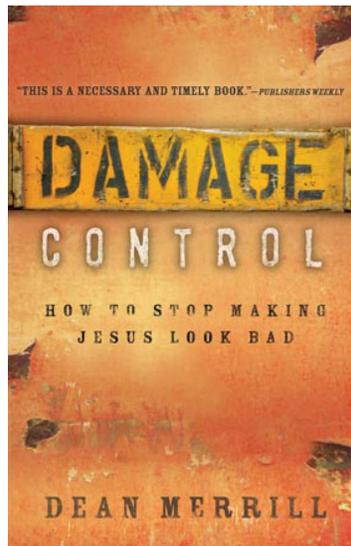


Damage Control STUDY GUIDE



This online guide is for leaders of small groups and classes who wish to facilitate an invigorating, interactive study of the book *Damage Control: How to Stop Making Jesus Look Bad*, by Dean Merrill (published by Baker, 2006). It will work for all adults, from new Christians to seasoned believers, and will result in new sensitivity toward how Christians are perceived by popular culture—and how to improve that perception.

Framework

The course is divided into ten sessions requiring approximately one hour each. Since the book has fourteen chapters plus an epilogue, several sessions cover two chapters on a common theme.

Each group member should have access to a copy of *Damage Control* for preparatory reading during the week. Clear instructions on reading for the next discussion are included at the end of each session.

Circle seating

Since this is an interactive experience, not a lecture series, it's important for the room arrangement to reflect that. Arrange seating in a circle if at all possible, so everyone can look one another in the eye and see facial expressions. Additionally, don't set up too many chairs in the beginning. It's psychologically better to add chairs as more people arrive rather than having the room feel half-empty.

Time control

A leader must exercise gentle but intentional control of the clock. While you don't want to cut people off in the middle of expressing their sincere thoughts, you cannot allow rambling. If you sense the frustration level building in the group, go ahead and intervene: "That's good, Jim—let me just add something here that relates to the next area we want to consider . . ." and quickly move to regain direction. Also, be conscientious about ending the meeting on time, or as close to it as possible. It's always better to have people wishing the session were longer than for them to be dreading how long it will string out.

The fine art of asking questions

The questions in this study have been carefully crafted to elicit thoughtful responses. They are neither too easy nor too difficult. Use them as written, unless you are sure

you have a better idea. Then, once you ask the question, wait for answers. Don't be afraid of silence. It often means people are deep in thought. (If members observe that you quickly get antsy and jump back in to answer your own questions, they will settle back and let you continue to do so.)

Food

Refreshments are a great way to build camaraderie in a group—provided that they don't become a burden for anyone, and provided that they don't consume an inordinate amount of time. If you decide to have food at the beginning of a meeting, be diligent in starting the actual study without too much delay. If you eat at the end of a meeting, of course, people can linger as long as they wish.

Prayer needs

Regardless of a group's official topic, members often arrive at a meeting with a distracting personal problem or concern. That's why it is good to offer opportunity for sharing personal needs and praying together at the end of the session. This is not "off the subject." This is ministering to one another as you journey together. Use whatever format your members find most comfortable.

Session One: *Who, Us?*

Welcome the group and make sure everyone knows each other's name. If the members are relatively new to each other, consider using nametags the first week. You might also employ an innocuous warm-up question such as:

- Let's go around the circle and each tell how long ago you came to this church (or this school, or this city), and what brought you here.

Or

- Let's go around the circle and each tell what was the first Christian book, other than the Bible, that you ever remember reading. Was it a good experience, or a waste of time?

Then say: "In this group, we're going to work our way through a new book entitled *Damage Control: How to Stop Making Jesus Look Bad*, by Dean Merrill. It was interesting that *Publishers Weekly*, which is based in New York City and is the foremost journal of the American book industry, said in its review, 'Merrill's message . . . will offend a few, encourage many others, and cause some Christians to make huge changes in how they relate to the people around them. This is a necessary and timely book.' So it sounds like we're in for a lively time together. Does everyone have a copy?"

