

Walking in the Good Way

A Leader's Guide for A Christian Discipleship Study Guide



Four Study Sessions for Individuals or Groups (Revised and Expanded)

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The Baptist Center for Ethics is a freestanding network of trained ethicists, ministers and educators, providing resources and services to congregations, clergy and educational institutions.

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SUGGESTIONS FOR USING THIS LEADER’S GUIDE

Walking in the Good Way: A Christian Discipleship Study Guide is a four-week study on ethics and discipleship.

This guide can be used by a:

- Bible study class,
- Small group,
- Churchwide seminar,
- Weekend retreat or for
- Individual self-study.

The study is practical and easy to use.

Each session has a study guide for class participants and a leader's guide for the teacher.

The leader’s guide engages Scriptures related to the corresponding study guide session. It is designed to assist the group leader in helping the class better understand and apply the material from each session. The questions at the end of each session guide will prompt discussion (and individual reflection).

Participants should read each study guide session ahead of time. The group leader should read both the study and leader’s guide in advance, using both to better teach the class.

SESSION ONE: RIGHT WALKING

Key texts: Judges 21:25; James 1:25

PART ONE

*In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes.
– Judges 21:25.*

Read Judges 21:25 aloud.

Explain: Judges focuses on the period after the Hebrew people conquer the land of Canaan and before the monarchy is established under Saul.

Judges 21:25, the final verse of the book, offers a summary of this period of transition, indicating that it was a time of instability and uncertainty.

Under Joshua's leadership, the Hebrew people took possession of the "Promised Land" and followed the commandments of God. After his death (Judges 2:6-9), the people turned from God within two generations (Judges 2:10).

"The Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and worshipped the Ba'als ... they followed other gods from among the gods of the peoples who were all around them ... [which] provoked the LORD to anger" (Judges 2:11).

God's displeasure at the people's lack of obedience and worship of other gods resulted in Israel being overtaken by surrounding nations (see, for example, Judges 3:7-8; 3:12-14; 4:1-2).

When the people repented and cried out to God, leaders, known as "judges," were called by God to restore obedience and remove the foreign army (see, for example, Judges 3:9; 3:15; 4:3).

Judges 21:25 summarizes the reason for this repeated pattern – there was no agreed-upon standard of right and wrong. The Hebrew people were like the three proverbial monkeys that Robert Parham mentions: seeing no ethics, hearing no ethics, and speaking no ethics.

Forgetting the instructions God had given them, morality and ethics became fluid concepts that were subject to an individual's or group's feelings about right and wrong. Everything was subjective.

The truck driver's comments in *Grand Canyon* summarize the periods of apostasy in Judges: "Everything is supposed to be different from what it is, and it is our fault for the way things are."

Parham suggests that we face a similar situation today: "The problem is not simply the failure of right behavior. At a more fundamental level, the problem is that we no longer share a common agreement about what is right and what is wrong."

Ethics is about understanding and choosing to act according to what is right. For the Hebrews, the rules were set forth by God and were to be taught to each generation (see Deuteronomy 6:4-9).

When they abandoned these instructions, the community fell apart due to a lack of knowledge of God and his commandments. Knowledge, Parham explained, “is multidimensional,” involving both “head knowledge about God’s law” and “an intimate relationship of deep loyalty and enduring commitment to God.”

The Hebrew people abandoned both dimensions regularly, and the judges helped restore head knowledge of God’s commandments as well as loyalty to and intimate relationship with God.

Parham explains that Christian ethics focuses on both aspects of this two-fold knowledge. “Biblical ethics ... is about knowing and doing the will of God according to Scripture.”

Discuss: Have each person share one or two items taking place in the world that they feel are “supposed to be different from what they are.”

Offer a few examples shared by Parham – violent shootings of innocent people, homelessness, obscene and hostile drivers, and incivility – to spur conversation.

Ask participants to explain the reason they included the item(s) on their list and to share any examples they would add.

Have them discuss how a lack of shared beliefs about right and wrong contributes to the issue(s) they listed.

PART TWO

Be doers of the world, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. —James 1:22

Read James 1:22 aloud.

