

Week 3: Loving Communication - Part 1

WEEK 3: DAY 1

Introduction: What's Love Got to do With It?

Surprisingly, as a family counselor I hear many kids make the statement, *"I feel my parents don't love me,"* despite the fact that virtually any parent questioned would emphatically state that they *do* love their kids. The problem is, parents sometimes *act* without love. The frustrations and difficulties of parenting can bring out the worst in us; we do and say things that are the opposite of love. Over time, if a parent is not taking responsibility, asking for forgiveness, a child will *not* feel loved.

As we look at the subject of Biblical love, Jesus gives us insight into what He expected of His disciples, which still applies to us today. Notice that Jesus is not making a suggestion, but a commandment.

John 13:34-35 *"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. ³⁵ By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."*

SELF-EXAMINATION

According to verse 35, how does the fulfillment of this commandment relate to your relationship with Christ and others, especially your children?

God tells us that we cannot express this love without His help. In the following verses, notice the connection between God's Word and the working of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

1 Peter 1:22-23: *"Since you have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit in sincere love of the brethren, love one another fervently with a pure heart, ²³ having been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever" [emphasis added].*

In this instance, the word *sincere* means without hypocrisy. This *sincere* love is made possible only by abiding in Christ, and obeying the truth through the power of the Holy Spirit who dwells in every Believer. In a previous study, we learned that 2 Peter 1:3 says of Jesus, “His divine power has given us knowledge of all things...through the knowledge of Him.” And that knowledge comes through God’s Word.

DIG DEEPER: FURTHER STUDY

Read the following Scriptures and describe the 4 ways God is telling us to love others including our children.

Romans 12:9 “Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil. Cling to what is good.”

1 Peter 4:8 “And above all things have fervent love for one another, for “love will cover a multitude of sins.”

Hebrews 6:10 “For God is not unjust to forget your work and labor of love which you have shown toward His name, in that you have ministered to the saints, and do minister.”

1 John 4:7 “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.”

What is biblical love?

Biblical love is not based on feelings, nor does it come naturally. We are naturally selfish and self-centered. Biblical love is an action, based on choice. This type of love is supernatural and can only come from a heart that is yielded to God, because it comes from Him. So it follows that to truly, sincerely love our children,

we must first love God and yield our hearts to Him! In our culture today, the word *love* is tossed around so much that the meaning has been cheapened. We use the same word to describe how we feel about God, our children, and certain foods! Most parents will eagerly testify that they love their children. But the *only* standard by which we can measure real love is the Word of God.

In the original Greek version of the New Testament, the following two words translate to *love*, in English:

FACT FILE

Phileo – *The response of the human spirit to what appeals to it as pleasurable. “Phileo seems to be clearly distinct (from agape) and speaks of esteem, high regard, and tender affection and is more emotional.”¹ Phileo is friendship love, determined by the pleasure that one receives from the object of that love. Phileo is conditional love.*

Agape – *The response of God’s heart toward unworthy sinners. Agape is God’s love demonstrated in self-sacrifice for the benefit of the objects of His love. “God’s essential quality that seeks the best interests of others regardless of the others’ actions.”² “It involves God doing what He knows is best for man and not necessarily what man desires...His son to bring forgiveness to man.”³ It is choosing to love.*

We have this *agape* love because “...the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us” (Rom. 5:5).

God has called us to love His children with *agape* love, a sacrificial love that is not withdrawn if the one loved fails to live up to demands or expectations. *Agape* love is based on the value God has placed upon our children, not on their personalities, strengths, weaknesses, or failures.

You have most likely come to the realization that it is *impossible* in our own strength to love with God’s love! But praise God, when we receive Christ, the Holy Spirit comes to live in our hearts. If we yield (die to self-will), the Holy Spirit will love our children through us! Because *Biblical* love is not based on feelings, or emotions, it is something that you do (a verb, not a noun) and can only be described by seeing it in action.

Therefore, it is essential that we *learn* to show God’s love to our children. The good news is, if our foundation of intimacy with Jesus Christ is properly laid, we are capable, in God’s strength, of building the

1 J.D. Watson, *A Word for the Day* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Pub, 2006), 21.

2 Richard L. Pratt, Jr, vol. 7, *I & II Corinthians, Holman New Testament Commentary*; Holman Reference (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 447.

3 Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary : New Testament*, (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2000), 66.

“supports of love” that our children need. Failure is not an option, we can all start somewhere and that point comes when we realize that loving our children comes from a heart surrendered to God. It is a behavior that we have to choose, seek, learn and grow into. We all love our children to a certain extent, but what we want to pursue is *excellence* in love.