If not, stop and take care of this. Sell copies as needed, collect funds, and make sure each participant (or couple) has their own book. Then hand out a blank index card to each person. Provide pens as needed. Give the following instruction:

"Title one side of this card GOOD. Title the other side EMBARRASSING. Now I want you to take a minute and jot down three things on each side. Think of three good things Christians are doing in today's world—things that make you proud to call yourself a Christian. Then on the other side, write three things that embarrass you about being a Christian these days. That shouldn't be too hard, right?"

Give the group a couple of minutes to work on this. You'll know how long to allow by watching your members. If their heads are down and their pens are moving occasionally, you'll know they're still working on the assignment. When their heads

come up and they start looking around the room—or making side comments to one another—it’s time to move on.

Ask for a sample of the responses, using examples from several different people. Don’t try to cover *every* example—that would take too long. Just air a sampling, enough to make the point that sometimes we truly help the cause of Christ, and sometimes we hinder it.

“Now let’s read a passage of Scripture that sets the stage for tonight’s discussion. It’s the story of Jesus’s ascension at the end of his earthly ministry. Let’s all turn to **Luke 24**, and we’ll start reading at **verse 45, continuing through to the end of the chapter.**”

Ask someone in the group (who you know would feel confident to do so) to read this aloud. Then move on to these discussion questions:

- What emotions would you guess the disciples felt at that moment? What was going through their minds?

“On pages 12–13 of *Damage Control*, there is a fable about what might have happened in heaven later that day. Please understand: This isn’t verifiable history. This is just a story to make a point. Please listen while I read. . . .” Start with the bottom paragraph on page 12 and read through to “. . . everyone leaves the room deep in thought.”

- How does this story hit you? What insight does this convey?
- What does the story show about Jesus’s level of confidence in human beings?
- Is that confidence well-placed, or not?

Read aloud the paragraph on page 14 that begins, “Sometimes Jesus’s friends are terrific. . . .” (The name Buechner is pronounced *beek-ner*.) Then ask:

- What do you think of Frederick Buechner’s quote? Is he being a little too harsh, or not?

“As we wrap up our first session together, let me reiterate that our goal as a group is to work toward being better representatives of the risen and ascended Lord. People in our world can’t physically see him—but they can see us. They draw their conclusions about him from watching us. Throughout the coming weeks, we will unwrap and flesh out the qualities we can embrace to ‘make Jesus look good.’”

Finish the evening with an opportunity for anyone to express a prayer concern. The intercession of fellow Christians in our daily concerns can be especially meaningful and helpful in a small-group setting.

For next time: Read chapter 1 (“Who, Us?”) and chapter 2 (“Ambassadors at Work”) in *Damage Control*. Also, make sure everyone is clear on the next meeting time and place.

Session Two: *Ambassadors at Work*

After welcoming the group and giving a little time for “How was your week?” conversation, guide the group toward the theme of chapter 2, which is Christians’ role as ambassadors.

- Has anyone in this group been in a situation—perhaps in the workplace—where you had to represent an unfamiliar or unpopular viewpoint to a group of people? They didn’t see things your way at all, and it was your job to try to stretch their minds. If so, tell us about it. What did you do? How did it go? Were you ultimately successful?

They may draw a blank on this, and if so, that’s all right. But give the group a moment to process this. Someone may think of a vivid illustration.

“Chapter 2 opens with a new title for us as Christians. It says we are not just *children* of God . . . and not just *followers* . . . or even *disciples*. We are, in addition to these things, *ambassadors*. Our main Scripture for this is **2 Corinthians 5:11–20**. Let’s read it together.”

