

The *iFollow* Discipleship Series



# Challenged to Love

*Putting 1 Corinthians 13 into Action*

by

Curtis Rittenour

***i*FOLLOW**

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# About the Author



Curtis Rittenour is a freelance writer and seminar speaker who has pastored for more than 25 years in Oregon, Kansas-Nebraska, and Upper Columbia conferences. He has taught classes in friendship evangelism, spiritual gifts, and reaching missing members across the North American Division. Rittenour has published articles in the *Adventist Review*, *Ministry Magazine*, *Signs*, *Insight*, and *Guide*, along with assisting in the creation of books, seminars, and small group resources for churches. He has also assisted in conducting research for the North American Division and General Conference. Rittenour graduated from Walla Walla University with a B.A. in Theology and from Andrews University Theological Seminary with a Masters of Divinity. He is married to Colleen, and they have five children and two grandchildren.

# Introduction

One of the most searched queries on the Internet is, “What is love?” It seems that no other word in the English language gets used more than the term *love*, yet no concept is more misunderstood. Love is woven deeply in our culture. Books, poems, and movies are laced with the expression. It’s no wonder. Doesn’t everyone want to experience love? Isn’t this the golden card to happiness, the secret key to all our problems? Yet for most people, love seems so elusive. It’s hard for many to wrap their arms around it.

Consider Wiki’s definition: “Love is a variety of different feelings, states, and attitudes that ranges from interpersonal affection (‘I love my mother’) to pleasure (‘I loved that meal’). It can refer to an emotion of a strong attraction and personal attachment. It can also be a virtue representing human kindness, compassion, and affection—‘the unselfish loyal and benevolent concern for the good of another.’ It may also describe compassionate and affectionate actions toward other humans, one’s self or animals.”<sup>1</sup> Whew! Maybe this is why love is such a slippery term to grasp.

The lyrics of popular music define love as a feeling that is often fleeting. Scientists say it is a chemical reaction within our bodies that is predictable. Social media posts often say it’s when you “really like” a cute guy you saw on Facebook. Can you truly love ice cream, a piece of art, or a baseball team? Or can you love someone who has deeply hurt you? Is love a concept, a philosophy, or simply a passing sentiment?

The Christian cannot easily ignore this discussion, for the Bible states, “God is love” (1 John 4:8). We are also told to “love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength” (Deuteronomy 6:5). And if you want to be counted as a follower of Jesus, don’t forget His words: “By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35).

In this iFollow Bible study we will look at the apostle Paul’s definition of

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<sup>1</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Love>

love. In his 2000-year-old letter to ancient Corinth, a church brimming with problems, he provides for us one of the most relevant chapters in all of Scripture: 1 Corinthians 13. To set the stage we'll first consider Christ's teaching in John 15, where we are commanded to love. Then we'll dig into the five natural sections of Paul's treatise on love.

Whether you are wrestling with love in the context of dating, courtship, marriage, parenting, or relationships in your community, church, or workplace, Jesus challenges you to love others. Such love is not fidgety or flighty. It is not a feeling easily shaped by the weather or by what you had for lunch. The love spoken of in 1 Corinthians 13 comes from God. This iFollow study guide will help you put such love into action.



*“My command is this: Love each other as I  
have loved you.”*

— John 15:12 NIV

# Chapter One

## The Command to Love

**W**e love to laugh at an oxymoron. It's comical to think about "tight slacks," "diet ice cream," or a "working vacation." Some of these contradictory words have become so popular that we don't even stop to realize how crazy they sound—like "awful good," "crash landing," or "freezer burn." Is it possible to create a "paper towel" or a "lead balloon"? Can something truly be "pretty ugly" or "seriously funny"? In fact, the two Greek terms that make up the word *oxy-moron* literally mean "sharp dullness" or "keen stupidity."

Sometimes what appears to be an oxymoron is simply a misunderstood phrase. For instance, "hot ice" appears to be a contradiction in terms, but to a jewel thief it simply means "stolen diamonds." When we speak of a person being "alone in a crowd," it is not a reference to an individual being among a group of people but rather the emotional reality of feeling all by yourself, even in the midst of others.

