



LESSON 5
PREPARATION NOTES

Love is
Offered

LOVE IS OFFERED IN BRIEF:

We are invited to receive the gift of salvation and live a new relationship with God. Common barriers to embracing a Christ-centred life are explored.

KEY ELEMENTS:

- It is important to prepare the material well and to intercede for your participants. Many lives have been changed through the sharing of this content.
- Over the past four lessons, God's love has been presented as personal, merciful and proven. This lesson emphasizes that this incredible love is *offered*.
- It is important to practice explaining the relationships diagram. It is best to simply read the text as written and not try to “wing it.” The relationships diagram is an effective tool to help people open their hearts to Jesus.
- This lesson looks at typical obstacles people encounter when introduced to the relationships diagram.
 1. The first obstacle is a perception that the relationships diagram is showing a scale of perfection in the spiritual life—that they could never identify with the kind of perfection implicit within the “Christ-centred relationship” or that it would be too arrogant to consider oneself in the third image.
 2. The second obstacle is the fear of failure as is related to the first obstacle. Here, participants think they will fail God, and that he will abandon them. The marriage analogy helps to explain God's patience with us and that he is not shocked by our weaknesses.
 3. The third obstacle is the fear of change, which manifests in two ways. Participants could be afraid of making lifestyle changes in turning away from sinful behaviours, and they could be afraid of what God has in store for their future if they give him permission.

- As you prepare, reflect on how making the decision to invite Christ to be at the centre of your life was challenging for you. This kind of reflection will help you to better understand your participants, anticipate their concerns and empathize with them. When appropriate and time-permitting, you can share your experiences if you think it will be helpful for where they are in making this commitment to Christ.
- At the end of the lesson, invite participants to meet with you for the *Discovery* follow-up. This will give you an opportunity to hear about each person's response to a relationship with God. It is imperative that all participants be given the opportunity to personally decide to put Jesus at the centre of their lives by choosing to embrace the third image of the relationships diagram. This invitation is offered in the personal follow-up meeting for two reasons: 1) to give them some time from the first proposal of the relationships diagrams to consider their response, and 2) to offer the invitation in a private setting, which will eliminate any concern of what others in the group may think of their responses.

RECOMMENDED READING:

- CCC 150-166; 1427-1433



LESSON 5

Love is Offered

1 Discuss how last week's challenge went.



LEADERS: Ask if anyone would like to share the bridge analogy with the group. If no one is comfortable sharing, make sure to briefly sketch out the analogy yourself as a review of where we left off in Lesson 4.

Introduction



Let's start things off this week with a big question, probably the biggest you will ever face.



Dr. Peter Kreeft is a respected professor of Philosophy at Boston College. During his many years of teaching at this Catholic university, he has asked many students the thought-provoking question: *"If you were to die tonight and God asked you, 'Why should I let you into heaven?', what would you say?"*

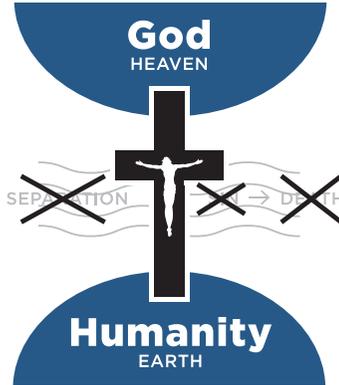
2 What do you think most people in the class said?

LEADERS: After they respond, say, "Keep this question in the back of your mind, as we will return to it later in the lesson. The rest of this lesson is aimed at answering this important question."

Back At The Bridge



In last week's cliffhanger, we are left reflecting on how we will get to the other side of the bridge.



3 How do we actually cross that bridge? See Acts 2:36-38 and Romans 10:9 to verify your answers.

ACTS 2:36-38

Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified." Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, "Brothers, what should we do?" Peter said to them, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

ROMANS 10:9

Because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

ANSWER:

Three key elements: Repentance, Faith, Baptism

Repentance: This means being truly sorry for our sins and desiring not to sin again. If we could do it all over again, we would want to choose differently.

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Faith: Trust, belief that Jesus has accomplished this redemption for us.

Baptism: Through Baptism, we are cleansed from original sin and receive the gift of salvation Jesus won for us on the cross. Jesus himself chose Baptism as the means by which we would receive salvation.

4 Now how would you answer the question, “Why should I let you into heaven?”

A | **ANSWER:** Jesus! It is because of Jesus’ death and resurrection that I have received forgiveness and mercy and the promise of eternal life.

