

Small Group Guide THE CROSS AND CHRISTIAN LOVE

The Church at Brook Hills

Dr. David Platt

September 22, 2013

1 Corinthians 13

Use this resource as a tool to help Christ-followers move forward in their spiritual growth. To do this well requires that the Small Group Leader is building a relationship with the individuals in the small group and has identified where the people are in their relationship with God. Are they Christ-followers? Are they growing in Christ? If so, in what areas do they need to grow further? As disciple-makers, Small Group Leaders shepherd people to know the truth of Scripture, to understand why it matters, and to apply it to their lives. Small Group Leaders come alongside those whom they disciple to discover how loving God, loving each other, and loving those not yet in the Kingdom should shape how they live. The structure of this resource coincides with moving people from knowledge (Main Truth) to understanding (Why It Matters) to application (Now What Do We Do?). Utilize this Small Group Guide as a flexible teaching tool to inform your time together and not as a rigid task list.

GETTING STARTED

Welcome – Incorporate time for greeting one another, enjoying any refreshments, and making announcements. If guests are visiting, make introductions and help them feel welcomed. Ask for their contact information, so you can follow up with them.

Looking Back – Provide an opportunity for small group members to share what God is teaching them, how they are applying what they are learning, and how He has given them opportunities to share the gospel with others. This can be done as a whole group or in smaller groups. Do the people know each other well enough to share more than surface level information? How can time together be used to foster deeper relationships among those in the small group? Also, what are the struggles and needs of the people in the small group? How can the people in the small group sacrificially serve each other?

Looking Up – Hold prayer as fundamental to small group time rather than supplemental to it. Give adoration and thanksgiving to God in prayer. Submit yourself to Him, confessing sin. Petition God for personal needs and other requests. Pray for the disciple-making efforts of those in the group and for the salvation of the lost in each other's families, spheres of influence, and in the world. The Weekly Prayer Focus below can also be incorporated in the group's prayer time.

Weekly Prayer Focus (from Our Worship Guide)

- *Pray for Our Lives: Praise God for His love demonstrated in the sacrificial death of Christ. Pray we will all rely on the love of God in our lives as motivation for our love for others. Pray our practice of community and the exercising of our gifts will be driven by our love for each other. Pray the world around us will recognize our love for one another as a sign of us being Jesus' disciples. Ask God to guide us into understanding love from His perspective. Pray for God to grow each of us individually and our church corporately in love.*
- *Pray for Our City: This week we are praying for the ministry of Brother Bryan Mission as they seek to minister to the physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of homeless and impoverished men in the Birmingham area. We are also praying for Christ Church and Paul Lawler, Pastor.*
- *Pray for Our World: This week we are praying for Brook Hills Mid-Termers Phillip and Stacie P. as they serve in East Asia. Phillip and Stacie, along with four of their*

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children, are living and serving in East Asia to help strengthen Long-Term church planting efforts among an unreached people group. Join us this week as we pray for Phillip, Stacie, and their children to be effective as they share the gospel and make disciples in East Asia. This week we are also praying for our Short-Term team led by Jim Shaddix who is serving in the Middle East.

MAIN TRUTH

Message Outline

THE CROSS AND CHRISTIAN LOVE

1 Corinthians 13

A Perspective on Love from Corinth...

- Spiritual gifts are significant, but love is supreme.
 - Love is the necessity apart from which nothing in the Christian life matters.
 - Love is the field in which everything in the Christian life flourishes.
- Spiritual gifts are temporal, but love is eternal.

The Nature of Love in the Church...

- Love is essentially selfless.
 - It seeks its joy in the good of others to the glory of God.
- Love is inevitably active.
 - It is not conveyed by words as much as it is shown by behavior.

The Marks of Love in the Christian...

- Are you patient with others?
- Are you kind to others?
- Are you jealous of what others have?
- Do you boast about what you have?
- Are you ever proud before others?
- Are you ever rude to others?
- Do you want things your own way?
- Are you irritable when things don't go your way?
- Do you keep any record of others' wrongs?
- Do you find any pleasure when others do wrong?
- Do you experience only delight when others do right?
- Do you tire of support for others?
- Do you hold onto faith for others?
- Do you lose hope for others?
- Do you endure trials with others?

