

On Love

20 Lessons
for the World
We Seek



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Live to love.

God intends all life to move in the direction of goodness, beauty, and love. You discover your reason for being when you commit to love daily. The practice of love is the key to abundant life.

In a world that often measures success by achievements, possessions, or status, this fundamental truth can get lost: your deepest purpose, your most essential calling, is to love. This isn't just an idealistic notion—it's woven into the very fabric of human existence and flourishing. When people near the end of their lives reflect on what mattered most, they rarely mention career accomplishments or material wealth. Instead, they speak of relationships, of love given and received, of connections made and nurtured.

When we got married fifty years ago, we wanted to inscribe something in our rings. We wanted a perennial reminder of our common purpose in life. We decided on four simple words: *We live to love*. We took the idea from the Bible. “We love because God first loved us” (1 John 4:19 CEB). This choice wasn't just about our marriage—it was about our understanding of what makes life meaningful. Lesson number one: you were created to love. Everything else in life revolves around this claim. The phrase “we live to love” has guided us

through both joyful and challenging times. During moments of conflict, it reminded us to choose love over being right. In times of success, it helped us focus on sharing rather than accumulating. When overwhelmed by grief, it prompted us to lean on each other. Through decades of parenting, ministry, and teaching, we've seen how this simple principle can transform not just marriages, but all relationships and communities.

This means you are beloved—cherished beyond measure. Perhaps life has gotten in the way of this deep-down conviction for you. Experiences of rejection, failure, abuse, or loss may have buried this truth beneath layers of doubt and pain. You may not always feel like you are loved, but you are. In this vast universe, you may question whether you have any value or worth, but you do. The simple fact is that you are absolutely unique. There will never be another you—another person with your particular combination of gifts, experiences, and perspectives.

More importantly, you can change this world into a better, more beautiful and loving place. The question is, how do you do this?

The answer begins with recognizing your own belovedness. When you truly understand that you are cherished, it becomes natural to extend that love to others. This doesn't mean you'll always feel confident or worthy—even those who seem most secure have moments

of doubt. But it does mean that underneath all the uncertainties and struggles, there's a bedrock truth: you are loved, and you are made for love.

The choices you make do make a difference. They shape the way you live, either opening a pathway for love or creating barriers to it. You can choose to live in love, person by person, action by action, step by step. We don't want to make this sound easier than it is—choosing love often means choosing the harder path, the path that requires more patience, more understanding, more forgiveness. But we are convinced that the practice of love has the power to make the world (even in its brokenness and dysfunction) more loving and just.

Francis de Sales reduced this quest for love to its simplest terms. He said that you learn to speak by speaking, to study by studying, to run by running, to work by working. In the same way, you learn to love by loving. Those who think there is any other path to love deceive themselves. This was his prescription for mastering the art of love, and we like it. Given the fact that love is an action, you can practice it. Defining love in theory helps no one; practicing love helps everyone.

His insight reveals a profound truth about the nature of love: it's not primarily about feeling the right emotions or understanding the right concepts. Love is a skill that develops through practice, much like learning a musical instrument or mastering a craft. Just as a mu-

sician must practice scales before playing symphonies, we begin our journey of love with simple acts—a kind word, a moment of attention, a gesture of care. Each small act of love builds our capacity for greater love.

You may have had the privilege of watching children take their first steps. Nobody really gives them any instruction. That first step in their lives is the product of literally thousands upon thousands of observations. Before they walked, they watched. Their own attempts to walk followed all that observation. They wanted to do what they saw, first holding on for dear life to something—anything—because it was scary. That first successful solo step was also the product of countless failures, all of which were learning experiences along the way. Learning to love, like learning to walk, includes modeling and imitation, starting with the simplest actions.

This process mirrors our journey in learning to love. We begin by observing love in action—perhaps in our families, our communities, or in stories that inspire us. We make tentative attempts, sometimes stumbling, sometimes succeeding. Each attempt, whether it ends in apparent failure or success, teaches us something valuable about what love looks like in practice. Just as a child's unsuccessful attempts at walking are actually essential steps toward walking, our imperfect efforts at love are vital parts of learning to love more fully.

