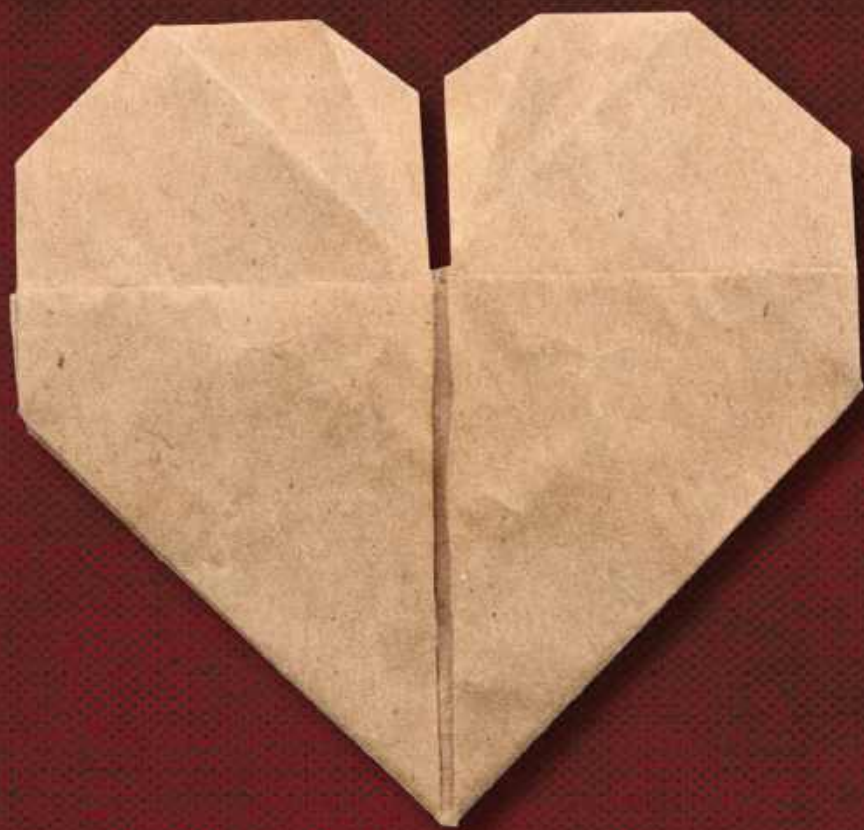


NEWSONGCHURCH.COM



30 DAYS

OF LOVE



NEW
SONG
COMMUNITY
CHURCH

30 Days Table of Contents

Week 1 ***God's Native Language***

- Day 1 = Love Begins Here – 1 John 4:7-12
- Day 2 = Noticing Others – Luke 10:33-35
- Day 3 = The Bible's Words for Love – Jeremiah 31:3
- Day 4 = God is Love – 1 John 4:16
- Day 5 = God Loves the World – John 3:1-17
- Day 6 = The Prodigal Father – Luke 15:11-24

Week 2 ***How to Become a More Loving Person***

- Day 8 = Step 1: Receive God's Love – 1 John 4:19
- Day 9 = Step 2: Bear The Fruit of the Spirit – Galatians 5:22-23
- Day 10 = Step 3: Know What Love Looks Like – 1 Corinthians 13:4-8
- Day 11 = Step 4: Choose to Do the Loving Thing – Matthew 22:37-39
- Day 12 = Step 5: Remain in Him – John 15:4-5
- Day 13 = The Benefits of Becoming a More Loving Person – Luke 6:40

Week 3 ***How to Really Love Your Family***

- Day 15 = Honor Your Father and Mother – Ephesians 6:2-3
- Day 16 = A Cord of Three Strands – Ecclesiastes 4:9-12
- Day 17 = Happy Wife, Happy Life – Ecclesiastes 9:9
- Day 18 = His Needs, Her Needs – 1 Peter 3:7
- Day 19 = Start a Youth out on His Way – Proverbs 22:6
- Day 20 = As For Me and My House – Joshua 24:15

Week 4 ***Loving God***

- Day 22 = Love the Lord With All Your Heart – Mark 12:30
- Day 23 = If You Love Me... – John 14:15
- Day 24 = What if I Fail? – 1 John 1:9
- Day 25 = Draw Near to God – James 4:8
- Day 26 = Delight Yourself in the Lord – Psalm 37:4
- Day 27 = Loving God Through Worship – Psalm 95:6-7

Week 5 ***Loving People***

- Day 29 = Love Your Neighbor – Matthew 22:39
- Day 30 = Serve One Another – Galatians 5:13
- Day 31 = Love the Stranger Among You – Leviticus 19:34
- Day 32 = Meet the Needs of Others – 1 John 3:17-18
- Day 33 = Forgive as God Has Forgiveness – Ephesians 4:32
- Day 34 = A Love Like No Other – Ephesians 3:17-19

Week 1

Sermon: God's Native Language

Find your notes from this morning's sermon and reflect on what you learned using the prompts below.

1. Summarize the sermon in one phrase or sentence:

2. Which part moved or motivated me most?

3. What new way of thinking about God do I want to adopt as a result of today's sermon?

4. What do I want to do differently as a result?

5. What do I need to tell God today?

God's Native Language
Bible Study 1
1 John 4:7-5:4

Warm Up

1. Did you have a nickname as a child? What was it, and how did you come by it?

In the Bible, God has many nicknames. His best one just might be “Love.” In John 8:44, Jesus describes the devil as “a liar and father of lies.” He says, “When he lies, he speaks his native language.” God’s native language is love. You might say that He’s monolingual. It’s the only language He speaks. Throughout this *30-Day Adventure* we’ll dive deeply into the incredible, inexhaustible love of God.

Study

Read 1 John 4:7-10

2. What’s the difference between saying “God is loving,” and saying, “God is love”? Why does that distinction matter?

3. Along with being “love,” God is holy, just, righteous, all-knowing, all-powerful, etc. How do all these qualities integrate together into God’s character? Do His justice and love ever compete with each other? How do they work together?

4. According to vv. 9–10, how did God show His love?

5. What difference does it make that God loved us before we loved Him? What if those two were reversed?

Read 1 John 4:11-16

6. What does v. 12 mean when it says that if we love others, God's love "remains" (or "lives") in us? What does it look like to have God's love "remain" (or "live") in you?

Read 1 John 4:17-5:1

7. What is "perfect love"? How does it drive out fear?

8. Why does John command us to love our brothers and sisters (4:21 and 5:1)?

Read 1 John 5:1-5

9. How do loving God, loving His children, and obeying His commands go together?

10. List the 10 commandments (found in Exodus 20). John says that God's commands are not burdensome. How does God's love, living in you, make these commandments easy, or at least light?

11. How has our faith (or your faith) conquered the world?

12. What ideas or commands from this passage do you want to put into practice this week?

Share requests and pray for each other.

Day 1
Love Begins Here
1 John 4:7-12

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. 1 John 4:7-8

I once asked an atheist friend, “Why do you believe there is no God?”

He answered, “Believing in God is illogical. You can’t see, smell, taste, touch, or hear Him. How can you believe in something that can’t be verified by any of your senses?”

I said, “Lots of things exist that you can’t verify with your five senses.”

“Like what?”

We were in a high school cafeteria, getting ready for an athletic awards ceremony. “Like love,” I responded. “Every person here came to celebrate someone they love.”

You can’t see, smell, taste, touch, or hear love, but it may be the most powerful phenomenon in the world.

Love is the most sung-about subject of all times.

Diana Ross sang, “What the world needs now is love, sweet love. It’s the only thing that there’s just too little of.”

The Bee Gees added, “Love makes the world go ‘round.”

And John Lennon claimed, “All you need is love.”

Diana might be right. With AI at our fingertips, lightning-fast communications, robots aiding in our manufacturing, and agricultural output outpacing population growth, we’re awfully close to having everything we need - *except* love.

We’re not likely to change that any time soon. But over these next 30 days, it’s possible we can significantly increase the love quotient in our little slice of the world.

Noticing Others

Imagine for a minute, walking through your nearest grocery store. In every aisle, someone smiles at you. In fact, *everyone* smiles at you. A man reaches an item on the top shelf that’s a little high for you. A lady sees your handful of items and says, “Please, go ahead of me.” The teenager just in front of you helps load your items onto the conveyor. The cashier hands you flowers with your receipt, to brighten your day.

Love has some complexities, but in its simplest form, it's just noticing others and putting their needs before your own.

The Bible says, *Do nothing out of selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility consider others as more important than yourselves. Everyone should look not to his own interests, but rather to the interests of others* (Philippians 2:3-4).

Noticing others, and doing things to enhance their lives, is the most basic action of love. Learning about it and getting better at it is what these 30 days are all about.

First Steps

There are two steps we need to take to get started:

1. First, if we're going to get better at loving people, we need to *admit* that we're not very good at it.

We were born with a strong undertow of selfishness. Recognizing this is the first step to getting free from it.

Your natural tendency (and mine) is to think about ourselves first and others second. Not only were we born this way, modern marketing trains us to be consumers, not contributors. Every advertisement you'll see today is designed to convince you that you need more, should have more, and must seek more for yourself. Then, and only then, can you possibly be happy. Your nature and your world conspire to make you more selfish and less loving.

2. Second, we need to *answer* the question, "Is learning to be a more loving person a worthwhile investment of my time?"

Escaping the undertow of selfishness takes effort. So let's take a minute at the beginning of these 30 Days to remind ourselves of the benefits of getting better at loving others.

Let's start here: *love is the essential activity of the universe*. God, who is love, formed the world because of love. His fundamental motive for creating everything that exists was so that He could express love to creation.

The Bible, in 1 John 4:8, "*God is love.*" God doesn't *show* love. He *is* love. Love is the core of His personality. Every second, minute, and hour, God is about noticing others and enhancing their lives.

When God created the world, He did it to create more love by making beings in His image whom He can love, and who, in turn, can love others around them.

Then, *when the time had fully come God sent His Son*, (Galatians 4:4), with great, terrible, and lasting consequences to Himself.

God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his one and only Son into the world so that we might live through him. Love consists in this: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, if God loved us in this way, we also must love one another. No one has ever seen God. If we love one another, God remains in us and his love is made complete in us (1 John 4:9-12).

The only appropriate response to God's love is to learn to love like He loves. If we do this, God will "remain in us," and His love will be "completed" in us. In other words, the work which God began at creation needs to be finished, by us! God is waiting, and rooting for us to become excellent at noticing others and enhancing their lives, even at personal sacrifice.

Loving others is the most important action in the world. You and I were born to complete God's creative work by noticing others, by seeing their needs, desires and potential, and then doing what we can to meet those needs, responding to those desires, and helping them achieve their greatest potential.

Pray about this as we begin:

Lord Jesus, during these next 30 days, I want to experience Your love by becoming more loving towards the people around me. Help me to become great at loving others. Overcome my selfishness and make me more like You. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Day 2
Noticing Others
Luke 10:33-35

***...a Samaritan on his journey came up to him, and when he saw the man, he had compassion. He went over to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on olive oil and wine. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him. When I come back I'll reimburse you for whatever extra you spend.'* Luke 10:33-35**

Someone once asked Jesus, "What does it look like to love my neighbor as myself?" In response, Jesus told *The Parable of the Good Samaritan*. It's about a man who gets robbed and beaten and is ignored by the two types of men you would expect to help him: a priest and a Levite. In fairness, both of them worked in the Temple. Mosaic Law forbade them to touch a dead body. If they did, they would be prohibited from entering the Temple for six weeks. Without getting close, they couldn't tell if the man was dead or alive, so they each "passed by on the other side" of the road.

Finally, a type of man you would expect *not* to help him comes by: a Samaritan – a half-Jew/half-Gentile with heretical theology. This unlikely fellow stops. And helps. He bandages the man's wounds and hoists him onto his own donkey. He pays an innkeeper to house and look after him. This is Jesus' story of what it looks like to love.

Yesterday we gave a simple definition of love: *noticing others and making their lives better*.

Jesus' first two characters (the priest and the Levite) *noticed* the beaten man, but they chose not to help him. The Samaritan noticed *and* helped.

Something for you and me to notice is the circumstances of the priest, Levite, and Samaritan. All three of them were going about their normal lives when they came across the beaten man. They all had things to do and people to see. The beaten man was not on anybody's agenda.

Watch your life today, and notice how many people you encounter who are not on your agenda. *Notice* them. Look at their faces. How do they seem to be doing? Is there a way you might be able to help make their life better?

If that's too tall an assignment for just the second day of our adventure, start with something easier. Instead of noticing everyone you don't know, just concentrate on noticing the people you already do know. And by "notice," I mean, *really notice* them. Pay attention to them when they're speaking. Ask them questions to see how they're doing. Listen to both their words and their non-verbals. How is this person doing, *really*?

With each encounter, ask yourself, “How might I make this person’s life better?” Can I say something to encourage them? Pray for a need they’ve expressed? Offer a promise from Scripture? Volunteer to do whatever it is they need done right now?

Then, for at least one of today’s scheduled meetings, do some advance work. Think of some way you can bless them before you even meet up with them. Bring flowers. Or fruit. Or a compliment. Or an invitation to do something with you that could be life-giving, like a walk on the beach, or a drive up the mountain.

An Admission

As I anticipate this assignment for myself, I’m fairly certain I’m going to fail. I’m task-oriented, and easily distracted. So here’s what I’m going to do, just today: I’m going to set an alarm on my phone to go off quietly every half hour. I’m going to use that quiet alarm to remind me of what I want to do today, which is *notice* the person in front of me.

Will you join me in this?

Let’s pray about it:

Lord Jesus, I tend to think about myself a lot more than I think about others. Please help me to reverse this today. Help me to really notice and care for every person I speak with today. Help me to love them, like You would, were You in my place. I know I need Your help to do so. So I’m asking this in Jesus’ name. Amen!

Day 3
The Bible's Words for Love
Jeremiah 31:3

***I have loved you with an everlasting love;
therefore, I have continued to extend faithful love to you. Jeremiah 31:3***

Now that we've gotten an up-close glimpse of what love really is (noticing others and making their lives better), let's back away for a minute and look at the big picture.

The Bible is a book about the love of God. It opens with God in relationship with Himself as Father, Son, and Spirit¹. He's creating a universe so that He can place humans in it (Genesis 1:27), and love them. The humans fail, so God saves them (John 3:17). The Bible closes with God creating a new and perfect place for His beloved (Revelation 22).

From front to back, the Bible is the story of a God who loves human beings unconditionally, repeatedly showing and telling us about His love.

Love in The Old Testament

During the days of the prophet Jeremiah, the people of Israel are facing a ruthless enemy who is coming to destroy their civilization. People are terrified. What will become of them? How will their children survive? What will happen to their nation?

As they cry out, God answers:

This is what the Lord says:

*I will certainly restore the fortunes of Jacob's tents
and show compassion on his dwellings.*

Every city will be rebuilt on its mound;

every citadel will stand on its proper site (Jeremiah 30:18).

Dig into the behavior of Israel during this time period and you'll see that they deserve what's coming. Even so, God promises to restore their fortunes once their judgment has been served.

Why would God restore them? According to His own words: *I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore, I have continued to extend faithful love to you* (Jeremiah 31:3).

The pages of the Old Testament Prophets are filled with stories and promises like that.

Love in The New Testament

¹ In Genesis 1, the Father creates the heavens and the earth. He does so by using words. "Let there be light." John 1 tells us that the Son is "the Word." As the Father creates through the agency of the Son, the Spirit was hovering there, watching and approving.

