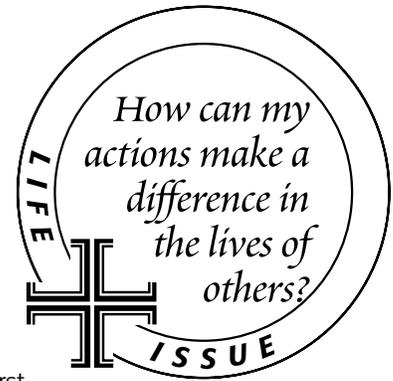


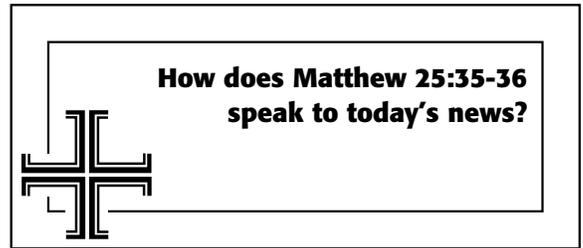
# Adding Value



## Theme

“People will always act in their own best interests.” This philosophy explains the success of capitalism in the Western world and is an assumption for how much of our culture operates. Surprisingly, the teachings of Jesus say exactly the opposite. Jesus tells us to act in the others’ best interests as we love God first, then love our neighbors as ourselves. Even if those neighbors are our enemies, we are commanded to love them! Throughout the Gospels, Jesus enlists the disciples (who include us) to add value to the world, to walk the extra mile for another, to bring a word of hope to a world that is too often mired in hopelessness. As Christians, we are commanded to look at what is and imagine and work toward what could be.

The purpose of this session is to begin a dialogue about what it means for each of us to “add value” to the world around us. It’s interesting that Jesus always told the disciples to “go and tell.” He equipped them to hang out with people who were different from them and encouraged them to take risks. He even warned the disciples that following him would make it impossible for them not to take risks. What risks are we willing to take to make our world a better place? What holds us back from being able to take those risks, and how can we remove those barriers? If we believe what Jesus taught, how do we gain the courage to act as Jesus did and add value to a world that so badly needs the gift of radical grace?



## Opening Prayer

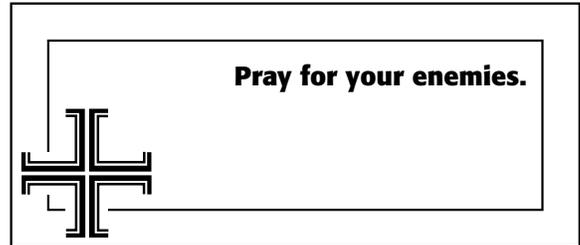
Jesus, thank you for modeling risk taking and putting our needs before your own needs. Forgive us when we get so caught up in our own plans that we forget to think about others. Forgive us for selfishly using resources as though they will be infinitely supplied. Lord Jesus, turn our hearts and actions outward. Help us look for ways that we can add value to the lives of others, even if it means that we may be uncomfortable at times. Help us to see your face in others so that we might love them rather than ignore them. Help us to live out our faith by doing good works in your name. Most of all, help us to remember that you love everyone and that you ask us to follow your example. Lord, instill in us the desire to truly love others and to be aware of the ways that we can add value. We pray in your holy name, Amen.

## **What does the Bible say?**

### **Luke 6:27-36**

<sup>27</sup>“But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, <sup>28</sup>bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. <sup>29</sup>If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. <sup>30</sup>Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. <sup>31</sup>Do to others as you would have them do to you.

<sup>32</sup>“If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. <sup>33</sup>If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. <sup>34</sup>If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. <sup>35</sup>But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. <sup>36</sup>Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.



### **James 2:14-17, 20-26**

<sup>14</sup>What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? <sup>15</sup>If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, <sup>16</sup>and one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,” and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? <sup>17</sup>So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

<sup>20</sup>Do you want to be shown, you senseless person, that faith apart from works is barren? <sup>21</sup>Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? <sup>22</sup>You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was brought to completion by the works. <sup>23</sup>Thus the scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,” and he was called the friend of God. <sup>24</sup>You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. <sup>25</sup>Likewise, was not Rahab the prostitute also justified by works when she welcomed the messengers and sent them out by another road? <sup>26</sup>For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead.

