
Channel Markers

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1

Priorities—Putting God First

Purpose: How are our priorities in life informed by our faith? How can we understand the Ten Commandments as “channel markers” for our lives?

Materials

- Bible
- *Channel Markers*
- notebooks
- pencils
- pens

Opening Activity: On your own, write down your answers to the following questions:

- What is the first thing you think about when you wake up?
- What is the most important activity you do each day?
- If you could do one thing before you die, what would it be?

Scripture: Exodus 20:1–17

Presentation/Discussion

- Read together Exodus 20:1–17.
- The author discusses the Ten Commandments as “channel markers” for our lives. What does he mean by this? How is this concept different or similar to the ways you’ve thought of the Ten Commandments in the past?
- How are the first two commandments “channel markers” for thinking about our life with God?
- In what ways do we put God first? As individuals? As congregations? As a culture?

Response/Exploration: As a group share your answers to the opening questions. Discuss how applying the channel marker “making

God a priority” would strengthen, change, or diminish your answers to the opening questions.

Application/Assignment

- Plan how you might apply what you heard or discovered about “making God a priority” over the course of this study. Report your plan at the next class meeting.
- Read chapter 2 of *Channel Markers*.

Closing Prayer

Loving God, you made us for yourself that we might worship you. Yet we often get lost in our own wishes, wants, and motives. Turn us back to the path that places you first. Teach us anew how to be your people, your disciples, your children. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

2

Integrity—Talking God or Being God?

Purpose: What does it mean to “take God’s name in vain”?

Materials

- Bible
- *Channel Markers*
- notebooks
- pencils
- pens

Opening Activity: Form pairs and answer the following:

- Growing up, what were you taught or what was your understanding of “taking God’s name in vain”?
- How does the author’s description of “taking God’s name in vain” expand or challenge your previous ideas?

Scripture: Numbers 20:9–13 (Moses striking the rock), 2 Samuel 12:5–9 (Nathan condemns David), Genesis 3:1–7 (the serpent in Eden), Mark 15:25–32 (Jesus’ crucifixion)

Presentation/Discussion: (The teacher should prepare to present and summarize the story behind each text passage listed above.)

- Divide the class into 2–4 groups, depending on the size of the class.
- Assign one of the above passages to each group.
- Ask each group to do the following:
 - Read the passage aloud as a group.
 - Summarize the story in their own words.
 - Describe who or what speaks truly for God in the passage? Or tell how God’s voice is implied? What does the voice say or do?
 - Explain who or what takes God’s name in vain? By what words or actions do they do this?
- Gather the class and have each group report its findings.

Response/Exploration: As a class discuss the following:

- How does the author define “taking God’s name in vain”?
- How do the author’s definition or the Bible passages you just read alter your understanding of this “channel marker”?
- In what ways might God’s name be “taken in vain”? Do any of the author’s examples resonate with you or your experiences?
- How have you taken God’s name in vain? How might your understanding of this “channel marker” impact your words or actions?

Application/Assignment

- This week listen and watch for ways in which you or others take God’s name in vain.
- Read chapter 3 of *Channel Markers*.

Closing Prayer

Creator God, you made us in your image to live for and with you, yet we confuse our will with your own. By your Holy Spirit, teach us anew to be your creatures not our own gods, that we may grow into the image of Jesus Christ in whose name we pray. Amen.

3

Time—Rhythm and Ritual

Purpose: How does the Fourth Commandment act as a channel marker to shape our use of time?

Materials

- Bible
- *Channel Markers*
- newsprint
- notebooks
- pencils
- pens

Opening Activity: Pick two words that describe your perception of time and how you use it: frenetic, balanced, sleepy, even, glacial, flying, roller-coaster, busy, crazed, lazy, yo-yo, precious, fleeting, commodity, infinite.

Scripture: Exodus 20:8, Deuteronomy 5:15

Presentation/Discussion

- Read together Exodus 20:8. What reason does this Scripture give for the meaning and purpose of the Sabbath?
- Read together Deuteronomy 5:15. What reason does this Scripture give for the meaning and purpose of the Sabbath?
- The author points out that the channel marker of the Sabbath places God's rhythm and ritual onto our use of time. What is the Sabbath rhythm? What rituals, classical or contemporary, could be put in place to help us maintain this rhythm?

Response/Exploration

- Recalling Deuteronomy 5:15, what could it mean for us to give our slaves, those things that work for us, a Sabbath time to rest. Who or what are our slaves in this culture?