The Relationships Diagram



Over the past four lessons, we have looked at the personal, merciful and proven love of God. We discussed how very intimately God knows each and every one of us. We have seen the Father's heart of mercy, which welcomes us back from our wanderings. Fully God, Jesus left heaven and became man to prove his love for us, even to the point of dying on the cross for our sins. This merciful God *offers* his love to all of us; he invites us individually to make his love our heart's home.

The following illustration helps us to identify how we are living our relationship with Jesus. It also helps us to understand the kind of relationship he desires to have with us: a relationship of friendship, intimacy, commitment, fidelity, mercy and love.



OUTSIDE OF MY LIFE



PART OF MY LIFE



CENTRE OF MY LIFE



OUTSIDE OF MY LIFE



PART OF MY LIFE



CENTRE OF MY LIFE

The top three images represent levels of commitment in three kinds of human relationships. The dashes around the person represent various aspects of this person's life, such as career, school, family, recreation, etc. The first image represents someone who is single; there is no romantic relationship in this person's life. The second image represents someone who is dating; this relationship is part of this person's life, but commitment is limited. The third image represents someone who is married; there is an intimate relationship and a permanent mutual commitment.

Let's compare this to our relationship with God.

The bottom three images represent levels of commitment in a relationship with God. The first image represents someone who does not have a relationship with Jesus and considers Jesus to be outside his or her life. The second image represents someone who acknowledges Jesus as part of his or her life, but has not completely committed to him. Jesus is just one aspect of this person's life among many others. The third image represents a Christ-centred relationship. This relationship is primary and central, influencing all decisions and every aspect of this person's life.

5 In light of this diagram, how do you think a person begins or recommit to a relationship with Jesus?

Starting a relationship with Jesus is much like exchanging marriage vows. You begin by saying "yes" or "I do" to Jesus. You ask him to be part of your life, in good times and in bad, and you commit yourself to him. For those who have been baptized, it is making an adult faith decision to affirm what our parents chose for us at our Baptisms.

LEADERS: Say, "Now that these three kinds of relationships have been explained to you, I'd like to ask you to think about your own life. I'm not going to ask you to share your answers with the group. I just want you to think about it."

- "Which image best represents your relationship with God?"
(Pause ... so they can think about it for five seconds, then ask...)
- "Which image would you like to represent your relationship with God?"

"And for those who might be thinking, 'I'm not sure that I'm comfortable choosing to invite Christ to be at the centre of my life,' another question for you to ponder would be,

- 'What would prevent *you* from choosing the Christ-centred relationship?'"

Leave some silence for personal thought, then invite someone to read aloud the next paragraph in the Study.

A Christ-centred life is a life of discipleship: living in relationship and friendship with Jesus. It is a life of forgiveness, healing, freedom, hope, love and comfort in difficult times. Christ is rightfully honoured when he is at the centre of our lives because it acknowledges his supreme greatness when we recognize him as Lord and Saviour.

As we consider this invitation and decision to live with Christ at the centre of our lives, we might encounter some interior concerns and doubts. *What will this decision mean for me? Can I really live out such a commitment?*

6 What might be holding you back from a Christ-centred life?

LEADERS: Encourage them to write down their barriers. Some may want to talk about their barriers, others may not want to discuss them. Either is fine—it is important to respect their process at this point.

L This is a natural point to affirm that having barriers or questions is ordinary. The key is our response to the barriers—will we let them hold us back, or will we press on to discover how God wants to help us break through the barriers? Be prepared to share about your own barriers in choosing Christ and how you overcame them.

Next we will look at some common barriers and misconceptions when considering Christ's invitation to relationship.

47

Scale of Perfection



A common barrier is the misconception that the relationship diagrams show a scale of spiritual perfection. This attitude can often be attributed to the mistaken belief that being in a relationship with Jesus is about “measuring up” or mastering the Christian life. We think the relationships diagram is an assessment of how “spiritual” we are. We assume that only perfect people like St. Teresa of Calcutta could really be in the Christ-centred relationship.

We can feel uncomfortable to even consider claiming to be in a Christ-centred relationship. We may think it would be too arrogant, and that it would be more humble to say our commitment is represented by the second image or somewhere between the second and third image.

The relationships diagram is emphasizing commitments we make (whether consciously or not), not degrees of spiritual perfection. Although living our faith is essential to our relationship with God, the person in the second kind of relationship with God is not necessarily less “religious” than the person in the Christ-centred relationship. The defining question is one of commitment. *Who is at the centre of my life? To whom am I entrusting my life?*

7 At first glance, what do you think is the difference between the person who sees their commitment to God represented by the second image and the person who would say it is like the third image?

