

LOVE EXTRAVAGANTLY

LUKE 6:27-42

Jesus spoke frequently about love. He told stories about love, taught about love, and embodied love in a way never seen before. After his death and resurrection, the early followers of Jesus began to meet and put into practice his way of love. They began to share and write down their memories and ideas about the love of God made known in Jesus. They tried to live out self-giving love with one another. Followers of Jesus have been trying to do the same ever since, paying close attention to the greatest commandments to love God and our neighbor.

As we deepen our love for God, we will necessarily be drawn into a call to love our neighbor. In the world that Jesus invites us into, a neighbor is more than just one who is nearby, in proximity. Neighbors include all God's children around the world. Loving everyone, all the time, means embracing even those who may seem like enemies or strangers.

Loving God and our neighbor makes sense to us. Loving our enemy is something else altogether. That can seem an extravagance too great to expect. Many of us are reluctant even to identify others as our enemy, despite living in a polarized culture that's all too comfortable with false binaries and opposing camps. Drawing lines between *us* and *them* is part of our problem, we rightly argue, and something to resist. We may be captive to a sense of niceness: "I like everyone," we insist, as if good people don't ever get annoyed or even enraged by others.

In any case, we should not easily dismiss language of enemies. It's a word Jesus uses. If it seems too harsh to our ears, perhaps simply associating it with people we find hard to love would be a place to start. We should have no trouble naming those.

It's worth noting that a life of robust Christian discipleship will spark opposition, leading to a scarcity of felt love between some of us. Even loving others in the expansive, extravagant way of Jesus infuriates some people. If we truly have no enemies, perhaps we have been conformed too much to this world, to echo the words of Paul in Romans 12:2.

Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

—Romans 12:2

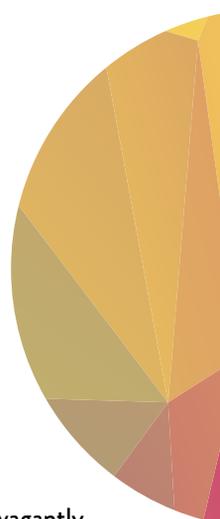
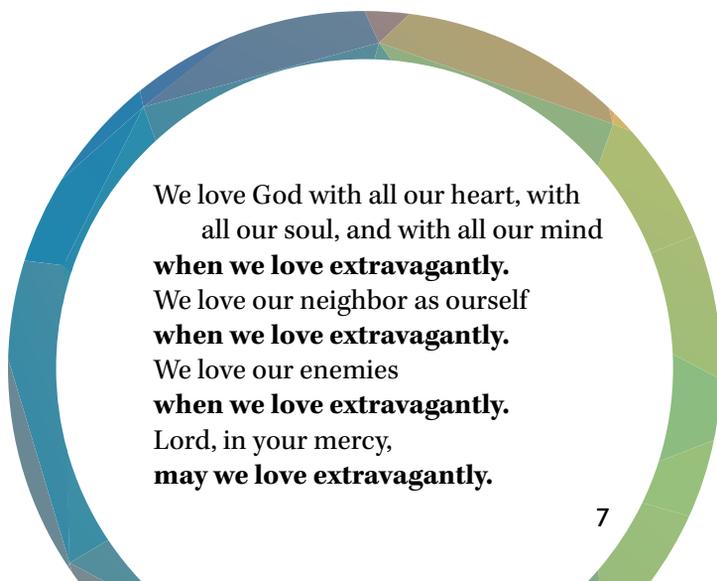
Some of us are comfortable using the word *love*. We apply it to many things. We love certain foods. We love our hobbies. We love some alma maters or institutions. Some of us easily apply the word to our friends and family members. We find it easy to say as the giver and recipient. “I love you.” “I love you too.” Others of us are more sparing in our use of the word. We may not hear it much or say it often. Perhaps we didn’t have many models of hearing it growing up, or we intentionally reserve it to use when it means the most.

➤ Where do you fall on a scale in your use of the word *love*?



➤ What or who are some of the people or things about which you have used the word *love*?

➤ Keeping in mind the call of Jesus to love God, neighbor, and even enemy, who or what do you hope to be able to add to the list as you work through this *Adult Reflection Guide*?



FINDING THE PRACTICE IN THE BIBLE



The call to love is found throughout the entire Bible.

Through this study we will move between Old and New Testaments, through a range of types of writing, finding the compelling command to love embedded in history, gospel, the epistles, and more. As we seek to follow Jesus, it is fitting to begin with some of his own words about love.

We've already mentioned Jesus' Great Commandment in Luke 10:27. Just a few chapters earlier, he teaches those gathered in what many Bible versions title as the Sermon on the Plain. Jesus leaves few ethical stones unturned, as he addresses how to respond to hatred from others, the importance of showing mercy, the need not to judge or condemn, the power of forgiveness, and a warning against hypocrisy. Embedded in all these instructions in Luke 6:27–42 is a primer on how to love.