Again, as you did last week, have this passage read aloud. One person can do it, or two people can alternate, or you can read around the circle. Then discuss:

- We’re going to look at some key verbs in this passage. The first one, in verse 11, is “persuade.” How is this different from the accusations we often hear today, that Christians are “coercing” others, “proselytizing,” or “forcing their religion down everybody’s throat”?
- What are some areas of widespread and energetic *persuasion* in our culture today? (sports loyalties, car brands, diet decisions, PC vs. Macintosh, etc.)
- The second verb, in verse 14, is stronger; it is “compel.” But here it is talking about what we Christians feel as a result of God’s love. How do you think this works? What is it about *love* (a very soft and gentle word) that ends up making us feel *compelled* to act?

- Has your love for another human being ever compelled you to do something? Tell us the story.
- The third verb, in verses 18 and beyond, is “reconcile.” Define what this means in everyday life.
- What is the issue between God and us that needs to be reconciled?
- In this passage, who takes the initiative toward reconciliation? Who steps out first?
- What is our role in all of this, according to verses 19–20?
- The fourth verb comes in verse 20: “implore.” How weak or strong is this word? What are its boundaries? What does this look like in a conversation about spiritual things?

“When ambassadors from Japan or Nigeria or Sweden, for example, first arrive in Washington, D.C., one of their first actions is to approach the U.S. Department of State and ‘present their credentials.’ They make it clear that they have come with the full authorization of their home government to represent its interests and opinions. While they may reside on U.S. soil, they will always keep thinking from the perspective of their home country. Their task is to build understanding between the two nations.”

- Imagine that you carry in your pocket a business card that reads:

JEFF SMITH

AMBASSADOR OF JESUS CHRIST

- You probably would be too modest to pull it out in everyday life—but how would it adjust your thinking? How would it affect your perception of your normal interactions in the course of a day or a week?
- What if an individual Christian says, “I actually don’t want to be an ambassador. Count me out of this job”? Is this even an option? How would fellow Christians convince the watching world that this person was *not* “in God’s diplomatic corps”?
- On page 23, the author talks about ambassadors sometimes being “recalled for consultation.” What is the equivalent of this in the Christian context?

As you close, spend time “consulting” with the heavenly “president” about what he expects from you in your role as his ambassadors. Ask questions, listen for his answers, and pledge anew your loyalty to his interests.

Here at the end of the second week, you may want to collect everyone’s phone numbers and email addresses for the sake of ongoing contact. See if the members feel comfortable with you making a copy of the “roster” for everyone.

For next time: Read chapter 3 (“The Christian ‘Brand’”) before next week’s meeting.

Session Three: *The Christian “Brand”*

After the initial warm-up and welcome, begin discussion with these questions:

- What did you think of the humor in the phony news release about the publishing giant Random House buying the Catholic Church? (pages 26–27)
- In your circle of friends and acquaintances, what impressions go along with the name “Christian”? (The first responses to this question may be quite negative. Let the group members keep talking for a bit. But if necessary, follow up with the next question . . .)
- In addition to what you’ve shared, do you ever hear any *positive* opinions? Such as?
- When people criticize Christians in today’s society, how much of what they say is fair, and how much is unfair? Put your answer in percentages—for example, “About 60 percent is valid, and the other 40 percent are cheap shots.” How would you set these numbers?
- At the top of page 30, the author briefly raises the dilemma of what to do about individuals who pose as Christians but really don’t walk their talk. (Read the paragraph aloud if necessary.) Is there a solution to this problem? What might be done? Or is it a fact of life that can’t be changed?

At this point, guide the group to the short epistle of **Titus**, one of Paul’s co-workers who was the “brand manager,” so to speak, for Christianity on the island of Crete. This was a fairly large island (160 miles long) in the middle of the Mediterranean; today it’s part of the nation of Greece. Its population at the time was not the most hard-working or high-principled (see Titus 1:12); they could jump to some pretty odd conclusions.

