
OBJECTIVE

To have each family member understand that Jesus Christ is the True Vine who connects us all; through Him we must grow in all our relationships.

PREPARATION

The committee leading this activity should review and use the *Preparing for the Family Night* checklist in *Appendix B* to plan for the event.

Session leaders should allocate sufficient time to prepare, familiarizing themselves not only with the session but also with each of the following Bible passages: John 15:1–17, Luke 8:5–15, Jeremiah 50:4–5, John 3:16, Matthew 22:36–40, and I Corinthians 13:4–8. In addition, look over any prayers that will be used so that you are comfortable with them as well. If theological questions arise during preparation, the leader(s) should schedule a meeting with the parish priest so that the lesson is fully understood before the session.

On the day of the session, allow time to organize the materials. It is important that the parish family tree not be visible until after the break-out sessions are complete.

MATERIALS NEEDED

For the Whole Group

- Copies of prayers and/or prayer services (*for all participants*)
- Flip chart, masking tape, and markers
- Bags filled with the following items (*one per family*):
 - *Family Time: Opening Activity* handout (*see p. 51*)
 - Construction paper (*multiple colors but mostly brown*)
 - Scissors, glue stick, and markers
 - Flip chart paper (*1 sheet per family*)
- Large icon of Christ the True Vine or projection of the icon
- Small paper icons of Christ (*one per family*)
- Large sheet of butcher paper with tree trunk outline (*write “Our Parish Family” on it*)
- *Family Time: Closing Activity* handout (*see p. 52*)
- Pens/pencils and paper
- *Family Night: Taking It Home* handouts (*see p. 53–54*)

For Children’s Break-out Session

- Large sheets of butcher paper with crayons/markers
- Optional materials: “Fruits of the Spirit” son with lyrics (*see pp. 41–42*) and song from the Fruits of the Spirit CD by Gigi Shadid (*which can be ordered at www.gsquareproductions.com*)

For Teenagers’ Break-out Session

- White construction paper and markers
- *Connecting to Jesus* handouts (*see p. 45–46*)
- Pens/pencils

For Adults’ Break-out Session

- *Sacrifice and Love* handouts (*see p. 49–50*)
- Pens/pencils

OPENING AND CLOSING PRAYERS

We recommend that as a parish family you begin and end your evening with a worship service or prayer. We have included a Small Compline service in Appendix A to reproduce and distribute for all to

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participate. If you choose a different service, make every effort to have the text available for everyone. For alternative prayer time, teach the families this beautiful psalm. It is important to take a few minutes as a group to review the meaning of this psalm so that all can be active participants when praying. Consult with your parish priest for guidance in this.

Return, we beseech You, O God of hosts; look down from heaven and see, and visit these vines and the vineyard which Your right hand has planted, and the branch that You made strong for Yourself. It is burned with fire, it is cut down; they perish at the rebuke of Your countenance. Let Your hand be upon the man of Your right hand, upon the son of man whom You made strong for Yourself. Then we will not turn back from You; revive us, and we will call upon Your name. Restore us, O Lord God of hosts; cause Your face to shine, and we shall be saved!

—Psalm 80:14–19

OPENING ACTIVITY: THE FAMILY TREE (15–20 minutes)

After the opening prayers, give each family a bag with materials and have them follow the instructions on the Family Time: Opening Activity handout. Begin the discussion when most of the families have completed the task.

DISCUSS (Look first to the children for answers and reflect back.)

- Can some of you share what you “grew” on your branches and why?
- What do branches need to grow? (*They need water, soil, food, sun, etc.*)
- Do branches exist by themselves? What connects them? (*The trunk connects them.*)
- In the Bible, Jesus says, “I am the **vine**, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me, you can do nothing” (John 15:5). What do you think He meant by this? (*Allow several people to answer before beginning the opening remarks.*)

OPENING REMARKS (Paraphrase in your own words.)

Very good answers! Before we move on, I want to make sure you remember what Jesus said. Let’s all read it together:

Write John 15:5 on a flip chart or project on the wall for all to see. Have everyone recite the passage in unison. If you like, have a quick contest to see who can recite it the loudest—the adults or the children.