Looking at God's actions throughout the Old Testament, the Apostle Paul concludes, *I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord* (Romans 8:38-39).

The Story of the Bible

Some have called the Bible, "God's love letter." It contains 66 books, divided into 1,189 chapters. The word, "love" appears 766 times in the Christian Standard Bible. That's a reference, on average, every chapter and a half.

When God wrote His love letter, He used Hebrew for the Old Testament and Greek for the New. Both languages are more precise than English. Where we have one word for "love," Hebrew has four words and Greek has three.

The Hebrew Words

Aheb/Ahavah is Hebrew's most common word for love. It means love between people, romantic love, and God's love for humanity. It implies a chosen, willed commitment to another, not just feeling. It's the word used in Deuteronomy 6:5 — *Love the Lord your God with all your heart.*

Hesed is my favorite Hebrew word for love. It means *lovingkindness, steadfast love, mercy, or covenant loyalty*. It's such a great word because it describes God's special love for His covenant people, Israel. His faithful and enduring love. *Hesed* may be the most theologically rich word in the Old Testament. It's the word used in Jeremiah 31:3.

Dod is the word for romantic and affectionate love. It's primarily used in *The Song of Solomon* and means warm, tender, and intimate love.

Racham carries the meaning of deep, tender compassion — the instinctive, nurturing love a mother has for her child. It's derived from the root word for womb (*rechem*), and often translated *compassion* or *mercy*. God uses this word to describe His own feelings toward Israel in Isaiah 49:15. *Can a woman forget her nursing child, or lack compassion for the child of her womb? Even if these forget, yet I will not forget you.*

The Greek Words

The New Testament's primary word for love is *agape*. It describes an unconditional, self-sacrificial, willed love. *Agape* is not based on the worthiness of the recipient or on feeling, but on a deliberate choice to seek another's highest good. This is the word John uses in 1 John 4:8 when he says, *God is love*. It is the love of the cross. *Agape* loves regardless of response, cost, or merit.

Greek's second word for love is *phileo*. *Phileo* refers to love between close friends or family members. It carries emotional warmth and fondness. William Penn, who wanted to create a place where people genuinely cared for each other, named the capital of the colony "Philadelphia," which means "city of brotherly love."

Greek's third word is *storge*. It describes familial love, particularly the instinctive affection between parents and children. It's the love that doesn't need to be chosen or cultivated; it simply *belongs* by nature of the relationship. Storge only shows up three times in the New Testament. Twice negatively, and once positively. Romans 1:31 lists the characteristics of people who have rejected God: *without love (astorgos), unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good*. 2 Timothy 3:3 describes the marks of people in the last days: *without love (astorgos), unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good*. And positively, Romans 12:10 commands we... *Be devoted to one another in love (philostorgos). Honor one another above yourselves*.

Speed-read or glance through the 1,189 chapters of Scripture and you'll find that God's love is not reactive, it initiates, it's unconditional, and it pursues us. God doesn't love because we are lovable; we are lovable *because* God loves us.

Let's pray about it:

Lord, I'm beginning to see how important love is! Thank You for showing me that giving love is the central purpose of my life, because it's the certain purpose of Yours. Help me today to keep on noticing people and enhancing their lives, like You do mine. In Jesus' name. Amen!

Day 4
God is Love
1 John 4:16

God is love, and the one who remains in love remains in God, and God remains in him. 1 John 4:16

“God is love,” may be the simplest and most important truth in the Bible. Everything God does is loving. Even when He says, “no,” He does so with your best interests in mind.

Yesterday we learned that the New Testament’s primary word for love is “agape.” It’s love, a choice made by the lover about the love-e. Prior to Christianity, Greek-speakers used the word agape as a word for general affection or preference. Christianity needed a word that captured the idea of divine, self-sacrificial, and unconditional love. There was no word in current usage that adequately fit that definition, so *agape* was repurposed.

When John says, “God is love” (agape), he’s describing an idea not based on the worthiness of the recipient, or on feeling, but on a deliberate choice to seek another's highest good. Agape loves regardless of response, merit, or cost.

This is our God: the One who loves regardless of how we respond, based on nothing we’ve done to earn it, and in spite of what it costs Him personally.

Think of your children, or of the person you adore most in this world. Even they rub you the wrong way from time to time. Usually we choose to love them because they’re in close relationship with us. That’s *phileo* love. We love them because they’re related to us.

Your self-centered way of seeing things rubs God the wrong way every time it rears its head. God loves you *in spite of* your selfish ways. He agapes you, not because you’re a great prize, but because agape is core to His nature.

He’s more than agape

Of course, God is more than agape. He is also holy, and just, and righteous, and all that is beautiful and good. None of these qualities conflict with his agape-ness. They are all integrated together. Even God’s wrath is part of His agape towards us.

This is worth pausing to think about. All of God’s divine qualities are unified together in what can only be called “perfection.” This God wants always, only and ever the best for you and all His creations.

He never changes.

The Bible says that Jesus (who is also God) is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Hebrews 13:8). Which means that at every moment you are unconditionally loved by Him, and you never have to worry that this will change.

Suppose for a second that our world is inhabited by a “god” who changes his feelings towards you every once in a while. Image what might happen if tomorrow morning, say, for just a nanosecond, this “god” decided on a whim to do something wicked, childish, or spiteful? Maybe he’d slow the world’s spin for a half a second, so we’d all fall down like when you’re standing in the aisle of a train and its conductor suddenly pumps the brakes. Maybe he’d reverse the flow of the rivers for a few hours, causing upstream floods and contamination. Living in a world with such a divine being would be unpredictable, unsafe, and lead to paranoia about what might happen next.

If God is loving even only 99.9% of the time, then everything we believe about the nature of the wind and waves and the very atoms we’re made of becomes a subject for worry.

He’s completely agape.

Or consider another scenario. Suppose we were governed by a “god” who isn’t fully loving, but only 99.9% loving?

This “god” wouldn’t love you completely, only partially. He’d never act *purely* out of love, but always with a very slightly mixed motive.

Once again we’d be faced with a world where we couldn’t know what we’re being handed. Everything we would experience would be tainted by the slightest amount of something other than love. Maybe divine disdain. Or God-centered greed. Or some other form of self-serving. That world would breed insanity. You’d never be able to trust that what you’re receiving isn’t setting you up for a disaster, or doesn’t have a hidden “gotcha” at the end of it.

We exist for Him, not vice versa.

Now, to be clear, everything in existence was created by God, for His glory. You were created for God’s pleasure. Your central purpose is to honor Him and reflect His magnificence back to Him. Nothing that has been made was made for its own self-aggrandizement or pleasure. It’s all for Him. But, because the God who made this world for Himself is all loving, every atom of it receives His loving attention and intention at every moment.

Application

The Apostle John, who had lived a long life by the time he wrote the letter of 1 John, described from personal experience how we ought to respond to the knowledge that God is love. He said *the one who remains in love remains in God, and God remains in him* (1 John 4:16b). In other words, in every moment that you act towards others the way God acts towards you (by noticing them, and acting in their best interest) you are fully participating in the life of God, and He is fully participating in your life.

Summary

In your quest to become a better lover, these three thoughts will help you, if you keep them at the front of your mind today are:

1. I live in a world governed by an amazing God who loves me purely, in every moment.

2. I was made by the amazing God to love Him purely, in every moment.
3. I am commissioned by this amazing God to love the people around me in every moment today.

Pray this out loud:

I love You Lord, because You first loved me. Thank You for always loving me, both in my best moments, and in my worst. Thank You for never failing to love me. Today I'm going to do my best to tell You repeatedly that I love You. Please help me love the people around me today better than I did yesterday. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Day 5
God Loves the World
John 3:1-17

For God loved the world in this way: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. John 3:16

If you're wanting to learn about the love of God, you can't find a teacher than His Son.

Early in Jesus' ministry, a prominent Pharisee knocked on His door, looking for answers.

"Rabbi," he said, "you must be a teacher sent from God, because no one could do what you're doing unless God is with him."

It was a polite way of saying, "Share your wisdom with me. I want to know more."

Cutting straight to what's most important, Jesus replied, "Nicodemus, there's exactly one thing you must do to see the kingdom of God, you must be born again" (John 3:3).

This is new news to Nicodemus. From childhood he's been taught that the Jews are God's chosen people. If you're born Jewish, you're chosen. You don't have to do *anything* to gain eternal life. Jesus opens his eyes to a new way of seeing, and he wants this rich life this Rabbi is offering.

"Tell me more," he says. "How can I be born again? I'm too big to fit back in my mother's womb" (John 3:4).

In response, Jesus patiently explains what Christians call, "The mystery of the new birth."

"In order to be born into the physical world, you need a physical birth. In order to be born into the spiritual world, you need a spiritual birth. The two are different. Both are necessary" (John 3:5-8).

"Are you sure about this?" asks the Pharisee (John 3:9).

"Yes. I know what I'm talking about. I've come from heaven, and I'll return there one day soon. Do you remember the story of Moses (from Numbers 21), when the children of Israel were bitten by snakes? Moses lifted up a snake on a pole so that anyone afflicted by a snakebite could look at that pole and cured from the venom in his system. One day I'm going to be lifted up on a pole, and because of that, anyone who looks to me for salvation will be granted it" (John 3:11-15).

Nicodemus gives Him a look like, "Really?"

“Yes really.”

Then Jesus delivers the iconic explanation that has been passed down to us on posters, billboards and sermons: *“God so loved the world that He sent His one and only Son, so that whoever believes in Him will not perish, but have everlasting life”* (John 3:16).

In one single sentence, Jesus identifies...

- the *object* of God’s love: the world.
- And the *scope* of God’s love: the whole world.
- And the *recipients* of God’s love: whoever will believe.
- And the *intention* of God’s love: that no one will perish.
- And the *duration* of God’s love: forever.

In the next verse, Jesus delivers a second sentence that deserves more attention than it gets. *For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him* (John 3:17).

Read up on what the first century world was like. It had wars, abuse, slavery, and every other hurtful thing people could do to each other. People were doing terrible things. Much like today.

God didn’t send Jesus into the world to condemn it; it was already condemned by all those terrible things. Instead, and almost unbelievably, because of His inexhaustible love, God sent Jesus to pay for all those terrible things, in spite of all their terribleness.

Someone has labeled the seven actions of John 3:16 this way:

<i>God -</i>	The Almighty Authority
<i>So loved the world -</i>	The Mighty Motive
<i>That He gave His only Son -</i>	The Greatest Gift
<i>That whoever -</i>	The Widest Welcome
<i>Believes in Him -</i>	The Easiest Escape
<i>Will not perish -</i>	The Divine Deliverance
<i>But have everlasting life -</i>	The Priceless Privilege

This is the story of the love of our God.

Pray this:

Lord Jesus, I’m one of those “whoever” You came for! I believe You are the Son of God. I believe You came into this world, lived a sinless life, and were lifted up on the Cross to die a substitutionary death for my sins. I trust in Your sin-payment for me, and I thank You for Your love for me. You’re the only God I’ll ever want, need or worship. In Jesus’ name. Amen!

Day 6
The Prodigal Father
Luke 15:11-24

But while the son was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion. He ran, threw his arms around his neck, and kissed him. Luke 15:20

Among His infinite talents, Jesus was a master storyteller.

On His march to Jerusalem, He told a story we know as “The Parable of the Prodigal Son.” It should be called “The Parable of the Prodigal *Father*.” The word “prodigal” means “recklessly wasteful, extravagant.” This is the story of a father who loves unconditionally and extravagantly. If you want to understand the love of God, look no further than Luke 15.

“A man had two sons,” Jesus begins (Luke 15:11). “One day, the younger son asked him for his inheritance. So the father divided his assets between them” (Luke 15:12).

If you’ve heard the story, you know it doesn’t go well for this ne’re-do-well child. After spending everything on wine, women, and song, he finds himself feeding pigs in a faraway country (Luke 15:13-14).

Push pause on the story for a minute, for a little cultural background. The audience Jesus is addressing is made up of first century Middle Easterners. In that culture, children respected their parents above all else. No son would dare insult his father the way this son did. And no father would respond with the reckless extravagance this father did.

Asking for his inheritance was like saying, “Father, I wish you were dead.” Upon hearing the son’s request, Jesus’ audience knew *exactly* what would happen next: the father would beat the son for his insolence. To their shock and dismay, this father not only did not beat his son, he actually gave him his portion of the estate.

Of course, the boy’s portion of the estate wasn’t a cash settlement. Agrarian cultures kept their wealth in livestock and land. In order to turn these into cash, the boy would have to peddle his father’s cows, sheep, furniture, tools, and utensils to the townspeople – another unimaginable thing!

Middle Eastern culture is what sociologists call an “honor/shame culture.” Every action was built around upholding honor and avoiding shame. This boy was shaming his father in front of the whole village!

And Middle Easterner culture has a group identity. To insult one member of the village is to insult every member of the village. By the time this rascal was through liquidating his father’s hard-earned belongings, the entire town was talking about whipping and stoning him – or, at the very least, tarring and feathering him.

The boy leaves town and sets up residency in a nearby nation. Different people, but the same Middle Eastern values. They put up with him as he spreads his money around, but once it's exhausted, they wanted nothing to do with him. No one would hire until finally, a farmer with a perverse sense of humor offers him a job feeding pigs (Luke 15:14-16).

It's a job no Jew can accept. According to Jewish law (Leviticus 11:7-8), pigs are unclean animals. Jews were forbidden to touch them. And pigs have to be fed seven days a week. You can't keep the Sabbath if you're feeding pigs.

In the pit of his shame, the son comes to his senses. "Everyone who works for my dad has plenty to eat!" (Luke 15:17).

He decided to return home. On the road, he rehearses. *"I'm going to say to my father, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven, and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired workers'"* (Luke 15:18-19).

Mile after mile he pictures himself reciting this speech while kneeling at his father's feet.

Jesus says, *"But while the son was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion. He ran, threw his arms around his neck, and kissed him"* (Luke 15:20).

Pause again. Remember how the village felt about this boy as he was leaving town? They vowed to tar and feather him if he ever returned. The boy knows this. With each mile, as he rehearses his speech, he pictures the townspeople pelting him with stones, swearing, and spitting on him.

The father, too, knows that this is what will happen if the boy ever comes home. So every day, he watches. Should his son ever breach the horizon, he's determined to get to him before the villagers can sound the alarm. One the day that head pops over the hill on road into town, the father does five things no Middle Eastern landowner would ever do (Luke 15:20-24).

1. He runs. This was against all etiquette. Aristotle said, "No great-souled man would ever run." It was undignified. It showed he was not in control. And to run, you'd have to lift your robe. Lifting your robe would expose your ankles. Exposing your ankles like appearing naked in public.

2. He orders that the best robe be put on the boy's back. The best robe was the father's personal robe.

3. He commands that a ring be put on the boy's finger. This would be the family signet ring, the one used to seal all official family documents, giving this son legal status to act once again in his father's name.

4. He insists that sandals be put on the boy's feet. In that culture, servants went barefoot. Only sons wore sandals.

5. He directs his servant to kill the fattened calf. In days before refrigeration, you only butchered enough meat to feed those who would be at your table. For two to four people, you'd kill a chicken. For ten to twenty, a goat. You only killed a calf if you intended to feed the whole village!

Remember what the son was expecting as he walked that long road home. He expected to be met with jeers and fists and rocks and spittle in his face. Instead, he found himself wrapped in the loving arms of his unconditionally-loving father, who was smothering him with kisses.

