

Links Players International Bible Study Series

THE LINKS PLAYERS COMMITMENT
Study 1 Loving God and others

Linking golfers around the world in Christ

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The First Tee

WHAT IS A LINKS PLAYER?

A **LINKS PLAYER**, FIRST AND FOREMOST, IS A PERSON WHO HAS SAID YES TO JESUS CHRIST'S OFFER OF ETERNAL SALVATION. Usually this person is a golfer, but to follow the mission of a Links Player, you might be only a golf fan, or have little to do with golf at all. The mission of a Links Player has nothing to do with golf, really. But it has everything to do with life.

Of course, there is a lot more than the simple word "yes" to making a decision to give your life to Christ. In fact, it is a decision that must be coupled with a commitment.

Jesus told His disciples to consider the cost of following Him. This was only fair of Him, for He also made it clear that suffering would be part of the lot in a Jesus follower's life. Suffering, the Bible tells us, is the most significant way that God blesses us, for in trials we learn, we grow, and we are brought into fellowship with Jesus Himself.

If you have never made a decision to follow Jesus and enter into fellowship (relationship) with Him, this study will still have value for you. It will help you consider the cost of making such an important decision and commitment. If at any time during this study you decide you are ready to move into fellowship with Jesus Christ, we invite you to turn to page 19 and follow the simple guide to giving your life to Him.

For Links Players, the commitment to follow Christ means that they are willing to accept the mission of a Links Player. There's no magic formula to following Christ; we must live the whole of our lives for Him everyday. But the five points of the Links Players mission are designed specifically to help you remember what was most important to Christ and to encourage you to give top priority to those same five points in your own life.

Here they are:

L **LOVE GOD AND OTHERS.** Jesus confirmed that the two greatest commandments were these: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and Love your neighbor as yourself.

I **INTEGRATE CHRIST'S REIGN AND INTEGRITY INTO ALL OF LIFE.** You can't have "just a little bit of Jesus." For this reason, Links Players find ways to walk like Jesus in all areas of life.

N **NETWORK FRIENDS TOGETHER IN CHRIST.** Links Players understand that fellowship with other believers has great value in our walk as God's people.

K **KINDLE COMPASSION FOR THE POOR AND NEEDY.** Jesus and His most prolific teacher, the apostle Paul, placed great emphasis on compassion for those in need. Links Players seek to incorporate this teaching into their own ministries.

S **SHARE CHRIST.** The walk with Christ is not a private stroll on a secluded path. We walk in the open, shining as a light that leads others to this wondrous life we have found.

In the eight-week study you are about to begin, we will look closely at the Bible's principles with regard to the first point of the Links Player's mission: Love God and others.

For God loved the world in this way: He gave His One and Only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life. —John 3:16

LESSON 1 THE LOVE OF GOD FOR US

WHEN JOHN DALY WON THE 1991 PGA CHAMPIONSHIP AT CROOKED STICK, an observant reporter noted that one of those following Daly in the lead group was a fan carrying a sign that read, "John 3:16." When Daly met with the press after his victory, the reporter was ready. "Was that guy writing down Scripture verses," the reporter asked Big John, "or were those your driving statistics for the day?"

The reporter's line was good for a laugh, but we all know the real answer to the question. The fan was doing his best to get his sign on TV and encourage viewers to consider John 3:16.

That being the case, viewers probably had one of five responses to the fan and his placard:

1. They knew the verse and the truth behind it, so they weren't at all curious as to the meaning of the sign.

2. They did not know the verse, but they did know from its format that it was something from the Bible. By the time they had finished watching the tournament, however, they had forgotten all about the fan and his not-so-subtle suggestion.

3. They did not know the verse, and they were suddenly curious to find out what it said. So they dug the dusty family Bible off the shelf and went searching for the verse and what it said.

4. They did not know the verse, and they didn't even know what the sign was meant to point them toward, so they put it aside in their mind, like they might put aside an unknown word used by an academician.

5. They knew just what this guy was up to, and they despised his attempt to bring religion into their home via this medium.



JOHN
3:16

QUESTION

How do you respond when someone tries to tell you about God?

LET'S ASSUME YOU WERE SOMETHING LIKE THE THIRD GROUP OF PEOPLE. You were curious to find out what this verse from the Bible said. (That's a good way to approach the Bible, even if you know what a verse says, for it keeps you looking at the Bible afresh.)

Here's what John 3:16 says: "For God loved the world in this way: He gave His One and Only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life."

Right away, particularly if you are a parent, you might look at this verse in a parental way. *What kind of parents, you might ask, would give away one of their own children, especially if that child is the only one they have? That's an important question here, because it challenges the character of God. And if you are going to get to know God, you can't be afraid to ask big questions about Him.*

QUESTION

What does the fact that God gave His Son mean to you when you think about who God is?

One thing we do know is that any parent who gave their child away would either be very evil or

would have a very good reason for doing so. Here is something we nearly all agree to about God: He is not evil. Therefore, God must have had a very good reason for giving His Son.

QUESTION

What do you think is involved in believing God's Son, Jesus Christ?

The verse itself tell us God's reason for giving His Son: God loves the world. That is, God loves the people in the world. With that love in mind, God gave His Son—whom the Bible tells us is Jesus Christ—that we might (1) believe in His Son, (2) not die, and (3) live eternally. In other words, God had three very good motives for giving His Son. Better yet, all of those motives have to do with the relationship that God wants to have with us. He wants it to be an eternal relationship.

You may be asking yourself some very powerful questions right about now. Let's talk about those for a minute.

QUESTION

What is the hardest part for you in coming to terms with your sin?