Paul knew that the people in Philippi loved each other, but he encouraged them to press on further:

Philippians 1:9-11 *“And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment,¹⁰ that you may approve the things that are excellent, that you may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ,¹¹ being filled with the fruits of righteousness which are by Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.”*

Notice that Paul did not pray for them to *feel* like loving, which will be discussed more in the next chapter. This is a prayer of action that we can use to pray for ourselves. Let me help you think through how you can use this as a prayer.

1. “That your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment” (v 10). To *abound* means to have excess—more than enough - in this case, love. *Knowledge* in the Greek *epignosis*, means to know something intellectually, but then act upon it. It is a prayer to know how to love Biblically and then live it out. *Discernment* means to have insight, or the capacity to understand, and make a decision concerning behavior that flows from your knowledge.
2. “That you may approve the things that are *excellent*” (v 11). *Approve* in this context means to continually put to the test, examine prior to the approval of your action. In other words, does it meet the qualification of being *excellent agape*, or love that meets the standard of God’s Word, which will then be a *sincere* love.

Our prayer is that God would fulfill this in you as you study His Word. Perhaps you have not done this before, take a few minutes and use the above passage of Scripture to write out a personal prayer on a 3x5 card and ask God to make it true in *your* life. For the next few weeks use the card to begin your study times by praying about these principles. For example:

“Lord Jesus, I am asking for this love to flow through me at all times. I want to overflow with Your love in all the situations I face each day. Lord, help me to never make an excuse for an unloving thought, word, or deed toward my children. Please give me Your discernment on how to share this love in all situations I face as a parent. Jesus, please be glorified in all I do in front of and to my children, Amen.

DIG DEEPER: FURTHER STUDY

Read the following Scriptures and write out what are the main exhortations.

Colossians 1:9 *“For this reason we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding.”*

Romans 12:2 *“And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.”*

Ephesians 5:10 *“finding out what is acceptable to the Lord.”*

WEEK 3: DAY 2

The Uniqueness of Our Children

An important principle, sometimes overlooked, is that God creates each child to be *unique*. For example, my daughter Katie was so shy, from the time she was able to walk until she was about five years old, if we were in a public place away from the house, she had to be physically connected to either my wife or me. She would not leave our side. Thankfully, with age she became much more confident. But during those younger years, even at a place like church where she knew so many people, she would literally run a distance of 10 feet just to switch from my hand to her mom’s. It was a little weird at times.

On Fridays, when Katie was in kindergarten, they had praise and worship for the whole school, some three to four hundred students. Fridays were definitely very difficult! Each week when worship started, the kids

would be screaming, “Oh, praise the Lord!” It was like a nightmare for Katie; she would cover her ears and put her head down, fighting the feelings of panic.

Even the daily routine on the playground, with fifty kids throwing balls around and yelling, was too difficult for Katie. So she would sit at a table, coloring and talking with the teachers. When she was about 5 years old, we took her to Disneyland and it was anything but the “happiest place on earth.” Katie did not like it at all. It took nearly five hours for her to relax in such a crowd of people. That is just the way Katie was as a child.

Yet my boys were completely different, nothing like Katie. My son Nick, in particular, was the complete opposite. We had to chase him around all the time, calling “Get over here young man!” because he always wanted to be so independent.

Many friends and family members noticed Katie’s behavior and it seemed strange to them. What if my wife and I had become embarrassed, or impatient, and ignored her needs by saying, “Will you stop it? Let go of me! Stand over there. The boys never did this.” If we had shunned her, what would have happened? We could have hurt Katie deeply and caused possible long-lasting damage simply because we refused to accept her *unique* emotional needs.

In order to have a deep appreciation for each child, we must always keep in mind *Who* created them. Yes, we are participants in the creation of our children but, from the beginning, God is the actual Creator. Genesis 1:26 says, “Then God said, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness...” and verse 27, “So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.” God formed man out of the dust (Gen. 2:7), and afterward He said that it was “very good” (Gen 1:31). Our children are created in God’s image and we need to value them that way, even with all their imperfections and unique personalities. It does not matter if you are a traditional, blended, single-parent, grandparent or even foster family, we all share the responsibility of having God’s children in our homes and need to value them as He does.

We must also keep in mind that God makes each of us with a unique personality. Ever notice how one child learns faster than another? One may be sensitive, another energetic, and yet another very kick-back and relaxed. You notice this in the Bible with Jesus’ twelve disciples. Peter was brash, always speaking up, while John, known as the apostle of love, was depicted leaning on Jesus’ breast.

In Psalm 139:13-14, David says to God:

“For You formed my inward parts; You covered me in my mother’s womb. ¹⁴ I will praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; Marvelous are Your works, And that my soul knows very well.”

