

Love:

The Foundation of Christian Thought and Wisdom

A Bible Study

(4 Weeks)

Leader's Study Guide

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“Faith, Hope, but Especially Love” and “Faith, Hope, but Especially Love, Paraphrased”
(A Well-Defined Christian Love)

Week 1

For this First Week: Read pages 40 – 51 titled “Faith, Hope, but Especially Love” and “Faith, Hope, but Especially Love, Paraphrased.”

Note: From this point on, none of the text italicized text is present in the lay version of this study guide. Italicized text is for the leader(s) to read, paraphrase, or omit at their discretion. Sometimes it will also serve informational purposes, providing additional background to questions or a section as a whole. All ice breakers are optional, but doing the first week’s icebreaker is strongly suggested, even if the ones in other weeks are skipped.

Ice Breaker: Tennis balls are required for this activity. If there are enough people, divide the room into groups of six to eight. A single group around that number is also fine. Hand a tennis ball to each group and explain that the game they are about to play is a relay. Each group should pick a person to be their anchor. The anchor’s job will be to hold the ball before the start of the relay and to receive and hold the ball at the end of the relay.

The relay begins when the organizer calls, “Ready, set, go.” At the signal to go, each participant in a group, beginning with the anchor, must hold the ball and then pass it to the next player to hold. That person should then pass it to the next player to hold, and so on until every player on a team has held the ball.

Importantly, for a player to count as having held the ball, no one else can be simultaneously touching it.

When the ball has been held once by every person on the team, it should then be returned to the anchor. The first team’s anchor to receive the ball at the end wins.

Before starting, ask if anyone has ever played this game before. If so, have them help the person leading the activity by assisting as a referee.

Give each team a moment to talk over a plan, and then start the relay.

Important: After the first competition, let groups know that the fastest teams are actually able to get their times from first-hold to last-hold down to under 1.5 seconds. Let them discuss whether they can alter their approach to make it faster before competing again. Repeat several more times to see if any team can get below 1.5 seconds (there is a way).

This activity is a metaphor for the notion that we often assume we are already as good as we are going to get at loving others, yet we are only skimming the surface of what God imagines we might become.

Spoiler alert: If you would like to know the secret to achieving the fastest times, every member of a group should cup their hands and line them up to form a chut, almost like a waterslide. The ball can then roll through their hands unimpeded. If they make the chut circular, then it will end where it began, and the person who started the process can simply catch the ball to complete the task.

Author's Note: These days, we should make a distinction between pop-cultural Christianity and Christianity proper. Pop-cultural Christianity is what we pick up via hearsay. It's what we hear this news channel, that friend, or some politician say the Bible is supposed to mean. What we *hear* from everyone in our immediate media and social circles then becomes what we *say*.

This is not to contend that such a filtered view of the Bible is necessarily or even completely wrong. But it helps to point out that such a hear-say, pop-cultural view of the Bible often has a first aim of controlling our social behavior more than shaping our spiritual behavior.

There is a popular phrase currently going around that acknowledges this truth in an oddly ironic way. Many people today are finding the need to *decontextualize* the faith that they have learned. For instance, many worshipers are finding that the modern-day biblical interpretations they have been taught are culturally related to the same ones used to justify slavery and the lynching of African Americans – love twisted in the service of hate

When a generation decides to bend the Bible to their own economic or cultural ends, an irony such as this always results. They claim the Bible is inerrant. But then they cherry-picking verses in a way that lays waste to that prior perfection. They emphasize some verses and overlook other verses that would have conveyed beauty, nuance, and often an altogether different meaning.

There is another irony present as well. This type of pop-cultural theology doesn't need to be decontextualized. It needs to be fully recontextualized by including the balancing verses and perspectives that various generations have found it culturally convenient to ignore.

As a consequence, before I wrote my paraphrased version of 1 Corinthians 13, and before I divided it up into the Ten Positive Commandments of Love that come after that, I wanted to make absolutely sure that the reader understood that everything I wrote was well-spoken to and supported by the broader biblical text – that I am not making things up as I go to fit some preconceived agenda.

