

*inspire.*

A CURRICULUM TO **INSPIRE** CHURCHES  
TO REACH, SERVE, AND INCLUDE  
PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

# SUGGESTED USE

*The Inspire curriculum is intended to be used by small groups over the course of 7 weeks. This is a curriculum that can be utilized as a church wide curriculum or undertaken by a single small group of people within a congregation. Accessible formats (large print and audio versions) are also available - see [thebanquetnetwork.com](http://thebanquetnetwork.com) or contact [info@thebanquetnetwork.com](mailto:info@thebanquetnetwork.com) for these files. We pray God uses this curriculum to empower your church to reach, serve, and include people with disabilities.*

**Note:** This curriculum was co-authored by an individual living with a disability, but has been written primarily with a non-disabled audience in mind. Unfortunately, most churches do not have many people who have disabilities in them. In order to draw more people with disabilities into churches, the general membership of churches must be inspired and equipped for disability-inclusion (a main hope of this curriculum). Nonetheless, we do hope that people with disabilities will participate in the Inspire curriculum both for their own edification and the edification of others.

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# JESUS AND DISABILITY

## INTRODUCTION

Though there are many things we probably won't know about Jesus' thoughts and opinions until we meet him in eternity, one thing we can be sure of was that he was passionate about people with disabilities. The gospels narrate portions and highlights of our Lord's ministry on earth, giving us windows into His primary cares and concerns. Though these gospel accounts are not exhaustive summaries of all Jesus did or said, there are several plain facts that emerge from these records about Jesus and how he related to people with disabilities:

1. Jesus spent an overwhelming amount of time speaking to, interacting with, and ministering to people with disabilities
2. Jesus intentionally sought out people with disabilities and cared for them
3. Jesus loved, welcomed, and included people with disabilities in His life and ministry in a way that was radically confounding to the culture around Him
4. Jesus' interaction with people who had disabilities was an important aspect of His identity that the evangelists, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, repeatedly include stories of His interactions with people who had disabilities in their gospels

This week we deal with the reality that if we want to be like Jesus, have a ministry like His, and be a part of a church that looks like Him, then we must have a unique love for people with disabilities. And beyond that, there is a good chance that we need to spend focused time reaching people who have disabilities with the gospel, serving them, and including them in our lives and churches. All Christians are called to value inclusion of people with disabilities in the church, but some—if not many—Christians should have a special missional focus towards this population. Just as Paul was primarily called to the Gentiles and Peter primarily called to the Jews, God often leads individuals to focus on extending the love of Christ to specific populations. Not everyone will be a missionary to people with disabilities, but if we are truly patterning our lives and churches after Jesus, then many people should have a focus on this population. Christians of all kinds should be more welcoming and loving towards individuals and families affected by disability.

# JESUS AND DISABILITY

## READ JOHN 5:1-8

What do you think it was like at the pool of Bethesda -- an identifiable location that was notorious for hosting "a great number of disabled people"?

What does it say about Jesus as He enters into the pool of Bethesda, rather than passing by, on His way to the festival?

## READ MATTHEW 11:1-4

What is unique or surprising about Jesus' ministry report? How is it different than our church's / your ministry report?

How does Jesus' engagement with people who have disabilities help to identify Him as the Messiah?

# JESUS AND DISABILITY 2

## INTRODUCTION

This week we continue our investigation of how Jesus related to people with disabilities by focusing on two additional realities that we glean from Scripture.

**One, people were always bringing people with disabilities to Jesus.** It was known that if someone had a disability the best thing that could happen to them was to get connected with Jesus. Even apparent non-believers were aware of this fact and took radical steps to seek out Jesus' healing presence. The implications of this for ourselves and our church are significant. Do people bring the sick and suffering to us? If not, why not? Do people with disabilities find us to be a caring, refreshing, and healing presence? If not, why not? In most places, churches are not known for their accessibility or their proactive steps towards inclusion. And this is not just true physically; many churches are emotionally and relationally inaccessible for individuals and families affected by disability. These realities need to change and will only change by a diligent emulation of our Savior.