Explain: James is a practical letter focused on applying Christian teachings to daily life. It is about Christian / biblical ethics.

James seeks to help Christians better understand how to apply the Bible’s teachings by pointing out common pitfalls, most notably the tendency to equate intellectual knowledge of standards of right and wrong (morals) with the day-to-day application (ethics).

Parham notes that knowing God’s laws is an essential foundation for ethical living. This takes place through moral education (see Deuteronomy 6:4-9), which is “fundamental to building good character in children and strengthening good decision-making among adults so that all might learn to *walk in the good way.*”

Yet, knowing and doing, morality and ethics, instruction and application cannot be separated.

Parham quotes Martin Luther King Jr., who asserted: “One of the great tragedies of life is that men seldom bridge the gulf between faith and profession, between doing and saying.” He also cites Dietrich Bonhoeffer: “Only he who believes is obedient and only he who is obedient believes.”

Both statements reflect the intimate connection between knowing morals and practicing ethics. Walking in the good way is impossible without knowledge of God’s commands, but knowing what is right and proper isn’t sufficient Application in daily life is needed.

James asserts that the validity of Christian faith is seen in how it is manifested in one’s life:

- “If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues ... their religion is worthless.” (1:26)
- “What good is it ... if you say you have faith but do not have works?” (2:14)
- “So faith, by itself, if it has no works, is dead.” (2:17)
- “For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead.” (2:26)
- “Anyone ... who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it commits sin.” (4:17)

James focuses on ethics, which Parham defines as “doing the right thing.” He explains, “*Halacha* (rabbinic interpretation of the Law) is a concept in Judaism that relates to our understanding of ethics. The root meaning of *halacha* is walk or behavior. ... Ethics is about right walking.”

Translating right belief (orthodoxy) into right action (orthopraxy) is central in James and at the heart of Christian ethics.

As Parham explains, “Christians are required to walk their talk ... Walking is faith in action!” While right walking is impossible without right thinking, right thinking without right walking is unacceptable.”

Discuss: Help participants consider the reasons they gave for including the items on their list of things that are “supposed to be different from what they are.”

Ask:

- Has a disconnect between Christian faith and Christian action contributed to this issue?
- In what ways have your choices contributed to one of the problems you highlighted?
- How does the Bible provide guidance on how you can “walk in the good way” with regards to this topic?

SESSION TWO: WEARING NEW SHOES

Key texts: 1 Chronicles 12:32; Matthew 5:13-14

PART ONE

Of [the tribe of] Issachar, those who had the understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do. – 1 Chronicles 12:32

Read 1 Chronicles 12:32 aloud.

Explain: 1 Chronicles provides an overview of Israel's history through a lengthy genealogy (chapters 1-9), followed by a description of events during the reign of King David (chapters 10-29).

1 Chronicles 12:32 is found in a list describing the troops from the 12 tribes of Israel who were part of David's army gathered at Hebron.

The unfaithfulness of Saul to God's commandments resulted in Israel being attacked (and overtaken) by the Philistines. During one of the battles, Saul and his sons were killed (1 Chronicles 10), which led to David being anointed at Hebron as the new king (1 Chronicles 11).

1 Chronicles 12 describes the tribes of Israel by troop size and military ability.

Simeonites and Ephraimites are called "mighty warriors" (verses 25 and 30), while the Zebulun and Asher tribes are said to have sent "seasoned warriors" (verses 33 and 36), for example.

Only the tribe of Issachar receives a non-military description – "those who had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do" (verse 32) – in addition to noting the soldiers they provided.

1 Chronicles 1-17 depicts a period of instability. The transition from Saul's reign to David's is a tumultuous one due to Israel having been overrun by the Philistines.

During the final days of Saul's rule, tension between David and Saul increases as Saul is rejected by God as king and David is anointed as the next ruler (see 1 Samuel 16:1-13).

The people of Israel view David more favorably than Saul during this interim period. An increasingly paranoid and unstable Saul becomes jealous of David and tries to kill him on multiple occasions, ultimately causing David to flee for his life and remain in hiding for a period of time.