God does not despise small things. In fact, God delights in little steps and simple actions. To master the art of love you must commit to live daily and deeply into a fuller love and thereby become an instrument of love in the world. You can be a loving agent of change. Ironically, you will find yourself changed in the process. Little steps can cultivate a limitless love of God. Simple actions can express an unbounded love of everyone and everything else. As we begin this journey with you, we suggest two easy practices right here at the outset that we hope will become spiritual habits.

Firstly, when you wake up every morning, simply remind yourself, “I am a beloved child of God.” Let those words—that proclamation—sink deeply into your soul. And as you live through the events of your day, let those words surface anew and define who you are. This isn’t just positive thinking; it’s about grounding yourself in the fundamental truth of your belovedness, which gives you the security and strength to extend love to others.

Secondly, either through words or through actions, make sure one person each day knows how much you love them. That might be a hug, a word of encouragement, a demonstration of empathy, or an explicit affirmation of how much you value their place in your life. You can extend this practice beyond your circle of family and friends into ever-expanding circles of connectedness. Look for opportunities to show love to those you

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might normally overlook—the grocery store cashier, the delivery person, the new colleague who seems uncertain. Make these two simple practices your first steps in daring to love more boldly today. Remember that living to love isn't about perfection—it's about intention and practice. Each day brings new opportunities to choose love, to grow in love, and to share love. This is how we fulfill our deepest purpose: we live to love.

Suggested Further Reading:

Mariann Edgar Budde, *Receiving Jesus: The Way of Love* (Church Publishing, 2019).

David N. Field, *Our Purpose Is Love: The Wesleyan Way to Be the Church* (Abingdon Press, 2018).

bell hooks, *All About Love: New Visions* (William Morrow, 2018).

Henry Scougal, *The Life of God in the Soul of Man* (Crossway, 2022).

Children's Book: Eric Carle, *Love from The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (World of Eric Carle, 2015).

Adopt a pattern of life.

Force does not produce a life of love. To become loving means to become your true self, a loving child of God. A pattern of life can help as you seek to grow in love. It is like a trellis that provides guidance for growth in the way of love.

Love does not coerce. Love cannot grow by means of force or demand. Love is more like a flower that emerges and blossoms. This does not mean that work has no place in the quest to live a loving life. But the effort involved takes more the form of releasing than grasping. A flower emerges, opens, and blooms. It doesn't thrust or force its way into the world. If God has made us to love, then loving means discovering your true self. It doesn't mean struggling to be something alien to who you are down deep inside.

Think about how a rosebud opens. You cannot force it to bloom by prying apart its petals—such force only damages the flower. Instead, the bud opens naturally when conditions are right: proper soil, adequate water, sufficient sunlight. Similarly, love flourishes not through forced actions but through creating the right conditions in our lives. This might mean cultivating patience, practicing presence, or making space for genuine connections.

Adopt a pattern of life.

We can't forget, however, that the care of a flower includes a good deal of tending. The environment may impede its growth. Disease sometimes attacks the plant. For a rose bush to prosper you must prune it. In the same way, given the fact that love is contextual and relational, your environment is important. Your life story and your surroundings matter. Unhealthy attitudes, attractions, or addictions create barriers to relationships of love. Loving God and neighbor includes emptying yourself of all those things that stand in the way of love.

Just as a gardener must regularly remove weeds that would choke out beneficial plants, we must be attentive to habits and patterns that might impede love's growth in our lives. These might be obvious barriers like prejudice or anger, or more subtle obstacles like busyness or distraction. The work of pruning—whether in a garden or in our spiritual lives—requires discernment and care. We remove what hinders growth while preserving and nurturing what promotes flourishing.