**Two, Jesus demonstrated a remarkable thoughtfulness toward people who had disabilities and extended holistic care toward them.** He did not reduce people's suffering to their disability itself, but acknowledged the impact of disability on other sectors of their life. People who have disabilities need spiritual and emotional healing just as much as they need physical or mental healing. In order to model our care after Jesus, we must learn to engage the whole person. Disability is often chronic and is something that can make the years seem "long" (see Luke 13:10-16). This makes it essential for us to understand the story of someone and his or her disability so that we can appreciate the endurance that has been required and gain an awareness of how the effects of disability has pervaded other aspects of his or her life. And finally, Jesus helps us to see that disability also impacts those closest to people with disabilities—family and friends—in profound ways. Our ministry must touch families too; many of whom are exhausted and burdened alongside the ones they love that are impacted by disability.

# JESUS AND DISABILITY 2

## **READ MATTHEW 15:29-31**

"Great crowds" bring people with disabilities to Jesus. What are the implications of that for you? And for our church?

## **READ LUKE 18:35-43**

How did Jesus' disciples relate to the blind man? How did Jesus relate to him?

## **READ MARK 9:14-27**

How do you think the boy's father felt when he heard Jesus' question in verse 21?

Tell us a time someone holistically cared for you in your suffering.

# DISABILITY AND THE GOSPEL

## INTRODUCTION

This week we examine what the gospel tells us about disability. Broadly defined, we can refer to "the gospel" as the good news about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and the implications of that for all people and all of creation. A beautiful exposition of these implications is expressed in Ephesians 2,

*"As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."* **Ephesians 2:1-10, NIV**

The nature of the Christian gospel runs contrary to the flesh and the world which aggrandize performance and ability. Believing in the gospel requires all people to acknowledge their need, dependence, and spiritual "disability" before God. When Christians confess their sins and believe in Christ they simultaneously recognize their bankruptcy before God and inability to perform the righteousness that they ought. The gospel also assures us that God loves us in our weaknesses and is glorified in them. And the climactic gospel event—the crucifixion--involved Christ taking on disability so that we may be healed. Jesus was crippled by the weight of the cross on His tortured body, He was paralyzed by the nails of the crucifiers, He was muted by the crowds cries of, "Crucify him!" and He suffered all of this brutal death for our sins.

# DISABILITY AND THE GOSPEL

## READ LUKE 23:13-32

Allow yourself to freshly reflect on Christ's crucifixion. What is your first reaction to these verses?

List all the forms of disability you can see Jesus enduring in this text.

## READ 2 CORINTHIANS 12:7b-10

How does the gospel reframe our weaknesses?

What do you think about the fact that God didn't take away Paul's thorn?



# DISABILITY AND THE CHURCH

## INTRODUCTION

A core conviction of The Banquet Network is that without individuals and families affected by disability in the church, the church itself is disabled. Paul's metaphor of the body of Christ explains the vital importance of every Christian no matter how things may "seem." This week we explore the necessity of having people with disabilities in the church and the unique gifts they offer to others. At times, disability ministry may only involve the able serving the disabled. But this dynamic is not a full realization of God's vision for the church. The biblical model of the church is one of a rich mutual discipleship in which all serve all. Here we will share a brief story from a Banquet Network church that exemplifies this reality:

"There is a young man that is a friend of mine who has autism. He had struggled for many years to find a job and despite receiving many rejections he persevered with an amazing assurance that God would provide him a job. On one occasion, we went together for him to put in an application for a job as a dishwasher at a local bakery. Despite my certain doubts, he was offered the job and awarded an opportunity. After several weeks on the job I asked him how it was going and he responded, 'Amazing! I just pray that I can keep this job forever. And that I can be the best dishwasher there has ever been.' His gratefulness was astounding. I'm not sure I've ever seen a stronger example of faith, perseverance, and contentment. It's one thing to talk about contentment and it's another to have a model of incredible faithfulness right before you. My friend's witness, amidst the challenges of autism, had a power and credibility that only he could provide."

Stories like this abound. People with disabilities have immeasurable contributions to make to the church and others have an immense need for their gifts. We long to see more people who have disabilities empowered to shape and disciple the church through their gifts and unique witness to Christian discipleship. Before we can get there, the Church must engage in its mission to reach this under-reached people group with the hope of the gospel.

*"Without people with disabilities, the church itself is disabled."*

# DISABILITY AND THE CHURCH

## READ MATTHEW 28:18-20

Have you considered people with disabilities as one of the nations or people groups intended in this text? Why or why not?