One commentator writes concerning this passage:

David now turns to consider *His power and skill*. And the particular phase of divine omnipotence he chooses is the marvelous development of a baby in his mother’s womb. When conception is made, it is like a speck of watery material smaller than the dot over this i, and all the future characteristics of the child are programmed—the color of their skin, eyes and hair, the shape of their facial features, the natural abilities they will have. All that the child will be physically and mentally is contained in that fertilized egg.⁴

This cannot be clearer. God has made each of us who we are, from birth, and He loves us. And yes, our children are born sinners just like us, and they need to be lovingly trained and disciplined, but it will always be in the context of who they are, and always with love.

DIG DEEPER: FURTHER STUDY

Read the following Scriptures and write down how the Psalmist’s attitude toward God’s creation (including our children) could help you embrace your child’s uniqueness. What should your attitude be?

Psalm 92:4 *“For You, LORD, have made me glad through Your work; I will triumph in the works of Your hands.”*

Psalm 104:24 *“O LORD, how manifold are Your works! In wisdom You have made them all. The earth is full of Your possessions.”*

Psalm 111:2 *“The works of the LORD are great, Studied by all who have pleasure in them.”*

⁴ William MacDonald and Arthur Farstad, *Believer’s Bible Commentary : Old and New Testaments* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997), Ps 139:13–14.

According to the following Scriptures, when does God’s plan for His children begin?

Jeremiah 1:5 *“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; Before you were born I sanctified you; I ordained you a prophet to the nations.”*

Galatians 1:15 *“But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother’s womb and called me through His grace.”*

So the conclusion that we can make from all this is that each of us is unique! It should now be no surprise that our children are very different from us, and from each other. In order to love them properly, we need to become students of our children; to accept their personalities, understand their needs, and learn to communicate with them in a loving way. And never to forget to show affection to them, which can even be according to their personality. If we do not apply ourselves to these areas of parenting, serious problems can occur.

Many parents, without knowing or recognizing it, can grieve a child’s spirit and damage their self-worth. Also by misrepresenting the Lord, by *not* loving a child and *adapting* to their emotional needs, parents can prematurely erode their own influence, or power, over that child.

ACTION PLAN

Take some time right now and write down a list of characteristics that are unique to each of your children and take it to God in prayer, and discuss if married. For example:

“Lord, my child is shy and at times she is very fearful. I know You have made her that way, so please give me Your wisdom, show me (us) how to minister to her in a way that will honor You and meet her needs.”

As we move through these studies, you will learn more about how to love your children God's way. Commit it to prayer, and He will be faithful to provide the wisdom and strength you need to make needed changes.

Loving Communication Takes Time

Another important aspect of loving a child is to spend time with them. In today's world, we are pulled in so many directions by jobs, ministries, hobbies, and recreation, little time is left for the children. Even parents whose kids are in soccer, softball, or other sports can be at risk. Sports are good, but some people take them to the extreme. If you have one child who is a sports "nut," but the other three are not, what are you communicating to those three when you spend all day Saturday and Sunday, like a taxi cab, driving the "sport" around while they stay home? Worse yet is when you drag them along and make them sit in the bleachers. We must find a *balanced* way to love each of our children, with their own particular interests.

Today, in our society, many mothers are at work. Please understand that I am not putting down working moms. The area where you live can dictate the need for a two-parent income. But the question is: When working parents come home, where are their hearts and minds? "Kids, leave me alone for a while. I need my space." We can be tired, so be honest with yourself about being available to them. If you are not, there are going to be problems.

Loving our kids is not necessarily affected by the fact that we are working, but by *our* behavior and attitude when we are home with them. Recent statistics show that an average working mother spends 11 minutes a day in one-on-one communication with her child. For those with multiple children, that time per child decreases even further. On an entire weekend, a working mom spends about 30 minutes per day in one-on-one communication with her child. A father today spends about eight minutes a day communicating one-on-one with his child, and about fourteen total minutes of one-on-one communication with his kids on a weekend.⁵

Within these same statistics, we find that children today are watching between three and four hours of TV a day. Is it any wonder that the media is proselytizing and infecting our children's minds with worldly views? Loving our children and meeting their emotional needs means sacrifice, giving of ourselves and being available for them. Adapting to their interests may be reading a book to them, playing catch, or walking the dog. It takes time, but parents will also reap the new rewards of really getting to know their children, and enjoying them!

The Most Powerful Motivator

It is my observation through study that there are four basic forces that motivate all humans. First is love, the most powerful motivator. The second is physical needs: food, security, warmth. Number three is pleasure: our jobs, car, house, or other things that please us. Fourth, and least powerful, is pain and fear.

5 http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1175/is_v20/ai_4433362

When it comes to motivating children, parents often lean most heavily on pain and fear. Isn't that interesting? The reality is, however, that a far more powerful motivator is *love*. Love will motivate our children to make right decisions when they are not in our presence, especially when they become adolescents. Our love is the most powerful motivation for them to say, "No, I don't want that" or "I won't do that." Our love for them is the key. God is our example, as discussed earlier, and it is "knowing that the goodness (loving kindness) of God leads you to repentance," (Rom 2:4) that we need to embrace. Since it was God's love and goodness that brought us to the point of repentance, should we not do the same with our children? What was the motivation that caused Jesus to come down and die for us? John 3:16 tells us it was His love for us that motivated Him to die on the cross.

