

LOVING THE UNLOVABLE

by Nicholas Stoddard and Carol Duerksen

KEY VERSE:

“But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.”

Luke 6:35

FAITH STORY:

Luke 6:27-36

FAITH FOCUS:

In this passage, we find Jesus teaching on how far our love must reach. It does not just stop with our friends. He says that it must extend to our enemies as well. We cannot just give our kindness to those who are first kind to us. Jesus points out that even the worst people of the world do that. To be different as Christ’s followers, we must love those who do not love us and maybe are even downright mean to us. In fact, we must do good to them, even though they will most likely not return the favor. Jesus hits home the point that even those perceived as lowliest by the world show favor to those who will return that favor. God showed a different love. God showed love to a world that did not deserve it. Christ calls us to imitate that love and mercy by giving ours to those who do not deserve it and will not repay it.

SESSION GOAL:

By the end of the session, students will learn that God’s love is unlimited and we are to imitate that unreserved love for all.

SESSION OBJECTIVES:

By the end of this session, the students will:

- Students will hear examples of persons who loved those who seemed to be unlovable.
- Students will think about persons in their lives who are hard to love, and come up with a plan to show them love.

MATERIALS NEEDED AND ADVANCE PREPARATION:

- 1 View the DVD movie “Beyond The Gates of Splendor” and plan for a time when the class can view it, OR choose several clips to show the class. This is a powerful modern-day example of what Jesus called us to do: love our enemies. It is the story of an Indian tribe in Ecuador that killed five missionaries but came to Christ because members of those missionary families continued to live and work with them. If you type in the name of the film on your search engine, you’ll be able to read reviews, a synopsis and how to locate it. Note: It is rated PG-13 for violence and nudity among the Indian people, so be aware of that as you contemplate showing it. There are two versions on the DVD—one that is 96 minutes long and one that is 40 minutes long. The 96 minute version may get long for your students because it goes into a lot of background on the families prior to them becoming missionaries. In my opinion (Carol) this film is worth seeing and I’d strongly

suggest planning on a longer class period so you can view at least the 40 minute version as part of your class time together. If you can't plan for a longer class time, you may want to view the film in one class period and then do this lesson as a follow-up the next week.

- 2 Bibles for every student
- 3 Brightly colored index cards and pens

SESSION OUTLINE

FOCUS: (10 minutes)

Welcome students, then tell them the following story:

Dirk Willems was caught, tried and convicted for his beliefs as an Anabaptist in 1569.. He escaped from a residential palace turned into a prison by letting himself out of a window with a rope made of knotted rags, dropping onto the ice that covered the castle moat.

Seeing him escape, a palace guard pursued him as he fled. Dirk crossed the thin ice of a pond safely. His own weight had been reduced by short prison rations, but the heavier pursuer broke through.

The guard began to cry for help.

TIME OUT. We'll stop the story to see how each of you would have reacted if you were Dirk. What would you have done when the guard fell in the water and started screaming for help? Bear in mind, you will probably be killed if you are captured.

Ask students to share what they would do if they were in Dirk's shoes.

Then continue with the story:

Hearing the guard's cries for help, Dirk turned back and rescued him. The less-than-grateful guard then seized Dirk and led him back to captivity. This time the authorities threw him into a more secure prison, a small, heavily barred room at the top of a very tall church tower, above the bell, where he was probably locked into the wooden leg stocks that remain in place today. Soon he was led out to be burned to death.

CONNECT: (7-10 minutes)

Ask: *Why do you think Dirk did what he did?*

If/when students say something about following what Jesus said, ask them to find the passage(s) in their Bible where Jesus is giving those instructions to people. Ask students to share those passages.

EXPLORE THE BIBLE: (10 minutes)

Invite students to turn to one of Jesus' passages about loving our enemies as found in Luke 6:27-36. Divide the passage into four sections and ask for volunteers to read the following verses:

First person: verses 27-29

Second person: verses 30-31

Third person: verses 32-34

Fourth person: verses 35-36

Discuss the following with the students:

- What do you think Jesus is referring to when he says the world “love”?
(He is not talking about love as a personal affection; rather it is the desire for the best to happen for that other person. It also goes beyond feelings and involves taking action.)
- For the disciples, who do you think were the enemies that Jesus was talking about?
(The list would include cheating tax collectors, Romans and other Gentiles, and even the religious leaders.)
- Why do you think Jesus asked his followers to love their enemies and do good to those who did not deserve it or could not pay them back?
(Because that is what Jesus did for all humankind. We rejected God and disgraced God by our words and actions, but God still loved us. Christ’s life on earth modeled a better way to live. He showed unconditional love to all people and asked his followers to do the same. By imitating Christ’s love, his followers help bring God’s kingdom on earth.)

