

LIFE ON THE VINE



LOVE

PREPARE

Read all the Scriptures assigned for the week. Pay particular attention to how the nature of God's love of us defines our love of God and of others. Think about the metaphors Paul uses to describe the love of the believer's life.

Consider the people in your class: how familiar do you think they are with Paul's list of the fruits of the Spirit? In particular, how often do you think they've studied about "love" in the Bible? How can this lesson take a fresh approach to a familiar biblical topic?

Read Chapter 2 in Kenneson's *Life on the Vine*. Note how the character of God's love is the basis for understanding the character of the Christian's love. Become familiar with the obstacles detrimental to the fruit of love and the "other-directedness" needed to cultivate love. Pay attention to the connection Kenneson makes between the Lord's Supper and the embodiment of love.



Invite a group member to supply the fruit to share during the meeting time. This week's suggestion is red grapes.

Set up the room: Have the items ready for the welcome table as well as Bibles and copies of the learner guide for group members.

To open the class time, you'll need a prism (a non-label side of a CD will work) and a flashlight.

PRAY

Pray Psalm 136:1-9. Picture what God's "steadfast love" means to you.

GATHERING AT THE TABLE OF LOVE

In Advance

Prepare the welcome table by arranging the bowl(s) or tray(s) of fruit brought in to share. Open the Bible to Galatians 5 and place the white pillar candle or taper nearby. Be sure to have matches or a lighter handy for the person designated to light the candle.

As People Arrive

Greet everyone. Introduce newcomers and visitors to other class members. Keep in mind that bearing the fruit of the Spirit begins the moment the first person walks in the door.

To Open

Just prior to getting started, pass around the fruit so those who've arrived can enjoy it. Reserve a portion of the fruit as a display on the worship table. Once it's time to start, call attention to the worship table. Invite everyone to focus on the fruit on the table as you read aloud Galatians 5:22-23. Light (or have someone else light) the Christ candle on the worship table.

Turn off the room lights. Then aim the beam of a flashlight on a glass prism or on the reflective (or non-label) side of a CD, aiming the reflected light on the ceiling. Move the prism or the CD in the beam of light until the refracted color spectrum becomes visible somewhere on the ceiling. Then while all eyes are focused on the color spectrum, have someone read aloud the excerpt from Kenneson's book (see the excerpt under "The Book" section on page 4 in the participant guide). Call attention to these sentences: *"Love is much like light, which, when passing through a prism, breaks into its component parts. Just as these colors neither exist apart from the light nor are something added to the light, so these eight fruit neither exist apart from nor are something added on to love"* (p. 37).

Conclude the gathering time with prayer. Consider using Psalm 136:1-9 as the starting point.

EXPLORING THE ROOTS OF LOVE

Read and discuss the two images Paul uses to talk about the marks or character of the believer's life—bearing fruit and wearing clothes. Hear someone read aloud Colossians 3:12-14 and Galatians 5:1, 13. Then discuss these questions:

- ◆ What characteristics of wearing clothes do you think Paul had in mind in describing the Christian life?
- ◆ What meaning does the image of becoming slaves to one another add to your understanding of the nature of the Christian life?
- ◆ Recall Galatians 5:22-25; what characteristics of bearing fruit do you think Paul had in mind in describing the Christian life?

- ◆ Which metaphor—fruit bearing, clothing, or slavery—most inspires and informs your living as a Christian? Which one most challenges or critiques your living as a Christian?

EXAMINING THE CHALLENGES OF LOVE

Character of the Fruit

Call attention to book's comment that "*the fruit of the Spirit listed by Paul are not nine separate fruit, of which love is simply the first. Rather, love—as embodied in Jesus Christ and poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit—most fully reflects the very character of God.*"

Then form three groups to exploring the pattern of God's love as the model for our love in Jesus' parable of the good Samaritan. Have each group read Luke 10:25-37 read aloud and look at the van Gogh painting of *The Good Samaritan* in the Learner Guide. Each group should discuss these questions:

- ◆ In what way does Jesus' parable validate the lawyer's statement in 10:27?
- ◆ When are we guilty of knowing the demands of living a Christian life but looking for a loophole or some way around them?
- ◆ What are some characteristics of God's love reflected by this parable?
- ◆ Which characteristics are the most difficult to reflect in our own lives?

Come together as a large group and call attention to the statement just above the van Gogh painting on page 2 in the participant guide: "*The defining feature of God's love is its 'other-directedness.'*" Ask someone to read aloud 1 John 4:19-21. Then discuss this question:

- ◆ To what extent is it possible for human beings to imitate God's 'other-directed' love? How do we experience this way of love as both a gift received and a fruit to be cultivated?

Obstacles to Bearing the Fruit

In addition to identifying the character of the fruit of love, cultivation of the fruit requires uprooting those practices which impede growth. Kenneson argues that our economic practices are chief among the impediments to bearing the fruit of love.

- ◆ *Promoting self-interest*: viewing others as customers or competitors
- ◆ *Price-tagging everything*: viewing people and their talents as commodities rather than as gifts.
- ◆ *Consumer choice*: believing we are Christian by virtue of the "Christian" products and services we "consume."

Talk about the effect these three practices have on Christian living. Which of the three present the greatest challenge to you?

BEARING THE FRUIT OF LOVE IN THE WORLD

Cultivating the Fruit

Read aloud Galatians 5:13. To cultivate the fruit of love means to cultivate a way of life that resists the commodification of our relationship with God, with others, and with all of creation. Kenneson suggests three cultivation practices:

- ◆ WORSHIP (Deuteronomy 6:4-6)—paying attention to others by paying attention to God through praise and thanksgiving.
- ◆ EMBODIMENT (1 Corinthians 11:17-34)—to act out in our relationships the sacrificial gift of Christ's own body, symbolized in the Lord's Supper.
- ◆ STEWARDSHIP (Mark 10:17-22)—maintaining a balance between our "self" and our "stuff."

Invite the three groups formed earlier to get back together. Assign one of the cultivation practices to each group to discuss with these questions to guide them: (1) how might that practice actually look in our lives? and (2) how can such a practice enable our love to more nearly reflect God's love? Encourage them to make use of the Scriptures cited for each practice to inform their discussion.

Offer these action/reflection ideas for the coming week:

- ◆ Evaluate the portion of time you devote each week to yourself and your agenda, as compared to the needs of others? What would it take to redirect some more time in an "others-direction"?
- ◆ Pay attention to habits and practices in your life that cause you to view others more as objects or commodities for your benefit. What would it take to eliminate some of them?
- ◆ Start thinking now: following our next celebration of the Lord's Supper, how will you "embody" the gift of bread and cup toward others?

Form a circle and pray Ephesians 3:16-17

*I pray that, according to the riches of his glory,
he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being
with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts
through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love.*