



Exploring tough questions
facing youth today

DO THE RIGHT THING

Ethics Shaped by Faith



The Pastoral Center

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Bible-based Explorations of Issues Facing Youth

» OVERVIEW

When conversing online, the acronym IRL stands for “in real life.” The virtual world of social media, text chats, blogs, and more have the power to remove us from the real world. What we experience online can skew our perspective on what it means to be human. It can numb us, incite us, distract us, depress us, confuse us, and make us rude or impatient. Strangely, this supposedly “social” and “connected” technology can profoundly disconnect us from others.

Religious faith can also place us in a bubble, especially when it distances us from others. When we keep the prophetic message at a safe distance, obscured in theological language and abstractions, we are missing the whole point. And when we see our parish as an insider club that serves itself, we can forget the radically inclusive message entrusted to us: God’s love is for *everyone*, and God expects us to transform the *whole world* through that love.

Through the incarnation, God showed up in the real world to show us that our faith is not just about talking the talk, but also walking the walk. It can be risky. It can be confusing. It can hurt. But living out our faith can also bring us great purpose, peace, and joy.

This series connects the Bible with the tough questions that youth (and adults) encounter in their neighborhood, in school, among friends, and even online. This process will help you as a leader break open these issues in a fun and meaningful way, sparking conversation and the kind of life change Jesus invites us to embrace.

» THE ROLE OF PARENTS

As children enter middle school and high school, they become more independent, self-reliant, and, well, self-centered. This can bring parents to make assumptions that this is the time to step back, giving their child more space to form their identity. While there is truth to that at some level (adolescents definitely shouldn’t be smothered), this is a stage of life when parents should in fact *lean in*. The apparent confidence and bluster youth show on the outside can mask the insecurity and confusion on the inside. Youth need their parents to be involved more than ever.

» WHOLE FAMILY FORMATION

Parents are the primary teachers of their own children, and parishes are waking up to the fact that faith formation programs need to bring parents into the process if they hope to see faith passed on to the next generation. Recent studies give us more and more evidence that the role of parents is the most important factor in determining whether a child will embrace faith as they move toward adulthood. Research from the Center for the Applied Research on the Apostolate shows that parents who talk about their faith and show through their actions that their faith is important to them are more likely to have children who remain Catholic.

More about Whole Family Formation >>>

To learn more about how your parish can take a comprehensive whole family approach to faith formation, visit GrowingUpCatholic.com.



While whole family events with elementary-aged children are on the rise, the role of parents can be an afterthought in youth ministry. We have designed the sessions in this series to work with or without parents present, and we encourage you to offer them as parent-child events.

If you choose to involve parents, it is important to consider before each session how to best do so. Many of the activities in this series are high-energy, creative, or silly. Some parents may need some encouragement to get out of their heads and have fun with the group. A few activities involving physical contact would be inappropriate for parents and youth to participate together, and we have noted them as such.

There are a number of ways to approach discussions with parent participation. Unless you have a small group, you will likely want to break into smaller groups for conversation. Some youth may be self-conscious and unable to be completely honest and open in a group situation with a parent present. For this reason, you may choose in some cases to assign parents to different groups from their own children, or to have separate parent and child groups altogether. Be sure to cover expectations around confidentiality. It is inappropriate for a parent (or youth) to share with another parent what their child said in a small group.

Note that even if parents and their children do not share all conversations together in the session, they will still have a valuable shared experience and can have extended conversations about it later.

>> **THANK YOU**

The role you play in gathering, animating, praying with, and forming youth is a valuable one. Thank you for all you do to serve the church and its families!

DO THE RIGHT THING

Ethics Shaped by Faith

INTRODUCTION

This unit on right and wrong is rooted in a phrase from the past. Our grandparents heard it from their parents, and they passed it on to our parents. "Remember who you are..." they said when someone asked for the car keys or went on a date. "Remember who you are" was shorthand for everything the community stood for and the family had attempted to instill.

