

# **SPOT THE DIFFERENCE**

*A group study course for Lent*

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# Introduction

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‘You’re a Christian, are you?’ said the stranger. ‘So what?’ I’d thought he was interested up till then, eager to find out more, and up to a point perhaps he was, but his comment oozed scepticism, and as we talked further I realised he had good reason. He’d known many Christians over the years, in fact been part of a church himself for a while, but he’d grown disillusioned, the glib talk he’d heard during that time about love, joy and goodness failing to find a corresponding echo in people’s lives. Christians, he argued, have no monopoly on such things, many non-believers indeed putting them to shame. And, of course, he was right. We show the same faults and weaknesses as anyone else, there being precious little about our lives to distinguish them from those around us. God forbid that anyone might judge Christ by the yardstick of our discipleship, but that, unfortunately, is precisely what many *will* do. Of course, we can argue in mitigation that the Church is as much for sinners as saints, but that doesn’t mean our flawed discipleship doesn’t matter. Our daily aim should be to grow more like Jesus, striving with God’s help to serve him better.

Traditionally, Lent is a time of examination directed towards that end; a time for recognising where our commitment is lacking and seeking to deepen our faith. The challenge is succinctly put in those stark words of my interrogator: ‘So what?’ What difference does being a Christian make to your life and what difference *should* it make? Are you simply going through the motions or does your discipleship actually show? In this book we consider five ways in which commitment should manifest itself: in a quality of love, a spontaneity of witness, a disposition of joy, a generosity of spirit and a vibrant inner faith. Of course there are other aspects we could focus on – peace, truth and hope, for example – but if these five alone were truly to characterise our life, what an

impact we would make. Focus upon such things, seeking with God's help to make them more fully a part of who and what you are, and, make no mistake, people will spot the difference!

NICK FAWCETT

# Session 1

## A love that shows

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### Theme

The 'new commandment' of Jesus was that we should love one another, but how far does love actually distinguish our lives as Christians?

### Opening prayer

O God of love, we ask you to give us love:  
love in our thinking,  
love in our speaking,  
love in our doing,  
and love in the hidden places of our souls;  
love of those with whom we find it hard to bear,  
and love of those who find it hard to bear with us;  
love of those with whom we work,  
and love of those with whom we take our ease;  
so that at length we may be worthy to dwell with you,  
who are eternal love.

Amen.

*William Temple (1881–1944)*

### Setting the scene

Let love be the controlling force in your life, just as Christ loved us, giving himself up as a fragrant offering and sacrifice pleasing to God. (Ephesians 5:2)

The commandments ‘You shall not commit adultery, shall not murder; shall not steal, shall not yearn for what belongs to someone else’ – these and indeed all others – are encapsulated in a single command: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself. If you love others, it stands to reason you will not wrong them; to love, in other words, is to obey the Law.’ (Romans 13:9, 10)