DIG DEEPER: FURTHER STUDY

Write down what the following verses say about acting out of love. What are the reasons, and the results, and how can you apply this to parenting?

Romans 5:8 *"But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."*

2 Corinthians 12:15 *"And I will very gladly spend and be spent for your souls; though the more abundantly I love you, the less I am loved."*

1 John 4:7 *"Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God."*

In our next section, you will learn to train your children by establishing rules, discipline and punishment. But remember, effective training must be done in love and motivated by love if we are doing it God's way. This is difficult for parents because it requires sacrifice. For love to be genuine, it must be demonstrated. Aren't you thankful that God didn't just *feel* love for us? Aren't you glad He *demonstrated* that love? He asks us to follow His example by going beyond *feeling* love to *demonstrating* love!

WEEK 3: DAY 3

Love: Reaction or Response?

Reacting in the Flesh

FACT FILE

React: The dictionary defines the word *react* in the following way: “to act in response to a stimulant or to stimulus, to act in opposition.”⁶

So, to react is not a purposeful or proactive state of mind, and as such, can surely turn out to be a **negative** action. We can take that further by saying that *loving* someone will not be of great quality if we are merely *reacting* to that person.

Reacting in the Flesh can be defined as a Christian reacting to a situation in a sinful manner, in the habit of their old fallen nature, or reacting in their strength and understanding rather than the power and wisdom of the Holy Spirit.

As Christian parents, as ministers, *reacting* in a negative way is sin and a misrepresentation of God. We should not be negatively reacting to our children in any circumstance. Reacting takes no thought, is a “no-brainer” response when the mind is motivated by the flesh. In other words, whatever comes to mind, we simply go with it. Reacting is from our sin nature, or flesh, and is not a demonstration of self-control, which is included in the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22). When kids do something wrong, parents can react in the wrong way with the first thing that comes to mind, which is often shouting harsh words, using disgusted or frightening facial expressions, or even physical violence. Other tactics are silence, rejection, and alienation. The list of sinful and fleshly reactionary expressions toward our children can get pretty lengthy. These are not loving and do not qualify as godly training.

⁶ Webster's New International Dictionary of the English Language; Second Edition Unabridged; G & C Merriam Company, Publishers, Springfield, MA 1944

It is so important that we remember *every day* that we are the most powerful influence in our children's lives! Every time we get angry, or react to our kids in a negative way, we should visualize pulling a sword out and slicing their hearts. Of course, we do not see the damage immediately, but it is truly taking place. In addition, when we do not deal properly with that damage, infection sets in and brings bitterness, then resentment, and when our kids become teenagers, we pay the price.

As a counselor, I have seen hundreds of Christian boys and girls with broken hearts. They are so infected and full of pain. Sadly, the parents who raised these kids never even realized the damage they were doing to their children, over and over again, by reacting in the flesh instead of responding in love.

Reacting to circumstances with a burst of emotions takes no time or effort, it is instantaneous. Proverbs 15:1 tells us, ". . . a harsh word stirs up anger." The Bible also tells us that we are to eliminate harsh actions from our behavior: "But now you yourselves are to put off all these: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth" (Col. 3:8). We are to accept this truth and make a conscious decision to stop every sinful reaction towards our children. Sadly, it is quite common for Christian parents to react in the flesh towards their children, yet never take responsibility for their behavior.

DIG DEEPER: FURTHER STUDY

Read the following Scriptures. Write down each negative quality and cause, relating it to the habit of "reacting". Do you see commands?

Psalm 37:8 "Cease from anger, and forsake wrath; Do not fret—it only causes harm."

Ephesians 4:22 "that you put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts."

James 1:20 "for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God."

Proverbs 20:3 *“It is honorable for a man to stop striving, Since any fool can start a quarrel.”*

Proverbs 27:3 *“A stone is heavy and sand is weighty, But a fool’s wrath is heavier than both of them.”*

Responding in Love

FACT FILE

Respond: According to the dictionary, when we *respond* to someone, we “react positively or favorably.”⁷

When we are responsive, the Thesaurus tells us that we are being acceptant, persuadable, or in other words, we are behaving in a positive way, which is the opposite of reacting.

Responding in Love – A Christian responding to a situation with the inward guidance, love, wisdom and power of the Holy Spirit.

