

Growing in Christ

Lesson 1: Commitment

Notes for the leader: This is the first in a series of lessons about "Growing in Christ." This lesson focuses on the crucial first step in beginning a relationship with God -- a conscious decision and commitment to accept Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

Hand out the Gospel Outline sheet (containing the twelve scripture passages) before beginning the lesson. It is very important that everyone be able to follow along in this outline as the lesson proceeds.

If you are ready for a serious relationship with God -- one that will change your life forever -- the first step is to really understand "the gospel message" and decide whether you are ready to make the choice that Jesus talks about. Understanding the gospel isn't just learning "church talk." There are some very important ideas, like "sin," "salvation," and "believing," that we need to define carefully to make sure we're talking about the real gospel message.

This lesson will focus on twelve passages of scripture. To save time, we've copied these passages onto a single sheet of paper. You can take this sheet with you and look up these passages and read them in more detail if you want to -- or you can share this sheet with someone else who needs to understand the message of the gospel.

The first two verses talk about "**salvation**," which is the first important word we need to understand. What does the word "salvation" mean to you? Anyone?

Notes for the leader: To be most effective, this lesson needs to include some interaction with the group -- but this interaction needs to be channeled to avoid "side issues" that can interfere with the flow and impact of the main message. Mention that there will be small group discussions after the main presentation where questions can be raised. Then, if a potentially distracting question comes up, suggest that it be raised in the small group session.

Start the interaction by collecting as many quick ideas about what "salvation" means as possible in less than a minute. This is not a "right/wrong" exercise -- if a word or idea has anything to do with salvation, give a quick positive reinforcement ("good!" or "great!" ...). If an idea is "off-base," just look a little skeptical, say "Hmmm..." and go on to the next one.

Great! So salvation includes

- Becoming a **member of the Kingdom** of God
- being accepted as a **member of His family**
- having **eternal life** with Him in heaven
- having **all your sins forgiven** – washed away
- being **set free from the power of sins** that have held you captive
- being **declared "not guilty"** in the eyes of God
- being **rescued from spiritual death**

This last thought is really **the basic meaning of "salvation" – to be rescued** from a situation that seems hopeless, and that is about to lead to death. We've all seen news stories on TV of a fishing boat caught in a storm and sinking. They send out an "SOS" – "please come and rescue us if you can; otherwise, we're going to die!"

The "good news" of the gospel is **that God is willing to rescue anyone who really wants to be rescued!** And he will do this freely, even though we do not deserve it!

The Bible says that **salvation is a gift from God:**

Romans 6:23

The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord.

Ephesians 2:8

It is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.

Our "**wages**" are what we have **earned** -- what we **deserve**. God's **free gift** is **eternal life** through "**grace**" -- **God's love, which we do not deserve**. And ... Paul tells us that the very **faith** that allows us to be saved **is a gift from God!**

But let's step back for a moment... **Why do we need to be rescued?** What's our problem?

The Bible says that **our sin is what separates us from God.**

In another lesson, we studied about the Last Judgment, in which **every one of us will stand before God and be held accountable** for everything we have done in our lives. We learned that the Devil and his followers will be cast into a "lake of fire," called the "second death," and that **everyone whose name is not found written in the Book of Life is cast into the lake of fire!** Jesus also called this "being cast into the outer darkness." We don't know exactly what Hell will be like, any more than we know exactly what Heaven will be like. But the Bible makes it clear to me where **I** want to spend eternity!

Hell means being forever outside the presence of God. This is what those who trust in Jesus are being rescued from! The Bible tells us in 2 Peter 3:9 that "*God does not want any to perish, but wants everyone to come to repentance.*" C.S. Lewis points out that **God did not prepare Hell for mankind, but rather for Satan and his demons.** But, he reminds us, **God has given us the freedom to choose whom we will follow.** And, if we want to do so, **He has given us the terrible freedom to accompany Satan into Hell!** This is a choice each one of us is making, whether we realize it or not.

Sin, you will recall, is **everything we do that falls short of what God wants us to be.**

1 John 1:8

If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

Romans 3:28

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

There are several words used in Hebrew (in the Old Testament) and Greek (in the New Testament) that we translate as "**sin**." One means simply "**missing the mark**," falling short of what we know God wants us to do or be. Another means "**falling**," as when we say that someone has "**fallen into sin**" -- not necessarily something they intended to do. Another word means "**going astray**," as in "*All of us, like sheep, have gone astray, and each of us has turned to our own way.*" (Isa 53:6) Finally, another word means "**deliberately disobeying God and doing what is evil.**"

All of these things are sin, and sin is what separates us from God. One way or another, **sin is what causes all the trouble in the world. We suffer for our own sins, and our sins cause other people to suffer. We suffer for the sins of our parents and our grandparents, and our children suffer because of our sins. Sin is like a hereditary disease** that is passed on from generation to generation all the way back to the **first sin**, recorded in the third chapter of Genesis.