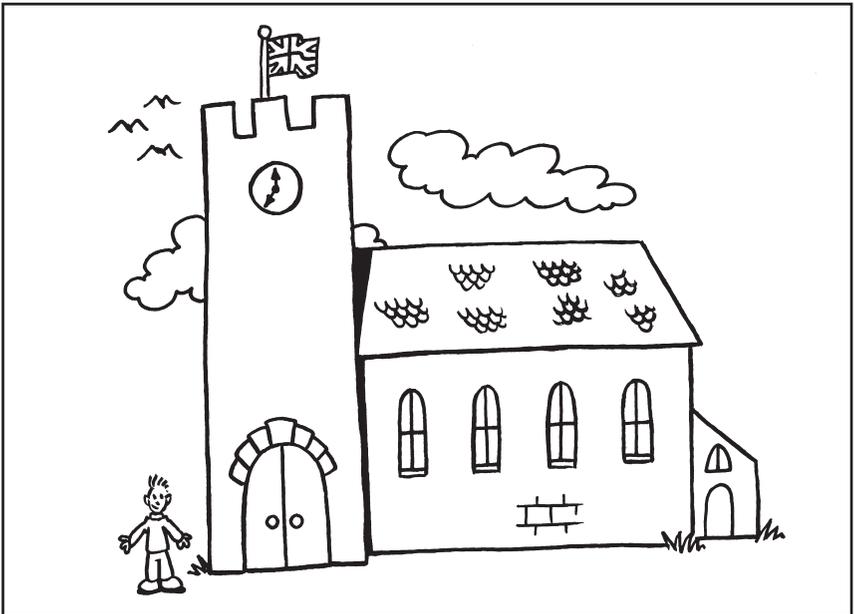
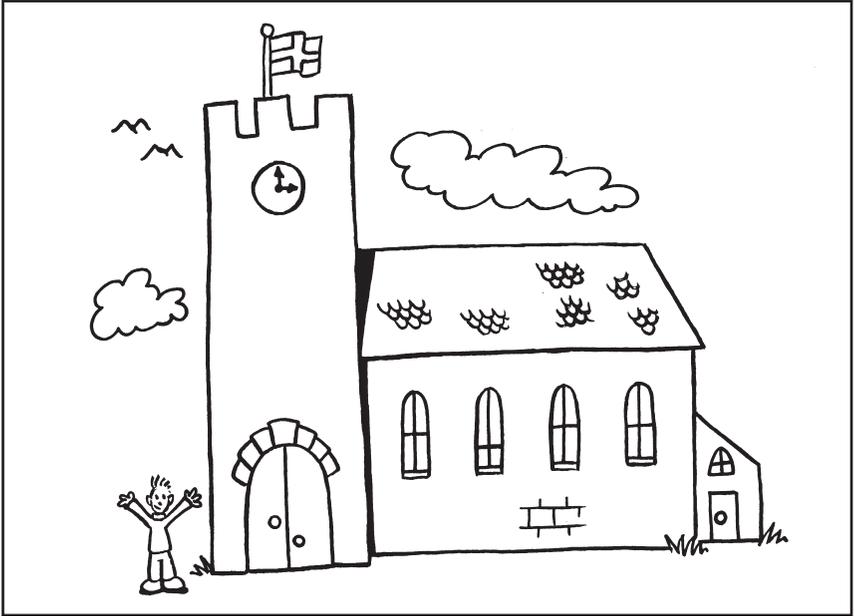
## **Activity**

Take a look at the pictures on the opposite page. Can you spot eleven differences between them? (The answers can be found in the Appendix.)

Talk together afterwards about what sort of differences there should be in the life of a Christian, and how far these ought to show.

## **Introduction**

It’s never easy to summarise something important in a few words, but with Christianity we’re invited to do just that, and by none other than Jesus himself. For him all the commandments and everything God requires of us boil down to one thing: love. So, unsurprisingly, the New Testament writers have much to say on this theme, time and again emphasising the importance of love in any authentic discipleship; this, more than any other, is the central message of the gospel and the defining mark of God’s people. Quite simply, as John reminds us, if we do not love then we do not know God – the two belong together. But do we love in a way that is any different to those around us? If asked to describe how your faith comes across to them, would anyone you know include love in their answer? The following passages bring home just how important a question that is.



## Exploring the Scriptures

*John 13:34, 35; 15:12*

I give you now a new commandment: that you love one another. You must love each other just as I have loved you. If you have such love, people everywhere will recognise you as my disciples. This, then, is my commandment – that you love one another as I have loved you.

*1 John 2:9, 10; 4:7-12, 20, 21*

If we claim to be in the light but hate others, we are, in fact, even now in the darkness, but if we love others, then we live in the light, and nothing in us will lead others to sin. Dear friends, let us love one another, because love comes from God; all those who love are born of God and know God. Whoever does not love knows nothing of God, for God is love. God demonstrated his love like this – he sent his only Son into the world in order that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins. Dear friends, given that God has loved us like this, shouldn't we love one another similarly in turn? Although no one has actually ever seen God, if we love one another, then he is one with us and his love is perfected in us. We cannot love him, whom we have never seen, unless we love others, whom we have seen. Christ's command to us is this: those who love God must also love others.

## Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ,  
fill us, we pray, with your light  
that we may reflect your wondrous glory.  
So fill us with your love  
that we may count nothing too small to do for you,

nothing too much to give,  
and nothing too hard to bear.  
Amen.

