

Nazareth?

A discussion-based Bible study lesson plan focused on John 1:43-51

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Objectives:

- A. First and foremost, to create a setting in which God's Spirit can speak to us through the biblical conversation between Jesus, Philip, and Nathanael.
- B. To learn from this passage, from the voices of its characters, and from one another's perspectives.
- C. To share an experience of openness, spiritual growth, and fellowship as a group.
- D. To recognize, or re-recognize, that prejudice is widespread among human beings and human cultures, and can be based on any of numerous factors and characteristics. (In other words, it's more pervasive and more varied than we may realize.)
- E. More specifically, to challenge ourselves to take a fresh look at prejudices.
 1. Prejudices that existed in the Holy Land during the first century.
 2. Prejudices that exist today—in the United States and around the world.
 3. Prejudices that may exist closer to home.
 - a. In our local community?
 - b. In our church?
 - c. In our own hearts and minds?
- F. To consider what we believe God thinks about prejudice, and to think about our desire to follow God's will might guide us as we deal with prejudices—our own, and those of others.

Assumptions & Understandings:

- A. This lesson plan is written for use by adults, although it could be also be used with youth/teens/adolescents.
- B. This lesson plan is focused on John 1:43-51, although certainly the facilitator or group members should feel free to bring other scriptural passages into the discussion.
- C. This lesson plan will most likely be used with a church-based small group or class (probably meeting either at the church or at a member's home), though it could be utilized in other contexts.
- D. The author of this lesson plan anticipates that it will most likely require only a single session of between 60 and 75 minutes, though "spilling over" into a second session is certainly an option.
- E. The author is a Congregational minister, writing with respect for theological diversity in mind.
 1. The author does not hold to the doctrines of scriptural inerrancy or infallibility.
 2. He does, however, cherish scripture as a key resource for spiritual growth and guidance.
 3. He has a background in Christian education for all age levels, and believes strongly in the value of group discussion in Christian spiritual formation.
 4. He happens to be a white male in his 50s who has lived in suburban settings nearly all of his life.
- F. Yes, the author believes that prejudice is, at least generally speaking, a negative aspect of the human condition—a manifestation of our imperfection and sinfulness.

Supplies:

- A. Bible(s)
 1. At a minimum, you as the facilitator should have a Bible for your own use during the session.
 2. If you think you'll want to compare translations during the session, you'll want to have various translations on hand (or have an app on your phone or tablet that offers multiple versions of the Bible).

3. If you think some may attend without bringing their own Bible, you might have a few extra Bibles on hand as a courtesy.
- B. Something to write on and visibly display to the group. Options:
 1. a whiteboard—with markers, eraser, and easel.
 2. a chalkboard—with chalk, eraser, and easel.
 3. a large pad of newsprint—with markers and easel.
 - C. Ideally, you'd also have at least four color copies of the sheet with the Bible passage color-coded for reading in roles.
 - D. Refreshments are entirely at your discretion as the facilitator. You might have coffee and cookies, lemonade and brownies, iced tea and a bowl of candy, soft drinks and pretzels—or none of the above.
 - E. Of course, seating is essential. You'll want to make sure you have plenty of chairs to accommodate the largest foreseeable number of attendees. Ideally, chairs would be arranged in a circle or oval, if feasible.

Convening the Group:

- A. As attendees are entering, gathering, and or mingling, you'll want to call the group session to order without being too abrupt or heavy-handed. This should occur as close to the stated start time as possible.
- B. Welcoming all attendees and thanking them for coming.
- C. It might be friendly, helpful, and fun to go around and have each attendee introduce themselves by saying his/her first name and a biblical figure that s/he finds heroic.
 1. If you want to make it more challenging, you can stipulate "no repeats," so you don't just get a string of people all saying "Jesus" or "Moses" or "David" or "Paul."
 2. Chances are, nobody in your group will say "Philip" or "Nathanael." You might offer a joking comment about their relative obscurity, and mention that the passage we're going to look at today features those two men, along with Jesus.

