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**INTERACTIVE STUDY GUIDE**

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# Session 1

## Come as You Are

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The Gospels are filled with examples of Jesus meeting people where they are. Accepting us as we are, while loving us too much to leave us as we are.

Jesus interacts with those who have stumbled, the broken and hurting. Jesus came to create a way for us to reconnect with the Father *and* to show us a better way to live.

### Jesus Meets Us Where We Are

In the gospel of John, Jesus was traveling to Jerusalem for a feast when He came to the pool of Bethesda. Surrounded by five covered colonnades, the pool was always crowded with people who were blind, lame, paralyzed, or otherwise disabled. Tradition held that, from time to time, an angel would come and stir the waters. If you were the first in the pool after the water was stirred, you would be healed.

In this story, Jesus saw a man who had been disabled for thirty-eight years lying near the pool. When Jesus asked him if he wanted to be healed, the man responded, “I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me.”

This man had bought into the idea that making it into the pool would bring healing. He believed it would happen only if someone could help him. His frustration was not that it had yet to happen, but *that no one would help make it happen.*

Jesus told him to get up, pick up his mat, and walk. The man did what Jesus instructed and was healed immediately. After years of being focused on the pool, he no longer was interested in the pool itself, because Jesus had provided the thing the pool never produced for him: healing. Jesus made it happen.

**Jesus had provided the  
thing the pool never  
produced for him: healing.  
*Jesus made it happen.***

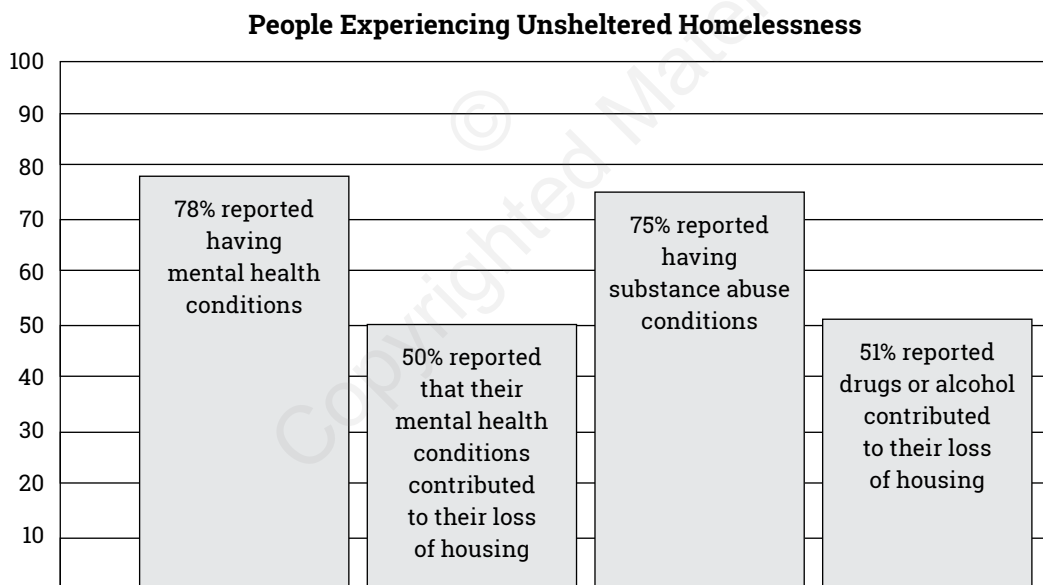
This story shows both the power Jesus has to meet the hurting right where they are and His uncompromising love and commitment to not leave the hurting where they are.

The man who had been disabled for thirty-eight years had no hope of being healed. In fact, he had been stuck because he had placed all his hope in a healing that was not possible. Yet, he was healed once he encountered Jesus. Likewise, no matter how long we have been suffering, Jesus meets His people where we are and as we are, but He does not stop there. He loves us too much to leave us as He found us.