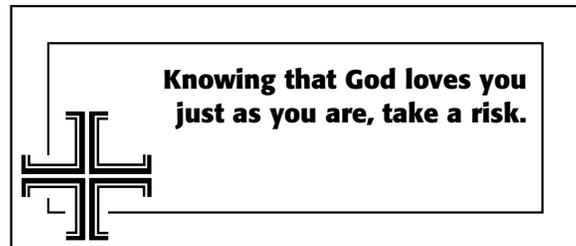
### **Think About...**

- How do the verses in Luke and James support each other? What can we learn from them as we seek to “add value” in our world?
- What motivates you to do good works? What other motivations have you seen? How would you respond to someone who said that doing good is not important because we are saved through grace alone? (James 2)
- When have you had the opportunity to practice Jesus’ command to “love your enemies”? What example(s) have you seen of another person loving his or her enemies? How might that concept add value in the world today if all Christians truly took the command to heart? (Luke 6)
- What makes it difficult to follow the words in these texts? What are some of the many things that get in the way of doing good and adding value? How important is it to you to know the outcome of your actions?

## What do others say?

Have you ever spent time watching an artist? It's fascinating to see the simple techniques they use to make something common valuable. The diamond cutter takes a raw piece of rock. He chips away at it, making it smaller and smaller, and in the process it becomes more beautiful and more valuable. The painter adds paint to the canvas and something beautiful appears. Artists expose various materials to tremendous heat to craft something that is more valuable and stronger than the original materials. These artists go to great lengths to add value to seemingly worthless things. To what lengths will we go to add value to our lives, and the lives of others?

There were two people in front of me in a grocery store line. As the woman at the front of the line began putting her items on the belt, I noticed a birthday cake from the bakery, a package of steaks, and other miscellaneous items. What interested me the most was to see her take food stamps from her purse to pay for her purchases. The woman in front of me promptly piped up, "Gee, must be nice. I can't afford cakes from the bakery and steaks." I remember being surprised that this woman said anything, but I have to admit that I was thinking the same thing. The woman in the front took a deep breath and, turning to look at the woman who spoke, she said, "Today is my son's birthday. I can't afford a gift. He requested a steak dinner. I want him to have a cake and I don't have an oven." She settled her bill, picked up her items and walked away, leaving the rest of us speechless. Imagine what she might have gone without that month in order to add value to her son's birthday. To make sure his birthday didn't pass unnoticed.



It may not surprise you that this woman would go to such lengths to add value to her son's birthday. Would it surprise you to know that God goes to great lengths to add value to our lives? We may need to allow God to be the artist, cutting things away, reshaping us, or adding things to us to make us more valuable. There are times when we may be put through the fire, only to come out stronger, and changed. Sometimes we have to be open to the process, we need to allow ourselves to be transformed. When we allow that transformation to happen, we may be surprised at how God begins to use us to add value to the lives of others.

God can also use us to be the artist, transforming the life of someone else. Sometimes those actions can be relatively simple and straightforward. One simple action may be paying more attention to the people we encounter each day. Others may be showing kindness, volunteering, or listening to another person. While small in scope, these actions can be transformative for that person. At other times, adding value may call for self-sacrifice, discomfort, or risk taking. What motivates people to be whistleblowers, uncovering injustices when they see them? Why do some feel called to go on mission trips or to sit with someone who is dying?

What would happen if we begin to actively seek ways that we could add value to another person's life or to our community? What would that look like? Might we take time to actually notice the people with whom we come in contact each day? Maybe that would mean that we take a few minutes to smile and visit with the person who makes our coffee at the gas station each morning. Maybe we would intentionally choose not to judge someone who is standing in front of us at the grocery store, because we know that we don't know the whole story. Maybe we would reach out to an elderly neighbor who is lonely and make a commitment to stop over to help with laundry once a week. Maybe we would volunteer at a women's shelter or an after-school tutoring program. We are so quick to complain when things don't go the way we want, but we rarely take the time to praise or thank people when things are done well. The little things we do and say can make all the difference. These small things can add value to another person's experience—and, in the process, to our own.