Opening Prayer Options:

- A. As the facilitator, you might lead the opening prayer yourself, setting the tone for the discussion.
- B. Or, if you prefer, you could ask for a volunteer to lead the group in a brief prayer.
- C. If you know the window of time for this session is very tight, you might opt not to open with a prayer.

An Opening Quote:

- A. Read this quote to the group: "*It is never too late to give up our prejudices.*"
- B. Ask the group whether they agree with the quote or not, and briefly why or why not?
- C. Ask the group whether anyone has any idea who said that quote.
 1. If nobody has a clue, or if several have answered but not been at all "warm" in their guesses, you might provide a couple hints:
 - a. It's a male author from the 1800s.
 - b. Philosophically, he's considered to be among the "transcendentalist" writers of that period.
 - c. He's typically known by all three of his names (first, middle, and last).
 - d. His most famous work was probably the book, *Walden*.
 2. You can have fun with this for a couple minutes, but don't spend too much time on it. After several guesses, if nobody has correctly answered, just disclose the answer to the group: Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862).

An Opening Brainstorm:

- A. Merriam Webster's definitions of the word "prejudice" include the following:
 1. preconceived judgment or opinion

2. an adverse opinion or leaning formed without just grounds or before sufficient knowledge
 3. an irrational attitude of hostility directed against an individual, a group, a race, or their supposed characteristics.
- B. Let's try to list as many different types of prejudice as we can. (Use whiteboard, chalkboard, or newsprint.)
1. We can start with two obvious examples: race (i.e. racism) and gender (i.e. sexism).
 2. But there are many more. What would you add?
 3. Note to the facilitator: There are *many* possibilities include age, class, country of origin, height, weight, municipality and state of residence, type of car that one drives, political persuasion, clothing, religious affiliation, occupation, etc. If your group gets stuck after only a small number of ideas are voiced, you might gently prompt them with a couple of these.
- C. Two quick questions as we look at our list:
1. How big a problem would you say prejudice is in our society today? How widespread? How harmful?
 2. How do you think God feels about human prejudice?

About the Gospel of John:

You might briefly share with the group some of all of the following information about the Gospel of John.

- A. Most "mainline" biblical scholars think it was written in the 90s C.E., or even later—the last of the four canonical gospels to be written.
- B. It may or may not have been written by the same John who walked and talked with Jesus.
 1. If it was that same John, he would've been remarkably old at the time of writing (~100 years old).
 2. If it was not that same John, it probably was one or more of his students/apprentices.
- C. Of the four canonical gospels, John is the outlier.
 1. Matthew, Mark, and Luke are considered to be "synoptic" ("syn" meaning same or similar; "optic" meaning view or perspective).
 2. John is not considered to be a synoptic gospel, having significant differences with the other three in terms of content, chronology, and theology.
- D. With all that said, John is a much-loved gospel, and it contains some cherished material not found in the other three, including the following:
 1. The moving, almost poetic, prologue (1:1-18).
 2. Jesus turning water into wine (2:1-12).
 3. The seven "I am..." sayings.
 4. The raising of Lazarus from the dead (11:1-44).
 5. The footwashing (13:1-20).
 6. The reinstatement of Peter (21:15-19).
 7. And yes, the discussion between Philip, Nathanael, and Jesus which we'll look at today.

John 1:43-51 in Context:

- A. What comes before it?
 1. The prologue to the Gospel of John (1:1-18).
 2. John the Baptist's testimony about himself and about the Messiah (1:19-28).
 3. John the Baptist's identification of Jesus as the "Lamb of God" (1:29-34).
 4. Jesus calling his first disciples (1:35-42).
- B. Then comes our passage for today. But, for context, what comes right after it?
 1. The wedding at Cana, at which Jesus turns water into wine (2:1-12).
 2. Jesus clearing the temple (2:13-24).
 3. The conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus (3:1-21).