Help the group discern how Paul wants the Christian faith to be perceived by this population:

1. **Elders** in the church were to be “blameless” (stated twice—1:6, 7); in other words, you really couldn’t put any blame on them. If you tried to blame them for something bad, it wouldn’t make sense. People would say, “Oh, come on! From what I know of him, he just wouldn’t do something like that.”
 2. **Older men** in the congregation were to be “worthy of respect” (2:2). You automatically looked up to them as role models.
 3. **Younger women**, having been mentored by **older women** (2:3), were to run their households with such diligence and grace “that no one [would] malign the word of God” (2:5). In other words, outsiders looked at these families and applauded.
 4. **Young men** were to be the opposite of “wild and crazy.” They were to control their passions and even their mouths to the point that their “speech . . . cannot be condemned, so that those who oppose you may be ashamed because they have nothing bad to say about us” (2:8).
 5. Even Christian **slaves** were to endure their situation with dignity, refusing to harass their masters verbally or otherwise, “so that in every way they . . . make the teaching about God our Savior attractive” (2:10).
- This is quite a high standard, isn’t it? What do you think it would take for the word “attractive” to apply to the Christian brand today?
 - While none of us can “fix” the mega-picture of Christianity in one fell swoop, we can do something about our own small spheres of contact. Take a piece of paper and write down two things *you* could do to improve the “attractiveness rating” of Christianity among those who know you. You won’t be asked to share these, so go ahead and be honest. Just think about this for a few minutes. And if you need ideas, go back and scan the qualities mentioned throughout Paul’s letter to Titus.

Give several minutes for this exercise, joining your group members in this activity.

Break into pairs for this week’s prayer time. Encourage members to quietly pray honestly and earnestly about their stewardship of the Christian name, and ask God for help in the areas of life that need improvement.

Extension option: If time allows, you and your group could benefit by picking out all the examples of “doing good” in Titus. At least half a dozen times in this short epistle, Paul calls our attention to this. Take a tour of the citations, and notice what is distinct about each one.

For next time: Read chapter 4 (“A Stone for Stumbling”) before the meeting.

Session Four: *A Stone for Stumbling*

If you thought this study was all about making the gospel palatable and easy to swallow in contemporary society, this week's chapter will throw a large wrench into those plans.

Here's an opening question to get you rolling:

- Have you ever wanted to change “just one little thing” about the Christian faith? If so, what? If you could rewrite one aspect of the Bible, what would it be?

Set up the next part of the discussion with this: “Like it or not, God's Word has the ability to make us squirm from time to time. If there were a popularity contest for the world's religions, Christianity might not win on the basis of being the easiest to follow.

“Chapter 4 gives us a list of eight statements that stick in the craw of many people. We're going to work through this list by dividing our group into two teams. One will represent the Voice of Today's Culture. The other will represent God's Perspective. I will give you a few minutes to prepare your arguments on each of these eight statements. Jot down any notes you wish.”

Segregate the two teams to opposite sides of the room for prep time. Using their books, they can consider the statements on pages 34–37:

1. Some things are innately, objectively true—which means other things are not.
2. None of us is entirely “good at heart.”
3. Jesus has a solution for this disconnect with God—and it's the only solution.
4. Jesus has a “change agenda” for each of us.
5. Part of his agenda is a call to self-sacrifice.
6. The Christian life is not a solitary endeavor; it's a group thing.
7. Evangelism is part of the package.
8. The Bible is not just “a nice book.” It's authoritative.

In each case, the first group (Voice of Today's Culture) will be building a case for why the statement is unreasonable, out of touch with the modern world, and

impractical for educated people. The second group (God’s Perspective) will prepare to defend the statement intelligently, based on a Christian worldview.

Start the debate. Read the first statement, give the first group 60 seconds to attack it, and then give the second group 60 seconds to defend it. The dialogue will no doubt be lively. Don’t let it run too long on any one statement, as the goal is not to exhaust the topic. It is rather to illustrate that the gospel has certain “non-negotiables.”