- Why has the idea of Sabbath become such a challenge for us in our culture?
- In what ways do you already claim this practice of Sabbath?
- In what ways might we as Christians reclaim the rhythm of Sabbath time?

Application/Assignment

- Choose one idea of Sabbath-taking from today's class and practice it at home this week.
- Read chapter 4 of *Channel Markers*.

Closing Prayer

Eternal God, you set an example for us by creating your world for six days and resting on the seventh. Free us from the slavery of our jobs, our striving, and our possessions. Enable us to live in the freedom of your rhythm and ritual so that we might serve you with energy and imagination as the body of Christ by the power of your Holy Spirit. Amen.

4

Memory— Remembering Our Roots

Purpose: How does “honoring our parents” teach us to live life fully by reclaiming our past?

Materials

- Bible
- *Channel Markers*
- notebooks
- pencils
- pens

Opening Activity: Choose a partner and tell a story from your past for each of the following scenarios:

- When you were proud
- When you were scared
- When you were ashamed or felt as if you had failed

Scripture: Genesis 4:2b–12 (Cain and Abel), Genesis 27:1–35 (Jacob and Esau), Genesis 45:1–15 (Joseph and his brothers)

Presentation/Discussion: (The teacher should prepare to present and summarize the story behind each text passage listed above.)

- Divide the class into 2-3 groups.
- Assign one Scripture passage to each group.
- Have each group read the passage and discuss the following:
 - For each character in the story, about which actions or events would he or she have felt proud? Scared? Ashamed? A failure?
 - How did each character claim or reject his or her parents or past?
 - Would the story have been different if one or more characters had honored their past? Why or why not?

Response/Exploration: Have each group present their findings to the class. As a class discuss:

- Did any story or character resonate with your experience or your past?
- What stories or memories might you need to reclaim?
- How might reclaiming this past help you to live better?

Application/Assignment

- What specific step or steps could you take this week to reclaim one piece of your past? Do at least one.
- Read chapter 5 of *Channel Markers*.

Closing Prayer

God, you are our heavenly parent and you place us in human families that can be both a blessing and a challenge. Open us to both the pain and pride of our pasts that we might truly honor all of our mothers and fathers who have shaped who we are. By your Spirit gather us into your family whose head is Jesus Christ our Lord, in whose name we pray. Amen.

5

Reverence—Honoring the Other

Purpose: How does our culture dishonor the “other”? How do the channel markers “You shall not murder” and “You shall not commit adultery” form and transform our behavior toward others?

Materials

- Bible
- *Channel Markers*
- notebooks
- pencils
- pens

Opening Activity: On your own, read the Robert George quote from page 36 in *Channel Markers*. What do you think of when you read this? Share your thoughts with one or two people near you.

Scripture: Exodus 20:13–14

Presentation/Discussion

- George discusses our culture’s view of the sacredness of life. He says, “Modern secular orthodoxy splits the human being, dividing the person from the body. The body is treated as an instrument for getting what the self wants—pleasure, emotional satisfaction, etc.” What are the implications of George’s assertion that the “body is treated as an instrument”?
- The author also describes these channel markers as “yellow lights” in our behavior toward others, especially regarding the sacredness of the body. What examples or stories in this chapter did you find intriguing?

Response/Exploration

- Choose one or more of the following topics with which you struggle personally or as a community: violence, sex and pornography, fertility and biogenetics, capital punishment.

- How does the author's presentation of reverence for life and body impact this issue(s)?

Application/Assignment

- The author writes, "We are all God's children. We too bear on our foreheads the sign of the cross. Every day we must choose how we shall live: reverently or selfishly." Think of three specific ways you could live more reverently of others this week. Do one or more of these actions before the next class. Report what you learned from the experience.
- Read chapter 6 of *Channel Markers*.

Closing Prayer

Compassionate God, your son Jesus Christ taught and healed, showing us that you care for both our spirits and our bodies. Send your Spirit upon us that we might discern ways in which we dishonor other people's bodies. Give us strength and courage to care for them as you would, even at the expense of our wants. Amen.

6

Manners— Respect in a World of Desire

Purpose: How do the last three channel markers teach us to “mind our manners”?

Materials

- Bible
- *Channel Markers*
- newsprint
- notebooks
- pencils
- pens/markers

Opening Activity: As a group, make a list of actions or behaviors you would associate with the words *etiquette* and *manners*.