Setting the Scene:

- A. Who's involved in this story?
 1. Jesus, perhaps traveling with Andrew and/or Simon Peter.
 2. Philip
 3. Nathanael
- B. Where are they?
 1. In, or perhaps on the way to, the region known as Galilee.
 2. Galilee is roughly 80 miles north of Jerusalem—several days' journey on foot.
- C. When does this story take place?
 1. John's gospel says that John the Baptist testified about the Messiah.
 2. Then, "the next day," John the Baptist saw Jesus and identified him as the "Lamb of God."
 3. Then, "the next day" after that, Andrew and Simon Peter begin following Jesus.
 4. And then, "the next day" after *that*, Jesus decides to go to Galilee.

Reading John 1:43-51 (NRSV)

- A. Invite group members to turn to John 1:43-51 in their Bibles and follow along.
- B. Then you, as the facilitator, can read the passage aloud for the group:

⁴³ The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." ⁴⁴ Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. ⁴⁵ Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." ⁴⁶ Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." ⁴⁷ When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" ⁴⁸ Nathanael asked him, "Where did you get to know me?" Jesus answered, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." ⁴⁹ Nathanael replied, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" ⁵⁰ Jesus answered, "Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these." ⁵¹ And he said to him, "Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

- C. Ask group members to share if they saw seemingly *significant* differences between the wording/translation in their own Bible and that of the NRSV text you read aloud. These can be acknowledged, and perhaps briefly discussed if there seems to be interest.

Reading the passage again—this time, as a dramatic reading

- A. Provide each role reader, and ideally each attendee, with a color-coded copy of the passage. (This is provided in large print at the end of this lesson plan.)
- B. Ask for four volunteers from the group to read dramatic parts.
 1. Black print: Narrator
 2. Red print: Jesus
 3. Blue print: Philip
 4. Orange print: Nathanael
- C. Depending on the group's size, and the room's configuration and acoustics, you might want the four readers to stand and/or come forward so that they can be heard more easily.
- D. Invite the group to hear the story again, particularly from the rich man's point of view.
- E. Then, cue the three readers to begin.

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Discussion Questions:

- A. Of the four men named in this passage, who exhibited a form of prejudice?
- B. What exactly was the nature of Nathanael’s prejudice?
- C. Can you think of any historical examples, other than Nazareth, of a place against which many harbored prejudice—somewhere that was looked down upon by much of the general public?
- D. Can you think of any examples of a place like that today?
- E. What did it take to shake Nathanael out of his prejudice?
- F. What do you think could help shake people out of their prejudices today?
 1. What specific steps could be taken by local, state, and federal governmental authorities?
 2. What specific steps could be taken at your church?
- G. In your view, what’s the significance of Jesus (the Lamb of God, the Messiah, the Christ, the Anointed One) hailing from a town with a less-than-sparkling reputation?
- H. If you’re brutally honest with yourself, what hints of prejudice do you hold?
 1. Look again at the list we made earlier. (See whiteboard, chalkboard, or newsprint.)
 2. Do you tend to have preconceived notions or “default opinions” based on any of those variables?
- I. Which prejudice(s) would you like to shake yourself free from in the coming months?
 1. What specific steps could you take toward that goal?
 2. Who’s help might you need along the way if you decide to embark on that goal?

Coming Full Circle:

- A. Remember that quote from Henry David Thoreau: *It is never too late to give up our prejudices.*
- B. Regardless of our stage in life, we can all grow in our love of God and love of our neighbors by recognizing our prejudices, and working on alleviating them.

Closing Prayer Options:

- A. As the facilitator, you might lead the opening prayer yourself.
- B. Or, if you prefer, you could ask for a volunteer to lead the group in a brief prayer.
- C. While time constraints may make it tempting to skip the closing prayer, that is not recommended. Even a very brief word of prayer can be the perfect way to wrap up the discussion, while of course honoring God and humbly asking for God’s help.

Adjourning the Group:

- A. Thank everyone for their attendance, and for their willingness to engage with one another on a topic that can feel delicate or uncomfortable.
- B. If this group is going to have future sessions (for example, if this session was part of an ongoing group in your church), remind the attendees of the date and time of the next meeting.
- C. Wish everyone a good day or good evening, and declare the meeting to be adjourned.
- D. If refreshments remain available, you might invite folks to partake.

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