When we allow God to transform us, we may find that it becomes easy to give rather than take. We begin to advocate for those in our society and communities who don't have a voice. We begin to truly love our neighbors and have compassion for those whom some might consider unlovable. We begin to be the person God designed us to be, and in our own way, we start helping to spread God's radical grace in this place, today.

### **Reflection from *Alive Now***

"Do We Know What We're Asking?"  
by Thom M. Shuman

We leave our box seats  
at the symphony or ball park,  
and pray you won't catch our eye  
as we pass by the homeless;

we wait for a few minutes  
at the doctor's office  
to get a \$10 shot  
so we won't catch the flu,  
while half a world away  
you sit for a week  
hoping medicine  
that will cost you a year's wages  
finds its way to your village;

we sit in our home theatres,  
watching the newest "reality"  
on our plasma screens,  
while you sit in the darkness  
rocking your child  
as she cries herself to sleep  
from hunger.

Lord Jesus:  
when,  
like James and John,  
we want to be at your side  
in glory:  
remind us where you sit.  
Amen.

From *Alive Now*, March/April 2006 (Nashville: The Upper Room, © 2006), pages 22-23.

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Writings by Thom Shuman are available on [www.occasionalsitings.blogspot.com](http://www.occasionalsitings.blogspot.com)

## Think About...

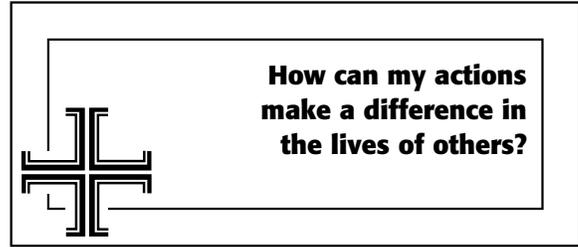
*Groups that have been together for one or more years may want to use the questions with* ■◻

- Tell about someone you know who has added value to your life. What did this person do? How is your life different because of knowing this person? Is the person aware of the value he or she added?
- Tell about a time when you felt fully alive. What were you doing? Were there risks involved in the activity? How might complacency dull our joy for living?
- What for you is the most pressing social issue today? As Christians, what actions do you believe our faith calls us to take?
- What are some ways that you often see people stepping in to help others? What might be examples of ways to go beyond what is expected?
- The second reflection contrasts our “safe” lives with the lives of people around the world. Can you think of any contrasts like that in your own life? What are some things that we could risk or give up to “sit” with Jesus?
- ◻ Sometimes our sacrifices and risks to benefit the world impact our friends and family. How has a decision you made to add value impacted someone else in your life?
- ◻ The writer of the first reflection wondered what the young mother had given up to buy the steak and cake for her son. When have you given up something so that another person could have or do something that was important to him or her? When has someone else given up something so that you could have or do something that was important to you?
- What issue or person is so close to your heart that you would sacrifice something valuable to make a difference? What is it about that issue or person that propels you forward? Which sacrifices would be easier, and which would be more difficult for you to make in this situation?
- ◻ What holds us back from taking risks for what we believe? How can we begin to remove those barriers? How does God’s radical gift of grace give us the freedom to take a risk?
- ◻ There are many different ways of understanding who might be an “enemy.” List the different kinds of enemies we face in our lives. Can you imagine God working in their lives? Can you imagine being someone God uses to impact their lives?
- What are some ways to watch for or pay attention to opportunities to use our everyday activities to add value? As a group, list as many as you can think of. How can we be more aware of how God might use us in the lives of others?
- Sometimes making a difference is a long-term commitment. What helps you to sustain your energy and commitment over the long haul? Can you think of an example of where you have had to do this?