Eventually, bring the debate to a conclusion. Thank everyone for giving it their honest effort, even if they didn’t agree with their assigned position. Then say:

“The point of what we’ve just done is to reinforce in our minds that some parts of the gospel are vitally important and can’t be given away, even if they’re unpopular. We don’t decide these core truths by taking a vote and going with the majority opinion. We accept them as divine revelation, regardless of how they ‘play’ in the marketplace of ideas.

“Now—given these ‘downsides’ in the public mind, these truths that many people raise questions about and wish were different—how much *more* important does it become for us not to *add* to the load with unwise speech and behavior? As the author says on page 39, “Here is a practical step for us: *don’t make matters worse by thoughtless actions on our part*. The cross may indeed be offensive, but its ambassadors shouldn’t be.”

Invite the group to turn to **1 Peter 4:12–19**. Read it together. Then discuss:

- What does Peter say here about the likeliness of our “taking heat” for our faith?
- What are some of the *legitimate* reasons for receiving opposition?
- What are some of the *illegitimate* reasons for receiving opposition?
- How does this passage say we are to handle hostility from those who disagree with the real gospel?
- Is anyone here currently going through this kind of experience? Would you like to tell us about it?

This last question may reveal a real-life situation that needs airing. Let group members bring wisdom and perspective to the person who is under pressure for his or her faith.

Then pray together for the courage and insight needed to hold steady to the “non-negotiables,” while avoiding foolish behavior that could further complicate the issue.

For next time: Read two chapters this week: chapters 6 (“Say What?”) and 12 (“Clearing the Fog”). They may also read chapter 5 (“What Fresh Eyes See”), if they wish; it’s an introduction to the next section of the book. But if time is limited, they should focus on chapters 6 and 12, which deal with a major area of concern: our communication style as Christians.

Session Five: *Say What?*

Introduce this week's meeting by summarizing the main point of chapter 5, which is this: *To represent Christ well in the world today, we have to get in touch with how others perceive us.* Perhaps you can read aloud the bottom two paragraphs on page 50, which encapsulate this point.

Then say: "Let's start tonight with the most obvious area that gets Christians in trouble: the way we talk. Just for fun, let me ask you this question."

- Tell a story from your own daily life about someone grossly misunderstanding what you said (on any topic). Was it their fault, or yours? Or some of both?

Proceed from this warm-up by bringing out a timer. Say: "For the first part of our meeting, we're going to point out the confusing jargon that Christians often use. This will be a lot of fun, I know; it's easy to 'throw stones' at people's language choices. We could spend the whole night doing this—but we won't. We'll give it 20 minutes, and then move along to focus on better ways of communicating. Here we go."

- When you first became a Christian, what was the most *mystifying* term you ran into? What made you say to yourself, *Huh? I have no idea what that means!*
- The author's second category (page 55) is "Words That *Overwhelm*." They cast the current culture as a battle zone, and we Christians are going to stomp the disgusting opposition into the ground. What examples of this have you heard recently?
- What about "Words That *Antagonize*"? The author gives a number of examples of feisty T-shirts and bumper stickers, for instance. What do you think is the motivation of Christians who use these?
- Finally, when have you felt *manipulated* by Christian language? Did you succumb to the tactic, or did you resist it?

Be bold in bringing this part of the discussion to a close at or near the 20-minute mark, even if people want to keep going. It's part of our human nature to enjoy pointing out faults in others. The whole evening, however, should not be given to this.

Instead, gently insist that the group move along to solving this problem.