This unit is less a workshop in decision-making skills than it is a course in Christian identity. It proceeds on the assumption that if we are clear about who we are, what to do next will become a little clearer. People of faith have not always agreed about what's right and what's wrong, but they *have* managed to agree on what's real: a Creator who is worth worshiping; a Christ whose humiliating death was turned to loving power by the resurrection; the Spirit of God at work in our world today; a place called church where we express and experience the community of Christ; and the freedom to be forgiven and start over when we mess up.

This unit pairs everyday youth issues with convictions basic to the biblical story. "How might Jesus' teachings and life example make a difference in what we do about violence?" it asks. "How might the activity of the Holy Spirit in our lives make a difference in the way we respond to authority figures?"

Youth who complete this unit can have a clearer sense of what it means to claim a Christian identity. This foundation can serve them well as they sort out the gritty details of what's right and what's wrong.

ADVANCE PREPARATION

1. Set up a "Decision Clinic" or "Clearness Committee"

Most youth find it hard to talk about the situations they are really dealing with, and not all groups trust each other. Consider providing another setting where more personal sharing can take place. Find a time when you and another adult can be available for individuals or small groups who want to talk about really difficult personal decisions or experiences. In Quaker circles, this is called a clearness committee, and is requested when someone seeks to reach clarity on how to respond to a concern or dilemma. A key rule for clearness committees is that committee members are forbidden to speak to the focus person in any way except to ask honest, open questions. No advice should be given.



EXTENDER SESSION

The extender session suggests special activities related to the issue of the unit. Extender sessions help accommodate the diversity of parish schedules. Since each unit is undated, youth may study units in their entirety and still participate in special events of the parish that get scheduled simultaneously with youth group time. Extender sessions can be used anytime, but the one for this unit best follows **Session 6**. Calculate now whether or not you will be using the extender session.



2. Watch for adults with a story to tell

Youth learn how to make good choices mainly through watching mature adults grapple with right and wrong. Who has a story to tell about his or her own youth? What sticky ethical situations have come up in your parish in the past five years? Is there someone willing to talk to the youth about what happened and how the church handled it? The **extender session** asks you to find several adults who can join you for a panel discussion.



THE TEACHING PLAN: The parts of the session guide

» **Faith identity.** An overarching Christian affirmation appropriate to the issue of the session.

» **Faith story.** The session is rooted in this Bible passage.

» **Faith focus.** The story of the passage in a nutshell.

» **Session goal.** The entire session is built around this goal. What changes—in

knowledge, attitude, and/or action—do you desire in your group?

» **Materials needed and advance preparation.**

This is what you will need if the session is to go smoothly. You'll feel more at ease if you've taken care of these details before you meet your group.

» FROM LIFE TO BIBLE TO LIFE

The teaching plan is called *life-centered*. However, when we write each session, we always begin with scripture. We ask, what does this particular passage say, especially to youth? Each session moves from life to Bible to life. So the Bible is really at the center of this way of teaching.

In every session we try to hit upon a tough question that youth might ask. Find out what questions on this issue are important for your group. Feel free to bring your own input and invite your group members to add their own experiences.

» TEACHING THE SESSION

The five step-by-step movements will carry you from *life to the Bible and back to life*. Each session takes about 45 to 50 minutes. If there is a handout sheet for the session, take note of any complementary activities and stories.

1. **Focus.** Intended to create a friendly climate within the group and to *draw attention* to the issue.

2. **Connect.** Invites participants to *express* their own life experience about the issue, through talking, drawing, role playing, and other activities. Also uses memory, reason, or imagination to get the group thinking about *why* they view the issue the way they do.

3. **Explore the Bible.** What does the Bible *say* about the issue? With a minimum of lecturing, dig into the faith story and search for answers to questions raised in the first activities. The

Insights from Scripture section will help clarify the faith story. Help participants discover how the faith community understands the Bible passage.

4. **Apply** the faith story. What does the Bible passage *mean* for contemporary life? This is the “aha!” moment when participants realize the faith story has wisdom *for their* lives.

5. **Respond.** Why does the Bible passage *matter*? What will the group do about the issue in light of what they have learned from their own experiences set alongside the faith story? How can we *live* the faith story rather than pass it off as a mere intellectual exercise?

» LOOK AHEAD

Here are reminders for what you need to do for the next session or two.

