

Love



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Isaiah 53, Matt. 22:37–39, 1 Corinthians 13, 1 John 3, 1 John 4.*

Memory Text: “And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love” (*1 Corinthians 13:13, NIV*).

It is only fitting that a study guide dealing with key concepts of the Christian faith should start with the topic of love. The apostle Paul points out that however important faith and hope and other elements of Christianity are, it all starts with love. Without love, we are, as he said, “nothing” (*1 Cor. 13:2*).

Some five centuries before Christ was born, the Greek philosopher Sophocles said, “One word frees us of all the weight and pain of life. That word is love.” True as these words are, this Greek sage still was ignorant about the depth of love that was to be proclaimed and modeled by our Savior.

God is love. Whatever else God is, and whatever He has done, is doing, and will do—everything is a manifestation of His love. This love is as comforting as it is difficult to comprehend. God's love far exceeds what human beings usually label as love, which is sometimes a mere shallow feeling or temporary infatuation that's often mixed with selfishness and greed. God does not just *have* love or *show* love. He *is* love.

The Week at a Glance: God's love for humanity has been revealed in numerous ways, the greatest being the Cross. As followers of Jesus, we respond to His love by loving others as Christ loves us.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, April 4.

Love—the Fabric of Life

We need to eat and drink in order to stay alive. Without liquid to drink or food to eat, we come to an end soon. But in order to live in any real sense of the word, we also need love. Life without love is a subhuman kind of existence. There is a built-in need in us to receive love. We need the love of parents. We need the love of family and friends. We need to be part of a loving community. But just as much as we need to receive love, we also need to give love. We are not truly human if we cannot love. But let's be clear: True love does not begin with us. The capacity for love is created in us by our Creator. (*See Gen. 1:26 and John 3:16.*)

How all-important is love in the life of the follower of Christ? *Matt. 22:37–39, 1 Cor. 13:1–3, 1 John 3:14.*

God's love always precedes our love. Whatever else we say about love, this point is crucial. True "love is not an impulse, but a divine principle, a permanent power. The unconsecrated heart cannot originate or produce it. Only in the heart where Jesus reigns is it found. 'We love Him, because He first loved us' [*1 John 4:19*]. In the heart renewed by divine grace, love is the ruling principle of action." —Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 551.

The famous British author C. S. Lewis uses the terms "Gift-love" and "Need-love" to differentiate between God's love and human forms of love. While God wants our love more than anything else, He does not need our love in the same way in which we need love from Him and from fellow human beings. "We [must] begin at the real beginning, with love as the Divine energy. This primal love is Gift-love. In God there is no hunger that needs to be filled, only plenteousness that desires to give."—C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (London: HarperCollins, 1998), p. 121. Our human love needs to be transformed by divine love, so that—while we will continue to yearn for love from others—we will be able to give love in a truly Christlike manner.

From your own experience, what is the difference between human love and God's love? What kind of human love best exemplifies God's love? How can we better manifest God's love in our own lives?

The Lesson in Brief

▶ **Key Text:** *1 Corinthians 13:13*

▶ **The Student Will:**

Know: That God is love and that Jesus is the greatest expression of that love.

Feel: The difference between human love and God’s all-encompassing, selfless love.

Do: Allow God’s love to manifest itself in our lives through Christ.

▶ **Learning Outline:**

I. Needing Love (*Gen. 1:26*)

A *The Message* Bible translates this text as “let us make human beings . . . reflecting our nature.” Because we reflect God’s nature, and because God is love, we should reflect this love through our actions. How can we do this in our lives?

B As humans, we all have the need to love and be loved. How is God’s love different from the love of others? Can you replace one with the other? Why, or why not?

II. Experiencing Love (*1 John 3*)

A God’s extraordinary love is highlighted throughout Scripture. Creation, the gift of the Sabbath, the plan of salvation, and the Spirit of prophecy all affirm God’s loving nature. Share specific ways you have experienced God’s unfathomable love.

B The gift of eternal life is the ultimate demonstration of love. What are other examples of God’s love?

III. Reflecting Love (*Matt. 22:35–40*)

Our reaction to the love of God should be love for one another. This can be hard to do in a world full of sin. How can you better reflect His love?

▶ **Summary:** God is love. When we allow Christ to abide within us, this love will be revealed in our lives.

The Old Testament God—a God of Love

It is often said that God’s love is clearly manifested only in the New Testament, while the “Old Testament God” is a God of justice and wrath. But careful study of the entire Bible shows that God does not have such a split personality. Though God’s love was manifested in the fullest measure in Christ (as portrayed in the New Testament), the God of Old Testament times is just as much a God of supreme love. God does not change (*James 1:17*). He does not gradually evolve from a God of wrath or a God of justice into a God of love. God’s love is eternal. The words to His Old Testament people apply to all times: “‘I have loved you with an everlasting love’” (*Jer. 31:3, NIV*).