FIRST, YOU MAY BE WONDERING WHAT GOD'S GIVING HIS SON HAS TO DO WITH OUR LIVING ETERNALLY. If you have heard the Good News (gospel) of Christ many times before, you know the answer to this question. The Good News follows in the wake of the Bad News that we are sinners—people who do what is right in our own eyes, even if it means we have to use other people to get what we want or think we deserve in life. Then there is the Worse News that those who are marred by sin, as we all are, cannot enter the presence of the Holy God of heaven. And that leads to the Worst News, which is that unless some miraculous way is forged between us and God, we will spend eternity separated from God, utterly alone with the consequences of our sin. The Good News is that God has made such a way through His Son, Jesus Christ.

SECOND, YOU MAY BE WONDERING WHY GOD WOULD DO THIS FOR YOU. One of the Bible's most industrious writers, the apostle Paul, marveled at the same thing. Paul even called himself "the worst of sinners." But that was what made God's plan so wonderful, Paul told the Romans: "But God proves His own love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us!" Even after 2,000 years, that is one of the Bible's most amazing truths. Christ didn't die for us once we got our act together; He died for us when we were at our worst.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

This week, read Romans 5 and Hebrews 10, two powerful chapters about what Christ has done for us.

FINALLY, YOU MAY BE WONDERING WHY IT TOOK SUCH AN EXTREME ACT—THE GIVING OF HIS SON TO DIE A WRETCHED DEATH FOR US—IN ORDER FOR THIS WAY TO ETERNITY TO BE MADE FOR US. This is another great question about the character of God. And here is the answer: In the same way that God established absolute patterns for nature (such as gravity or entropy), He established absolute patterns for dealing with sin. In the Old Testament law, God made it clear that His people must sacrifice animals, shedding their blood as a covering for sin. But animals are not perfect, so those ancient sacrifices were never lasting. When Jesus Christ came, He lived a perfect life, so that when the time came for Him to die, His sacrifice was perfect and everlasting.

Yes, God's love for us is beyond all love. Our sin required complete sacrifice on His part—hardly a fair bargain for Him! Above all things, His love for us should inspire in us a response to love Him with our lives. After all, He certainly owes us nothing more. As we would say on the golf course, we're away!

GAME ON! One of the most basic principles of practicing your game is this to spend half your time on or around the practice green. The green is where you spend half your time on the course.

LESSON 2 WHY WE LOVE GOD

NO GOLFER CAN ANSWER THE QUESTION OF MOTIVATION FOR ANOTHER. **There's a simple reason for that: Each golfer is motivated in his or her own way. Some golfers are motivated to play better than they did the last time out. Some are driven to beat their opponent that day, perhaps an old nemesis or a friendly rival. Some like the challenge of a new course or a tricky set of elements.**

QUESTION

What motivates you to play golf? And just for fun, if you don't play golf, what motivates you to stay away?

Then there are those who are not motivated by the sport so much as the recreation. They head to the course for some time away from their usual routine. Or perhaps they are in it for the company (the social kind). Or the benefits it can bring to their company (the financial kind).

You see, there are any number of motivations for playing golf.

But when it comes to loving God, there is really just one motivation: We love because He first loved us.

YOU MAY HAVE SOME FRIENDS WHO WOULD DISAGREE WITH THIS PROPOSITION. They would tell you that you must love and serve God in order to get into heaven. Our lives, they would explain, are like a test. How well we score on "the goodness scale" dictates whether we'll make it through the pearly gates on Judgment Day.

The Bible presents another idea altogether. It's called grace.

None of us is good enough to get into heaven on our own, because we have all sinned—repeatedly, if the truth be told—and come up short of God's perfect standard. Way short.

QUESTION

If you were God, what list of criteria for entering heaven would you consider reasonable?

That's why we need Jesus. Only His perfect sacrifice makes it possible for us to enter heaven. What we must do is attach ourselves to Jesus and this truth about Him through faith in what He has done. Biblically speaking, what He has done is offer us *grace*, sometimes explained as God's riches at Christ's expense. That is, we can receive the rewards of heaven because Christ paid the price for us to be so enabled. What we must do is not a bunch of good works, but instead place our faith in the One who has done the greatest work of all.

AND YET THE BIBLE IS FULL OF TEACHINGS ABOUT DOING THE RIGHT THING. **Right about now, you have to be wondering why. Why, if there is nothing we can do to gain heaven by ourselves, does God give us a thick book full of instructions about how we should act?**

For instance, most everyone is aware of the Ten Commandments. Relatively few people actually know what all those commandments are, but nearly all people have heard of them. They may be familiar with the classic film, with Charlton Heston as Moses. Or they may follow the legal and political arguments about whether the Ten Commandments should be posted in schools or court-houses. They may even think that in a time such as ours, when ethics have often been deserted in exchange for a profit, it's time for the Ten Commandments—or something very much like them—to be brought back for everyone to learn and follow.

But here's the amazing thing. Even if everyone knew the Ten Commandments, no one would be able to follow them, not in actual deed or intent of the heart. And as much as we'd like to order the severity of sins, the Bible makes it clear that we cannot do that, for if we have broken one point of the law, we have broken it all (James 2:10).

QUESTION

Throughout your life, what has motivated you to do the right thing? Fear of punishment? Guilt from the past? A parental voice? Or something else?

SO IF WE CAN'T ACHIEVE OUR OWN WAY INTO HEAVEN, WHAT MOTIVATION IS THERE FOR DOING RIGHT? The primary motivation for doing right is to love God back. Of course, we can never give Him what He has given us: our lives, our families, the nature around us, His Son as the sacrifice for our sin. But we can give Him what He asks of us: our obedience, our praise, and love for others. We'll talk about each of these three topics in the weeks to come. For now,

let's consider the words of one of those who followed Jesus during His time on earth.

John was a fisherman before Jesus came along. He spent his working days on the sea of Galilee with his brother James and their father, Zebedee. Along, with Peter, and perhaps others of the disciples, Jesus called them away from what they were doing, saying, "From now on, you will be fishers of men." The Bible tells us that these men left their nets immediately to follow Jesus. Apparently, it was an invitation they had been eagerly awaiting.

