

session 1 study guide

God's unconditional love

message

God's unconditional love. It seems like such a simple concept, yet it is one of the hardest to understand. A love that is not based on who we are, where we have come from, or what we have done in our past. A love that stays constant even when we don't want it, don't deserve it, or don't even know about it. It doesn't waiver. It doesn't change. It doesn't end. Even when we are at our worst, God's love remains true.

Each one of us is sinful, broken and undeserving, and yet God gives us His love without conditions and without limits. What does it really mean to love like that? Why us? How should we respond?

Read the following verses from Luke 15:11-32. In this passage, Jesus is speaking in parables to a crowd that included people from all walks of life—from the rule-abiding Pharisees and teachers of the law to tax collectors and social outcasts. He often used parables or short stories to help His listeners better understand a key point by using situations or circumstances the audience would be familiar with.

As you read the following passage, keep these questions in mind: (1) Who might the different characters in the parable represent? (2) What point is Jesus trying to illustrate in the passage?

Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them.

"Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself

out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

“When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.’ So he got up and went to his father.

“But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

“The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

“But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.

“Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’

“The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’

“‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found’ ” (Luke 15:11-32).

dig

1. What might have motivated the younger brother to demand his half of the estate and then skip town?

2. What are the consequences of the younger brother's actions—for himself and his family?

3. Have you ever felt a desire to just pick up and leave? How would this decision affect your life? How would it affect the lives of your friends and family?

4. Try to put yourself in the father's shoes. He probably wasn't thrilled to be giving his son half of his estate to squander. So why did he give the son what he asked for? How do you see this as a demonstration of the father's love for his son?

5. What would have happened if the father had said no to his youngest son?

6. When the younger son ran away, he went to work on a pig farm (see vv. 15-16). The Israelites, like the family in the story, followed Old Testament Law and did not eat pork (pigs are listed in the Law as an unclean animal). Knowing this, what is the significance of the younger son taking this type of job?

7. Why was the older brother upset at the party the father threw for the younger son's return? Was the older brother justified?

8. Who do the characters in the story represent?

9. This parable is the third in a series of parables that Jesus told that focused on the depth of God's love for us. Read Luke 15:7,10 and 31. How does God's unconditional love for us lead Him to respond to the homecoming of a lost sinner?

apply

WANTED: unconditional love

1. What does unconditional love look like? Imagine you are writing a personal ad to find a friend who loves you unconditionally. What things would you expect? What would someone have to put up with in your life if they loved you unconditionally?

WANTED: Friend to provide unconditional love. Must be willing to put up with my _____ and my _____.
Must not get upset when I _____ or _____ . You must love me even though I often _____ and sometimes _____.
Commitment-phobes need not apply.

2. Do you have people like this in your life? Who?

Christ's sacrifice

Try as we may, we are human and therefore not capable of giving perfect unconditional love. But God is.

He never tires, never gives up, and never turns away. He loves us so much that He sent His Son to die in our place as a sacrifice for our sins. Romans 5:8 says, "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

While we were *still sinners*.

God didn't wait until we were obedient and good and pleasing to Him. It was when we were at our worst that He gave us His best.

1. Imagine a close friend or family member. What would you be willing to do for that person? Give up your time? Give up your money? Sacrifice your priorities in order to benefit him or her? Write about someone for whom you would do anything. What makes you so willing to give up everything for that person? What makes him or her worth it?

2. Now think of someone you don't get along with very well. What would you be willing to do for that person? Loan them \$5 for lunch? Let them stay in your home? Donate a kidney to save his or her life? Write about a time you had to do something for someone you didn't really like. How did it make you feel?

why us?

It's easy to do something nice for someone who is nice to you and to be generous to those who give to you. But to show love—unconditional love—to someone who at times distrusts you, doesn't listen to you, and maybe even hates you—well, that's not so easy. But that's what God does for us.

So why does God do this for us? We mess up. We disobey. We ignore God and put Him on the back burner. Why would He love us without exception when we are so undeserving? Why?

He made us. “For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb” (Psalm 139:13).

We are His. “Know that the LORD is God. It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture” (Psalm 100:3).

He chose to love us. “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit” (John 15:16).

going it alone

1. Not only does God love you unconditionally, but He also has a design for your life. Read Jeremiah 29:11. What plans does God have for you?

Unfortunately, in spite of the unending love and guidance of the God of the Universe, many people believe that *they* can do it better and that *they* know what’s best for their lives.

2. What causes people’s desire to go it alone and just do things their own way?

3. In what areas of your own life have you strayed from your heavenly Father in order to do your own thing?

4. Who do you want to be in control of your life? Think about the benefits of each.

Benefits of God in Control

Benefits of Me in Control

reflect

Once you have accepted Christ into your heart, no matter what you do or don't do, God loves you! The love you receive from family or friends can change. God's love for you always remains the same because God doesn't change. While we may understand this love in our heads, it may be more difficult to truly feel. Take a moment to consider the full meaning of a God who loves you without conditions.

1. Why is it often difficult to receive unconditional love from God or even from others?

2. According to the following verses, what should your response be to God's unconditional love?

John 13:34: _____

1 John 4:11: _____

Psalm 95:6-7: _____

Psalm 66:20: _____

3. How would the Christian faith be different if God's love *was* conditional and based on what you did?

4. How do you think your life would be different if you trusted God completely and let Him lead every aspect of your life?

5. Oftentimes, it is hard to understand God's plan at the moment because we cannot see the big picture. Our site is limited; God's view is infinite. Describe a time when it was only after the fact that you realized the perfect nature of God's plan.

meditation



Neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation,
will be able to separate us from the love of God
that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

ROMANS 8:39