

Love:

The Foundation of Christian Thought and Wisdom

A Bible Study

(8 Weeks)

Leader's Study Guide

Table of Contents

Week 1	Chapter 1 introduces <i>Love: The Foundation</i> , with the discussion giving everyone in the group a chance to break the ice and get to know each other.
Week 2	Chapter 2 asks everyone how Bible-believing Christians ever figured that God was okay with lynching people. It examines whether it would be possible for modern Christians to go back in time and use the Bible to persuade slave-owners and Jim Crow adherents that they were wrong.
Week 3	Chapters 3 and 4 explore the relationship among wisdom, humility, and love.
Week 4	Chapters 5 and 6 explore the importance of understanding not only the theology we need for living our lives but also the Christology we require.
Week 5	Chapters 7 and 8 explore a positive definition of Christian love based on the ten main topics in 1 Corinthians 13.
Week 6	Chapters 9 and 10 contrast the ten Old-Testament “Thou shall not” negative commandments with ten New-Testament “Thou shall” positive commandments. They also examine the hidden depths that lie beneath the seeming simplicity of the Ten Commandments.
Week 7	Chapters 11 and 12 delve into the centrality and importance of grace to Christianity and wise-love.
Week 8	Chapters 13 and 14 consider whether wise-love really does produce better life outcomes and recap the essentials of wise-love.

“Introduction”

Week 1

For this First Week: Read pages 1 – 6 titled “Introduction” and “The Problem.”

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: When I was in second grade, my teacher insisted that after saying the Pledge of Allegiance each morning, we then sing, "Getting to Know You" from the movie *The King and I*. To this day, I remember the words from the refrain: "Getting to know you / Getting to feel free and easy / When I am with you / Getting to know what to say." I can tell you the exact effect the song had on me. It made me feel heard, valued, and loved. So, rather than immediately diving into the study material, this study began with the little getting-to-know-you game above.

The following questions are, likewise, a kind of getting-to-know-you exercise. But they are also a getting-to-know-yourself exercise because, at least for me, sometimes when I answer questions coming out of the blue, I round unexpected corners of myself that I did not even know were there.

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. This week, 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.

Give the group about ten minutes to discuss and take notes if they would like. There is no need for participants to answer every question nor for the larger group to get through every question once everyone has joined up again.

When it is time to cover the questions as a large group, it is recommended to take one or two at a time, let everyone share, and then use that as a springboard into discussion if people have additional thoughts.

1. Is there a sin you would say is far worse than other types of wrongdoing? If so, why do you think of that one as the worst one?
2. What top three things would you say are wrong with society right now?
3. Do you have a friend from across the religious, political, or racial aisle with whom you regularly discuss points of contention so you can better understand their position?
4. What one word do you think best describes the God you worship?
5. What one word would you use to describe yourself and why?
6. Would you consider yourself a good person who has worked hard and deserves most of what you have?
7. How often do you think of the sins you commit, besides when you're in church?
8. How often do you pray for forgiveness for your sins outside of the Lord's Prayer or weekly prayer of confession in church?
9. Do you remember the worst thing you've ever done? Do you count it against yourself, or have you mostly forgotten about it as a bygone from a long time ago?
10. Have you ever considered whether the way you were raised has anything to do with the way you interpret the Bible?

For the Coming Week: Read pages 1 through 6, titled "Introduction" and "The Problem."

“The Problem”
(and the Root of the Problem)

Week 2

Ice Breaker: *The Sixty-Second Stare.* Have group members pair up before knowing what the activity will be. Then have them stare deeply into each other’s eyes for sixty seconds as one tells the other about one of the best days they have recently had. Then reverse the process. At the end, ask a few people to share their partners’ stories with the larger group, if each partner consents.

Author’s Note: In a recent opinion piece, Abigail Disney, granddaughter to Walt Disney, opened by asking, “If my grandfather’s company doesn’t stand for love, what’s it for?” At root, that’s the question I am posing in “The Problem,” but regarding the church.

Because it is often hard to look directly at ourselves and our own issues, I wanted to go back in time and ask the question of our predecessors. Then I wanted to sit for a moment with their answers, wondering why it would be impossible to argue them out of believing their Bible and its God were in favor of massive wealth accumulation, in favor of lynching as a way of keeping the right people in their place, and against the notion of a common, equal, and loving good for all people.