During the ensuing three years, John and the others saw Jesus perform countless physical and natural miracles, including raising people from the dead, healing those who had been blind and utterly crippled, changing water to wine, and calming the stormy seas.

When John later wrote his gospel, he did not refer to himself by name. Instead, he called himself "the disciple that Jesus loved." What a powerful way to identify himself! Not as "a fisherman," not as "one of the Twelve," not even as "John"—but as "the disciple that Jesus loved."

QUESTION

What is the biggest piece of evidence in your life that God loves you?

It was this memory, this truth about his relationship with Jesus, that drove John's actions for the rest of his life. It is often noted the John was the only one of the apostles (what the Twelve closest disciples were called after the coming of the Holy Spirit) who was not martyred for his belief in

Christ. What is also noted, however, is that John suffered torture and exile for his faith in Christ. He "took up his cross daily" for the sake of Christ. And what motivated him was the love Jesus had shown him.

In his later years, John, like some of the other apostles, wrote letters to the churches and to individuals, affirming them in their faith and instructing them in their beliefs. Here is what John wrote in one of his letters: "We love because He first loved us."

FOR FURTHER STUDY

This week, read Matthew 27 and 1 John 4 as reminders of God's great love for you.

That was all the motivation John needed. By focusing on the love of God for him through Jesus Christ, John was able to keep what Jesus called the greatest commandment: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind" (Matthew 22:37).

GAME ON! Once you're on the practice green, you want to simulate a round, where most of your putts are long putts you want to lag close or short putts you must make. Spend your time lagging from a distance and draining putts from three to four feet in.

"If anyone loves Me, he will obey My teaching." —John 14:23

LESSON 3 HOW WE LOVE GOD, PART 1 Obedience

IF YOU REALLY WANT TO IMPROVE AT GOLF, HERE'S A SIMPLE PIECE OF ADVICE: DO WHAT YOUR TEACHER SAYS. If you're thinking that sounds absurdly basic, you're right. But the fact is that a lot of golfers pay a lot of money for help from a teaching professional, but they do very little to follow up on that teaching.

In-between lessons, they practice little or not at all. Most often a golfer takes a lesson, then heads to the course as quickly as possible to see if it "works." If it does, then maybe that golfer will practice what he has been taught. But the greater likelihood is that it won't work, because it hasn't been habitually incorporated into the golfer's swing. The golfer abandons the idea and eventually the lessons altogether.

QUESTION

What is a good piece of golf advice you have been given by a teaching professional? How well did you follow that instruction?

The only thing that will improve your game is if you obey your professional. That's right, obey.

Obedience is something we think of with regards to young children and parents or teachers. But outside of a few legal instructions—"Obey the speed limit," for instance—it's not an idea we associate with adults in our society. Even when we work for a boss, we don't use the term "obey." Instead, we choose something different: "Follow her orders" or "Do his bidding." What's odd is that these sound more like our response to a military leader or a slave master, which suggests we have no choice in the matter—unless we're willing to be ousted.

To obey, however, seems like a different matter. It gives the suggestion of choice. And as independent adults, it's a choice we are rarely willing to make. It requires us to willingly place ourselves in submission to another, and to willingly do what they ask us to do.

Who would make such a choice?

WELL, THE BIBLE TELLS US THAT A FOLLOWER OF JESUS CHRIST WOULD MAKE THAT CHOICE. Jesus told His disciples, "If anyone loves Me, he will obey My teaching" (John 14:23, NIV).

Sometimes the principles of Scripture are too plain to be discussed. This is one such principle. If we want to show our love to God, we must do what He says. This is why it is important to keep before us the motivation that we learned about in the last lesson. Not everything that God instructs us to do will be easy. If we don't have our eyes fixed on what He has done for us, it will be easy to disregard God's instructions and choose our own course.

QUESTION

Are you defensive when you hear the word "obey"? If so, why do you think this is?

And yet, there are some secondary motivations as well that may help you obey God's commands. First, while on the surface, a teaching of Scripture may seem too harsh, every one of those teachings has been written to protect you from the strategies of the enemy, Satan: fear, worry, guilt, frustration, loneliness, and more. Second, if you wisely consider the impact you have on younger generations, when you obey God, you are showing them that you follow a Higher Authority (the Highest, actually!). That's important when you are encouraging them to follow the earthly authorities that have been established to lead them.

Let's assume you're motivated. You're ready to do what God tells you to do. That's a big step. It means *everything* that comes from God's voice to you is now your guiding ethic. You can't pick and

choose which commands of God you will allow to apply to you. Put in those terms, the stakes just got a whole lot higher.

If you have been around Christians for a while, you might be tempted to fall back on a familiar platitude: "The safest place to be is in the center of God's will." That's true when it comes to your relationship with God. But when it comes to your relationship with your family or your neighbors or your own body, God's will can be quite unsafe.

QUESTION

Of the biblical commands you are familiar with, which would you say is the most difficult for you to follow?

That's why it took Gideon so long to decide to obey God.

THE STORY OF GIDEON IS A FAIRLY WELL-KNOWN ONE AMONG THOSE WHO HAVE READ THE OLD TESTAMENT. Gideon was a young man of a weak clan. He told God this, suggesting he was not qualified to do what God asked of him. But after a series of confirmations from God, Gideon was convinced that even he could obey God, though what God was calling him to do was lead His people into battle. Safe? Hardly. But Gideon was convinced.

We must be similarly convinced. We must realize that if God loved us so much that He gave His only Son for us, He would not then lead us down paths that harm us. Jesus said that earthly men are kind to their children, then added, "How much more will your heavenly Father give good things to those who ask Him!"

After we are convinced, we must go forward with expectation. That is, we must expect that God will ask us to do things in His name. Most of these are found plainly stated in the Bible. Consider these, for instance:

[Jesus said], "Give to the one who asks you, and don't turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you" (Matthew 5:42).