To that end, these two chapters are paired for your consideration. May the words of my pen and these meditations of my heart be acceptable to the one we confess as our rock and our redeemer (Psalm 19:14, paraphrased).

A Few Ground Rules before Discussion: This is a study about love. Rather than just talking about love, from the beginning the study will be much more useful to everyone if there is a chance to practice love. As you will find out in the coming weeks, wise-love begins first and foremost with 1) humility. Humility then leads to the ability to 2) listen and really hear beyond the words to the intended perspective behind the words. That, in turn, leads to 3) empathy and action. In this case that action will mean relating back what you've heard from your partner and, where necessary, making sure to convey the emphasis or emotions that went along with their words.

The main thing to remember here is that the doorway into love and to being a good listener is humility. Try not to convey judgment by arguing back, displaying negative facial expressions, showing anger, etc. There are no right or wrong answers to any of these questions because they are asking about what you think, not about what you're supposed to think. Only if we feel safe with each other will we be willing to be open and honest, allowing the conversations that follow to be interesting, deep, and fruitful. In other words, to really learn about love we must begin to fill the room with what it feels like to be loving.

Some Questions: To begin, pair up with another person and take ten or fifteen minutes to share your answers to each of these questions. When the group comes back together, each pair will share the answers of their partner rather than their own answers.

1. In the first chapter from this week's reading, can you find any fault in what the author says? Does he supply ample support for each of the ten themes addressed, or do you feel the themes he supplies misrepresent what Paul is actually trying to say? If you feel the reasoning is wrong for one or more of the themes, would you mind sharing for which one(s) and why?
2. There is a lot to digest in the first of these two chapters. Do you have any questions over what you read there that you would like to share?
3. If you were asked to describe what Paul's 1 Corinthians message to the church was in seven words or less, what would you say?
4. Is there a contradiction between what you say you believe theologically and what your daily actions say you believe Christologically? Or put another way, does what you say you believe theologically (and the way you live as a consequence) contradict the example Christ set for us as Christians in the way he lived and treated other people.
5. The Christian church in America and many other parts of the world is shrinking. If we were to begin to reach out into the world with the same level of personal excellence in our moral lives that Paul asked the Corinthians to display in his time, do you think the church would begin to grow again?

6. Paul mentions cults of personality. He seems to think they cause problems. According to what he says, why do you think he was so negative about them? Also, do you see cults of personality in our society today, and are they causing similar problems to those Paul explained would happen?
7. Over the years, sometimes my personal or political feelings about what I should do in certain situations seems to contradict what the Bible says. Has that ever happened to you? And if so, how do you go about resolving the issue?
8. Imagine you're in a situation where you believe you're absolutely right about a moral issue and you feel the other person hasn't a clue what they're talking about. Maybe it's your spouse, friend, child, neighbor, etc. How might you best go about handling that situation in light of the principles Paul lays out in 1 Corinthians 13?

For the Coming Week: Read pages 52 through 59, titled “The Tenets of Wise-Love” and “Love and the Ten Commandments.”

“The Tenets of Wise-Love” and “Love and the Ten Commandments”

(Ten Positive Commandments to Make the Negative Commandments Whole)

Week 2

Ice Breaker: *You will need a ready supply of paper to oversee a quick paper-airplane Olympics. Have everyone make their version of a paper airplane. Then see whose airplane flies the farthest on the first throw. Alternatively, see whose airplane comes closest to hitting a designated target in the room. Or do both.*

Author’s Note: I have to confess that there were times as a child where I could be an exceptionally good Christian of the most questionable kind. I remember one instance in particular. We were down in Georgia visiting my grandmother on my father’s side. Earlier that day, she had used blueberries I had picked to make the most heaven-sent pie I can ever remember tasting. When I wandered into her bedroom sometimes later, she had undone her hair and was about to run a hot iron through it.

I had never seen my grandmother like that before. I contemplated her for a long second. Then I did what any good Christian boy following the ninth commandment would do. I told her the full truth of what my young heart thought: “Grandma, you look just like the Wicked Witch of the West.” And, indeed, she did. But suffice to say my grandmother didn’t appreciate the comment. If looks could kill, I wouldn’t be writing this sentence today.