» INSIGHTS FROM SCRIPTURE

Here is a resource for Explore the Bible. Don't try to use all the material given. Take what you need to lead the session and answer questions your group may have. Let the Insights section inspire you to think and study more about the passage for the session.

» HANDOUT SHEETS

Occasionally, there will be a handout sheet to complement your session. If you choose to use this, make enough copies for the group in advance of the session. These sheets may include questions, stories, agree/disagree exercises, charts, pictures, and other materials to stimulate thinking and discussion.

Generally, no participant preparation is required unless the session plan calls for you to contact selected group members for specific tasks.

Acknowledgment: A particularly helpful resource is *The Church as Parable: Whatever Happened to Ethics?* by David Schroeder and Harry Huebner.

SAMPLE - DO NOT REPRODUCE

SAMPLE - DO NOT REPRODUCE

»» SESSION 1

CREATOR WORTH WORSHIPING »»

»» FAITH IDENTITY

We are heirs to the story of a loving Creator worth worshiping.

»» KEY VERSES

"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me." (Exodus 20:2-3)

»» FAITH STORY

Exodus 32:1-8; Exodus 20:1-21

»» FAITH FOCUS

While Moses encountered God on Mount Sinai and received the ten commandments, the Israelites grew impatient. They asked Aaron to make them gods and ended up worshiping a golden calf. The two incidents contrast two understandings of God: one phony and one worth bowing down to.

»» SESSION GOAL

Help participants recognize the relationship between how we envision God and what we consider right and wrong.

»» Materials needed and advance preparation

- Several high school yearbooks or photo albums (College yearbooks might work better for an older group)
- Chalkboard/chalk or newsprint/marker
- Bibles
- Copies of the handout sheet for Session 1
- Empty boxes about the size of a cereal box (*Option A* in Apply)
- Large sheets of white paper
- Drawing materials
- Magazines that can be cut, scissors (*Option A* in Apply)
- Glue or tape
- Idol-building materials (see *Option D* in Apply)
- Song books (*Option* in Respond)



TEACHING PLAN

1. FOCUS 5 minutes

Bring several old photo albums or high school yearbooks to the meeting and leave them out where participants can browse through them as they gather. Write the phrase,

Remember who you are

on newsprint or a chalkboard. Begin the session by asking the group what they think this phrase means. Then ask, *What does it have to do with deciding the right thing to do?*



2. CONNECT 5 minutes

Continue by drawing attention to the yearbooks you brought in. Ask:

- *Why do schools create yearbooks? Why is it so interesting to look at them and remember?*
- *What can you tell about a school by studying its yearbook? Do different schools have different identities? How is that identity passed from one class to the next? Can you tell who goes to what school just by how they act?*
- *Where do we get our sense of right and wrong?*

The main point to get across is that what we do flows out of who we understand ourselves to be and who we look up to.

3. EXPLORE THE BIBLE 10 minutes

Shift to this activity: Hold up a Bible. Then say, *This is a yearbook of sorts, filled with snapshots that tell us who we are and who God is. Like a yearbook, it tells stories that remind us of where we came from and whose we are. Today we're going to look at two snapshots from Exodus: one that shows us a god who is phony and one that shows us a God worth worshipping.*

Ask your group what pictures come to mind when they think of the book of Exodus. Make sure they are clear that this session's Bible passage comes from the giving of the law on Mount Sinai following the Hebrews' dramatic escape from Egypt across the Red Sea. Even youth who have very little church background may be familiar with the Exodus story from movies like *Prince of Egypt*.

Give two good readers copies of the handout sheet. They should stand on opposite sides of the room to read it so that it is clear they are telling two different stories. This reading contrasts the "I AM" God with a handmade image of a god, but ask your group what *they* heard and how the two snapshots of God were different. List responses on a chalkboard or newsprint. Important to include:

- The golden calf is handmade; the God on the mountain is beyond human control.
- The golden calf is made visible by an image; the God on the mountain is made visible by a way of life.

Also ask: *What kinds of idols do people worship today? Can people believe in God and still be worshipping an idol?*

» HOW ARE FAITH MEMORIES CREATED?