*St Ignatius Loyola (1491–1556)*

## **Enlarging the picture**

To some, the Christian's talk of love is just wishy-washy idealism, a way of glossing over the need for moral decision-making, avoiding taking a stand on controversial issues. Loving one another, they say, is all very well, but what does it involve in practice? We need guidelines, rules, boundaries – clearly marked lines that spell out how love ought to show itself in specific situations.

Is that right? I can understand the concern, for love undeniably leads different people to act in different ways, what seems right to one seeming wrong to another. But is that not precisely the point of Jesus' teaching? There are no one-size-fits-all regulations, love indeed having to decide afresh in each and every circumstance. It may seem woolly, but in fact it's the most demanding way of all, for it must meet people where they are rather than take refuge in moral certainties.

To illustrate what that means, I want to paint for you four simple scenarios, each leading into points for discussion concerning issues that are anything but simple.

### *Scenario 1*

Jack walked cheerfully through the school gates, then froze in dismay as he spotted a group of youths loitering ahead. He'd come to know them all too well across the years, their repeated bullying having made his life a misery and cast a shadow over what should have been carefree times. Hurriedly he pressed himself against the wall and tried to sidle back the way he'd come, hoping

he hadn't been noticed, but it was no good – the gang were advancing menacingly towards him, grinning as they approached.

Should he run? He wanted to, but what was the point? They'd catch him soon enough and punish him all the more for their exertions. So he just stood there, waiting for the fist in the stomach, the kick on the shin, the slap across the face, determined if nothing else to keep the tears from his eyes during his ritual humiliation.

They were upon him now, yet no fist came – no sickening thud and writhing on the floor in agony . . . nothing! Dimly he was aware of the ringleader speaking, and suddenly it dawned on Jack that the words were not of insult but apology and the outstretched hand a gesture of friendship rather than aggression. The most feared boy in the school – his name for so long a byword for brutality and aggression – was speaking of faith, remorse, and new beginnings; he who had shown no mercy now seeking forgiveness. Could it be true? Surely not! But Jack wasn't going to argue the toss. Hesitantly he shook the proffered hand, still expecting some sting in the tail, and when none came he raced off – baffled, bewildered, but, above all, relieved.

### *Discussion points*

- Does that story seem a little far-fetched? You might think so, but you'd be wrong, for *I* was the one being bullied and the ringleader in question was literally transformed overnight, going on to become a full-time Christian evangelist! Can you think of other people who have changed as dramatically from an attitude of hate to love? Have you personally known anyone transformed in this way? Are there people you've given up on or do you still believe they can change?
- Few of us will experience such a radical transformation from hate to love, simply because we didn't actually hate in the first place, but is love more a part of your life now than it was before you became a Christian? Jesus spoke of loving one's enemy. Could you have done that in Jack's shoes?

- Jesus speaks of people knowing we're his disciples by our love. Is that realistic? Do you think people see a distinctive quality of love in your life? Do you think they see *any* love in your life?

### *Scenario 2*

Private Taylor dived down into the crater as a shell exploded nearby, accompanied by yet another burst of machinegun fire. He couldn't take much more of this – hour upon hour grovelling in the mud waiting for the bullet or shard of shrapnel that would put an end to his war, maybe even his life, as it had done for so many of his colleagues. He'd seen hundreds cut down beside him, their bodies mangled beyond recognition, and the sights and sounds of battle, too dreadful for words, haunted his thoughts day and night. How he hated this place, and, most of all, how he hated the enemy who made it necessary for him to be there. If he could only get his hands on them, he'd make them pay.

A sudden moaning broke into his thoughts – animal-like, stomach-churning – the sound of someone in agony, piteously appealing for help. He turned reluctantly, fearful of what he might see . . . then gasped, in relief and shock. It wasn't one of his comrades, but a German, his face a welter of blood, an arm almost severed, and a tangle of shattered bones protruding from a gaping wound in his chest.

Suddenly all hatred was gone, replaced simply by compassion for a fellow human being in need. He took his hip flask of rum and put it to the lips of the stricken soldier, who drank urgently, desperate to numb the pain. Blinking back tears from his eyes, Taylor gently cradled the man's head in his arms, cursing now not the enemy but this foul and futile war. There was nothing he could do, nothing *anyone* could do, except offer what support he could as the life ebbed slowly away. The wounded man shuddered in a last paroxysm of pain, then looked up with a smile of gratitude before his eyes glazed over and looked out no more.