Take a look at a few important evidences of God’s love in Old Testament times as listed below, and add a few other clear evidences of His love found elsewhere in the Old Testament.

• **God’s love in creation** (*Gen. 1:26–31, 2:21–25*).

• **Providing a solution for the sin problem** (*Gen. 3:15, 22:8, Isaiah 53*).

• **The gift of the Sabbath** (*Exod. 31:12–17*).

• **The continuous gift of prophecy** (*Amos 3:7*).

There are stories and statements in the Old Testament that are, at least on the surface, difficult to understand. It is true that we read about bloodshed and war. But never forget that God is consistently portrayed as the covenant God who draws people to Himself and does not forsake them, in spite of the fact that they turn their backs on Him time and again.

What do you answer when confronted with questions about war and bloodshed in the Old Testament? How do you reconcile the divine commands to eliminate entire nations (for instance, Israel taking possession of the land of Canaan) with the concept of a God of love?

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate**

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Love is God’s defining attribute. All of God’s actions, from Creation to Redemption, are motivated by His selfless, unconditional love for us.

Just for Teachers: In this lesson, we focus on the love of God for us. Help your students understand the central importance of love in our relationships with God and in our Christian lives. How can we emulate God’s love in our relationships with others?

Celsus, one of the many critics of Christians and Christianity in late antiquity, wrote sardonically, “ ‘These Christians love each other even before they are acquainted.’ ”—W. Carl Ketcherside: *In the Beginning*, chapter 11, “Fear of Love,” italics supplied, <http://www.mun.ca/rels/restmov/texts/wcketcherside/itb/chap11.html>. Celsus found Christian love absurd. Yet, how much more absurd would someone like Celsus find the idea that although God is acquainted with us already and knows for a fact that we are not lovable, He loves us anyway?

Discuss With the Class: As the quote from Celsus suggests, there probably are as many distinct concepts of love as there are people. Ask each member of the class to define what love means and to give an example. How do these definitions measure up against God’s love for us? How do they help us understand God’s love better?

Consider This: God wants something from us in return for the wonderful and mystifying gift of love He showers on us: to let Him show this love to others through us. What can we do to make it easier for Him to do this work in our lives?

► **STEP 2—Explore**

Bible Commentary

I. “The Greatest of These” (*Review with your class 1 Corinthians 13.*)

In discussing the importance of love, Paul compares it to the gift of

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The New Testament God—a God of Love

Why did Jesus Christ come to the world? Why did He have to suffer, and was it necessary for Him to die on a cross? And why will He come again and restore this world to its original unblemished condition? Was there no other way? And if not, why does it take so long before the sin problem is fully dealt with? We are in no position to answer these questions. In His infinite wisdom God *devised* a plan to deal with the predicament of sin in the best possible way. Being a holy God, He could not overlook the rebellion against His perfect law; being love, He could not stand back and let His creatures perish without doing His utmost to save them.

“God’s holiness is his majestic purity that cannot tolerate moral evil. God’s love is his outgoing, tenderhearted embrace of the sinner. God’s holiness is his separateness from what is unclean and profane. God’s love is his willingness to identify with those who are unclean in order to help them. . . . [But] God’s wrath is provisional whereas his love is eternal.”—Donald G. Bloesch, *God the Almighty: Power, Wisdom, Holiness, Love* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1995), pp. 140–143.

What do the following texts tell us about the New Testament message of God’s love?

- God’s gift of His Son (*John 3:16*)
- The Son’s giving of Himself (*Phil. 2:5–8*)
- The gift of the Holy Spirit (*John 14:16–18, Acts 2:1–4*)
- The availability of spiritual gifts (*Eph. 4:11–13*)
- The certainty of salvation (*1 John 3:1–3*)
- An eternal future in an environment of love (*2 Peter 3:13*)

How would you summarize the New Testament message about the love of God?

How do the three angels’ messages of Revelation 14:6–12 fit in this overall New Testament theme of divine love? Ellen White speaks about the message of the third angel as the good news of justification by faith “in verity.” How does that all fit in with the theme of God’s love for humanity?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

tongues, prophecy, and martyrdom. These gifts and experiences were tangible evidences to the early Christians that they were on the right path in spite of the world's opposition and ridicule. But the gifts aren't the point.

So, what is?

Love: love of God for human beings, love of human beings for God, and love of human beings for one another. The miracles, the mysteries, and what seem to be superhuman acts of devotion arise from love and serve the purposes of love. Otherwise they are just magic tricks and empty pretense.

