

SESSION 1
Love



QUESTION 1:

What foods do you like best straight out of the oven?

THE POINT

Let love permeate every relationship.

THE PASSAGE

John 15:9-14

THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

Nobody likes the ends of the bread loaf. I have four small 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. But marriages and friendships don't have to follow this downward spiral. Fortunately, the Bible gives us a surefire method to keep our connections with others from going stale. If you are a follower of Jesus Christ, 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? Are you sick and tired of watching people walk out of your life? 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.

John 15:9-10

9 As the Father hath loved me, so have I loved you: continue ye in my love.

10 If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love; even as I have kept my Father's commandments, and abide in his love.

KEY WORD: Continue (v. 9)—A believer's continual connection to Christ, like branches to a vine, is necessary for spiritual health and yields the fruit of love for others.

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 30 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.

Take special note of the word *abide* in this passage. This is a key word in John 15. To abide somewhere is to dwell there continually; a place where you abide is a place where you are 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 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 ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love." 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 are 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).

Consider a real-life example. 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. If he continued on this track, he soon would find himself in a corner office with a six-figure income. However, his zeal to climb the company ladder was beginning to compromise his relationships at home.

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. His wife Lindsay was supportive at first, but now she doubted Brett's motivations. She knew in her heart that his obsession with work wasn't about the family; this had become all about Brett. As his commitment to his career continued to climb, the "fun-meter" in their house began to fall. Even Brett's two sons began to ask why dad seemed so serious all the time. 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 relationships with others. His followers must adopt His values and follow His voice. When we ignore the nudges and promptings of the Holy Spirit and chart our own selfish course, we are disobedient, we sabotage our personal success, and we sour the people around us. We must stay close to the Lord.

QUESTION 2:

What do we tend to expect from the people who love us?

John 15:11-12

11 These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full.

12 This is my commandment, That ye love one another, as I have loved you.

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 is not a grim, teeth-clenching exercise. Quite the opposite! In verse 11, Jesus said, "These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full." Is the joy of Jesus inside you? If so, submission to Christ is not 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.

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. This deep emotion of delight would appear like a ray of sunshine bursting through the clouds, and then suddenly vanish. He came to realize those occasional pokes in his heart were the touches of the Holy Spirit, whispering God's love, and urging him to follow the trail to heaven. Unfortunately, Lewis's prideful resistance was strong. Lewis reflected on the night when the crusty shell of atheism began to crack:

You must picture me alone in that room ... night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. 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.¹

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.

Do you exhibit the joy of the Holy Spirit? Is your outlook on life refreshing to those around you? If not, ask the Lord today to restore the joy of your salvation (Ps. 51:12).

QUESTION 3:

How does our relationship with God impact our relationships with others?

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 commandment, That ye love one another, as I have loved you." The gift of Christ's love came with this instruction: share it! We are commanded to love the people around

us in the same way Jesus has loved us. As recipients of a rich inheritance, we are not to hoard grace; instead we are empowered and emboldened to give grace to others.

Jesus did not 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 and they open up their messy lives to you. The spark of relational fire is found in these unforeseen moments of love.

QUESTION 4:

When have you experienced the joy of loving others as Christ loves you?

John 15:13-14

13 Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.

14 Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you.

Every year on 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 him?

Jesus set the price high, defining love by supreme sacrifice. The best way to build a relationship is not 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 another person? This is the yardstick that often measures your love for them.

“Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.” Little did the disciples know that, even as Jesus taught them how to love, this would be lived out in their own lives. 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.

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 should not 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.

QUESTION 5:

What are some practical ways our group can demonstrate sacrificial love to others?

ENGAGE

Choose one of the photos that illustrates the kind of love Jesus calls for. Then write a prayer asking God to help you love in this way.



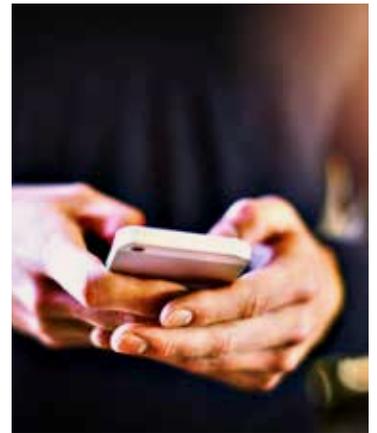
My Prayer:

LIVE IT OUT

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!

Like the heels of the loaf of bread, our relationships can become stale, hard, and flat. Love requires continual refreshment to remain healthy.



END NOTES

1 C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (New York, NY: Harcourt Brace, 1955), 221.