

1 | Love



THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

Nobody likes the ends of the bread loaf. I have four kids who can make a sport out of arguing, but the bread heels have never been among the things they have fought over. In the ten years I've been their dad, never once have I heard one of my children scream: "No, I want the crusty, super stale little cardboard-like pieces!" *Never*. Kids want the fresh stuff. And so do adults.

Relationships are a little like those heels of bread. Over time, they tend to harden and become stale. Fortunately, the Bible gives us a surefire method to keep our connections with others from going stale. If you're a follower of Jesus, you have the power within you to produce incredible freshness in the lives of others. This method for growing phenomenal relationships is foolproof, but it's not free. This deep connection is love.

Are you disappointed in the way your relationships are turning out? Do you long to go deeper with those around you? If so, listen to the words of Jesus as He explained the dynamics of love.

GROUP TIME

THE POINT: Let _____ permeate every _____ .

I woke up one morning craving coffee so fiercely that I sprang from the mattress and sprinted to the coffee maker. (Actually, I do this every day.) A steaming cup of coffee in thirty seconds? Yes, *please*. As I stood there, waiting impatiently for something hot and delicious to happen, I realized quickly that the machine had gone on strike. The tiny screen on the coffee maker told me: YOUR TANK IS LOW. It needed water. In short order, I *poured in* so that something beautiful would *pour out*.

Jesus made it very clear in John 15 that there is an ocean-sized reservoir of love, but it doesn't begin with us. Love is found in God. We must drink from the deep well of the heavenly Father's supply if we ever hope to pour meaningfully into the lives of others. Let me say it this way: The quality of your relationships with others will always be tied to the quality of your relationship with God.

John 15:9-10 ⁹ “As the Father has loved me, I have also loved you. Remain in my love.

¹⁰ If you keep my commands you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love.

Love for others is to be grounded in _____ .

Take special note of the word *remain* in these verses. This is a key word in John 15. To remain somewhere is to dwell there continually; a place where you remain is a place where you're comfortable enough to make yourself at home. Jesus urged His followers to keep their lives fresh by staying close to Him, by making themselves at home in His love. Jesus' followers certainly might achieve the intimacy Jesus described here through regular prayer and study of the Scriptures, but this soul-deep intimacy with God comes through more than just a consistent quiet time alone with God. Faithful obedience to God's Spirit and to His Word is the key.

Obedience to God is the crucial factor in bearing fresh fruit in the lives of other people. Notice how Jesus tied the knot tightly between love and obedience: “If you keep my commands you will remain in my love” (v. 10). If you do what Jesus tells you to do, then you will feel the full force of His affection! It's not that Jesus will love you more—you're already completely loved by God—but you will more deeply know and experience that love. Your commitment to the commands of Jesus is the linchpin to producing life in those around you (vv. 5-8).

John 15:11-12 ¹¹ “I have told you these things so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete. ¹² “This is my command: Love one another as I have loved you.

Love for others should _____ Jesus’ love for us.

Have you ever met a man who claimed to be a Christian but forgot to inform his face? Week after week, he plods into the church building with a scowl and a grimace and makes a beeline to his pew. He is an oxymoron.

Living in Christ should produce joy in the heart! Obeying Him isn’t a grim, teeth-clenching exercise. Quite the opposite! In verse 11, Jesus said, “I have told you these things so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete.” Is the joy of Jesus inside you? If so, submission to Christ isn’t a road of misery, but a road to freedom. When you discover your debts are paid and your sins have been erased, you walk with a much lighter load.

John 15:13-14 ¹³ **No one has greater love than this: to lay down his life for his friends.** ¹⁴ **You are my friends if you do what I command you.**

Love for others involves _____.

“No one has greater love than this: to lay down his life for his friends” (v. 13). Little did the disciples know that, even as Jesus taught them how to love, this would be lived out in their own life. In the years that followed, those in Jesus’ inner circle would sacrifice all for their Savior. For example, James, the brother of John, was executed with a sword because of his commitment to Jesus (Acts 12:2). Church history indicates that, with the exception of John (and of course Judas Iscariot), Jesus’ apostles were martyred for their faith. They were willing to die as a measure of their love for their leader. These men, who once ran from the sword (Mark 14:46-50), now showed the supreme level of love by laying down the earthly treasure of their own bodies. No higher form of love has ever been known.

SHARE THE LOVE

Complete the sentences below. Then ask God to use these insights to help you love others the way He loves.

I struggle to love people when _____.

If I know I'll be around someone hard to love, I usually _____.

I might be hard to love when I _____.

LIVE IT OUT

Like the heels of the loaf of bread, our relationships can become stale, hard, and flat. Love requires continual refreshment to remain healthy. Here are three ideas to boost your level of love in the lives of others.

- ▶ **Give a small gift.** Give an unexpected gift to someone who needs it. Attach this simple note: “Thank you for playing an important role in my life.”
- ▶ **Reach out.** Think of a relationship that has become stale, or even hostile. Make a phone call to see if you can revive or refresh that connection.
- ▶ **Make a major sacrifice.** Think of something that hinders your closest relationships—golf clubs, salon appointments, cable TV, a car payment, and so on. Then get rid of it!

TALK IT OUT

Want to go a step further? Gather with two or three Christ-followers of the same gender. Read John 15:9-14, then use the following summary and questions for a deeper discussion.

We’ve probably all heard someone say, “I love him, but I don’t like him.” In that attitude, we treat love as some sort of concept we’re required to embrace—especially with relatives—but there are no concrete, day-to-day expressions of love. Yet the starting point for any strong relationship is love—love that is expressed in both attitudes and actions. Jesus modeled this kind of love for us, and calls us to do the same.