The Ten Commandments teach us a great many things we should NOT do, lying being among them. But later, Christ adds that each of the Ten Commandments rests in the shadow of something more positive, the commandment to love. I could have kept quiet in the presence of my grandmother. Or I could have pointed out the deep, unassailable truth of how much I loved her blueberry pie. Either of those two truthful reactions would have clearly been more loving than the loveless truth I picked.

I think we teach kids and beginners “do not’s” because they are easier to handle and understand. The Old Testament is all about beginners and beginnings, so it makes sense that it emphasizes “do not’s.” But the New Testament is about maturity. It’s about the ends to which the beginnings have been directed all along. So, it makes equal sense that there are multiple positive versions of love’s ten commandments scattered throughout the pages of the New Testament. I picked the version in 1 Corinthians because it was written in a time and place that most closely parallels our modern cultural times.

Verses and Readings to Explore:

Matthew 5:21–22. “²¹You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ ²²But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire.”

To use the QR Code at right,
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frame or box appears, 4) hold the
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displayed link.

**The Sermon on the Mount has a
similar structure to 1 Corinthians 13
and also parallels the Ten
Commandments**



Some Questions:

1. If someone were to ask you, could you name all Ten Commandments?
2. Do you really agree with Matthew 5:21–22? Doesn't it seem like going overboard to equate getting a little angry with being as bad as murder? Really?
3. The author believes that another definition of humility is to count all Ten Commandments as equal. Would you walk around with as much ease as you do now, head held high, if you saw lying or jealousy or failing to honor your mother and father as every bit as bad as committing murder?
4. Do we ever use the cover of obeying the Ten Commandments to be hateful, doing the right thing while still managing to do the wrong thing, the hateful thing, the thing lacking in love?
5. The author mentioned that he felt he was being good by telling his grandmother the truth that she looked like the Wicked Witch of the West. He may have been keeping the ninth commandment. But was he breaking any other ones in the process?
6. Non-violence seems to be an idea that floats through all the Old Testament commandments – don't do violence to the truth, don't do violence to another person's

soul, don't do violence to relationships. Is this a practical way to live life? Don't we sometime need to initiate violence in order to get the end result we desire?

7. Had you ever considered the idea of sins as addictions – as ways in which we go about avoiding various kinds of pain – mental, spiritual, emotional, economic, intellectual, etc.? What do you think now?
8. Do addicts ever want to admit they are addicted or in the wrong? If we think of sins as addictions, what does that suggest about our willingness to deceive ourselves over what we are sometimes doing?
9. One well-known fact about addiction that is often overlooked is that as a person takes an addictive drug or engages in an addictive activity, they cease being the person they were prior to becoming addicted. The activity literally rewires their brain, making them effectively a different person. They no longer have the same decision-making capacities. They no longer see the world in the same way. With that in mind, does sin have an addictive nature that also bends or damages the soul in some way that also makes a person different?
10. The ten positive tenets of wise-love can all be grouped under one of three different headings. Some tenets fall squarely under being humble. Some fall under being better listeners, capable of hearing what other people are trying to tell us. Some are directed at the empathy that results from finally hearing what other people are trying to say. Using these three headings – 1) humility, 2) humble listening-hearing, and 3) having empathy – use a whiteboard to place each of the ten tenets under the heading(s) where it fits best.

For the Coming Week: Read pages 60 through 72, titled “What is Lost When Grace Is Lost” and “Maturity through Grace and Love.”