What was that original sin? [*Get a few answers. Point out that it did not involve eating an apple – it was about the "fruit of the knowledge of good and evil."*]

God told Adam and Eve, "Everything here is yours to enjoy as you wish. **Only one thing is forbidden: you shall not eat the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil.**" God was reserving for himself alone **the right to say what is right and wrong.**

God is infinite, and can see all of history. **He can see the consequences of every choice we make.** We are very limited in our understanding, and **we often can't see the consequences of our actions even a few minutes from now.** That is why **God is God, and we are not.**

And what was the temptation? [*Get a few answers.*] "You will not surely die," the serpent said to the woman. "For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and **you will be like God, knowing good and evil.**"

The **temptation**, in other words, was **to set ourselves above God**, and say, "**I will decide what's right and wrong for myself!**" This is how sin entered the world. And each one of us suffers the consequences of that sin. **Each one of us**, at some point fairly early in our lives, **has reenacted that first sin**, saying to ourselves, "**I will decide what's right and wrong.**"

Our sin affects our minds, and our **bodies**, and our **souls**. We can't even trust our own thinking, because of the way it has **been infected by the effects of sin!**

Now so far, this doesn't sound like "good news" at all! In fact, it sounds like a **pretty hopeless situation!** And it would be, except for the fact **that God has sent His Son into the world to rescue us from our sins!**

The heart of the gospel message can be found in three verses in John, Chapter 3, in the words that Jesus himself said to Nicodemus:

John 3:16-18

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned; whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.

Think about this for a minute ... no matter how familiar the words may seem to you.

Why did Jesus say the Father sent him into this world to save us? Because **He loves us!** ... He loves us! He loves **you!** He loves **me!** Why does he love you and me? **Because we are so lovable?** ... No! **Because He is a perfect God of perfect love!**

Romans 5:8

God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Here is where **a lot of people misunderstand the message of the gospel**. They think it says, "First, I need to get my life together. **I need to become a good person. Then, God will love me and accept me!** But **that's not what the gospel says!** It says that **God loves us while we are still sinners!** And that **He loves us so much that he was willing to send His only Son to die for us!**

Jesus made some amazing claims about himself:

John 14:6

I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

Notice that Jesus did **not** say, "I'm **one way** you can find the truth," or "I'm **one way** you can find a relationship with God. He said he's the **only way!** Peter put it this way in Acts 4:12:

Acts 4:12

Salvation is found in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.

So .. what do you need to do to **become a member of the Kingdom of God?** To **have your sins forgiven?** To be **declared righteous in the eyes of God?** To **know that you will be with him forever?**

You must put your faith and trust in Jesus Christ!

When Jesus talks about "**believing**" in him, he **doesn't just mean intellectually understanding** who he is and what he's done. As James tells us, **the Devil and his followers know who Jesus is!** They **believe that he's the Son of God!** But that doesn't mean that they're part of his kingdom, because **they aren't willing to trust him, and follow him, and do what he says!**

Jesus put it this way:

Matthew 18:3

Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Why did Jesus use the example of a little child? The answer is clear: **because little children still know how to trust in the way that Jesus wants us to trust him!**

But **we have to make a choice:** We must **repent of our sins**, and really, truly **be willing to give them up**. The Greek word we translate as "repent" is "metanoia" -- and it means, literally, **to change**

your mind. To realize that you've been headed in the wrong direction. **To make an intelligent decision** to turn around, to change your course, to **surrender yourself to him.**

That's what the son did in the story Jesus told, which we studied in another lesson. He had demanded his share of the family money now, and his father gave it to him and let him go. He went to a far-off land and started to party. He had lots of friends ... until the money ran out. Then the "friends" all disappeared. And times grew hard. Finally, he hit bottom, taking a job feeding pigs ... and realizing that the pigs were eating better than he was! Finally, Jesus said, **he came to his senses and made an intelligent decision: "I will go back to my father, and say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. I ask you only to take me back as a hired worker on your farm.'" And his father accepted him back as a son, and hugged him, and there was great rejoicing, because "this son of mine was dead, and is alive again. He was lost, and is found."** The son in Jesus's story **repented, and confessed, and surrendered himself** to his father.