Responding takes *thought*; we have to use our mind and will. Scripture commands that we “. . . *bring every thought captive unto God’s Word*” (2 Cor. 10:5). Responding also takes *self-control*. We must bring our will under subjection to the power of God, which allows the fruit of the Holy Spirit to blossom. “*But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control*” (Gal. 5:22-23). In addition, Scripture tells us we must add self-control to our foundation of faith:

2 Peter 1:5-7 *“But also for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love.”*

7 Webster’s II New Riverside Dictionary Revised Edition, Office Edition, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1996

 **SELF-EXAMINATION**

Take a moment and list some of the negative facial or verbal reactions you use with your children.

Finally, responding rather than reacting takes *time*. It may take as long as counting to ten, it may take much longer. In a later chapter we will discuss discipline, including the importance of never doing it in anger. Sometimes the ability to respond with appropriate discipline requires that a parent take “time out”. Do you need to walk away from the situation and pray? Ask God for the wisdom to respond in a way that honors Him and lovingly encourages your child.

Proverbs 15:28 *“The heart of the righteous studies how to answer . . .”*

James 1:19-20 *“So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath; for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God.”*

Clearly, Scripture tells us not to react in the flesh; but to respond thoughtfully with love. Remember, our purpose is to glorify God, even during discipline, even when our kids are failing, even when they do not want to listen, even when they are challenging us - even then, we need to respond in love. Remember that it is God’s will we are fulfilling, not our own.

DIG DEEPER: FURTHER STUDY

Read the following verses and list our responsibilities concerning love.

John 13:34 *“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another.”*

Colossians 3:14 *“But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection.”*

Ephesians 4:15 *“But, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ.”*

1 Peter 1:22 *“Since you have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit in sincere love of the brethren, love one another fervently with a pure heart.”*

1 Peter 4:8 *“And above all things have fervent love for one another, for “love will cover a multitude of sins.”*

Working with the Strong-Willed Child

Proverbs 14:29 says, *“He who is slow to wrath has great understanding, but he who is impulsive exalts folly.”* In other words, reacting rather than responding demonstrates a lack of understanding in us, as well as promoting continued foolish behavior in our children. This is especially true with the strong-willed child.

As I shared previously, during the first four or five years of my oldest son’s life, I frequently *reacted* to his strong-willed behavior like a raving maniac. I was angry, and I abused my authority. Finally, God got through to me, “Hey Craig, would you ever put gasoline on a fire when you’re trying to put it out?” I thought, “Of course not!” Then, again I heard God’s voice, “Well, every time you get angry and your son knows it, you are provoking him to continuous folly in his behavior.”

Scripture reveals that when we exasperate a child, those with a strong will push right back. Ephesians 6:4 says, *“And you, fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord.”* This verse says “fathers” because they are given responsibility to govern the home, but the principle is for moms, too. The command is “do not provoke.” There is no exception clause here, or elsewhere. The acceptable option is to *train* them, which will be discussed later, in depth. To “provoke to anger,” *parorgizo* (Greek), means to move someone to the point of anger, or “to provoke to anger, irritation or resentment.”⁸

8 Zodhiates, 1122.

When God commands us not to do something, and we do it anyway, it is a *sin*. No parent likes it when a strong-willed child refuses to listen, or obey. But the Bible encourages us to always *respond* in love, or Christ-likeness. Hebrews 10:24 presents “provoke” in a positive way, “*And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works.*” Stir up, sometimes translated stimulate, or provoke, is *paraxusmos* (Greek), and refers to the act of encouraging someone to good behavior. What we really want to do is “stir up” love, which stimulates good behavior in your child. This I call using the “fire-extinguisher” of love.

We have to remember that personality comes from the way God wires us. Those strong-willed individuals are the Peter’s and Paul’s of the world. We need people like them in our lives, in the kingdom! They are the people who, when they are trained right, cannot only press on through great opposition, but also bring others through with them. Victory comes by *responding* to **truth**, using self-control, and not being driven by our feelings and emotions. For us as parents, *truth* means that our response comes from a heart and conscience trained by the Word of God. Deut. 27:26 says, “*Cursed is the one who does not confirm all the words of this law by observing them. And all the people shall say, ‘Amen!’*” To *confirm* means God’s Word has come into our hearts and dictates our behavior.

Matthew 22:36-39 “*Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?’ Jesus said to him, ‘You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’*”

In this passage, God emphasizes the importance of love and the value of human life. When we love and value someone, we treat him or her accordingly. Obviously, we can choose to fail by not loving, even though we are called to serve as a *minister* and example of Christ to our children. Here is an example of acting in the opposite of love: It is a heated moment after your child just did something really foolish, and you are having an intense debate. The phone rings, and you stop to answer (it’s a friend of yours): “Hello. Hi, oh hey, everything’s OK. I’m fine, how are you?” You seem happy to hear from them and your tone of voice turns instantly pleasant. What did you just communicate to your child? The person on the phone is more valuable.