Love has a greater chance of thriving, therefore, among those who embrace “a long obedience in the same direction,” to borrow the title of a well-known Eugene Peterson book. Adopting a pattern of life that includes loving practices is one of the most effective ways to grow in love. Such a pattern is sometimes called a “rule of life.” But “rule” in this sense does not mean “law or regulation.” We are not talking here about a set of demands to

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be obeyed compulsively or obsessively. Our experience has taught us that this only frustrates you to no end. The phrase “rule of life” means a guide, a way to live in love. A rule of life sets your course, reminds you about those things that really matter, and fixes your attention on the goal you are pursuing.

A rule of life is like a trellis. We love this image. A trellis is a framework that supports and guides a plant, enabling it to grow in a way that is most helpful to it. As such, rules of life have guided the spiritual life of ordinary people for generations. They are one of the most helpful supports for those seeking to live extraordinarily well.

The simpler a rule of life the better. One of our favorites that comes out of our Methodist heritage is encapsulated in three simple phrases. This rule is easy to remember and provides a template for you to reflect on how you are doing:

Do no harm.

Do good.

Immerse yourself in the practices of love.

These rules help define love in your life. They provide guidance to a question we all ask from time to time, what is the loving thing to do? Like a compass with three clear directions, these principles can orient you in any

situation, from the most mundane daily choices to life's greatest challenges.

Think of these three phrases as concentric circles of love in action. "Do no harm" forms the essential foundation—it's where we begin. "Do good" moves us from passive resistance of evil to active engagement with goodness. "Immerse yourself in the practices of love" takes us deeper still, into transformative ways of being in the world.

Do no harm. Every day you undoubtedly witness harmful things. You hear words that harm others. You may be horrified by acts of violence or terror. The ethic of love proclaims boldly, do no harm. Do not participate in evil around you. Resist being pulled into attitudes and actions that demean, marginalize, and dehumanize other people. This isn't just about avoiding obvious forms of harm—it's about developing a sensitive awareness to the subtle ways our actions might impact others. It means considering the ripple effects of our choices, the unintended consequences of our words, the implicit messages in our behavior.

Do good. Every day also provides multiple opportunities for you to do good to and for others. Little acts of kindness send ripples of love into the world. Live with a "pay it forward" attitude. Become more intentional about seeing and trying to understand those around you.

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Identify needs. Simply ask yourself the question, how might I make this person's day better?

Immerse yourself in the practices of love. God has promised to meet you in so many different ways. Those places of divine/human encounter are spaces filled with love. God meets you first and foremost in prayer. God becomes living and present to you in sacred texts. God shows up in your camaraderie with other people. God beckons you to embrace love around the Table of the Lord.

God also becomes real for you, as Mother Teresa reminds us, in the distressing disguise of the poor. Love reigns in every act of compassion. Waging peace and challenging injustice lead to a more just and loving world. No act is too small. In all these practices you both embody love and learn how to be more loving.

Adopt a rule of life. Make it simple. Make it your own. Start small. Choose one or two practices to focus on initially. As these become integrated into your life, gradually add others. Let your rule grow with you, always keeping in mind that its purpose is to nurture love—love of God, love of others, love of self, love of creation. Try not to become obsessed with it; rather, let it function as a framework for a life of loving action. Let your rule of life be like a trellis that facilitates your growth in love.

Adopt a pattern of life.

Suggested Further Reading:

Joan Chittister, *Wisdom Distilled from the Daily: Living the Rule of St. Benedict Today* (HarperOne, 2009).

Rueben P. Job, *Three Simple Rules: A Wesleyan Way of Living* (Abingdon Press, 2007).

Stephen Macchia, *Crafting a Rule of Life: An Invitation to the Well-Ordered Way* (InterVarsity Press, 2012).

Marjorie J. Thompson, *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life*, revd edn (Westminster/John Knox Press, 2015).

Children's Book: Kim Mitzo Thompson and Karen Mitzo Hilderbrand, *I Can Do It* (Twin Sisters, 2020).

In a world marked by division and hostility, how do we live with genuine love? Paul and Janet Chilcote offer a refreshingly practical path forward through twenty essential practices anyone can begin today.

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