LOVE IS ACTIVE

The kind of extravagant love Jesus models and preaches is active. Far from being constrained to a warm emotion, it bubbles over into concrete movement and self-giving mission. Note the verbs in what Jesus says. What is he asking his followers to *do*?

“But I say to you that listen: Love your enemies; do good to those who hate you; bless those who curse you; pray for those who mistreat you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also, and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who asks of you, and if anyone takes away what is yours, do not ask for it back again. Do to others as you would have them do to you.”

—Luke 6:27–31

GOLDEN RULE

Verse 31 is often called the Golden Rule. It's a powerful and oft-quoted statement from Jesus, but he was actually expounding on a well-known Hebrew text. God gave Moses a similar ethical guideline in Leviticus 19:18: “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.”

LOVE GOES BEYOND OUR TRIBE

In his teaching on the plain, Jesus presses his listeners—then and now—to expand our understanding of who our neighbor is, and who to treat as we'd like to be treated. He draws the circle of active love wider, including even enemies within it. This is not a passive kind of love. It's difficult and messy, and it asks something of us.

“If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you expect to receive payment, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. Instead, love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he himself is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”

—Luke 6:32–36

The Greek word used here for *love* is *agape*/ἀγάπη. It emphasizes the social or moral dimensions of sacrificial love—love that requires something of us. It’s the love we see embodied most fully in God’s gift of self in Jesus Christ.

LOVE INCLUDES DOS AND DON'TS

Loving others in the extravagant way of Jesus involves considering our actions from two stances, both positive and negative. There are things we *do*, and things we *don't do*. Jesus seems to indicate a kind of reciprocal response in the kinship economy of God. If we were all to do the things of love and stop doing all the other things, all our lives would be transformed for good.

“Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.”

—Luke 6:37–38

- As you consider what extravagant love in the way of Jesus entails, what are you being called to do?
- What are you called to stop doing?



**TO LOVE
EXTRAVAGANTLY,
DO**

**TO LOVE
EXTRAVAGANTLY,
DON'T DO**

FINDING THE PRACTICE THEN AND NOW

THE SHARED GOLDEN RULE

The call to love others as yourself crosses boundaries of religious traditions. A colorful poster of quotations from many religions that resemble the Golden Rule may be found at bit.ly/FMGoldenRule.¹ Following are several of them.

- How do these stories and sayings from other major religions deepen your understanding of Jesus' call to love?



- Buddhism: “Treat not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful.” [Source: *Udana-Varga 5.18*]



- Islam: “Not one of you truly believes until you wish for others what you wish for yourself.” [Source: *The Prophet Muhammad, Hadith*]



- Hinduism: “This is the sum of duty: do not do to others what would cause pain if done to you.” [Source: *Mahabharata 5:1517*]
- Judaism: A story is told about the first-century Jewish scholar and sage Hillel. A potential convert to Judaism asked to have all the Torah's teachings summarized while he stood on one foot (a plea for a very short sermon!). Hillel answered: “That which is hateful to you do not do to another; that is the entire Torah, and the rest is its interpretation. Go study.”²

Jesus and Hillel seem to have a similar approach to teaching. In Luke 10:25–37, just after he shared the greatest commandment to love God and love neighbor, Jesus was asked, “Who is my neighbor?” He told the parable of the Good Samaritan, then asked a question himself: “Who was a neighbor to the man?” When the answer “the one who showed him mercy” was given, Jesus said, in like fashion to Hillel, “Go and do likewise.”

1. “Golden Rule Poster” on Scarborough Missions: A Canadian Roman Catholic Mission Society website, www.scarboromissions.ca/golden-rule.
2. The William Davidson Talmud found online at Sefaria: A Living Library of Torah Texts Online, www.sefaria.org/Shabbat?tab=contents. Click on Shab. 31a, and scroll to paragraph 6.

THE CALL TO LOVE FROM DR. KING

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. repeatedly addressed the call to love everyone, particularly our enemies. In a favorite sermon he preached and revised several times, called “Loving Your Enemies,” he made the distinction between liking people and loving them. After mentioning all the things people had said and done to him and others, he admitted he did not like them at all. Yet Jesus said we must love them, which is different from liking them. We love them not because they’re likeable but because God loves them. And only love has the power to transform people. Hate only breeds more hatred and is destructive.

Dr. King revised his sermon for a print anthology during two weeks he spent in jail in Albany, Georgia, in 1962. In it, he offers up both the how and the why of loving one’s enemies. Loving our enemies requires us to develop the capacity to forgive, to see the image of God in them, and to seek out understanding over hate, which injures us all. Love, Dr. King says, is “the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend.”