There is a Father in heaven, who loves you, and everyone you know, recklessly. Wastefully. Extravagantly. He is willing to humiliate Himself to have a relationship with you. It doesn't matter what you've done, or how you've treated Him. He simply loves you, beyond all rationality.

Pray this:

Heavenly Father, I can see that words fall short of describing how great Your love is for me, and all people. But this story gives me the picture. Thank You for loving me! In Jesus' name. Amen!

Week 2

Sermon: How to Become a More Loving Person

Find your notes from this morning's sermon and reflect on what you learned using the prompts below.

1. Summarize the sermon in one phrase or sentence:

2. Which part moved or motivated me most?

3. What new way of thinking do I want to adopt about how I see, think about, and treat people as a result of today's sermon?

4. What do I want to do differently as a result?

5. What do I need to tell God today?

How to Become a More Loving Person
Bible Study 2
1 Corinthians 13:1-13

Warm Up

1. Sing a line from your favorite love song as a teenager.

Study

Read 1 Corinthians 12:31

2. Based on what you already know about 1 Corinthians 13, what do you suppose the “even better way” is that Paul is talking about?

Context

The book of 1 Corinthians is Paul’s response to a letter the Corinthians had sent to him. Their letter reported some divisions within the leadership of the church, a grave sin being committed by one of their members, and asked practical questions about marriage, meat sacrificed to idols, how to conduct public worship, spiritual gifts, and the resurrection. Paul responds to all of them. 1 Corinthians 13 is in the middle of the section on spiritual gifts.

Read 1 Corinthians 13:1-3

3. In these three verses, Paul lists six spiritual gifts that aren’t talked about much. Tongues (v. 1), prophecy, mysteries, knowledge, faith (v. 2), and voluntary poverty (v. 3). How can these gifts benefit the body of Christ?

4. Why is practicing love a better way to benefit the body than practicing any and all of these gifts?

Read 1 Corinthians 13:4-8a

5. Of these 15 qualities, which one is the hardest for you to practice, and which one is the easiest, and why?

6. What do all of these qualities have in common?

7. If you had never heard the word “love” before, and had only this passage as a description, how would you define “love”?

Read 1 Corinthians 13:8b-10

8. When will these spiritual gifts “cease”? Why will they cease?

Read 1 Corinthians 13:11-12

9. What’s Paul’s point here?

Read 1 Corinthians 13:13

10. How are faith, hope and love related, and why is love the greatest of them?

11. The city of Corinth was known for its sexual looseness. Imagine growing up in that environment and then being introduced to the love and Lordship of Christ. How would your concept of love change? In what ways would your concept of how to interact with others change?

12. What new or different things have you learned about love from this study, and the readings you’ve done so far? How are you trying to live differently as a result?

Share requests and pray for each other.

Day 8
How to Become a More Loving Person
Step 1: Receive God's Love
1 John 4:19

We love because he first loved us. 1 John 4:19

“Reactive attachment disorder,” is a condition that develops in children who grow up without a person in their lives who consistently responds and cares for them. They don’t know what love is because they haven’t experienced it. These children tend to be emotionally withdrawn, and seldom seek comfort from others. Fortunately, the condition is reversible. When adopted into a nurturing family, such kids can learn to love and trust others.

There’s a lesson here: *People learn to love from experience.* Not from a textbook or lecture, but from a real, live person expressing it to them repeatedly.

This week, we’re going to learn how to become more loving people. I’m going to give you a five-step process straight from the Bible. If you put these five steps into action, practicing each of them often, you will become a master at loving others.

Your first step to becoming a master at loving others is simple, but lifechanging. Like a child who needs the experience of being loved by a bigger person, you need the experience of being loved by God. His love is real, and perfect, and available to you in this very moment.

Last week we learned from John 3:16 that *God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in him will not perish, but have everlasting life.*

Everlasting life isn’t just life in heaven after you die. Everlasting life is a quality of life that begins when you invite Jesus, the Son of God, to become your Lord and Savior. In Revelation 3:20 He promises that *If any hears my voice and opens the door [to your life], I will come in to him, and eat with him, and he with me.*

If you have never formally opened the door to your life to Jesus, right now is the best time to do that. Say to Him, “Lord Jesus, I believe You came to earth to pay the price for my sins by dying on the Cross. I admit I have sinned and ask You to forgive me. I invite You to come into my life and live with me. I ask You to be my Lord and Savior, and purpose to follow You from now on.”

If you prayed that prayer just now, God, through His Holy Spirit, has just entered your life. Your past is forgiven, and God is now living within you.

1 John 4:19 says that the reason we are able to love is because “... *he first loved us.*” From now on, you will experience the love of God personally.

Whether today is the first day of your experience with the love of God, or you've been a Christian for a long time, the first step to becoming more loving is to experience love from God. There are four ways this will happen for you.

How to Personally Experience God's Love

1. In your heart. Romans 5:5 says, *God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.* Pay attention to this. At every moment, God is with you, expressing His love to you, directing your thoughts and attitudes as you pay attention to Him.

2. Through the Spirit's inner witness. Romans 8:16 says, *The Spirit himself testifies together with our spirit that we are God's children.* At every moment, God is testifying to you, assuring you that He is with you, and all of His promises in Scripture are available to you. Again, pay attention to this.

3. By remaining in Christ. John 15:9-10 says, *As the Father has loved me, I have also loved you. Remain in my love. If you keep my commands you will remain in my love.* In the passage, Jesus compares Himself to the branch of a grapevine, and us to the vine that's attached to it. As long as we stay attached, we experience all that He has for us, including massive doses of His love.

4. By obedience. You remain in Jesus by keeping His commands (John 15:10). In John 14:23 Jesus also says, *If anyone loves me, he will keep my word. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.*

Step 1 in the great assignment of becoming a more loving person is to experience what real love is like, by experiencing it from the Master of love Himself. Start today in paying attention to how God goes about loving you from the inside out.

Pray this:

Lord Jesus, I receive Your love for me today. Help me to learn to love others like You love me! In Jesus' name. Amen!

Day 9
How to Become a More Loving Person
Step 2: Bear the Fruit of the Spirit
Galatians 5:22-23

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Galatians 5:22-23

In the side yard of my house I have an apple tree. I didn't plant it; I just discovered it one day. My only explanation for how it got there is that somehow an apple core must have fallen out while I was taking our trash to the bin.

When it first stuck its nose out of the underbrush, I couldn't tell exactly what it was, but from the looks of it, it seemed to be a tree. I like trees, so I let it continue to grow until one day, it had blossoms, then buds, and by early summer, those buds were becoming nice, beautiful apples.

From my perspective, all those apples happened by accident. But biologically, you and I know that that tree produces apples because that's what God designed it to do.

An apple tree needs soil, sunlight and water to grow. All three of those were naturally present when I accidentally dropped the apple core some years ago. In its early days, I didn't do anything to help the tree. But now that I know what it is, I do three things to help it produce fruit. I prune it in the fall, fertilize it in the winter, and water it in the spring and summer. It grows more and better apples when I do these things.

Yesterday we started in on a process of becoming more loving people. Step 1 is to experience love in order to give love. Step 2 is to do what you were designed to do, which is bear the fruit of the Spirit, and the fruit of the Spirit is love.

Galatians 5:22-23 lists nine traits of a person who is bearing the Fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Some Bible scholars say that each of these nine are unique traits unto themselves. Others say that love is *the* fruit of the Spirit, and the other eight qualities are all descriptions of what love looks like when it's put into action.

For the sake of the week's assignment, let's assume the latter. Let's assume that the fruit of the Spirit is love. In other words, when you and I look like what we were designed to look like, we're like a tree with branches sticking out, and on every one of those branches are bushels of love.

In one sense, our love bushels should just come out naturally. If we sit in the right soil, absorb enough sunlight, and drink in enough living water, the tree that is our life will burst out with love. This is God's plan for us. If you've received the Holy Spirit into your life through inviting Jesus to be your Savior, this fruit should be happening without conscious effort on your part.

And it might be. But my experience with pruning, fertilizing, and watering tells me that I can produce more and better fruit if I intentionally do things to nurture the fruit the Holy Spirit is trying to produce inside of me.

So let's get intentional. As Christians, we have the Holy Spirit within us. He is producing the fruit of love in our lives. There are some things we can do to assist in this process. We can choose to be good soil. We can absorb the right nutrients. And we can keep ourselves from doing things that will damage our fruit.

We'll talk about each of these concrete actions over the next few days. For today, your assignment is to continue to pay attention to the Holy Spirit within you, as we learned yesterday. And now also to be aware that the Holy Spirit is deliberately working to produce the fruit of love in your life.

Pray this:

Lord Jesus, today I am giving You my full cooperation in producing in me the love You designed for me to produce. In Jesus' name. Amen!

Day 10
How to Become a More Loving Person
Step 3: Know What Love Looks Like
1 Corinthians 13:4-8

Love is patient, love is kind. Love does not envy, is not boastful, is not arrogant, is not rude, is not self-seeking, is not irritable, and does not keep a record of wrongs. Love finds no joy in unrighteousness but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. 1 Corinthians 13:4-8a

Lee Strobel tells a story about his very young son playing soccer. During the first part of the season, Strobel's team lost every match. They never even took a shot at the goal. In frustration one day, Lee sat his son down and said, "Kyle, the purpose of the game is to put the ball in the net."

That changed everything. The moment the game started, Kyle stole the ball from his own teammate, sprinted down the field, and kicked the ball directly into the goal. He repeated this over and over again, changing the way he and his team played for the rest of the season.

This week we're learning the process of becoming a more loving person. Step 1 is to experience God's love. Step 2 is to begin to bear the fruit of love in your life. Step 3 is to know what love looks like. In the game of loving others, you can't score a goal unless you know what a goal looks like.

First century Las Vegas

In 54 A.D., the Apostle Paul received a letter from the church in Corinth. The church had questions and divisions, so they wrote Paul to ask for help. In response, the Apostle composed the letter we know as "1 Corinthians." In that day, the city of Corinth was like Las Vegas. Lots of sex masquerading as love. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Paul gave the Corinthians a detailed description of what true love looks like.

Reread the verses at the top of this page and count the number of actions listed. (The answer is *fifteen*). Paul's description is fifteen actions, zero feelings. And every action is a choice to elevate the interests of the other person. This is what the game of love looks like.

Walk through them with me in the next sixty seconds. (That's four seconds per action.) At the bottom of the page, jot down thoughts as they come to you.

1. What does it take to be *patient* with another person?
2. What does it take to be *kind*?
3. What do you need to set aside in order to *not envy*?
4. What do you have to do to *keep yourself from bragging*?
5. What do you need to do to *think humbly* of yourself?
6. What can keep you from *being rude* to someone?
7. How can you keep yourself from seeking *your own good* above others?

8. When you're tired or hungry, how do you keep from getting *irritable*?
9. How will you stop yourself from *keeping a record* of other people's wrongs?
10. What does it look like to *rejoice* when the morally-right thing happens?
11. What does it mean to *bear all things*?
12. What does it mean to *believe all things*?
13. What does it mean to *hope all things*?
14. And what does it mean to *endure all things*?
15. How is it that *love never ends* (or *never fails*)?

Mastering this Biblical description of true love will make you a master at loving others.

Pray this:

Lord Jesus, as I look over this list, I can see that You were always patient and kind, never envied anyone, never boasted about Yourself, were never arrogant, rude, self-seeking, or irritable. You never kept records on how people wronged You. You never rejoiced when bad triumphed, and You always were happy when good came out on top. You bore all things, believed all things, hoped all things, endured all things. And to this day, Your love has never failed. Help me to retain this idea, and live it out. Bring it to my mind often, I ask, in Jesus' name!

Day 11
How to Become a More Loving Person
Step 4: Choose to Do the Loving Thing
Matthew 5:44; 22:37-39

***But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...
Matthew 5:44***

He said to him, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and most important command. The second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself.” Matthew 22:37-39

The Nature of God’s Commands

I’ve been watching my children give commands to their children recently, and discovered three things.

1. His commands are good for you.

The first is, because they love their children, they never give a command that isn’t good for their child. God doesn’t either. Every time you feel the inner witness of the Spirit nudging you to do something loving, remind yourself, “God never asks me to do things that aren’t good for me.”

2. His commands are doable.

The second is, my children never command their kids to do anything the kids can’t do. Sometimes what they ask is *stretching*, but it’s always doable. Likewise, every time the Lord asks you to do something, you can do it!

3. You get to choose.

The third is, every time my children give their kids a command, the kids have a choice. They can obey, or disobey.

Yesterday, 1 Corinthians 13 showed us that love isn’t a feeling. It’s an action. Today let’s add to that: love is not only an action, it’s also a choice. It’s an act of your will. Every time you’re presented with the opportunity to love, you get to decide whether you’re willing to do so or not.

Read this out loud: *“Love is a choice I make.”*

In Matthew 5:44 Jesus gave us a choice: *love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...* You can choose to pray for them, or not.

In Matthew 22:37, Jesus gives us another choice: *love the Lord your God with all your heart.* You can love Him, or not.

The same is true with Matthew 22:39: *love your neighbor as yourself*. (Remember, Jesus never asks you to do something that isn't good for you.)

When you make a choice, the choice makes you.

Someone happens to you every time you make a choice. As you're making your choice to love or ignore, you become a warmer or colder person depending on which you choose. It's a principle of life: you make your choices, and your choices make you.

Love takes effort.

Before we close today, I want to add one more thing.

Paul included fifteen actions in his description of love. If I could refine his list, I'd add a sixteenth: *love is work*. Since we are by nature self-centered people, almost every time we do something for the benefit of another, it involves effort on our part. You will never be a loving person until you acknowledge this. But once you acknowledge this, loving others will become easier, because every time you think about loving someone, you will no longer have to wrestle with the fact that doing so will require effort.

Our church's building sits at the east end of an outdoor strip mall. Wind blows from west to east here, so trash from the rest of the mall is constantly floating into our parking lot. Years ago, I made the decision that every time I walk from my car to the building, I will pick up a piece of trash on my way in. This requires a little effort. And by little, I mean, *little*. All I have to do is bend down and pick something up. And now that I've pre-decided that I'm going to make that effort, the effort is even littler.

The first time I thought about picking up trash, an obstacle came to my mind. "If you pick that up, you'll get your hands dirty. And if you get your hands dirty, you'll have to wash before you shake anyone else's." In that moment, I decided that being the kind of person who is willing to pick up some trash is worth the price of having to wash my hands a lot. So now, I don't even think about it. I just scan the ground, bend down, and whisk up an offending object on my way indoors. After twenty-five years of this, it's a no-brainer. I made my decision, and my decision has made me into a person who makes our parking lot cleaner.

Every time you think about doing the loving thing by, say, noticing another person and trying to make their life better, you get to choose. And every time you choose to do the loving thing, the loving thing gets easier.

Pray this:

Lord Jesus, starting today, I am making the volitional choice to love You with all my heart, soul, and mind, and to love the people around me, because I am, and want to be, a loving person. Help me to notice people today and do things that make their lives better. In Jesus' name. Amen!

Day 12
How to Become a More Loving Person
Step 5: Remain in Him
John 15:4-5

Remain in me, and I in you. Just as a branch is unable to produce fruit by itself unless it remains on the vine, neither can you unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. The one who remains in me and I in him produces much fruit, because you can do nothing without me. John 15:4-5

For three years Jesus had spent day and night with the Disciples. In almost every minute of every day they watched, listened and learned. When they had questions, He answered them. When they needed encouragement, He gave it. When they lacked wisdom, direction, or provision, He supplied it. Then came the Last Supper. *I have fervently desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer*, He said (Luke 22:15).