“What is Lost When Grace Is Lost” and “Maturity through Grace and Love”

(The Centrality of Grace to Faith and to a Healthy Society)

Week 3

Ice Breaker: *You will need tape and string for this activity. Break off two pieces of string that are long enough to fit across a doorway. Tape one piece of string about two feet off the ground with one end of the string on one side of the door and the other end taped to the other side of the door. Do the same with the other piece of string, but this time about four feet off the ground. Now, see if everyone can pass through the door without touching either the top or the bottom string. Once a person has passed through the door, they can help subsequent people with balance or other issues until everyone is through the door. Feel free to place the strings closer or farther apart to make the activity more or less challenging, depending on the personality, age, and athleticism of the group.*

Author’s Note: Around 1996, one of my African-American math students called me an Oreo. He said I would have no idea what it meant to be a black person until I moved to Newark, NJ, where he grew up. I had heard the term Oreo applied to me before. The message conveyed by the insult was that despite having black skin, my interior thoughts were more emblematic of a white mindset.

I could have ignored the boy’s opinion. But I took his words to heart. Soon afterwards, I moved to South 8th Street. It was among the worst of Newark’s inner-city neighborhoods at the time.

I arrived with exactly the attitude the child predicted: I assumed that my background, my work ethic, my education, and my achievements made me just a little bit better than the people I had settled among. It didn’t take me long to realize how wrong I was.

Among the first patterns I noted was how no one seemed to look down on anyone else. Everyone was simply trying to get by in a place where life was hard. Instead of cold aloofness, I found an uncommon, unassuming, and, to me, surprisingly down-to-earth kindness.

At some point someone explained to me what they felt the real difference was between the inner-city and the suburbs. They said people in the suburbs weren’t necessarily better people than in the inner-city; they were often just better at hiding their faults. Walk through the inner-city mid-summer, and everyone’s out on the front porch or in the streets just living life. Take the same drive in the suburbs, especially the more affluent enclaves, and everything is behind closed doors of fenced-in backyards.

Down to earth was one phrase that came to mind. Salt of the earth also applied to many inner-city folks. The way I came to understand their thinking was that, being lowest on the social ladder already, what was the point in anyone pretending they were better than anyone else?

My time in Newark taught me that giving grace means never forgetting that we all come from the dirt and are all destined for the grave. Humans come from humus. So love the dirt! That's grace.

Verses and Readings to Explore:

Luke 11:1–4. “¹He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, ‘Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.’ ²He said to them, ‘When you pray, say:

Father, hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come.
³ Give us each day our daily bread.
⁴ And forgive us our sins,
for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.
And do not bring us to the time of trial.’”

The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant



Giving Water to the Homeless



Pride and Grace: Read the First Seven Verses Presented



Some Questions:

1. What things are you most proud of – accomplishments, possessions, status, etc.?
2. How would you feel if you lost those things, with little hope of gaining them back?
3. Would you be willing to share with the group the thing about yourself that you are *least* proud of? Or, if not outwardly sharing, would people be willing to raise their hands to show that there were things that came to mind almost immediately?
4. Do you think that people generally get what they deserve or, at least, that they should get what they deserve? Asked another way, after all the things you did as a kid that were incredibly dangerous, stupid, perhaps even illegal – would you still be where you are today had you suffered the full and deserved consequences of those actions?

5. Is it possible in the Bible's eyes to feel a sense of prideful deservedness and still be the beneficiary of God's grace? Or to be gracious to others?
6. In our society, what metrics mark some people as more deserving and other people as less deserving? Are these the same metrics God would use?
7. Is it possible to build a society where some people are seen as better than others without a sense of pride and deservedness being involved?
8. Olympians and Olympic hopefuls judge themselves by their worst performances because in order to make the team, their worst has to be better than everyone else's best. Do we judge ourselves the same way in our daily lives, or do we try to forget our worst and most embarrassing days/actions/sins as quickly as possible? And what about how we judge other people?
9. Can you define what the Bible means by grace? According to that definition, are we a gracious society?
10. Do you think it would be possible for us to be a gracious society, or would people just take unfair advantage of all that grace and get lazy? Also, does accepting God's grace make us lazy Christians?

For the Coming Week: Read pages 73 through 84, titled "Evidence of the Protective Wisdom Love Provides" and "Wise-Love Reprised."

