

Good Soil



A place for growth and nurture

Session 4.3: LOVE

INTRODUCTION: GROWING IN FAITH, HOPE & LOVE

In this short series, we have been thinking about the three Christian virtues named by St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 13: **faith, hope and love**.

While these are very common words, we will be trying to dig deeper to explore their meaning and application for us as Christians. So, not just 'What is love?' but 'What is Christian love and how can we have it? (or perhaps 'What is God's love and how can we know it?'). We will be looking to the Bible to help us explore the theme, and once again thinking about how we can grow in our life with God.

PREPARATION FOR GROUP LEADERS

Please remember to keep in touch with your group and remind them of the date and time of the session.

The activity for this session could either be done beforehand (to share with the group) or could be thought about afterwards for 'homework'. It involves either writing or finding an expression of our love for God in the form of a 'love letter', poem, hymn, even a non-religious song. This can be the person's own work, or they can use something written by someone else, which means something to them. Allow space in the session for people to share something they've brought with them.

THINKING ABOUT LOVE (to read at home)

What is love? In many ways, it is a much over-used word in the English language. The word can be a defining moment in a relationship (when someone says for the first time “I love you”) or we can throw it around casually to announce our favourite pastime, entertainer, or flavour of ice-cream. It is the subject most referred-to in the last 100 years of popular music. *But what is Christian love?*

The New Testament was written in Greek, and the Greek language had several different words for different kinds of love. C.S. Lewis famously wrote about *The Four Loves*, but there may be more that could be defined as types of ‘love’. Here are some of the main ones:

- Éros** Intimate, romantic or sexual love between partners.
- Philia** The love of friendship; affectionate regard between equals; ‘brotherly love’.
- Storgé** Family love; the love of parents for children; natural love for something/someone that belongs to you.
- Philautia** Self-love (which can be both positive or negative, ranging from necessary self-care and self-esteem, to selfishness, narcissism and egotism).
- Xenia** Hospitality; especially towards foreigners or strangers; a form of love shown to guests out of a sense of duty or generosity.

Finally, the love we will discuss most in this session, and the love the New Testament and the early church mainly talked about was...

- Agapé** The King James Bible translated this as ‘charity’ (but it means more than our modern understanding of charity). **Agapé** is often called the ‘highest form of love’. It is the love of God for humanity, and the love of humanity for God. It was this that Jesus spoke about when he named the two great commandments and gave his disciples a new commandment. Although it was used by Greek writers before the New Testament, it was Saint Paul who gave us the ultimate definition in 1 Corinthians chapter 13.

BEFORE OR AFTER: QUESTIONS AND ‘LOVE LETTERS’

Feel free to think about these questions before, during or after the session. You might want to take something with you to share, or just keep it in mind...

How would you describe the different types of love in your life?

How would you describe your love for God?

Has your love for God changed over the years? Is it new? Or well-established?

Could you write a ‘love-letter’ to God?

How would you express your love for God in words? Or do you express it best in actions?

Can you think of a poem, hymn or song (religious or not) that best expresses your love for God? (either written by yourself or written by someone else). If you wish, share it with the group.

If you’re feeling creative, perhaps you could try writing some poetry, a hymn or a ‘love-letter’ – and use it as a prayer.

STARTING THE SESSION: FINDING OUR ROOTS

As the group gathers, does anyone want to share their answers to any of the questions above?

Has anyone written or brought a song, hymn, poem or love-letter with them? Would anyone like to share?

Other questions:

What does ‘love’ mean for you?

Can you think of a time when you have found love in an unexpected way, or from an unexpected source?

Can you think of a time when you have found love hard to give, or difficult to receive?

A PRAYER

God of love,
In your love you call us together as your children.
May you bless this time together:
make us more aware of your everlasting and gracious love,
help us to grow in love
and enable us, by your Spirit, to share it with the world.
In the name of Jesus our Lord. Amen.