Show family affection to one another with brotherly love. Outdo one another in showing honor (Romans 12:10).

Let the message about the Messiah dwell richly among you, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, and singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, with gratitude in your heart to God (Colossians 3:16).

Each of these verses almost certainly points to something you've not yet achieved at every turn in your life. And yet, unequivocal obedience is what God seeks from us. So one of the most worthwhile pursuits we can undertake as followers of Christ is to know what His Word says by studying it regularly. But in the wake of our knowing, we must continue in doing. Indeed, obedience makes our faith come alive, "for just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead" (James 2:26). And it is how we show God our gratitude for the love He has shown us.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

This week, read Judges 6-8 to see how God called Gideon and honored his obedience.

GAME ON! Got a coin? To train your eye to see the center of the hole, drop a coin on the putting green and make some attempts at hitting that coin from three to six feet away. You'll be pleased at how big the hole looks after this kind of training.

But You are holy, enthroned on the praises of your people. —Psalm 22:3

LESSON 4 HOW WE LOVE GOD, PART 2 Praise

IN OUR GENERATION, SPORTS COVERAGE BY THE MEDIA HAS REACHED REMARKABLE HEIGHTS. Not only can you watch round-the-clock sports channels, like ESPN, but you can watch round-the-clock golf channels as well.

We could spend many paragraphs identifying what this has done to us, but the most obvious observations we can make are these: First, sports TV gobbles up our time. Second, sports TV gobbles up our attention.

QUESTION

Who is a favorite professional golfer of yours? What do you like about this player's character and game?

Of course, the advertisers like that, too. The more we watch sports, the more we see the advertisers' products. But you have probably never considered that the athletes themselves like all this attention we're giving them as well.

In many parts of the world, with the United States and Australia out front in this regard, we have raised our athletes to a tier well above that of average citizens. Whether or not they should be, we have made athletes our heroes. We have given them our praise for every great catch, every hard throw, every long drive, and every last-second game-winning shot. And sports TV feeds our vision of what players can do. The higher esteem we give them, the greater their worth when it comes time to sign contracts, both to play and to endorse products on behalf of hungry advertisers.

CALL THIS THE WAY OF THE WORLD IF YOU WISH. Say there is not much we can do about the accolades given to mere men and women—be they athletes, Fortune 500 CEOs, lauded politicians, or Hollywood stars. But don't miss the underlying principle: esteem breeds worth—as long as that esteem is given for actual achievement.

Place that idea along what the Bible says with regard to how we address the God who loves us, and you'll see how praise fits into our relationship with God and how we love Him.

Take a moment to think about this verse written by David:

Ascribe to the LORD the glory of His name; bring an offering and come before Him. Worship the Lord in the splendor of His holiness (1 Chronicles 16:29).

QUESTION

Based on your own life, why would you say that God deserves praise?

In today's context, we almost exclusively consider offerings to be something of monetary value, usually money itself. Yet, this passage from the Old Testament surrounds the practice of an offering with an entirely different idea: giving God the praise He deserves.

Why does God deserve praise?

In the Old Testament, we begin to learn the answer to this question. According to the laws God gave to Moses, when a Hebrew farmer planted a tree, he was not to eat of its fruit for the first three years. Apparently, it was just to be left on the ground where it fell. In the fourth year, the fruit was still not to be eaten, but this time it was to be harvested. And once it was harvested it was "consecrated as a praise offering to the Lord" (Leviticus 19:24). So we know this basic principle: *God deserves praise because of what He provides for us.*

But that seems like little more than good manners, to be grateful for the food we are given—or any

other material provision, for that matter. Surely, there must be more significant reasons to praise God!

David's words point to two more such reasons: *God's name is glorious* and *there is splendor in His holiness*.

Perhaps it is odd to think of a name holding such stock. That is, until you think of some of the names we know from the world of sports: Nadia, the Babe, Pelé, Tiger. All of these players have achieved a level of greatness that allows them to be identified immediately, even with only a single name. Just saying their name sets them apart.

So it is with the name of God, a name so meaningful that the Hebrews dared not speak it aloud. (Our own New Testament relationship with God allows us to approach Him with confidence and even to cry *Abba*, which means "Daddy.") But by now you understand the idea. God is so awesome, so infinite, even His name alone is glorious.

QUESTION

What are some ways you can list to praise God? Which of these are you most comfortable using in your own time before Him?

And then there is the splendor of God's holiness. What a wonderful combination! When we think of something that is holy, we almost recoil in our own mind, for holiness—true, unadulterated holiness—is overwhelming. It is the same for something that is visually splendid. So bright is it that we must avert our eyes, lest they be blinded. With God we encounter that kind of splendid holiness, the kind

that caused Isaiah to cry out: "Woe is me, for I am ruined, because I am a man of unclean lips and live among a people of unclean lips and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of Hosts" (Isaiah 6:5).

Finally, we must go back to our original reason for praising God and apply it to the personal relationship we have with Him through Jesus Christ. We are to praise God because of what He provides for us.

Through Christ, God has made a way for our sin to be forgiven, for eternal life to be gained, and for access to God to be attained. We could not have done any of this on our own. We had to have Christ. The greatest thing God has ever given us was His only Son. For that, we must praise Him everyday.

NOW HERE IS ONE LAST GRAND THOUGHT FOR TODAY. If your love language is the giving of gifts, you can be assured that your praise is a tangible blessing to God. Look at one more line from a psalm of David:

But You are holy, enthroned on the praises of your people (Psalm 22:3).

FOR FURTHER STUDY

This week, read Psalms 77-78, which convey Asaph's praises for God's great works.

Do you know how your praises demonstrate your love to God? They serve to build His very throne and to keep it sustained throughout the generations. Our continued esteem makes God more and more worthy in the eyes of those who love Him!