If you're willing to do this, Jesus makes this promise:

John 5:24

Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.

And Paul tells us that

2 Corinthians 5:17

If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come.

In John's vision in Revelation, Jesus says:

Revelation 3:20

Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will go in and eat with him, and he with me.

There's a famous painting that hangs in St. Paul's Cathedral in London, called "The Light of the World." It shows Jesus standing at the door of a small, simple cottage in the woods, at night, holding a lantern, knocking on a door that's surrounded by weeds and overgrown by vines. When the painter's friends first saw the picture, they said, "You've made a mistake!" "Really?" said the painter. "What mistake do you see?" "There's no latch or handle on the door," they said. "Ah," said the painter. "That's the whole point of the painting. **The latch is on the inside.**"

Like the door in the painting, **the doors to our hearts and lives open only from the inside.** Jesus will knock on the door, **but each one of us must decide for himself whether we're going to open the door and let him in.** God has allowed each of us the freedom to choose whether or not to be part of His kingdom.

If we let Jesus in, **he will implant his Holy Spirit in us**, to live in us, and **begin changing us** into the men or women God intended us to be. **We can't do this by our own will power, but we can do it by the power of God.** But we have to be willing to give control of our lives to him, and **be willing to let him work in us and change us.**

If this makes sense to you, and you want to give your life and yourself to Jesus, you **can make sure right now that you're part of God's kingdom!** All you need to do is to **admit that you're a sinner**, tell God that you **repent of your sins**, and tell him that you are willing to **accept Jesus and follow him.**

There's a brief prayer printed at the bottom of the page each of you have. If you want to make this choice right now, you can pray quietly along with me.

But first, I need to warn you: Jesus never promised that if you come to him and follow him, that life will become easy, and all your problems will disappear. In fact, he warned his disciples that they would be persecuted, and that some of them would even die because they followed him. But he did promise that he would never leave them ... never forsake them ... no matter what troubles might come in their lives. He promised that **whoever comes to him, he will never turn away. He promised a personal relationship that starts now, and lasts forever.**

If you want this relationship with Jesus, please pray quietly with me right now:

Lord Jesus, I know I'm a sinner, and I want to change.
Thank you for dying for my sins.
I ask you to come into my life as my Savior and my Lord,
and to change me into what you want me to be.

Notes for the leader: Depending on the size of the group, have them break into small groups of four to ten. Make sure that each group has a capable leader, who can answer questions that come up about the gospel message. Make sure the groups understand how much time they have. 10 to 20 minutes is ideal. Give each group a time warning three or four minutes before they need to reassemble as a large group, so they can bring their discussion to an orderly conclusion. Then close with a prayer for those who have committed (or re-committed) their lives to Christ. This prayer might include, for example, asking that God will give them a hunger to know His word better; that they will find fellowship with a mature believer who can help them study the Bible, help them find answers to their questions, and encourage them in their walk with Christ. Ask for the Holy Spirit to work in their minds and hearts to enable them to communicate with God in prayer and to resist temptation.

If circumstances permit, it's a good idea to walk around and listen to each group discussion so that you can help out with any "difficult" questions.

For this lesson, the handout sheet serves as the "Take-Home Thoughts" page.

Understanding the Gospel

1. SALVATION IS A GIFT FROM GOD

The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 6:23)

It is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God. (Ephesians 2:8)

2. OUR SIN IS WHAT SEPARATES US FROM GOD

If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. (1 John 1:8)

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. (Romans 3:28)

3. GOD SENT HIS SON INTO THE WORLD TO RESCUE US FROM OUR SINS

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned; whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. (John 3:16-18)

God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8)

I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. (John 14:6)

Salvation is found in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved. (Acts 4:12)

4. YOU MUST PUT YOUR FAITH AND TRUST IN JESUS CHRIST

Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 18:3)

Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life. (John 5:24)

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come. (2 Corinthians 5:17)

Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will go in and eat with him, and he with me. (Revelation 3:20)

5. YOU CAN GIVE YOUR LIFE TO JESUS RIGHT NOW

Lord Jesus, I know I'm a sinner, and I want to change.

Thank you for dying for my sins.

I ask you to come into my life as my Savior and my Lord,
and to change me into what you want me to be.