Relationships—whether with family, friends, co-workers, or even people we just pass on the street—are connections we experience every day. These connections, big or small, impact who we are. Just as something physically healthy for us contributes to our physical well-being, our relationships as Orthodox Christians, must be spiritually healthy, contributing to our spiritual well-being.

The relationship we have with our family is one of the most critical in our lives. In a healthy family, the connections help all members develop. But even in the strongest of families, there are struggles to keep the connection with one another strong. Many

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circumstances cause us to get angry, feel hurt, not listen, and treat each other with less love and attention than we should.

You just finished decorating branches for your family tree. Our next step will be to connect the branches together to create a tree. Can anyone guess what is missing? (*After several responses continue.*) A tree trunk is missing. We need a trunk because it connects the branches and distributes food and nutrients from the roots. As Christians, we are connected to one another through Christ. (*Show large icon of Christ the True Vine.*) He is the trunk that connects us all and gives us the food and nutrients we need for survival. Our families must be connected to Christ to be connected to one another.

We connect with Christ at our baptism and continue to strengthen this connection through the sacraments and life in the Church. By establishing a lasting relationship with Christ, we live and bear fruit, becoming firmly rooted in the path toward salvation. On the other hand, if we are separated from Christ, we lose our true source of nourishment. This is what we will be exploring today—being the branches on the Vine of Christ. Before we move on, let's see who remembers what Jesus said. (*Say the following and allow participants to fill in the blanks.*)

"I am the vine, you are the _____. He who abides in Me and I in him, bears much _____; for without Me you can do _____."

BREAK-OUT SESSIONS (45–60 minutes)

Three age-appropriate break-out sessions are offered on the following pages. These may or may not work for your parish, depending on the number of families that participate. If you are not able to break into three groups, keep participants together and adapt one of the sessions to best meet your needs.

- Children's Break-out Session—Bearing Fruit (*pp. 39–42*)
- Teenagers' Break-out Session—Connecting to God (*pp. 43–46*)
- Adults' Break-out Session—Sacrifice and Love (*pp. 47–50*)

Transitioning smoothly from one activity to the next is critical when leading a session, especially for young children. For this reason, make sure to know exactly where each group is going for the break-out sessions and who is leading them. Give clear instructions and proper support so the lessons can begin promptly.

Please note that the children's and teenagers' groups will vary greatly in age, as well as in developmental and spiritual levels. If there are many children, it would be best to split the preschoolers through 2nd graders into one group and the 3rd through 6th graders into another. Likewise with the teenagers, split the junior high and high school students into two groups when appropriate. However the groups are arranged, make sure that all the young people are fully engaged in the lesson. For more specific information about the developmental needs of children and teenagers, see the *Guidelines* published by the Department of Youth and Young Adult Ministries of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America (www.youth.goarch.org). Above all, always be certain there is enough adult supervision to ensure that the young people will be safe and supported in their learning.

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CLOSING ACTIVITY (15–20 minutes)

Reassemble the participants back together as families. Give each family group a Family Time: Closing Activity handout. Have them follow the instructions on the handout, and when most families are done (they can continue at home if necessary) begin the wrap-up discussion.

DISCUSS (Look first to the children for answers and reflect back.)

- What did you learn today?
- What are you going to do as a family when you get home?
- Does anyone remember the passage about Jesus we learned earlier? (Repeat as a group.)

WRAP-UP (Paraphrase in your own words.)

Connections: we spend our whole life making connections, whether at home, school, work, church, or in the community. Our primary connection in life should be with Christ, the True Vine. As we learned, we strengthen our connection with Christ through prayer, the sacraments, and living a Christian life. In strengthening our relationship with Christ, we strengthen our relationships with one another by learning to live as He showed us on earth—through love and forgiveness. So as we look at the relationships in our own family, let us not forget our strength and foundation—our connection to the True Vine, Jesus Christ.

Today we constructed our individual family trees, but we also learned that we are part of another family—our spiritual family. As baptized Orthodox Christians, we are all one family in Christ. Our family doesn't stop with mom and dad or grandma and grandpa—our family is everyone in this room, everyone in this church, everyone in Orthodox Christian churches around the world. As we leave here tonight, place your extra branch on the large parish family tree and take with you the words of Christ, *“I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me, you can do nothing”* (John 15:5).