It was an important evening. They would never again spend twenty-four hours a day with Him. What could Jesus say that would sustain them without His presence? Jesus thought carefully about that. He chose a metaphor. *I am the vine, and you are the branches*, He said. Then three critical words: *Remain in me* (John 15:4). Without Jesus' physical presence that three-word action is the key to a vibrant Christian life.

A branch that becomes detached from the grapevine cannot live. All its nutrients come from the vine. Likewise, a Christian gets all of his or her spiritual nutrients from Christ. This is why Jesus said, *you can do nothing without me* (John 15:5b).

When I try to love others in my own strength, I only get so far. On my own, I'm not wise enough to see what my friends truly need. And I'm not patient enough to keep loving them when they get difficult. And honestly, in my own flesh I'm not motivated enough to want to, even if I could.

But when I'm connected to Jesus, He reminds me that this person in front of me is a treasure, and that there are times when I need the kind of love they need right now. He'll whisper to me, *Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends* (John 15:13, NASB). Or, *...even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many* (Mark 10:45, NIV). Or, *Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up* (Galatians 6:9, NIV). Or, *whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me* (Matthew 25:40, NIV).²

How to Remain in Him

Of the five steps to becoming a more loving person, Step 5 is both the simplest and hardest at the same time. The simple part is *Remain in Jesus*. Don't go anywhere or do anything without Him. The hardest part is *Remain in Jesus*. Don't chase after lesser

² Jesus usually whispers to me in whatever translation I have memorized.

things. Keep your mind focused on Him. Resist the temptation to do things that displease Him.

How can you do this? The place to start is with your mind. 1 Thessalonians 5:17 says, *Pray constantly*. In his earliest days as a missionary to the Philippines, Frank Laubach made it his goal to put this into practice by keeping his mind constantly thinking about God. At first, Laubach found this impossible. His mind was easily distracted. So he decided to make up games that would remind him to think about God. One of his games was called, “Game with Minutes.” He’d set an alarm to go off every sixty seconds. The alarm reminded him to refocus his thoughts on God.

Night after night Frank wrote in his journal, “I failed again today.” But he kept at it. And after forty years of practice, he realized that it had been months since he had spent more than a minute *without* thinking about God. It took decades, but Laubach found that it really is possible to pray constantly.

Romans 12:2 says, *Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind*. Every time I turn to my phone, turn on the television, or turn onto the freeway, my mind is fed messages and ideas that want to conform my thinking to this age. 2 Corinthians 4:4 calls Satan, “the god of this age.” If my thoughts are going to remain in Jesus, I need to have my mind *transformed* by God, not *conformed* by Satan.

The way that happens is by absorbing Biblical content. There are five levels of absorbing Scripture. I can hear it, read it, study it, memorize it, and meditate on it. I hear the Word through sermons, podcasts, and small group discussions. I read the Word by opening my Bible and putting my eyes on a page. I study by asking and answering questions about a passage. I memorize it by committing verses to rote memory. And I meditate on it when I take quiet minutes to think deeply about meaning, relevance, and application of a passage to my life. King David declared, *I have treasured your word in my heart so that I may not sin against you* (Psalm 119:11). Applying these levels of Scripture absorption to your life is one of the surest ways to keep your mind and heart connected to the Vine.

Each of what we call “The Spiritual Disciplines”³ are designed to help you remain in Jesus. Here’s one more that’s crucial: hanging with the brethren. In Acts 2:46, members of the very first church *devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple* (which would be for large, corporate worship – like our Sunday services) and they *broke bread from house to house* (like our Life Groups). When we are with brothers and sisters in Christ, they encourage us to live for God more, trust God more, and remain close to Jesus.

Pray this:

³ The list of spiritual disciplines includes prayer, Bible engagement, worship, fellowship, serving, tithing, fasting, solitude, silence, and many more.

Lord Jesus, You are the Vine, and I am one of Your branches. Today I purpose to remain in You. I plan to think about You and pray to You constantly. I plan to spend time on some level absorbing Scripture, and if not today, very soon I'll spend time at church or in my Life Group to help strength my bond to You as well. In Jesus' name. Amen!

Day 13
The Benefits of Becoming a More Loving Person
Luke 6:40

...everyone who is fully trained will be like his teacher. Luke 6:40

Throughout this week we've been learning a process for becoming a more loving person:

1. Receive God's love by inviting Jesus into your life.
2. Begin to bear the fruit of love through the Holy Spirit's work in your life.
3. Understand that love isn't a feeling, it's a choice of the will to be patient, kind, content, and humble. Not proud, rude, self-seeking, or irritable. Not keeping a record of wrongs or finding joy in unrighteousness, but rejoicing in the truth. And bearing, believing, hoping, and enduring all things for the good of others.
4. Every chance you get, make the choice to do the loving thing.
5. Stay connected to Jesus, so that His love can flow through you.

As we complete our second full week of work on becoming more loving, your human nature is likely asking, "Is all this effort worth it?" Let's take a minute to get clear on the benefits of what will happen to you as you become a master at loving others.

Four Benefits of Becoming a Great Lover

(1) You'll become like Jesus.

According to the Bible, the great purpose of your life is to become like Jesus. Our Lord was the most loving person who ever lived. In His Sermon on the Plain, He pointed out that *everyone who is fully trained will be like his teacher* (Luke 6:40). The more you excel at loving others, the more you will be like your teacher, Jesus.

As a result of the love Jesus' expressed for us, *God highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name* (Philippians 2:9). This principle of reaping what you sow applies to you, too. The greater you love, the greater honor, name and reputation God will give you.

(2) You'll receive more love.

The Law of the Harvest is a universal principle sewn within the fabric of the world. *Whatever a person sows he will also reap* (Galatians 6:7). The more you love others, the more love you will experience.

(3) You'll make up for hurts you've caused.

Love covers a multitude of sins (1 Peter 4:8). You're never going to become perfect, but as people see your desire to look out for their interests, they'll like you more, trust you more, and overlook and forgive you when you hurt or disappoint them.

(4) You'll have less fear.

There is no fear in love; instead, perfect love drives out fear, because fear involves punishment (1 John 4:18a). The more you love others, the more you'll experience a sense of security and freedom from fear. Particularly fear of judgment.

Lord, I want to become more like You. Help me to love today like You love. In Jesus' name, Amen!

Week 3

Sermon: How to Really Love Your Family

Find your notes from this morning's sermon and reflect on what you learned using the prompts below.

1. Summarize the sermon in one phrase or sentence:

2. Which part moved or motivated me most?

3. What new way of thinking about me and my family do I want to adopt as a result of today's sermon?

4. What do I want to do differently as a result?

5. What do I need to tell God today?

How to Really Love Your Family
Bible Study 3
Colossians 3:12-15; Philippians 2:1-4

Warm Up

1. What do you think of these two statements? “Marriage is the laboratory where we learn to love one other person the way we will one day love Jesus.” And “Family is the social building block for just about everything good in this world.”

Read Colossians 3:12-15

2. Which place is easier to practice these verses: in church, or in your home. Why?

3. List the eight commands in verses 12-13.

4. List the two commands in verses 14-15.

5. Which of these are easiest for you to follow, and which is the most challenging?

6. If you are going to fully follow all ten commands, what attitudes and practices will you have to adopt?

Read Philippians 2:1-4

7. What does this passage add to your Colossians 3 assignment?

8. What's the best way to decide, remember, and practice "looking out for the interests of others," especially at home?

9. When you think of these couples in the Bible: Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Leah, Ruth and Boaz. How well did they do in following Colossians 3 and Philippians 2?

10. What gives you an advantage in loving your family over the couples in question 9? How can you take advantage of that advantage?

11. On Day 20 this week, you'll read: *The Bible presents the family as the foundational building block of society, designed by God as a unified physical, social, and spiritual unit. The nuclear family is comprised of a husband and wife who, at marriage, become "one flesh" (Genesis 2:24) in a permanent, sacred bond. God's normal plan is for this primary unit to become parents by producing sons and daughters, who are a heritage and reward from Him (Psalm 127:3).*

Ephesians 5:21-33 and Colossians 3:18-21 outline complementary roles within the household, urging husbands to love their wives sacrificially, wives to respect and submit to their husbands, and families to live in harmony.

Children are to obey their parents (Ephesians 6:1), while parents are to nurture their children gently (Ephesians 6:4), and train them to know and love the Lord (Deuteronomy 6:6-7, 17-18) and follow His ways (Proverbs 22:6).

How well are you doing at fulfilling your role(s) in your family these days?

12. What one action or idea do you want to work on this week to improve in loving your family?

Share requests and pray for each other.

Day 15
Honor Your Father and Your Mother
Ephesians 6:2-3

Honor your father and mother, which is the first commandment with a promise, so that it may go well with you and that you may have a long life in the land. Ephesians 6:2-3

Great societies are built on great families. And the greatness of a family is largely determined by how the father and mother treat each member, and how each member treats the father and mother.

God's Ten Commandments divide neatly into two sections. The first four commandments (Have no other gods; Don't make carved images; Don't take God's name in vain; Keep the Sabbath holy) focus on our relationship with God. The second six commandments (Honor your father and mother; Don't murder; Don't commit adultery; Don't steal; Don't lie; Don't covet) focus on our relationship with people. Notice that the first of the people-focused commands is about how to treat dad and mom.

To honor your parents means to prize them, care for them, and respect them. It's behavior that's been slipping in recent American generations.

In the second half of my life I came to love my father deeply. But it didn't start out that way. My dad was a high command-and-control type. He was an only child who was used to being the center of attention. As a ten-year-old, I remember thinking that he didn't really like me.

When I became a Christian, I read the Ten Commandments for the first time. It surprised me that the command, "Honor your father and mother," had no qualifier. It doesn't say, honor them if they're nice, or kind, or likeable, or fun. It just says, "honor them."

During my first year in college, I made the decision to hug my dad. We were both so new at it that it didn't go well. But it was a start. Next, I decided that whenever he invited me, I'd make the effort to do things with him. And I decided that when he wanted to give me advice, I'd listen.

Somewhere along the way, I grew to love my dad. And he grew loveable. Then I had kids, and all they ever knew was a loveable grandpa.

Dad passed away nine years ago. It was a great loss for me. I am daily grateful for all the things he did for me, and all the good memories my family shares of him.

I tell you all of this because it could have gone another way. I could have held on to my resentment and minimized our interactions. I could have unloaded on him about how I

really felt as a child. That would not have been honoring, and it wouldn't have done any good.

I was far from perfect at honoring my dad. But I got better over time. And today I'm so glad I made the choice to love him as best I could as a teen, and then learn to love him better as I grew in adulthood. I'm pretty sure a certain percentage of the blessings I'm experiencing today are as a result of that decision to love.

What about you? Are you prizing, caring for, and respecting your dad, at least as much as you are able? Are you honoring your mom for the things she's done for you, even if she hasn't done them perfectly?

As we continue this adventure of learning to become good at loving others, what is one way you can intentionally love one or both of your parents better, starting this week?

Pray this:

Lord Jesus, today I am making the decision to intentionally love my parents more deeply than I have in the past. Please give me insight into their love languages, and ability to express Your love to them through me. In Jesus' name. Amen!

Day 16
A Cord of Three Strands
Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

Two are better than one because they have a good reward for their efforts. For if either falls, his companion can lift him up; but pity the one who falls without another to lift him up. Also, if two lie down together, they can keep warm; but how can one person alone keep warm? And if someone overpowers one person, two can resist him. A cord of three strands is not easily broken. Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

The passage above is often used at weddings to reinforce how good it is to enter into a lifelong relationship with a spouse. But look at the passage again. Nowhere does it mention a marriage. In fact, the descriptor in v. 10 says, “companion.” So before we get too deep into the discussion of how important it is to love your family, let’s broaden the focus for a minute and talk about how important it is to have a close companion, whether that’s in a marriage or just in a friendship.

Think about these friends in the Bible. How important were they to each other? Elijah and Elisha, Naomi and Ruth, Jonathan and David, Paul and Barnabas, Paul and Silas, Paul and Timothy. The point Ecclesiastes 4 is making is that everybody needs a friend. Ideally, that friend would be a long-term spouse, but in our church, I know of sisters and brothers who have cared for each other, and non-related friends who have cared for each other. If you’re single right now, I hope you have a close friend. And if not, I hope you’ll cultivate one soon.

Years ago, a new attendee came to me and said, “Pastor, I want a prayer partner. Would you find one for me?” I have benefited from several prayer partner relationships, so I agreed to do so.

All that week I prayed and mentally searched my mind for a suitable prayer partner for this lady. When Sunday came I sought her out and said, “Sherry, I’ve been praying about this, and I’ve come to the conclusion that I can’t find you a prayer partner; the Lord has to bring her to you.”

Not too long after that Sherry sought me out and said, “Pastor, God showed me my prayer partner! I shook hands with a lady in church a few weeks ago, and the Lord said to me, ‘She’s the one.’ I invited her to coffee, and guess what? She had been praying for a prayer partner too!”

Sherry and Karen became as thick as thieves. They prayed together, played together, and watched each other’s children. They attended women’s conferences. I think they may have even vacationed together. The relationship lasted over two decades, until a job situation moved Karen out of state.

Ecclesiastes 4 gives three reasons that two are better than one: mutual encouragement when we’re down (v. 10), mutual support when we’re vulnerable (v. 11), and mutual

protection when we're attacked (v. 12a). Then it adds a little mind-zinger, *And a cord of three strands is not easily broken* (v. 12b).

This third strand is usually thought of as God Himself, but the text doesn't mention Him explicitly. Solomon might be envisioning the bonds that deepen when a child comes into the home. Or he could be thinking of the benefits of not just a twosome, but a group, like a Life Group. Once again, Solomon's point is, there is great value in relationships. It's a message we need to hear in a day when people's phones have become their closest companions.

Over the years, I've watched thousands of people come to our church and build deep friendship. And I've watched a few come and never find any close relationships. From all my watching, I can honestly say, it takes being a friend to have a friend.

Several chapters back, I mentioned that *love is work*. Love is intentionally extending yourself, taking initiative, being interested in other people, asking them questions, and thinking of good questions to ask. So is friendship. Ecclesiastes 4 is saying, "The work is worth it!"

If you're married, I encourage you to redouble your effort to be friends with your spouse. Pay attention to him/her. Ask them good and thoughtful questions. Questions that go beyond "How was your day?" Questions that open up inner thoughts, like, "What are you dreaming about these days?" and "What is God teaching you in this season?"

If you're not married, and lack a close friend, I encourage you to pray this prayer:

Lord Jesus, I know You made me to be in relationship with others, and in close relationship with at least one friend. Would You lead me to that potential close friend soon? And would You help me to step out of my comfort zone and initiate things to do together. Please give me a friend that I can be a blessing to, and not just receive from. In Jesus' name. Amen!

Day 17
Happy Wife, Happy Life
Ecclesiastes 9:9

Enjoy life with the wife you love all the days of your fleeting life, which has been given to you under the sun, all your fleeting days. For that is your portion in life and in your struggle under the sun. Ecclesiastes 9:9

Have you heard the phrase, “Happy wife, happy life?” No one can say for sure where it came from, but there’s some truth to it. Emotions are contagious, so if either the husband or wife is grumpy, irritable, sad, or in some way less than happy, they’ll likely cast a pall over the whole household.