This helps us understand the significance of the Issachar description. Having an "understanding of the times" characterizes the tribe's perceptiveness during this period of turmoil as Saul's influence and power are waning and David's is rising.

PART TWO

The tribe of Issachar recognized that Saul had become unstable, unfaithful to God's commands and unfit to lead Israel. They sensed that David would replace Saul since he remained faithful to God and was the true leader of the people.

The tribe offers a model of perceptiveness to change and demonstrates how to respond positively and proactively. As Parham explained, to follow the example of Issachar "means that Christians grasp accurately the present situation and offer a good course of action."

In response to periods of instability and transition, Christians can deny that change is taking place, resist the change, withdraw from society or follow fashionable trends, Parham notes.

Or, we can seek to discern the signs of the times by acknowledging that change is taking place and seeking to engage the transformation in ways that are faithful to the Bible's teachings.

Discuss: Ask participants to name one or two changes currently taking place in the world that require discernment to respond appropriately and to share how they have responded (or have observed others responding).

Ask: How do the Bible's teachings help us recognize the "signs of the times" and enable us to respond appropriately to these changes?

You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot. You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid.
– Matthew 5:13-14

Read Matthew 5:13-14 aloud.

Explain: These verses are part of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), and they focus on the transformative influence Christians should have.

The sermon begins with a litany of blessings (verses 3-12) – character traits that should be exhibited in the lives of those who follow Jesus.

This opening segment concludes with Jesus calling his followers to become a blessing to the world by embodying these characteristics in their lives: be salt, be light (verses 13-16).

These verses remind us that Christians don't strive to embody the traits of verses 3-12 for their personal gain or benefit. The goal is not to bask in God's blessings, but rather to transform our communities by taking practical steps to share these blessings with those around us.

“Jesus is our best example of proactivity,” Parham writes. “The Sermon on the Mount uses vivid images to describe taking the initiative to alter relationships.”

“Salt and light permeate their environments,” he adds. “As salt and light, we make things happen rather than being inactive or only reactive.”

Parham then offers four ways that Christians can be salt and light in changing times:

(1) Positive instead of negative – “Refram[ing] issues in a positive way so we will gain a hearing.”

(2) Proactive instead of reactive – “Taking the initiative to alter relationships.”

(3) Responsibilities instead of rights – “Balanc[ing] personal and corporate rights with the responsibility to pursue the welfare of neighbors.”

(4) Civil critique instead of scapegoating – “Judg[ing] the words and actions of others ... with humility, prudence and empathy.”

Discuss: Write the four responses on a dry erase board or have a way of displaying them for participants as a reference during discussion.

Consider making a list of biblical texts that relate to each approach. For example:

(1) Isaiah 1:17 and Psalm 82:3: Pursue justice for the oppressed and powerless.

(2) Matthew 5:38-42: Turn the other cheek, walk an extra mile.

(3) Romans 14:14-20: Consider the struggles of others with regards to Christian freedom.

(4) Matthew 7:1-5: Recognize your failures by removing the plank from your own eye first.

Assign participants one of the four types of responses. Have them share an example of how this type of response could help them to address one of the changes they shared in part one.

Ask:

- How does understanding the signs of the times contribute to positive, proactive responses?
- What biblical texts might be relevant to each approach? Share the biblical texts you identified ahead of time if participants struggle to respond.

Lead a discussion of the prevalence of “rights-centered” thinking and how the call to “be salt and light” urges a “responsibility-centered” way of life.

Ask:

- How does an emphasis on rights contribute to societal problems, including scapegoating?
- How can a focus on responsibility in how we use our rights help address these issues?

SESSION THREE: STUMBLING BLOCKS AND STEPPING STONES

Key texts: Galatians 5:17; Amos 5:14-15

PART ONE

*What the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit,
and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the
flesh. – Galatians 5:17*

Read Galatians 5:17 aloud.

Explain: In Galatians, Paul addresses challenges to his authority and message that had arisen since he last visited the Christians in Galatia.

A group had arrived who preached a “different gospel” (see Galatians 1:6-9) and questioned Paul’s authority (see Galatians 1:10-2:14).