Scripture: Exodus 20:15–17

Presentation/Discussion: Discuss the following channel markers and the author’s modern translation. Can you think of examples of each that you have either seen used by others or ignored? Share these with the group.

- You shall not steal; respect what belongs to others.
- You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor; respect the other and always speak the truth about them.
- You shall not covet anything belonging to your neighbor; watch out for your wants.

Response/Exploration: Look again at each channel marker from today’s lesson.

- How would knowledge of these channel markers have helped you in either a current or past situation? Explain.
- How do these channel markers support one another? Are there ways in which they might be at odds? Why or why not?

Application/Assignment: Take a few moments at the end of class to reflect on the first half of *Channel Markers*.

- How has the author informed or challenged your view of the Ten Commandments?
- Read chapter 7 of *Channel Markers*.

Closing Prayer

Giver of all good gifts, you bless us with possessions and with the people who surround and nurture us. Guide us to treat both other people and their possessions with respect, trusting in your ability, not our own, to provide for our wants and needs. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

7

Heading for the Open Sea

Purpose: God calls us to live out our faith in our lives. With this in mind, how do we live out our faith and reflect our love for God by loving our neighbor?

Materials

- Bible
- *Channel Markers*
- newsprint or whiteboard
- pens/markers

Opening Activity: Begin this activity by asking the participants to name one of their neighbors. As the group is doing this, write down their answers on the newsprint or whiteboard. Once there is a sizable list, ask the participants these questions:

- What is the biggest factor that influences your relationship with the neighbor you named?
- What is the main barrier in your relationship?

Scripture: Luke 10:25–37

Presentation/Discussion

- Read the passage from Luke and begin with a brief discussion of the passage. First, take a look at the individuals in this parable. A priest first passes by the man on the side of the road. Surely this priest, a holy man, would help this man, but no, he passes by. Next comes the Levite, a member of the priestly tribe, one of the most respected groups in the nation. Again we would expect this man to offer assistance, but again, he passes by. Finally comes the Samaritan, a person who would have been disliked by the Jews of this period because of his ethnicity. It is, of course, the Samaritan, not the priest or Levite, who helps the man, and this teaches us, the hearer, an important lesson when regarding our neighbors.

- Discuss the passage. How does this passage relate to the author's statement "Love looks beyond appearances. Love sees through labels. Love gets involved because love cares. Love has both the discernment and the imagination to see the whole person." (56)?
- In this parable Jesus was playing against people's stereotypes. Ask the group what are the first characteristics they look at when evaluating another person? List these characteristics on the newsprint. Now compare those characteristics with the ones attributed to the three men in this parable. Do any of them overlap? What does that tell us about how we view our neighbors?

Response/Exploration

- Break the group into three small groups. Give each group five minutes to come up with a brief reenactment of this story from the perspective of one of the three main characters—the priest, the Levite, or the Samaritan.
- Instead of using these old stereotypes, ask each group to come up with a modern day equivalent of this old character: the priest might become a pastor; the Levite, a prominent politician; the Samaritan, a Muslim.
- Each group should try to explain the actions of their character to the rest of the group as they reenact this parable.

Application/Assignment

- What has this parable taught us about how we ought to treat our neighbors?
- If we apply the author's question "What if we genuinely loved God with our whole self and let that love shape our everyday living" (60) to our neighbors, what consequences would that have for our relationship with them? Challenge the group to see the whole person.
- Read chapter 8 of *Channel Markers*.

Closing Prayer

Loving God, you have called us to worship you in part by being with our neighbors. Guide us in the relationships of our lives and help us to be valued friends and neighbors to all whom we encounter. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

8

Living as if

Purpose: We are called to live life as disciples of Jesus Christ and to be aware of the kingdom of God in our midst.

Materials

- Bible
- *Channel Markers*
- newsprint
- pens/markers

Opening Activity

- Ask the participants in the class to make a list of characteristics they believe belong to a good disciple of Christ.
- Encourage them to articulate these characteristics using their own language not simply relying on the Bible. As they provide characteristics list them on the newsprint.