Sadly, we frequently do that, never even thinking twice. Especially when our kids are little, before their cognitive skills are developed, they see it so plainly: *Mom or Dad likes other people more than me*. This common occurrence, even in Christian homes, is one reason we find so many kids struggling with self-worth.

Love Is a Choice

The Bible says that we are to “*put on love.*” It is a *choice*, not a *feeling*. Feelings may follow, but first we must act in obedience to the Word of God. “*But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection*” (Col. 3:14). The word translated “love” here is *agape*. The Nelson Illustrated Bible Dictionary

says this about *agape love*: “contrary to a popular understanding, the significance of ‘agape’ is not that it is unconditional love, but that it is primarily a love of the *will* rather than of the *emotion*.”⁹

Agape love means *responding* to my children as if I love and value them, even when I am upset with their choices. I may have negative thoughts, but still *respond* with love and patience. I am learning *self-control*, the art of quenching my flesh, so that I avoid saying something foolish, judgmental, mean, or unkind. This is the fruit of the Spirit, not the fruit of Craig. This love does not come naturally. Plus, Biblical love is not based on feelings; it is a choice to submit, or yield to the conviction of the Holy Spirit. We all recognize it – the conviction telling us when we are out of control (Eph 4:30). *Agape love* is the decision to value another person, perhaps a child, when our own comfort is disturbed. Romans 13:8 says, “*Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law.*”

Communicating love starts in the heart. Learning to respond in love rather than react from the flesh is a process. Today, I no longer react in anger to my children but *respond* in love. Praise God, my oldest son has not held any un-forgiveness toward me for the many mistakes during his first six years of life. It is because God has healed his memory of my angry, sinful behavior.

If you are trapped in a reactive, sinful pattern of behavior, take heart. You and your child can experience similar healing. In the next chapter we will deal with changing that reactive behavior to a loving response. It is important to understand, however, if you choose to continue *reacting* negatively, you will pay dearly later, and so will your children.

WEEK 3: DAY 4

What Love Is Not: Part 1

All of us believe that we know how to love our children. But we can only prove it by comparing our type of love with the love described in God’s Word. The most complete passage on this topic is found 1 Corinthians 13, which describes both what love is and is not. While we study the principles in this chapter, we will be evaluating our knowledge and behavior in relation to God’s revealed wisdom on love.

As we go through this process, please keep in mind that God loves you, and His instruction is meant to encourage, not condemn. It is Satan, our enemy, who wants us to feel condemned. The Holy Spirit ministers to us by revealing areas where we need change, and our job is to receive that conviction. God wants us to

understand the difference between conviction and condemnation, and that “*there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ.*” (Rom. 8:1).

Think about it: there is a reason you are reading this material right now. God has been waiting to share these things with you. Tell Him, “OK, God, I am ready. As You reveal truth to me, where I am doing something wrong, I pray that You would bring conviction, and place a desire in my heart for change.”

In 1 Corinthians 13, God uses **verbs** to explain love, not adjectives. This is because “agape” love can only be described by observing it in action. Love is not something that we merely *define*; it is something that we *do*. It is not just a feeling, or an attitude; it is an action that centers on others, not on self.

1 Corinthians 13:4-8a “*Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails..*”

As we look at ourselves in relation to these aspects of love, giving special attention to the way we love our children, it will be helpful to look at both what love is, and is not.

1) LOVE IS NOT IMPATIENT.

FACT FILE

Longsuffering, or patience: means to be long-tempered, the opposite of hasty anger, instead it involves exercising understanding and patience toward people. It also requires that we endure circumstances, not losing faith or giving up.¹⁰

The Scripture tells us that love “*suffers long,*” (patient NASB, NIV) and commands us to do so. The opposite of long-suffering, or being patient, is *impatience*. **Love is not impatient.** If we put selfish, unrealistic expectations on our children, and then become angry when they fail, we are being impatient and failing to love them properly by God’s standard.

I hear parents complain, “My three-year-old constantly leaves messes, and doesn’t want to obey.” My response is, “Really? What do you expect of a three-year old?”

Others reveal, “My teenager never wants to do chores and it makes me so angry. It’s hard to be patient

10 Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary : New Testament* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2000) 939.

when he (she) won't do what I ask!" I respond by asking, "Is that a surprise? How have you trained your child?" And often the response is, "What do you mean 'trained'? I just expect obedience."

Then I reply, "No wonder he's fourteen and acts like he's six. You place expectations on him, yet you have no idea how to train him to meet those expectations." By reacting in anger, you are actually creating an angry person within your child (Prov 15:1), and you are influencing him to go out and do the same (Prov 22:24-25). So, who should break this cycle? Who is really responsible, your fourteen-year-old child, or you?"

