THE CORNERSTONE OF OUR FAITH

Jesus Christ
The Chief Cornerstone
Ephesians 2:20

The One Anothers
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how to use this study

Each lesson in this *The Cornerstone of Our Faith* study has four major parts.

Every lesson begins with an introductory section called *The Foundation*. In this section, the author will give background material to help prepare your mind and heart for God’s Word.

The second part of each lesson is called *The Cornerstone*. This section is always the heart of every lesson. The Bible is explored in detail to help us understand the text. Those who are accustomed to hearing African-American preaching can hear this section “preach.” God’s Word is powerfully presented so that all can understand.

The next section of each study is critical for the Word to fulfill its intended purpose. It is called *The Inscription*. Just as people take note of inscriptions on cornerstones or monuments, each lesson is written so as to drive home a point worth remembering and a principle worth following. It offers the encouragement to change attitudes or behaviors to align better with God’s Word. To *know* the Bible is one thing; to *do* it is another.

Every lesson ends with a series of thought-provoking *Discussion Questions* that help you explore God’s Word on a personal and a congregational level. These questions provide opportunities for group discussion and participation. Teachers can tell by the responses whether their students have really come to grips with the lesson.
This study is focused on several texts of Scripture that enjoin Christians to live among one another in particular ways. The lessons are purposely designed to be personal and practical.

There is immediate benefit in seeking to consistently live out these lessons. This benefit will be seen in the life of the individual Christians and in the lives of all that we encounter – especially within the household of God.

The texts that are examined stress mutual, reciprocal duty. Mutuality refers to having the same relation each toward the other and relating to each other in the same way. Reciprocity is doing something in return and of equal merit. Each Christian owes his/her fellow Christian. These passages tell us just what we owe one another.
Perhaps the most overused and consequently underappreciated word of Scripture is *love*. This is because the word has been thoughtless and flip-pantly used within Christian circles. However, love is the core of the Scriptures. All that we are called to be is centered in love. The challenge we face is mentally separating love from the arena of the clichéd and trite and practically experiencing it in the parking lot and the pew.

**Key Concepts**

We have one English word for love, but the common Greek used in the first century made use of four different words. One of the Greek words translated into English as “love” is *eros*. This describes a romantic, sexual love. The word is not used in the New Testament. A second Greek word is *storge*. This is familial love as like parents for children. This word is not used in the New Testament. A third Greek word is *phileo*. This is deep and abiding friendship. It is used 21 times in the New Testament. *Agape* is the fourth word. It is descriptive of good will and is used 106 times in the New Testament.
I Want to Know What Love Is

In 1984, a group called “Foreigner” sang the popular song, “I Want to Know What Love Is.” It became a hit that reverberated across the nation. When we open John’s letter to the ancient church, we find a clear definition of what love is (1 John 4:7-10). This is particularly the case when we are speaking of agape.

The technical definition of this term is to be full of goodwill and to exhibit the same. It has the added thought of wishing one well or regarding the welfare of someone. It is noteworthy that the major emphasis is not on feeling or words, but rather on will and action. John made this quite clear in his letter (1 John 3:18).

Agape love is not an abstract principle. In speaking of God, John wrote that God is love. Lexicons (Greek dictionaries) can provide us with the technical definition of the term, but something much more is needed to grasp what John meant. John did not reduce God to an abstract principle. What John did was describe God as the one who loves. What we are given in Scripture is a definition by demonstration (1 John 4:10). In his letter, John defined God being love by God’s activity – particularly in sending Jesus for a fallen world. Therefore, a contextual definition of love is grace, irrevocably tied with justice, which itself is tempered by mercy. The grace is seen in God’s activity of sending and sacrificing Jesus for us.

Justice is irrevocably tied to grace in that the penalty for sin had to be paid. Sin against the holy God had to be atoned for. Mercy is invoked in that God spared us from paying the penalty. So in reality, love doesn’t define God. God defines love by His actions.
What are the implications of God’s love to my identity as a Christian? Jesus made them quite clear. We are to love one another (John 13:34-35). We should not only want to know what love is. We should also want to be what God is – particularly in the matter of love. One who is intimately acquainted with God acts in love, because love is godly action toward others.

Jesus commanded that we have agape love for one another (John 13:34). He called it the new commandment. This is a newness in the sense of quality as opposed to a newness in sense of time or age. It is not new today and old tomorrow. Rather, following this new sense of dealing with one another makes for a growing and enduring relationship.

