

# Living in Community

*Volume 10*

## Deep Research Sunday School Lessons

*A 24-Volume Comprehensive Series*

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*Deep Research Sunday School Lessons*

# Living in Community

*Volume 10*

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## **About This Series**

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Welcome to Deep Research Sunday School Lessons, a meticulously researched collection of Sunday School lessons designed for thoughtful, transformative learning.

Our mission is simple: to return Sunday School to school, a place where deep conversations happen, where difficult questions are welcomed, and where faith and intellect work together.

Each volume is organized around a central biblical theme such as forgiveness, community, justice, anger, or character. Within that theme, you will find multiple lessons, each based on a specific Scripture passage and developed for three age groups.

## **A Note on Scripture Sources**

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These lessons draw primarily from the 66 books of the Protestant canon, using the New International Version (NIV) as our primary translation. Occasionally, lessons may reference the Deuterocanonical books (also called the Apocrypha), which are accepted as canonical by Catholic and Orthodox traditions and valued as historical literature by many Protestant scholars.

We include these texts sparingly but intentionally, because we believe they offer valuable historical and theological context for understanding the world of the Bible and the development of Jewish and Christian thought.

Whether or not the Deuterocanonical books are part of your personal faith tradition, we invite you to engage with them as literature that shaped the faith of millions and provides insight into the intertestamental period.

Above all, we believe that Christians should be inclusive of other Christians. The body of Christ is large, and our differences should draw us closer together in mutual respect, not push us apart in division.

## **How to Use This Book**

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### **For Teachers and Group Leaders**

Each lesson in this volume is designed to stand alone, allowing you to teach them in any order that fits your curriculum or group needs.

The discussion questions provided at the end of each lesson are starting points, not scripts. Allow your group to explore tangents and raise their own questions as the Spirit leads.

### **For Individual Study**

If you are using this book for personal devotion or self-directed study, we encourage you to take your time with each lesson, journaling your thoughts and prayers as you go.

### **For Families**

These lessons can be adapted for family devotion time. Parents may wish to simplify certain concepts for younger children while using the discussion questions to engage older children and teens.

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*We pray that this volume blesses your study, enriches your teaching,  
and draws you ever closer to the heart of God.*

*The 1611 Press Team*

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# Love in Action

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*From Words to Deeds, Does our love move beyond feelings to actual sacrifice?*

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**1 John 3:11-24**

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## Instructor Preparation

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Read this section before teaching any age group. It provides the theological foundation and shows how the lesson adapts across developmental stages.

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## The Passage

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**1 John 3:11-24 (NIV)**

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*11 For this is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another. 12 Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own actions were evil and his brother's were righteous. 13 Do not be surprised, my dear brothers and sisters, if the world hates you. 14 We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers and sisters. Anyone who does not love remains in death. 15 Anyone who hates a brother or sister is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life residing in him.*

*16 This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. 17 If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? 18 Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.*

*19 This is how we know that we belong to the truth and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence: 20 If our hearts condemn us, we know that God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. 21 Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before*

*God 22 and receive from him anything we ask, because we keep his commands and do what pleases him. 23 And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us. 24 The one who keeps God's commands lives in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: by the Spirit he gave us.*

## Context

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John is writing to churches wrestling with false teachers who claim to know God but live selfishly. These teachers speak beautifully about love but show no practical care for struggling believers. John contrasts this empty rhetoric with Jesus's ultimate demonstration of love, laying down His life, and calls believers to mirror that sacrificial pattern in both ultimate and practical ways.

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The immediate context sets up a stark choice between the way of Cain (self-serving hatred that leads to murder) and the way of Christ (self-sacrificing love that leads to life). John has just declared that anyone who doesn't love remains spiritually dead, making this passage his explanation of what genuine, life-giving love actually looks like in practice.

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## The Big Idea

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**True love is defined not by our feelings or words but by Christ's cross, and genuine believers demonstrate this love by willingness to sacrifice their lives and, practically, their resources for fellow believers in need.**

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This isn't a guilt trip about giving more money. John is exposing the disconnect between claiming God's love dwells in us while living with closed hearts toward struggling brothers and sisters. He connects the ultimate (dying for others) to the practical (sharing possessions) to show that both spring from the same self-sacrificing heart that mirrors Christ's cross.

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## Theological Core

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- **Christ's cross defines love.** Love isn't a feeling or concept we figure out, it's revealed in Jesus laying down His life, and that becomes the standard for all Christian love.
  - **Sacrificial love proves spiritual life.** John connects loving action to evidence that we've "passed from death to life", genuine conversion shows up in willingness to sacrifice for others.
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- **Material sharing demonstrates spiritual reality.** How we handle possessions when we see believers in need reveals whether God's love actually dwells in us or if we're just using religious words.

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- **Action trumps sentiment.** Love that stops at words and emotions without moving to costly action isn't the love John describes, it's empty religious talk that proves the absence of divine love.