## Meeting Others Where They Are

Often people experiencing homelessness are in a chronic state of homelessness, and not simply because they have lost a job or fallen into tough times. Many have undiagnosed and therefore untreated mental illnesses along with self-medicating substance use issues. And while lack of housing is a major factor in homelessness, we must look at the full picture.

The California Policy Lab, a nonpartisan research institute based at the University of California, found that 78 percent of the people experiencing unsheltered homelessness (i.e., “street-level” homelessness) reported having mental health conditions, and 50 percent said their mental health conditions had contributed to their loss of housing. Additionally, 75 percent of the unsheltered population reported having substance abuse conditions, and 51 percent said the use of drugs or alcohol had contributed to their loss of housing.<sup>1</sup>



Individuals experiencing homelessness and untreated mental illness attempt to numb their pain by self-medicating with alcohol, opioids, meth, fentanyl, and other legal and illegal drugs. Many people who come to centers like the Winchester Rescue Mission in Winchester, Virginia, and Haven for Hope in San Antonio, Texas, say that alcohol and drugs “help” their

mental illness. Their belief is they can self-medicate their way to healing, or at least temporarily forget the issues of the day. Sadly, this keeps these individuals enslaved to addiction, isolation, and homelessness.

Jerome<sup>2</sup> came to Winchester Rescue Mission after a judge remanded him to custody. Diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia in 2007, Jerome did well when he took his prescription medications. But he often failed to take them, choosing to self-medicate by other means. Jerome bounced between homelessness and serving jail time for crimes he committed when he was not taking his prescribed medications.

At the Mission, Jerome found not only a welcoming and loving environment but also invaluable support from case managers, clinical counselors, and medication management professionals. This support helped prevent him from returning to his unhealthy habits. After meeting his basic needs, he was encouraged to learn more about the God who empowers us and how to exit homelessness. Jerome determined that he would listen, learn, and take his meds. As a result, he stabilized and then began to thrive. Today, Jerome mentors other men experiencing homelessness and says, “I’m no longer defined by my disease.”

When followers of Christ take Jesus’s approach to simply meet people where they are, it is a game changer. We must also love individuals and support their change and improvement, not enabling them to stay the way they arrived. When Jesus approached the man at the pool of Bethesda, He did not try to convince him that the pool theory would not work. Instead, Jesus first got to know the man by talking to him, looking him in the eyes, asking him questions, then providing him with exactly what he needed in the moment so he could envision living a new life—a life he had only dreamed about for thirty-eight long years.

## **The Truth about “Loving Your Neighbor”**

Sometimes we help someone by meeting their simplest of needs and sending them on their way. But other times it takes a bigger investment of resources and time, much like the story of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10.

The story begins with a lawyer asking Jesus what he had to do to inherit eternal life. Jesus responded by asking the lawyer what was written in the Law. “Love the Lord your God with all

your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind; and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself,’” the lawyer said.

After Jesus agreed that the lawyer had answered correctly, the man asked, “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus responded with a story that involves the investment of resources, time, energy, risk taking, and of course, love.

A man traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho was attacked by robbers who beat him, took his clothes, and left him half dead. A priest and then a Levite each passed by, but neither stopped to help him—in fact, after assessing the situation, they both took extra effort to avoid the injured traveler by crossing to the other side of the road. Finally, a Samaritan came along and, seeing the man, took mercy on him, bandaged his wounds, and carried him to an inn to receive additional care. “Look after him,” he told the innkeeper, “and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expenses.”

This story teaches us the importance of “loving your neighbor” regardless of who that person is. Jesus takes exceptional care to leave out any identifying attributes of the man who was beaten. It is impossible to assume anything about the victim’s social status, nationality, lifestyle, or religious affiliation. Omitting these clues prevents us from making assumptions about why the man was on the road and what help he truly needed.

