

THRIVE

High School Small Group Guide

Session 3

Session Topic: Freedom from Empty Rules

Session Overview: Following Jesus is not about following empty rules. We can trust the Holy Spirit to guide us to live a Godly and fulfilling life.

- This is the last session of a three-part series called "Freedom." We've been talking about freedom – specifically spiritual freedom – and what that means for us.
- In our first session, we compared the true freedom that Jesus offers to the fake freedom that we sometimes settle for. True freedom is rooted in Jesus' work on the cross, which breaks the power of sin in our lives so we can choose to obey God and live by the Spirit.
- Last session, we talked about freedom from perfection: God knows we aren't perfect, so He offers unending grace as we pursue Him and the ways of His kingdom.
- In this session, we'll be talking about freedom from following empty rules. Think for a moment... what things does God ask us to do? When God asks us to do something, it's because He loves us and wants the best for us. We may not always realize it, but God giving us instructions is like parents telling their young kids not to put a paper clip in an electrical outlet – it's for their own good.
- A healthy parent teaches their kids positive habits – like brushing your teeth every day. A healthy parent teaches their kids to avoid negative choices – like lying and stealing. The difficulty comes

when we view God's rules as "to-do" or "not-to-do" lists instead of the loving, living words they actually are.

Reflect and Discuss: What rule did your parents enforce (or habit did your parents teach you) when you were younger that you didn't like but then recognized the benefits of once you were a little older?

- Sometimes when we do what we're not supposed to or don't do what we're supposed to, we start to feel guilt and shame. If you are caught in this cycle of resentment, guilt, and shame, eventually it causes burnout. Jesus talks about burnout in **Matthew 11:28-30**.

Read Matthew 11:28-30

- In this passage, Jesus was talking to a group of Jewish people who felt like they were never enough. The religious leaders of the day strived to follow hundreds of religious rules, and they thought God would love them more if they followed all of them. They also expected other Jews to follow these rules. But we know that following Jesus is not about rules. It's about a relationship with Jesus.

Reflect and Discuss:

1. What can we learn from Matthew 11:28-30? How does that apply to our own lives?

- As we just read, following Jesus is not about rules. It's about a relationship with Jesus. That's the point of our main passage for this session. But here's the thing: once you've begun following Jesus and you're in a relationship with Him, you WANT to obey Him because you trust that He is guiding you to live the best life possible. It may not seem like a big shift, but obeying God because you feel guilty and obeying God because you trust and love Him are two radically different things. This doesn't necessarily mean

that we will want to go to church every day, read the Bible a ton, and pray constantly. It just means that we want to grow closer to Jesus and are willing to do certain things to become more like Him.

Reflect and Discuss:

1. Do you go to church (or do other Christian things) out of guilt and/or fear right now? Or is it to please your parents or grandparents? Or do you try to grow in faith because you truly love and trust Jesus and want to grow closer to Him? On a scale of 1 to 10 (1 being they are just a Christian out of guilt and/or fear or to please their parents AND 10 being they truly want to grow closer to Jesus because they love and trust Him), where do you fall? Are you content with this spot on the scale or are you hoping it will change?
 - God has set us free from meaningless rules that cause us to live fearful, shame-filled lives. So, does that mean we don't have guidelines to follow? No, of course not. But the difference is we begin obeying God because we trust Him. We know He loves us, He's with us through His Spirit, and He wants the best for us, so we obey Him because we trust Him. Let's watch a funny video that illustrates this point a bit more.

Watch "God's ways vs Man's ways": www.youtube.com/watch?v=2utXPjySWdE

- When God says something that we struggle to understand, we choose to obey because we trust Him. When God says something that we don't particularly like, we choose to obey because we trust Him. When God says something that is really difficult and requires sacrifice on our part, we choose to obey because we trust Him. We

are free *not* to obey, but we *choose* to obey God because we trust Him.

