

Eight Steps to a Better Love Life

Do you know the command given most often in Scripture? It is, *to love*. Love is *the message* of the Christian faith: God's love for us, and our love for God as expressed through our love for others.

Some years ago I participated in a nation-wide study to explore possible correlations between loving churches and growing churches. We found an unmistakable synergy. The "great commandment"—to love—and the "great commission"—to make disciples—are intimately related. *Loving churches are growing churches.*ⁱ

But, how does a church become a more loving church? More to the point, how do church people become more loving people? Are there specific steps that can be taken to become a more loving person? I believe there are. Here are eight suggestions on how to become a more loving Christ-follower...

STEP ONE: Make a "Love Covenant" with God

Without a serious commitment, the effort to become a more loving person will be nothing more than a broken New Year's resolution. Loving is a lifestyle, not an on-again off-again activity. A "love covenant" is your personal commitment to God to personify what He calls Christ's followers to do. A love covenant with God says that you are personally willing, as the Apostle Paul said, "...to make loving your aim."ⁱⁱ

You will find it helpful to write out your love covenant. Here is one you might adapt:

Dear Lord:

I thank you that you love me. I thank you for showing me that love has no conditions ... no strings attached. You don't love me to get something from me, or to use me, or to take away my will. You love me unconditionally!

I thank you for not just saying you love me. You really proved it. I know you love me ... because you died for me! Talk about commitment ... there isn't any greater love than that.

I also thank you for accepting me ... the way I am. I know I could do better in certain areas. Certainly you know it, too. But that doesn't mean you love me any less. Or that you will love me any more when I improve. You accept me ... and love me just the way I am. I don't have to be anything different, or prove anything. You just love me.

I think of what you said to me: "love each other as I have loved you." I want to do that. I want to reflect your love in me. I want to learn to love in a way that will really affect those around me. In the process, I want to become the most loving person you created me capable of becoming.

Lord, I covenant with you to make loving a priority in my life. I ask for your help.

A love covenant with God should have the same faithful intent that God has in his covenant promises to us: "Though the mountains be shaken, and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed."ⁱⁱⁱ

STEP TWO: Identify Those Who Need Your Love

Who are the people God wants to love...through you? I suggest five different groups of people to whom you are God's "love connection"...

Family. This includes your father, mother, spouse, children, siblings, in-laws, grandparents, grandchildren, nieces, nephews, aunts, uncles, cousins, etc. All those related to you biologically or through marriage.

Friends. These are people you enjoy being around. You invite them to dinner. You go to recreational activities together. You share yourself with them, and they with you. They're your friends.

Acquaintances. These are people with whom you are in contact on a regular basis, such as business associates, neighbors, church members, club members, and others whom you know casually.

Enemies. In Matthew 5:44, after Christ issues his well-known command to “love your enemies,” He goes on to explain that enemies are: a) those who speak badly of you, b) those who hate you, c) those who mistreat you, and d) those who persistently harass you.

Needy. Christ commanded his followers to “Love your neighbor.”^{iv} When asked “Who is my neighbor?” He told the parable of the Good Samaritan as an example of a loving act to a person in need. The Apostle John also addressed the call to love those in need: “But if a man has enough to live on, and yet, when he sees his brother in need shuts up his heart against him, how can it be said that divine love dwells in him?”^v In both the Old and New Testament God’s people are told to show compassion to those in need.^{vi}

Now, select one or two names from each of these five categories (5-10 total) who are God has put in your circle of influence and wants to love through you. These are your “love connections”.

STEP THREE: Act First

Often we wait for the other person to make the first move. Will he stop? Will she smile? Will he speak to me? Will she call or invite me over? When it comes to intentional love, don’t wait for the other person. Act as though the responsibility for the initiation and growth of the relationship depends entirely on you.

Scripture tells us that “Love is not a matter of words or talk, it must be genuine and show itself in action.”^{vii} Don’t just do it once, but again and again. Make a habit of acting first!

STEP FOUR: Communicate

There are different levels of communication on which we interact. Ask yourself, “At which of these levels do I communicate with each of the 5-10 people in my love connections?”...