L **LEADERS:** They will likely answer, “The person who says the third image trusts more, is more committed, etc.”

A **ANSWER:** From this perspective, it is completely understandable that they would hesitate to say they are in the Christ-centred relationship. To say you have the Christ-centred relationship would sound arrogant, as if you were a saint! In their minds, a person who has not yet mastered the Christian life can only be in the second kind of relationship. What we want to make clear, though, is that the third image does not represent a perfect life, but a decision made to put God first.

Let’s go back to Dr. Kreeft’s question to help our understanding of a relationship with Christ.

8a In light of the scenario presented by Dr. Kreeft, how would a person in the second kind of relationship answer the question about why God should let them into heaven?

ANSWER: People in the second kind of relationship would answer with a list of all they have done for God, how good they are, or perhaps how “not all that bad” they are. These people trust in themselves (their works alone) to get into heaven. Many Catholics, knowing the Gospel, still have the mindset that they have to “measure up” before God will “show up.”

The second kind of relationship can actually be a place of independence and pride. “Yes, I believe in Jesus, and I have to somehow keep him happy with me, or prove myself to him.”

8b What would the person in the Christ-centred relationship say?

ANSWER: This person would say, “God lets me into heaven because of Christ’s death and resurrection.” Even the good we do is because of Jesus living and acting in us, enabling us to do it. If we believe that Jesus is our Lord (King, Leader) and Saviour (the only one who forgives us, restores us, heals us), we can be in right relationship with God, and experience peace.

LEADERS: Assure your group that if we understand who Jesus is, we will see that it is not proud to say, “I am in the Christ-centred relationship.” If we think salvation is about how good and skilled we are at living the Christian life, then the third image would indeed be a proud choice. But if we understand that it is Jesus who opens heaven to us and gives us the grace to follow his model of life, then we see that the Christ-centred relationship is the most humble.

Most participants do not choose a “works” (it depends on me) mentality with a rebellious attitude. They just need to be encouraged to freely choose Christ with childlike faith. They do not need to prove anything, but they will have to be open to turning away from sin and cooperating with God’s grace—hence the need for follow-up teachings to help them live their conversion in an ongoing way.

Think back to the story of the Prodigal Son in Lesson 2. When the son returned to say that he was “no longer worthy to be called your son,” his father did not ask him to correct all his faults before he offered his forgiveness. Instead, the father was filled with compassion and ran to embrace him. Similarly, when we make the decision to turn our hearts to God, he does not demand perfection before he offers his forgiveness; he is filled with compassion and runs to embrace us.

Fear of Failure

49

A second barrier we encounter is related to self-doubt. We aren’t sure we can live up to what God expects of us.



We need to know that though our failures are inevitable, Jesus will not fail us. We fear that if we fail, God will abandon us; we must remember that God’s love is unconditional, as we learned in Lesson 1. We can also look to the example of human relationships as an analogy of how we can relate to God.

9a How would a prevailing fear of failure affect a relationship with a friend?

9b How would a fear of failure similarly affect the way we relate to Jesus?

10 Read Hebrews 13:5. What encouragement can we take in light of any fear of failure?

HEBREWS 13:5:

“I will never forsake you or abandon you”.

ANSWER: Jesus said, “I will never forsake you or abandon you” (Hebrews 13:5). This is his promise to us. He will not jump in and out of our lives. We can count on him to work with us, despite our failures. When we work with him and cooperate with his grace, we can trust that our relationship is secure. We can also trust that he will help us to live a life pleasing to him, since he has sent us his Holy Spirit (which we will learn about in Source).

A Our failure is an opportunity to repent and grow. It need not be the destruction of the relationship. Struggles and challenges are all part of the development of the relationship. As long as there is repentance and forgiveness, the relationship can continue to grow.

Understanding that we do not have to be perfect to live in the Christ-centred relationship is very freeing. We realize that our relationship with Jesus is secure. This does not mean that we believe we are “once saved always saved”—through serious sin we can still choose to turn our back on Jesus. We trust, however, that our security is established by God, not by our level of spiritual mastery. Without a sense of security and safety, it is difficult for this relationship to grow in intimacy and fidelity.

