



LESSON 1
PREPARATION NOTES

God's Love

GOD'S LOVE IN BRIEF:

- God knows and loves us personally.

KEY ELEMENTS:

- Many people conceptualize God's love in a vague and distant way.
- This lesson shows that God loves us personally. This is the first point about God's love that we look at in *Discovery* (God's love is personal, proven, merciful and offered).
- God's love is also secure; it is a refuge for us.
- We can love God back in a personal way, relating to him as a friend.
- It is important for leaders to be inviting, warm and non-judgmental. This first meeting is vital for making participants feel welcomed and comfortable.



LESSON 1

God's Love

LEADERS: Take 10-15 minutes so your group can get to know each other before diving into the material.



Introduction

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Christian faith is built upon the love of God. God's love is the central message of Christianity and the source of our faith. We need to understand God's love if we are to make sense of anything else the Catholic Church professes.

The expression "God loves you" is familiar to many—so familiar, in fact, that we risk forgetting what it means. If we were to ask at a Christian gathering who thinks God loves them, the majority of people would likely raise their hands. One has to wonder, though, do we *really* know God loves us?

Many people think of God's love in general, vague or detached terms; their experience of it is thus rather thin, shallow and impersonal. Surely, if God is God, his love should give us much more than a vague sense of comfort. It *must* be more than this.

1 What happens in our hearts when we are loved? How are we affected?



LEADERS: Ask whichever of the following questions is best suited to your group:

- "Remember one of your first crushes. How did it affect you?"
- "What was it like when you first noticed or met your boyfriend/girlfriend/spouse?"

Let participants share. Wrap up the discussion by saying that our experience of God's love should also have a deep effect on our lives. Sometimes when we think of God's love, we imagine a poster in the church basement that shows Jesus surrounded by cute puppies and reads, "Smile, Jesus loves you!" Our depth of understanding or experience of God's love must not remain at this level; God's love is so much more than a trite saying on a poster! We hope this lesson will help participants grasp the depth of God's love for them.

God's Personal Love



God's love for us is personal, proven, merciful and offered. We will look at these aspects of God's love throughout this faith study. It is important to understand all of them in order to appreciate the true character of God's love for us. It can be difficult to believe that God loves us as individuals and knows and cares about our personal lives. The truth is that he knows each of us by name. He knows all the details of our lives, even to the number of hairs on our heads! He loves us and delights in us individually. We need to hear these truths.

LEADERS: Before starting on this section, divide up the Scripture selections so that someone is prepared to read each passage.

L Don't take for granted that participants believe Scripture is a reliable source at this point. You might find it helpful if when you talk about each Scripture verse in this lesson to say, "If this passage is true, what does this say about God's love?"

2 Write down what strikes you about God's personal love in these passages:

JEREMIAH 29:11

For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.

A **ANSWER:** The Lord has a plan for our lives. He wants what is good for us, and not what will bring us sadness. He can turn what is difficult in our lives to good.

ISAIAH 49:15-16

Can a woman forget her nursing-child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands; your walls are continually before me.

ANSWER: He will never forget us. We are engraved on the palm of his hand. We can depend on God. He knows us by name! How **A** amazing it is to have someone, especially someone powerful and famous, know us by name. He knows us personally, not just as a general human being “out there.”

PSALM 139:1-3

O LORD, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways.

ANSWER: God understands us completely. We are never outside his protection.

This verse shows how the Lord knows the details of our lives. Details matter and are important in love. If a six-year-old girl shows her father a picture she has drawn, a loving response is to notice all the details and to delight in them. This shows love; a glib “that’s nice” and putting the drawing aside does not communicate love. God knows everything about us. Even the smallest details of our lives matter to him. **A**

LEADERS: Using the Celebrity Analogy is a good way to wrap up this section. Below are two versions (romantic and sporty)

L ROMANTIC VERSION

For ease of reading, the following version will be about a woman and a famous male celebrity—but you can adjust this for your participants as needed.

If Mr. Famous (insert name of a popular celebrity) went on TV and said, “I love you,” to his fans, and you ran excitedly to your friend’s house proclaiming that (Mr. Famous) told the world that he loves you, your friend wouldn’t believe you.

Now imagine that (Mr. Famous) flew to your city and picked you up at your house. You spend an amazing weekend together, staring into each other’s eyes and sharing your hopes and dreams with each other. After returning to Los Angeles he appears on TV and tells the world how much he loves you (referring to you by name). Now your friends can definitely believe it when you say that (Mr. Famous) loves you personally.

For love to be genuine, it has to be directed to us personally. We do not have an unreliable source (such as a poster of Jesus with puppies) to tell us God loves us personally. Scripture, Jesus coming to earth, and the Holy Spirit in our hearts all tell us we are children of God (Romans 8:15-16).

SPORTY VERSION

For ease of reading, the following version will be about a famous male celebrity—but you can adjust this for your participants as needed.

If a famous athlete like (Steph Curry) went on TV and said, “You’re important to me,” to his fans, and you ran excitedly to your friend’s house proclaiming that (Steph Curry) told the world that you’re important to him, your friend wouldn’t believe you.