Exchange of clichés. “Hi, how are you?” And whether you feel like it or not, the response is “Fine, how are you?” At this level we don’t do much except share clichés. “So, have a nice day.” “You, too.”

Exchange of information. The conversation is about impersonal and non-threatening things—the weather, the ballgame, the job, a television program, world events. “Looks like rain.”

Exchange of opinions. Here we begin to share more about who we are—our attitudes, goals, and values as we run the moderate risk of being more transparent. “Here is what is really important to me...”

Exchange of feelings. The most intimate level of communication is when we share our emotions, our joys, our fears with another person. This level of communication requires mutual vulnerability and trust. “I’m afraid about...”

As communication grows, love grows. Try deepening your level of communication with the people in your love connections.

STEP FIVE: Empathize

Webster’s definition is: “the ability to share, understand and feel another person’s feelings.” Atticus Finch speaks simply about empathy: “If you just learn a single trick, Scout, you’ll get along a lot better with all kinds of folks. You never really understand a person until you understand things from his point of view...until you climb inside his skin and walk around in it.”^{viii}

Deeper communication makes it possible to really empathize with a person; or, as legend has the American Indians’ using the word: “to walk a mile in another person’s moccasins.”

STEP SIX: Identify a Love Opportunity

Is there a hurt or an opportunity where your love can help? Jesus spoke of love that responds to needs:

“For I was hungry and you fed me; I was thirsty and you gave me water; I was a stranger and you invited me into your home; naked and you clothed me; sick and in prison, and you visited me. Then the righteous ones will reply, ‘Sir, when did we ever see you hungry and feed you? Or thirsty and give you anything to drink? Or a stranger and help you? Or naked, and clothe you? When did we ever see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ And I, the King, will tell them, ‘When you did it to these my brothers, you were doing it to me’.”^{ix}

The love opportunity may be a physical need, it may be an emotional need, a relational need, or a spiritual need. Through good communication (Step 5) and heart-felt empathy (Step 6), you will discover opportunities for loving action. Then, you can take the next step...

STEP SEVEN: Respond with a Caring Gift.

A well thought out gift is a unique expression of love. Look at the greatest giver and gift of all—God and His Son.

A good gift is *meaningful*...based on the needs of the person receiving it.

A good gift is *sacrificial*...or it’s just a convenience.

A good gift is *unexpected*...rather than predictable due to protocol.

A good gift is *unconditional*...with no expectation of return.

Gifts are not always purchased at the local shopping mall. You might give the gift of forgiveness to a person in need of it...the gift of appreciation to someone who feels neglected. You can give support to a person who is alone and afraid. Jesus said: “Here is a simple rule of thumb for behavior: Ask yourself what you want people to do for you; then grab the initiative and do it for them!”^x

STEP EIGHT: Give Yourself

Sharing your most treasured possession is hard to do because it’s all you have...it is you. The ultimate step of love is to give yourself to another. Wedding vows are perhaps the most visible form of this commitment to love. But giving yourself need not be limited to one person or one family. Giving yourself is when love actions become a way of life to those in your love connections. The Apostle John called it “laying down your life for your brother.”^{xi} Jesus called it loving “...your neighbor as yourself.”^{xii} And he demonstrated such love by giving his own life. Giving yourself is actually being God’s channel of love to the people in our love connections. And through this love, others will experience the person and the attraction of that perfect love.

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ⁱ This study, and its applications, are documented in the book *Who Cares About Love?* (Charles & Win Arn), available from Church Growth, Inc., P.O. Box 541, Monrovia, CA 91017; 1-800-844-9296 for \$5.00.

ⁱⁱ I Corinthians 14:1

ⁱⁱⁱ Isaiah 54:10

^{iv} Matthew 19:19

^v I John 3:17

^{vi} Deuteronomy 15:7, Psalms 41:1, Psalms 82:3, Proverbs 21:13, Matthew 19:21, Galatians 2:10

^{vii} I John 3:18

^{viii} Harper Lee. *To Kill a Mockingbird*. New York: HarperCollins, 1960, p. 128.

^{ix} Matthew 25:35-40

^x Luke 6:31

xi I John 3:16
xii Mark 12:33