*Discussion points*

- What things stop you from loving others? Are there situations in which you fail to love as much as you should? Are you willing to enlarge on these?
- What does love in the Christian sense actually mean? What *doesn't* it mean? Does anything set apart the love Christians show to that shown by others? Do you think it should?
- Can love conquer hate or is this simply naïve idealism? Would you see the non-violent campaigns of Martin Luther King or Mahatma Gandhi, or the resistance of those like Desmond Tutu, Allan Boesak and Trevor Huddleston to apartheid in South Africa, as examples of love in action? If so, what do you make of the fact that Gandhi was a Hindu? Consider also the subsequent work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. What impact has this had and what might have happened without it?

*Scenario 3*

'It's not fair!' snarled Jason, glaring furiously at his mother.

'It's perfectly fair, dear,' she answered, 'as you well know.'

'It's not,' snapped Jason. 'Why can't I borrow the money if I want to? Gareth's dad allowed *him* to borrow even more.'

'Maybe he did, but that's not the point. For one thing, you can't afford to repay it and you certainly don't want a mountain of debt hanging round your neck. For another, I honestly think you'll be wasting your money and be far better spending it on something else. And anyway, you don't *deserve* it at the moment – not after that scrape you got yourself into, for which, may I remind you, your father and I are still having to pay.'

Jason, however, was having none of it. 'If you really loved me,' he muttered, 'you'd *give* me as much as I need. You just don't care, do you?'

'I *do* care,' sighed his mother, well used to his emotional blackmail, 'and that's precisely why the answer's still no. Giving in would be

the easy option, but eventually it would do none of us any good. I'm not enjoying this, Jason, despite what you think, but it's because I love you so much that I won't change my mind. Hopefully you'll understand one day.'

But Jason wasn't ready to listen any longer. With a snort he got up and stormed out the room, slamming the door behind him.

### *Discussion points*

- Are there times when love involves being cruel to be kind? Can you give examples? Have you experienced this firsthand?
- Do you see love as an easy or hard option? Can it be used as a way of sitting on the fence and avoiding complex moral issues or is the opposite true?
- Have there been times when love has led you to question biblical teaching or established church doctrine?

### *Scenario 4*

The true story of Nicky Cruz will be familiar to many from the powerful 1970 film *The Cross and the Switchblade*. Brought up in Puerto Rico by parents steeped in witchcraft, Nicky was soon no stranger to trouble and when, in 1955, aged 16, he and his brother were sent to live in New York City, he quickly became part of the infamous Mau Maus gang, equally swiftly rising to become their leader. Street-fights, drug-taking, robbery and murder became a way of life for him until David Wilkerson, an itinerate preacher, began crusading in the ghetto, persevering with his mission despite Nicky beating him up and threatening to kill him if he continued. When Wilkerson hired a hall in the area for an evangelistic rally, Cruz decided to make good his threat, but when he arrived at the scene and heard Wilkerson preaching, something came over him, and instead of attacking the preacher he knelt down and prayed, asking forgiveness from both Wilkerson and God. He went on to

train for the ministry, returning to the ghettos to win for Christ many of his old gang, including their new leader. The founder of Nicky Cruz Outreach, devoted to helping troubled young people, and of 'halfway houses' aimed at the rehabilitation of drug addicts, Cruz has preached the gospel across the world.

*Discussion points*

- Can you think of other people who have been shining examples of love? What was it that motivated them?
- Are Christians meant to love everyone? Is this possible in the real world? Is there a danger of sentimentalising, offering pious platitudes? Could you, for example, feel love for a terrorist, murderer or rapist?
- Has the Church/religion been an agency for love or hatred across the years? Does this raise issues that Christianity and we as Christians need to face?

## **Food for thought**

Consider the following proverbs and quotations. What are they saying? Which do you find most helpful? What are their strengths and weaknesses? Do you agree or disagree with the point they're making?