We have a marriage myth in our culture that ought to be cleared up. Somewhere along the way we adopted the idea that the purpose of marriage is to make each other happy. Not true! According to the Bible, the purpose of marriage is to make each other holy.

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself for her to make her holy, cleansing her with the washing of water by the word. He did this to present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or anything like that, but holy and blameless (Ephesians 5:25-27).

To “make holy” means to make clean – like taking a shower, or washing your hands. The priest ministering in the Temple had to wash his hands and feet before approaching the Altar to make sacrifices. Husbands and wives have a similar job: to help each other become as cleansed of sin as possible so that we are pleasing to God as we approach His throne.

How do you help someone become holy?

First, let’s talk about two ways that *don’t* work. The first is nagging. Nagging is like being nibbled to death by a duck. It drives us apart, not together. Husbands and wives live too closely together to be accountability partners. We know each other’s every flaw and weakness. No one can live with being called out every other minute. If you need or want an accountability partner, apply yesterday’s lesson and culture a close friendship with someone outside your home.

The second means to holiness that doesn’t work is shaming. Shaming is when you attack the other person’s identity, or belittle them. Or use your words to intentionally make the other person feel bad. Contrast that with constructive criticism, which addresses the person’s behavior, but not their ego or identity, and hopefully does so in a gentle and caring way.

Being shamed by your spouse is particularly hurtful because this person (your husband, or wife) is the person whose opinion you value the most, and the person you most want to think well of you. When a guy in the car next to you shouts or extends his middle finger, it hurts a little. And when a close friend puts you down, it hurts a lot. But when

the person you feel the closest to criticizes your character, the pain goes deep. So deep that most of us want to run and hide rather than move closer together and improve.

How to Help Your Spouse Become Holy

There's an old saying that goes, "You catch more flies with honey than with vinegar." Honey is sweet. Vinegar stings. Instead of stinging our spouse, encourage them. Catch them doing good and right things and say, "I see such good in you!" Reinforce positive behavior rather than criticize negative behavior.

Wives, catch your husband praying and let him know how that inspires you. Compliment him for telling your children about God, for getting ready for church early, for reading his Bible, for taking the initiative on having the family read the Bible together. And husbands, do the same for her.

The second positive way to influence each other towards holiness is by example. Husbands, inspire your wife to want to pursue God by pursuing Him so genuinely yourself that she wants to be like you. Get up early enough to spend time with the Lord in Bible reading and prayer. Talk with her about what you're learning from God. Volunteer to lead something at church. Share your faith with a friend and invite him to join you on Sunday. And wives, do these and similar things for him.

In Ecclesiastes 9:9, Solomon was thinking about how short life is. He decided, "It won't last long! So here's what you should do. *Enjoy life with the wife you love all the days of your fleeting life, which has been given to you under the sun, all your fleeting days.*"

The way to truly enjoy your life with your wife is to keep the goal of marriage in front of you. The goal is to make each other better, more God-honoring, more like Jesus. As you do that, you'll experience more joy, which is better than happiness. Happiness lasts a moment; joy is a state of being.

Pray this (if you're married):

Father, today I recommit my marriage to You. I purpose to love my husband/wife the way You love me and the way Christ loved the church. I purpose to live my life with You so well today that it will honor You, and hopefully inspire him/her. Help me to notice and applaud his/her spiritual steps sincerely, every day. In Jesus' name. Amen!

Day 18
His Needs, Her Needs
1 Peter 3:7

Husbands, in the same way, live with your wives in an understanding way... 1 Peter 3:7

Since the inception of the free love movement in the 1970s, there's been a persistently-pushed agenda to deny gender differences and say, "men and women are just the same." The Bible makes clear that's simply not true, and I for one am grateful. What kind of boring world would this be if everyone had the same personality – all extraverts, say, or all right-brain artists, or all computer nerds? Or the same taste in clothes, colors, styles and fashion? Even worse, what if men and women really were exactly alike? Imagine marrying a mirror-image of yourself? Where would the delight in new insights and observations come from? Sameness is flatness. God loves us too much to birth us into a monochrome world.

One proof that God intended our distinctives is found in how He tells us to treat members of the opposite sex. "*Husbands, love your wives just as Christ loved the church and gave himself for her*" (Ephesians 5:25). And "*wives, respect your husbands*" (Ephesians 5:33). We all need both love and respect, but we need them in different amounts because God wired us up differently!

Peter, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, says to married men, "*Husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way...*" (1 Peter 3:7). He's saying, "understand your wife. Study her. Major in her, like you'd major in a math or chemistry in college. Take note of her likes and dislikes. Notice how she thinks and feels. Track the changes in her moods throughout the day/week/month/seasons. Become an expert in the woman you married." Likewise, women ought to study their husbands deeply.

If you'd like a shortcut in the study of your spouse, Christian psychologist Dr. Willard Harley did some work that can save you some time. In his counseling practice, he studied thousands of couples. He observed that all of us, male and female, have the same 100 top needs. *But*, the order of those needs is very different between genders. The top five needs of men are distinct from the top five needs of women.

Here's what Harley discovered:

The Top Five Needs of Women are for...

- **Affection:** She needs regular verbal and physical expressions of care, such as hugs, holding hands, and sweet notes.
- **Conversation (Intimate Conversation):** She needs unhurried time to talk about personal feelings, daily events, and deep thoughts, without distractions.
- **Honesty and Openness:** She needs complete transparency and truthfulness from her husband so that trust remains unbroken.

- **Financial Support:** She needs her husband to provide enough resources to live comfortably and securely without constant money panic.
- **Family Commitment:** She needs her husband's active, dedicated involvement in raising and caring for their children.

The Top Five Needs of Men are for:

- **Sexual Fulfillment:** This typically ranked as the primary need for men, representing deep physical and emotional vulnerability rather than just a physical release.
- **Recreational Companionship:** He has the desire for a wife to be a primary partner in hobbies, sports, or leisure activities, mirroring the shared experiences from their dating days.
- **Physical Attractiveness:** He needs his wife to make an intentional effort to care for her appearance, health, and presentation, which directly feeds a husband's appreciation for her.
- **Domestic Support:** He has a desire for the home to be a peaceful, organized sanctuary rather than a chaotic environment or source of continuous stress.
- **Admiration:** He needs to receive words of praise, respect, and validation from his wife, reassuring him that she respects his character, value, and achievements.

Now that you've seen both lists, I encourage you to do two things.

First, reread the list of your partner's needs and make the choice to more intentionally love him or her by putting all five of them into practice.

Second, decide *not* to reread the list of your gender's needs or think, "he or she should be doing more of these!" That kind of thinking will only lead to disappointment and resentment. Remember, you can only control your choices, not your partner's choices. Love first and let God take care of the rest.

Now would be a good time to take the list of your spouse's top five needs and post them somewhere that will catch your eye often.

Pray this:

Lord Jesus, thank You for making men and women different in so many ways. Help me to authentically love my spouse according to his/her needs more, and better today. In Jesus' name. Amen!

Day 19
Start a Youth out on His Way
Proverbs 22:6

Start a youth out on his way; even when he grows old he will not depart from it. Proverbs 22:6

The Bible makes clear that children are to be loved in the same manner as adults: by looking out for their interests, applying grace, mercy, patience, wisdom and all the other expressions of value we've been talking about so far. But, alongside all these expressions of love, the Bible gives a specific directive on how parents are to guide their children to maturity. *Start a youth out on his way; even when he grows old he will not depart from it* (Proverbs 22:6).

Other Bible translations read, *Train up a child in the way he should go...* (NKJV). Both the verbs "start" and "train" are making it clear that parents are to take an active role in directing their child's development.

The second half of the first phrase reads, "on his way." Emphasize the "his" for a minute. "Start a youth out on *his* way." I.e., pay attention to his (or her) unique personality, inclinations, and innate abilities.

Part of a parent's job is to discern those traits and steer the child towards opportunities and experiences that enable those traits to flourish. For instance, a physically-gifted child should be given plenty of opportunities to learn lessons in discipline and humility by exposure to sports, while a musically-gifted child ought to be encouraged with music lessons and attendance at concerts. A technically-oriented child should be given opportunities to explore mechanical things, etc.

Since no two children are completely alike even within the same family, the extracurriculars they get exposed to should be tailored to their particular strengths. Identifying those strengths is one of the great joys of parenthood. And finding time to channel those strengths is one of the delightful challenges.

The second sense of starting your child out in *his* way involves the moral standards and godly behaviors taught throughout Scripture. While every child has different abilities, every child has the same moral code embedded in their heart. Therefore, parents should train every child in the same moral code – the one given by God in the Bible.

Here are three suggestions for training your youth in the love and morals of God's Word.

1. Train them spiritually.

Dad and Mom are their children's primary spiritual trainers. Church, grandparents, and godly friends will help, but no one can help share a child's love for God and understanding of His ways like fathers and mothers.

Personally, I believe every child ought to have the Bible read to him or her regularly, even before they're able to talk or understand simple words and phrases. I encourage new parents to buy a children's picture Bible and read to them from it before bedtime or naptime (or both).

When your little one turns three or four, give them their own Bible. Write a few words of encouragement on the inside cover about what a treasure this book is, and what a treasure your child is to both dad and mom. Sign and date it.

Children of all ages should catch their dad reading his Bible and having a personal time with the Lord. From time to time, invite one or more children to "Come have a Quiet Time with me!" so they experience how easy it is to spend a few minutes reading Scripture and how meaningful it is to have a few minutes prayer.

The most important means for helping your kids develop their own love for God is by bringing them to church every Sunday you're in town, making a point not to be out of town too many Sundays, and finding a church to attend whenever you're on vacation. By the time they're eight or nine, serving alongside one or more parent at church has been proven to be the single most effective means of insuring your children will be church attenders when they grow up.

2. Train them intellectually.

Studies show that reading to your child before bedtime boosts their critical cognitive skills like vocabulary, language comprehension, and brain development. Listening to stories activates regions responsible for mental imagery, narrative comprehension, and visual association.

Be selective in what you read. Frankly, some children's books are trash. They picture people arguing, lying, or practicing other less-than-edifying behaviors. Choose books that shape morals and illustrate righteous character. One of my most joyful memories is reading *The Chronicles of Narnia* to kids, and now, to many of my grandkids. Search the internet for Christian and upright-values-teaching books for children. Ask for recommendations from godly parents in your peer group.

Readers are leaders. Teaching your children the value of books can develop a lifelong love that will benefit them at every stage of life.

3. Train them financially.

In our modern world, understanding how money works is crucial. Children should know the value of a dollar, how to earn one, the dignity of labor, and how to work hard. Appropriately-aged chores should be assigned. An allowance, and opportunities to earn extra money through odd jobs gives a child a chance to begin understanding the concepts of saving, spending, tithing, and investing. Many banks and credit unions offer junior savings accounts to help kids learn about the power of compounding interest.

Several Christian financial teachers have produced excellent resources to help parents teach their children godly financial principles. Here are a few:

- **Financial Peace Kids Toolkit** - by Dave Ramsey and his daughter Rachel Cruz is designed for children ages 3–10. It features a chore chart, goal trackers, spend/save/give envelopes, and a guide to help kids manage physical cash they earn from working.
- **Smart Money Smart Kids** - by Dave and Rachel, is a parenting book with a blueprint for raising financially literate children. It describes basic concepts for young children and transitions into handling high school dilemmas, paying cash for college, and fighting comparison.
- **Your Kids Can Master Their Money** - by Ron and Judy Blue, provides parents with games, incentives, and actionable challenges. It focuses on shaping a child's character to help them become prudent planners, willing workers, and generous givers.
- **Raising Money-Smart Kids** - Ron and Judy Blue walk parents through how to instill early principles of earning, saving, and wise investing into their family life.
- **Money Matters for Kids** - by Larry Burkett is geared toward ages 6–12. It teaches tithing, stewardship, and basic budgeting using puzzles, jokes, and interactive math exercises.

One of God's great blessings is bestowing on us the privilege of creating and shaping human lives. In my experience, nothing is more gratifying than watching people I have helped bring into this world grow in godliness, character, love for God, cognitive abilities, and wisdom.

Pray this:

Heavenly Father, thank You for creating us as sons and daughters, and for giving us the ability to create and nurture sons and daughters of our own. [If you're a parent, pray this also:] I ask that You bless my children outrageously, and that You use me as a mighty force in shaping them according to their unique abilities, as well as spiritually, intellectually, and financially. In Jesus' name. Amen!

Day 20
As For Me and My House...
Joshua 24:15

If serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve.... But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord. Joshua 24:15 (NIV)

As an eyewitness to the ten plaques in Egypt, the adjutant to Moses in the wilderness, and the general in charge of the conquest of Canaan, Joshua learned a lot about God, and a lot about leadership. Weeks before his death, he summarized his conclusions about both in one sentence. *As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord* (Joshua 24:15).

The first half of his sentence is about leadership. “As the father of my family, I’m its primary leader. Failing to set a direction for them would be a colossal failure in leadership. So I’m declaring today the way my family will go.”

The second half of his sentence is about God. “I’ve seen the gods of Egypt and the gods of Canaan. They’re dead, powerless, false gods. My family’s greatest and best hope is to follow the One, True, Living God, and that’s what we’re going to do.”

We don’t have time to read through every reference to family in the Bible, so let me distill it for us here. The Bible presents the family as the foundational building block of society, designed by God as a unified physical, social, and spiritual unit. The nuclear family is comprised of a husband and wife who, at marriage, become “one flesh” (Genesis 2:24) in a permanent, sacred bond. God’s normal plan is for this primary unit to become parents by producing sons and daughters, who are a heritage and reward from Him (Psalm 127:3).

Ephesians 5:21-33 and Colossians 3:18-21 outline complementary roles within the household, urging husbands to love their wives sacrificially, wives to respect and submit to their husbands, and families to live in harmony.

Children are to obey their parents (Ephesians 6:1), while parents are to nurture their children gently (Ephesians 6:4), and train them to know and love the Lord (Deuteronomy 6:6-7, 17-18), and follow His ways (Proverbs 22:6).

Practically, what all this means is, if you have a family, you ought to thank God for each of its members every day. Personally, my daily habit is to thank God for three things before I get out of bed every morning. I thank God for my salvation, my family, and for one thing that’s happened in the past twenty-four hours. I do this because I never want to take those first two for granted, and I want to stay aware of what God is doing around me and for me every day.

Also practically, it means that, if you have a family, you should take your role in it seriously. Men, love your wife like Christ loves the church. Women, respect your

husband and support him in every way you can. Fathers, teach, train, inspire your children in all matters of faith, and expose them to activities and opportunities that will help them discover their strengths and propensities. Mothers, you have pretty much the same assignments as fathers, although as the one who is likely spending more time with the kids, you have an extended opportunity to demonstrate the powers of faith and prayer to them as you experience big and little events together throughout the day.

Children, your job is to honor your parents (Exodus 20:12), follow their instructions (Ephesians 6:1), absorb their legacy, and pass it on to your children and grandchildren when they come (Psalm 78:6-7).

This has been God's plan and design since Adam met Eve. I have found, the more closely we follow this plan, the closer we become as a family, and the deeper our sense of mutual identity develops. Having come from a broken family, what I'm experiencing now as a father, husband, and grandfather is better than I ever imagined. I wish this for you, too.

Pray this:

Father in heaven, thank You for creating me as Your child, with the opportunity to experience love and inspiration from my family and friends. Help me to fill my roles well, and faithfully. In Jesus' name. Amen!

