

Topic 13: Love



The Hallmark of a Follower of Jesus

“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

—John 13:34–35

What’s the best way to show people you follow Jesus? Wear a cross around your neck? Get a religious tattoo—maybe a Bible verse—in Greek or Hebrew? What about Christian T-shirts or one of those “Jesus fishes” on your vehicle with a catchy bumper sticker just below it?

None of that is wrong. If you feel led to do such things, great. But Jesus indicated his followers should be marked by something much deeper, higher, and more compelling.

Christ called his disciples to love one another—just check out the memory verse for this lesson. Notice what else he said: Loving as *he* loved is what singles us out as his followers. Love is our calling card. Loving others well—even our enemies—is the best case we could ever make for the truth of the gospel.

In Mark 1, Jesus said, “Follow me, and I will *make you become* fishers of men.” Bottom-line, he was saying, “Let me change you.” In other words, discipleship is more than learning certain truths and participating in various “Christian” activities. Discipleship means becoming like Jesus. It means seeing his character begin to form in our own lives. That character begins and ends with love.

“Love” in the Bible

The primary Old Testament Hebrew words translated “love” are *ahab* and *chesed*.

“Let all that you do be done in love.”—1 Corinthians 16:14, NASB

Ahab, typically means “to desire, delight in, or breathe after” someone or something (as in longing for something). When describing male-female, husband-wife relationships the word may have sexual connotations. However, it is also used to describe:

- ▶ Parent-child relationships (Genesis 22:2)
- ▶ In-law relationships (Ruth 4:15)

- ▶ A servant's love for his master (Exodus 21:5)
- ▶ The affection between intimate friends (2 Samuel 1:26)
- ▶ God's love for us (Exodus 20:6; Deuteronomy 7:13)

The other word, *chesed*, is often translated "loving kindness" or "steadfast love" when referring to God's faithful, covenant love for his people—his commitment to show them goodness and favor (Psalm 17:7; 63:3). When used of people, *chesed* is often translated "kindness" or "loyalty" (Genesis 24:49; 2 Samuel 2:5).

In the New Testament, the Greek words *agape* and *phileo* are used to speak of both human and divine love. Some have tried to distinguish sharply between the two, saying that *agape* refers to God's perfect love for us; and *phileo* refers to mere human, brotherly love or friendly affection. But such distinctions oversimplify. In Scripture, there is much overlap. For example, God is said to *phileo* humans (Revelation 3:19). And humans are also encouraged to love (*phileo*) God (1 Corinthians 16:22).

There is much we could say about love, and in this study, we'll be talking about what the Bible says about love.





Bible Study

Biblical Truths About Love

Love originates in God because he is love.

1. Read carefully these verses from 1 John:

Dear friends, let us continue to love one another, for love comes from God. Anyone who loves is a child of God and knows God. But anyone who does not love does not know God, for God is love.

God showed how much he loved us by sending his one and only Son into the world so that we might have eternal life through him. This is real love—not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins.

Dear friends, since God loved us that much, we surely ought to love each other. (1 John 4:7–11, NLT)

a. John tells us here God is the essence of love. Given that this is his *nature*, how does John describe God’s *actions*?

b. According to John, what are the expected actions of a child of God?



The spiritual life can be boiled down to one word: love.

2. Check out this key passage from Mark's gospel:

One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?"

"The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."

(Mark 12:28–31)

It's worth noting that in the time of Christ, the leaders of Jewish religious culture had dissected the Mosaic Law into 613 individual commandments¹—365 "don'ts" (one for each day of the year!) and 248 "do's." They argued incessantly over which ones were the most important. And they put in time and effort to make sure they were good Jews: Obeying requirements for food, worship, idols, clothing, work, money, marriage, farming, sex, hairstyles, legal, lending, health, parent-child and employer-employee/slave relationships, mourning, proper sacrifices, priest's duties, and more.

- a. Do the people of today's church still argue about rules that should be followed? What rules have you heard others say are important?

- b. Jesus reduced 613 rules to one principle, with two parts: *Love God* and *love people*. When life gets complex, and we want to know what rule to follow, Jesus tells us to rely on this guiding principle. Why do we so often find this simplified, straightforward command so difficult to live out?

¹ "613 Commandments," *Wikipedia*: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/613_commandments (accessed August 8, 2016)



Loving God and loving people are a package deal.