AS FAMILIES PREPARE TO LEAVE

- Remember to close with a short worship service or closing prayer.
- Don't forget to give families the *Family Night: Taking It Home* handout.
- Let them know when the next Family Night is scheduled.
- Enlist families to help you clean up (*rotate monthly*).
- Thank them sincerely for their attendance and participation.

OPTIONAL

During this session, families will be creating a parish family tree with those present at the gathering. Consider building on this session later in the month by having other members of the community add a branch to the parish tree. If you have the capability, you may consider adding pictures to the tree using a digital camera or asking everyone to bring their own photo.

BEARING FRUIT

CHILDREN'S BREAK-OUT SESSION

OPENING ACTIVITY: IN THE GARDEN

Break the children into small groups of 4–5. Give each group a large piece of butcher paper and markers or crayons. State the following in your own words:

We just learned about our connections to Jesus Christ, the True Vine. I want to talk about something else we mentioned: “bearing fruit.” Does this mean we should all start growing apples and oranges? No! “Bearing fruit” means living like Jesus and doing things that make us, and those around us, better Christians. With this in mind, you are going to draw a garden. Now, this won’t be like the garden in your backyard. It will be full of the fruits Jesus Christ wants us to grow in our lives. What are some of these fruits?

Allow the children to share some examples before proceeding.

Very good! Now we will proceed to our groups. Remember to work together as a group, as you will all present your gardens in a few minutes.

When sufficient time has passed, have each group share their gardens.

STATE *(Paraphrase in your own words.)*

These are all wonderful gardens! Remember that gardens require hard work and patience—a lot of it—before they start bearing fruit. What do gardens need to grow? *Allow for several answers and supplement with the following:*

Most importantly, there has to be enough water, sun, and soil for a garden to grow. Once the plants begin to grow, we also must constantly pick out the weeds to keep them healthy. If we are to “bear fruit” in our lives, what are some things we can do? *Allow for several answers and supplement with the following:*

In our lives, we must make sure to be spiritually fed (just like the plants need the water, sun, and soil) with all that the church provides to help us grow. We must also pluck out the sin from our lives so that it doesn’t grow and choke us like the weeds in a garden. This will allow us to “bear fruit” and live as Jesus instructed, growing as Christians.

BIBLE PASSAGE: LUKE 8:5–8

Let’s see what we can find in the Bible about growing in Christ. Today we are going to read a parable from the Gospel of St. Luke. Parables are short stories that Jesus used to explain the faith to His followers.

A sower went out to sow his seed. And as he sowed, some fell by the wayside; and it was trampled down, and the birds of the air devoured it. Some fell on rock; and as soon as it sprang up, it withered away because it lacked moisture. And some fell among thorns, and the thorns sprang up with it and choked it. But others fell on good ground, sprang up, and yielded a crop a hundredfold. When He had said these things He cried, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear!”

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DISCUSS (*Allow all to share and reflect back.*)

- What does this passage tell us?
- What do you think it means?

BIBLE PASSAGE: LUKE 8:11–15

Those are some excellent thoughts! Actually, if we keep reading Jesus told us exactly what this parable means:

Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. Those by the wayside are the ones who hear; then the devil comes and takes away the word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved. But the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no root, who believe for a while and in time of temptation fall away. Now the ones that fell among thorns are those who, when they have heard, go out and are choked with cares, riches, and pleasures of life, and bring no fruit to maturity. But the ones that fell on the good ground are those who, having heard the word with a noble and good heart, keep it and bear fruit with patience.

DISCUSS (*Allow all to share and reflect back.*)

- Now, what does this parable mean?
- What was the seed? (*The Word of God was the seed.*)
- Who was the sower? (*Jesus was the sower.*)
- How should we tend to our gardens?

WRAP-UP (*Paraphrase in your own words.*)

This parable comes alive in the Holy Land where the soil is mixed with tons and tons of small rocks. It's almost as if there is half soil and half rocks throughout the entire land. A sower would definitely find a great deal of his seeds being sown on rocks. It would be impossible to sow them only on the soil due to the many rocks found in the earth. This parable teaches us that Jesus is the sower, the seed is the Word of God, and we are the ground. We must always remember to tend to our soil, preparing it to receive the word of God. By doing this, we will receive nourishment by connecting our life to Jesus, growing and bearing fruit as Christians.