- headline experiences
- repetitive experiences
- personally touching events
- significant relationships



» Option: For a more in-depth study, have participants turn to Exodus 20 and 32:1-8 and re-read these passages themselves. For additional discussion, try these statements out on your group. Ask:

Which ones would most people believe today? Which statements are opposites?

- God has told us what is good.
- Right and wrong is pretty much left up to us.
- Right worship is important for right behavior.
- Who we worship in church on Sunday doesn't affect how we make decisions about right and wrong the rest of the week.
- People no longer have problems with idolatry today.
- Any false center to our lives or false understanding of God is an idol.

4. **APPLY** 20 minutes

» **Option A:** Divide participants into teams of two or three. Have each group design an “idol” that shows a false god people build their lives around today. Each team needs a box to use as a base for their idol, enough paper to cover the box, and access to markers, magazine photos, etc. While teams work, ask them to think about this question: *If this idol is “god” (money, beauty, etc.), what kinds of behavior might we expect to see?*

Allow 10-15 minutes work time, then bring the teams back together and have each group present its idol and the behavior the idol suggests. Examples: If a national flag is god, it would be wrong to allow another country to oppose it. If money is god, one should always seek jobs that make the most money possible. If God is always an angry judge, then one can never make a mistake or tolerate mistakes in others.

» **Option B (time-saver option):** If your group is small and your time limited, have each person draw an idol rather than organizing teams and building with boxes. Somewhere on the drawing they should:

- name the idol
- list kinds of behaviors that would be expected for that idol

Or bring in your own examples of idols (see examples above) and discuss what kind of behavior they would call forth.

» **Option C (extra challenge option):** Rummage through your local thrift store for cheap costume jewelry and have your group make their idols out of earrings and knickknacks as the Israelites did. Can they come up with something worth bowing down to?

» **Option D (for camp/retreat setting):** Divide participants into teams of two or three. Have each group design an “idol” that shows a false god people build their lives around today. Build “idols” out of cloth dipped in plaster of Paris:

- 1½ parts plaster of Paris
- 1 teaspoon powdered alum for each cup water
- 1 part water

Mix plaster of Paris and alum, add water, and stir until smooth.

Dip cloth (gauze, old sheeting, even paper towels will do) into plaster mixture, and drape over a bottle, cardboard, or other frame. Groups will have 15-20 minutes to shape the cloth before it dries very hard.

While teams work, ask them to think about this question: *If this idol is “god” (money, beauty, etc.), what kinds of behavior might we expect to see?* (Examples are listed under **Option A** above.)

5. **RESPOND** 5 minutes

Put your idols in the trash or recycling. If participants have worked hard on their creations this might not be so easy! But idols need to be done away with.

Ask participants to think of life situations that have caused them to struggle with right and wrong. If you have time, share briefly; if not, challenge your group to think about this question over the next few days: *How might different gods or understandings of God lead to different actions in these situations?*



An idol is made visible by an image; the God on the mountain is made visible by a way of life.



LOOK AHEAD

Skim the rest of the sessions in this unit. It will help you know where you are going and get tuned in to the approach this unit takes. Also read the Bible passages for each session. It is easier to teach a passage if it has been rattling around in your head for several weeks.



When you close, hold up a Bible and one of the yearbooks or photo albums you brought. Remind participants that this, too, is a book that helps us remember who we are, because it tells stories that remind us of who we are created to be and who we might become. It gives us pictures of a God worth building a life around and shows us what it was like for people a lot like us to honor this Creator. Why do we need to know this? Because, slowly but surely, we become like the One we worship. And who we worship determines how we act.

Suggested benediction: *Remember who you are—you are heirs to the story of a loving Creator worth worshipping.*

» **Option:** If your group is willing to sing together, close with a familiar song.



INSIGHTS FROM SCRIPTURE

Many youth today (and adults too) find it hard to believe that God is real. The existence of God may be just something they teach you in Sunday school when you're a kid. In the secular world where we spend most of our time, it can be embarrassing or unlawful to even mention God. For many North Americans, God is on par with Santa Claus and the tooth fairy.

Those of us who are believers struggle to affirm the reality of an unseen God and to make sure we are not seduced into false understandings of who that God is. The Bible passage for this session presents us with an ancient version of this same struggle.