3. Let's look again at 1 John 4:

If someone says, "I love God," but hates a fellow believer, that person is a liar; for if we don't love people we can see, how can we love God, whom we cannot see? And he has given us this command: Those who love God must also love their fellow believers." (1 John 4:20–21, NLT)

- a. These are sobering words! What would you say if someone responded to this verse and said, "Yeah, but my boss—if you knew him, you'd know why I despise him!"?

Even the Ten Commandments illustrate this basic "Love God, Love People" principle. The first four commandments are about loving God, and the final six commandments have to do with relating in love to others. We've seen Jesus highlight this connection in talking about the Great Commandment; John echoes it in his epistle. God doesn't want us to miss this: *We can't separate loving him from loving others!*

"Do not waste time bothering whether you 'love' your neighbor; act as if you did."—C. S. Lewis

Love is more an action than an emotion.

4. "Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth" (1 John 3:18). Why is it dangerous to speak of love as a feeling—as something that we fall into or fall out of? Why aren't warm feelings enough?



God’s love is sacrificial and unconditional.

5. Read John 3:16 if you are not able to quote it from memory.

- a. What was the result of God’s great love for the world? Is there such a thing as a love that doesn’t cost anything? Why or why not?

- b. Read Romans 8:31–39. List all the things that the apostle Paul says can separate a child of God from God’s love. What actions disqualify us from receiving his affection?

- c. What does this tell us about the way we are to love others?

God’s love extends even to “enemies.”

6. Consider these words of Jesus:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward

“What does love look like? It has the hands to help others. It has the feet to hasten to the poor and needy. It has eyes to see misery and want. It has the ears to hear the sighs and sorrows of men. That is what love looks like.”—Augustine



will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”
(Matthew 5:43–48)

- a. Practically speaking, what does it look like to love an enemy? In day-to-day life? On social media? When talking with friends and the enemy isn’t around?

- b. Read Jesus’ famous Parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25–37. As you do, remember that the Jews and Samaritans in Jesus’ day couldn’t stand each other—for historical, racial, and cultural reasons. Where in your own experience have you seen this kind of “risky, unexpected” love?

God’s love is jaw-droppingly beautiful!

- 7. Take a few minutes to slowly read 1 Corinthians 13—often called the “Love Chapter” of the Bible.

“Love slays what we have been that we may be what we were not.”
—Augustine

- a. Why would Paul suggest that spiritual abilities, theological knowledge, or religious actions can actually get in the way of genuine love?



b. Now, read 1 Corinthians 13 a second time, inserting your own name every time you see the word “love.” How would your life and relationships be different if you loved like that?

c. What’s the most amazing display of love you’ve ever seen by another person?

Love makes room for those who are different.

Read Romans 14. In this chapter, Paul talks about a common problem of the church. Many followers of Jesus have different convictions about some behaviors not expressly forbidden by God. For first-century believers in Rome, it was the issue of eating meat that had been part of pagan rituals. For modern believers it might be an issue like drinking a beer or a glass of wine.

8. How does love make a difference when Christians have different scruples or standards on issues like these?



Our love can become displaced.

9. Ponder this verse: “Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him” (1 John 2:15, NASB). What does it mean to “love the world”? Why is this a problem? How can a person tell if he or she is in love with “the world”?

We can't love rightly apart from God's enabling Spirit.

In Galatians 5:19–21, Paul talks in depressing detail about all the selfish and wrong ways we act when left to ourselves. Then he writes the phrase, “But the fruit of the Spirit is love” (Galatians 5:22). Here he offers a supernatural possibility—letting God's Spirit reign and rule in us, bringing forth a harvest of love.

What's distinctive about a follower of Jesus? The same virtue that marked our Savior—love. In the strength and security, the wonder and power of Christ's sacrificial, unconditional love for us, we are free to love others. Because we are loved eternally, and perfectly by the Perfect One, we have nothing to fear. We can move toward others to give and serve and bless—just as he did.

We love because he first loved us.



Take-Home Reflections

To Love or Not to Love

Look at this chart to see in what direction a follower of Jesus can direct his or her love.

