroned between the cherubim, you alone are God over all the kingdoms of the earth. You have made heaven and earth. Give ear, LORD, and hear; open your eyes, LORD, and see; listen to the words Sennacherib has sent to ridicule the living God.

"It is true, LORD, that the Assyrian kings have laid waste these nations and their lands. They have thrown their gods into the fire and destroyed them, for they were not gods but only wood and stone, fashioned by human hands. Now, LORD our God, deliver us from his hand, so that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you alone, LORD, are God."

Share with one another any challenges you find in praying and encourage one another, agreeing to pray for each other in those areas of need.

3. Working out with others = Fellowship, Vision & Worship

Read the following verses and talk about how each verse reveals the importance of the ways in which we "work out together."

Fellowship—Acts 2:42-47

Vision—Jeremiah 29:11-14a

Worship—Psalm 100

Discussion Question:

Share a time when fellowship, vision or worship have helped increase your faith.

End in Prayer:

Pray together Ephesians 3: 16-21

We pray, Father, that out of your glorious riches, you may strengthen us with power through your Spirit in our inner being so that Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith. And we pray, that we would be rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all your holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that we may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. And, now to you who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to your power that is at work within us, to you be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever.

Amen.

BUILDING CHARACTER

Week 9: Joy

Materials: Bibles

Introduction:

Over the last few months you have studied faithfully many traits that are the foundation for being a person of character. Today, in your final study, you will focus on the trait of joy.

Discussion Question:

Describe how happiness differs from joy.

To be happy is to be delighted or pleased or glad over a particular thing like great weather for a game or a good grade on a difficult test. Happiness is dependent on circumstances. Joy, however, is deeper than happiness and is not dependent on circumstances. Joy is a sense of well-being deep inside a person's core. Joy is contentment with fate—where one is cheerfully, actively approaching life.

Discussion Question:

Read Galatians 5:22-23. What do these verses teach about where joy comes from? Can we produce joy in ourselves?

Joy is a gift from God; we cannot produce it ourselves but we can receive it as we trust in God. With this definition, we can conclude that the opposite of joy is not unhappiness but unbelief, a lack of trust in God.

Scripture:

Read the following verses and discuss how they encourage our hearts to trust God:

Psalm 9:10

Isaiah 41:13

John 14:27

Romans 9:38-39

Philippians 4:19

1 John 5:13

These and many other verses lead us into a deeper understanding of who God is and as we learn more about His faithful and loving character we trust Him more and more. We can trust the commands He gives us to live moral lives because they are given to us in love. When we live the way God calls us to live we can experience the quiet joy that comes from a sense of satisfaction that we are conducting our lives as we ought to be.

Joy, though, is more than just doing the right thing. We can observe at least three habits or disciplines that directly impact our ability to become more joyful people. These habits grow out of the character traits we've been considering. See if you can match the habits with one or more character traits:

An Attitude of Gratitude

An Attitude of Worship

An Attitude of Eternal Perspective

Integrity

Faith

A teachable spirit

A servant's heart

Self-discipline

Compassion

Courage

Habit 1 – An Attitude of Gratitude

People who focus on their blessings are a blessing to be around. People who focus on their difficulties are difficult to be around. Which type of person do you want to be?

Discussion Question:

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 and talk about when we should give thanks. Is it always easy to do this? Share any ideas you have about how to give thanks as these verses describe.

Habit 2 – An Attitude of Worship

Worship occurs when we consciously aim ourselves—body, mind and spirit—toward God. We worship for many reasons, including that God leads us to worship him and that it helps us renew our relationship to God.

Discussion Question:

Read Psalm 95:6. This verse tells us one way to worship God and one reason to worship God. Describe what this verse says and share other ways you can worship God and other reasons to worship Him.

Habit 3 – An Attitude with Eternal Perspective

We live on the earth, we breathe its air, we enjoy its beauty, we are responsible to take care of it, and we love our earthly home. It is a beautiful, wonderful, blessed place of temporary residence. It is only the first step toward something so much grander and greater and bigger and more overwhelming. Life on earth is like the appetizer before the real feast comes!

Discussion Question:

Read Revelation 21:1-7. Discuss the way God describes our new home in heaven. Remembering that everything that is good on earth will be better in heaven, use your imaginations and describe what you think heaven will be like.

End in Prayer:

Pray together, reading together from Ephesians 3:20-21

Heavenly Father,

To you who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to your power that is at work within us, to you be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever

Amen.

Mona Lindeman serves Christ in the community, growing where God has planted her. These days that garden for growth ranges from tutoring speakers of other languages in English to leading a neighborhood Bible study to joining with her husband, Jeff, in mentoring young couples preparing for marriage. Mona is a CPA and a former partner with PYA, a management consulting and accounting firm specializing in the healthcare industry. Mona and Jeff have been married since 1984. They live with their son, Matthew, in McLean, Virginia.

Susan O'Loughlin Ward serves on the board of the C. S. Lewis Institute and is a graduate of its Years 1 and 2 Fellows Programs. She has served as a mentor to younger women through her church and CSLI's Fellows Program. Earlier, she was a health policy consultant and served as Deputy Administrator of the Washington State Health Care Authority and Director of Quality for the Washington State Hospital Association. She and her husband, Scott are focused on discipling their two teenage daughters, and are living in Vienna, Virginia.