Reflect and Discuss:

1. Have you ever trusted somebody with something even though things looked like they weren't going to work out? What happened?
2. When have you trusted in God's plan even when the road ahead looked dark?
3. When have you seen good come from bad? Or blessings come from failure?
 - At the in-person session, we did a fun activity to illustrate what trusting in God even when it doesn't make sense looks like. Feel free to try it at home if you'd like.
 - Somebody held a Ziploc bag filled with water over their head. Somebody else poked several pencils through the bag while it was over the other person's head. Even though it looked like water was about to spill all over their head, the person under the bag of water had to trust that the person poking the pencils through knew what the outcome would be. Obviously, the person under the bag didn't get wet.
 - This is what it's like to trust God even when it doesn't make sense. Sometimes you have to just trust in God's plan even when you don't see the good that will come from something. God can see the future and the bigger picture, so we can put our trust in Him. He can create beauty from the ashes, and even if we face darkness in our lives, God will guide us through it and never leave our side.
 - But how do we know where God is leading us? How do we know what God is saying to us?

- God speaks to us in many ways. He can speak to us through wise advice from people we trust. He can also speak to us when we read and study the Bible and talk to Him in prayer. Let's read about each of these ways God speaks to us...
- First, God can speak to us through **people**. Have you ever been struggling with a tough decision and then a family member or close friend gave you great advice? Have you ever been listening to the radio and the perfect song came on at the perfect moment to make you feel better? Has a friend ever texted you some really encouraging words that helped you get through the day? God could be speaking to you through these people.

Reflect and Discuss: Have you noticed God speaking to you through other people before?

- Second, God speaks to us through the **Bible**. The Bible is a fascinating book. God – by His Spirit – inspired people to write the words we now read in our Bibles. Those people wrote in their own language and with their own style, but they wrote exactly what God inspired them to write, so we can trust what's in the Bible. The Bible tells the grand story of God's love for us and His plan to save us from our sins. It also is filled with wisdom on how to live a fulfilling life in which we love God and love others.

Reflect and Discuss: How do you think God speaks to us through the Bible? Has any part of a passage ever "stuck out" to you when you were reading God's Word?

- Third, God speaks to us in **prayer**. We often do all of the talking in prayer... but do you ever spend time listening for God while praying? A great way to seek God's voice and guidance while

reading the Bible and while praying is with **Lectio Divina** (pronounced lexio diveena).

- “Lectio Divina” means “divine reading” in Latin. In Lectio Divina, we read and re-read a Scripture passage slowly and prayerfully to grow closer to Jesus and let Him talk to us through His Word. There is no hurry in Lectio Divina. Listen for the voice of God in your heart. There are 4 steps to Lectio Divina.
- **STEP 1: LECTIO (LISTEN / READ):** Read the Scripture passage. Be sure to read it slowly. Comprehend who, what, when, where, and why. Pay attention to the details.
- **STEP 2: MEDITATIO (MEDITATE):** Now, reread the passage and select a word or phrase that stands out to you. Meditate on that one word or phrase. To meditate on it just means to turn it over in your mind and repeat it. Just sit and think about it. Other thoughts may come to mind and distract you, but that's okay. Just take a deep breath and refocus on God's Word.
- Ask yourself, What does this mean to me? Does this word or phrase cause me to think of any memories? What does this word or phrase make me desire or dream about? What does it tell me about God? What does it tell me about my relationship with God? What does it tell me about how to live?
- **STEP 3: ORATIO (PRAY):** Ask God for the grace to be changed by what you have read, to come more fully into being who He wants you to be and to help you apply the Scripture to your life. Speak to God and ask, Why does this stand out to me? What are you trying to teach me? What are you saying to me through these verses?

- **STEP 4: CONTEMPLATIO (CONTEMPLATE):** Lectio Divina concludes by resting quietly in God's arms. No words are necessary; simply rest in gratitude for God and His Word. Try to slow your thoughts and focus on the presence of God. Focus on the Holy Spirit's presence inside you.
- It is not easy to sit in silence. Your mind may wander, and your body may feel restless. Focus on your mind and body as often as necessary to resume a feeling of stillness. You may or may not feel connected to God. Do not worry. It pleases God every time you engage authentically in prayer.