GAME ON! To practice lags and get comfortable with the speed of unfamiliar greens, back up thirty to forty feet from a hole on the practice green and enlarge the hole in your mind's eye to three feet out from all sides of the hole. Now practice putting each ball into that imaginary circle.

For the person who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. —1 John 4:20b

LESSON 5 HOW WE LOVE GOD, PART 3 Loving Others

IN GOLF, WHILE MOST TEACHING PROFESSIONALS ARE GENERALISTS, SOME ARE KNOWN FOR THEIR ABILITIES TO TEACH SPECIFIC ASPECTS OF THE GAME. For instance, most serious golfers are familiar with Dave Pelz's short game academies. And Links Player Stan Utley, who has played major and minor professional tours for many years, has earned a reputation more recently as a teacher of putting, that most mysterious and most coveted skill. A number of tour professionals have turned to Utley for help.

QUESTION

If you could choose one aspect of your golf game to work on and improve in the next month, what would it be?

If the Bible writers were in any way specialists, John, the fisherman who followed Jesus as one of His twelve closest disciples, would have to be regarded as an expert in love. We've already seen, in fact, that John referred to himself in his gospel as "the disciple Jesus loved." That wasn't just a sentimental moniker. John, you may recall, was the only one of the Twelve disciples at the cross. He saw what Jesus' love ultimately meant—complete surrender for others.

John maintained the theme of love in his epistles, or letters, which we find late in the New Testament. Not martyred for his faith, John's life outlasted the lives of the other apostles, so he wrote some of the Bible last books, including three brief letters and the Revelation given to him while he was in exile on the island of Patmos.

It was in the first of these letters, though, that John made it clear how our love must be expressed.

It is returned to God, we know. We have already studied the motivation for our love of God, which is His first love for us. But John extends the teaching on love outside of the target of God Himself. John was extremely adamant about our need to love others as well.

LOOK AT THIS PASSAGE, FROM JOHN'S FIRST EPISTLE:

This is how we have come to know love: He laid down His life for us. We should also lay down our lives for our brothers. If anyone has this world's goods and sees his brother in need but shuts off his compassion from him—how can God's love reside in him? (1 John 3:16-17)

QUESTION

Who is our example in love? What makes it easy to follow this example? What makes it difficult?

Perhaps your initial reaction to this passage is one of relief. You are saying to yourself, "It's true that I have enemies in this world, but I for one do love my brother." That may be true, but John's reference is to the greater circle of brothers, not just to our biological siblings. At the very least John means our brothers in the family of God; more broadly, he may mean our brothers on earth, all our fellow men and women. We must show love to them all, and the places a great demand on us.

More than that, this love is sacrificial, just like Christ's love. It means that we regard our surplus as belonging to those in need. It means we serve others as Christ served us, a concept we will explore in Lesson 6. And it means we act compassionately, which we will examine in Lesson 7.

Finally, you may have gathered from this passage that true love trumps religion. With religious eyes, we excuse ourselves for focusing only on God. We go to church on Sundays, direct our worship toward Him, and don't worry about how all this applies throughout the week. True love

cannot be so limited in its actions. It must focus upward *and* outward. In fact, the apostle James explained it this way: "Pure and undefiled religion before our God and Father is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself unstained by the world" (James 1:27).

How broad our love must be! We are not allowed the luxury of a "personal religion." We can't simply say "the right words" and consider ourselves in right relationship with God. John had more to say in this regard:

"Little children, we must not love in word and speech, but in deed and truth; that is how we will know we are of the truth, and will convince our hearts in His presence, because if our hearts condemn us, God is greater than our hearts and knows all things" (1 John 3:18-20).

FOR FURTHER STUDY

This week, read the five chapters of 1 John to capture the fullness of the apostle's teaching on love.

When it comes to true love, there is no faking it. Our hearts will bear witness against us if we are only "talking a good game."

IF, THEN, WE ARE CALLED TO PRACTICAL LOVE, IT WOULD DO US GOOD TO TAKE SOME TIME AND CONSIDER THE OBJECTS OF OUR LOVE. First, make sure the objects of your love are not objects at all, not in the sense that they are material things or personal aspirations. The objects of our love are to be people. (Always remember that Scripture is clear that only three things endure eternally: God, God's Word, and people. You should set all your life's priorities from that list.)

Now, if we are to love people, we can assume that the people we are to love will fall into one of three categories—people who are easy to love, people who are not easy to love, and people we have never really thought of loving. Don't disregard that last category, for it has been said that the opposite of love is not hate but indifference. Before we move into our next two lessons, where we will consider how we render love, take a few minutes to list some people who should occupy your heart of love.

People it is easy for me to love

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

People it is hard for me to love

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

People I've never thought to love before today

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

GAME ON! Every great putter will tell you that getting the right speed effectively widens the hole by allowing the ball to fall in on the sides rather than lip out. Be sure you pay close attention to developing your ability at putting with accurate speed as well as aim.

"On the contrary, whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you must be your slave." —Matthew 20:26-27

LESSON 6 HOW WE LOVE OTHERS, PART 1 Service

GOLFERS KNOW HOW TO TAKE FULL ADVANTAGE OF THE SERVICE INDUSTRY. Even if you don't belong to a country club, the establishments where you play keep you coming back by maintaining a competitive price and keeping their course in good condition. If you do play at a country club or more upscale daily fee courses, you know the golf facilities often feature other service-based amenities, too, like good food, golf lessons, and even club and shoe care.

QUESTION

Describe the best service experience you have had. What were some things that made your day or your stay so special?

There's one catch to all that service: you're paying for it. It doesn't always seem like that, of course, because much of the attention is just subsumed in the overall fee or added to your monthly bill. Either way, it doesn't feel like a one-for-one exchange.

But even if we were paying for those services singularly, we would never mistake the service we receive as an act of love. Frankly, it's what the competitive market often requires of those businesses.