LEADERS: Using marriage as an analogy can help participants to understand this concept. For the first few days of marriage, the husband and wife live perfectly together, playing house. But for the rest of their lives, they will fail each other on a daily basis; they are both human and thus tend to live for themselves in many ways. Despite their failures, however, they are confident in their relationship because they are *committed* to each other. Because of their commitment and love for each other, they work and struggle to strengthen their relationship. Their marriage is a work in progress; failures and mistakes do not end the relationship. Failure is an opportunity to repent.

The same thing is true of our relationship with Jesus: we will fail on a daily basis. The Lord knows our weaknesses and he is not surprised by our sin. We need only to come to him in honest repentance and ask for his grace to help us overcome our failures and weaknesses. Knowing God’s mercy does not give us license to sin, however—we still ought to try to avoid all serious and deliberate sin, as well as those “everyday” failures.

We want participants to understand that this decision is connected to their Baptism. Tremendous power and grace are given to us at Baptism—these gifts cannot be lost in a simple failure (unless of course, that sin is grave, with full knowledge and consent).

We must also recognize that if we rebel through actions that “bring death” into our relationship with God, and choose not to repent, we are not cooperating with him or his grace. In fact, mortal sin cuts us off from God’s love and salvation. It is like severing a branch from a tree, so that the sap can no longer reach it. The Sacrament of Reconciliation is our opportunity to be reconciled with God.

Fear of Change



The decision to invite Christ to be at the centre of our lives is certainly a life-changing decision. It is a decision to orient our whole life, our life's actions, choices, priorities and purpose toward God. This means making some choices to change the way we are living, so as to honour God and live as a follower of Jesus. There are other fears about allowing Christ to be at the centre of our lives. We can worry about the changes this kind of decision will impose on our current way of life.

11 What are the kinds of changes people might fear about inviting Christ to be at the centre of their lives?

ANSWER:

Fear of giving up certain lifestyle choices and sinful behaviors that are contrary to God's will.

Fear of too many rules and restrictions.

Fear of a boring life.

Fear of being controlled.

Fear of missing out on all that the "world" has to offer.

Fear of getting "religious."

Fear of vocation.

Fear of God imposing difficulty.

LEADERS: There are two general fears expressed here.

- 1) Fear of what will have to change in one's lifestyle, and
- 2) fear of the future.

1) FEAR OF LIFESTYLE CHANGE

Do not shy away from helping your participants understand that a decision to follow Christ will mean there will be behaviours and choices they will likely need to give up or change. This is really important for them to consider and commit to doing for the decision to be authentic and lasting.

You will want to guide them towards a humble and contrite disposition as they invite Christ to be at the centre of their lives.

PSALM 51:17

*The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.*

LEADERS: You could ask, “What should be the attitude of our hearts?” The attitude of our hearts should be one of true repentance for our failures and desire to live in a way that is pleasing to God. Jesus knows your heart and is not concerned if you have been good or bad in the past. He already knows everything about you anyway. What counts for him is the present attitude of your heart. We should believe that Jesus is truly God and our means to salvation. We should approach him with great faith, trusting that his mercy is greater than anything we have done.

The Sacrament of Reconciliation is especially helpful to put Christ at the centre of our lives—it gives us the opportunity to show our desire to convert our lives to Christ, to be forgiven, and to receive the grace to live as Christians. Reconciliation is an integral part of making a decision to follow Jesus.

Ultimately, you can direct participants to turn away from sin by preparing them to go to the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

2) FEAR OF THE FUTURE

LEADERS: You can expect participants to be apprehensive of what God might ask of them or what they might miss out on if they embrace a Christ-centred relationship. You surely have your own experiences of this. Prepare a personal sharing of your own fears and how God dispelled those perceptions. Talking about it and exposing it can be, in itself, very helpful for them to move forward in this important life-changing decision.

The following quote from Pope Benedict XVI is perfect for addressing these kinds of fears. Take time to discuss it. Have someone read it aloud, and then read it aloud a second time, inviting participants to underline key words and phrases.

“ If we let Christ into our lives, we lose nothing, nothing, absolutely nothing of what makes life free, beautiful and great. No! Only in this friendship are the doors of life opened wide. Only in this friendship is the great potential of human existence truly revealed.... Dear young people: do not be afraid of Christ! He takes nothing away and he gives you everything. When we give ourselves to him, we receive a hundredfold in return. Yes, open, open wide the doors to Christ—and you will find true life. ”

Pope Benedict XVI

Mass for the Inauguration of his Pontificate

12 **What do you think might need to change in your life if you embrace a Christ-centred relationship? Take a moment to reflect and write down potential changes in your life.**

LEADERS: This is a moment for personal reflection. It is important that each participant has the opportunity to reflect on the personal consequences of making a decision to embrace a relationship with Christ. After giving time to reflect personally, this may be a good opportunity to share from your own experience about changes you had to make when you embraced a relationship with Christ, and how making these changes in one's life is always worth it.