At one point, he addresses what he calls his “most bitter opponents” and says this: “We shall match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. We shall meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will, and we shall continue to love you. . . . Love is the most durable power in the world.”³

- ✦ Where do you see current examples of soul force winning out over physical force, or the durable power of love in the face of an enemy?



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3. Martin Luther King, Jr., “Loving Your Enemies,” in *The Radical King*, ed. Cornel West (Boston: Beacon Press, 2016), 62. The essay is also available at bit.ly/FMMLKLovingEnemies.

PRACTICING THE PRACTICE

The kind of love Jesus calls us to is not about how we feel about the other. Our enemies may act with malice. Our neighbors may disappoint us. Those who are in need may not be deemed to deserve our help. Even God may seem absent. Jesus asks us to choose love, not because of what the other does or doesn't do, but because of who *we* are: children of the Most High, called to reflect the love and mercy of God, our heavenly parent. In other words, we don't love because we get something out of it, whether in this world or the next. ("If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same" [Luke 6:33].) We love because God first loved us. We love because we can't help ourselves, so grateful and transformed are we by the grace and love of Jesus Christ.

CHOOSE TO LOVE

What can you do to remind yourself that followers of Jesus choose to love? It may seem overly simple, but a physical cue or reminder can help you bring your attention back toward love when it is easy to forget.



REMINDERS TO CHOOSE LOVE

- ▣ Something to carry with me
- ▣ Something to post as a visual cue (on a phone, computer, mirror, or wall)
- ▣ A verse to memorize or phrase to repeat
- ▣ Something to prompt love for God, for neighbor, and for enemy
- ▣ More reminders to choose love, in different places you spend time

PRAY FOR ENEMIES

Sometimes enemies are easy to identify. Those who oppress with violent acts can be labeled with little trouble.

- What other actions would lead you to label someone an enemy?

- Who are the people in the news who you might call enemies?

- Who are the people who have hurt or angered you in the past?

- Who are the people you find difficult to love?



Look back over the Scripture passages on pages 8–9, then write a prayer asking God to help you love those you have listed.



AN ACT OF LOVE

Choose someone from your list of enemies.

- Besides the ways in which they have hurt or angered you, what do you know about them?
- What do they care about?
- What are their hobbies or joys?
- What can you do that supports this person's interests as a conscious act of love?

For example, perhaps you have a deep disagreement with someone at church. If you know they love to bake in their spare time, you might bring them a bag of sugar. You might not need to tell them that your "sweet gesture" is because Jesus said to love our enemies, but then again, you might ...

- If you can't interact directly with the person you listed, how might you act lovingly in their name?