## ***What’s my response?***

This month, focus on acting in the best interests of others. As you go about your daily activities, ask yourself, “How can my actions make a difference in the lives of others?” Pick one or two of the following activities to try as you continue to experience God’s radical gift of grace.

- Read Matthew 25:31-46 before you read the newspaper. Make a list of the articles and issues that moved you. Think about how you might view these situations differently through the lens of your faith. Make one phone call or write one letter or email to become involved.



- Think about the people in your neighborhood or community who could benefit from your help. Take time this month to explore ways that God might be calling you to add value to a situation. Let God use you to make a difference, no matter how small.

- Think about something that you have always wanted to do, but maybe were too shy or afraid to try. Knowing that God loves you just as you are, take a risk! Do the thing that you haven't had the courage to do up until now. Write about your feelings before and after accomplishing this dream. If the thing you want to accomplish is a long-term goal, at least take the first step!

- Visit someone who could use a friend. Take time to have a good conversation with this person. You may be the bearer of God's radical gift of grace for this person today.

- Write examples of how God has been gracious to you and to your family. Include how God has shown God's grace through others. Say a prayer of thanksgiving.

- Rent a movie that portrays how someone has added value to the lives of others. Some examples are *Pay it Forward* (PG-13), *Finding Forrester* (PG-13), *Gandhi* (PG), and *Stand and Deliver* (PG). Watch any or all of these films with friends or family and discuss the glimpses of radical grace that appear as characters add value to the lives of other characters in the movie.

- Rent *Schindler's List* (R) or *Hotel Rwanda* (PG-13) to watch with other adults and discuss possible motivations for Oskar Schindler and Paul Rusesabagina as they save countless lives in desperate times.

- Pray for your enemies.

- Take a small risk this month by smiling at everyone you meet or greeting everyone with a "good morning," or "Hi." At the end of the day, notice how you feel about your day. Think about how this small risk might move you to the next step in adding value for others.

- Research an issue about which you feel strongly (children's rights, HIV/AIDS epidemic, women's rights, civil rights, peace activism, etc.). Use the Internet or phone book to contact organizations that are advocates for bringing about justice in that area. Think about one small thing that you can do to be an advocate for those who don't have a voice. Find a local organization working on this issue.

- Keep your eyes open for incidents where someone is being treated unfairly in your workplace, in a social setting, at the health club, at church, or at home. Make your thoughts known about the situation to start people thinking about the consequences of their actions.

- Write a letter to your local or federal senator or representative expressing your support or concerns about a current issue.

- Learn about the mission outreach opportunities in your congregation or in the local community.

- Watch for people who are new or seem less connected to others in your neighborhood or workplace. Make an effort to start a conversation with them.

## **Closing**

### **Closing Prayer:**

God, thank you for calling each of us to serve others in your name. Help us to be ever watchful for situations where we might be your hands and feet in the world, remembering that when we help others, we also help you. Challenge us to grow in trust so that serving others becomes natural for us. Encourage us to listen to your voice and to follow your lead, knowing that wherever we go, you are walking beside us. We pray this in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Amen

### **If you'd like to read more...**

Bachman, John W. *Together in Hope: 50 Years of Lutheran World Relief*. Minneapolis, MN: Kirk House Publishers, 1995.

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Cooper, Rodney, L. *We Stand Together*. Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1995.

Hafften, Ann E., Ed. *Water from the Rock: Lutheran Voices from Palestine*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2003.

"Justice and Righteousness," *Alive Now*, July/August 2004. Nashville, TN: The Upper Room, 2004.  
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Marty, Martin E. *Speaking of Trust: Conversing with Luther about the Sermon on the Mount*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2003.

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Runge, C. Ford, Sneauer, Benjamin, Pardey, Philip G., Rosegrant, Mark W. *Ending Hunger in Our Lifetime: Food Security and Globalization*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 2003.

The ONE Campaign is an effort to rally Americans to fight the emergency of global AIDS and extreme poverty. Learn more at <http://www.one.org/>

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Yunan, Munib. *Witnessing for Peace in Jerusalem and the World*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2003.

