




Toward Love in Action

THEOLOGICAL THEME: Love for God and love for others is the fruit of true Christianity.

In a world filled with ideas about what love is, it can be hard to discern what it looks like to follow the Bible's commands to love. Predominant in our culture is an elevated importance on our feelings. To most people, love is primarily an emotion felt, which can come and go as it pleases. The world's definition of love does not always involve actions. Biblical love, however, is evidenced in our actions, not just in our feelings and preferences.

 How would you define *love*?

Though love is not only a feeling, we must continually stoke the fire of our love for people, both for the ones we adore and the ones we don't particularly care for. We do so as we remember the love of Christ so lavishly bestowed upon us. The natural response of a true Christ-follower will be to pour out on the world around us the same love we've been shown in Jesus.



Voices from Church History

"Love is not affectionate feeling, but a steady wish for the loved person's ultimate good as far as it can be obtained."¹

—C. S. Lewis (1898-1963)

Date of My Bible Study: _____

In this session, we will study the biblical call to love as heard from one of the apostle John's letters to believers. We cannot evade the Bible's command to love. It comes through loud and clear, running throughout the pages of Scripture, in both the Old and New Testaments. As those who have been rescued from our sin, we now have been given a new identity and the fruit of love will be evident in our lives. This love is not something kept within us; it will naturally be shown through our actions.

1. The way of the world is marked by hatred (1 John 3:10-13).

¹⁰ By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother.

¹¹ For this is the message that you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. ¹² We should not be like Cain, who was of the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous. ¹³ Do not be surprised, brothers, that the world hates you.



Just as the physical fruit of the plant kingdom is limited by genetic makeup, so are people. All of humankind has inherited Adam's sin nature; therefore, our corrupted spiritual DNA leads only to death, moral decay, and a distance from God that we can never span. Only through Christ does our spiritual DNA change. When we trust in Christ, we are born again to a new life, a new identity, and a new purpose. Our old state of death and decay is done away with, and in its place we are given eternal life and the beginnings of spiritual transformation.

At the moment of our salvation, God initiates a great work in us. It is a work that makes us more and more into the likeness of His Son. We partner with Him in this work until the day we meet Him face to face and we finally become complete, lacking in nothing. Until then, we are all works in progress, but the proof that we have been given this new identity is the work that has already begun.



What are some changes God has made in you since you have become a Christian?

What do you remember about the story of Cain and Abel? Both made a sacrifice to God, yet only Abel's was accepted by God as righteous. Abel is listed in the "Hall of Faith" in Hebrews 11:4, where we are told that Abel's sacrifice was a more acceptable sacrifice because of his faith. Since we know that our salvation is graciously given to us by faith and never by the works we do (Eph. 2:8-9), we must assume that though Cain and Abel both brought a sacrifice, only one did so with the undercurrent of faith: Abel.

It takes only one difficult relationship to see that the love we are called to exhibit is not something we can conjure up on our own. Loving others like Christ loved us is a feat that can only be done with supernatural power. This is why the nonbeliever is unable to display the spiritual fruit of love: The power of the Holy Spirit is not within them. The call to love as God has loved us is a calling they can never carry out. Neither is it possible for those in Christ, that is, without God's working and enabling grace transforming our hearts to show a supernatural, unexplainable love.



The world is marked by hate, but does that mean all the world can do is hate? Why or why not?



How does the world's love differ and fall short of God's love?

2. The way of the church is marked by love (1 John 3:14-15).

¹⁴ *We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death.* ¹⁵ *Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.*

John tells us something startling here that we don't want to miss. The way we will know we have passed from death to life—that we have been saved—is when we love fellow believers. It's not sinning less or obeying the commands of Scripture more. It's not attending worship gatherings or reading the Bible daily. All of those are important and can be signs of our salvation too. But John singled out loving brothers and sisters in Christ as evidence of our eternal life. Love is what sets us apart from the world. Failing to love is hate, and hate is what marks the world.

Our salvation compels us to love God in return, but it does not stop there. We also love what He loves, or more precisely, those whom He loves. This is why evidence of our new life is not just our love for God but our love for the church—His Son's bride. This is not to say that we don't love unbelievers as well. We are to love our neighbors (Mark 12:31) and our enemies (Matt. 5:44). But our love should be different for the church. Just as we are to love our spouse and children in a different and deeper way from others, we are to love believers differently than unbelievers.



Voices from Church History

“When He tells us to love our enemies, He gives, along with the command, the love itself.”²

—Corrie ten Boom
(1892-1983)



How have you seen the Spirit's fruit of love worked out in your life?

Just as the positive fruit of love is evidence of our new spiritual DNA, so are the continual expressions of the deeds of the flesh evidence of a lack of transformation. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught on this problem (see Matt. 5:20-22).

The scribes and the Pharisees were religious—very religious. They tithed down to the spices in their cabinets. They strived to follow every single rule in the Scriptures precisely, even developing additional rules. The scribes and Pharisees were the experts in religion. If anyone could be called righteous, it was them. Yet Christ said that their righteousness, as impressive as it seemed, was not enough. Salvation required a greater righteousness.

Sure, from the outside, they appeared to live far more righteously than all the others in Israel, and they took pride in that. They were known for it. They flaunted it. They delighted when people marveled at their righteousness, and they looked down on others for their failure to live as they did. But they failed to grasp their need for God’s grace and they failed to love others.