Does John 15:12 contain an oxymoron? "My command is this: Love each other..." After all, how can you *command* a person to love? Is this a pun, or is a deeper truth hidden in Christ's words? Even if Jesus was serious, it seems more than a stretch to juxtapose the verbs "command" and "love" in the same sentence.

The key to unlocking the secret of this text is found in the qualifier attached at the end. Jesus said, "My command is this: Love each other as *I have loved you.*" Whatever confusion we have about love, however mixed the terms may appear, Christ clears the air and defines true love by His own actions. In this first chapter we'll reflect on Jesus' template for love. In following chapters we'll study Paul's detailed description of genuine Christian love found in 1 Corinthians 13.



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## ADVENTIST VOICES PAST AND PRESENT

- While not being sure of whether He [Jesus] would resurrect or not if He died for us, He had a choice to make—either to abandon the work of salvation and save Himself, as Satan tempted Him to do (see Matt. 27:39-44), or die for us and possibly perish. But as the history of the human race came up before the world’s Redeemer and He saw that we were doomed without Him; as He saw that humans as lawbreakers, “if left to themselves, must perish”; as He saw our helplessness, and the power of sin, “the woes and lamentations of a doomed world [rose] before Him. He [beheld] its impending fate, and His decision [was] made. He [would] save man at any cost to Himself [quoting from *The Desire of Ages*, p. 693].”  
Onaolapo Ajibade, “Amazing Love!” *Adventist Review*, July 25, 2013.
- Many in the church believe that it is our beliefs—the cognitive knowledge that we have—that distinguishes us as Christian Seventh-day Adventists in the world. It is, they suppose, the unique doctrines we believe, our theology, our keeping of the Sabbath, our diet, or our belief that hellfire is not an ever-burning fury. This is what makes us stand out as Seventh-day Adventists in the world. And there is much to be said for sound doctrine, as Paul warned his protégé Titus (Titus 2:1). Nothing we say about agreement matters if we unite for the sake of heretical beliefs. So our Adventist doctrines are not here being questioned.

Nevertheless, while I certainly believe all these doctrines with all my heart, and I’m so grateful for the picture of God it allows me to understand, Jesus challenges the assertion that it is our beliefs that distinguish us from the world. “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:34, 35). By your love, Jesus says, people will be able to tell that you are my followers. By your love people will recognize that you are with me and not with the world.  
Tara Vin Cross, “Many Hearts, One Love,” *Adventist Review*, April 18, 2013

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### Laying Down Your Life

Love is usually understood as something you get—a feeling of pleasure, or a payback for being nice to someone else. We say, “I’m in love,” to reinforce that it’s an emotional high that you ride like a hot air balloon. But Christ turns this notion upside down. True love is not something you get, it is something you give. It is self-sacrificing.

Jesus said, “Greater love has no one that this, than to lay down one’s life for his friends” (John 15:13). If you lined up all the definitions of love in the world,

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## INSPIRED THOUGHTS



- The whole work of grace is one continual service of love, of self-denying, self-sacrificing effort. During every hour of Christ's sojourn upon the earth, the love of God was flowing from Him in irrepressible streams. All who are imbued with His Spirit will love as He loved. The very principle that actuated Christ will actuate them in all their dealing one with another. This love is the evidence of their discipleship. ... When men are bound together, not by force or self-interest, but by love, they show the working of an influence that is above every human influence. Where this oneness exists, it is evidence that the image of God is being restored in humanity, that a new principle of life has been implanted.  
Ellen G. White, *God's Amazing Grace*, p. 145
  - It is because Christ would not save Himself that the sinner has any hope of pardon or favor with God. If, in His undertaking to save the sinner, Christ had failed or become discouraged, the last hope of every son and daughter of Adam would have been at an end. The entire life of Christ was one of self-denial and self-sacrifice; and the reason that there are so few stalwart Christians is because of their self-indulgence and self-pleasing in the place of self-denial and self-sacrifice.  
Ellen G. White, *Our Father Cares*, p. 240
  - This world is not a parade ground, but a battlefield. All are called to endure hardness, as good soldiers. They are to be strong and quit themselves like men. ...The true test of character is found in the willingness to bear burdens, to take the hard place, to do the work that needs to be done, though it bring no earthly recognition or reward.  
Ellen G. White, *God's Amazing Grace*, p. 306
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at the very top, in the most pure form, is love that is willing to die for another person. It is not driven by getting a warm fuzzy in return. Hormones don't guide one's actions here. This type of love is completely and unselfishly thinking about the good of another person.