Week 4

Sermon: Loving God

Find your notes from this morning's sermon and reflect on what you learned using the prompts below.

1. Summarize the sermon in one phrase or sentence:

2. Which part moved or motivated me most?

3. What new way of thinking about God and how I relate to Him do I want to adopt as a result of today's sermon?

4. What do I want to do differently as a result?

5. What do I need to tell God today?

Loving God
Bible Study 4
John 14:15-26

Warm Up

1. If you could leave your children with only one message, what would it be?

Read John 14:15-17

2. List as many reasons and/or incentives as you can think of to keep Jesus' commands.

3. Do you think it's possible to keep Jesus' commands perfectly? What actions or habits do we need to practice regularly in order to keep His commands as close-to-perfectly as possible?

4. What part does the "Counselor" play in helping us keep Jesus' commands?

Read John 14:18-21

5. Jesus describes "The one who has my commands and keeps them." Is it possible to have Jesus' commands and *not* keep them? What does that look like?

6. v. 21 continues, "And the one who loves me will be loved by my Father." Doesn't God love everyone? What does Jesus mean here?

7. How does Jesus “reveal” Himself to those who love Him (v. 21b)?

Read John 14:22-26

8. “The word that you hear is not mine but is from the Father who sent me”? What does that mean, or how does it work?

9. How important is the Holy Spirit in the life of a Christian?

10. How important is the Holy Spirit in your life? How aware of Him are you throughout the day?

11. Our Day 23 reading says, *Our progress in becoming great for God is measured by how well we are becoming great at loving. Have you been making some tangible progress during these 30 Days so far?*

12. What one action or idea do you want to work on this week from this study, or from one of this week’s readings?

Share requests and pray for each other.

Day 22
Love the Lord with All Your Heart
Mark 12:30

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.” Mark 12:30

On Tuesday of Holy Week, Jesus spent the morning teaching in the Temple and answering the accusations of the Sadducees who were questioning His authority. Hearing the lively debate, a scribe (a teacher of the Law) approached, asking Jesus *“Which command is the most important of all?” (Mark 12:28).*

Normally you’d find Jesus answering a question with a question, but on this morning, He gives a straight answer. He quotes Deuteronomy 6:4-5, with one slight modification. Deuteronomy says, *“Listen, Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength.”* Jesus adds one more aspect to loving God, *“with all your mind.”* He’s quoting, but adding this phrase in order to effectively summarize the whole Old Testament.

So far in our adventure, we’ve spent our first week learning about God’s nature as pure love, and our second week learning a process for improving our ability to love. Last week we concentrated on loving our family members. This week we’ll hone in on the most important type of love: loving God directly.

Being that God is big and invisible and has no needs, how do you love someone like that? More specifically, what does it mean to love God with your heart, and your soul, and your mind, and your strength?

Let’s look at each one of those for a minute.

Love with Your Heart

Your heart is the seat of your desires and feelings. To “love God with your heart” means wanting Him, and letting your emotions and loyalties point to Him. Loving God with *all* your heart means you want Him and His best before anything else.

That’s a tall task! But remember a few days ago when we learned that love is a choice? Jesus is asking us to make the choice to let our emotions and loyalties desire God and His agenda more than anything and everything else.

Love with Your Soul

Your soul is the spiritual part of you. It houses your morals and your perceptions of the unseen world. God is asking you to love His ways – His way of seeing the world, His definition of right and wrong, above all other ways. And He’s asking you to take that unseen part of you, the part that perceives that there’s more to this world than you can engage with your five senses, and love the unseen dwelling place of God, which is heaven.

A perfect example of this is David, in Psalm 42. *As a deer longs for flowing streams, so I long for you, God. I thirst for God, the living God. When can I come and appear before God?* (Psalm 42:1-2).

Another good example is the sinful woman in Luke 7. *She brought an alabaster jar of perfume and stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to wash his feet with her tears. She wiped his feet with her hair, kissing them and anointing them with the perfume.* (Luke 7:37-39). That perfume likely represented her entire fortune. She gladly gave it, along with her heart and emotions, to honor her Rabbi, Jesus.

Love with Your Mind

Your mind is the place of your thinking and reasoning. Loving God with your mind means learning His truth, studying His word, storing up knowledge of Him, and thinking rationally and clearly about the choices you make. It especially means making the choice to listen during the sermon, probably take notes, and sometimes searching commentaries at home to go deeper.

Loving God with you mind means reading Christian books about God and His ways, possibly listening to podcasts and/or accessing online courses to learn more. It could mean attending classes, or teaching classes to learn more about God and His ways. It's likely at some point, one who loves God with all his or her mind will begin a program of memorizing Scripture.

Love with Your Strength

Your strength is your physical energy. It means using your time to serve Him. And because your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19), those who love God with all their strength will strengthen their bodies with healthy eating, sleeping, and exercising habits.

Pray this:

Lord Jesus, I want to love You with all that I am and all that I have. As I picture myself in the future, I see me loving You more from the bottom of my heart and the depths of my soul. I imagine myself putting greater effort into knowing more about You through personal study and groups and classes. I plan and purpose to use my body and my energy in more and greater service to You. In Jesus' name. Amen!

Day 23
If You Love Me...
John 14:15

If you love me, you will keep my commands. John 14:15

On the night before His crucifixion, Jesus gave us a way to test our love for Him. *If you love me, you will keep my commands* (John 14:15).

Before saying this, He had already given three commands that evening:

- “*Wash one another’s feet*” (John 13:14) – a euphemism for serving each other.
- “*Love one another*” (John 13:34).
- “*Believe in God; believe also in me*” (John 14:1).

So at the very least, if you love Jesus, you’ll serve His followers, love His followers, and express faith in God the Father and God the Son.

The Apostle John, who was there that night and recorded these words for us, believed that the sign of our love for Jesus really is love for one another. Years later he wrote, “*This is how we know that we love him: if we keep his commands. The one who says, ‘I have come to know him,’ and yet doesn’t keep his commands, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoever keeps his word, truly in him the love of God is made complete. This is how we know we are in him: The one who says he remains in him should walk just as we walked*” (1 John 2:3-6).

Honestly, loving any group of people, even Jesus’ best-behaved followers, is a challenge. It’s not fully possible in your own flesh (or mine). Which is why, immediately after saying, “*If you love me, you will keep my commands.*” Jesus continued, “*And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever. He is the Spirit of truth*” (John 14:15-17a). Jesus knows that to keep His commands to love each other, we need the divine power of the Holy Spirit working in our lives.

Can you see how all that we are learning about love fits together?

We love, because He first loved us (1 John 4:19). Because we’ve experienced His love, we want to love Him back, and we want to love those who love Him. Everything revolves around loving God and loving people. This is the master lesson of our lives. How we treat others (especially God and His people) matters far more than our grade point average, military rank, salary, net worth, awards, possessions, accomplishments, vacations or athletic achievements. And the only way to make progress in this is to live closely with the Holy Spirit, so He will produce the fruit of love within you (Galatians 5:22-23).

Our progress in becoming great for God is measured by how well we are becoming great at loving. Have you been making some tangible progress during these 30 Days so far?

As you think about today's lesson, along with all that you've learned through sermons, Bible studies, and daily readings so far, what personal application or step do you want to take today?

Pray this:

Lord Jesus, I want to prove my love for You by increasingly obeying Your commands to love You and Your people. Help me today to rise to a new level in this. In Jesus' name. Amen!

Day 24
What if I Fail?
1 John 1:8-9

If we say, “We have no sin,” we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” 1 John 1:8-9

In yesterday’s reading, we heard Jesus set a high mark for us when He said God’s greatest commandment is that we love the Lord with *all* our heart, soul, mind, and strength. That literally means, “put God first in everything, everywhere, always.”

Even the Apostle Paul couldn’t do that. He said, *We know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold as a slave under sin. For I do not understand what I am doing, because I do not practice what I want to do, but I do what I hate.... I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my flesh. For the desire to do what is good is with me, but there is no ability to do it. For I do not do the good that I want to do, but I practice the evil that I do not want to do* (Romans 7:14-19).

Right there in Scripture, for all the world to see, Paul is admitting that he can’t help but do things that *don’t* always put God first. He’s saying, “I’m a failure.”

If you truly desire to put God first in everything, you’ll truly desire *not* to sin. But, like Paul, you’ll do so anyway from time to time. Is there any hope then? Scripture’s answer, and Paul’s answer is a resounding **YES!** Paul asks, *Who will rescue me from this body of death?* (Romans 7:24). His answer is, *Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord* (Romans 7:25). What he means is, “Jesus is the answer. He is the solution to my failure, every time.”

You know the story. On Good Friday, Jesus willingly gave His life as a once-for-all sacrifice to pay for your sins and mine (Hebrews 10:10; 1 Peter 3:18). The moment you called on Him for salvation (Romans 10:13), He applied His sacrifice to your sins, past, present and future. That’s why Paul can say, *Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus* (Romans 8:1).

New believers sometimes struggle with this idea. “I know Jesus forgave me of everything the day I asked Him into my life. But since then I’ve sinned again. How can He forgive me again?” The answer to that is, there is no *again*. Jesus paid for all your sins on the Cross in 33 A.D. His payment is a past action that covers everything in the future. So whether you received Him into your life in 2003, 2013, or 2023, your sins in 2026, 2036, and 2046 all were covered by what He did in 33 A.D.

Psalms 103 illustrates how completely you’ve been forgiven. *He forgives all your iniquity* (Psalm 103:3). *As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us* (Psalm 103:13). What’s novel about east and west is, if you travel north, you’ll eventually wind up traveling south. Whereas, no matter how far you travel west, there will never be a point at which you’ll be traveling east.

Here's a question every Christian asks at some point in their life. "Since God has already forgiven me, is it okay for me to indulge in sin once in a while?" Paul's answer to this is, *Should we continue to sin so that grace may multiply? Absolutely not!* (Romans 6:1-2a). We want to fight to say no to sin every moment, even though it's likely we'll give in once in a while.

So, what's the solution? What should I do when I have given in to sin? The Bible's answer is 1 John 1:9. *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*

Here's how it works. When you invited Jesus to be your Lord, you voluntarily gave up the leadership of your life. Then, sometime later, you saw a shiny object and said, "I want that."

The Holy Spirit inside you whispered, "No you don't. It's not good for you. It would be a sin to indulge in that."

You said, "Yes I do. I think I know more than You do about this, so I'm going to embrace this shiny object, even though You think it's wrong."

When you did that, you took back the leadership of your life. In effect, you kicked God off the throne of your life. 1 John 1:9 is telling you how to put Him back on the throne. *If we confess our sins...* To confess means, "to agree with." To give God back the rulership of your life, you confess, by saying something like, "Lord, You know that shiny object I grabbed hold of yesterday? I agree with You that it wasn't good for me, and I'm sorry. I was wrong to grab hold of it. I once again submit myself to Your leadership of my life."

God's promises are, *he is faithful and righteous to forgive us.* "Faithful" means, you can depend on Him every time. "Righteous" means, He always does the right thing. And, *he will cleanse us from all unrighteousness.* "Cleanser" means, to wash away. "All unrighteousness" means, everything that's not right.

Almost every day for the past 24 days we've had an assignment to do something that requires some effort. Today's assignment should require only a little effort for you. Today, every time you think of your life, or God, just celebrate that you are cleansed, and celebrate His faithfulness to forgive you every time you sin. Just smile and thank Him for His incredible gift of forgiveness and salvation.

Pray this:

Lord Jesus, today I am once again consciously surrendering the leadership of my life to You. Thank You for forgiving my every sin, past, present, and future. You are the Lord, and I believe Your ways and plans for me are better than any plans I can devise for myself. Be my Lord today. In Jesus' name. Amen!

Day 25
Draw Near to God
James 4:8

Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. James 4:8

There's an old saying that goes, "Dogs often look like their owners."

Today I plugged this into ChatGPT to see if there is anything to it, and there is! According to Chat, there are a couple of reasons for this. One is what's called the "Mere Exposure Effect," which is that we prefer things that look familiar. We naturally choose a pet that shares features with us or our family. A second is what's called "Personality Syncing." While looks are chosen at the start, personalities tend to match up later. Over time, dogs often mirror the habits, stress levels, and social traits of their humans.

I enrolled in seminary before the internet existed, so everything the school wanted to communicate had to come in print form. The enrollment office gave me a stack of booklets, one of which was a kind of yearbook album with pictures of the faculty and their spouses.

As Lori and I leafed through this together, she observed, "Almost all these professors and their wives look alike." Apparently dog owners and seminary professors have something in common: they choose companions that look like them.

Fast-forward forty-four years, and now *I* am a seminary professor. Do Lori and I look alike? I'm not so sure, but having observed a lot of couples, and I have observed that "Personality Syncing" is definitely a thing. People who hang out together, over time, mirror one another's values, habits, social traits and behavior.

This is why it's so important to walk closely with the Holy Spirit. As you live with Him, talk to Him, listen to Him through prayer and reading the Word, your personality will slowly "sync" to be like His.

There's a wonderful promise about this in James 4:8, "*Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.*"

How does one "Draw near to God?"

We've covered this already, so it won't be new to you. There are many spiritual practices that move you into the presence of God the Holy Spirit. Here are a few:

- Prayer: Talking honestly to God and listening for His guidance.
- Bible Reading: Studying Scripture as God's written Word to learn His character and will.
- Worship: Singing praises and honoring God, either alone or with a church community.
- Repentance: Turning away from sin quickly and asking God for forgiveness.

- Fellowship: Meeting with other Christians to encourage one another and grow in faith.

When I first became a Christian, churches were singing a simple song that goes, “He’s as close as the mention of His name.” I have found that to be true. The instant I turn my thoughts to God, I am aware of His presence with me. Drawing near to Him takes only a thought, because He’s always there.

Our focus this week is on *loving God*, so here’s your application today. It’s rude to ignore someone who’s standing beside you. You naturally look at them, and talk with them, acknowledging their presence with you. Let that be your practice throughout this day. Talk to God, through the Holy Spirit, as your companion. Express your thinking to Him. Thank Him for being here with you. Ask His opinion on things you’re thinking about, and His for wisdom on decisions you’re making.

Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. If “Personality Syncing” theory is correct, if you’ll acknowledge His nearness regularly, you’ll find your personality syncing with His, and you becoming like Him, which is not only the sincerest form of flattery, but the ultimate expression of your love for Him.

Pray this:

Lord Jesus, I am drawing near to You right now. Thank You for being with me always! My intention is to be aware of You as much as possible all day today, and to talk with You often as the day goes along. Please do some “Personality Syncing” in me today. In Jesus’ name. Amen!

Day 26
Delight Yourself in the Lord
Psalm 37:4

Take delight in the Lord, and he will give your heart's desires. Psalm 37:4

I moved to Oceanside many years ago because I was convinced God had asked me to plant a church here. I didn't know how long I would or should stay, only that God had called me to this place. There's a verse that explains why I've stayed for over three decades. *Trust in the Lord and do what is good; dwell in the land and live securely* (Psalm 37:3).

Along with trusting God and doing good, His command is for us to *dwell in the land*. A mentor once explained to me, "When the commander tells his troops to march south, he expects them to keep marching that direction until he issues a new command. God told me to "dwell" in Oceanside, and He hasn't given me a new command since, so I'm still here."

