



It became popular in the 1980's for companies to institute "Casual Fridays" as a way to increase employee morale. On these end of the week workdays, staff members could switch from ties and jackets to polos and khakis or from polos and khakis to jeans and a T-shirt. "Casual" meant fewer formalities and more comfort.

Over the past few decades, the concept of casual has taken root in our culture as something akin to a core value. Whereas travelers in the 1960's donned sports coats and dresses to fly Pan Am, people today opt for shorts and tank tops as they city-hop on Southwest. Letter writing with its salutations and syntax has morphed into truncated texts with their I-o-I abbreviations. We've experienced the wholesale casual-ization of our nation.

Some have complained that this journey into informality has detrimentally impacted the Church. Others have celebrated what they perceive as a decreased focus on nonessential traditions and an increase emphasis on authentic faith. Does God care whether someone is wearing a tie or white gloves and a hat? Is God put off by wrinkled khakis and an untucked shirt?

According to Scripture, what we wear doesn't seem to be at the top of God's lists of concerns. What does seem to matter to God, however, is when we take a casual approach to the things that the Bible details as important to God—things like sexual purity, marital fidelity, radical financial generosity, working on behalf of those caught in cycles of poverty, and letting our faith shine brightly in and through all our words and actions. Whenever we casually shift the boundaries on these issues away from God's design to something more contemporary, God calls it sin. And when we embrace God's preferences and make them our own, God calls it *righteousness*.

Corporate America can have its "casual Fridays," but God claims each and every day and calls them righteous days. Likewise, we can wear what we want to church, but casual obedience to God's will, will never do. As lovers of God, let's love God as God desires to be loved. Righteous!

Personal Reflection and Application

Keep a journal to address the following questions and topics.

AC Read 1 Sam. 1-3 & 7. Compare and contrast the two sons of Eli to Samuel. What were the various motivations that seemed to have directed these three young men? In what ways did their behaviors align with God's desires? In what ways did they fail to live according to the will of God? How did God respond?

Q Righteousness occurs when people live in fidelity to God. It has little or nothing to do with a disembodied list of do's and don'ts and everything to do with loving God according to God's desires. In what ways do you exhibit righteousness in your life? In what ways is your life out of alignment with God's desires for you? What is lost and/or gained by continuing to be casual about your faith? What is lost and/or gained if you choose to live a more righteous life?

AC Ask a trusted and mature Christian friend to help you identify a path toward becoming more aligned with God, i.e. more righteous.

P *God, I desire to live fully for you.*



Small Groups

Opening Question: In what ways are you more casual and in what ways are you more formal?

AC Read the story of Samuel found in 1 Samuel 1-3; 7-8. Describe the various roles Samuel seems to serve. Compare and contrast Samuel to Eli's two sons. What do you find admirable in Samuel? In what ways would you like to emulate Samuel? What do you find admirable in Hannah, Samuel's mother? In what ways would you like to emulate her?

AC Examine the following passages on "righteousness":

Gen. 6:9; Psalm 1; 34:11-22; 37; Prov. 10:3-11; Amos 5:24; Mal. 3:18; Mt. 5:6; 6:33; 13:41-43; Rom. 1:16-17; 2:13; 3:9-12; 2 Cor. 5:20-21; 2 Tim. 3:16; 4:6-8; Titus 3:4-8; Heb. 12:11; 1 Pet. 2:24; 1 John 3:4-10. According to these passages, what is a good working definition of righteousness and of what importance is choosing to be righteous to the follower of Jesus?

Q In what ways do you think you've taken too formal of an approach to knowing and following God? In what ways do you think you've been too casual in pursuing God's desires for your life? What's one step you can take this week to have a more authentic and more intimate dependence on God?

One on One Relationships

One of Samuel's distinctive strengths is his commitment to listening to God. Listening to God, however, presents a challenge to many people who are seeking to know God better. Some of the common questions include: *Does God still speak today? How do you hear God's voice? How can you tell whether what you are hearing is from your own thoughts or from God? If I don't hear God, am I doing something wrong? Should I trust others who say, "God told me"?*

God does still speak today. He communicates through Scripture, through others, through nature, through events, and through various forms of the "still, small voice." *Hearing God* by Dallas Willard is a great resource on this subject.

One key to discerning God's voice is to know that whatever God says must line up with Scripture. In fact, there is plenty that we can hear from God simply from the pages of the Bible. The tougher challenge is learning to heed what God says. You might want to help your disciple identify two or three things she or he resists or struggles to hear from God. Pray together, study together, and encourage each other to listen to God in these important areas of your disciple's life.

Families

Pick and tweak items below to fit your own family's context.

AC Read 1 Samuel 3 together. Play act the chapter. Take turns being Samuel, Eli, and the Lord. Remind your kids that we read the Bible so that we, like Samuel, can hear what God wants to say to us.

AC Practice listening really well to each other this week. Set up some obvious guidelines such as: great eye contact and active listening (*"If I heard you correctly, you said ..."*). Celebrate your victories with a special meal or dessert at the end of the week.

AC Designate a kitchen utensil as the speaker's microphone, and at dinner one night only the holder of the utensil has the right to talk while everyone else listens. Talk about God's right to tell us what to do and about learning to listen to God.

AC The Bible contains many stories of God disciplining his children. Read Hebrews 12:1-13 and 1 Samuel 2:27-36. Talk together about the importance of discipline—both human and divine. Talk about the strengths and weaknesses of the approach to discipline in your home. Discuss what it might mean to receive God's discipline.