IN THE KINGDOM OF GOD, YOU'LL FIND MUCH TO DO WITH SERVICE AS WELL. Primarily, you'll find this: we are to go from being served to serving. Jesus made this plain, and when we find it easier and easier to follow His teaching in this particular matter, it is evidence of His Holy Spirit at work in us. How do we know that? Because you'll look far and wide finding someone for whom service comes "naturally"!

The discussion began between Jesus and His disciples when two of them, James and John, plotted with their mother to sit at Jesus' right and left hand in heaven. Matthew recorded in his gospel that it was the mother who approached Jesus with the request. Jesus reminded the brothers that there was a price to be paid for service to the King, then He added that this matter of eternal position was not for Him to determine, but for the heavenly Father.

QUESTION

What are some of the ways you have been taught or you have thought about getting ahead in the world?

Interestingly, but certainly not coincidentally, the other disciples heard about this exchange. Here is what happened:

When the 10 disciples heard this, they became indignant with the two brothers. But Jesus called them over and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles dominate them, and the men of high position exercise power over them. It must not be like that among you. On the contrary, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man (Jesus) did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life—a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:24-28).

This must have been as shocking a teaching to the disciples as it is to us. To be sure, the disciples did not look like the board of directors for your typical corporation. There were only one or two business types among them; the rest were blue-collar guys. But they were not used to serving. The world's models then were similar to what they are today. Seize power. Exert authority. Look out for Number One. That's how you got ahead.

Now here came Jesus, whose teaching they had grown to trust, telling them that this was a backwards idea. What they needed to be thinking of was others. They needed to find ways to serve others. And they were to do this not for pay but out of love.

QUESTION

Who is someone you can point to in your own life who offers an example of selfless service? Can you cite specific ways to serve that this person has demonstrated for you?

YOU MUST KNOW BY NOW, HOWEVER, THAT JESUS WAS NOT JUST A SPEAKER. He backed everything up by example.

On the night before He died, when He knew exactly what was coming, Jesus acted with complete humility before His disciples. The King became the courtier. No, He became less than that. He became the menial servant. Look:

Before the Passover Festival, Jesus knew that His hour had come to depart from this world to the Father. Having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end...

So He got up from supper, laid aside His robe, took a towel, and tied it around Himself. Next, He poured water into a basin and began to wash His disciples' feet and to dry them with the towel tied around Him (John 13:1, 4-5).

Here was Jesus the Messiah, the One who had come to seek and to save, setting aside any claim to the throne to place His disciples on a high pedestal. For any time we lower ourselves, we lift up others. The disciples were not comfortable with this, because they knew who Jesus was, and they did not feel worthy to have their feet washed by Him. But Jesus pressed on, through Peter's objections. And when He was done, He made it clear that what He had done was not just for them, but for those they would encounter for the rest of their lives:

When Jesus had washed their feet and put on His robe, He reclined again and said to them, "Do you know what I have done for you? You call Me Teacher and Lord. This is well said, for I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example that you also should do just as I have done for you" (John 13:12-15).

There you have it. Love is expressed through sacrificial service.

We don't think of washing one another's feet today. In a world of tubs and showers, it would seem odd to fill a basin or jar and wash your guests' feet. However, there are many other ways to show people that we have no desire to lord our position over them. In sin and in Christ, we are all in the same position! We are desperate before God and Christ is our only hope for heaven.

So we come in humility and service, and we love in with those two characteristics. This doesn't come "naturally." It only comes when the Holy Spirit takes over our heart, soul, and mind. If you're not sure what to pray for in your daily walk with Christ, today we have found a good suggestion: *Father God, Take my heart, my soul, and my mind, and match them to Your Son. Make me a servant, willing to help whomever needs help, regardless of our relationship or position. Amen.*

FOR FURTHER STUDY

This week, read Romans 12, which encourages us toward practical service in the church and in the world.

GAME ON! The average golfer won't normally notice the effects of a ball that has been slightly knocked out of round—except on the putting green. If you've smacked a tree or bounced it off a cart path, for the sake of your putting, you should exchange your ball.

"But a Samaritan on his journey came up to him and when he saw [the man], he had compassion." —Luke 10:33

LESSON 7 HOW WE LOVE OTHERS, PART 2 Compassion

BY NOW YOU HAVE LEARNED THE POWER OF PARABLES AND ANALOGIES. We have used them throughout these lessons to take the familiar game of golf and help you understand key truths of Scripture.

Unfortunately, some of the Bible's accounts that have been written off as "stories" through the centuries—Noah's ark, David and Goliath, God's handwriting on the wall in the book of Daniel—should not have been so lowly regarded. They are not stories, but part of the history of God's people. Indeed, no archaeological discovery has ever disproved the biblical record.

QUESTION

How do stories reach you in ways that other forms of communication do not?

Other parts of Scripture, however—and particularly Jesus' teaching—are truer examples of stories. Their accounts never occurred historically, but they were told with great purpose. The Bible calls these parables, which are stories with meanings behind them. Some of these meanings were difficult to discern, and the disciples often sought explanation from Jesus. But other parables were straightforward in their meaning, such as this one:

Just then an expert in the law stood up to test Him, saying, "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

"What is written in the law?" He asked him. "How do you read it?"

He answered: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.

"You've answered correctly," He told him. "Do this and you will live."

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

Jesus took up [the question] and said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him, beat him up, and fled, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down that road. When he saw him, he passed by on the other side. In the same way, a Levite, when he arrived at the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan on his journey came up to him, and when he saw [the man], he had compassion. He went over to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him. When I come back I'll reimburse you for whatever extra you spend.'

"Which of these three do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?"

"The one who showed mercy to him," he said.

Then Jesus told him, "Go and do the same" (Luke 10:25-37).

Even people who have little knowledge of the Bible often recognize the principal character in that parable. It is the good Samaritan. Over time, the expression "good Samaritan" has been used to describe anyone who helps another in an hour of great need.