While this group’s specific teachings are unclear, Paul addressed the assertion that non-Jewish believers needed to be circumcised (2:1-10; 5:1-6; 6:12-16) and observe the Jewish holy days (4:10-11) in order to be accepted as Christian converts.

Paul offers a defense (Galatians 2:15-5:1) both of his apostolic authority and message. In doing so, he sets forth an often-misunderstood contrast between faith and “works of the law.”

Paul says that we enter into a relationship with God not by means of circumcision or any other “works of the law” but by faith. Yet, this does not mean that Christian obedience – manifested in proper behavior – is unimportant or tangential to the Christian life. It is the expression of true faith.

This is why Paul implored the Galatians: “Live by the Spirit ... do not gratify the desires of the flesh” (5:16). Similarly, James 1:22-24 said that right thinking without right walking is not Christian faith.

Both sides of the equation must be maintained. They cannot stand alone. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer summarized: “Only those who believe obey” and “only those who obey believe.”

Having confronted this “different gospel,” Paul turns to the application of the gospel that he has preached. The virtues listed in Galatians 5:22-23 are not a means to be accepted by God, but are the natural outworking of faith in Christ.

Galatians can be summed up as follows: salvation through faith is a gift; good works are a manifestation of faith in the grace of God.

Believers face a continual choice: To “live by the Spirit” by letting Christian virtues (the fruit of the Spirit) flow through and from our life, or to “gratify the desires of the flesh” by allowing vices to control us.

It is a choice, in Parham's terms, between being stumbling blocks and stepping stones, which has both individual and community implications.

To walk in the good way requires that we turn from "works of the flesh" and daily yield to the work of God's Spirit, which is expressed in acts of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, etc.

As Parham explains, "Right character is a major concern in the New Testament with its pictures of our two natures waging war with one another. ... The Bible recognizes the struggle between good and evil, right and wrong. ... Grace forgives our sins and gives us the power to be and do good."

The fruit of the Spirit, like the beatitudes (blessings) in the Sermon on the Mount, builds up the community of faith. Walking in the good way is a community-focused journey. As Parham explains, vices "stunt our moral growth and cripple our society," while virtues "build up life."

Discuss: Engage participants in a discussion of the distinction between "works of the law" as a means to salvation and "good works" (the fruit of the Spirit) as a manifestation of yielding to God's influence in our lives.

Ask: Does this distinction help you understand the connection between faith and good works?

Lead a discussion of the fact that vices and virtues impact not only individuals but also communities.

Ask: How does the communal focus of our actions – that we can be stumbling blocks or stepping stones for others – shape your understanding of the fruit of the Spirit?

PART TWO

Seek good and not evil, that you may live; and so the LORD, the God of hosts, will be with you, just as you have said. Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate. – Amos 5:14-15

Read Amos 5:14-15 aloud.

Explain: Amos is a prophet out of step with the times, offering critique amid peace and prosperity.

He presents his message shrewdly, beginning with a proclamation of judgment on the non-Hebrew nations surrounding Israel (Amos 1:2-2:3) and on Judah (Amos 2:4-5).

Moving from one nation to another, and likely building a growing chorus of "amens" from his listeners, Amos declares, "For three transgressions and for four," God will "send a fire" of punishment.

Then Amos shifts unexpectedly to the northern kingdom of Israel, his audience, who, he prophesies, will also be visited with fire “because they have rejected the law of the LORD, and have not kept his statutes” (Amos 2:4-5).

The prophet reveals the basis for divine punishment – “They sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals” (Amos 2:6) – and laments that prior calls for repentance had gone unheeded (see Amos 4:6-13).

Amos’ call to seek good and not evil in 5:14-15 interrupts a message about a coming punishment. It offers one of a few glimmers of hope for repentance in the darkness of the prophetic critique through two contrasting imperatives: seek good, not evil; hate evil, love good.

To use Parham’s terms, Amos calls the people to pursue virtues (stepping stones) and to shun vices (stumbling blocks).

The Bible sets forth lists of virtues and vices (see Galatians 5:16-26) to help believers understand the good way that they are called to seek and the evil path that they are warned to avoid.