OPTIONAL MUSIC: FRUITS OF THE SPIRIT BY GIGI SHADID

See pages 41–42 for lyrics and hand motions. Consider writing the lyrics on a large piece of paper for all to see and follow along.

Close with the following prayer: (teach children how to do a full or half prostration at the end of each line)

Come, let us worship God, our King, and bow down before Him.

Come, let us worship Christ our King and God, and bow down before Him.

Come, let us worship Christ, truly our King and God, and bow down before Him.

FRUITS OF THE SPIRIT BY GIGI SHADID

I am the Vine, *I am the Vine,*
You are My branches,
Abide in Me, *abide in Me,*
Live in my mansions.

I'll give you fruit, *I'll give you fruit,*
Hold on to Me
And you will see, *and you will see,*
Love, joy, and peace.

I am the Vine, *I am the Vine,*
You are My branches,
Abide in Me, *abide in Me,*
Live in My mansions.

Patience and faith, *patience and faith,*
More self-control
Kind, good, and gentle,
Fruits for the soul.

I am the Vine, *I am the Vine,*
You are My branches,
Abide in Me, *Abide in Me,*
Live in My mansions.

I'll give you fruit, *I'll give you fruit,*
Hold on to Me
And you will see, *and you will see,*
Love, joy, and peace.

Patience and faith, *patience and faith,*
More self-control
Kind, good, and gentle,
Fruits for the soul.

I am the Vine, *I am the Vine,*
You are My branches,
Abide in Me, *Abide in Me,*
Live in My mansions.

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FRUITS OF THE SPIRIT BY GIGI SHADID

(hand motions in parentheses)

I am the Vine *(left hand up)*, **I *am the Vine*** *(right hand up)*,
You are My branches *(hands wiggle down back to your sides)*,
Abide in Me, *abide in Me* *(point both thumbs to your chest, first the left and then the right)*,
Live in My mansions *(put both hands over your head like a house and slightly move from side to side)*.

I'll give you fruit, I'll give you fruit *(pretend you are picking fruit and putting it in a basket)*,
Hold on to Me *(link arms with the person next to you)*,
And you will see, *and you will see* *(pretend to look into the horizon, putting your right hand over your eyebrows, then your left)*,
Love, joy, and peace *(cross your arms and move from side to side)*.

I am the Vine *(left hand up)*, **I *am the Vine*** *(right hand up)*,
You are My branches *(hands wiggle down back to your sides)*,
Abide in Me, *abide in Me* *(point both thumbs to your chest, first the left and then the right)*,
Live in My mansions *(put both hands over your head like a house and slightly move from side to side)*.

Patience and faith, *patience and faith* *(make praying hands)*,
More self-control *(wag your finger and tap one toe)*,
Kind, good, and gentle *(with your left hand gently wipe your right arm from the shoulder to the fingertip, then do the right hand to the left shoulder, left hand again)*,
Fruits for the soul *(clasp both hands, elbows out, then press your hands to and from your chest, like a heart beat)*.

I am the Vine *(left hand up)*, **I *am the Vine*** *(right hand up)*,
You are My branches *(hands wiggle down back to your sides)*,
Abide in Me, *abide in Me* *(point both thumbs to your chest, first the left and then the right)*,
Live in My mansions *(put both hands over your head like a house and slightly move from side to side)*.

I'll give you fruit, I'll give you fruit *(pretend you are picking fruit and putting it in a basket)*,
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I am the Vine *(left hand up)*, **I *am the Vine*** *(right hand up)*,
You are My branches *(hands wiggle down back to your sides)*,
Abide in Me, *abide in Me* *(point both thumbs to your chest, first the left and then the right)*,
Live in My mansions *(put both hands over your head like a house and slightly move from side to side)*.

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www.gsquaredproductions.com

CONNECTING TO JESUS

TEENAGERS' BREAK-OUT SESSION

OPENING ACTIVITY: CONNECTIONS

Pass out a sheet of construction paper, markers, and the Our Connections handout to each teenager and state the following in your own words:

Today, we learned how we are all connected through Christ, the True Vine. Take the next five minutes to think about the people you encountered throughout the day. Draw a circle in the center of your construction paper—this represents you. For each person you interacted with today—whether you spent an hour with them, or just said “excuse me” in the hall at school—write their name and draw a connection line. If the interaction was positive, put a plus sign next to their name. Use a minus sign next to their name to indicate a negative interaction. If you had a neutral interaction, put a zero next to their name. When you finish, answer the questions on the handout.

