

6-SESSION
BIBLE STUDY

BIBLE
STUDIES
FOR LIFE

Session 6: Leaders's Guide

DISTINCT

LIVING ABOVE THE NORM



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SESSION 6

DISTINCT IN MY LOVE

The Point: Love everyone unconditionally.

The Passage: Matthew 5:43-48

The Setting: In Jesus' day, the Jewish people in general and the religious leadership in particular were quite clear on who were their neighbors and who were their enemies, and how they should treat each. While the admonition to "love your neighbor" appears in the Old Testament, the conclusion "and hate your enemy" is a mere extrapolation, and not God's design. This session passage finds Jesus setting the record straight that His followers are to love both neighbor and enemy.

QUESTION #1

When is it appropriate to use the word "love" ?

Optional activity: Supplement Question 1 by creating a chart with three categories: "Appropriate," "Maybe," and "Not Appropriate." Encourage group members to identify different times when we use the word love for something and then to work as a group to assign each one to a category. For example, your group may decide that using love in the context of marriage goes in the "Appropriate" category, while using love to describe tacos goes in the "Not Appropriate" category. Again, the goal here is to create a fun debate around our use of the word love in today's world.

Note: If you don't have a whiteboard or chalkboard to create the categories, consider taping a large piece of paper to the wall.

Video Summary: Think about all the ways we use the word love during a given week. We use the same term to describe our feelings about pizza as we do to describe our relationship with our mothers. We use the word love to describe anything that makes us feel good at a given moment. But Jesus is calling us to something more. As His followers, we are called to love in the way He does. That standard of love is unconditional and knows no limits. It's distinct. But unless we believe and trust the love that Jesus has for us, we'll never be able to truly love others.

WATCH THE DVD SEGMENT FOR SESSION 6. THEN USE THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS AND DISCUSSION POINTS TO TRANSITION INTO THE STUDY.

- When have you consistently prayed for someone who was difficult to love and experienced a change of heart as a result?
- In what ways does your belief and trust in the love Jesus has for you better equip you to truly love others?

THE POINT

Love everyone unconditionally.

THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

In America today, we “love” everything. Think about all the ways you use that four-letter word during a given week. We love burgers, children, puppies, ice cream, college football, spring days, vacations, action movies, romantic movies, and gazillions of other things.

Isn't it amazing that, with the wealth of words we have at our disposal in the English language, we use the same term to describe our feelings about a hot dog as we do to describe our relationship with our mothers? Surely we can't feel the same way about a cat video on the Internet as we do about our own children.

Most of the time, we use the word “love” to describe anything that makes us feel good at a given moment. With that definition, it's no wonder we fall out of love with people at about the same rate we fall out of love with certain kinds of food.

Jesus calls us to something more. As His followers, we are called to love in the way He does. That standard of love is unconditional and knows no limits. Now that's distinct!

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

Matthew 5:48-48

⁴³ “You have heard that it was said, Love your neighbor and hate your enemy. ⁴⁴ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ so that you may be

sons of your Father in heaven. For He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. ⁴⁶For if you love those who love you, what reward will you have? Don't even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing out of the ordinary? Don't even the Gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸ Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

Perfect (v. 38)— The term can mean flawless. It can also have the sense of mature, complete, or fully developed in a moral or spiritual sense. In reference to God's people, "mature" or "complete" is the more likely meaning.

Response: What's your initial reaction to these verses?

- What questions do you have about what it means to love unconditionally and without limits?
- What new application do you hope to get from this passage?

Matthew 5:43-45

Most of the world operates by a simple premise: Love those who love you. In this worldview, people only get into relationships for what they can gain from them. Every relationship is self-serving; thus, if a relationship ceases to give you what you want, you simply move onto the next one.

The kingdom of God does not operate that way.

Jesus called us to love those who feel animosity and even hatred toward us. He gave us an example from weather: when the rain falls, the evil receive the benefit in the same way the righteous do. This is God's "common grace." It's "common" because He extends it to everyone. This doesn't mean God approves of everything that happens on the earth. It only means God's love is completely distinct from our love. He extends His love to people not because they love Him, but because it's in His character to do so.

QUESTION #2

What are some practical ways to love those we don't like?

It's good to remind group members that there's no "automatic switch" for becoming more loving toward others. Instead, this question provides an opportunity to work together as a group to map out a plan for developing into people who are better able to show unconditional love to others.

Optional follow-up: How would you define an enemy in your life?

Jesus gave us our marching orders: love and pray. And don't just pray for people who wish you good; also pray for those who wish you evil.

- **Prayer shapes our hearts.** When we pray for someone who is difficult to love, we will find our hearts being bent toward that person. The reason is simple: it's hard to hate someone you are asking God to bless and help.

QUESTION #3

When has prayer changed your attitude and actions toward someone difficult to love?

This question is a bit more personal in nature. It may take group members several moments to decide what they are comfortable sharing. Give them the time they need.

- **Prayer expresses our love.** Prayer is one of the best ways we have to express our love for someone. We are asking the God of the universe to exercise His power on behalf of someone else, for his or her good. That's powerful!