Scripture: Read Luke 17:20–21

Presentation/Discussion

- Read the passage from Luke. In this chapter, the author poses this question “What if the essence of the Christian life is not forgiveness but discipleship?” Modern pop-Christianity has developed an emphasis on forgiveness and salvation over and above discipleship and “right living.” The author speaks of Dallas Willard’s notion of “bar-code faith,” the belief that how you live has little bearing on the life of faith.
- Present this assertion to the group and ask them to assess it. Is the author correct about discipleship being the essence of the Christian life?
- Give them time to discuss this question, and ask them to elaborate on their responses.

- After giving them some time to answer the initial question, follow up by asking what attributes from the opening activity capture the essence of the Christian life?
- In what ways do these attributes elucidate our desire to live Christlike lives?

Response/Exploration

- Clearly we have some ideas about what it means to be a disciple. If the model is clear then why don't we lead our lives in a more Christlike manner?
- Ask the group what barriers they experience to discipleship in their lives. Let them share these barriers in an open way, and if the group is comfortable with this, add these barriers to the newsprint.

Application/Assignments

- In the closing minutes go around the group and ask each person to name one aspect of their life that they will covenant to improve. It can be something small, such as simply talking to an unpopular coworker, or a fundamental life change.
- Encourage the group to examine their lives in relation to the understanding of discipleship they have articulated and the one reflected in this chapter from *Channel Markers*.
- Read chapter 9 of *Channel Markers*.

Closing Prayer

Gracious and Holy God, you have called us to be disciples of you. Help us to serve you, as you would have us serve, and love others as you love them. Help us to remove the barriers to discipleship in our lives and make us your renewed servants. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

9

Living as if the World Were a Safe Place

Purpose: By betting on God rather than ourselves we can free ourselves from our anxieties, thus making ourselves free to dream.

Materials

- activity sheets
- Bible
- *Channel Markers*
- newsprint
- pens/markers
- small slips of paper

Opening Activity

- When people are struggling with anxieties it can be of tremendous help if these anxieties are named. Open this session by discussing anxieties we face in this world.
- Rather than asking people to name their anxieties, an activity that could be problematic in even the most close-knit groups, offer them a list of common anxieties. Create a list of ten anxieties prior to the class and make enough copies of it for each person.
- Ask each person to rank the potential anxieties on their sheet from 1 to 10, 1 being the most anxious issue, 10 being the least. You can use whatever categories you like; some suggestions are: money, family, health, property, legal issues, politics, terrorism, crime, and war.

Scripture: Read the paraphrase of Matthew 6:19–34 on pages 71–72 in *Channel Markers*.

Presentation/Discussion

- Safety is of course a relative term, and for those of deep faith and those of no faith the world can be a very dangerous place. However, much of our lives are dominated by anxieties over

things we cannot control, worrying about what might go wrong as opposed to focusing on our role in God's kingdom. If we focus on our role in God's kingdom then we are freed to dream, rather than worrying about all the trappings of this world.

- In this section contrast the power of dreams with the fear of anxieties. On newsprint make two columns, one that says anxieties, the other dreams. Remind the group that the point is not to alleviate all planning and organization from our lives and live a free-wheeling life of hope without action; rather it is to worry only about what we can control.
- With this in mind ask the group to look at their rankings of anxieties. Which of these anxieties can they directly control? If an issue is not under their direct control, list it on the newsprint. If there are other anxieties the people feel but cannot control, list those as well. In the next column, list some dreams of the group. These dreams should not be dreams of our own, but our visions for God's work in the world.
- Challenge the group to focus on God's will, not their own.

Response/Exploration

- Now that we have our dreams on the board, talk about these. Ask the group how our anxieties stand as a barrier to our dreams.
- If we move these barriers from our path, are we free to dream big about our role in God's kingdom?

Application/Assignment

- Begin this final section by rereading the Ron Hansen story on pages 74–75 of *Channel Markers*.
- Emphasize the final point of the story, that God wants to be surprised.
- Provide each member of the group with a small slip of paper. Have each person write down in one sentence how they plan on surprising God in their lives.
- Ask them then to tuck their surprise into their purses or wallets and leave it there as a reminder of their place in God's kingdom.
- Read chapter 10 of *Channel Markers*.

Closing Prayer

Merciful God, help us to overcome the anxieties that plague us. Give us your dreams and inspire us with your vision that your imagination might become ours. Help us to surprise you every day as you surprise us with your undying grace. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

Living as if You Were a Really Good Person

Purpose: We are called by God to lead lives of discipleship, and discipleship demands goodness on our part.