The Power to Love in Christ...

- So what is the definition of Christian love?
 - To love is to be toward others the way God in Christ is toward us.
 - We receive His love.

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- We reflect His love.
- And what is distinct about Christian love?
 - Christian love is exemplified in the cross of Christ.
 - It is based on mercy in the lover, not merit in the beloved.
 - Christian love is empowered by the Spirit of Christ.
 - It is not natural, but supernatural.
 - Christian love is enamored with the return of Christ.
 - It can't help but to serve others in the present because it can't wait to see Christ in the future.

Message Summary

Sandwiched in a discussion of spiritual gifts and the church, this famous chapter in Scripture presents a description of that which is more important than gifts and roles in the church – love. Void of love, acts of service, the acquisition of knowledge, and even meeting together with other believers is meaningless. When gifts are exercised with love, the Christian life flourishes. Although 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 describes the marks of love, love is primarily selfless and active in nature. While this chapter presents a description of love, love finds its definition in treating others the way God in Christ treats us. Such love is exemplified in the cross of Christ, empowered by the Spirit, and enamored with the return of Christ.

WHY IT MATTERS

Digging Deeper

Begin by asking the group to relay what they think of when they hear “1 Corinthians 13.” Next, bridge the conversation to discussing the context of the passage. The love chapter appears in the middle of a larger conversation about spiritual gifts. Chapter twelve describes the purpose of gifts in the body of Christ and the need for each believer to utilize their gifts, and chapter fourteen specifically focuses on the gifts of prophecy and tongues. How does the surrounding context of 1 Corinthians 13 affect the way we interpret and apply this passage? What are the dangers of reading this chapter out of context?

Read 1 Corinthians 12:31 to set the stage for the next chapter. The church at Corinth had become so focused on the sensational gifts of the Spirit that they lost focus on what was clearly most important – love. It was evident in how they treated each other and in the various rebukes and instructions provided thus far in 1 Corinthians including divisions in the church (1 Cor. 1-3), sexual immorality (1 Cor. 5-7), lawsuits against one fellow believers (1 Cor. 6), insisting on their own way even if it injured another (1 Cor. 8-10), acting and dressing in shameful ways (1 Cor. 11), and taking the Lord's Supper in a selfish manner (1 Cor. 11). Therefore, 1 Corinthians 13 serves as a rebuke to the Corinthian church. In your own life, have you missed the point? Is loving others – your family, your friends, your co-workers, your classmates, your acquaintances, your neighbors, etc. – a priority in your life? What is the basis of your response to the previous question? Why would answer “yes” or “no” to it? Based on the content of your thoughts, what you talk about, and how you spend your time and money, what are your priorities? Where does loving God and loving others fit on your list of priorities? As believers in the twenty-first century, what things or desires prevent love from being a priority in *our* lives? Identify things that hinder us from loving others well. How can we guard against such hindrances? Encourage the group to be specific as they process responses to this question.

On a sheet of paper and with a scale from one to ten, have the group to rate their love for fellow believers and their love for nonbelievers and to list why they chose that particular rating. Next, have them consider one step they can take over the next couple of weeks to grow in their love for these two groups of people. Have them partner with another person sitting near them and to share that action step the person.

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During the sermon, Pastor David challenged the church to memorize 1 Corinthians 13:4-7. Make this a goal of the small group. Discuss ways that you can help each other to learn this passage. Let this be part of your time together as a group, and identify a target date by which your group can learn this text. Depending on your group, it might be worthwhile to discuss why memorizing Scripture is so crucial.

With regard to the questions below, give explicit attention to how Christ-followers can address the sinful tendencies discussed. With Christ-likeness as our goal, we need to specifically equip each other to combat sin and to know what it looks like to pursue godliness. Remind the group that we can do none of this on our own power. We need the Spirit to work in us and through us. At the same time, we also must be abiding in Christ in order to bear spiritual fruit in our lives (Jn. 15:1-5). Discuss what it means to abide in Christ and how we cultivate the Spirit's fruit in our lives. Encourage believers to confess any sin that they see in themselves.