Read together the following Scriptures: **1 Peter 3:15–16** and **Ephesians 6:19–20**. Then discuss:

- Peter says we need to be “prepared” in advance for dialogue with unbelievers. How prepared do you feel you are for this kind of discussion?
- What are Peter’s two terms for the *way* or *style* we’re supposed to use to explain our faith? (See the end of verse 15.)
- Paul, on the other hand, uses a stronger description in Ephesians for his way of “mak[ing] known the mystery of the gospel.” What is it?
- How does this balance with the terms Peter used? Can you practice both at the same time?
- Paul prays “that whenever I speak, words may be given me . . .” from God, we can assume. Have you ever sensed that God was giving you *his words* to say in a certain situation? What was that like? How did things turn out?
- “Salvation” and “saved” are certainly valid biblical words. If you sense, however, that someone today might not catch their significance, what are some good alternatives to use? What did you think of the author’s option on page 137?
- What other Christian terms need a fresh recasting, in your view?
- What line of reasoning have you found effective in bringing people directly to the person of Jesus instead of straying off on tangents?
- What did you think of Sarah Hinlicky’s emphasis on the power of story with young people today (see pages 143–45)? Have you used this approach yourself? If so, how did it go?

Concentrate your prayer time this evening on friends and acquaintances who don’t yet know the Savior. Go ahead and name them before the Lord, asking for wisdom on how to communicate clearly and compellingly to them.

For next time: Read chapter 7 (“One Lord, One Faith, 31 Flavors”) and chapter 10 (“Bridge Building”).

Session Six: *Bridging the Gaps*

Start the meeting tonight by opening up your local phone book to the “Churches” section of the Yellow Pages. Read through the subsection headings, from “A” to “Z.” Then ask the group:

- In which denomination (or other Christian grouping) did you start out your life as a believer?
- Are you still there, or have you made a change? If so, why?
- Which of the distinctions between Christian groups are truly important? Which are just accidental?
- Have your non-Christian friends ever talked about this issue with you? What have they said? And how did you respond?
- Recognizing that none of us can wave a magic wand and resolve all church differences in a moment, what are some practical ways we can begin to “major in the majors,” as the author urges on pages 67–68?
- Have you ever tried to mediate a conflict between two Christian groups (or individuals)? How successful were you? What did you learn that you’ll remember for whenever “next time” rolls around?

Point out that “Actually, bridge building can happen on many levels. It’s more than a denominational thing. Chapter 10 spotlights a variety of other venues for the ‘Christian reconciliation’ we talked about several weeks ago: politics, everyday social life in a community, troubled marriages. To set the foundation for this, let’s read **Romans 12:9–21** together.”

- It is often said that conflict can be resolved when the two parties “meet each other halfway.” Another phrase is the need for a “50/50 compromise.” What do you see in verses 9–16 that actually asks the Christian to go *more* than halfway, *more* than 50 percent?
- Paul asks us in verse 18 to “live at peace with everyone”—but he includes two caveats. He recognizes two factors that might preclude this goal. What are they?
- What does verse 21 say to you? Give an example, even a hypothetical one if necessary.
- In the dramatic story of South Africa in the early 1990s (told on pages 104–9), what impressed you most? What made the difference in preventing an ethnic explosion there?
- Have you ever “let someone off the hook” the way Ginger’s dorm assistant did in the story on pages 112–13? In the end, how did things turn out? Would you do the same thing if the situation came up again, or not?
- What makes it tough to hold a *Christian* marriage together these days? Why do you think we’re not presenting a better track record to the watchful world?
- If you lived in a place that offered the new “covenant marriage” option (see pages 115–16), would you take it, or not?

Discuss whether there’s an opportunity for bridge building in your community that your group could become involved in. How might you make a visible difference to your acquaintances and neighbors? What would make them say, “I’m so glad somebody finally stepped up to tackle that problem”?

Pray together about what God would have you do, either as a group or individually.

For next time: Read chapter 8 (“Consistency, Please”).

Session Seven: *Consistency, Please*

This meeting will quickly develop its own momentum because the topic is a hot one. Just be careful that, as the leader, you don't allow the discussion to degenerate into a gripe session. Keep pulling the group's attention toward what we can do to present a more consistent example to the watching world.