APPLY: (Length will depend on if you watch the movie.)

Discuss:

- Can you imagine liking your enemies? Can you imagine loving your enemies as you would your friends? (It probably isn’t possible to like what your enemies do, but you can desire the best for them as people.)
- Why do you think Jesus asks us to love our enemies and do good to those who don’t deserve it or can’t give it back? (Because that is what he did for us. Humanity rejected God, but God still loved us. Our role as Christians is to imitate the things that God does—loving the unlovable in this case.)
- What does loving others involve? Do we just have nice feelings for others? (Jesus showed love by healing people, standing up for them—like the woman caught in adultery, correcting them, feeding them, associating with them when it was unpopular to do so, etc.)
- Loving our enemies and doing good to those who do not deserve it sounds almost impossible—how can we pull it off? (We can’t by ourselves—we need to pray and depend on the Holy Spirit for help.)

Watch the movie “Beyond the Gates of Splendor” (or discuss it if you’ve watched it earlier).

Discuss how students felt about it.

- Why were the women able to go back and live with the people who killed their husbands?
- How was the grandson of one of the men able to become so close to the man who killed his grandpa—to the point where he saw the man as a grandfather figure?
- Who lost what in this true story?
- Who gained what in this story?

RESPOND: (5–10 minutes)

Hand out the index cards and pens. Ask students to think of people in their lives whom they have trouble loving. It may be someone who is mean to them or who always borrows things without paying them back, or it may be someone that our culture says is not cool enough to be loved.

Students should write the name(s) of those persons on their card, and then think of at least one thing they could do to show their love to the person. They should write that action on the card, along with the words “Pray for Love” as a reminder that prayer will be a part of the process.

Ask students to take the card home and place it someplace where they will see it often—locker door, bathroom mirror, etc—as a reminder to practice loving people unconditionally just like God does for us.

Close with a prayer, asking the Holy Spirit for strength and courage to love and do good to those who seem unlovable. Allow for some quiet time during your prayer and ask students to pray quietly for the person(s) on their card.

INSIGHTS FROM SCRIPTURE:

These verses are a summary of Jesus message to us on how we are to relate to others. In order to be the people of God, we have to love just as God loves. Jesus points out that we aren't being any different than the fallen world if we love just those who love us. In Matthew's version of this passage (Matthew 5:44-48), Jesus says that even the publicans and tax collectors—seemingly some of the worst sinners—do the same.

The word for love in this passage is not referring to affectionate love. Rather, it is the compassionate desire to see what is best for another person. This is not the kind of love you can “fall into”—it requires a conscious decision and an extreme amount of extra effort. It is not natural to refrain from retaliation when someone takes advantage of you. Reason doesn't tell us to compassionately desire the best for the person wronging us. But Jesus does. “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you.”

Unconditional loving and refraining from reciprocal violence is all well and good, but Jesus goes one step further in this sermon. He pushes us into the realm of concrete kindness by adding the phrase “...do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return” (verse 35). It is one thing to desire the best for someone else, but to make personal sacrifices to make it happen is another thing entirely. Christ is not asking for this unconditional love to be simply a heartfelt desire. It has to take tangible form in our actions towards others.

We are to accept abuse without retaliation as well as give to those in need without seeking gain for ourselves.

Christ never says that we are to approve of the wrongful actions done by others; he just says that does not dictate our response. It is not possible to love the conduct of someone who harms you, reviles you or violates you. Yet we must still speak kindly to them, giving them aid in their time of need.

We show love and kindness regardless of what is done to us. If someone is violent towards us, we do not respond in kind. Christ calls us to seek to do good to others in return for evil.

Verses 35 and 36 state that this model of unconditional love comes from God. God was merciful and kind to those who were not thankful and could not give that love back. Matthew's gospel speaks of God providing rain both for those who are righteous and those who are unrighteous. This passage's summary of Christ's message was not something new and original—it was a message of love already well used by the one true God.