Some in the group might feel discouraged because they lack in so many of these areas. Remind the group that sanctification – the Spirit changing us more and more into Christ's image – is a process. It takes place over time. The longer we walk with Him and the deeper we go in our relationship with God, the more He changes us from the inside out. 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 serves as a tool for measuring where we are right now in our relationship with God. The point is to identify both where you are and how you can take a step to grow then to actually proceed in taking that identified step. As a small group leader, how can you help those in your small group take these steps? How can the group help each other to move forward in their relationship with Christ?

As we always seek to hone our ability to share the gospel, utilize some of the group's time for the people to pair up with one or two others and to practice describing the love of Christ. How would they describe the love of Christ to someone who knows little of who Christ is or what He has done? How does Christ embody love? In addition to 1 Corinthians 13, helpful passages include John 3:16; Romans 5:1-11; and Romans 8:38-39.

An idea for closing out the group's time together is to take the description of love in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7, to identify how God has demonstrated those specific characteristics to you or to His people in Scripture, and to praise Him for perfectly embodying love and for loving sinful people like you and me.

NOW WHAT DO WE DO?

Group Discussion & Application

Use the following questions to help review the application of God's Word to our Head (What does God want me to know?), to our Heart (What does God want me to desire/value?), and to our Hands (What does God want me to do?).

- How does the culture describe love? How does it define love? How does this contrast from how Scripture describes and defines love?
- Read 1 Corinthians 13:8-13. Discuss how the two illustrations in this section (the growing child and a person looking in a mirror) demonstrate the temporary nature of spiritual gifts.
- Love is selfless, but the opposite of love is not hate but pride, which connotes selfishness. Discuss concrete examples of love seeking its happiness in the good of others to the glory of God. To love like this involves denying self. What does it look like to prioritize others instead of yourself in your relationship with your family, your friends, your roommate, your co-workers, or with that "difficult" person in your life? What does it look like with regard to the small group?
- Read John 13:34-35. Jesus states that the mark of His followers should be their love. Why is this important? What prevents us from being known by our love for others? Are these characteristics of love listed in verses 4-7 evident in your interactions with people? Which ones are least evident? How can you by God's grace begin to strengthen these areas of weakness?

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- Describe both patience and impatience. How does one develop a patient attitude even when inconvenienced, annoyed, or hurt by others? If we tend to be impatient, in what ways do we need to die to self?
- With regard to kindness, in what ways can you actively work for the welfare of others in this small group, in this church, in your family, or at your workplace? How can you proactively show kindness this week? Is your attitude towards small group not what you can get but what you might give? Discuss how a “what can I get out of this” attitude affects both the small group and the church and why such an attitude is sinful.
- Why is envy a sin? What is a root of this sin (i.e., comparison, insecurity, etc.)? How do we combat envy? Why do we allow sins such as envy or pride to fester in our lives?
- What strategies do we often employ to minimize our failures and to maximize our successes? How is this pride? How do we combat arrogance in our lives?
- If others have hurt us, we can be tempted to keep a mental record of how the person has wronged us, and even if we have “forgiven” them, we will likely play through that mental list each time they injure us. This particularly applies to relationships with a spouse, a parent, or a close friend. When tempted to rehearse that mental record of wrongs, how can we filter our thoughts and renew our mind? Next time that temptation arises, how can you respond in a godly manner? How does such record-keeping affect our relationships with others? How does such record-keeping affect *us*? What sins does such resentment breed?
- What prevents us from experiencing delight when others do what is right? What keeps us from being able to rejoice with others? Why is this important? How does it affect the life of the church or the small group?
- What does it look like to “bear all things” (1 Cor. 13:7)? How can the small group community better support each other in a healthy way?
- With regard to “believes all things” and “hopes all things” (1 Cor. 13:7), how can we respond when we are tempted to lose hope with regard to a person coming to faith or a Christian repenting from sin? How do these two characteristics of love affect church discipline (see 1 Cor. 5)? Do you pray believing that God loves that person, desires their repentance, and has the ability to forgive them? Take time as a small group to pray for such individuals that the group members know.
- How do we endure trials well with others? Ask the group members to share ways in which they were supported and encouraged during trials they have previously faced.
- In order to truly show Christian love towards others, we must first receive Christ’s love. However, some people struggle with receiving His love. Why? In the face of such reasons, how can someone learn to receive the love of Christ?