How would you summarize Jesus’ teachings in John 15:5-6?

What obstacles make it difficult for you to “remain” in Christ?

How have you seen your relationship with Christ impact your relationships with others?

DAY 1: Make a relationship with Jesus your first priority.

Read John 15:9-10.

Brett was the rising star in his company. He was hired as a front desk helper, but he soon outworked his competition and relished every promotion. Over a period of eighteen months, Brett received four bonuses and three new titles on his business card. However, his zeal to climb the company ladder was beginning to compromise his relationships. Brett was on a slippery slope. It all began when he volunteered for an additional project at the office. That assignment caused Brett to miss supper at home most nights, but he convinced himself that the additional work would come back to benefit the family. As his commitment to his career continued to climb, the “fun-meter” in their house began to fall. The family was soon in crisis.

Brett’s story is a tragic story of disobedience. A love for Jesus had taken a back seat, and he no longer was obedient to Christ. Consequently, his love for position in the company took priority over his love for his family. And everyone suffered, including Brett.

Remaining in Jesus’ love is the key to all success, especially in our relationships. Jesus’ followers must adopt His values and follow His voice. When we ignore the promptings of the Holy Spirit and chart our own selfish course, we’re disobedient, we sabotage our personal success, and we sour the people around us. We must stay close to the Lord.

Carve out time today to get alone with God. Take a hike, go on a bike ride, or just spend a few minutes gazing at the night sky. Take a break from any pressing life issues and focus on the One who matters most.

“The quality of your relationships with others will always be tied to the quality of your relationship with God.”

BEN MANDRELL

DAY 2: Deep and lasting joy is found in Jesus.

Read John 15:11.

In his book *Surprised by Joy*, C.S. Lewis told the story of his unusual conversion to Christianity. Wounded deeply by his mother's death, Lewis drifted from God for decades before surrendering his life to his Savior. What caused this brilliant intellectual to come to Christ? The answer: joy!

Throughout his life, Lewis experienced unforeseen, fleeting pangs of intense inner joy. He came to realize those occasional pokes in his heart were the touches of the Holy Spirit whispering God's love. Unfortunately, Lewis's prideful resistance was strong. He reflected on the night when the crusty shell of atheism began to crack: "That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me I gave in and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England."⁸ God continued to work on Lewis, soon calling him to a personal relationship with His Son. In Jesus, Lewis found the fullness of joy and spent the rest of his life writing about it.

Choose one of the gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John) to find examples of when Jesus had personal encounters with others. Commit to read through that gospel in the next three weeks.



DAY 3: Offer others a Christ-like love.

Read John 15:12.

Notice in John 15:12 that once the love of Jesus is dwelling inside you, it can never be bottled up. The love of Christ must flow in and out of you: “This is my command: Love one another as I have loved you” (v. 12). The gift of Christ’s love came with this instruction: share it! We’re commanded to love the people around us in the same way Jesus has loved us. As recipients of a rich inheritance, we’re not to hoard grace; instead we’re empowered and emboldened to give grace to others.

Jesus didn’t leave the command to love nebulous or vague. He directed us to love people in the specific way He loved. How did Jesus show His love? He gave. He forgave. He pardoned. He was gracious, kind, merciful, sacrificial, and intentional. When you love people as Jesus does, you begin to break down their defenses. Even the crusty shell of cynicism can begin to crack as others open up their messy lives to you.

Who do you know that needs to experience Christ-like love today? Take steps to express this kind of love, even if it includes sacrifice, forgiveness, or grace.

DAY 4: Relationships are built on selflessness and endurance.

Read John 15:13.

Every year on the afternoon of Mother’s Day, Charlie makes a dash for the nearest convenience store in search of a last minute card. With only three lame cards left in the rack, he is forced to buy the cartoonish card that he has jammed awkwardly inside the wrong-sized envelope. In spite of this, Charlie soothes his conscience by thinking, *Hey, at least I made an effort.*

This example raises a couple of relevant questions: What is the least amount of energy required to pay the bill of love? How much does a person have to pay to expect good relationships with those around her?

Jesus set the price high, defining love by supreme sacrifice. The best way to build a relationship isn’t by offering clearance cards that cost less than loose change. Rather, the way to build a relationship is often through pain and suffering. How much pain are you willing to endure for others? This is the yardstick that often measures your love for them.

Have coffee or lunch with an older, mature Christian. Find out what he or she has learned about nurturing healthy, Christ-focused relationships.

DAY 5: Our love for others is evidenced in our actions.

Read John 15:14.

Take inventory of the relationships in your life. Ask yourself the hard questions, and be honest. How strong is your relationship with your spouse? With your children? With your extended family? With your friends? Do any of these relationships need work? If so, what would you be willing to pay for better relationships? What sacrifices could you make to advance the lives of these people who are important to you?

Let me give you one small piece of advice: While it is sometimes wise to avoid “sweating the small stuff,” this concept shouldn’t necessarily be carried out in relationships. The little things do matter in your relationships. A willingness to die for those we love often translates into the daily need to stifle our own self-importance and study the lives of those around us. What does this person need that I could supply? Could I write a note of encouragement to lift his head? Could I provide a meal to fill a belly? Could I offer her a day away from the kids so she can restore her peace of mind? Love beckons us to pay a price—sometimes large, sometimes small—for the other person.

Identify one relationship that needs your attention. Do one thing today for this person as a visible display of your love.

“No one has greater love than this: to lay down his life for his friends.”

JOHN 15:13