Things the Bible calls us to love:	Things the Bible warns us NOT to love:
<p>Our neighbor Leviticus 19:18</p> <p>The strangers and foreigners who reside in our midst Leviticus 19:34; Deuteronomy 10:19</p> <p>The Lord our God Deuteronomy 6:5; 10:12</p> <p>God's salvation Psalms 18:1-2</p> <p>Justice Psalms 99:4</p> <p>God's law and commandments Psalms 119:47, 97, 113, 127, 140, 167</p> <p>The name of God Psalms 119:132</p> <p>Wisdom Proverbs 4:5-6</p> <p>Discipline Proverbs 12:1</p> <p>Those who reprove or correct us Proverbs 15:12</p> <p>Good Amos 5:15</p> <p>Kindness Micah 6:8</p> <p>Our enemies Matthew 5:44</p> <p>Fellow disciples John 13:34</p> <p>All God's people Ephesians 1:15 (To husbands) Your wife Ephesians 5:25; Colossians 3:19</p> <p>The Lord Jesus Christ Ephesians 6:24</p> <p>Our brothers and sisters in Christ 1 Thessalonians 4:9; Hebrews 13:1; 1 Peter 1:22</p> <p>The imminent appearing or second coming of Christ 2 Timothy 4:8 (To young wives and mothers) Your husband and children Titus 2:4</p>	<p>Violence Psalms 11:5</p> <p>Cursing others Psalms 109:17</p> <p>Being simple-minded Proverbs 1:22</p> <p>Transgression Proverbs 17:19</p> <p>Sleep Proverbs 20:13</p> <p>Pleasure Proverbs 21:17</p> <p>Wine Proverbs 21:17</p> <p>Money Ecclesiastes 5:10; 1 Timothy 3:3; 6:10; Hebrews 13:5</p> <p>Evil Amos 5:15</p> <p>Perjury Zechariah 8:17</p> <p>The approval of others more than the approval of God John 12:43</p> <p>This present world 2 Timothy 4:10; 1 John 2:15</p>



Life Application

An important part of discipleship is learning how to apply God's truths to your life. Below are just a few ways you can start thinking about what you've learned and apply it to your daily life.

1. Memorize our verse, John 13:34–35.
2. Review this lesson. On a separate sheet of paper, journal your response to this truth: *We will never know how to love until we first know that we are loved.*
3. Practice loving others. We will only become loving people by doing loving acts. Like any skill, getting good at love requires practice and repetition! Pick a couple of the loving acts listed in "Show Your Love" on the next page, or invent your own and try them out this week.
4. Wrestle with one or two of the following:
 - ▶ Do you have to *like* somebody in order to *love* them in the way that Christ commands? Why or why not?
 - ▶ Is there someone you've treated with cruelty, hatred or violence? If love is a hallmark of Christians, how can you react the next time you're in a similar situation? How can you make things right with the person you've wronged?
 - ▶ Do you have an "enemy"? A bully at school, disrespectful boss, mean neighbor, manipulative person, critic on social media, political candidate, or arrogant relative? How can you pray for them and for yourself?



Show Your Love

- ▶ Secretly serve a roommate, classmate, teacher, coworker or friend. Identify a need and meet it, without revealing what you have done or taking credit.
- ▶ Give a loved one a hug for no reason.
- ▶ Do a dreaded chore for a family member—one that he or she really struggles to complete.
- ▶ Clear the table—without anyone prompting you.
- ▶ Wash the dishes or put them in the dishwasher without being asked.
- ▶ Change that diaper the moment you realize it's dirty and/or wet. Don't wait for someone else to "catch a whiff"!
- ▶ Offer to run errands for a friend who is frazzled.
- ▶ Do something sweet for your wife or mother—choose a day other than Mother's Day!
- ▶ Practice a not-so random act of kindness for a neighbor.
- ▶ Sneak into someone else's room one morning and make the bed.
- ▶ Give someone your undivided attention. Ask them questions and really listen for one hour.
- ▶ Notice a friend's needs. Then meet them before being asked.
- ▶ Take twenty minutes to sit down and write a letter of encouragement to someone who has marked your life.
- ▶ Say a prayer for someone you don't get along with or just don't like. Ask God to help you love this person the way that he does.
- ▶ Identify something that needs to be done that nobody else seems to notice. Go through the proper channels and do it!
- ▶ Donate your expertise to someone who really needs it.
- ▶ Take your kids with you to help a friend or family member.
- ▶ Tithe your waking, non-working, and non-school moments for one week. If that comes to five hours, then that's 300 minutes a day. Agree to spend thirty minutes daily serving someone different for the next seven days.
- ▶ Gather your small group or discipleship group and secretly go help someone in need.
- ▶ Pile your family in the car, drive around until you see an elderly person doing yard work. Tell him or her you have two free hours and ask, "How can you use us?"
- ▶ Offer to babysit for three hours for a harried homemaker.
- ▶ Clean your dad's vehicle.
- ▶ Double your portions as you prepare supper and invite a neighborhood family to join you. Or take a meal to an elderly neighbor.
- ▶ Tutor a kid who's having trouble in school.