Look at Jesus with the money changers long ago, and this is exactly the question I believe was running through his head: “If my father’s house doesn’t stand for love, what does it stand for?” The question was lost on the money changers on the temple steps, it was lost on nineteenth-century American slaver holders who were likewise fine with their unholy exchange, and I am wondering if it might not also be lost on some of the loudest religious voices of our age. In “The Problem,” I wanted to explore why.

Verses and Readings to Explore:

John 8:1–11. ¹But Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. ²Early in the morning he came again to the temple; all the people came to him, and he sat down and taught them. ³The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and placing her in the midst ⁴they said to him, ‘Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. ⁵Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such. What do you say about her?’ ⁶This they said to test him, that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. ⁷And as they continued to ask him, he stood up and said to them, ‘Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her.’ ⁸And once more he bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. ⁹But when they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the eldest, and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. ¹⁰Jesus

looked up and said to her, ‘Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?’ ¹¹ She said, ‘No one, Lord.’ And Jesus said, ‘Neither do I condemn you; go, and do not sin again.’”

To use the QR Codes at right,
1) turn your cellphone camera on,
2) aim it at one of the squares,
3) draw closer to the image until a
frame or box appears, 4) hold the
camera steady until a message
appears, then 5) tap the message
to go to the website at the
displayed link.

Ezekiel’s Description of Satan and Why He was Condemned



The Beatitudes and Humility



Some Questions:

1. Does anyone believe that if they went back in time, they could convince slave-holding Christians that their interpretation of the Bible was wrong? Why or why not?
2. What was Satan’s main sin?
3. Was Lucifer the owner of the light or the guardian of the light (“the stones of fire”) as explained in Ezekiel? Did he have dominion over the workings of heaven itself, or was he supposed to be a servant helping with major *day-to-day* operations?
4. Does Satan remind you of any historical figures when he imagines that he is exceptional, that he is superior, that he deserves to be in charge, that he owns the place, and that he can use violence to put and keep himself in charge?
5. Why does Jesus spend so many verses in the beatitudes (7 to 8 verses) outlining what it means to be humble before using one verse to tell us that we, too, are the light of the world?
6. In the story about the adulterous woman, when Jesus suggests that the person in the crowd who was without sin cast the first stone, are any of the ten commandments exempted from what counts as a sin as bad as adultery?
7. Is there any way to feel superior to other people without feeling that breaking some commandments is not nearly as bad as breaking other commandments?
8. Are there commandments you are guilty of overlooking as you compare yourself to other people?

9. If people read the Bible with a spirit of pride and deservedness, will the Bible deliver the same message to them as it will if they read it with a spirit of humility? If you think “yes,” then why? If “no,” then why not?
10. Does an absence of personal or group humility eventually lead to hate and violence, or is being arrogant equally likely to lead to peace and love?

This will initially seem like a leading question with one correct answer. Once people have concluded that arrogance will likely lead to violence, move the question from the abstract to the concrete using follow-up questions.

For instance: 1) Is it humble or arrogant to believe that a person or religious group has the only correct interpretation of the Bible? What about the only correct interpretation of the Constitution? 2) Is it humble to believe that older immigrants and their second- and third-generation descendants are better for America than recent immigrants? 3) Is it humble to believe that most of team A’s facts, narratives, and news are true while disregarding most of team B’s facts, narratives, and news?

Could I, you, we be contributing to the climate of violence in America? What would happen to the climate if each of us took a humbler approach to the world?

For the Coming Week: Read pages 7 through 22, titled “The Conversation Where Opposites Agreed” and “Epiphany and Transformation.”

“The Conversation where Opposites Agreed” and “Epiphany and Transformation” **(Wisdom, Humility, and Love)**

Week 3

Ice Breaker: *Two Lies and a Truth: Have study participants come up with three statements, two that are false and one true. One at a time, have each participant share their three statements and then allow the group to vote on which of the three they think is the true one. Do this until everyone has had a chance to share.*

Author’s Note: There are actually two origin stories that deeply contributed to my understanding of the nature of wisdom, also referred to as foresight, in the Bible. My professor at the Naval Academy tensioned the bow that set me flying in search of a reliable way of exercising wisdom. But another event determined the outcome of that flight.