Consider This: In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul describes the kind of person who gives the appearance of doing everything right. Do you ever find yourself just *going through the motions*? How can we guard against this pretense?

II. The God of the Old Testament Versus the God of the New: A Divine Split-Personality Disorder or a Case of Human Misunderstanding?


(Review with your class Genesis 1:26–31, 2:21–25, 3:15, Isaiah 53.)

Some people find it hard to reconcile the God of the Old Testament with the God of the New. They say the God of the Old Testament is a God of wrath, the sender of plagues and of destroying angels, who would rather blot the name of His people out of His book of life than forgive. By the same token, it is said that the New Testament presents us with a radically different portrait of God: one of love, self-sacrifice, and inclusiveness.

How do we know that the Old Testament God is the same God of love we see in Jesus Christ in the New Testament? Perhaps, it is not the different halves of God that need reconciling but our view of Him. We would do well to remember that the same God who sent destroying angels also sent manna. The God of the Old Testament not only created us and preserved us—as seen in the texts above—He laid the foundation for our redemption. How could we even begin to know that Jesus was who He claimed to be unless the Old Testament first told us when, where, and how to expect Him?

Consider This: Jesus says that the Old Testament scriptures testify of Him (*John 5:39*). What does this suggest to us about the unity of the two Testaments in conveying God's message of love?

III. A Response of Love *(Review with your class Deuteronomy 6:5, Matthew 5:44, 22:37–40, 1 Peter 1:22.)*

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A Response of Love

The tragic reality of this world is one of self-love, blind ambition, hatred, competition, corruption, and war. As long as the citizens of this world let themselves, knowingly or unknowingly, be guided by the principles of the prince of darkness, love will have no chance to blossom. Mother Teresa once said, “If you judge people, you have no time to love them.”

If we truly have been converted and become disciples of the Lord, the principle of love will reign in our lives. Whatever our weaknesses, we will steadily grow in our love for God and for our fellow human beings. In a very real sense conversion is reorientation—a shift away from the love of self to the love for God and to the love of others.

What underlying principle should we discern as we study the commandments that God has given us? Has this principle been operating differently since Christ came to this world? *Deut. 6:5, 6; Matt. 22:37–40.*

If we truly have been changed by Jesus Christ, His love will characterize our dealings with other people. Though we may not like some people, we are called to love everyone, even our greatest enemy. This not only will benefit the people we associate with but will also prove an enormous blessing for ourselves. Give love and unconditional acceptance to those you encounter and notice what happens.

How should love permeate what we say and do? *Matt. 5:44, 25:31–46, 1 Pet. 1:22.*

“If church members will put away all self-worship, and will receive in their hearts the love for God and for one another that filled Christ’s heart, our heavenly Father will constantly manifest His power through them. Let His people be drawn together with the cords of divine love. Then the world will recognize the miracle-working power of God, and will acknowledge that He is the Strength and the Helper of His commandment-keeping people.”—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 7, p. 940.

Are you naturally loving or naturally selfish and self-centered? What practical steps can you take to move away from self and manifest love toward others?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

The Bible—Old and New Testaments—tells us to love God and to love one another. But as if being told so were not enough, God as Jesus Christ provides the example (*Phil. 2:5–7*), the motivation (*2 Cor. 5:14, 15*), and the means (*John 16:12–15*). All that remains is to allow Him to change us.

Consider This: It is easy to love people with whom we have something in common or people who make us feel good about ourselves. After all, as Jesus said in Matthew 5:46, even tax collectors—the yardstick of amorality at the time—could do the same. What about those who seem strange or alien to us or who frustrate or antagonize us? What examples can we draw from Jesus, the One who is “altogether lovely,” and from His life and ministry about how to love the unlovely and unlovable?

► STEP 3—Practice


Just for Teachers: Use the questions below to help class members understand that love is crucial to life itself and that in God we see love in its perfect form.

Thought Questions:

- 1 Paul states that of the spiritual gifts—faith, hope, and love—love is the greatest (*1 Cor. 13:13*). Why is it the greatest? What is its relationship to the other two gifts?
- 2 Caring for someone or something because doing so somehow benefits us is a rather cynical definition—or practice—of human love. How would you define human love? What relationship does human love bear to divine love? Are the two related, even though human love is imperfect?

Application Questions:

- 1 In John 13:34, 35, Jesus states: “ ‘A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another’ ” (*NIV*). He leaves little doubt that fulfillment of this directive was to be the defining characteristic of the church He was leaving behind. Does love characterize the church as we see it today? What is our role in making the church more loving and less prone to judgmentalism and petty politics?