A Christian scholar once explained that Jesus never asked us to do anything He was not willing to do. And in this case, Christ literally laid down His life not just for His disciples, but for the entire world. When the Savior freely stretched out His gentle hands to be spiked to a wooden beam, He was not expecting to rise again.<sup>1</sup> He truly exchanged His life for ours. If He never saw the light of another morning, He was still committed to die for our sins.

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<sup>1</sup> See Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 753

What adds even more depth to such unfathomable love is that we did not deserve to be loved. We hadn't lived good lives or paid any dues to be treated well. In fact, Paul writes, "For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were *still* sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:6-8, emphasis supplied). The point is clear: Jesus died for bad people.

What an oxymoron! The Son of God, the eternal Creator who made life and breathed worlds into existence...died? Our spiritual senses have become dull, singing "Jesus Paid it All" so many times that the words have become meaningless. If we would truly understand love, we need to stop and think deeply about Christ's sacrifice for us. Seeing such love in action helps us to fulfill Jesus' command to love others. We can find some examples of such love in history.

Four chaplains understood sacrificial love. When the *Dorchester* left New York on January 23, 1943 to transport World War II troops into service, four chaplains accompanied the 900 men. German U-boats had sunk ships earlier, so when radar detected an enemy submarine, Captain Hens Danielsen instructed his men to sleep with their life-jackets on. Down in the depths of the ship's hold the air was stuffy, and most men ignored the command.

At 12:55 a.m. the vessel was torpedoed by a German sub off Newfoundland and knocked out the *Dorchester's* electrical system. Panic set in. Men scrambled to get up on deck. The four chaplains worked to calm the men and organize an orderly evacuation. They began passing out life-jackets and helping the wounded into lifeboats.

When all the life-jackets were distributed and more were needed, the four chaplains quickly removed their own vests and handed them to others. As lifeboats pushed away, one man looked back in the glow of flares and saw the four chaplains standing on deck with their arms linked. They were singing and praying as the ship sank into the icy waters of the Atlantic.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus said, "Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends" (John 15:13). Such love doesn't expect to be around to receive a medal of honor. It is given purely out of free choice, dedicated to the benefit of another person. To love like this cannot come from within us. It must be provided by Someone greater. Jesus first showed us such love and now commands and enables us to love others.

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<sup>2</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Four\\_Chaplains](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Four_Chaplains)



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## RESOURCES FOR SPIRITUAL GROWTH

- Christ's love for me goes beyond my love for ice cream, sports or even friends and family. His love is a giving love. It is a sacrificing and selfless love. It is a love that shows itself in action. Romans 5:8 says, "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Jesus loves us, not because we are attractive or share some interest with Him, but simply because He loves us. So, He made the ultimate sacrifice, giving up everything—all his glory, His life—to serve us. Matthew J. White, "Sacrificial Love," Focus on the Family <sup>5</sup>
- Through His sacrificial love, God brings us into an intimate relationship with Him through salvation. He then compels us to love others as Christ loved us—first. Sacrifice on behalf of others is not for the weak and not likely seen apart from love. The love Paul speaks of is born of a strength and resilience that challenges us to live for others, even for those too weak and feeble to give anything back to us. It's a love that challenges us to follow God Himself—the Commander of heaven—and to imitate His sacrifice as we serve others on His behalf: "We cared so much for you that we were pleased to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives, because you had become dear to us" (1 Thessalonians 2:8). Ed Stetzer, "Compelled by the Sacrificial Love of Christ," *Christianity Today* blog, July 6, 2012<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.focusonthefamily.com/marriage/gods\\_design\\_for\\_marriage/does\\_your\\_spouse\\_see\\_jesus\\_in\\_you/sacrificial\\_love.aspx](http://www.focusonthefamily.com/marriage/gods_design_for_marriage/does_your_spouse_see_jesus_in_you/sacrificial_love.aspx), accessed July 5, 2014

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2012/july/compelled-by-sacrificial-love-of-christ.html?paging=off>, accessed July 5, 2014

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### Friends or Servants

Christ's example of self-sacrificing love comes out of choice. It is not based on feelings, yet it is not void of emotion. Though it is not driven by moods, there is an element of friendship that gives us powerful energy to love like He loved. Jesus' command to love does not proceed from an unfeeling boss who sits apathetically on the sidelines, occasionally shouting directions. Combined with His own example of laying down His life for us, He explains:

"You are My friends if you do whatever I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you" (John 15:14, 15).