» TO SEE GOD

The Israelites, camped out in an unfamiliar wilderness with their harrowing escape from Egypt still fresh in their experience, allowed insecurity to overwhelm them. It seemed Moses had disappeared. The mysterious 'I AM' God he told them about seemed remote and unreal. So they turned to Aaron and begged for a God they could see.

Why did the Israelites want to worship a golden calf? For one thing, it was a familiar god. Bull symbolism was used throughout the ancient Near East to represent deity. For another, it was a symbol of both fertility and valor in battle, sometimes associated with human war leaders as well as gods. No doubt the Israelites felt safer in hostile territory with the image of a warlord in their midst.

But as we see from God's reaction and Moses' destruction of the idol later in chapter 32, God did not wish to be associated with a phony golden calf made out of recycled ear-rings. Nor did God care for the wild partying that resulted from this kind of worship. The biblical tradition insists that this kind of god is not real, even if visible; nor does its worship lead to the good life.

» WHAT KIND OF GOD, THEN?

We believe in a Creator who made the world and named the good. The Bible describes God as the maker of heaven and earth. Usually we think of this as the physical world: sea, sky, plants, etc. We remember the creation story where God proclaimed each day's work good. But, perhaps even more important, is the idea that *God is the maker of the moral order.* God "has told you, O mortal, what is good," the prophet Micah says in Micah 6:8. "And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

Exodus 20 is one of the places where God names what is good. We may be inclined to think of the ten commandments as a list of restrictive rules, but what they really are is a vision of the good life. Certain behaviors simply do not work well for human beings. They destroy human community and alienate us from the Creator. The book of Exodus—and in fact all of the Bible—could be called God's "I Have a Dream" speech. It tells the truth about human brokenness and sin, but also shows us who God created us to be and who we might become.

We believe in a God who is revealed primarily through a way of life. If we could step back in time and visit an ancient Near Eastern temple at the time of the Exodus, we would find an image or idol of this people's god. It would be located in the holiest spot in the center of the temple. If, on the same trip, we could visit the Hebrew tabernacle described in Exodus, and were permitted to peek into its holiest spot, we would find something different. There would be no image of God because the Israelites did not believe it was possible to capture God this way. Instead, we would find a set of stone tablets with a vision of the good life carved on them. What God has chosen to reveal to us is not the divine face but the divine dream for creation: a way of life that leads to wholeness and peace.

We believe in a God who created us in the divine image. We are not permitted to *make* images of God, but we are called to *be* God's image: for that is what we were created to be (Genesis 1:27-28). We are intended to embody God's love and care for each other and for all the earth. Slowly but surely, we become like the One we worship. And who we worship determines how we act.



What God has chosen to reveal to us is not the divine face but the divine dream for creation: a way of life that leads to wholeness and peace.





Story in Stereo

Exodus 19:3-6; 20:1-17; 32:1-8



Voice 1: Moses went up to Mount Sinai. God called to him from the mountain and said, "This is what you are to say to the people of Israel: You have seen what I did to Egypt when they enslaved you, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be a special holy nation."

Voice 2: When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, "Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him."

An idol is made visible by an image; the God on the mountain is made visible by a way of life.



Voice 1: I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me.

Voice 2: Aaron answered them, "Take off the gold earrings that your wives, your sons, and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me." So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron.

Voice 1: You shall not make for yourself an idol.... You shall not bow down to idols or worship them.... You shall not misuse the name of the Lord....

Voice 2: Aaron took what they handed him and molded it into an idol in the shape of a calf. Then they all said, "These are our gods who brought us out of the land of Egypt."

Voice 1: Remember the sabbath day by keeping it holy.... Honor your father and your mother so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you.

Voice 2: When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf and announced, "Tomorrow there will be a festival to the Lord." So the next day the people got up early and brought offerings and sacrifices to the calf.

Voice 1: You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony against your neighbor, you shall not covet.

Voice 2: Afterward they sat down to eat and drink and got up to party.

Voice 1: Then the Lord said to Moses, "Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt. They have been quick to turn away from what I commanded them and have made themselves an idol cast in the shape of a calf."