What a lot of people don't know is that there was little or no impetus for the Samaritan to help the beaten man. You might guess this was because there was no promise of reward, and you would be right. But heroes aren't compelled by rewards. What makes this parable especially remarkable is that the injured man was a Jew and the Samaritan, being Samaritan, was his despised, mistreated enemy. Samaritans were "half breeds," purposely avoided by any self-respecting Jew.

AND THAT MAY BE THE KEY RIGHT THERE. The Samaritan was not self-respecting. He respected this other man in a way that others did not. He did not regard himself as too busy, too clean, too inexperi-

enced, or too much or too little of anything else. He saw the job that needed to be done, and he did it.

QUESTION

What has kept you from helping other people in a sacrificial way in the past? Do you spy a chance for change in this area of your life?

The Bible tells us that God is "no respecter of persons" (Acts 10:34, King James Version). He doesn't play favorites. And neither did this example of practical love for one's neighbor that Jesus set before the people, this Samaritan.

Two thousand years later, after Jesus' telling of this parable and His teaching surrounding it, we must continue to

determine to respond to its closing sentence: "Go and do the same."

We already know from Lesson 5 that love is not a matter of romantic words as you might find in a note between sweethearts. It's not a matter of spoken promises. Love is about selfless action, about lifting up those who never thought they would be lifted up (often because they don't think they deserve it). We know this is true from our own experience with Jesus, who has raised us up despite our sin and brought us under His incessant ministrations.

Now, Jesus was saying, it is our turn. Now we turn His compassion toward others—our neighbors, yes, but also our spouses, our families, our colleagues, our friends, and our enemies. We must love them with a love that gives.

There is no way to do this out of our own motivation. We might think we *should* do this as moral

QUESTION

Define love as you think Jesus would define it.

people. But moral people still are left with their own driving force. On the whole, their personal priorities will also outweigh the needs of others. We are motivated by Christ's love for us, His dying, undying love.

TAKE THE TIME TO STEP OUT IN COMPASSION AND ASSISTANCE IN THE NAME OF JESUS. Do it for His glory. You'll be pleased with the satisfaction you often get out of serving others, especially when they don't expect it, but don't make that your main goal. Love people because God first loved you. Then your satisfaction will remain where it should be: in Him.

If you are the kind of person who always seems to be busy, with tightly scheduled days, and helping others would be an inconvenience, even depriving those to whom you've already promised help, consider:

1. Planning time to go out and seek those who have special, urgent needs.
2. Asking God to free you at moments when you would normally balk at stopping to help another.
3. Praying that when you cannot stop, another follower of Christ will be able to come along and offer assistance in Christ's name.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

This week, look at the places you travel around town in a whole new light. See them as places of opportunity for ministry, and ask God how it is that you might serve others with compassion.

In the end, prayer will be critical for all of us in this matter, for compassion is something we can all learn to extend more liberally.

GAME ON! In recent seasons, Tour players have focused less on counting their total putts and more on the total distance of putts made per round. This change can help you, too. Sixty total feet of putts made in a round is a good average to shoot for.

Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may discern what is the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God. —Romans 12:2

LESSON 8 REVIEW AND ADVANCE

FOR SEVEN LESSONS NOW, WE HAVE CONSIDERED THE FIRST ASPECT OF BEING A LINKS PLAYER IN DEPTH. Now let's spend a day reviewing what we have studied and consider how we might enact this principle in our lives. James wrote, "But be doers of the word and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves...the one who looks intently into the perfect law of freedom and perseveres in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer who acts—this person will be blessed in what he does." (James 1:22,25). So let's make it our goal today to move from study to practice.

QUESTION

What is your most difficult struggle with carrying out the principles of the Bible?

In review, answer the following questions:

1. What is the first aspect of being a Links Player?

2. What is our motivation for loving God?

3. Jesus said that if we loved Him, we would do something for Him. What is it?

4. What are three reasons to praise God?

5. The apostle John told us that there is a telltale sign that we love God. What is it?

6. Identify two themes of our love for others.

This is a just a simple review, but as golfers we know that simple is often safest. When we reduce our swing thoughts to a few simple ideas, we usually make great progress. Contrarily, we can study swings all day and all night and it will make no difference in our game until we get out and play.

Many people who study the Bible enjoy digging into the detail. There is certainly nothing wrong with this approach, and often the details will enhance our understanding of who God is. But the details can also keep us from setting the study books down and doing what they say.

In simple terms, then, we have four possibilities for motion from this set of lessons about how to love God and others: (1) obeying God's commands, (2) praising God, (3) rendering selfless service to others, and (4) showing compassion to others.

What is one way right now that you can commit to loving God and others in the next 24 hours?

IF YOU ARE DOING THIS STUDY AS PART OF A GROUP, YOUR GROUP SHOULD TAKE SOME TIME TO TALK ABOUT THE IDEAS

QUESTION

If you are meeting in a group, what have been some positive aspects of this arrangement? If not, how might a group study enhance your learning and application of the material?

YOU HAVE RECORDED FOR LOVING GOD AND OTHERS.¹ There are three critical advantages to this. You may recognize the first two from the business world. First, your good ideas may generate good ideas for others. Second, others may have resources that can help you with your own idea. But the third reason to present your ideas to others is the most important—so they can affirm and pray for you as you go forward with implementing your plan.

Sometimes it is difficult to know what to pray for others. Beyond healing in a time of sickness or relief in a time of trouble, our tongues are often tied when it comes to prayer. Having a list of practical ministries that your friends will be trying in the days to come should help you as you talk to God.

Don't forget the follow-up here, either. In the days to come, call your friends and ask them about how they are progressing. Even with prayer, our best plans don't always go smoothly. This can be particularly true if we are attempting to love those we have not shown love to before. They may not know how to respond. Or they may respond by taking offense or rejecting your help. That's when it is good to have a friend call and hear your story and pray with you again.