Christ has drawn us into His circle of confidence. We are not outsiders, but we stand together with Him in service. That includes being privy to His



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## OTHER VOICES

- Jesus showed us how to be courageous and sacrificial while we die for our beliefs, not while we kill for them.  
- Frederica Mathewes-Green
  - We love because He first loved us.  
- The Apostle John
  - The most persuasive love always involves sacrifice.  
- Tim Chaddick
  - Being deeply loved by someone gives you strength, while loving someone deeply gives you courage.  
- Lao Tzu
  - I have found the paradox, that if you love until it hurts, there can be no more hurt, only more love.  
- Mother Teresa
- 

plans to spread the gospel with the world. Servants do not always have a close relationship with their master. Slaves are simply given commands to obey. But in the Christian's life, we are pulled close in companionship.

Jesus opened to the disciples many secrets of the kingdom of heaven. For instance, He explained plainly the meaning of parables. He also gave three disciples a glimpse of Himself in glory on a mountaintop. He walked with them, ate with them, taught them, and journeyed beside them through good and bad times. "Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me..." (Matt. 11:29) was His method. He offers to work beside us, not stand over us like a cruel taskmaster. Such love motivates us to serve.

### Chosen by God

Jesus explains His love for us by going even deeper. "You did not choose Me," He says, "but I chose you and appointed you..." (John 15:16). There is something that warms us inside when we are chosen. No one wants to feel like they are the leftovers, or that another has to put up with us. Who wants to hear, "Well, if you're all that's left, I guess I have to take you."

A woman desires to be chosen by her man, to be exclusively picked as the one he wants more than any other. She feels safe and cherished in such a relationship.

Who wants to go on a date with a person who says, “I’m stuck with you”? Jesus sees each of us and says, “I want you.” It indicates a relational tie between His heart and yours. Such strong words of interest help us respond in love. There is a reciprocal answer to the command to love. It is not duty but devotion that draws us to serve Christ.

Imagine working in a factory. Your boss comes by your workstation and regularly asks how you are doing. “Is there anything you need?” he inquires. On your birthday he gives you a card. He regularly affirms you on your work. When you are sick, he sends you a text letting you know he hopes you get well soon.

One day your boss is replaced by a new man who is a driver. Every time he comes by your station he tells you to “step it up.” He never asks how you are doing, and if you are sick he threatens to replace you. Never once has he thanked you for what you do.

Which of these two men would you rather work for?

Jesus commands us to love. It sounds a bit autocratic, but when you see that He has given His life for you and calls you His friend, drawing you close to His side, you begin to desire to obey Him. It is joy, not drudgery.

## **Bearing Fruit**

Christ adds one more element to this “greater love” quality in the life of His true followers. He says you are chosen, so “that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask the Father in My name He may give you” (John 15:16).

We can spew forth all sorts of statements about love. We can promise another person we truly love them and that we will be faithful. We can write cards, sing songs, buy flowers, and make public commitments—but if the “fruit” of our life does not match the words from our lips, such “love” is meaningless. Even our best efforts can still be driven by selfishness.

The fruit we most often think of are character qualities. But this passage actually speaks of another type of fruit that is the result of our work in sharing Christ with others. When we genuinely love Jesus and serve others, our efforts will draw people to God. Friends and neighbors will see within our self-sacrificing efforts a picture of Christ and His work of salvation.

The cross is not just a beautiful painting by some famous artist. Calvary is to be mirrored in our own actions. “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me” (Galatians 2:20, NIV), says Paul. People are moved to believe God loves them because they see such love expressed toward