## READ 1 CORINTHIANS 12:12-26

What do you think Paul means when he says "those parts of the body that seem weaker are indispensable?"

Do you feel like our church recognizes the need we have for people with disabilities and the unique gifts they possess? How could we do a better job at this?

## READ 1 CORINTHIANS 9:19-23

What ideas do you have about how obedience to these verses could look in efforts to reach people who have disabilities?

## SOME STATISTICS:

- The Lausanne Convention estimates that only 5% of people with disabilities will ever hear the gospel in an effective manner. **Do we care about the largest under-reached people group in the world?**
- 1/3 of families affected by disability have been asked to leave a church. **What do we value more: a disruption free church service or all kinds of people worshipping Jesus?**
- Of the families that do attend a church, 86.5% report that their church needs more training and education regarding disability. **Are we willing to listen and learn?**
- 1/5 Americans have a disability. **Do our churches reflect these numbers?**

# DISABILITY AND RELATIONSHIPS

## INTRODUCTION

Many pastors first reaction to the topic of disability inclusion is to lament the enormous need and cost of making their church building more physically accessible. Though buildings are important, they are a secondary concern to what matters most: the existence of real relationships with people who have disabilities. When we know people and care for them, the way we think about barriers—physical and otherwise—is radically transformed. Mark 2 contains a powerful example of this, as the friends of the man who was paralyzed overcome inaccessibility and demonstrate a beautiful determination to get their friend to Jesus.

*"A few days later, when Jesus again entered Capernaum, the people heard that he had come home. They gathered in such large numbers that there was no room left, not even outside the door, and he preached the word to them. Some men came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus by digging through it and then lowered the mat the man was lying on." Mark 2:1-4, NIV*

The answer to disability inclusion is not simply accessible building plans or adaptive technologies; the answer must include meaningful relationships. In relationship, we develop compassion and understanding for the stories of people who have disabilities; in relationship, we discover the solidarity we share with people who have disabilities as image bearers of God; in relationship, we experience the indispensable gifts of people with disabilities. In relationships, we find the motivation to understand and overcome the barriers that keep people from worshipping Jesus. Our greatest need is for love and a willingness to foster friendship. This week's curriculum seeks to both free us from some of our excuses and perceived barriers to disability ministry and empower us to take up the one most important task in this mission: getting to know people who have disabilities.

# DISABILITY AND RELATIONSHIPS

## READ MARK 2:1-12

Why do you think the man's friends were determined to make a way?

What would it take for you to do something like this for someone else?

## READ 2 SAMUEL 9

How did the world encourage Mephibosheth to think of himself?

How did David encourage the world to think of Mephibosheth?

How was the relationship between David and Mephibosheth transformative for them and those around them?

# DISABILITY AND STRUCTURES

## INTRODUCTION

Though we know that without relationships and love no progress will be made in ministry with people who have disabilities, there is great value in developing formal structures for disability ministry. We long to see more churches taking systematic approaches to reaching, serving, and including people who have disabilities. We dream of more churches with disability point persons and step-by-step processes for integrating individuals and families affected by disability into the full body life of the church. We dream of churches with training pipelines that equip and commission people to serve as missionaries to people who have disabilities. We rejoice over carpool plans and contact lists that ensure people with disabilities are able to get to worship. Developing structures is a good way to ensure that the most important things happen, and happen well. In the early church, there was a certain population being neglected—the Hebrew widows—and the church established a structure to make sure this neglect ceased,

*"In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word." This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith." Acts 6:1-7, NIV*

This was certainly a noble response on the part of the early church. Scripture contains many other examples in which God's people rightly create and follow systems for ministry. This week, we consider the value of formal structures for disability ministry and imagine what systems and structures could be developed in our church context.

# DISABILITY AND STRUCTURES

## READ LEVITICUS 19:14

What does it say about humanity and the need for this law? What does it say about God and his institution of this law?

## READ 1 TIMOTHY 5:9-14

Does the existence of a list of widows in the church in Ephesus surprise you? How do you imagine that the list in Ephesus began?

## READ ACTS 6:1-7

What can we learn from the way the Twelve handled the neglect in the daily food distribution?

What ideas do you have for systems and structures to reach, serve, and include people who have disabilities in your church and community?