AS WE CLOSE THIS STUDY, LET'S DO SO AS CHANGED PEOPLE. God's mercies are new every morning, which means He is always ready to have you start afresh with Him. Each day your life is going to be tainted by sin, whether you seek it out or you step in it without seeing it coming. But we are a people freed by Christ, and we do not need to dwell on our failures. We need to stand on the truth of His forgiveness, confessing our sins to Him and moving on in His grace (see 1 John 1:9).

This very day let's make a fresh commitment to love God in word and in action, toward Him and toward others.

¹Large groups may need to break up into smaller groups of 3-5 in order to best accomplish the exchange of ideas and prayer for one another. If, on the other hand, you are not in a group, write out your commitment and hand it to a friend who will call you in the next few days to ask how you are progressing and to pray for you.

FOR GROUP LEADERS USING THIS STUDY

IT CAN BE DAUNTING TO BE CALLED ON TO TEACH THE WORD OF GOD. Indeed, many potential leaders have told us that while they are capable of and eager to bring a group together, or to act as host, teaching is an entirely different level, one for which they do not consider themselves prepared.

QUESTION

Why are you being called upon to lead a Bible study group? In what ways do you feel best prepared?

Other don't feel so much weight when it comes to teaching. They know their Bibles well, or they're naturals when speaking to a crowd.

It is, then, the precise goal of the structure of these Links Players Bible studies to provide a fully operational Bible study for those teachers who need much assistance and yet a format that leaves room for experienced leaders to bring their own learning to the table.

In each lesson, you will find five features:

- **THE OPENING SCRIPTURE VERSE.** You might encourage members of the group to memorize the verse each week. This may depend on the interest of your group, but even the newest in Christ need to begin committing the Word of God to memory, as it will hold them to righteousness when times of decision come in their lives.
- **THE NARRATIVE LESSON.** This lesson uses golf analogies to tie into Scriptural truths. Many non-golfers read our daily devotional, so the analogies are not necessary, nor are they normally meaningful only if you deeply understand golf. In some cases, you may wish to go to your Bible to provide more context for the Scriptures as they are presented in each lesson.
- **THE QUESTION BOXES.** These boxes may help individuals in your study reflect more personally on the lesson, but the questions can also open honest, rich discussion in your group setting. As you progress with your group, you'll acquire a sense of whether they are interested in open discussion, or whether they would simply desire to be taught in a straightforward style.
- **FOR FURTHER STUDY.** This final box always give the group something to beyond the boundaries of the brief study. They may do this before they come each week, or they may do the further study after you gather and discuss the main topic.
- **GAME ON!** These golf tips are provided to build a bridge for those who play the game. It might help your group get to know each other better if they work on these tips together when they head to the golf course.

Finally, the set of lessons concludes with a Review and Advance lesson. While you may emphasize life application of the study each time you meet, this lesson is intended to bring personal application to the forefront, so that each member of the group can assess their own position before God and move forward in their relationship with Him.

However you choose to use these studies, be it verbatim or as a loose guide, we pray that your group will be enriched and motivated by the studies. Should you have any questions or suggestions for us as we develop more of these studies, please give us a call at Links Players, 1-800-90-LINKS.

BECOMING A LINKS PLAYER

THE GOLF COURSE IS A PRETTY STRANGE PLACE TO GO LOOKING FOR GOD. The truth is, though, that God is infinite and able to meet us where we are. So people have met God through Jesus Christ in just about every imaginable venue, from the finest country clubs to the most despicable of the world's prisons. What matters is the readiness of your heart. When you're desperate for God, it is usually because everything else in the world has left you wanting something more. If you find yourself in that state today, God has quite an offer for you, made through His Son Jesus Christ with these simple words: "Follow Me."

In that day they will say, "Surely this is our God; we trusted in Him, and He saved us. This is the LORD, we trusted in Him; let us rejoice and be glad in His salvation." —Isaiah 25:9

When He said these words to His various people when He lived on earth, their responses varied. Some made excuses. Some considered what was involved and found it to be too much for them. But His disciples, those who chose to follow Him, set aside all they had tried before and followed. Was it easy? Often not. Was it what they expected? Once in a while. But was it what they desired? In their heart of hearts, yes. And the same holds true for the men and women in our time who have said, "Yes, I will follow."

If you have completed this study and reviewed the five points of the Links Player's personal mission as outlined on page 1, you have a good sense of what is involved in following Christ. You can't know everything, but you have enough information to "consider the cost," as Jesus said. If you now find yourself ready to commit to following Christ, here's what you do:

FIRST, if possible, make your commitment in the presence of someone who has already done so. This is not necessary, but from the moment of your surrender, you will have a partner in the faith, a person who can encourage and support you.

SECOND, begin to pray. This is a holy act, but it requires no special words or patterns. The Bible tells us that Jesus intercedes for us, carrying our prayers to the Father in heaven.

THIRD, give your sinful life to God. Tell Him that you are sorry for what you have done in the past, but that you know He can free you from the eternal consequences of that past.

FOURTH, tell God that you are thankful for the death of His Son, whose shed blood cleanses your sin.

FINALLY, let God know that you are ready for a new life, empowered by the Holy Spirit, to do things you have never done before, replacing sinful habits with righteous ones. Ask Him to guide you step-by-step, particularly in the next few days as you tell others about this important decision and commitment you have made.

Now that you have made this commitment to follow Christ, you are a Links Player. That's it.

But remember, too, that you are just a seedling. God has it in mind for you to grow. You can do this through important acts of faith, such as baptism and implementing your spiritual gifts. You will also want to form the habits of Bible reading, memorization and prayer, to learn more about God and to develop your communicative relationship with Him. If you're not sure how to go about all of this, your group leader can help answer your questions and point you to others who can help as well. Don't go it alone! God's plan includes rich fellowship among His people, for "as iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another" (Proverbs 27:17).