If Psalm 37:3 tells you where to be, Psalm 37:4 tells you what to do while you're there. *Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you your heart's desires.*

Let's have a little fun with Hebrew verbs for a minute. The root of the verb "take delight" is 'anag. There are seven ways to conjugate a verb Hebrew. This one is in the *hitpa'el*, which is reflexive. It means "delight yourself." In other words, "Don't ask someone else to generate delight for you, do it yourself."

The sentence sets itself up as a conditional statement. "If you will delight yourself in the Lord, then something will happen for you." Specifically, if you will delight yourself in the Lord, *he will give you your heart's desires.*

Let's go a little farther. The verb 'anag carries the idea of being pampered, or luxurious living, or fine dining. It's saying, "When you sit down to be with the Lord by, say, reading Scripture or praying, don't think of your time with Him as a chore, or a transaction to be completed. Think of it like being pampered by your parent, or lounging on plush furniture in a beautiful room surrounded by gold, silver, and world-class artwork; or imagine yourself sitting down to a five-course meal in a Michelin star restaurant.

The second half of Psalm 37:4 is, *and he will give you your heart's desires.* The verb for "give" is *natan*. It's in the imperfect tense, which means the action is on-going, or happening repeatedly. The rabbis say this verse is promising, "If you delight yourself in the Lord, He will give you your heart's desires, and return to give again."

Putting this all together, Psalm 37:4 is telling you how to love God in a way you might not have thought of before. It's commanding you to actively seek your deepest, most pampering joy and satisfaction in God. That sounds pretty wonderful, doesn't it?

But wait, there's more! As you actively seek your deepest, most pampering joy and satisfaction in God, your heart will align itself perfectly with His plans, priorities and desires for you, so that He will be able to give you exactly what you're desiring in that moment. And He'll do this again and again and again.

Pray this:

Lord Jesus, I know that being in Your presence in heaven one day will be delightful. But I don't want to wait until heaven to take my delight in You. So today, I am reveling in how magnificent You are, and how lavish your love is, and how good it feels to sit with You in this moment. I am surrounded by Your wonder, and beauty, and I am pampered by Your love. Put into my heart right now the exact desires You want me to have. I want Your plans and priorities and desires for my life Lord. In Jesus' name. Amen!

Day 27
Loving God Through Worship
Psalm 95:6-7

Come, let's worship and bow down; let's kneel before the Lord our Maker. For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, the sheep under his care. Psalm 95:6-7

We sometimes hear about things the early church did so much better than we do. Like, they shared their faith boldly, endured martyrdom willingly, and loved each other authentically. Every age, people, and culture have their strengths.

I think one of the greatest strengths of the 21st century church is our corporate worship. The hymns of the 18th and 19th centuries had great theology, but our generation's songs excel at honoring God with our words and hearts. Think of songs like, "How great is our God." Or, "Jesus, be the center of my life." Or, "Let it be today we shout the hymn of Heaven with angels and the saints, we raise a mighty roar. Glory to our God who gave us life beyond the grave..."

A friend told me, "God once said to me, 'I love Sundays because that's the day my children sing to me.'"

A few years ago I wrote a book titled *I Love Sundays*. While studying for it, I thought a lot about how God must feel every time we gather for worship. How would you feel, surrounded by your family and closest friends? They're all smiling at you, and telling you how highly they think of you, and how much they appreciate all that you've done for them. That would feel great, wouldn't it?

We weren't designed to be worshiped, so after a few minutes, everyone's compliments would start to feel awkward. But God is fully content to be worshiped. In fact, He made us to do exactly that.

Isaiah 43:20-21 (NIV) says,
I provide water in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland, to give drink to my people, my chosen, the people I formed for myself that they may proclaim my praise.

Psalm 149:3-4 says,
Make music to him with tambourine and lyre. For the Lord takes pleasure in his people.

Psalm 95:6-7 says,
Come, let's worship and bow down; let's kneel before the Lord our Maker. For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, the sheep under his care.

Psalm 95:6 invites us to worship God together as an expression of our love and because we owe everything to Him. *He is our Maker*. Can we ever say thank you enough for being made?

Psalm 95:7a gives a second reason to worship Him together. *For he is our God*. It's easy to take that for granted when you've got bills to pay, kids to raise, work to do, and videos to watch. But sit with that for a minute. He is your *God*. Is there enough air in your lungs to give Him the gratitude He deserves?

And Psalm 95:7b gives a third reason to worship Him with your extended faith family. *We are the people of his pasture, the sheep under his care*. Our world purports to offer several different shepherds: Mohammed, Buddha, Zoroaster, Joseph Smith, Kim Jong Un, Sean Moon (son and successor to Sun Myung Moon), David Miscavige (successor to L. Ron Hubbard), Warren Jeffs (leader of the Fundamental Church of the Latter-day Saints), and a host of others. Imagine placing your hope in one of them?

You were made to worship God, and He loves it when you do. Your praise is one of the few things God doesn't have unless you give it.

This coming Sunday, and every Sunday, is a significant day to express your love for God through corporate worship. And here's a principle: you generally get about as much out of something as you put into it. So when Sunday comes, put your whole heart into worship in the company of fellow believers, at church. To maximize the experience, both for you and for God, pick out the clothes you'll wear before you go to bed on Saturday night. And go to bed early so you can wake up refreshed. And before you head to church, spend a few minutes on your knees thanking God for what He's done for you this week, and letting Him know you're eager to worship Him with your extended faith family this morning. And play some worship music while you dress so your heart gets warmed up. And then leave for church a few minutes early so you're not rushing when you get there and can spend a few minutes encouraging the other members of your church as you bump into them in the lobby.

Worship is an absolutely appropriate way to express love to God!

Pray this:

Father God, I acknowledge You as my Creator, Almighty Sovereign, and my Good, Good Shepherd. I worship You right now because You are worthy, and because of all You've done for me. I'm eager to gather with my church this Sunday! I hope You'll not only hear my voice as I sing in worship, but see my heart, and know how sincerely it will be expressing my gratitude for all that You are. In Jesus' name. Amen!

Week 5
Sermon: Loving People

Find your notes from this morning's sermon and reflect on what you learned using the prompts below.

1. Summarize the sermon in one phrase or sentence:

2. Which part moved or motivated me most?

3. What new way of thinking about loving people did I learn today?

4. What do I want to do differently as a result?

5. What do I need to tell God today?

Loving People
Bible Study 5
Mark 12:28-34

Warm Up

1. How have you grown during these 30 Days? In your understanding of love? In how you act towards others?

2. From all that you've heard (in sermons), read in the *30 Days* book, and discussed in our group, what are three things you want to remember?

Study

Read Mark 12:28-34

3. Why are these two commandments the most important?

4. How do these two commandments relate to the 10 Commandments?

5. In the three possible love relationships (God, neighbor, and self), where are you the strongest? And where are you the weakest?

Read Mark 11:28; 12:13-14; 12:18-19

6. How was the Mark 12:28 teacher's attitude different from the many others who questioned Jesus?

7. What does Jesus' response to this man tell you about Jesus?

Read Colossians 3:12-15 & Philippians 2:1-4

8. Work together to create a definition for "love."

9. How does this definition reinforce for you some of the things you've been learning?

10. In what way do you want to grow in love over the next few years...

- Towards God?
- Towards those in your family?
- Towards the needy?
- Towards the wealthy?
- Towards yourself?

11. What was the high point of this Campaign for you?

12. What shall we study next as a group?

Share requests and pray for each other.

Day 29
Love Your Neighbor
Matthew 22:39

Love your neighbor as yourself. Matthew 22:39

Check this out: in Leviticus 19, as God is establishing the laws and values for the nation of Israel, He says, *Do not take revenge or bear a grudge against members of your community, but love your neighbor as yourself* (Leviticus 19:18).

Now read the following verses, and see if you notice a pattern:

Matthew 19:19 - *Honor your father and your mother; and love your neighbor as yourself.*

Matthew 22:39 - *Love your neighbor as yourself.*

Mark 12:31 - *Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other command greater than these.*

Mark 12:33 - *To love your neighbor as yourself is far more important than all the burnt offerings and sacrifices.*

Luke 10:27 - *He answered, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself."*

Romans 13:9 - *The commandments, do not commit adultery; do not murder; do not steal; do not covet; and any other commandment, are summed up by this commandment: Love your neighbor as yourself.*

Galatians 5:14 - *For the whole law is fulfilled in one statement: Love your neighbor as yourself.*

James 2:8 - *Indeed, if you fulfill the royal law prescribed in the Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing well.*

What do you notice about loving your neighbor? God seems to take it pretty seriously, wouldn't you say?

In the Luke 10 passage, Jesus' proclamation is followed by a scribe asking a question: *And who is my neighbor?* (Luke 10:29). Jesus responds by telling the Parable of the Good Samaritan, a story designed to illustrate that even people we don't naturally like are our neighbors.

If you take the time to think through who *your* neighbor is, the list gets pretty long.

Who is my neighbor?

Dr. Leslie Mitton, in his commentary on the book of Mark, answers the question “Who is my neighbor?” with this: “Our employer is our neighbor too; so are our work people, all who serve us in shops, the men who empty our dust bins and those who try to keep streets and parks clean.” (Mitton, *Gospel of Mark*, p. 99).

I want to add one more group to that list, because in our day, you rarely hear anyone say much that is nice or kind about this group of people. When we think about people we ought to extend love to, we naturally think of the poor and homeless, and we should. But I’ve noticed that rich people have become a target for all kinds of vitriol these days.

For the past several years, political movements have targeted wealthy people as people to be hated rather than loved, understood, or cared for. This might be a smart strategy when it comes to vote-getting or balancing a government budget, but it’s out of line with Jesus’ definition of a neighbor.

Why is it easier to offer love and prayers for the poor than for the rich? Is it envy? Or because we think they’ve got so much they deserve to be taken down a notch?

Here’s a question for which I don’t have an answer: *how does one show love to a wealthy person?* I don’t know for sure, but I’m thinking that if you can mentally sort through the perceived social barriers between you and people with lots of commas to their net worth, you’ll unlock the key to loving anyone.

A practical assignment

On the practical side, let’s shift for a minute to a simpler assignment. Who is someone not necessarily in your inner orbit of family and friends that you’d be willing to show love to today? In what tangible way might you demonstrate the love of God to them sometime before the sun goes down today? Would it be through a gift? A gesture? A word of encouragement? A prayer? Some secret act of kindness? Or maybe, by extending a spoon?

Heaven and hell

I came across a story recently that describes how things could be different if we all practiced loving our neighbors as ourselves. It’s the story of a man who was granted a glimpse of the afterlife.

The man looks into a room and sees people sitting around a grand banquet table with food piled high. There’s plenty for all, yet they’re all starving and miserable. Each person has a long-handled spoon tied to their arm. The spoon is long enough to reach the food, but too long to bend and feed themselves. This is hell, a place where everyone tries to feed only themselves.

Down the hall is another room with an identical set-up. It’s got the same table, same food, and same long spoons. Only here, everyone is well-fed, laughing, and genuinely happy. The man looks closer and sees why: in this room, every person is using their long spoon to feed others.

As I read the story, it occurred to me that not only does the Lord long for us to genuinely love our neighbors as ourselves, but that such a world can only exist if people like us use our spoons the way Jesus would.

Long spoon, anyone?

Pray this:

Lord Jesus, I have received so much love from You, and so much love from Your people! Help me today to extend my spoon, or my hand, or my words of encouragement to someone in a way that truly blesses them. In Jesus' name. Amen!

Day 30
Serve One Another
Galatians 5:13

You were called to be free, brothers and sisters; only don't use this freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but serve one another through love. Galatians 5:13

It's Thursday evening, and it's been quite a week. On the previous Friday they had hiked from Jericho – fifteen miles up 3,300 feet of elevation in dry heat, with no shade. The rest of the week had been booked solid with people: an exhilarating welcome on Sunday morning, dinner parties every night, teaching crowds every morning, debating with Pharisees, teaching the Disciples, performing miracles for those in need.

As Thursday dawns, it's the day of Israel's most important annual celebration. Think Thanksgiving Day, or Christmas. Everyone wants to relax and enjoy themselves, including Jesus.

He must have been tired. And the dread in His heart was immeasurable. In just a few hours He's going to be interrogated by the Jews, beaten by the Romans, and have the sins of the world laid on His soul while on the Cross, and He knows it's all coming.

But right now, there's a party to put on, the Seder Meal – Israel's remembrance of their exodus from Egypt, replete with a multi-course meal and four servings of wine. As the disciples are gathering, what does Jesus do? Does He hug them all and engage in small talk? Does He find His seat to rest up for what's coming? Does He give last minute instructions to the kitchen staff about meal prep and seating arrangements?

Scripture says that in spite of His weariness and sense of foreboding, *He got up from supper, laid aside his outer clothing, took a towel, and tied it around himself. Next, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet and to dry them with the towel tied around him* (John 13:4-5).

When Jesus had washed their feet and put on his outer clothing, he reclined again and said to them, "Do you know what I have done for you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are speaking rightly, since that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done for you" (John 13:12-15).

On this night-of-all-nights, Jesus wanted His followers to know how important it was to love each other by performing tangible acts of service for one another. He wanted us to know that there's a special bond between members of the family of God, so that, in spite of our circumstances, feelings, and whatever else we'd rather be doing, we serve each other.

Because of this, in our church, we look for ways to help each other when there's a crisis. Almost every month, and sometimes every week, somebody's organizing a "meal train"

– a schedule of nightly dinners delivered to a family where dad has been in the hospital, or mom’s just given birth, or there’s been a death, or some other challenge or trauma. Members bring food as a tangible means of saying, “I love you, and I’m here for you.”

Also because of this, members serve each other using their spiritual gifts (1 Peter 4:10). We serve by teaching each other’s children in New Song Kids Classes, or teens in Mosaic. We serve coffee, greet at the doors and collect the offering. We run sound or tech equipment. We host the online service attendees. We serve as Prayer Partners. During the week, we help clean the building, or build or repair things. We pray through weekly prayer lists. We distribute food from our food pantry. We assemble the Sunday program inserts. We enter newcomer’s names and everyone’s prayer requests into the database. We host funerals. We watch children for Momco moms, and preschoolers for preschool parents. We lead Life Groups, and Mosaic Small Groups.

Serving is part of the calling of every Christian.

The funny thing about serving is, much of the time we don’t feel like doing it. But then we show up and serve anyway, and it always feels good! There’s a sense of satisfaction in knowing that you did something to help others, and that God was honored and pleased with you.

Jesus said, *The greatest among you will be the servant of all* (Matthew 23:11). Is serving God’s people somewhere on your weekly schedule? If so, way to go! And if not, when will you start?

Pray this:

Lord Jesus, thank You for giving me the ability to bless others in some small way, like You have blessed me in such big ways. Give me eyes to see today how I can be Your hands and feet to someone in my church by serving them in a specific, tangible way. In Jesus’ name. Amen!

Day 31
Love the Stranger Among You
Leviticus 19:33-34

When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the Lord your God. Leviticus 19:33-34 (NIV)

In 1984, a band called *Foreigner* topped the Billboard Charts with an anthem called “I Want to Know What Love Is.” This band had come together a few years earlier when Mick Jones, its main songwriter, accidentally noodled a riff one afternoon that became, “It Feels Like the First Time.” The tune was so good, Mick knew he had to record it, but he had no band members to do so.

Mick began a citywide search, auditioning musicians throughout all of New York City. He finally settled on three British citizens (including himself), and three Americans. Mick had originally intended to call the band, “Trigger,” but by the time they got ready to record, he had discovered that a band already existed by that name. As he looked around the room, he realized that 50% of his band were foreigners to each other. “Foreigner!” he said, and the name stuck.