“Evidence of the Protective Wisdom Love Provides” and “Wise-Love Reprised”

(A Practical Display of the Fruits of Wise-Love and a Practical Summary)

Week 4

Ice Breaker: *Have everyone play a good old-fashioned game of rhythm. Before the game begins, go around the circle and have everyone pick an animal sound. No two people’s sounds can be the same. The leader begins the game by having everyone clap for two beats and rest for two beats until everyone has the proper rhythm. After a few measures, the leader claps twice, makes their sound on the next beat, and on the beat after that makes the sound of the person they are passing the action to. That person then claps twice, then on the next beat makes their sound, and on the beat after that the sound of the person they wish to pass the action to, etc.*

There are only three rules. First, the rhythm cannot stop once it starts. Second, you can’t pass the action immediately back to the person who passed it to you. Finally, if you can’t complete this process in rhythm when the action gets passed to you, you’re out. The game ends when only three people are left. The leader retains control of the rhythm by continuing to clap along, so they can speed up the clapping to make the game more challenging.

Author’s Note: Probably one of the first lessons I learned in evangelical circles was to keep a prayer journal: When you said a prayer, you recorded it. That way when God answered the prayer, you could note that the prayer was answered and understand that God was faithful.

The scientist in me liked that idea. But, with my former Navy professor’s comment in mind, I decided to adopt the method to what I thought were better ends, especially since it seemed a mighty big assumption to imagine that as a young Christian my prayers were always in accordance with God’s will.

To my mind, the better test was to ask if there was a sure way to know I was acting and praying in accordance with God’s will. So eventually I began to watch what actions bore reliable fruit and what actions did not. As I relayed earlier, the actions that bore the most reliable fruit were the ones that were more humble, mindful, and considerate both of one’s self and others, rather than being just directed at the self.

It is such an accurate indicator that I fail to understand why people fail to give the experiment a try themselves. In the first of these last two chapters, I wanted to conduct that experiment in terms of history and take the reader along for the ride. In the final chapter, I wanted to offer a practical way to live out this ethic of wise-love so the reader could see if the results held true for themselves, as it did for the 102-year-old Col. dePyssler.

Verses and Readings to Explore:

Introduction to a Research Model on Wisdom: “The importance of wisdom for the well-being of individuals and the welfare of society has been pointed out by many scholars. For almost 40 years, the psychological science has given evidence for the association of wisdom with many positive outcomes. In more concrete and practical terms, wisdom has been associated with personal benefits such as better physical and psychological health, life satisfaction and happiness (Thomas, Bangen, Ardelt, & Jeste, 2017), as well as with societal benefits such as the sense of common good (Baltes, 2004; Staudinger, Maciel, Smith, & Baltes, 1998) and improved interpersonal relations (Thomas et al., 2017) at large. In particular, the significance of wisdom has been pointed out in developmental, both individual and social, transitional periods (Kunzmann & Baltes, 2005).” Introduction to “Can Wisdom Be Fostered: Time to Test the Model of Wisdom” at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23311908.2017.1381456>.

Wisdom from the First Three Verses Listed



Some Questions:

1. Who or what do you define as your tribe – your religious tribe, your social tribe, your political tribe, your ethnic or racial tribe?
2. Do you believe everyone has at least some small piece of God in them that should be honored?
3. Wise-love is defined as 1) approaching life and other people with humility, 2) using that humility to foster in one’s self the ability to listen and fully hear what others are conveying, and 3) embracing the capacity for empathy with action.

Do you believe that living this type of life is the best way to maximize your wellbeing and a return on your efforts while alive? In other words, do you really believe it is wise to be a loving person and loving society? Or is it better to embrace social hierarchies so that we can believe we are better than other people and then act accordingly?

4. Can we define hate using an altered form of the same trinity: 1) no humility, leading to 2) no mindfulness of others, resulting in 3) no empathic action?
5. Would you consider intentionally trying to do one kind thing each day for someone outside of your tribe?
6. What one lesson from the past eight weeks do you think you will carry with you into your life as you go forward? If you don't have any lessons that come to mind, that's fine. But if you would like to, please share.

An Invitation to Further Exploration:

Love's Trinity



What's Your Belief Style?



Wise-Love Turned Inward