DISCUSS (*Allow all to share and reflect back.*)

- How many people did you interact with today?
- How many were significant interactions?
 - How many were positive? How many were negative? How many were neutral?
- How many were small interactions?
 - How many were positive? How many were negative? How many were neutral?
- Did any of your negative interactions with people cause you to be more negative with someone else later in the day?
- Did any of your positive interactions with people cause you to be more positive with someone else later in the day?

BIBLE READING: JEREMIAH 50:4–5

“In those days and in that time,” says the Lord, “the children of Israel shall come, they and the children of Judah together; with continual weeping they shall come, and seek the Lord their God. They shall ask the way to Zion, with their faces toward it, saying, ‘Come and let us join ourselves to the Lord in a perpetual covenant that will not be forgotten.’”

DISCUSS (*Allow all to share and reflect back.*)

- What does it mean to join ourselves to the Lord?
- What is a “perpetual covenant that will not be forgotten”?
- If we “join ourselves to the Lord,” how will it affect our connections with others?

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

We are called to join ourselves to the Lord each and every day. If Christ were standing next to us at every moment, how would we treat others throughout the day? We should constantly strive to do His will, asking for His help, and living as if He is always with us. There is a beautiful and relevant prayer written by Metropolitan Philaret of Moscow (a

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saint of our church) that asks for God’s help and strength during the day. Listen carefully as you will discuss the prayer in small groups.

Lord, grant me to greet the coming day in peace. Help me in all things to rely upon Your holy will. In every hour of the day, reveal Your will to me. Bless my dealings with all who surround me. Teach me to treat all that comes to me throughout the day with peace of soul and with firm conviction that Your will governs all. In all my deeds and words, guide my thoughts and feelings. In unforeseen events, let me not forget that all things are under Your care. Teach me to act firmly and wisely, without embittering and embarrassing others. Give me the strength to bear the fatigue of the coming day with all that it shall bring. Direct my will, teach me to pray, pray Yourself in me. Amen.

—Prayer of Metropolitan Philaret of Moscow

You will have 10 minutes to discuss the prayer in small groups. Be prepared to share your answers with the whole group.

Break the teenagers into groups of 4–5 people and give them the handout and pencils. After ten minutes have passed, bring the group together to discuss the prayer.

WRAP-UP (*Paraphrase in your own words.*)

As Christians, we must remember that we are connected through Christ, and our interactions with others should reflect this. A person was quoted as saying, “If it were not for the Christians I have met, I, too, would be a Christian.” In other words, they believed in the message of the Gospel, but unfortunately they encountered so many Christians living contrary to its teachings that they didn’t want any part of it. If Christ is the True Vine, then we are His branches and must choose to live and “bear fruit” as Christ instructed. We must always ask Christ to bless and guide us in this task. Before we close with a prayer, take five minutes to look back at your interactions with others and consider ways you could make them more Christ-centered.

Close with the following prayer:

Lord, grant me to greet the coming day in peace. Help me in all things to rely upon Your holy will. In every hour of the day, reveal Your will to me. Bless my dealings with all who surround me. Teach me to treat all that comes to me throughout the day with peace of soul and with firm conviction that Your will governs all. In all my deeds and words, guide my thoughts and feelings. In unforeseen events, let me not forget that all things are under Your care. Teach me to act firmly and wisely, without embittering and embarrassing others. Give me the strength to bear the fatigue of the coming day with all that it shall bring. Direct my will, teach me to pray, pray Yourself in me. Amen.

—Prayer of Metropolitan Philaret of Moscow

CONNECTING TO JESUS

OUR CONNECTIONS

Today, we learned how we are all connected through Christ, the True Vine. Take the next five minutes to think about the people you encountered throughout the day. Draw a circle in the center of your construction paper—this represents you. For each person you interacted with today—whether you spent an hour with them, or just said “excuse me” in the hall at school—write their name and draw a connection line. If the interaction was positive, put a plus sign next to their name. Use a minus sign next to their name to indicate a negative interaction. If you had a neutral interaction, put a zero next to their name. When you finish, answer the questions on the handout

How many people did you interact with today?