The priest and Levite seemed to make hasty judgments without taking the time to fully understand the situation. As religious leaders, they may have felt obligated to adhere to societal expectations or rules around ritual purity that discouraged interactions with those considered unclean or impure—such as a wounded person. Ironically, these social norms, although misguided, may have played a role in shaping their response to the man in need.

Additionally, the priest and Levite may have held biased views about individuals traveling that road or those of different social or ethnic backgrounds, especially in the land of Samaria, which may have also contributed to their unwillingness to help. Biases can develop based on stereotypes or generalizations about certain groups of people, leading to a tendency to make snap judgments without considering the individual circumstances.

Rather than succumbing to hasty judgments, the Samaritan assessed the situation, set aside any biases, and prioritized the immediate needs of the wounded man. The Samaritan—the outcast—was the one who showed compassion and met the beaten man’s needs right where he



was. He bandaged the traveler's wounds, put him on his own donkey, and took him to an inn to be cared for. Maybe that was enough, right?

The Samaritan loved the wounded traveler as he was, but he loved him too much to allow him to go unattended on the side of the road in the short term and untreated at the inn over the long term.

Yet the Samaritan challenged himself to go even deeper ... to invest in a stranger, a neighbor, telling the innkeeper, "Take care of this man.... If his bill runs higher than this, I will pay you the next time I am here." The Samaritan knew it was not enough to leave the man where he was.

The hasty judgments made by the priest and Levite serve as a reminder of the dangers of making assumptions without gathering adequate information or considering the broader context. Their actions highlight the importance of examining our own biases, challenging societal norms, and cultivating a mindset of true empathy and compassion.

As James wrote:

My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism. Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, "Here's a good seat for you," but say to the poor man, "You stand there" or "Sit on the floor by my feet," have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? (2:1–4)

This passage reminds us of the importance of seeing beyond stereotypes and prejudice. It challenges us to recognize the inherent worth and humanity of every individual, regardless of their situation. By embracing compassion, we can overcome biases and treat all people with the dignity and respect they deserve.

## Meaningful Engagement

For many Christians, offering meals and a warm bed (what individuals experiencing homelessness often refer to as "three hots and a cot") is the start *and* end of their compassion story. Food

and sleep are important, but it is not the whole story. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs identifies food and shelter as basic needs but reminds us of more essential human needs such as safety and self-esteem.<sup>3</sup> Long before Abraham Maslow formulated his theory, Jesus recognized that meeting physiological needs was just the beginning. We also need connection, accomplishment, purpose, meaning, and love.

## **We also need connection, accomplishment, purpose, meaning, and love.**

The parable of the Good Samaritan provides a powerful lesson on the importance of extending compassion and offering long-term support to those experiencing homelessness. By taking the beaten man to an inn and collaborating with the innkeeper to care for the man in need, the Good Samaritan exemplified the significance of sustained assistance, financial provision, and building relationships.

In today's world, this story encourages us to go beyond immediate aid of three hot meals and a cot and engage in efforts that address the root causes of suffering and homelessness by providing ongoing support and empowerment. "Meaningful engagement"—a concept you will see throughout this study—is the best way the church can help in the face of what often feels like a hopeless situation.

We often make snap judgments about people experiencing homelessness. We stereotype these individuals as lazy or lacking ambition. We think "they" *chose* homelessness; they could improve their situation if they would just try harder; or they are responsible for their situation. But in developed countries like the US, homelessness results from a combination of factors such as self-medicating mental health issues, poor medical care, and inadequate education.

To meaningfully engage homelessness, we must understand its root causes, address each person as an individual with a unique journey that led to where they are today, and then collaborate to provide the long-term help they need.

This is what the Good Samaritan did. His love transcended societal barriers, showing compassion and acceptance for a stranger in need. He saw the immediate need for medical attention and took immediate action, and he also saw the long-term needs for safe shelter and continued medical help.

