

CURRICULUM SERIES

FIVE WEEKS

Letters to the Church



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UNDERSTAND IT

This five-week curriculum introduces students to five of the Pauline Epistles. Each lesson focuses on a different core message Paul wrote and applies it to our lives today. This curriculum was originally designed with middle school students in mind and can be scaled to work for small, medium, and large youth groups.

THE CENTRAL TRUTH OF EACH WEEK

WEEK 1: CORINTHIANS-LOVE IS ESSENTIAL

With 1 Corinthians 13 as a guide, students will look at how love should be an essential part of everything we do.

WEEK 2: GALATIANS-FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT

Followers of Jesus show fruit of the Spirit. Students will discuss what fruit of the Spirit they struggle with and how they can help grow that fruit.

WEEK 3: PHILIPPIANS-NO REASON TO BRAG

We have no reason to brag about ourselves. Students will talk about the image of Jesus and how we can represent him more rather than allowing our own accomplishments and failures to define us.

WEEK 4: COLOSSIANS-ENCOURAGEMENT

Paul used letters as a source of encouragement to the church, and we can do the same. Students will write letters to persecuted Christians and send them to Open Doors USA to be distributed to the church around the world.

WEEK 5: THESSALONIANS-JOY, PRAYER, AND THANKSGIVING IN TOUGH TIMES

When we're faced with tough times, we can have joy, pray, and give thanks. Students will discuss how they can apply this to their lives.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

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Corinthians

UNDERSTAND IT

THIS WEEK'S CENTRAL TRUTH

Love is essential in everything we do as followers of God.

KEY VERSES

1 Corinthians 13

PREP

Over the next five weeks, we'll talk about five of the Pauline Epistles—letters to the early church written by Paul. Paul was the first missionary to bring the gospel to non-Jewish people, which was a huge deal. Because he was starting from scratch in areas with long histories of pagan rituals, he had to work really hard to get them to understand what it meant to be a follower of God. He'd go to an area, begin a church and seed a few leaders, and then move on. He'd follow up with churches by writing them letters to encourage them, to correct them, and to teach them new things.

This week's focus is the "love" chapter of 1 Corinthians—one of the most popular passages in the Bible. We'll use this chapter to talk about what it means to love a significant other or even our friends—but the passage was written in the context of how the early church was doing really great things but failing to love one another. The church in Corinth let differences define their community rather than uniting through love.

How can we be a church that does things from a place of love? Why is it bad if we're doing good things but not doing them in love?

Note: Be prepared to share a story from your own life to help connect Point #2.

INTRODUCE IT

ACTIVITY: THE MISSING HEART

SUPPLIES

A deck of playing cards

INSTRUCTIONS

Before your group meets, separate the playing cards into piles according to their numbers or face cards (1-10, Jacks, Queens, Kings, and Aces). Each number or face card should be in individual piles, with all four suits in each pile.

The size of your group will determine how many piles you use. For the purposes of these instructions, we'll assume you have nine students. Feel free to adjust this number in any way you need.

With nine students, pick three piles of cards.

From each pile, pull the heart cards out and hide them somewhere around your youth space.

Randomly assign the remaining cards to your students. Have them find the other students who have matching number or face cards. If many of your students are new or haven't spent time with each other before, this could be a great time to do some get-to-know-you questions.

Tell the students that their missing hearts are hidden somewhere around the youth space. Students have to work together to find the missing heart from their piles. Begin the search.

After all the hearts have been found, collect the cards and gather together.

ASK

- *What does a heart symbolize?*
- *How would you describe real love?*
- *How important is love?*

SAY SOMETHING LIKE . . .

For the next five weeks, we're going to read some of Paul's letters to the early church. Today we're going to take a deeper look at how Paul understood the value of love.

But first, if you've never heard about Paul before, here's a little background:

Paul was the first missionary to bring the good news of Jesus to people who were not Jewish—this was a huge deal, because all Jewish people had a basic understanding of what it meant to follow God. But bringing the news of Jesus to people who didn't know anything about the Messiah meant that these new believers were starting from scratch. Paul would come to new cities, teach them about God, and then leave them after a little while. In order to keep up with those churches, he'd write them letters. Those letters would encourage them, teach them new things about God, and also let them know where they were messing up.

STUDY IT

SAY SOMETHING LIKE . . .

Today we're reading a letter to the church in Corinth, so we'll talk a little about the city first.

