



Bible Study

LET'S MAKE OUR CHURCH A CARING COMMUNITY!

“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” John 13:35

LEADER'S GUIDE

Note to Teacher: This Bible class is intended to lay the foundation for “compassion ministry.” It’s important for the teacher to understand this concept. All members are Christ’s witnesses, but the church also has an outreach ministry, which is intentional, uses the gifts of members, and is part of the structure of the congregation’s ministry. All members are Christ’s disciples, but the church also has discipleship ministries (especially Bible classes). So, too, all members of a Christian congregation should love one another. But the church will organize compassion ministries, based on the gifts (and needs) of the members, the needs of the community, and the opportunities it offers to serve people outside the congregation and create occasions to share the gospel. The early part of this study will focus on the need for love, and the latter part (which could be a second lesson to allow more time for helpful conversation) will prepare the congregation to discuss ways to meet the needs (including compassion for physical, social, and emotional needs) of members of the church and the community.

Purpose of this Bible Class lesson:

To lead all participants

1. To see more clearly and appreciate more fully what it means to be loved by God in Christ
2. To desire more eagerly to love others—fellow members and visitors to our congregation—in the way that they are loved by God.
3. To believe that this love, along with spiritual nurture and outreach, is Christ's vision for his Church

Read Acts 2:42-47, and describe the relationship characteristics of the early Jerusalem church:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Characteristics of

Relationship to the Word – Devoted to apostles' teaching

Relationship to the World – Gave to those in need, enjoying the favor of all the people, people were being saved.

Relationship to each other – Devoted to fellowship, eating, praying and praising together

God cares for us with an *agape* love

The Greek words for love:

1. **Storge** – the natural **family affection** parents have for children (occurs as a negative in Romans 1:31; 2 Timothy 3:1-3)
2. **Philia** – based on **shared or common**, interests, insights or tastes (James 4:4)
3. **Eros** – characterized by love of **beauty** or **the physical**, love that desires to **possess**. Not found in the New Testament; not contrary to the Bible—in other Greek writings it can also be a love of what is good, or even love for the gods.
4. **Agape** – God's kind of love! Rarely used before the New Testament, but almost the only word used for love in the New Testament. God's **agape** is aroused not by what we are, but by **who God is**; not by the fact that we are lovable, but by the fact that God is **LOVE** (1 John 4:8)

Look at the passages below, where agape is translated “love.” What are the distinguishing marks of the *agape* of God?

1 John 4:10 – *This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins*

Distinguishing mark: God's love and sacrifice for us

John 3:16 – *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*

Distinguishing mark: gave his son to give us eternal life

Romans 5:6-8 – *You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

Distinguishing mark: Christ died for God's enemies

Ephesians 2:1-5,8-9 – *As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. ... For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast.*

Distinguishing mark: Instead of wrath, God made sinners alive with Christ and gave them faith

Summary: God's love, *agape*, as revealed in the Scriptures is unlike any other love. It does not look for something of worth, some kind of attractiveness, on the part of the potential recipient of His love. It does not contemplate what kind of return it might get from a person to determine whether or not it is worthwhile to give him His love. God's love is a giving love through and through. The cross of Jesus is the outstanding demonstration of the love of God.

God's *agape* love transforms us into caring children of God

Look at the passages below. Summarize what they tell us about the impact of God's *agape* for us:

1 John 4:7,8,19 – *Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. ... We love because he first loved us.*

Luke 7:47 – *Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little.*

Summary: God's *agape* gives birth to **our love**_____

1 John 3:14 – *We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love each other. Anyone who does not love remains in death.*

1 John 3:10 – *This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not God's child, nor is anyone who does not love their brother and sister.*

John 13:35 – *By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.*

Summary: *Agape* is **evidence** of our new birth.

1 John 4:21 – *And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.*

John 13:34 – *A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.*

Romans 13:8-9 – *Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law. The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery," "You shall not murder," "You shall not steal," "You shall not covet," and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself."*

Summary: *Agape* for others is **the Lord's command**_____

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

Romans 5:5 – *And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.*

Summary: *Agape* is the **fruit**_____ of the Holy Spirit's work.

1 Corinthians 13:1-3 – *If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.*

Summary: Agape is essential to Christian life.

We put flesh on *agape* by what we do and say

Our actions reveal *agape*.

James 2:15-16 – *Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it?*

1 John 3:16-18 – *This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.*

Our words reveal *agape*.

Hebrews 10:24-25 – *And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.*

Proverbs 12:25 – *Anxiety weighs down the heart, but a kind word cheers it up.*

Proverbs 16:24 – *Gracious words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones.*

Discussion about increasing the *agape* level in our church through Special Ministries

Respond to these common objections to ministry to people with a disability:

“It doesn’t pay to spend so much time on one or two members.” **If the church were a business, this might make sense. The church, however is the body of Christ, and when one suffers, the rest of the church suffers, too. We speak of our “church family” and we demonstrate this when we carry the burdens of our family members. Christians would not argue, “It’s too much expense to get Grandma a wheelchair,” or “If we offer a special education for our daughter, it won’t be fair to the rest of the family.”** *Agape* love makes the effort to help, and what helps one member will probably help many others, too.

“The family should take care of that.” The family is already bearing the burden daily and family members need to be able to focus at church and Bible class to meet their heavy spiritual needs. Family members are not always equipped to meet the special needs of their loved one. It is a great encouragement to the family when *agape* love gets involved to encourage and help.