- Love cures people – both the ones who give it and the ones who receive it. (Carl Menninger)
- Give me such love for God and men, as will blot out all hatred and bitterness. (Dietrich Bonhoeffer)
- I have decided to stick with love. Hate is too great a burden to bear. (Martin Luther King)

- People are lonely because they build walls instead of bridges. (J. F. Newton)
- If I love the world as it is, I am already changing it. A first fragment of the world has been changed, and that is my own heart. (Petru Dumitriu)
- Love is the movement, effusion and advancement of the heart toward the good. (St Francis de Sales)
- Have a heart that never hardens, and a temper that never tires, and a touch that never hurts. (Charles Dickens)
- Only love can bring individual beings to their perfect completion as individuals because only love takes possession of them and unites them by what lies deepest within them. (Teilhard de Chardin)
- Where there is no love, pour love in, and you will draw out love. (St John of the Cross)
- To love is to wish the other's highest good. (R. H. Benson)
- I beg you to stamp everything with the seal of love, nothing else will last. (Elizabeth of the Trinity)
- We have just enough religion to make us hate, but not enough to make us love one another. (Jonathan Swift)
- Love seeks one thing only: the good of the one loved. It leaves all the other secondary effects to take care of themselves. Love, therefore, is its own reward. (Thomas Merton)
- Love is all we have, the only way that each can help the other. (Euripides)
- Some day, after mastering the winds, the waves, the tides, and gravity, we shall harness for God the energies of love, and then, for the second time in the history of the world, man will have discovered fire. (Teilhard de Chardin)

## Prayer

You make it sound so simple, Lord,  
summarising the Law and the Prophets,  
the way to life itself,  
in one simple command:  
to love.

But we don't find it simple at all.  
We find it harder than we ever imagined,  
both understanding what love involves,  
and then acting upon it.

When we are faced with complex situations,  
and are unsure what love asks of us,  
afraid we may hurt instead of heal,  
harm instead of help,  
teach us your way,  
**the way of love incarnate.**

When love is demanding,  
calling for sacrifices we would rather not make,  
choices we would prefer to ignore,  
commitment we are reluctant to give,  
a response that goes against the grain,  
teach us your way,  
**the way of love incarnate.**

When we find others hard to love,  
our attitude towards them clouded by hurt, jealousy,  
pride and anger,  
so much that poisons relationships,  
teach us your way,  
**the way of love incarnate.**

When we are indifferent to others,  
so wrapped up in our own world,

our own concerns and interests,  
 that we overlook their needs,  
 teach us your way,  
**the way of love incarnate.**

When our words say one thing but our lives say another,  
 our talk of a special kind of love  
 belied by the mediocrity of our discipleship,  
 the lack of anything even remotely distinctive,  
 teach us your way,  
**the way of love incarnate.**

**Amen.**

## **Completing the picture**

Below are some biblical verses exploring God's call to love. Reflect on them quietly together and then discuss any further thoughts arising from them.

- If I speak in the tongues of people or angels, but do not have love, I become nothing more than a blasting trumpet or clashing cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have faith such as to remove mountains, yet do not have love, then I am nothing. If I dispense all my goods and surrender my body to be burned, yet do not have love, it profits me nothing. Love is patient and kind; it is not jealous or puffed up with its own importance, vaunting itself before others, nor does it knowingly cause offence. It does not seek its own well-being, is not easily provoked, and does not think evil or rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices rather in the truth. It embraces all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love is eternal. Three things continue – faith, hope and love – and the greatest of them is love. (1 Corinthians 13:1-8a, 13)

- You have become a new person, your minds being renewed into the likeness of the one who created you. So then, as God's chosen ones, holy and greatly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience, being merciful to one another and forgiving any quarrel you may have; in other words, forgive as the Lord forgave you. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. (Colossians 3:9b, 10, 12-14)
- My advice to you is to love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, and pray for whoever mistreats you. Do for others precisely what you'd like them to do to you. Why should you expect a blessing for loving only those who love you? Even sinners do that. (Luke 6:27, 28, 31, 32)

## **Blessing**

Gracious God,  
may your love fill us,  
transform us,  
sustain us  
and flow through us,  
this day and always.  
Amen.