Like most of the Hebrew prophets, Amos’ list of vices and virtues is less codified, being woven throughout his declarations (see, for example, Amos 5:21-24).

Yet, his point is the same: certain behaviors and attitudes should be avoided (vices / stumbling blocks) and others should be embraced (virtues / stepping stones) by individuals and communities.

Parham shares that early Christian monks compiled lists to help believers avoid sinful behavior. These were later organized and condensed into a list of seven “deadly” sins – pride, sloth, envy, anger, greed, lust and gluttony.

These lists are important, he explains, because “knowledge about vices alerts us to those qualities of character that stunt our moral growth and cripple our society.”

Christians have set forth also a list of “cardinal” virtues – prudence, temperance, courage (or fortitude) and justice – to aid believers in walking in the good way. “These virtues ... are pivotal,” Parham noted. “All other virtues depend upon them.”

Two vices – pride and sloth – are discussed in section three of the study guide.

Parham calls pride “a destructive illusion” that hinders our “total dependence upon God, and our interdependence with others.” It causes us to see ourselves as more important than anyone or anything else.

Sloth “literally means, ‘no caring.’ Sloth is apathy, indifference or inaction,” he says. It is “the refusal to be responsible,” “moral indifference” and an “unwillingness to inconvenience ourselves.”

Israel suffered from the “destructive illusion” of pride, Amos declared, resulting in myriad sins; most notably, pride among the prosperous ruling class that resulted in a lack of concern (sloth) toward the most vulnerable members of society.

The powerful were lying on ivory beds, sitting on comfortable couches, eating sumptuous meals, singing “idol songs” and enjoying wine and fine oils (Amos 6:4-6). Meanwhile, the poor were abused through unjust economics (Amos 8:4-6).

This is a picture of pride and sloth: a lifestyle focused on personal comfort and exhibiting a moral indifference to addressing societal injustice.

The cardinal virtues, by contrast, “build up life” and are “traits for the kingdom of God,” Parham explains. Prudence, temperance, courage and justice are the virtues on which all others depend.

Prudence indicates thoughtfulness and entails wisdom; temperance focuses on moderation and restraint; courage addresses boldness and fortitude in the face of opposition; and justice focuses on ensuring that those without a voice are not oppressed or exploited.

Amos exhibits each virtue:

- *Prudence* in how he shared his message (Amos 1:1-2:4).
- *Temperance* in remembering that the goal of his message and ministry was repentance and not condemnation (Amos 5:14-15; 9:11-15).
- *Courage* in proclaiming a difficult message to a nation in which he did not live (Amos 1:1).
- *Justice* in speaking for those who were overlooked and exploited (Amos 2:6-7; 5:7).

Discuss: Help participants reflect on how pride and sloth contribute to today’s problems (perhaps using an issue from their “everything is supposed to be different from what it is” list).

Ask:

- How is Amos’ message applicable today?
- What would the prophet say about how we have contributed to injustice?

Encourage participants to consider how the cardinal virtues help us become aware of the ways that vices cause us to overlook the needs of those around us.

Ask:

- Which virtue do you struggle with the most?
- Why?
- In what ways does Amos’ moral witness offer us guidance on how to practice these virtues?

SESSION FOUR: PATHS FOR RIGHT WALKING CITIZENS

Key texts: Romans 12:2; Matthew 13:3

PART ONE

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds so that you may discern what is the will of God: what is good and acceptable and perfect – Romans 12:2

Read Romans 12:2 aloud.

Explain: Romans is unique for at least two reasons:

- It is addressed to the Christians in Rome whom Paul had never met and is sent to introduce himself to the community in preparation for a planned missionary trip to the region.
- It is more structured than his other letters, offering an overview of the gospel he was preaching rather than addressing specific issues within the community.

Romans can be divided into two sections – theology (Romans 1:16-11:36) and ethics (Roman 12:1-15:13).

After Paul explains his understanding of the Christian faith, he turns to the resulting life that should flow from this faith. It involves a constant effort to yield oneself to God’s Spirit so as to be able to “discern what is the will of God; what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Romans 12:2).