“The pastor already has too much to do.” Unless the pastor has a gift for this kind of help, this is a great place for other members to carry out their vocations. Contacting Special Ministries does not have to be the pastor’s responsibility; a member who has a gift for communication can help the church learn how to solve challenges that the church may face by reaching out to Special Ministries.

“We don’t know what to do.” Special Ministries has people who have experience and understanding in addressing problems. Your fellow believers can help you turn a problem into a blessing, and even an outreach opportunity.

Look at the list of people served by Special Ministries resources.

This list is a conversation starter. If this is being covered as a single lesson, you won’t cover all the Special Ministries, just the ones that participants (or you the leader) refer to, when answering the question.

Which ones might your church need to increase? This is an opportunity to look at situations in your congregation that are going unaddressed or that have frustrated previous solutions. Elders or other boards of nurture might take notes on the conversations generated.

Which ones might be a good opportunity for your church to use for outreach? If you serve members with a specific disability, is it a common problem in your community? How can you make connections, to serve those people? (Don’t forget to ask Special Ministries for help.) Evangelism team members might take notes on the conversations generated.

Which ones might you personally be drawn to show some *agape*? Pay attention to where members’ hearts are. Not everyone will be gifted to serve with the Word, but ministry requires people in many roles, even a ride to the dentist or someone downloading resources from the Internet or someone to sit with in church. This is a good point in the study to encourage members to pray about this lesson and find a way to show love personally.

Mission for the Visually Impaired (Blind, difficulty reading normal size print) wels.net/mvi

It is common for some older members to need larger print materials. With current technology it takes just moments to produce worship materials in a larger font. MVI offers Braille and audio resources, too. Some visually impaired young people are using the camera function on their tablets to create large print versions of hymns, etc. Many communities have organizations for the blind, and if your church makes the effort to provide special resources, you might want to let these organizations know – and tell them if members are willing to provide transportation.

Mission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing wels.net/mdhh

Up to a third of people over 60 have significant hearing loss, but many are in denial. The congregation can help those without hearing aids by providing good acoustics and appropriate (not amateur) amplification technology, including small pocket assistive listening devices such as the Williams Sound System. People with hearing aids will be helped by the church’s use of a “hearing loop.” Use of such technology should be promoted, including on the website for visitors. Special Ministries can help congregations obtain sign language interpreters when a deaf person will be present for a worship service. This can be especially appreciated by the community for weddings and funerals. There are organizations for the deaf, and if your church makes the effort to provide an interpreter, you should let such organizations know.

Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities Ministries wels.net/iddm

It's usually family members in the congregation who must advocate to church leaders for their children or siblings with autism, Downs syndrome or other developmental disabilities. Sadly, despite our emphasis on the need to attend worship and grow spiritually, families with these needs are sometimes met with negative responses to their requests for spiritual help for their loved ones. Leaders may not know how to help when we first confront this need, but we should commend members who seek help in supplying worship and Bible study opportunities for their family with developmental challenges. We can ask the family, "How can we help?" Sometimes group homes are near the church and a very rewarding outreach opportunity is possible. If we have a few members with special needs, why not invite the community to our classes or "Worship at the Cross services?"

Mental Health Needs (addictions, support groups, survivor abuse) wels.net/mental-health

Elders are sometimes aware of members who struggle with addiction, but often the congregation is too small to have its own group or there's an embarrassment factor about having your problem be known at your church. An alternative is to advertise to all the WELS churches in the area. Maybe have a meeting at a neutral location. Church leaders often are unqualified to lead an addictions support group, if they have not experienced the struggle. Special Ministries can help groom a leader for addictions ministry. People in recovery sometimes are looking for multiple groups to attend, so a church should make the existence of the group known in the community.

Health and Wellness (aging, nursing home, active seniors, parish nurses, chaplain training) wels.net/health-and-wellness

Encourage members to talk about the congregation's shut in ministry and solicit insight into the needs that might not be met by pastoral visits alone. Most church leaders think of geriatric care facilities (nursing homes) as places to have devotions with members. Working with the activities directors at care facilities, how we might serve the residents and even their families in the community? Focusing on this possibility for compassion ministry, how might compassion ministry in nursing homes expand opportunities to reach out with the gospel?

Prison ministry Bible study at a local jail wels.net/prison

Church members do occasionally wind up in jail locally or prison (usually in another community). WELS Prison Ministry and the pastor (or nearby pastor) can focus on spiritual needs – compassion ministry may include reaching out to support and encourage the family and preventing shame from disrupting the connection to the church family. Letter writing and sending cards of encouragement can be powerful. Where a local jail chaplain is open to the starting of a jail ministry, this serves the local community because the inmates and their families are local people. WELS supplies guidelines for ministry to sexual offenders (who might not be allowed to attend a public worship service).

Ministry to members away in military service wels.net/military

Ask if there are veterans in the Bible class, ask them what they appreciated when they were in the military. Most WELS members are unaware of how WELS serves WELS members when they are in the military: 1) referrals lead to contact between the National Civilian Chaplain who provides weekly military devotions, connects them with a WELS military contact pastor nearest their stateside location, counsels those who are deployed if they reach out to him; 2) if stationed in Europe, WELS European Civilian Chaplain serves them. If there is a military installation near the

congregation, discussion of how best to serve the WELS members there can lead to outreach to other military families with needs.

Care of called workers wels.net/cccw

The Special Ministries program CCCW (“Triple C W”) is a structure for a small group of caring leaders to express the church’s love for the Lord’s servants among them. Compassion ministry in this case only leads to outreach in the sense that when called workers and their families are loved and encouraged, they can whole-heartedly recommend their church family to nonmembers.

You can find more information at: wels.net/special-ministries/

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