This is why Jesus condemned the scribes and Pharisees so strongly with a series of “woes” in Matthew 23. They weren’t marked by love as a true follower is (John 13:35); they were marked by their own effort. When we come to Christ in faith, trusting His perfect work is our only hope, a great and glorious exchange occurs. Our burden of sin is taken and Christ’s righteousness is given to us (2 Cor. 5:21). In the moment we believe, we are granted right-standing with God and our righteousness does exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees because it is Jesus’ righteousness. Our church attendance, tithing, and proper vocabulary are not what save us, and neither are they what define us.

The mark of a true follower of Christ is the righteousness of Christ. And the righteousness of Christ bears the fruit of the Spirit. At the top of that list is love. And this love sets us apart from the world and identifies us as God’s children.



How should the reality of Christ’s right-standing with God given to us by faith change the way we think about loving others?

3. The way of love is marked by action (1 John 3:16-18).

¹⁶ By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. ¹⁷ But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? ¹⁸ Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.

We can picture God's love as a circuit. In the next chapter, John explains that we love others because God first loved us (1 John 4:11,19). God sent His Son to show us His love for us. Christ walked to the cross to show His love for us. God raised Jesus from the dead to provide a way for us to experience this love. He has started the circuit of love we experience through Christ, but it ought not stop with us.

We are conduits of God's love. It is not a power we can provide on our own. Only through a connection with the power source can we bring true acts of sacrificial, life-giving love to a lost and weary world. We must pass on the baton of love to those around us and complete the circuit of God's provision through our hands and feet, bringing the light of Christ to the desperate people around us.

Voices from the Church

"God teaches us *love* by putting some *unlovely* people around us. It takes no character to love people who are lovely and loving to you."³

—Rick Warren



What are some things that might prevent us from showing God's love to others?

So how do we complete this circuit? How do we love others with God's love? How do we overcome the potential barriers to our obeying the call to love? Here are five actions to consider as we strive to show the world around us the love of Christ:

- 1. Pray.** This is our starting point. Regardless of our stage of life, income level, or ministry training, we can pray. And even when we are stymied by the needs around us and have no idea what to pray for, the Holy Spirit intercedes for us. He knows the will of the Father. He also knows our heart and connects the two in a way we could never utter on our own.
- 2. Pay attention.** We don't need to look far to see people with needs. But sometimes we get so busy that we overlook the opportunities to love right at our doorstep. Sometimes we simply have to open our eyes, slow down, and pay attention to what is going on all around us.
- 3. Proclaim the gospel.** Christ met many physical needs during His ministry on earth, but He met spiritual needs as well. As we love the people around us, both those who know Christ and those who don't, let's be a continual source of gospel truth. The enemy seeks to steal, kill, and destroy (John 10:10), and he most often attacks our view of God and tries to cast doubt into our hearts regarding God's goodness and His unending love for us. Let's not stop at loving others through meeting physical needs; let's tell others how much God loves them and how they can experience His love through Christ.
- 4. Provide for those who are where you cannot be.** We certainly cannot meet every need that comes our way. Some seasons of life do not allow us to be the physical hands and feet of love, but others who are capable of serving need help. We all need to be involved in the financial support of missionaries and organizations who are faithfully bringing the love of Christ to every tongue, tribe, and nation.
- 5. Publish the needs to others.** As you see needs, pray for them and provide for them, but don't forget to tell others too. Invite others to get involved. We love out of obedience and gratitude, and there are great rewards both on this earth and eternally for those whose lives are marked with love. Let's give those opportunities to others who have yet to experience the blessings of pouring out our lives for the sake of others.



Voices from Church History

"If we have got the true love of God shed abroad in our hearts we will show it in our lives. We will not have to go up and down the earth proclaiming it. We will show it in everything we say or do."⁴

—D. L. Moody (1837-1899)



Why must the way of love be marked by action?



What are some ways you can act in love for the benefit of your community?

99 Essential Christian Doctrines

19. *God Is Love*

To say that God is love is to say that God is the essence of love, or that perfect love both resides and resonates within God Himself—one God in three Persons. The imperfect love that human beings share between one another is a dim reflection, a sign that points to the perfect love that resides within God. The greatest act of love by God toward humans isn't the giving of earthly goods but the giving of Himself in Christ so that we might become reconciled to Him.

Conclusion

The desire of a Christ-follower is to honor God with our every moment, and the (super)natural fruit of His disciples will be a deep and abiding love for others. As recipients of the merciful and powerful love of Christ, let's walk forward—marked by love—in grateful worship, allowing the love of God to spill over to those we encounter.

CHRIST CONNECTION: In teaching the church about the nature of true love, the apostle John reminded Christians that love is not merely a matter of feelings or words but of action. Love was demonstrated and defined most clearly by Jesus' action of laying down His life for His people.

HIS MISSION, YOUR MISSION

MISSIONAL APPLICATION: God calls us to open our eyes to see who is in need and what we can give as a demonstration of Christ's love.

1. What hatreds and malice do you need to rid yourself of so that you can love like Christ?

2. What are some practical ways we can love others according to the love we have been given in Christ?

3. How can your group join together in love to meet the needs of a fellow believer in the coming days?