Paul reveals what it looks like to discern and follow God’s will so as to walk in the good way:

- Fulfill your role in the community with humility and without jealousy (12:3-8).
- Love others, help those in need and seek to live in harmony (12:9-20; 13:8-14).
- Relate constructively to governments (13:1-8).
- Consider others when exercising your rights and freedoms (14:1-15:6).

In Romans 12:2, Paul highlights an ongoing struggle between vices (being conformed to this world) and virtues (being transformed by the renewing of your mind). This struggle to walk in the good way is a challenge for each generation and every individual. The specific issues we face might change, but the tension remains.

Sometimes it is a matter of volition – we know what we ought to do but we struggle to do it (see Romans 7) – but often it is an issue of not fully knowing how to apply our convictions in a changing world.

Parham addresses this second form of internal struggle in session four. We must “fin[d] ways to express our strongly held moral convictions in a constructive way. How do we witness to our values without degrading those with much different values? How do we act as Christian citizens in a rapidly changing culture?” he asks.

He shares three ways Christians have responded to Paul’s imperative to “not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds”: withdrawal, theocracy and transformation.

- *Withdrawal* involves separation from society so as to avoid being tainted by sin.
- *Theocracy* seeks to align national (and international) laws with a given interpretation of the Bible.
- *Transformation* remains within society and seeks to change policies and practices to advance the common good without trying to create a union of church and state.

Parham urges the third option, explaining that the Bible “gives us no blueprint for government ... ordains not economic order domestic agenda or foreign policy.” Rather, it “gives us broad outlines for good citizenship” that requires us to work out the details about how to walk in the good way as we seek to transform society.

Discuss: Lead participants in a discussion of the three paths for Christian citizenship.

Ask:

- Are there benefits (and drawbacks) to each approach? If so, what are they?
- Where have you seen each approach expressed? What were the results?
- How does the transformation approach seek to bridge the gap between withdrawal and theocracy?

PART TWO

[Jesus] told them another parable: The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened – Matthew 13:33

Read Matthew 13:33 aloud.

Explain: Matthew 13 reminds us that the gospel involves a commitment to walk in the good way in order to transform society even when we don’t see immediate results.

This perspective is reflected also in several imperatives that we examined in previous sessions: “be salt, be light” (Matthew 5:13); “live by the Spirit” (Galatians 5:16); “do not be conformed to the world but be transformed” (Romans 12:2).

In seeking to be a transformative influence on society, Parham notes that Christians face two significant challenges that can corrupt our message: “From one direction, we are pushed toward alignment with one political party ... From another direction, we are pushed away from the public square.”

Christians should reject both approaches, he says, and seek “to engage pro-actively in the public square” through transformative influence.

Parham shares five “rules of thumb” to aid Christians in navigating these pitfalls, enabling us “not to be conformed to this world, but to be transformed” (Romans 12:2a) while allowing us to be a leavening agent in society (Matthew 13:33).

1. Be wise as serpents and harmless as doves.

This principle, based on Matthew 10:16, involves having a tough mind and a compassionate or tender heart, according to Martin Luther King Jr. This is particularly important in a society increasingly divided by partisan politics, a trend that manifests itself even in Christian churches.

“Tough mindedness alerts Christians to the truth that no political party represents all moral truth,” Parham explains. “Tender heartedness ... enables us to see our duty to initiate constructive change and gives us the moral energy to do so.”

He adds: “Christians engage the political process for the good of neighbor without placing *the* Christian mantle on any political party or position.”

2. Be prophetic.

The Bible offers many examples of prophetic witness, revealing that speaking out boldly about social ills is an important part of Christian faith.

Yet, too often prophetic witness is confused with sanctifying the views of a given political party or with offering condemnation divorced from a desire for the person or group being critiqued to change.

Prophets who became props for a political agenda were called out by the biblical prophets (see, for example, Isaiah 28; Jeremiah 23; Ezekiel 13), and the biblical prophets always coupled their critique with a call to repentance (for example, Joel 2:12-14; Amos 5:14-15; Luke 3:7-14).

