

What does the Bible Say?

Lesson 4: God's Plan – Choosing love

From the homework in Lesson 3, you spent some time this week listening to the Lord about the roots of your sin. Perhaps you discovered some desires, idols, or lies that you need to renounce or a new perspective to embrace. You also examined some scriptures and truths to keep you strong.

Take a minute to share what you learned from your homework.

Strength through Prayer

Once we've had a chance to explore our heart, mind, behaviors, patterns, and sinful nature, James 5:16 guides us to pray for one another. We cannot emphasize enough the importance of prayer as a tool to overcome sin. We need the Holy Spirit and God's divine power to do what we cannot do by ourselves.

Take time to pray the following aloud:

Renounce and ask forgiveness from the Lord for any desires or idols you discovered in your life and renounce any lies you've believed. Confess what you've been living for instead of God. Ask Jesus to help you overcome and thank him for his mercy.

Pray about what you've chosen to believe and what you've realized is true about God, yourself, others, or your situations. Speak to the Lord about how you want your heart and your life to change, and ask Jesus for help.

While it is important to renounce lies and hold onto truths, following Jesus includes turning away from our sin and choosing love. We can ask ourselves, "Instead of choosing this sin, what would it look like for me to love God, others, and myself in a healthy way?"

Choosing love

Since God is love (1 John 4:16), we can understand that love is the opposite of sin and the remedy for our struggles. It sounds simple; it's just hard because our emotions, thoughts, and struggles can get in the way of our ability to love. But when we just don't know what to do about a situation, we can ask the simple question, "What would love look like?" Galatians 5 says, "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. ²³ Against such things there is no law" (NIV). When we choose actions motivated by these qualities, rather than the sin that is trying to control us, we are doing what pleases God and are living by the Spirit.

Love is a choice, even when we might not feel love in our hearts. What can we do when we don't feel love? We ask the Lord for forgiveness, and pray for him to help us. So, what does love look like? Here is God's definition of love:

⁴ Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵ It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. ⁶ Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. (I Corinthians, 13, NIV)

Love always considers what is helpful for the other person. Love is honest and is willing to uncover the truth, but love doesn't dishonor others or focus on their faults. Love remembers the good qualities and actions of others and often feels and expresses genuine gratitude. Love also encourages people and points them toward God and his love. Love never rejoices when another person suffers, fails, or does something wrong. Love hopes for the best and acts out of that hope. Love doesn't compare people to each other but sees tremendous value in each person. Love is not competitive but rejoices when others succeed. Love is a true friend who isn't selfish and never tries to be better than someone else. Instead, love considers the needs of others above our own, understanding that the Lord loves and values us all.

In very practical ways, love is an action. Love doesn't wait to receive. Instead, love reaches out. Love prays for others, calls, texts, and spends time with others. Love asks questions, listens, and shows interest in the lives of others. Love strengthens others for their good, encourages others, and shares truth from God's Word. Love serves, shares possessions, gives gifts, and expresses gratitude. Love remembers birthdays or special occasions and makes others feel special. Love checks on a friend when they're hurting or going through a difficult time. Love is open, honest, and vulnerable and allows others to see our weaknesses and needs.

Love also addresses problems in relationships and seeks to understand and resolve misunderstandings. Love forgives, even when an agreement can't be reached. Love doesn't ignore people or cancel them. Instead, love keeps seeking ways to show love and keep relationships alive. But love also respects others who do not want a relationship or our love. All these expressions of love can produce much fruit for God's glory!

How do you strive to show love? Where do you need to grow?

Review your homework from Lessons 2 and 3 and the areas where sin is difficult for you. Discuss what love would look like instead of sin. Share how you might choose love in the examples you gave.

When love is hard

If someone doesn't want our love and continually rejects the truth, we can't force our love on them. Love doesn't always receive love in return. Others can reject our love, and this hurts! This can make love difficult and sometimes complicated. We can start to feel fear when we're around this person and allow fear rather than love to control how we act and feel. Love is sometimes the hardest choice we will ever make, but it comes with a promise: Love never fails (I Corinthians 13:8). God considers love the most important quality in our lives, even above faith and hope. Perhaps we read our Bibles, pray every day, share our faith, go to

church, sacrifice time and money to serve the Lord, and even do miracles in his name (Matthew 7:22-23). Those are amazing and noble things to do! But God says that without love, there is no reward, even if we are full of faith and hope (1 Corinthians 13:1-3). In other words, our first priority should always be to love.

1 John 4 says, “¹⁸There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.” Sometimes we fear love because of past experiences – rejection, pain, abuse, and trauma. As we grow in our understanding of God’s love and protection over us, we can become less fearful. When loving others is a challenge, we need time to meditate on how much the Lord loves us to fill ourselves with the truths of his love. Justice, healthy boundaries, and discipline that shapes a person’s character can also be forms of godly love (Hebrews 12). We may need time away from a person, but love never gives up, permanently closes the door, or intentionally ignores people. There may be seasons and spaces of rest in relationships. But our ultimate goal is to love, even if it’s from a distance when physical or emotional separation is best. Perhaps our time is limited, and we must prioritize relationships. We can still consider ways to express love. What is going on in our hearts, though, is far more important than the level of interaction with a person. When our hearts love, we can have peace.

When is love difficult for you? Describe an example or a time when loving someone else was hard.

What does it look like to respect others when they don’t want our love or our relationship?

John says that “whoever lives in love, lives in God, and God in him” (4:16). This love that is from God completes us and make us confident on the Day of Judgment. As we grow in Christ, we begin to see this love growing and reigning in our hearts. If we continue distancing ourselves from love, then we do not truly know God (4:7-21). This is why we *strive* to love, and this love that we share with others is evidence that God is in us. The two greatest commands of God are to love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength, and to love others in the same way that we love ourselves (Mark 12:30-31). This is only possible when we realize how much our heavenly Father dearly loves us. With this knowledge, we can become stronger so that we choose love instead of sin. At every point, we can ask the Spirit for help, and he will give us strength to love, because love is always God’s will.

Through this study, we begin to see how our hearts are so different from God’s heart. But this is also why Jesus came and why we desperately need a Savior to help us. Jesus said, “Healthy people don’t need a doctor. It is the sick people that need a doctor” (Luke 5:31). Jesus is here today not to condemn us, but to help us love the way God loves (John 12:47).

Is there anyone in your life you need to forgive? If yes, are you ready to forgive them? Talk about what forgiveness and love toward them might look like. If not, explain why.

Select a person in your life who’s hurt you or someone you’ve even sinned against. Reviewing the section on Choosing Love, how could you begin showing love for this person? **(Be specific about how you will show love through your actions.)**

Make a list of three other people in your life. Write how you want to show love to them in a practical way over the next few weeks. **(Look at the last paragraph of Choosing Love for ideas.)**

Homework:

- Take time this week to show love to others based on what you learned in this study. Be prepared to share next time about how you followed the Spirit in love!
- Read II Corinthians 7:10-11. Write about whether you have godly or worldly sorrow over your sin.
- If you are genuinely struggling to overcome sin with love or forgiving someone, pray to the Lord for help. We also have more tools for inner healing and restoring relationships, if you need help. You can also consider receiving professional support from a licensed biblical counselor.