The love we show our kids *must* be longsuffering. Whether it is the "terrible twos", or the "challenging teens," love means dying to self as we patiently teach them and guide them into maturity. From the time we bring them home from the hospital, it seems that they just *want, want, want*. Everything is, "Mine, mine, mine." But we cannot be impatient! Love requires patience.

This is a good place to stop and reflect on your relationship with the Lord. Before you came to Christ, God was very patiently leading you to a place where you would surrender to Him, and even now God is being patient with your ignorance and disobedience.

Romans 2:4 says, *"Or do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance?"*

The Scripture also says in 1 Corinthians 13:4 that love "*suffers-long*," which is derived from the above word "*longsuffering*". Notice that the longsuffering and goodness of God leads us to repentance, not God's anger and impatience. Should we not demonstrate the same attitudes to our children?

The Bible says in 2 Peter 3:9, "The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance."

Oh, how truly looooooongsuffering God is toward us!

ACTION PLAN

Write down three areas where you are impatient with your children, then ask God to forgive you. Now, ask your child/children to forgive you (be specific to each area). Follow up by committing these areas to prayer, asking God for strength and wisdom to change.

Keep in mind, some children will require much more patience than others. My son Nicholas was a strong-willed child. He required much time from my wife and I, and ten times the amount of energy compared to my son Justin and our daughter Katie. It was constant! He would wake up in the morning, and by 9:00 a.m. my wife and I would think, “Oh, my gosh, he’s beating to a drum, but it sure is not ours.” Sometimes we would have to discipline him ten, even twenty times in one day. Justin or Katie, meanwhile, might have required one or two.

Loving Nicholas was indeed hard work during these times! Often, our thoughts were, “I’m sick of this! Why can’t he just obey the rules? Why doesn’t he just grow up?” We would stay up until all hours of the night discussing him, “What are we going to do tomorrow? God give us strength!” Loving Nicholas properly *required* a tremendous amount of patience.

Romans 15:4 *“For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope.”*

DIG DEEPER: FURTHER STUDY

Paul prayed concerning the quality of love and patience we need in our hearts. What is the source of this love?

2 Thessalonians 3:5 *“Now may the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God and into the patience of Christ.”*

ADD/ADHD

At this point, I want to say something about attention deficit disorder (ADD). This is a genuine disorder causing inability to focus, take direction, put commands in order, respond, and so on.¹¹ I do work with some children who truly have ADD, or attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), but I would say that over 85 percent of the ADD and ADHD diagnoses today are false. This is especially obvious when considering the questions a therapist, or physician, typically asks parents about their child’s behavior, while never asking

11 <http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/adhd/symptom.htm>

about the parents' *method* of training. In addition, they never consider how often the parents *react* to a child with anger, exasperating them and provoking his/her behavior to continuous folly.

It is questionable why the number of children diagnosed with ADD or ADHD is increasing. Current reasons seem to be that they do not sit in class and listen to the teacher, or have had zero training at home other than yelling and screaming. With no consistent loving discipline, it is no wonder children act the way they do. After closely examining their discipline style, I have told many parents, "It's not that your child has ADD, or ADHD, but the problem is your ignorance and/or unwillingness to love and train them according to God's will."

When parents are *blessed* with a strong-willed child, they can be led to believe that treating the child medically is the solution. In most cases, the greatest problems are parental ignorance and/or unwillingness to *yield* and *obey* God's commands. Have you heard the terms "battle of the wills", or "power struggle" in relation to parenting? This can all lead to a disorder in children that we have named *UADD*, or unwilling-attention-deficit disorder. And, if a child does not have UADD, then it is often what we call *LOPD*, lack-of-parenting disorder, or a combination of both.

If your child has been diagnosed with ADD or ADHD, however, please do not think you must immediately take them off medication. Instead, apply the principles that you are learning throughout this study. You might find that ninety days from now, you will be able to wean them off that medication, and perhaps you will discover he/she never needed it in the first place. We have witnessed this many times! I encourage you to pray about this.

DIG DEEPER: FURTHER STUDY

Read the following Scriptures and write down what they say about longsuffering patience, love, or both.

Romans 15:5 *"Now may the God of patience and comfort grant you to be like-minded toward one another, according to Christ Jesus,..."*

Galatians 5:22 *"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,..."*

Hebrews 6:12 *“That you do not become sluggish, but imitate those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.”*

1 Thessalonians 5:14 *“Now we exhort you, brethren, warn those who are unruly, comfort the fainthearted, uphold the weak, be patient with all.”*

WEEK 3: DAY 5

2) LOVE IS NOT UNKIND

FACT FILE

Kind: the word *chrestos* (Greek), to do good; denotes being gentle, merciful, sympathetic, gracious and good natured in contrast to harsh, hard, sharp, bitter or cruel. The term also expresses the idea of moral excellence.