In my second year at the Academy, I went looking for a sleight-of-hand magic book in the fourth-floor stacks of Nimitz Library. Before I found the book I was looking for, I stumbled upon an economics book. Curious about what people in economics studied, I pulled it off the shelf. Within seconds of scanning its pages, I laughed: They were using the same equations I was using in my physics classes. They were simply using them to talk about different ideas.

That’s the night I realized the central wisdom of the physical sciences was that certain general principles ran like a freight train through much of reality. That is when I began to suspect that other general principles carried freight for the spiritual world as well (and that people ignored them at their peril). The only question left was what those spiritual wisdom-principles were.

The holy battle over what counts as real, trustworthy wisdom is a war over these two central questions of faith: 1) Did God create this world in love, and does it operate best when navigated using the laws of love he gave us, or 2) do we believe the wisdom of the world that says poppycock to this reply? When we are tempted by powerful self-interests – by fear, anger, greed, hunger, politics, safety – will we double down on humility and love for all or hierarchy and love for the few? That choice is put to every Christian soul on a daily basis.

Verses and Readings to Explore:

Deuteronomy 8:11–18. ¹¹Take heed lest you forget the LORD your God, by not keeping his commandments and his ordinances and his statutes, which I command you this day: ¹²lest, when you have eaten and are full, and have built goodly houses and live in them, ¹³and when your herds and flocks multiply, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, ¹⁴then your heart be lifted up, and you forget the LORD your God, who brought you

out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage, ¹⁵ who led you through the great and terrible wilderness, with its fiery serpents and scorpions and thirsty ground where there was no water, who brought you water out of the flinty rock, ¹⁶ who fed you in the wilderness with manna which your fathers did not know, that he might humble you and test you, to do you good in the end. ¹⁷ Beware lest you say in your heart, ‘My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth.’ ¹⁸ You shall remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth; that he may confirm his covenant which he swore to your fathers, as at this day.”

Romans 1:28—2:5



Romans 2:17–24



1 Corinthians 5:1–2, 9–12



Some Questions:

1. Based on the verses you just read, how do you think God felt about the moral uprightness of the Israelites and the churches in Roman and Corinth?
2. Who did believers tend to judge harshly, and who did they tend to judge less harshly, if at all, according to these accounts?
3. Does this pattern hold for believers in today’s churches?
4. According to Matthew 7:1–3, does what you say in judgment of another person say more about them or more about who you are or perhaps have been?
5. In the first chapter, you picked some things you really think are wrong with society. According to Matthew 7:1–3, what is the implication of your picks for yourself, your community, and possible even for your church?
6. The author defines wisdom as a useful set of patterns that are universally present, even in situations and populations that at first glance appear to be different. So, is Matthew 7:1–3 a command, a universally true spiritual wisdom-pattern, or both?
7. Is there anything in the Lord’s Prayer about the Matthew 7:1–3 principle?
8. Would you say it is wise for us to judge other people who do not call themselves believers according to these Scriptures and our daily prayers?

9. The author clearly believes that loving other people is wiser than judging them. In fact, he believes that, at root, the Bible is all about love and that it teaches us how to love better, not judge better. Have you ever looked at the Bible that way before? And do you agree or disagree?

10. You've heard that Christian love cannot be separated from humility. What do you think, and why?

For the Coming Week: Read pages 23 through 39, titled “Reformation” and “Rome Versus Corinth.”

“Reformation” and “Rome Versus Corinth”

(Theology and Christology)

Week 4

Ice Breaker: *You will need cards with pre-drawn figures for this activity. Have people in the group pair up and sit back-to-back. Give one member of each pair a card with a simple line drawing on it of some animal or object. Give the other member of each pair a piece of paper and a pencil. Without actually saying what the animal or object is, have the person holding the card describe to the person holding the paper what actions they need to make to reproduce the card’s picture on the paper. Give participants about three minutes to attempt to accomplish this task. Then share the results with everyone. Time permitting, pairs can switch roles and repeat with a new paper and picture card.*

Author’s Note: When I wrote the first draft of this book, the chapter “Rome Versus Corinth” was not included. That is probably because for the vast majority of my life I always used the phrase, “I think,” never the phrase, “I feel.” It took a girlfriend of mine, who also happened to be a psychologist, to point that out to me.