How many were significant interactions?

Of these significant interactions ...

- how many were positive?
- how many were negative?
- how many were neutral?

How many were small interactions?

Of these small interactions ...

- how many were positive?
- how many were negative?
- how many were neutral?

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SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

Read each line of the prayer and discuss practical ways you could apply each to your daily life.

PRAYER OF METROPOLITAN PHILARET OF MOSCOW

Lord, grant me to greet the coming day in peace. Help me in all things to rely upon Your holy will. In every hour of the day, reveal Your will to me.

Bless my dealings with all who surround me. Teach me to treat all that comes to me throughout the day with peace of soul and with firm conviction that Your will governs all.

In all my deeds and words, guide my thoughts and feelings. In unforeseen events, let me not forget that all things are under Your care.

Teach me to act firmly and wisely, without embittering and embarrassing others.

Give me the strength to bear the fatigue of the coming day with all that it shall bring. Direct my will, teach me to pray, pray Yourself in me. Amen.

How are we attempting to join ourselves to God when we pray this prayer?

SACRIFICE AND LOVE

ADULTS' BREAK-OUT SESSION

OPENING ACTIVITY: WORD ASSOCIATION

Today we talked about the importance of Christ, the True Vine, in our relationships with others. Our discussion is going to begin with a couple word associations. Write down five words or phrases that come to mind when you think of the word “sacrifice.”

Allow participants a minute to write down their words and proceed with the following:

Now, consider the word “love.” Write down five words or phrases that come to mind when you think of “love.”

Allow participants a minute to write down their words before proceeding to the discussion.

DISCUSS (*Allow all to share and reflect back.*)

- What were some of the words or phrases you associated with sacrifice?
- What were some of the words or phrases you associated with love?
- Were any of the words the same?

STATE (*Paraphrase in your own words.*)

To love is the greatest of all commandments given to us by Christ. Unfortunately, in today's society the word's true meaning is warped and greatly misunderstood. Love is not temporary. It is everlasting. Love does not fulfill selfish desires. It is giving and sacrifices. God is love. In knowing this, we recognize that love is holy and sacred. Let's read and discuss a few Bible passages on sacrifice and love to help us learn more about these virtues.

BIBLE PASSAGE: JOHN 3:16

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.

DISCUSS (*Allow all to share and reflect back.*)

- What is Jesus trying to tell us in this passage?
- This passage has been called the essence of the Gospel. Why?
- What does this passage mean for our lives? How does this passage affect our everyday lives?

BIBLE PASSAGE: JOHN 15:12–13

This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends.

DISCUSS (*Allow all to share and reflect back.*)

- What is Jesus trying to tell us in this passage?
- What are some ways we “lay down” our lives for our friends?

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- What does this passage mean for our lives? How does this passage affect our everyday lives?

BIBLE PASSAGE: MATTHEW 22:36–40

“Teacher, what is the great commandment in the law?” Jesus said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”

DISCUSS (*Allow all to share and reflect back.*)

- What is Jesus trying to tell us in this passage?
- Who do we consider our “neighbor”? Are there times we conveniently leave people off this list?
- What does it mean for our lives? How does this passage affect our everyday lives?

STATE (*Paraphrase in your own words.*)

Christ sacrifices Himself because of His tremendous love for us. We are called to do the same, not only for Him but also our neighbor. A neighbor is not just the person next door but anyone we interact with. How do we do this? How can we show Christ’s love to everyone we encounter on a daily basis? Break into small groups to look more closely at what love is. Use the handout to guide your discussion of I Corinthians 13:4–8.

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

Break participants into groups of 4–5 people. Give each group a Small Group Discussion handout and a pen. Allow 10 minutes for discussion and bring everyone back to share.

WRAP-UP (*Paraphrase in your own words.*)

As we have learned, love and sacrifice go hand-in-hand. Through truly loving others, we sacrifice our own will and live for God. When we do this, we connect ourselves to Christ, the True Vine, and cannot be separated from Him—for the bonds of love are stronger than anything Satan has to detour our path. If we abide in love, we abide in God as part of the branches on His vine—bearing much fruit for the Kingdom to come. Take the next five minutes in silence to reflect on some passages about love on the back of your handout. They are quotes from a remarkable Orthodox nun, Mother Gavrilia, who lived her life to love others.

