

# Love

## A Sacred Summer

### STORY

Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. Love your neighbor as you love yourself. Love your enemies. Those are the words of Jesus. Jesus says that loving God and loving our neighbors are the greatest commandments. (Matthew 22:37-40) On his last night with his disciples, Jesus said that they would be known as his followers by how much they love each other. Why is it so hard for us to love ourselves and love our neighbors?

In the Message Bible, John 1:14 says, "The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood." At the end of 2014, my husband and I moved back to my hometown of Nashville, TN. We knew that wherever we found a house, we wanted to get to know and really love our neighbors. How did we do this? First, we knew we needed to honor the neighbors who were already there because we were the new folks. We were part of the newcomers who were making property taxes go up and adding to the traffic.

One practice I used to meet my neighbors was "Praying the Neighborhood". We would walk our dog and pray for each home: for God's love to fill it and for peace to be felt there. I would say "hi" to people I'd see in their yards or on their porches and introduce myself. I also made cookies for my neighbors and gave them to each house on the street with an invite to join us for a neighborhood brunch. Some people had lived on our hill for over 50 years. Others were young adults who were just moving to town after college to try out the music business. Not everyone showed up, but it was the beginning of loving our neighbors. To truly love our neighbors, we actually had to make a commitment to doing just that: loving and being present for them.

To love our neighbors and our neighborhoods well, and to love our enemies and the folks who drive us crazy, we need to know and believe that we are **TOTALLY LOVED BY GOD**. We forget that Jesus loves us and that we are chosen by him and called his friends. When we forget how much we are loved, we can't love others well. When we don't love ourselves, we have a hard time loving our friends, much less the people who really bother us or our enemies. We need to open the gift of God's love this summer. We need to experience the love of Jesus so we can share it with our friends, families, and our enemies too. Open the gift of love.

\*Written by Lilly Lewin.

## PRACTICES

*Each day of the week, take time to do the 5 or the 15-minute practice.*

*Plan a time to do the Going Deeper practice sometime during the week.*

- **5-minute Practice:** Wrap yourself in a blanket to represent the surrounding presence of God and God's lavish love. Experience the Love of Jesus/God today for 5 full minutes. Close your eyes and imagine Jesus sitting with you. What is Jesus saying to you? What emotions come up when you consider God's great love for you? What other things help you experience the love of Jesus?
- **15-minute Practice:** Wrap yourself in the blanket of God's love and then make a list of the people who are bugging you this week. Choose one of them and pray for them when you get up in the morning. Before you head to bed, journal one thing you're thankful for about them. At the end of the week, write down one thing you can do to show them love.
- **Going Deeper Practice:**
  - Think about someone in your life who needs to know that they are loved right now. Write a card, make a phone call to them this week! If they live near you, invite them on a walk, or drop off a surprise treat for them.
  - Make an intentional plan as an individual, family, or group to love your neighbor this week. Start where you live and get to know the people who live around you.

## SCRIPTURE

John 13:34-35, 1 John 3:17-18, 1 John 3:1, Matthew 5:44

## QUESTIONS for Journaling and Discussion

- Why is it so hard for us to love ourselves as Jesus loves us?
- What helps you know and experience the love of Jesus?
- Read John 13. What does foot-washing look like in our era? How do we love and care for our friends and family in a way that shows them the true love of Jesus? Plan a time to wash the hands or feet of the people you gather with and talk about the love of Jesus and how we can love more like he loves us.
- Read John 13:34-35. Why do you think the disciples needed a new commandment? Why do we need to be reminded about loving one another?
- Who are your enemies? What are the groups or people, whom you truly feel hatred towards rather than love? Ask Jesus to help you pray for and love them.

## EXPERIENCE

Choose one or several to try:

- **For All Ages – Love You Neighbor:** Love your neighbor by extending a simple gesture of kindness. You might bring in their trash cans on trash day, drop off a special treat you picked up at the grocery store, pick a bouquet of fresh flowers and leave them in a jar at their door, or write a note of encouragement. As you extend kindness, you share the love of God. (Other ideas for practical ways to show God’s love: make cookies, help with lawn care or childcare, wash your neighbor’s car, invite someone on a walk.)
- **Family, Kids and Small Groups:** Create HEART PRAYERS. Use heart Post-it notes or create some hearts and cut them out. Make a heart for each member of your family or small group. Put them up so you will see them each day and pray for each person to know and feel the love of Jesus.  
**Write a note of encouragement** to members of your group or family. Tell each person what you love and appreciate each of them.
- **People Who Bug You:** Who is that person in your life who bugs you? Who asks you a question and you want to respond with anger or an eye-roll? Who is the person you get irritated by just being around them? Maybe it’s a sibling who knows how to say just the thing to set you off. Or maybe the neighbor who’s too loud or doesn’t like your dog and lets you know it. Perhaps it’s someone in your class who acts weird or someone at work. Jesus didn’t ask us to love just the people we like. When we choose to follow Jesus, it means we love everyone. Even the ones that bug us. How can you show God’s love to this person this week? Do at least one tangible thing to express the love of Jesus to the person who bugs you the most.
- **All Ages: Create in Art:** Read 1 Corinthians 13 and create a collage, poem, or an art piece in response to this famous passage on LOVE. Read the passage in different versions.
- **Listen:** What songs help you love Jesus? Create a playlist to listen to that helps you love Jesus. What songs help you feel the love of Jesus surrounding you? Create a playlist of these songs.  
**Start with something like** “Hymn of the Holy Spirit” by Pat Barrett and “Beloved” by Jordan Feliz.
- **Read:**
  - **Prayer: Forty Days of Practice** by Justin Roberts and Scott Erickson (a visual daily devotional)
  - **The Ragamuffin Gospel: Good News for the Bedraggled, Beat-Up, and Burnt Out** by Brennan Manning
  - **Life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in a Secular World** by Henri Nouwen

## PRAYER

Breathe in love.  
Breathe out all fear.  
Breathe in the love of Jesus.  
Breathe out fear.  
Breathe in love.  
Breathe out shame.  
Breathe in love.  
Breath out hate.  
Breathe in love  
so you can love others. AMEN

Jesus, hold me close today in your arms of love.  
Help me to know that I am beloved. AMEN