Materials

- Bible
- *Channel Markers*
- newsprint
- pens/markers

Opening Activity

- Have the group think about good people they know. If possible these should be people known to the whole group, not just to individual participants.
- List these people on newsprint with one quality that makes them “good.”
- After each participant has given a name, look for common traits of goodness as defined by the group.

Scripture Passage: Matthew 5:20–48

Presentation/Discussion

- Read Matthew 5:20–48.
- We are good not to master life but to reflect God’s love to the world. When we read this passage through the lens of the world we live in, the author says that it seems to be taken straight out of the morning headlines.
- Break the group into six small groups, even if it means there are only two or three people in each group.
- Ask them to look at one of the author’s six questions on page 80 of *Channel Markers*.
- Ask each group to determine the good response to the question they have been given. What would a good person do in light of these questions?

- Have each small group present their answers to the group, keeping in mind that our goodness glorifies God not ourselves.

Response/Exploration

- Once you have a model for goodness, decide if it is a goodness defined by our culture or a goodness defined by God.
- The author speaks of practicing goodness through two specific routines. First, he says we should “image” our day. Walk through your day and imagine yourself handling each situation with “poise and grace.”
- Have each person take a few moments to imagine themselves in this way.
- After giving them some time, ask those who would be comfortable to share their images with the group.
- The author then talks of goodness as a physical practice. In our gestures, facial expressions, and body language we can practice goodness.
- Go back to the list of good people from the opening activity. Ask the group about their physical practice of goodness. Do they have benevolent smiles, caring eyes, open postures? How we present ourselves in the world can affect how we act.

Application/Assignment

- In the final few minutes, have each person share a time when someone treated him or her with goodness and how this goodness made them think of God.
- Ask how these images changed how they see others and how they will strive to interact with all the people they encounter.
- Read chapter 11 of *Channel Markers*.

Closing Prayer

Holy God, you are a God of imagination. Help us to imagine the life you have planned for us. Help us to imagine goodness and kindness. Help us to envision our place in your kingdom. We ask these things in Christ's name. Amen.

Living as if God Were Your Only Audience

Purpose: Our role as disciples is to glorify God, not ourselves.

Materials

- Bible
- *Channel Markers*
- newsprint
- pens/markers

Opening Activity

- When we say we are Christians, what do we mean by that? Do we think of our faith identity only in terms of our perceived salvation, or does our identity as Christians say something more about us?
- Ask the group to share how their faith influences their lives and especially their relationship with other people.

Scripture Reading: Matthew 6:1–7

Presentation/Discussion

- Read Matthew 6:1–7.
- All of us can think of people who do things to glorify themselves and not God. The desire to make our lives about us and not about God is quite tempting in our society, but God is calling us to more than this. The author is reminding us that God's cause is not necessarily our cause, and our piety can often be insincere. Our faith becomes sincere and our piety real when we make the root of our goodness God and not ourselves.
- Give the group several examples of acts of benevolence and ask them how they would make each act about God and not about themselves.
- Break the group into four smaller groups and give each one a project. One is charged with beginning a prayer group at

church, a second group is planning a generous gift to a university for a new library, a third is an individual sharing his or her experience volunteering at a soup kitchen, and the fourth is a politician speaking to a church.

- Give the groups several minutes to develop their plans and then have them present their answers in skit form. Remind them that the purpose of this is not to glorify the individual but to glorify God. Excessive pieties, however, can often seem to be false piety, so there is a balance to be maintained.
- After each presentation give the group time to discuss what they have seen.

Response/Exploration

- Now ask the group to reflect on their own lives. Are they using their lives and their good deeds to glorify God or themselves?
- Ask them to share one instance in the last year when they have done something they perceive to be good. Have them elaborate by sharing what that act did to glorify God.
- Encourage them to seek God actively in each situation involving an act of benevolence or piety in their lives. If we are looking for God in acts of kindness, then sooner or later our acts will begin to reflect God's presence.

Application/Assignment

- Ask the group to reflect on the last several weeks.
- Ask them to pick out one tangible change they plan on making in their lives and share it with the group.
- Were they able to surprise God?
- Have they changed one key aspect of their lives?
- Have they changed how they see others?
- Challenge the group to continue to seek goodness and glorify God with their lives.

Closing Prayer

God, help us to act in the world you have created. Help us to be your hands and feet, ministering to those who are in need. Guide us in our daily lives to serve those who are near and far and let our piety be our greatest gift from you and to your children. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.