## Could This Be Your Church?

In a small town, nestled amidst rolling hills, a humble church called Grace Community Church formed. The congregation had a grassroots calling to love and serve people experiencing homelessness in their community. They understood that their mission was not just to provide the temporary relief of food and a mattress, but to offer a transformative and holistic approach to those experiencing homelessness, even those struggling with addiction and mental illness.

Loving the families and individuals suffering the effects of homelessness meant creating a welcoming environment of dignity and respect, with the complexities and challenges of each person. **The church leadership began by educating their members about the importance of using *people-first* language—emphasizing the individual's worth beyond their circumstances.** They encouraged seeing *the person* before he or she was afflicted by addiction or mental health issues, recognizing each person as traveling a unique journey with unknowns around every corner, and acknowledging the truth of “there but for the grace of God go I.”

John walked through the doors of Grace Community Church’s safe and welcoming ministry after being directed there by another service agency. He had been battling substance abuse for several agonizing years. His life journey began full of hope. He had a job that covered his rent, utilities, a car payment, and other bills. He had family and friends. But as he looked for a little more excitement—a little more happiness—he started partying. After a few years, drug and alcohol addiction took him by surprise and John lost everything due to his life choices.

When he got to the church ministry via a referral of a sister service agency, John was greeted with open arms and genuine care. Just as the Good Samaritan met the immediate needs of the man beaten on the road, Grace Community Church volunteers jumped in to treat John's most visible needs for food, rest, a shower, and fresh clothing.

As John's broken body responded to the compassionate care he received, he became open to the possibility of change. Grace Community Church's team provided him with information about a local rehabilitation program and connected him with a support group that helped him navigate the challenges of recovery. But they did not stop there.

John began a new journey, this time to sobriety, and the church continued to offer him unwavering support. They provided him with a safe and stable living environment, connecting him with mentors who walked alongside him and helped him develop new skills for employment. They celebrated his milestones, offering encouragement during challenges and empowering him to build a future free from addiction.

Grace Community Church approached its service to those experiencing homelessness by creating a holistic program that met people where they were and provided them with the means to overcome life-dominating barriers to success. They *meaningfully engaged* with those who were experiencing homelessness. They did this by:

- Starting with providing essential services such as food, showers, fresh clothing, and rest.
- Then addressing the underlying causes of homelessness by partnering with local treatment centers for substance use disorder and mental health challenges.
- Organizing counseling sessions, support groups, and workshops on addiction recovery.
- Offering case management, job training, and life-skills development.

The church also recognized that everyone, sheltered or unsheltered, needs community and connection, a need to simply belong. John attended regular gatherings with participants from the church and from the homelessness community, sharing meals, stories, and laughter. These

opportunities to fellowship erased the lines between the sheltered and the unsheltered, and drew everyone together in the common goal of learning, healing, and growing.

The Good Samaritan was committed to the beaten man's long-term needs no matter the cost. In the same way, the church ministry members recognized the cost of showing Jesus-centric compassion to the hurting individuals who entered their doors. They refused to enable destructive behaviors, choosing instead to provide empathetic support while maintaining healthy boundaries, a *smart-love* approach. They recognized that true love requires collaboratively guiding individuals toward professional help and resources rather than perpetuating a cycle of dependence. Smart love works.

## The Good News

This true story serves as a model for churches and communities seeking to love families and individuals experiencing homelessness where they are without enabling the behaviors that led to their homelessness. By offering dignity and respect, creating a supportive environment, providing resources for recovery and rehabilitation, and maintaining healthy boundaries, they demonstrated that true love involves both compassion and accountability.

Through their holistic approach, Grace Community Church not only helped individuals experiencing homelessness find stability and healing, but they also cultivated a community that understood the power of love and its transformative impact. They embodied the message that God loves us as we are but loves us too much to let us stay as we are.



Homelessness is a major challenge, but it is one that we can address. There are about 600,000 people experiencing “street-level” homelessness in the United States, and there are about 350,000 congregations in the United States. What would happen if every church in the United States worked with just one or two people experiencing homelessness? Think about the impact your congregation could have.