Jesus’ teaching of love was not the first time that God’s people were ever commanded to love other people (Leviticus 19:18). What was new about His command was the fresh perspective He placed on how to love one another. As opposed to the standard from which people then and now generally operate, Jesus calls for us to perform godly actions toward those whose behavior toward us merits no positive treatment (Matthew 5:43). His willingness to sacrifice His life for all humanity is the supreme example of this love. He, therefore, commands us to love one another in conformity to how He has loved us. Again, this new commandment is new because Jesus takes love to higher heights and deeper depths.

Jesus was pointedly clear in stating how important agape love is among His followers. Their identity as His followers was not centered in the miracles some were enabled to perform or the daring demonstrated in preaching Jesus’ message. Although these things were indeed noteworthy, they were not the identifying mark on which Jesus was focused.
Instead, love among themselves would serve as that badge of identification.

Perhaps one of the most misunderstood or completely missed teachings of Jesus is how His genuine followers are identified. This becomes quite apparent when we consider the traditional answers presented to this question. For some, the genuine people of God are those who teach the right doctrine. Though sound doctrine is extremely important, it is easy to remove agape love from the content of what we consider sound doctrine. Every Christian and every congregation of God’s people must stand up for and promote sound doctrine, but this matters little without remembering that agape is a part of that doctrine. In fact, agape is the center of gospel. There would be no good news for humanity without the act of God in Christ for humanity.

Others may champion following the right worship practices as their badge of truly belonging to Christ. It is certainly important to worship God properly. Jesus described such worship as of necessity being genuine and in accordance to truth (John 4:23-24). Our worship should consist of acts of which God approves. This requires careful, prayerful examination of the Scriptures to determine what is appropriate and what should be avoided. When the church meets publicly to worship, she should always be concerned for worshiping in a manner that honors the Lord. However, seeking to cross every “t” and dot every “i” is not the badge of identification for God’s people. To even think in this manner can easily morph into thoughts of earning God’s grace. It is love, not the exactness of our acts of worship, which identifies us as Christ’s followers.

Still others can become fixated on the name that they wear as the true marker of being God’s people. There have been many debates about this matter, and some of the debates span hundreds of years. Once again, there is value in seeking to align ourselves with the descriptive terms used in
Scripture to identify God’s people (Acts 11:26; 1 Peter 4:16; Romans 16:16). Such references are timeless in their value. Nonetheless, Jesus did not point to nomenclature as the badge of identification. He pointed to love. There is power in a body of people developing and functioning in an atmosphere of agape love. A multitude of sins is covered in this atmosphere (1 Peter 4:8). This does not mean that sin is given free license to reign in the lives of God’s people. Rather, it means that there is a tremendous capacity to work patiently with one another as each of us continuously experiences God’s transformative work in our lives.

We can never underestimate or devalue the need to love one another. No individual Christian or congregation of Christians can function as God’s child without agape love. It was this kind of love that moved the Father to send the Son for our salvation (John 3:16). It is this kind of love that moves a husband to honor the Lord in how he treats his wife (Ephesians 5:25-33). It is this type of love that allows persons of every background, race, culture, and ethnicity to function as one body in this world (Galatians 3:26-28). It is this type of love for which our divided, troubled, and chaotic world genuinely yearns. The degree to which we give and receive agape love is the degree to which we will be effective in converting and discipling others for Christ (Matthew 28:18-20).

Love should never be reduced to mere sentiment or even mere benevolent deeds. Jesus calls us into deeper waters than this. He calls us to act toward others in the manner that promotes their greatest good. This includes the good in time and in eternity.

Love is redemptive for the church family. Given the damage we have experienced in a Satan-dominated world, we are in dire need of a community in which we can be spiritually
nurtured. This also allows us to become spiritual nurturers as we grow in this atmosphere of love (Ephesians 4:9-32).

Discussion Questions

1. Why is the command to love often so easily missed or dismissed?
2. What thoughts generally come to mind when we hear the word love?
3. Why is agape love not just an abstract principle?
4. Why does Jesus describe love as a new commandment?
5. How does this new commandment enhance the quality of our relationships?
6. Why did Jesus say that agape love is our badge of Christian identification?
7. What are some additional ways in which we tend to identify the true followers of Christ?
8. What is the danger of using other measuring standards to determine the true followers of Christ?
9. In what sense does agape love cover a multitude of sins?
10. In what ways is love redemptive?

Just for Further Thought

1. Discuss how we can grow in showing love toward the unloveable.
2. Discuss how agape can lead to phileo.