Watch the following video to learn more about Lectio Divina:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=gKYEOc3ik9k

- If you'd like, try Lectio Divina for yourself. Start by asking the Holy Spirit to lead and guide you.
- ***Pray:*** Come Holy Spirit. Open our hearts and our minds so that we're ready for you to speak to us through your Word.

Lectio (Read):

Open up your Bible and highlight **Galatians 5:13-15**. Then read it aloud slowly, listening for words or phrases that stick out to you. Pause. Then, read it again either out loud or silently. You can even read the verse in another translation.

Reflect and Discuss: What word or phrase stuck out to you when you read this?

- Let's read some background information on the context in which this scripture passage is found. Galatians was written by St. Paul. During St. Paul's first missionary journey, he founded churches in Galatia, which is near Asia. Jewish Christians arrived in Galatia

after St. Paul left. These Jewish Christians accused St. Paul of leaving out important parts of the gospel. The Jewish Christians claimed that the Galatians needed to follow Jewish laws and customs to be considered real Christians. St. Paul strongly opposed this teaching of the Jewish Christians. Galatians proclaims that salvation is a free gift from God and rejects the idea that salvation is or can be earned.

Meditatio (Reflect):

- This is the time to reflect on why this word or phrase might be standing out. Take 1-2 minutes to jot down your thoughts. Here are questions to consider when reflecting on these verses:
 - What is true freedom?
 - How should you use your freedom?
 - How do you love those around you?
 - How are you called to love those around you?

Oratio (Respond):

- Now that you have considered what God might be saying to you in scripture, this is your opportunity to respond to him. Pray and talk to God about your insights. Then, take 1-2 minutes to write down your prayer and your insights in your notes.

Reflect and Discuss:

1. What is God saying to you through this scripture?
2. What do you think he is asking of you?
3. Where in your life can you put this into practice?

Contemplatio (Rest):

Next, reread the Scripture and allow time for silence. Thirty seconds to a minute or so is ideal. Give God the space to speak in the silence.

- As we can see, God speaks to us in many ways. Sometimes we don't even realize He's trying to speak to us through the Holy Spirit. Remember that the Holy Spirit is alive in you, so you can interact with the Spirit as you live your day-to-day life. So when someone is annoying you and you're about to explode but something inside of you says, "Chill out, they may be having a terrible day – just let it slide," that's God's Holy Spirit speaking to you.
- Or when your parents discipline you and you want to talk back or roll your eyes but something inside of you says, "Take a breath, this is your mom and dad, they love you, and they do so much for you," that's God's Holy Spirit speaking to you.
- Or let's say you're hanging out with some friends and they start trash-talking someone and you want to join in on the conversation but something inside of you says, "This doesn't feel right, so I'm going to change the subject," that's God's Holy Spirit speaking to you.
- And the Holy Spirit not only teaches you or reminds you of what's right but also empowers you to choose what's right. If you're a follower of Jesus, we never have to say, "I can't do it, it's too difficult," because the same power that raised Jesus from the dead, the Holy Spirit, is alive inside of you.

Read Romans 8:11

Reflect and Discuss:

1. Have you ever felt that something just "wasn't right" or heard a little voice in your head telling you "Don't do it!" so you made the right decision instead? Do you think it could have been the Holy Spirit?
2. Have you ever felt the need to go out of your way to do a good deed in public? Do you think this could have been a prompting of the Holy Spirit?
 - As we've seen, God broke the power of sin in our lives – that's what we discussed in the first session. And God gives us unending grace as we pursue Him – that's what we talked about in the second session. So, we can trust the Holy Spirit to guide us through life and our decisions. And we choose to obey and follow because God loves us, He's with us, and He's for us.

Session Challenges

- Each session, you will have a challenge to complete and a theme verse to memorize before you come back. The more verses you memorize and the more challenges you complete this semester, the more prizes you can win!
- The theme verse for this series is **Matthew 11:28**, which is "Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest."
- Now for our challenge: Try Lectio Divina once on your own this week (if you did it as part of this lesson, it counts!). You can choose your own Bible passage or try it with Luke 6:27-31 (the verse on the Lectio Divina handout).

End in prayer.