After five minutes have passed, close with the following prayer:

Lord, grant me to greet the coming day in peace. Help me in all things to rely upon Your holy will. In every hour of the day, reveal Your will to me. Bless my dealings with all who surround me. Teach me to treat all that comes to me throughout the day with peace of soul and with firm conviction that Your will governs all. In all my deeds and words, guide my thoughts and feelings. In unforeseen events, let me not forget that all things are under Your care. Teach me to act firmly and wisely, without embittering and embarrassing others. Give me the strength to bear the fatigue

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of the coming day with all that it shall bring. Direct my will,
teach me to pray, pray Yourself in me. Amen.
—Prayer of Metropolitan Philaret of Moscow

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LOVE

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

LOVE SUFFERS LONG AND IS KIND; LOVE DOES NOT ENVY; LOVE DOES NOT PARADE ITSELF, IS NOT PUFFED UP;

- How does love suffer long and be kind?
- How does love not envy, parade itself, or puff up?
- Keeping these definitions of love in mind, how can we love both our family and our neighbor?
- What makes this difficult?

**DOES NOT BEHAVE RUDELY,
DOES NOT SEEK ITS OWN,
IS NOT PROVOKED, THINKS NO EVIL,
DOES NOT REJOICE IN INIQUITY BUT REJOICES IN TRUTH;**

- How does love not behave rudely or seek its own?
- How does love not become provoked or think evil?
- How does love not rejoice in iniquity but rejoices in truth?
- Keeping these definitions of love in mind, how can we love both our family and our neighbor?
- What makes this difficult?

**BEARS ALL THINGS, BELIEVES ALL THINGS,
HOPES ALL THINGS, ENDURES ALL THINGS.
LOVE NEVER FAILS.**

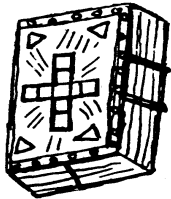
- How does love bear all things?
- How does love believe all things?
- How does love hope all things?
- How does love endure all things?
- How does it never fail?
- Keeping these definitions of love in mind, how can we love both our family and our neighbor?
- What makes this difficult?

FAMILY NIGHT: TAKING IT HOME

"I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing." —John 15:5

PRAY TOGETHER

Return, we beseech You, O God of hosts; look down from heaven and see, and visit these vines and the vineyard which Your right hand has planted, and the branch that You made strong for Yourself. It is burned with fire, it is cut down; they perish at the rebuke of Your countenance. Let Your hands be upon the man of Your right hand, Upon the son of man whom You made strong for Yourself. Then we will not turn back from You; revive us, and we will call upon Your name. Restore us, O Lord God of hosts; cause Your face to shine, and we shall be saved!
— Psalm 80:14-19



MORE ON THE VINE

... the vine shall give its fruit ...	Zechariah 8:12
You have brought a vine out of Egypt ...	Psalm 80:8
... of this fruit of the vine ...	Matthew 26:29

Want to find more?

Grab your Bible and concordance and look up the word "vine" or anything else you want to look for.

FEATURED ARTICLE: PUTTING CHRIST BACK INTO "CHRIST"MAS BY DORIA SAROS

You mean it's not "X-mas" or "gift-mas" or "rush-around-and-go-crazy-mas?" Wow, you could have fooled me! Every year I start the Christmas countdown with the best intentions, and each year I find it more and more difficult to keep my focus on the reason for the season—Christ.

As a forty-something youth minister and step-mother of three, I am especially concerned about my own behavior during the Christmas season. According to *Group* magazine, parents are the unequivocal single most important influence on their child's spiritual growth. If I struggle to keep my focus on Christ during the madness of the shopping season, what am I demonstrating to my own children?

The world is a very seductive place in which commercial marketing is frequently challenging our God-given spiritual discernment. How many times have we found ourselves so consumed by the material aspect of gift-giving that we completely lose focus of the Nativity and our greatest gift, the newborn Jesus?