READING THE SCRIPTURES AND DIGGING DEEPER

Jesus' commandments were all about love. Would four volunteers be prepared to read these out in the group:

From Matthew chapter 5:

*⁴³ 'You have heard that it was said, "You shall **love*** your neighbour and hate your enemy." ⁴⁴ But I say to you, **Love*** your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.*

From Mark chapter 12:

*²⁸ One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, 'Which commandment is the first of all?' ²⁹ Jesus answered, 'The first is, "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; ³⁰ you shall **love*** the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." ³¹ The second is this, "You shall **love*** your neighbour as yourself." There is no other commandment greater than these.'*

From John chapter 13:

*³⁴ I give you a new commandment, that you **love*** one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should **love*** one another. ³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have **love*** for one another.'*

From John chapter 15:

*⁹ As the Father has **loved*** me, so I have **loved*** you; abide in my **love***. ¹⁰ If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my **love***, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his **love***. ¹¹ I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.*

*¹² 'This is my commandment, that you **love*** one another as I have **loved*** you. ¹³ No one has greater **love*** than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. ¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command you.*

*** In all these instances, the Greek word used is related to the word *agapé*.**

Jesus not only spoke of love: he revealed God's love through his life of service, his care for others, and his death on the cross.

In trying to live our lives following Jesus, which of the above commandments do you find the most difficult?

What does it mean to love our neighbour as ourselves?

What does it mean to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength?

What sort of love can we have for enemies?

What does it mean to love others as Jesus has loved us?

Can you think of any examples when this has been true for you?

While there are thousands of love songs, movies, and books about love, this passage has stood the test of time and remains one of the most famous and influential of all writings about love in human history:

Reading: 1 Corinthians 13 (New Revised Standard Version)

*If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have **love***, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ² And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have **love***, I am nothing. ³ If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have **love***, I gain nothing.*

*⁴ **Love*** is patient; **love*** is kind; **love*** is not envious or boastful or arrogant ⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶ it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. ⁷ It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*

*⁸ **Love*** never ends.*

But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. ⁹ For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; ¹⁰ but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end.

¹¹ When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. ¹² For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.

*¹³ And now faith, hope, and **love*** abide, these three; and the greatest of these is **love***.*

*** In all these instances, the Greek word used is *agapé*.**

This famous passage was not intended as a piece to be read at weddings, or necessarily simply a definition of the word 'love'. It was part of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, and comes as the climax to a long argument about divisions in the church, where there were disagreements about spiritual gifts. Chapter 12 is Paul's famous illustration about the body having many parts, all important though different. At the end of chapter 12 he points them to the most excellent of all God's gifts... Love (**Agapé**). It's a beautiful passage, which aims to remind us of the important things, especially in an imperfect church and with our human frailties. It also says that the most spectacular gifts and examples of faith are fairly worthless without God's love being shown in our lives.

How hard or easy is it to 'love one another' in the midst of the busy work and ministry of the church?

How can we grow in the kind of love Paul writes about here?

What tools or disciplines does the church give us? What helpful patterns of life help us to grow in love? What in our worship symbolises love for one another?

What tips do you have for how to love 'difficult' people? Are you aware when you are being 'difficult' to others?!

A famous hymn speaks of Jesus' love like this:

**My song is love unknown,
my Saviour's love to me,
love to the loveless shown,
that they might lovely be.**

by Samuel Crossman (1624-1683), Singing the Faith no. **277**.

What do you make of the words of this hymn?

*How can we demonstrate God's love to others outside of the church?
What will they notice about our love when they come in?*

What is it about our lives, as well as our prayers, that demonstrate that we are God's beloved children?

*And how do we show our love **to** God?*

PRAYING TOGETHER

- Thank God for the amazing love we can know through Jesus;
- Thank God for the people who have loved you, and those who have helped you to understand God's love;
- Pray for those who are feeling unloved, or who are not aware of God's love;
- Pray for those whose relationships are breaking down, or who have recently been divorced or separated;
- Pray for those who are preparing for marriage;
- Pray for the church, that we will grow in God's love and be able to better show love to one another and to the world;
- Pray for those who need to know God's healing love through times of illness, grief, or worry;
- You might like to say **the Lord's Prayer** together.

A PRAYER (based on Psalm 63:3)

Lord, your steadfast love is better than life,
there is nothing purer, greater, or stronger than your love.
You are, and always will be,
the most constant presence in our lives.
For this reason, our lips will praise you forever. Amen.

SUGGESTED SONGS TO LISTEN TO (or your own choice)

You can find all of these songs on  YouTube

Falling in Love, by Phil Wickham

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TLIQOwnsexU>

How He Loves, by Peter Mattis / Bethel Music

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5L4FbKbyleA>

O Lord Your Tenderness / Such Love, by Graham Kendrick

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7a5abPFX7tU>