The dictionary defines a foreigner as, “a person born in or coming from a country other than one's own.” The Bible records that, as the Israelites were exiting Egypt, a large band of foreigners went out with them. (Exodus 12:38 - *A mixed crowd also went up with them.*)

At the time, Egypt was the most powerful nation on earth. They had conquered and enslaved people from lots of different countries. Israel's exodus provided the perfect opportunity for these “foreigners” to slip the bonds of slavery with them. As a result, from its very beginning, Israel had “foreigners” living among them. To ensure they were well-treated, God commanded Israel to *Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt* (Leviticus 19:34).

Yesterday we read how important it is to love and serve the members of your church. Galatians 6:10 says, *Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us work for the good of all, especially for those who belong to the household of faith.* In other words, “Love your church members most of all, but when you can, show love to people who are not only outside of your church family, but outside of your nation's citizenry.”

Personally, I love culture. I love seeing how people from different backgrounds do things. And I love learning about their family traditions, holidays, and perspectives. I love hearing their accents and their insights. It's like seeing the world through different eyes.

After declaring, *Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt*, God goes on to describe the most important way to do this. He says, *Do not be unfair in*

measurements of length, weight, or volume. You are to have honest balances, honest weights, an honest dry measure, and an honest liquid measure... (Leviticus 19:35-36).

Years ago, a large number of Florida rental cars were being pulled over and robbed by gang members. These savvy gangsters had figured out that most cars rented near theme parks were occupied by people visiting from other countries. Foreigners are easy marks because they are already experiencing culture shock, don't know the language well, and are unable to contact the police quickly. Plus, they aren't likely to be in town long enough to testify in court.

The bad guys were able to identify which cars were rentals by the decals on their back bumpers. Wanting to generate business, Hertz, Avis, and the other rental companies placed decals with their name and logo on each of their cars.

The car-theft scheme was thwarted when the rental companies removed their advertising from their cars.

It's easy to deceive someone who is unfamiliar with our culture and ways of doing things. God warns instead, "Don't take advantage of them. Treat them fairly."

In my college days I did some traveling in western Europe. One day a friend and I got off a train in Vienna, Austria. We knew nothing about the city, and apparently the look on our faces showed it. While still in the train station, a little old lady came up to us and asked, "Would you like me to show you around the city? It will give me a chance to practice my English!"

That turned out to be one of the best days of the trip. And she's a great example of showing love to a foreigner!

Do you know any foreigners? How could you show some of Jesus' love to them?

Pray this:

Lord Jesus, as I'm learning to be a more loving person, I want to do what you've asked and love foreigners too. If there's an assignment to be given today or soon, I volunteer! Use me in the life of a foreigner among us. And if possible, use me to introduce them to You. In Jesus' name. Amen!

Day 32
Meet the Needs of Others
1 John 3:17-18

If anyone has this world's goods and sees a fellow believer in need but withholds compassion from him—how does God's love reside in him? Little children, let us not love in word or speech, but in action and in truth. 1 John 3:17-18

As I was reading up on the Apostle John's idea of loving with action as well as truth, I came across two thought-provoking quotes, both by men with the last name of "Lewis."

The first was a pastor named "Greville Lewis." He wrote, "It is easier to be enthusiastic about Humanity with a capital 'H' than it is to love individual men and women, especially those who are uninteresting, exasperating, depraved, or otherwise unattractive. Loving everybody in general may be an excuse for loving nobody in particular."⁴

The second Lewis was the Oxford scholar, C.S. Lewis. He wrote a short novel called *The Screwtape Letters*, about a senior devil advising a junior devil on how to corrupt a human. The younger demon is told to direct his human subject's benevolence toward people he doesn't know, making that love largely "imaginary," while steering his actual malice toward his immediate neighbors and family. As Screwtape (the senior demon) notes, it is much better for the forces of hell if a man's mind is "*crisscrossed with good intentions*" for humanity globally while he remains cruel to his mother at home.⁵

It is dangerously easy to love a vague concept of humanity while neglecting the real people right in front. This was true, not only in our century, but also in the first century. John observed this same thing as he pastored and preached in his day and age. To combat this, he wrote, *This is how we've come to know love: He laid down his life for us. We should also lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. If anyone has this world's goods and sees a fellow believer in need but withholds compassion from him—how does God's love reside in him? Little children, let us not love in word or speech, but in action and in truth. 1 John 3:16-18*

"Let us love not in words alone, but in actions and in deeds." Four weeks before writing this, I experienced a Grand Mal Seizure. It came as a complete surprise, and damaged many of my muscles. To complete my sorrow, the State of California took my driver's license away.

In these driving-deprived weeks, not only have I experienced love through words, as church members have prayed for me, both at church and at our house, and long-distance friends have written cards, emails and texts of blessing. But I've experienced

⁴ Greville Lewis, *The Preachers Handbook*, 1954

⁵ C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, Letter VI, 1942

physical expressions of love, as people have volunteered to drive me places, and others have brought dinner to our home. I have been loved with words and deeds!

There's a famous story about George Müller, the nineteenth-century missionary to Bristol, England who created orphanages and cared for thousands of orphans. Müller operated entirely on faith. His rule was to never ask a human being for money or food, but to bring his needs solely to God in prayer.

One morning, a housemother walked into George's office with the news that there was no food in the house, and no money to buy any. Three hundred hungry children were getting dressed and waiting for breakfast.

Müller told the housemother to seat the children at the long dining room tables. Plates, cups, and utensils were set out, though every single dish was empty.

Müller stood, closed his eyes, and prayed, "Dear Father, we thank you for what you are about to give us to eat. Amen."

At "Amen," there was a knock at the front door. It was the local baker. *"Mr. Müller, I couldn't sleep last night. So I got up at 2:00 a.m. and baked three fresh batches of bread for you."*

Then came a second knock. It was the milkman. His milk cart had broken down right in front of the orphanage, shattering a wheel. He said, "This milk will spoil by the time the cart is fixed, so would the orphans come and take all the heavy cans off his hands?"

By opening his doors in faith, Müller witnessed a complete breakfast provided for 300 children just minutes after praying.

Pray this:

Lord Jesus, here I am. Use me today in some tangible way to show love to someone in need. In Jesus' name. Amen!

Day 33
Forgive as God Has Forgiven You
Ephesians 4:32

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving one another, just as God also forgave you in Christ. Ephesians 4:32

Everyone who's been hurt struggles with forgiveness. And everyone has been hurt. Which makes learning to forgive a universally necessary skill.

Author Sharon Jaynes writes about an experience she had at a football game. She writes, *My seat was on the end of a long row of blue bleachers, and there was a steady flow of fans up and down the concrete steps. After a while, I noticed that four out of five people tripped on the step right in front of me. At halftime, I measured and discovered that the step was about a quarter inch higher than the others. So the people tripped.*

I've learned that forgiveness is like that step. It's just a little bit higher than anything else we practice as Christians. Unfortunately, it's the one step a lot of us seem to trip on the most, myself included.⁶

It's easy to understand why we trip when trying to forgive. Every person you need to forgive is someone who's caused you pain. In order to forgive them, you have to let go of your anger and resentment, which feels like letting them win, or at least letting them get away with what they've done. Who wants to do that?

Here's the good news. Forgiveness frees your heart from bitterness. It also relieves the stress hormone surge you've been holding onto. And it decreases the strains that cause long-term heart disease and heart attacks.

Unresolved bitterness weakens your immune system, disrupts your sleep, and causes digestive troubles. Those go away when you release the person who caused your bitterness.

Here's some more good news. Forgiveness requires no actual action on your part. It doesn't require you to start trusting the person, liking the person, reconciling with the person, or even speaking with the person.

Forgiveness is a decision you make in your heart and mind that does wonders for your body and soul.

Now here's some bad news. There's a connection between demonic activity and harboring unforgiveness. Unresolved bitterness creates a portal from your soul to the

⁶ Sharon Jaynes, <https://proverbs31.org/read/devotions/full-post/2022/04/29/choosing-to-forgive-the-step-we-trip-on#:~:text=“Bear%20with%20each%20other%20and,as%20the%20Lord%20forgave%20you.>

dark side of the spiritual world. It's an open wound where bitterness can grow, giving Satanic forces an opening to infiltrate your life.

Notice it in these three passages:

- *Don't let the sun go down on your anger, and don't give the devil an opportunity.* Ephesians 4:26-27
- *Anyone you forgive, I do too. For what I have forgiven – if I have forgiven anything – it is for your benefit... so that we may not be taken advantage of by Satan.* 2 Corinthians 2:10-11
- *If you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your heart, don't boast and deny the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from above but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic.* James 3:14-15

Pastor Josh Howerton says, "When we forgive, we pull heaven down into our lives. When we choose not to forgive, we pull hell up into our lives."

Paul's words are, *Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving one another, just as God also forgave you in Christ* (Ephesians 4:32). By the time Paul wrote that, he had been sworn at, spit upon, insulted, and run out of multiple towns. He had received forty lashes minus one five times, been beaten with rods three times, stoned and left for dead, and probably more we'll learn about in heaven.

Reread what he said: *Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving one another*. Paul could easily have harbored unforgiveness towards a thousand people. It must have taken great strength of will to write Ephesians 4:32.

Or maybe it didn't. Maybe Paul found it easy to write about forgiveness because he remembered so vividly all he'd been forgiven for. *Forgive one another, just as God also forgave you in Christ*.

When you think about it that way – that the pile you have been forgiven is far higher than the pile you're needing to forgive from others – that extra little height in the step isn't that tall after all.

C.S. Lewis once wrote, "Last week, while at prayer, I suddenly discovered – or at least felt as if I did – that I had really forgiven someone I have been trying to forgive for over thirty years. Trying, and praying that I might. When the thing actually happened— sudden as the longed-for cessation of one's neighbour's radio—my feeling was 'But it's so easy. Why didn't you do it ages ago?'"⁷

Is there someone, or several "someones" you need to release from the hurt they have caused you? Today is the best day you'll ever have to choose to forgive them. Do, just now! – And then do it again tomorrow, if you need to. Or an hour from now. It's a

⁷ C.S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm*, 1964

necessary part of what it means to love others, and a necessary part of the making-whole of your soul.

Forgiveness is not:

- Pretending the hurt didn't happen or didn't matter.
- Excusing or minimizing the wrong.
- Reconciling with someone who remains unsafe.
- Forgetting what happened.
- A one-time decision that never needs to be repeated.

Forgiveness is:

- Choosing not to let past injuries control your present identity.
- Releasing the debt you feel the other person owes.
- Refusing to turn justified anger into prolonged self-harm.
- Refusing to continue to be bitter and angry, thinking that it hurts the other person.
- A decision that may need to be made repeatedly, especially for deep wounds.
- Compatible with strong boundaries and self-protection.

Pray this:

Lord Jesus, today I am giving up the right to carry bitterness against those that have hurt me. I release my hurt, my anger, and my resentment to You. I know You've experienced far worse. And I know the amount You've forgiven in me is greater than the amount I'm now forgiving. Thank You now, for bringing heaven down closer to me as I forgive today. In Jesus' name. Amen!

Day 34
A Love Like No Other
Ephesians 3:17-19

I pray that you, being rooted and firmly established in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the length and width, height and depth of God's love, and to know Christ's love that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Ephesians 3:17b-19

Thirty-four days ago we began an adventure together. Take a few minutes now to think about what you've learned; and, more importantly, what you've experienced; and more importantly, who you've become.

Studies show that reviewing materials you've read dramatically flattens the forgetting curve and significantly boosts your long-term retention. If you're open to it, consider rereading this book, or skim the headings and verses to reinforce your experience.

Here's a thumbnail review:

In week one, we learned that God's very nature is love, so much so that if Satan's native language is lying, God's native language is loving. We learned that loving means noticing others and meeting their needs. And we learned that "agape" is the ancient Greek word that means "unconditional, self-sacrificial, willed love." It's *a love like no other*.

In week two, we learned a five-step process for becoming a more loving person. We learned that the more loving you become, the more you'll become like Jesus. And the more love you'll receive. And the more you'll make up for hurts you've caused. And the less you'll fear.

In week three, we learned about loving the members of our family. We learned that honoring our parents is a key to longer life. And that the purpose of marriage is to make each other holy (not happy). And that men and women have the same basic needs, but the top of our needs-lists are very different. And that loving our children means helping them discover and develop their unique abilities, and helping them internalize God's righteous moral standards. And that God gave each member of the nuclear family a special role to play.

In week four, we learned about loving God Himself. He wants to be first in everything in our lives! We won't always put Him there, but when we fall short, He has made a way for us to restore Him to the leadership of our lives. We learned to draw near to God. And to delight in Him. And the importance of showing Him love by worshiping together with His faith family on Sundays.

In week five, we focused on loving people. God is easy to love, people are not! We learned about the long spoon. And about serving each other. And serving foreigners. And about the benefits of forgiving.

If you're thinking that 34 days is too little time to master such a momentous subject, I agree with you. Therefore, I hope you'll mark these 30 Days as the *beginning* of your quest to become more loving, rather than a once-in-a-lifetime period in which you dipped your toe into the topic.

A picture of love

During my research for this study, I looked for stories that illustrate unconditional love. I have one that I have not yet used, so I'll leave you with it here. It's about a Polish doctor, who was not a Christian.

It's the story of Janusz Korczak. Dr. Korczak was a children's author and pediatrician who ran an orphanage in Warsaw during the early days of World War II. In October 1940, when the Nazis forced the Jewish population into the Warsaw Ghetto, Korczak refused to abandon his orphans. He went with them, begging for food and medicine on the ghetto streets to keep the 200 children alive, while repeatedly refusing offers to smuggle him to safety on the "Aryan" side.

On August 5, 1942, the German SS arrived to deport the orphans to the Treblinka extermination camp. Because Korczak was a celebrated international figure, a prominent Nazi officer recognized him at the train station and offered him a last-minute reprieve, telling him he did not have to board the train.

Korczak refused. He would not leave his children to face the terror of the gas chambers alone.

Korczak dressed the children in their finest clothes, gave them each a favorite toy or book, and led them through the ghetto streets to the train station. He held the two youngest children by their hands, telling them they were just going on a picnic in the country so they wouldn't be afraid. He boarded the cattle car with them, comforting them until their final moments.

This story illustrates so well what agape love looks like. It's the intentional choice to give up one's own life out of devotion to the well-being of others, which sounds a lot like Jesus.

But Korczak wasn't a follower of Jesus. He was an agnostic. He had never experienced the peace that comes from personal forgiveness of sin, or the hope that comes from having the Holy Spirit reside within.

His story inspires me to believe that if a man who hasn't experienced God's love through Christ can act this much like Christ, that there is every reason to believe that you and I, who live every moment in His love, can truly become masters of agape incarnate.

As we wrap up, pray:

Lord Jesus, thank You for what You've taught me so far. I know it doesn't matter how much I know about love, but how much I show about love that counts. Help me to show

love at a higher level as a result of this experience, and help me to continue to grow to love like You do. In Jesus' name. Amen!

.

©2026, Hal Seed

All Scriptures are from the *Christian Standard Bible (CSB)* ©2017, by Holman Bible Publishers, used by permission, unless otherwise noted.

All rights reserved. No portion of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or any means – electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, scanning, or other – except for brief quotations in critical reviews or articles, without the prior written permission of the author.