We need to change our worldly thinking to a more Christian attitude of grati-

tude. For example, in this country it is traditional to celebrate birthdays by showering the birthday boy or girl with accolades and gifts. So why don't we apply that same tradition for our Lord and Savior? After all, whose birthday is it anyway?!

So, what are we going to give Jesus for His birthday this year?

I'm not saying that we should stop exchanging gifts. What I am suggesting is that we remember Jesus above all on our Christmas lists. Obviously, the gifts we give to Christ deserve greater effort than the gifts we give to one another. Therefore, our "shopping" for Jesus will be more creative than in the usual sense. But here is a tremendous opportunity for us to work with our children in expressing our love for God with a truly giving heart.

Here are some gift suggestions for our Lord and Savior: How about giving a donation to a local food shelf in someone's name for Christmas (adult friends love this)? How about taking the money that we save on groceries during our fasting and donating it to a food shelf? How about making homemade cards or cookies for someone who is sick or shut in? How about inviting someone into our



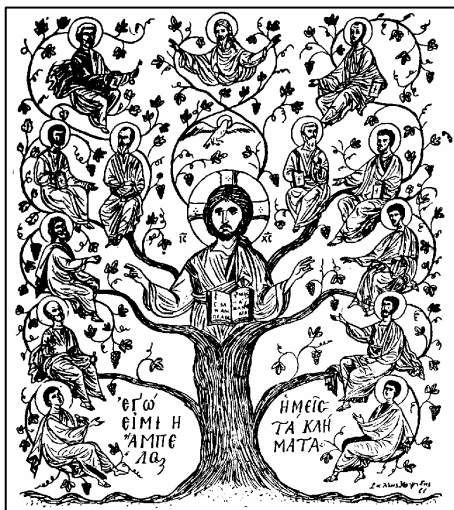
home for the holiday meal who doesn't have family nearby? How about giving an elderly member of the community a ride to and from church for Christmas services? How about dedicating more of our prayers to being thankful? How about having the courage to declare "Merry Christmas" or "Christ is born," instead of the more 'politically correct' "Happy holidays."

These are just a few ways to give the gift of glory to Jesus Christ. By keeping our perspective on who Christmas is all about, we help put the holiness back in holiday. God willing, with each act of kindness we will help spread the news to our children and to our community,

**Christ is born!
Glorify Him!**

—Article taken from the *Youth Worker Pulse* email ministry. For further information, visit www.youth.goarch.org.

FAMILY ACTIVITY: MAKING A FAMILY TREE



Now that you have constructed a family tree, consider making a family tree icon when you go home. You don't need to be an amazing artist to do this—anyone can assemble it. Make sure everyone participates and remains prayerful in the process. Here are some suggestions for getting started:

- Get a precut piece of wood to mount the icons on.
 - Stain or paint it to the desired color.
 - Sketch a tree and paint it.
 - Find a small paper icon of Christ.*
 - Use Mod Podge to affix the icon of Christ to the trunk.
 - Find a small paper icon of each family member's patron saint.*
- Affix each icon with the Mod Podge to a branch.
 - Decorate the tree by painting fruit, flowers, and leaves.
 - Put a final coat of a protective sealant (*available at most arts and craft supply stores*).
 - Give the icon to your priest for blessing.

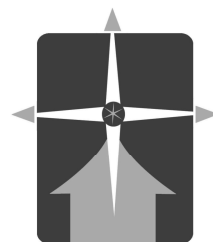
*To obtain icons for this project, consider scanning icons you already have. If this is not possible, contact Holy Transfiguration Monastery in Brookline, Massachusetts (www.thehtm.org) to order small paper icons.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

- *The Winter Pascha* by Thomas Hopko, published by St. Vladimir's Seminary Press (www.svspress.com).
- *Daily Meditations and Prayers for the Christmas Advent Fast and Epiphany* by Presbytera Emily Harakas and Fr. Anthony Coniaris, published by Light and Life Publishing (www.light-n-life.com).
- *Making an Orthodox Family Advent Calendar* (www.phyllisonest.com).

FAMILY CHALLENGE

Your challenge this month is to connect with Christ by connecting with others. Check with your parish priest to find out if there is someone that could use some contact—a college student from out of town, an elderly person, a new family in town, etc. Have fun and connect!



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