Here are three start-up questions to get rolling:

- How recently did someone complain to you that “Christians are just a bunch of hypocrites”? What was their illustration to prove this, and was their claim supportable?
- In such a conversation, how do you usually respond? What do you say?
- What do you think your unchurched friends and associates expect of you as a Christian? Absolute perfection, or something less? Describe the standard they hold in their minds.

“Let's look at two stories Jesus told about consistency. Turn to his wrap-up at the end of the Sermon on the Mount, as recorded in **Matthew 7:24–29**. I won't ask you to sing the old Sunday school song that comes from this story! Actually, Jesus is talking to grown-ups here. In fact, as we read this, visualize Hurricane Katrina slamming into New Orleans. . . .”

- Which house was easier to build in the beginning? Why?
- According to Jesus, what was the difference epitomized by the two builders?
- This story came at the end of an excellent sermon. Can you remember actually changing something in your life as the result of a sermon you heard? Tell us about it.

“The second story appears in **Matthew 21:28–31**. Let's read this one also.”

- Tell me about the first kid. What are some adjectives to describe him?
- Tell me about the second kid. What are some adjectives to describe him?
- Which one of the kids are YOU most like?

“Now let’s apply these teachings to some practical areas of daily life. The book mentions three: media choices (pp. 80–82), marriage commitments (pp. 82–85), and giving habits (pp. 85–86). Let’s talk honestly about each of these.”

- How much effect do you think popular media (TV, movies, music, the Internet) have on your life as a Christian? None, a little, some, quite a bit, or maybe a lot?
- Where do you draw the line on what to watch or listen to? What gets you to say to yourself, “Nope—I’m turning it off”? (Follow up quick answers with “Okay. Anything else?”)
- Does Romans 16:19 say anything to you personally in this area? (See the author’s personal application on page 82.)
- When it comes to marriage, nobody *likes* divorce. Everybody agrees it’s a messy situation. In light of that, why do you think Americans, including Christians, are near the top of the world’s statistics in this area?
- What are some realistic things we can do to shore up our marriages *without* offending those who are already divorced? How can we all improve future statistics?
- Page 85 says our grandparents gave a higher percentage of their money to God than we do. Why do you think that is?
- Why is generosity a key element of being a Christian?

Pray together about your desire to be “doers of the Word, and not hearers only” (James 1:22).

For next time: Read chapter 9 (“Peace on the Inside”) and chapter 11 (“One-Way Kindness”).

Session Eight: *From the Core to the Edge*

Set the stage by explaining, “Tonight’s meeting will consist of two halves. In the first half, we will take a step back and look at the role our own inner peace plays in representing Jesus in the world. The second half will focus on ways of bringing that composure to troubled, marginalized people.”

- Describe someone you know who tends to be highly agitated.
- Who is the *calmest* person you know?
- Just a few hours before all chaos would break loose for Jesus, look at what he said to his followers. Read **John 14:1–4** and **25–27**. How do you explain this composure at such a moment?
- Now let’s turn to the exhortation of **1 Thessalonians 5:13–15**, starting at the phrase “Live in peace with each other . . .” What are the two specific instructions in this passage that are to be applied to “everyone”?
- How does inner tranquility benefit Christ’s ambassador?
- How do you feel about solitude—is it a good thing or an irritation for you?
- Read Henri Nouwen’s perspective (pages 98–99) and tell how this strikes you.
- *Optional:* What about singing together one of the classic hymns about peace (“Like a River Glorious” or “It Is Well with My Soul”), or perhaps a contemporary song on that theme? (You don’t have to have accompaniment; just sing a capella. Provide lyrics if needed.)

“Chapter 11 talks about representing Jesus to those who cannot pay us back. It contains a sizeable list of Scriptures about God’s feelings for the poor. Scan those quotations silently, starting at the bottom of page 121.”

- Why do you think the Bible brings this up so frequently?
- Have you ever done something for someone who could not reciprocate? In other words, there was no “angle,” no benefit for yourself. Tell us the story.