She had lost her mother at the age of fifteen and never stopped feeling that loss acutely. When I dated her years later, it was the one part of her I was unable to understand. But during the course of the relationship, she taught me that understanding does not always precede empathy. Sometimes we have to lead with our hearts before our heads can follow. Sometimes we simply have to allow ourselves to feel and to care before we can understand why the caring is so deeply important. Unfortunately, it is often easier to favor our own preconceived notions about some person or social situation than to empathize – to truly feel.

This is something of the difference between having a head-shaped faith and theology but not having the heart-shaped love and Christology that should go along with it. It is also probably why I failed to add the chapter on Rome versus Corinth until later. Even though I believe that we mature via the ever-unfolding trinity of faith, hope, and especially love, that does not make it any easier to change the self-protecting tendency to rationalize before trying to empathize. But that is what Christ and God the Father come knocking at our door to ask of us.

Verses and Readings to Explore:

1 Corinthians 4:1–5. ¹“Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God’s mysteries. ²Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy. ³But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. I do not even judge myself. ⁴I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord

who judges me. ⁵Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive commendation from God.”

To be Saved, Word and Heart are Enough



James Says Be Doers of the Word and not Merely Hearers



Self-Deception and Wisdom



Some Questions:

1. There seems to be a contradiction between what Paul is saying in Romans, that words and emotions are enough to be certain of being saved, versus what James is saying. Why?
2. Is it really possible that we could be deceiving ourselves about whether we do or do not believe in God, as it says in Matthew, the last of the three QR code readings?
3. Are you someone who is comfortable with mysteries and unanswered questions? Or do you prefer solid, definite answers to things?

Do you think that you can be saved by mentally believing in a theological message and the God behind that message, or does being saved also require a daily Christlike change of heart and action?

4. If we look more closely at the first QR code that pulls from Romans and says that confessing with the mouth and believing with the heart are enough, does it actually contradict any of the other verses referenced, or does it only appear to contradict them at first glance? And what is the reasoning behind your answer?
5. Why was Paul's emphasis of a Christology (what it means to live in a Christlike manner) so critically important to the survival and growth of the church in Corinth?
6. Imagine that you couldn't say one word about your faith: no bumper stickers, no Instagram posts, no necklaces, no obvious work-related identifiers. What if people

- could only watch your actions? Would they know you were a Christian, or might they have their doubts?
7. Do you ever practice being a more loving person, in the same way you would practice golfing, dribbling a soccer ball, or running? Is it even possible to practice being a more loving person like that?
 8. In your own mind, what would it look like to be excellent in loving other people, and how closely do you fit that bill? Also, if you do not like your answer, what one thing might you begin to do to change that?
 9. The theme of living by the letter of the letter of the law versus living by the spirit of the law would be an entire Bible study unto itself. If you would like to dig a little deeper into the matter, consider the outline and reference verses located at the first QR code below (biblegateway.com, “Dictionary of Biblical Themes: 5381 Law, Letter and Spirit of”) or the story of how Jesus felt about the Pharisees, an encapsulated version of the same ideas located at the second QR code.

**Bible Gateway Outline of
Mistaking the Letter of the
Law for the Spirit of the Law**



**Jesus’s Unvarnished Opinion
of the Pharisees and People
Like Them**



For the Coming Week: Read pages 40 through 51, titled “Faith, Hope, but Especially Love” and “Faith, Hope, But Especially Love, Paraphrased.”

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

Week 5

Ice Breaker: *You will need cards, tape, and pencils or pens for this activity. Tape a card to each participant’s forehead. The card should contain the name of some popular historical or iconic figure (Cleopatra, Shakespeare, Thor, President Lincoln, Chuck Norris, Beyonce, etc.). The object of the game is for each person to wander around asking only “yes” or “no” questions as they attempt to figure out who they are. Once they guess the answer, they should remove the card from their forehead and join in to answer the questions of anyone whose forehead still retains a card.*

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 shaping and controlling our social behavior more than our spiritual behavior.

There is a popular phrase going around right currently that acknowledges this truth in an oddly ironic way. Many people today are finding the need to *decontextualize* the faith that they have learned. To use the historical example cited earlier, many people 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.

When a generation decides to bend the Bible to their own economic or cultural ends, an irony 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.

That is where the irony comes in. 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.

So, 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 (see Psalm 19:14).

Verses and Readings to Explore: There are no real verses to highlight in this section because the reading cited all the most important ones. Instead, this week moves straight to questions.

Some Questions:

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 seem 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 6

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 nots” 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 nots.” 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.”

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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 7

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 8

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