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Love Personified

Jesus Christ is our ultimate Role Model. If we wonder what our love should be like, we need to look only at our Savior. In Him we see the perfect example. Humanly speaking, Christ had every reason to dislike or even hate a lot of people. The spiritual leaders were so envious of His success that they constantly harassed Him and eventually decided to eliminate Him. Why should He have loved these people? His own family was at times less than supportive. His disciples often fought among themselves and were absent when their presence would have counted most. How could He love them at those moments when they totally forsook Him?

Besides all this, Jesus also manifested His love in particular toward those who would not get much positive attention from the spiritual leaders of His day: women (including prostitutes), those who suffered from leprosy, people from Samaria, members of the occupying force, and tax gatherers.

Take a careful look at some concrete examples of Jesus showing unselfish love, in circumstances in which most people would have found it difficult to do so.

1. Luke 17:12–19
2. John 13:1–17
3. John 19:25–27

How should the manifestation of divine love in the ministry of Jesus impact our discipleship? *2 Cor. 5:14, Phil. 2:2.*

The love of Christ compels us, the apostle Paul says (*2 Cor. 5:14*). The English translation is somewhat ambiguous, for the original Greek construction may be translated as the love that comes from Christ, as well as the love that we have for Christ. Both meanings are grammatically justified and also are theologically correct. When we grasp something of the magnitude of Christ's love, it will create a loving response, and this will give us the intense desire to share that love with others.

Jesus also loved those who were despised by most other people and were generally considered rather unlovable. He went out of His way to show them His love. How do I show my love to the homeless, to people who live at the fringes of society, and to those who do not in any way represent the values that I treasure?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

2 As Christians, we want to win people to the gospel. Cultivating a loving attitude toward others is one way of doing so. Yet, in many instances, Jesus Himself—the ultimate embodiment of love—failed to win His hearers over. How can we apply His example?

► **STEP 4—Apply**

Just for Teachers: Suggest the following scenarios to your class in order to determine what a loving response would be in such a context. Remind them that the answer is not always to “grin and bear it.” Ask your class members to keep this important question in mind: When is silence the wisest response, and when is a loving but firm response an opportunity to open a door for someone to walk through to meet Jesus?

- You are having a conversation with someone on a random topic, and it becomes clear that he or she is interested in spiritual things. You share your beliefs. He or she politely but firmly asks you probing questions for which you don’t have ready answers. How do you respond?
- Someone is spreading wild and destructive rumors about you at church or work. As a result, you lose an opportunity for a promotion or a ministry you really wanted. You discover the source of the rumors. How do you handle this situation?
- You are a leader of a ministry at your church. You suspect that one of your volunteers is engaged in clearly improper or inappropriate—possibly illegal or immoral—behavior that bears directly on their role in the ministry. Your suspicions are correct. How do you confront this person?
- There he is at the same intersection every day on your route to work. His sign says, “Homeless, hungry, God bless.” You avoid making eye contact as he walks past and hope he doesn’t notice the fish symbol on your car that marks you as a caring Christian person. He asks you for money. What do you say and do?

Just for Teachers: Present these as questions or hypothetical situations, or role-play them if you think it would make more of an impact.

Further Study: Read Ellen G. White, “God’s Love for Man,” pp. 9–16, in *Steps to Christ*. Also read “Calvary,” pp. 741–757 and “‘It Is Finished,’ ” pp. 758–768, in *The Desire of Ages*, which deal with the final moments of Christ’s earthly life. The book *The Four Loves*, by C. S. Lewis, is an inspiring essay on the various kinds of human and divine love.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 One cannot escape the *why* question: If God is love, why is there so much suffering? It is not only the scale of suffering that causes people to question God’s love but also the fact that so much appears to affect innocent people, and so much appears utterly senseless. How do we, as Seventh-day Adventist Christians, deal with this reality? How does our understanding of the great controversy help us understand this difficult topic?
- 2 How can one love an abusing parent, a serial killer, or a totally selfish person? How did Jesus love those who were totally unlovable?
- 3 How can one continue loving if there is no response to that love? Again, how did Jesus continue to love those who would never love Him back?
- 4 Who are the outcasts, the despised, and the reviled in your own society? What kind of outreach and ministry does your church have for those people? What would it take to get yourself and your church involved in such a work?
- 5 In a real sense, true love demands a death to self, a willingness to put self aside for the good of others. What choices do we have to make in order to experience that death ourselves?
- 6 Besides the Cross, what are other ways that we can see God’s love for humanity?

Summary: God is love. This characteristic is the basis for everything God is and does. This loving God is already revealed in the Old Testament, but His love is seen in its ultimate form in the gift of His Son, Jesus Christ, for our salvation. This divine love finds a response in the love of the Christian. If we profess to be disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ, our life will be marked by unconditional love toward our Maker and unselfish love for others.