The chapter gives several examples of organizations that specialize in this one-way kindness. If your meeting place has a computer, you might look together at some of the websites listed in the footnotes (p. 173). Explore how you can get involved.

- www.compassion.com
- www.missionofmercy.org
- www.worldvision.org and its Love Inc. link
- www.convoyofhope.org

If this isn’t practical, then bring some printed samples or brochures from compassionate ministries in your local community.

End the evening with practical planning on how you will show the love of Christ to those on the ragged edge.

For next time: Read chapter 13 (“More than Words”).

Session Nine: *More than Words*

This chapter may—or may not—take you and your group into unfamiliar terrain. The supernatural power of God both fascinates and frightens us. We’re not sure what to make of it.

Don’t feel obligated to *prove* anything tonight. Just take the Scriptures and the discussion questions below at their face value. Dampen any theologically stumping speeches by saying, “Let’s get back to what the text actually says here. What is the Bible trying to tell us?”

Start off with this non-threatening opener:

- Through your personal process of coming to faith in Christ, was there anything out of the ordinary about it? Any circumstance or event that went beyond words and formal principles of truth? Tell us about it.
- When you read in the New Testament about dramatic miracles, healings, etc., how does it make you feel? Awed? Scared? Uneasy? Wishful? Thankful? Pick a word of your own to describe your feelings.
- Had you ever noticed the seeming contrast of Paul’s approach in Athens (Acts 17) to his approach in Corinth (Acts 18)? [If necessary, review this material on pages 149–50.] What stands out to you?
- What did you think of Rich Nathan’s Starbucks story on pages 153–54? Weird? Cool? Would you ever do such a thing yourself? If not, why not?
- What else in this chapter triggered a fresh thought or perspective in your mind?

“The most important aspect of this is to see our friends and acquaintances encounter the reality of an awesome God. However he chooses to touch their lives is fine with us. Let’s go back to the list we drew up in Session 5 of the people we seriously

want to come to faith in Christ. Do you have any additions to make now? Just give their first names if you prefer.”

Update this list on a large sheet of paper, then spend time praying for these individuals by name. Ask God to reveal himself to them—and to use the members of your group in the process.

For next time: Read chapter 14 (“Damage Control”) and the epilogue (“Giving Our Best”).

Session Ten: *Mopping Up*

In this final time together, you'll focus on the messy problem of doing "damage control" after a fellow Christian has embarrassed the name of Christ. You'll also bring the series to its conclusion, highlighting each lesson you've learned along the way.

Here is your opener:

- Don't you just hate it when your kids embarrass you in public? Somebody tell a story—but please, be kind about it!
- Now here's a twist: What kinds of goofy things did *you* do as a kid? How did you make it hard on *your* parents? Be honest.

Open your Bibles and read two passages together: **1 Timothy 2:14–16** and **1 Peter 2:15–16**. Together, construct a list of "do's and don'ts" for responding to outside critics. You should be able to come up with five or six good guidelines.

When this is finished, continue with the following discussion:

- Why *not* just keep quiet in the aftermath of a fellow Christian's embarrassing behavior? Isn't silence sometimes the best policy?
- On page 162, the author talks about our need to "distinguish without denigrating." What does that mean to you? Where do you draw the line?
- In the story about the restaurant waiter (pages 162–64), what did you think of how Jon Lawson handled the situation? What did you like, or not like, about his approach?
- What is the toughest job of "mopping up" you've ever attempted? What did you do well? What could you have done better?

Wrapping Up the Course

- Now that we've thoroughly investigated the task of being an ambassador for God's kingdom, are you glad to be in this role, or not? What is your overall view of your "job"?

Read aloud the stirring words of E. Stanley Jones (medical missionary to India in the first half of the twentieth century) on page 168. Then discuss:

- He sounds quite optimistic, doesn't he? Are you optimistic about representing Christ in today's environment? Why or why not?
- What motivates you to do the very best job you can in upholding the name and cause of Christ?

Pray together one last time for each other in this vital work.