A good illustration of this word is when Christ used it of Himself, saying, *“... My yoke is easy (chrestos), and My burden is light.”* (Matt 11:30). True love motivates us to act in merciful goodness toward our children, so that they can see Christ in us, an example of a loving and kind *minister* of God.

“Love is . . . kind.” (1 Cor. 13). The opposite of kindness is being unkind. **Love is not unkind.** Unkindness is allowing oneself to be provoked and angry, then yelling, judging, ignoring, comparing our children to their siblings, and acting as if their failures are a threat against our parental authority. God will use our children’s mistakes and failures to accomplish His will in our lives, to *transform* our character as needed. He will use our child’s weaknesses to reveal our *own* weaknesses. If we refuse to accept and work with God in those difficult areas, we will also miss opportunities for God to work on our own weaknesses!

We must remember that our homes are a training ground. Children are born without Godly character, as we were also. They do not arrive with traits of maturity. The Word tells us *“foolishness is bound up in the*

heart of the child” (Prov 22:15). The emphasis here is that all children are born with a *sinful bent*; understanding this, we can learn to discipline them in a loving way.

Proverbs gives us a picture of their lack of maturity, which puts a big responsibility upon the parents (22:6; 19:18). They lack judgment (10:21); enjoy foolishness (10:23); are gullible (14:15); avoid the wise (15:12); are proud and haughty (21:24); despise good advice (23:9); make truth useless (26:7); repeat their folly (26:11); trust in themselves (28:26); vent their anger (29:11); cause strife and quarrels (22:10); stir up anger (29:8); go their own way (15:21); lash out when they are discovered in folly (17:12); are endangered by their words (18:6, 7); walk a troublesome path (22:5); must be guided by hardship at times (26:3); persist in foolishness (27:22); show propensity for laziness (22:13); and are lustful (22:14), and greedy (22:16), just to name a few. This does NOT mean all these negative character traits will manifest themselves, but it does give us a description of immaturity—foolishness. Are you beginning to get the picture? Good. Now you are ready for the assistance you need to Biblically help your children develop character and maturity through *proper* teaching and Godly discipline.

Why do we act surprised at childish behavior? And why do we think that *anger* makes our discipline more effective? Many people were raised this way, and are just repeating behavior learned from their own parents. That is the way I was raised. There was a time that I believed if I wasn’t twisting my face and raising my voice, my discipline was not working. However, where is that behavior commended in the Bible? Nowhere. In fact, James 1:20 states the exact opposite, “...for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God.” What are you trying to produce?

I was in a restaurant restroom washing my hands years ago when an extremely agitated man came bursting through the door. He was herding his nine- or ten-year-old son, who was obviously on the verge of losing his dinner. The dad threw open a stall door and pushed the boy inside, all the while yelling,

“Hurry, hurry, hurry. Are you going to throw up? What’s wrong with you?”

Apparently the sick boy supported himself by leaning his hands on the toilet seat. The dad yelled, “Don’t touch the toilet seat!” grabbed his son, ran him over to the sink and began frantically washing his hands, complaining, criticizing and judging the poor boy. This *out-of-control* father, upset because his dinner was interrupted, made a big, embarrassing scene in front of me, an absolute stranger. I could only imagine what went on in the privacy of his own home!

I felt like handing the guy my card and telling him that, in the near future, he would have an angry adolescent on his hands and probably need some counseling!

We must *learn* how to discipline with no sinful expression, without our hair standing up, or our veins popping

out of our neck. The good news is, as we submit to the Lord we will be able to do it. I want to remind you again, acts of love and kindness are to be done out of obedience to the Lord; we love Him, abide in Him, and He empowers us to do these things. It is NOT about feelings, because at times we do not FEEL like loving.

The sad reality in many Christian homes is that parents show more contempt and more unkindness toward their own children than they do anyone else on earth—*reacting* in the flesh instead of *responding* in love (truth). We must *cooperate* with God by allowing Him to first train us, and then take responsibility when we are unloving.

Paul gives some pointed instruction in Ephesians 4:31-32:

“Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you.” [emphasis added].

Notice what needs to be put away. There also is the command to “*be kind*”, “*chrestos*” (Greek), which is a behavior that we are to pursue and continue to pursue.

ACTION PLAN

Take some time and write down those things that you need to “put away”, ask forgiveness from God and then ask God to show you how to *proactively* be kind to your children. Pray for the faith to trust Him and keep at it, even though you sometimes fail. Ask for His grace to always ask for forgiveness when you fail. This is the only way you will experience godly change.

DIG DEEPER: FURTHER STUDY

What are the following verses instructing us to do toward others and our children?

Romans 12:10 *“Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another.”*

Colossians 3:12 *“Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering;”*

Galatians 5:22 *“But the fruit of the Spirit is...longsuffering, kindness, goodness...”*

Proverbs 19:22a *“What is desired in a man is kindness...”*