# DISABILITY AND THE CHURCH 2

## INTRODUCTION

Trying to reach, serve, and include people who have disabilities is a gigantic task. Not only is the global population of people with disabilities massive, but the disparity between one type of disability and another is also significant. Blindness, deafness, and autism all come with unique sets of needs for inclusion and contextualization. The immensity of the task makes the mission of ministering to the disability population more than what a single local church could handle on its own. Churches need other churches in order to do this well. Because of this conviction, The Banquet Network works primarily on the church level; connecting churches with other churches who have experience or expertise in the area of another church's need. For instance, when a church receives an influx of people with hearing disabilities we connect them with another church who has been doing ministry to deaf populations for several years. Or when one of our churches decides to do a "parents night out" they borrow parental agreement documents and volunteer checklists from another church. These kind of partnerships are essential. Most churches don't have the time, capacity, or resources to reinvent the wheel every time they encounter a new type of disability.

This week we look at some examples of how the early church's mutual cooperation strengthened and sustained their mission. We will also consider what sort of ecclesial cooperation could help us to carry out the mission of reaching, serving, and including individuals and families affected by disability today. The early Christian churches may have had slim economic and political resources, but they had an impressive willingness to love, share, and sacrifice for the sake of advancing the gospel amongst both their personal congregation and congregations of Christians in other areas.

# DISABILITY AND THE CHURCH 2

## READ ACTS 11:19-30

Note all the ways you see cooperation and sharing of gifts between these churches.

How do you feel about this? How did this cooperation assist the Church's mission?

## READ 2 CORINTHIANS 8:1-6

How does Paul use the example of one church to encourage obedience in other churches?

Does your church have a spirit of humility and willingness to learn from other churches? How could you grow in this area?



# MOVING FORWARD

## INTRODUCTION

In the final session of this curriculum we take a moment to sit back and reflect on what God has said and invited us to do in response to the past 6 weeks of our study and discussion. Scripture promises blessing for those who hear, obey, and warns against those who accumulate knowledge without translating it into loving action. We will use the banquet parables of Luke 14 (which served as inspiration for the name "The Banquet Network") as orienting passages for our consideration of what is next for each of us and our faith community. For some, this experience will have simply led to a growth in awareness of disability and an increased appreciation or value for individuals and families affected by disability in the Church and story of God. For others, this curriculum will have drawn you into a desire to serve in disability ministry in some capacity. And maybe even for a few, you will have discerned a missional calling to people who have disabilities as a result of this study. Whatever it is, we want to take time to sketch out (that means actually write it down or record it in some fashion) as a group what these seven weeks have meant for us personally and what they mean for our church.

# Moving Forward

## READ LUKE 14:1-14

How do you react to Jesus's poignant words in these passages? How do you envision our church living out these verses?

How do you read these verses differently as a result of this curriculum?

How have these last 6 weeks impacted your heart?

As a result of this curriculum what do you desire to do or feel that you and our church should do in response?

What fears and doubts do you have about taking a step forward into greater engagement in ministry to people with disabilities?

# MOVING FORWARD

## CONCLUSION

The Banquet Network encourages you to follow up with us and let us know your thoughts or plans on how you will engage disability ministry moving forward. If you still don't know where to start or what to do next, we'd like to talk about that with you—we have plenty of ideas. And if your church is not already, we would love for one of the results of this curriculum to be your church becoming a Banquet Network member.

This can mean a couple of different things. For one, your church can commit to growing in your love for people with disabilities and welcome the opportunity to help other churches do the same. Secondly, we ask that you would consider supporting us in our mission and efforts to bring the gospel to individuals and families affected by disability. There are several ways that you can offer support to us:

1. Support through prayer
2. Support through giving
3. Support through volunteering

If you are interested in giving or volunteering with us, go to [thebanquetnetwork.com/give](https://thebanquetnetwork.com/give) or email us at [info@thebanquetnetwork.com](mailto:info@thebanquetnetwork.com).

Thirdly, we invite you to sign up to receive the latest news and updates at The Banquet Network. If interested, go to [thebanquetnetwork.com/newslettersignup](https://thebanquetnetwork.com/newslettersignup) and enter your email address to subscribe to our quarterly newsletters.

And lastly, we would love to receive your feedback on this curriculum so we can improve it going forward. Join us as we work to reverse the exclusion of some of the most indispensable members of the body of Christ. Thank you for your time and engagement with the Inspire curriculum.