“Being prophetic means we tell the truth, speak in the defense of the weak against the powerful, resist the seductive advances of political leaders and avoid ideological loyalties,” Parham explains.

3. Be resident aliens.

We embrace the tension to live in the world but to be guided by God by being a transformative influence (like salt, light, seed and leaven) and avoiding the pitfalls of withdrawal and theocracy.

4. Be transformers.

Christians face two pitfalls, Parham observes: accommodation (aligning their moral agenda with culture) and domination (using political processes and laws to push their moral agenda). In both scenarios, the Romans 12:2 tension and the Matthew 13 call to be leavening agents are lost.

Each pitfall seeks to make the Christian faith identical with the social order, “obscuring what is distinctive in the Christian message and creative in Christian morality,” as Reinhold Niebuhr noted in “An Interpretation of Christian Ethics.”

Parham urges the route of transformation, which involves “moral persuasion” through embodying Christian values in how we raise our children, confront dishonest practices, speak truthfully and civilly, defend the cause of the poor and urge people to focus on the common good.

This approach agrees with Niebuhr’s observation that “the highest achievements of social good will and human kindness can be guaranteed by no political system. They are the consequence of moral and religious disciplines.”

5. Be civil.

The Bible says that speech can be used for good or evil (see Proverbs 18:20-21; James 3:9-10) and urges a constructive use of the tongue.

The practice of civility by Christians is essential in an increasingly polarized society where divisive rhetoric reigns.

“Christian extremists on the right and left are defining the issues and polarizing the Christian community into artificial camps of us-against-them,” Parham observes.

By contrast, he explains, civil speech is constructive and honest, looks at the bigger picture and genuinely cares about others.

It is a means of embodying the virtues of Galatians 5:22, of being transformed by the renewing of our minds (Romans 12:2), and of being transformative agents within society (Matthew 5:13).

Discuss: Lead participants in a discussion of the five “rules of thumb” for constructive engagement.

Ask:

- Which of these five approaches do you find most challenging?
- Why?
- What are some practical ways that you could practice each of these principles?
- What other biblical texts are relevant to practicing transformative engagement?
What other guiding principles would you add to this list?

YOU MIGHT ALSO ENJOY THE FOLLOWING BIBLE STUDIES:

Being Doers of the Word: This 13-lesson online Bible study uses the book of James to help people who profess faith to back it up with love-based actions – and to expect nothing in return. Lessons include: “Developing a Mature Faith,” “Being Doers of the Word” and “Pursuing Wisdom.” A [leader’s guide](#) and [student guide](#) are available for purchase.

Honoring the Ten Commandments: This 13-lesson online Bible study explores how people of faith can honor the Ten Commandments through lives that uphold them. Lessons include: “Toward a Moral Way of Life” and “Approaching the Ten Commandments with Care.” A [leader’s guide](#) and [student guide](#) are available for purchase.

Questions Jesus Asked: This 13-lesson online Bible study considers Jesus’ questions as recorded in the Gospel of Luke, exploring ethical issues that Jesus raised and showing how these same issues related to our lives today. Lessons include: “Who Is Your Neighbor?” “What Is Faithful Stewardship?” and “What Do You Owe the Government?” A [leader’s guide](#) and [student guide](#) are available for purchase.

OTHER AVAILABLE RESOURCES:

Different Books, Common Word: Baptists and Muslims: A documentary that reveals how Baptists and Muslims are changing history by the way they are engaging each other. Tired of being defined by extremists, some U.S. Baptist and Muslims have sought and found common ground: the common word in both traditions to love neighbor. Learn more about the film at DifferentBooksCommonWord.com.

Gospel Without Borders: A documentary that brings more light and less heat to the issue of immigration. It separates myth from fact, examines what the Bible says about treatment of the “stranger,” shows the experiences of documented and undocumented immigrants and provides handles for Christians to advance the common good. Learn more about the film at GospelWithoutBorders.net.

Through the Door: A documentary that highlights the faith community’s engagement with prisons (including inmates and officers, being in prison and out, both charity and justice). Learn more about the film at ThroughTheDoor.info.