Matthew 5:46-47

If we only love those who love us in return, that's easy. Tax collectors were locals who had gone over to the side of the Romans because of their own greed. They collected taxes for Rome, plus whatever additional money they deemed fit. Needless to say, the tax collectors were despised. But even they loved those who loved them.

Similarly, the Jews looked down on the Gentiles as irreligious people, pagan in both nature and customs. Gentiles didn't have the first idea about who God is, and their actions showed it. But Jesus maintained that even the Gentiles greeted those they called brothers.

Jesus was not validating the contempt that flowed through the community toward the tax collectors and Gentiles. Instead, He was using the people's own self-righteousness and judgment against them. Even the tax collectors and Gentiles loved in the easy way.

Jesus calls His followers to a harder kind of love. He wants us to put ourselves out there, risk rejection and ridicule, and then do it all over again—with no thought of reciprocation.

According to Jesus, the defining mark of His true follower is love. Love is the one element of discipleship that can't be faked. Many people might perform miracles and do all kinds of other religious deeds, but that doesn't mean they will enter the kingdom of heaven (see Matt. 7:22-23). We can become very adept at "playing disciple" by sheer acts of will. But you can't manufacture genuine love.

Jesus said, "By this all people will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35). Let me say it again: love is the greatest defining mark of a Christian. Those who truly love demonstrate they have experienced the love of Jesus Christ and are growing in their understanding of the great love of God in Christ.

QUESTION #4

What do we risk when we embrace Jesus' definition of love?

Encourage group members to consider this question from multiple angles. What do we risk personally? What do we risk from people in our "tribe"? What do we risk from the culture around us?

Optional follow-up: How does Jesus differentiate between easy love and difficult love in this passage?

Matthew 5:48

When we see the word perfect, we tend to think of something flawless. Without error. Pristine. If that's what Jesus meant in verse 48, it becomes an absolutely crushing statement.

Thankfully, that's not the case. Jesus didn't have that kind of perfection in mind. The word He used here wasn't so much about flawlessness, but function.

Imagine you're a young parent preparing to assemble a crib. You open the box and see a dizzying array of diagrams and parts. As you assemble the crib, you notice a set of screws

that require a special tool to tighten them. Fortunately, the manufacturer included a tool that fits just right; the bed finally comes together. That tool was the perfect tool for its function. You might never use it again, but for that moment, and on that particular occasion, it fit just right. Was the tool absolutely perfect, in terms of its flawlessness? Probably not. But to do the job it was designed for, it was good and right. It was perfect.

We need to look at Jesus' call to be perfect in terms of our function. Verse 48 reminds us that we are distinct among God's creation. We were created in His image to relate to Him in a unique way.

To be created in God's image means we were made to display God's character and glory in every part of our lives. We should strive to be the kind of parent God is. And we should love like God does:

- ***God loves those who don't acknowledge Him.***
- ***God is generous to those who don't recognize or reciprocate His generosity.***
- ***God provides for those who are ungrateful.***
- ***And we are to be like Him.***

That's what makes us distinct.

QUESTION #5

What are some opportunities we have to express unconditional love?

Once again, encourage group members to think about opportunities in multiple areas of life—at home, at work, at church, in the community, and so on. Also ask them to consider opportunities to express unconditional love both as individuals and as a group.

BE PERFECT?

Select two of the categories below. How would your life be different if you were able to perfectly display God's character and glory in those categories?

Your relationships

Your finances

Your emotions

Your dreams

How have you been blessed in these categories through your relationship with God?

QUESTION 6: How would you describe your role and function as a follower of God?

Ask group members to revisit the Scripture passage for today's session. This question is designed to help them actively engage the text and then sort out for themselves the connection between what these verses say and the application for how they live their lives as followers of God.

Optional follow-up: As your group closes this study, share one change you plan to make in order to live a life that stands apart from the crowd—a life that is distinct.

LIVE IT OUT

Showing love the way God loves is what makes us truly distinct. Let's look for opportunities to stand apart from the rest of the world.

- **Pray.** Commit to pray every day for one person in your life who is difficult to love. Pray that God would bless that person. Notice how your heart softens toward that person.
- **Thank.** Have you ever been difficult to love? Think of someone who loved you during a time when you were hard to love. Make a call and express your thanks for the way his or her love reminded you of the way God loves all the time.

Think of someone who loved you during a time when you were hard to love. Make a call and express your thanks for the way his or her love reminded you of the way God loves all the time.

- **Sacrifice.** Jesus loves us sacrificially. What is one practical way you can sacrificially love someone else this week?

It's OK to love ice cream. And puppies. And college football. But don't confuse all that love with God's love—the love He calls you to walk in. God loves you. Now go and do likewise.

Challenge: Jesus is calling us to love in the way He does. That standard of love is unconditional and knows no limits. As you live out this kind of love with others, consider journaling about the impact unconditional love is having on your relationships. You may not recognize the significance until you see the proof on paper.

Pray: As the leader, close this final session of Distinct in prayer. Ask the Lord to help each of you love as He loves. Conclude by committing to live lives that stand in sharp contrast to the world. Lives that are distinct.

My thoughts