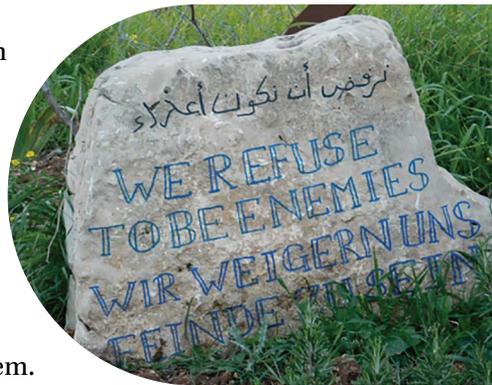


SHOW LOVE

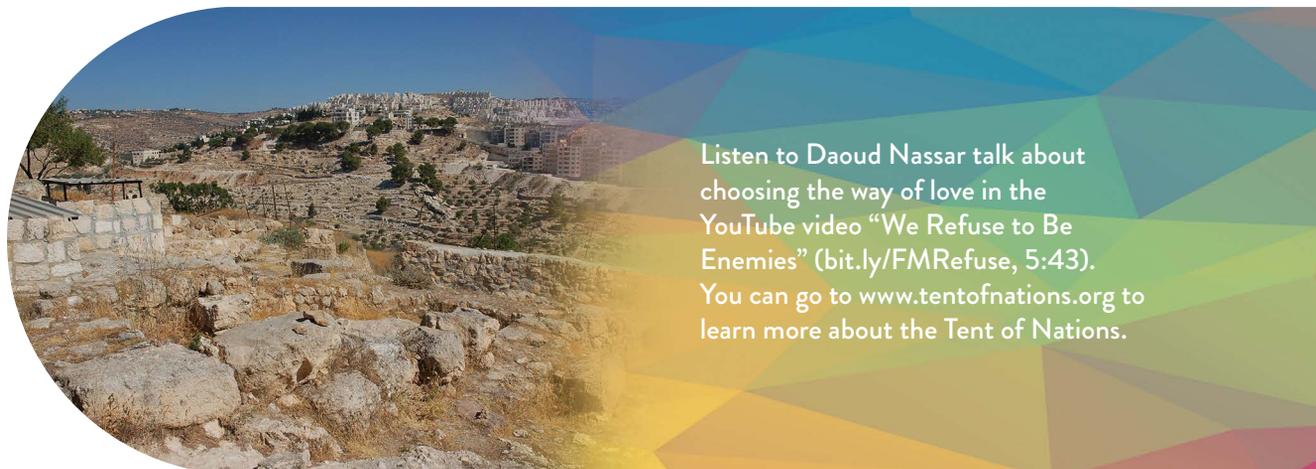
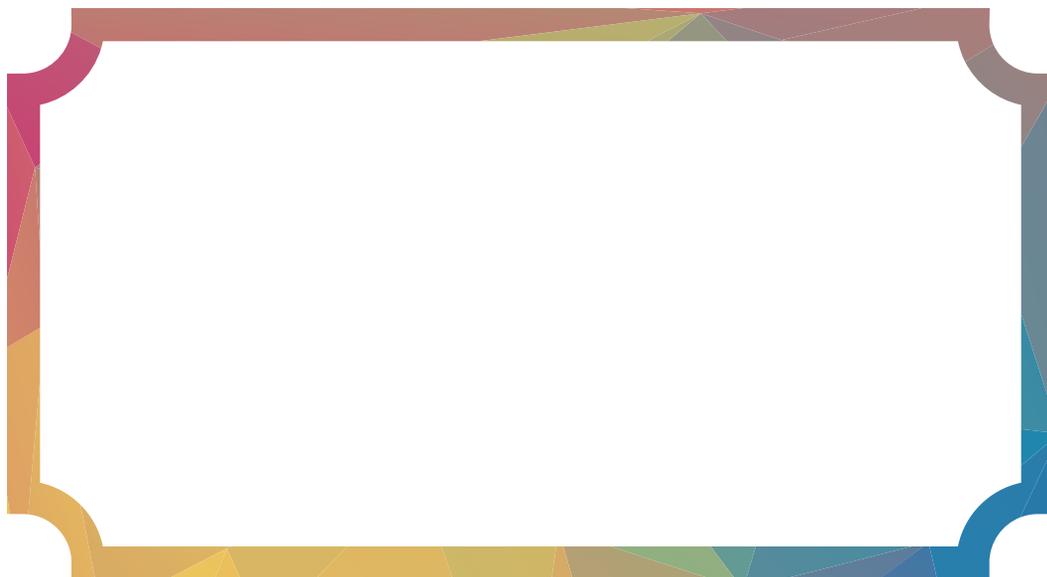
THE FOURTH WAY

Just south of Bethlehem, a Palestinian Christian educational farm called the Tent of Nations welcomes volunteers from all over the world to help cultivate the land and build bridges of hope and peace. In the face of decades of oppression and violence against them and their property, they recognized three responses that would be easy to make. They could give in to violence, give up, or run away. Instead, they have adopted what they call the fourth way of nonviolent resistance. At the entrance to the farm is a stone with the words “We refuse to be enemies” engraved on it, summing up their understanding of the extravagant kind of love to which Jesus calls them.

- Imagine you are engraving words for the entrance to your home that sum up your understanding of love. What would you put?



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Listen to Daoud Nassar talk about choosing the way of love in the YouTube video “We Refuse to Be Enemies” (bit.ly/FMRefuse, 5:43). You can go to www.tentofnations.org to learn more about the Tent of Nations.

FOLLOWING JESUS

Jesus calls us to love everyone. When we are honest about what that means, and how difficult it can be, we see just how bold the vision of Jesus is. More than a feeling, loving extravagantly is active love, full of verbs and intentions. It requires us to draw a wider circle than we usually want to and include even those we find difficult to love. Loving our enemies may mean we learn to love those who actively persecute us or those we care about, responding with the soul force of the greatest power in the world. It means we try to remember that we ourselves have first been loved that way. So we commit to loving as we have been loved in response. As we continue, we will dig even deeper into the *who* and the *how* of extravagant love.

▶ We end our session as we began, with a return to word associations. What do you think of when you hear the word *extravagant*?

EXTRAVAGANT

▶ After your reflection in the session, what do you think of when you hear the word *love*?

LOVE

▶ What does love given like this look like?

A quick glance at thesaurus.com gives these as synonyms for *extravagantly*:

- effortlessly
- liberally
- readily
- abundantly
- like water
- without restraint

Lord, help me to love extravagantly. Help me love you with all my heart, all my soul, all my strength, and all my mind. Help my love look and feel effortless, even when it is difficult. Let love flow like water, abundant and ready, toward my neighbors. Help me to love even my enemies without restraint. Thank you for loving me, and thank you for Jesus, who shows me what extravagant love looks like. Amen.