Paul came to Corinth and stayed there for 18 months, building the church there. He moved on and traveled to a few other cities. While he was in the city of Ephesus, he heard stories of divisions happening in Corinth. You see, Corinth was the home to many different types of people, and those people were beginning to argue.

If you read 1 and 2 Corinthians, you'll see that Paul talked to them about what it means to be a united church.

Part of being united despite our differences is loving one another. Jesus taught us to love our neighbors and even our enemies, so Paul reminded the Corinthians of that.

READ

If I could speak all the languages of earth and of angels, but didn't love others, I would only be a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I had the gift of prophecy, and if I understood all of God's secret plans and possessed all knowledge, and if I had such faith that I could move mountains, but didn't love others, I would be nothing. If I gave everything I have to the poor and even sacrificed my body, I could boast about it; but if I didn't love others, I would have gained nothing.

Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged. It does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth

wins out. Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance.

Prophecy and speaking in unknown languages and special knowledge will become useless. But love will last forever! Now our knowledge is partial and incomplete, and even the gift of prophecy reveals only part of the whole picture! But when the time of perfection comes, these partial things will become useless.

When I was a child, I spoke and thought and reasoned as a child. But when I grew up, I put away childish things. Now we see things imperfectly, like puzzling reflections in a mirror, but then we will see everything with perfect clarity. All that I know now is partial and incomplete, but then I will know everything completely, just as God now knows me completely.

Three things will last forever—faith, hope, and love—and the greatest of these is love. (1 Corinthians 13 NLT)

ASK

- Can you name for me some of the things Paul wrote that describe what love is and isn't?
- We just named a bunch of things. In one or two words, explain what love is.

SAY SOMETHING LIKE . . .

Point 1: Love is defined by selflessness.

This passage seems to be saying that love is selfless. What that means is that love is something you do for the other person—not for yourself.

Earlier I mentioned that Corinth was a very diverse place—the people who lived there came from a lot of different backgrounds. Sometimes differences make it harder to understand how to care for one another. For example, if I come from a quiet family and you come from a loud family, you might try to care for me by jumping on me and giving me a hug—but that could really freak me out.

Paul wanted the church in Corinth to embrace the fact that the people there were so different, so he reminded them that love means you look at what the other person wants or needs in order to care for them.

SAY SOMETHING LIKE . . .

Point 2: The church in Corinth was doing good things—just out of the wrong place.

The church in Corinth was doing a lot of things they were supposed to do—feeding the hungry, helping the poor, healing people, teaching about God, fighting injustice, and more.

ASK

If you do all of the right things but you don't do them with love, are you really doing the right things?

DO THIS

Tell a story about a time you did something “right” but without love. Talk about how it ended up being the wrong thing to do.

SAY SOMETHING LIKE . . .

Point 3: Being a follower of Jesus means that everything we do is out of selfless love.

We all know the difference between right and wrong—but when we do the right things with the wrong intentions, it's not right anymore. Love is an important part of what it means to live out our faith.

Paul says in the last verse, “Three things will last forever—faith, hope, and love—and the greatest of these is love.”

What this means is that probably all of us believe in God and have hope through Jesus. But if you don't love others, then you're kind of missing the point of what it means to follow Jesus.

Being a follower of Jesus means that everything we do should be done with love—that even though we may be very different from one another, we meet each other halfway to care for one another.

CONNECT IT

Divide your students up into small groups for the following discussion questions.

SAY SOMETHING LIKE . . .

Today we talked about love in Corinthians . . .

ASK

- *In your own words, what is love?*
- *Have you ever done something good for someone, but you didn't really care? Why is it important that love is a part of our actions?*
- *Who is someone you know that's a good example of the love found in 1 Corinthians 13? How is that person a good example?*
- *What can you do to love others well?*
- *Why do you think love is the most important thing you can do?*

LIVE IT

SAY SOMETHING LIKE . . .

Let's reread a portion of our key verses together before we go. We'll read verses 4-7. I'll start and then ask you to read out loud along with me.

Note: If your students aren't able to have these verses in front of them, you can read this as a call-and-response: read a few words and have them repeat after you.

Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged. It does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance. (1 Corinthians 13:4-7 NLT)

PRAY

God, thank you for the way you love us. It's out of the love you give us that we can turn around and love the world around us. Help us remember to keep love at the center of everything we do, because without it, even our best gifts fall short and could never have the impact you intend for them. Amen.