Now imagine that (Steph Curry) sent his private jet to pick you up so you can come to visit him over the weekend. Of course he makes sure you get the best seats to his game. After the game he introduces you to all the guys from the team. Later, you go out on the town and have a great night with awesome food and laughs. In the midst of all the fun, you really connect and have some good deep talks.

After returning home, (Steph) is interviewed about the weekend game on ESPN. He can’t help but bring you up, referring to you by name. He tells the world how important and awesome it was for him to have you supporting him at his game this weekend.

Now your friends can definitely believe it when you say that you are important to (Steph Curry).

God's Secure Love

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L **LEADERS:** Have everyone look up these verses together.
Choose one person to read each passage aloud.

3 Write down the qualities of God's love expressed in the following passages:



JOHN 10:10-15

E.G. verse 11: I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

A **ANSWER:** Selflessness and security. The good shepherd will not abandon his sheep. He knows his sheep by name and lays down his life for them. There is a strong sense of security in the loving care of a protector who is willing to sacrifice himself.

ROMANS 8:35, 37-39

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

A **ANSWER:** Nothing can separate us from the love of God. God will always be there for us.

L **LEADERS:** Follow up by asking, "What is the only thing that can separate us from God's love?"

A **ANSWER:** Ourselves (our sin)—since we are given free will.

4 How would you describe God's love in light of these reflections, Scripture verses, and any personal experiences?

LEADERS: Again you might want to rephrase the question, asking, "If all of these Scripture verses are true, and accurately describe God's love, how would you describe what you know about God's love?"

L You may get the sense that some participants have a limited faith background and are not sure they understand God's love. You could then gently ask, "Have you ever had an experience of God's love?" Sharing your personal experience of God's love will help to paint the picture for them.

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Our Personal Love for God



We may find it hard to believe that God loves us personally. This is perhaps because we relate to him in an impersonal way, thinking of him as a faraway cosmic entity. Because we don't believe he is personal or accessible, we treat him in a detached and distant kind of way.

5 How would we relate to God if we considered him as a Person (as a close friend)?

A **ANSWER:** We can probably all improve on how we relate to God. If we do not consider God to be as real or accessible as a regular person, it is relatively easy to not pray or go to church, especially when something else comes up or distracts us. We would not, however, arbitrarily break appointments with an important person or a close friend, as this would wound our relationship with them.

LEADERS: You could say, “Imagine what life would be like if God were right here beside you now; how would that change the way you interact with him? What if he were in your everyday activities? At home, at the store, when you are with your friends and family?” God really is that close to us!

Think of a personal example of how you have grown in this area. Share with the group. **Note:** The personal application of this question comes up in this lesson’s challenge.

6 Read Matthew 18:2-3. How might we relate to God if we approached him with a childlike heart?

MATTHEW 18:2-3

He called a child, whom he put among them, and said, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

ANSWER: Consider the freedom of children. They are (generally) not inhibited; they touch, go, talk to whomever, wherever. They are trusting. They give and receive love freely. In their innocence, they feel free to access God at any time.

Notice that Jesus did not say, “if you know and follow all the rules and are perfect you will enter the Kingdom.” His focus in this passage is on the disposition of one’s heart as that of a child toward his or her Father.

LEADERS: Challenge the participants to give faith a real chance and to enter into the rest of *Discovery* with a childlike heart.

Summary

God's love for us is very real. *Discovery* will look at how God's love is personal, proven, merciful and offered. In this first lesson, we have focused on God's personal love; his care and concern for each human being is central to our Christian faith. We are invited to be secure in his intimate, unchanging, eternal and unconditional love.

Living It Out

CHALLENGE

Choose one way to relate to God as someone who is personally present in your life.

MEMORIZE JEREMIAH 29:11

For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.

Leader's Journal



Take 15 minutes as soon as possible after finishing the lesson to reflect on how God moved during your study and how your small group participants responded.

1 Thanksgiving

Reflect and say a prayer of thanksgiving for specific ways the Holy Spirit was present in that small group.

- a. How did you experience the Holy Spirit helping you to lead the lesson?

- b. How did you experience the Holy Spirit moving in the small group today?

- c. What were the positives from today's group?

- d. What were areas for improvement?

2 Prophetic Listening

Ask the Holy Spirit to help you review the lesson. Think about each person in your small group as you prayerfully reflect on these questions.

- a. What are some indications that each participant caught the main points of this lesson?

- b. If you noticed gaps in any participant’s understanding of the main points, is the Holy Spirit inviting you to do anything over the course of this week to help this person better understand?

- c. Are there any other ways the Holy Spirit is inviting you to intentionally care for or nurture your individual small group participants?

- d. Is there anything you want to remind yourself from what played out in this lesson for when you sit down to prepare the next lesson?

3 Intentional Accompaniment

Write down a plan to intercede for your small group participants based on the specific insights above, including how you will reach out to them and/or tailor the next lesson’s introduction based on your reflections.