

Bring Your Bible Study to Life!

About four hours. No, it wasn't the result of an accident, but rather an object lesson for a Bible study in the gospel of Mark. The small group that I led last spring for students at the University of Maine had just studied the story of the paralytic in chapter 2. Rather than just discuss it, I wanted us to apply it. And so we lived it out.

Just before our group met, I had brought a pallet and had hidden it in the closet of the room in which we held the Bible study. At the end of the study, I brought it out, and told Jon that this was his "home" for the next several hours. He had to remain on the pallet and could not do anything for himself. If he needed anything, he would have to ask the other members of the Bible study.

To make it a little more real, the rest of the students in the study were responsible for caring for him from the end of the study until the large-group meeting later that night. They had to carry him from place to place, feed him dinner and keep him company before the meeting. In the middle of the large-group meeting he was "healed," and afterward we hung out in the Union coffee shop and debriefed our experience.

Jon shared how hard it was to be so dependent on his friends. He said it was easier to endure discomfort and inconvenience for a while than to keep asking for help. Everyone else said they were glad they didn't get picked to be the paralytic. We concluded that we prefer to be responsible for taking care of another person (as long as there are limits), rather than to be carried by others.

We also talked about what a blow it is to our pride when Jesus tells us that he hasn't come for the righteous, but the sick and sinners (Mark 2:17). We'd like to believe that there are areas of our lives that we don't always need to ask God for help with. And we'd like to think that we're indispensable to God--that there is work that God just couldn't do without us.

Why act it out?

This object lesson was only one of many that I used in the Mark study last spring. The students involved in the study were mostly new students who were already involved in fellowship activities and who had demonstrated an eagerness to go deeper in studying and applying Scripture. I wanted to give them an experience that they wouldn't necessarily be getting in the other chapter Bible studies they were involved in. In particular, I wanted to provide object lessons that would press us to be more honest in

how we lived out what we were learning. These pointed applications moved us out of our "comfort zones" with one another and with others outside the study.

There's no reason any small group couldn't enjoy these life-stretching experiences. All it takes is a little creativity and some thoughtful planning. Are you ready to try it?

Below are a few examples of other things we tried in the Mark study (some of these were borrowed from other InterVarsity staff in the New England region). They can be adapted to other Bible passages, or they just might trigger a completely different idea for you to try with your group.

Follow Me. The very first section of Mark that we studied ended with Jesus' call to the fishermen to follow him. As we finished praying at the end, I stood up and said, "Follow me." Then I led the dozen or so students on a whirlwind tour of the Union (including the bookstore and the snack bar). When we got back to our meeting room, we talked about how self-conscious we felt and tried to draw some parallels to our own experiences of being identified as followers of Jesus on campus.

Ears to Hear. Before we got to the parable of the soils (Mark 4:1-25), I wrote a rather obscure parable about a professor and some students and mailed it to each person in the study (without explanation). I wanted them to see the value of admitting when they don't understand something and then asking a lot of questions, rather than pretending they know what's going on.

Going Out in Pairs. We got to the section where Jesus sends the disciples out in pairs about the same time our fellowship was taking part in the "Jesus Awareness Week" on campus. Our small group split up into pairs with the challenge to do something we normally wouldn't do to make someone else more aware of Jesus. Applications of this ranged from sitting behind a table (and risking being identified with a Christian fellowship) to talking with strangers in the Union.

Softer Hearts. When we studied the feeding of the five thousand (Mark 6:30-52), where the disciples struggle with pride and hard hearts, I had each person think of the one person they were the most tired of dealing with that semester and why. Once they had identified who that person was, their assignment was to serve him or her in some specific way in the coming week. The next week we talked about the pride and the poor attitudes in our hearts that this exercise had brought out.

Too Quick to Judge. Our object lesson for the "Clean/Unclean" section (Mark 7:1-23) began with each person making a list of who they thought were the two most spiritual and the two least spiritual people in the room. After everyone had written out the names, I asked them to turn their lists in to me so I could read them aloud.

At this point many of them began to protest: "We can't do this! It's not right. How can you determine someone's spirituality? Why would we want to hurt one another like

this?" When the clamor died down, I asked if we ever made lists like this in our heads. After talking for a while we realized that we often judge each other secretly and unfairly in this way. It's only when we have to make those judgments public that we become noble and concerned about others' feelings. (Don't actually read the lists--destroy them!)

Studying the passage together after this helped us see more clearly what those things are from within our heart that "defile" us (Mark 7:21-23).

Doers of the Word

Leading that Mark study was the highlight of the semester for me. It also set the stage for many of the students who were in the Bible study to continue on in a leadership development group the next semester.

The apostle James says that people who are "doers of the word who act, not merely hearers who forget--they are blessed in their doing" (James 1:25). That was true of our experience as a small-group Bible study. And the object lessons we experienced were a very helpful vehicle in pushing us beyond hearing and towards doing.

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