Universal Invitation— Personally Yours

51

We have just looked at various obstacles when considering a Christ-centred relationship. God knows our fears and weaknesses, and doesn't expect us to be instantly perfect. He is with us to help us every step of the way. Be assured that God greatly desires to be in a right and restored relationship with each of us, with *you*. Jesus Christ has made the way possible through his life, death and resurrection.



“ Finally, I turn to every man and woman, including those who have fallen away from the Church, who have left the faith or who have never heard the proclamation of salvation. To everyone the Lord says: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me” (Revelation 3:20). ”

Verbum Domini, 124

In Jewish culture, to share a meal is a sign of welcoming and intimacy—a powerful sign of what is happening between us and Jesus. In the classic painting based on Revelation 3:20 by William Holman Hunt, Jesus is portrayed knocking at a door which has no handle. This door can only be opened from the inside. Jesus will come in if we open the door to him. Do you hear him knocking? Will you open the door to Christ?

What are the obstacles to a Christ-centred relationship that you need to take to prayerful reflection this week?

LEADERS: Let them know this question is not intended for group sharing, but for them to personally review the lesson's content.

Mention the importance of making the personal decision, and note that there will be an invitation to a Christ-centred relationship at their follow-up. We want them to know this challenge is coming so they can take time to prepare, otherwise we're missing the point of having the challenge in the follow-up.

The decision to put Christ at the centre of your life is perhaps the most important decision you will ever make. Jesus is offering you his everlasting love and forgiveness, and all he asks for in return is your love and your faith in him. A decision like this should not be taken lightly, and so we want to give you space to reflect on your answer to the question:

Which of the three relationships do you want to represent your relationship with Jesus?

Your *Discovery* leader will set up a time to meet with you personally before Lesson 6 to discuss your response to this most important question.



Summary

What an incredible love story! God proved his love for us by sending his Son to die on the cross to reconcile us with himself. For love to truly be love it has to be offered and received. In Christ we are offered love, reconciliation and the hope of eternal life. He invites us to make that choice through faith and to reorient our lives, placing God at the centre of all we do, becoming his disciples.

CHALLENGE

This week, prayerfully consider Christ's invitation to relationship. Ask yourself: "What might be holding me back from this decision?" Plan a time to meet individually with your small group leader sometime this week to discuss your response to Christ's invitation to a personal relationship.

MEMORIZE REVELATION 3:20

Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.

LEADERS: At this time, let participants know that you would like to meet with each of them some time in the next week to discuss their response to Christ's invitation to relationship. **This one-on-one follow-up is VITAL.** It is important that you make it clear that you will be asking them about their personal response to the invitation to commit to a Christ-centred relationship. It is important to address this in advance so that no one is surprised at being asked about their personal response.

If, for some reason, someone cannot meet with you before the next lesson, try to schedule the follow-up meeting as soon as possible afterwards. No participant should finish *Discovery* without an individual meeting that includes a specific challenge to consider Christ's invitation to a personal relationship.

Leader's Journal



Take 15 minutes as soon as possible after finishing the lesson to reflect on how God moved during your study and how your small group participants responded.

1 Thanksgiving

Reflect and say a prayer of thanksgiving for specific ways the Holy Spirit was present in that small group.

- a. How did you experience the Holy Spirit helping you to lead the lesson?

- b. How did you experience the Holy Spirit moving in the small group today?

- c. What were the positives from today's group?

- d. What were areas for improvement?

2 Prophetic Listening

Ask the Holy Spirit to help you review the lesson. Think about each person in your small group as you prayerfully reflect on these questions.

- a. What are some indications that each participant caught the main points of this lesson?

- b. If you noticed gaps in any participant’s understanding of the main points, is the Holy Spirit inviting you to do anything over the course of this week to help this person better understand?

- c. Are there any other ways the Holy Spirit is inviting you to intentionally care for or nurture your individual small group participants?

- d. Is there anything you want to remind yourself from what played out in this lesson for when you sit down to prepare the next lesson?

3 Intentional Accompaniment

Write down a plan to intercede for your small group participants based on the specific insights above, including how you will reach out to them and/or tailor the next lesson’s introduction based on your reflections.