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## Age Group Overview

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### What Each Age Group Learns

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#### Grades 7, 8 / Adult

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- The cross of Christ sets the standard for all Christian love, sacrificial, costly, and action-oriented rather than sentimental
  - Material generosity toward struggling believers isn't optional charity but essential evidence that God's love lives in us
  - The tension between claiming to love God while living with closed hearts toward needy believers reveals spiritual contradiction
  - Discerning when and how to sacrifice requires wisdom, but the willingness to sacrifice reveals authentic spiritual life
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#### Grades 4, 6

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- Love isn't proven by what we say but by what we do when someone needs help
  - When we see friends or family struggling with real needs, choosing to help shows real love
  - Saying "I love you" but not helping when we could help doesn't make sense if we really mean it
  - Sometimes loving others costs us something, but that's how we know it's real love like Jesus showed us
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## Grades 1, 3

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- Jesus loved us by giving His life to save us
  - God wants us to love others by sharing what we have
  - When we see someone who needs help, we can show love by helping them
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## Common Pitfalls to Avoid

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- **Turning this into a guilt-driven giving campaign.** John's point isn't about donating more money but about whether our hearts are genuinely moved by others' needs. The issue is spiritual, does God's love actually dwell in us?, not financial.
  - **Minimizing the "lay down lives" language as merely metaphorical.** John means this literally as the ultimate expression, while showing that the same sacrificial heart expresses itself practically through resource-sharing. Both levels matter.
  - **Missing the connection between ultimate and practical sacrifice.** John deliberately links dying for others and sharing possessions to show they're different expressions of the same Christlike love, the heart willing to sacrifice for others' good.
  - **Avoiding the question about who qualifies as "brothers and sisters."** This tension is part of John's text and deserves honest wrestling rather than quick answers. The principle of sacrificial love expands outward, but John focuses on the believing community.
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## Handling Hard Questions

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### "Does this mean I have to give away everything I own?"

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John isn't calling for total divestment but for hearts that are genuinely moved when we see believers in real need. The question isn't "How little can I give?" but "Does seeing a brother or sister in need actually stir my heart to action?" John is diagnosing whether God's love lives in us by examining our response to others' needs. Some situations might call for extreme sacrifice, others for practical help, but the key is a heart willing to be moved.

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## **"What if someone is in need because of their own poor choices?"**

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John doesn't address the cause of need, only our response to genuine need in the believing community. While wisdom calls us to help in ways that truly help rather than enable, John's focus is on whether our hearts remain closed when we see real struggle. Discernment about how to help is important, but John is questioning whether we feel moved to help at all when faced with genuine need.

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## **"Doesn't this create impossible expectations, who can really be willing to die for others?"**

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John presents Christ's sacrifice as the standard that shows us what love looks like, not necessarily what every situation requires. The willingness to sacrifice, evidenced in practical sharing, proves that God's love lives in us. John connects the ultimate and practical to show that authentic love moves beyond words to costly action. The cross shows us love's true nature, and resource-sharing shows whether that love dwells in our hearts.

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## **The One Thing to Remember**

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**Christ's cross defines love as costly action, not warm feelings, and our willingness to sacrifice practically for struggling believers reveals whether God's love actually lives in us or we're just using religious words.**

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## **Grades 7, 8 / Adult**

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Ages 12, 14+ • 30 Minutes • Student-Centered Discussion

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## **Your Main Job Today**

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Guide students to wrestle with the connection between Christ's ultimate sacrifice and our practical responses to need around us. Help them explore whether their own love moves beyond feelings to action, especially when it costs something.

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## **The Tension to Frame**

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Does the way we handle our resources when we see believers in need reveal whether we actually understand what love means, or are we deceiving ourselves with religious language while living

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selfishly?

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### **Discussion Facilitation Tips**

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- Validate their experiences of wanting to help but feeling overwhelmed by the scope of need around them
  - Honor the complexity of discerning between wisdom and selfishness when deciding how to respond to requests for help
  - Let them wrestle with John's challenging questions rather than rushing to easy answers about giving and sharing
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### **1. Opening Frame (2, 3 minutes)**

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You see someone at school who can't afford lunch and sits alone every day. Part of you feels bad for them, wants to help somehow. You've got extra money, could easily share. You even think about going over there. But then you hesitate. Maybe it would be awkward. Maybe they wouldn't want help. Maybe tomorrow someone else will do something. So you scroll through your phone instead and post something about being kind to others.

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Later that same day, you're texting with friends about how much you care about people who are struggling, how important it is to show love, how Jesus wants us to care for others. You genuinely mean it. You feel it. But that kid is still sitting alone tomorrow, and you've still got extra money, and you still don't do anything.

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Here's the uncomfortable question: is there a difference between feeling love and showing love? Between talking about love and acting with love? And if there is a difference, which one actually counts as love? Most of us would say both matter. But what happens when they don't match up?

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Today we're looking at someone who says there's a massive difference between love that stays in our hearts and heads, and love that costs us something real. He's about to show us what love actually looks like by pointing to the most extreme example possible, and then asking us what happens when we see real need but don't feel moved to help.

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Open your Bibles to 1 John chapter 3, starting at verse 11. As you read, pay attention to how John defines love and notice what he says real love requires from us.

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## 2. Silent Reading (5 minutes)

**Managing Silent Reading:** Walk quietly around the room. Help with difficult words like "residing" or complex phrases. Watch for students who finish early, let them sit with the weight of John's challenging questions about their own hearts.

### As You Read, Think About:

- What does John say proves that we have "passed from death to life"?
- How does John define what love actually is and where we learn about it?
- What's the connection between "laying down lives" and sharing material possessions?
- How do you respond to John's question about seeing someone in need but feeling no pity?

### 1 John 3:11-24 (NIV)

*11 For this is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another. 12 Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own actions were evil and his brother's were righteous. 13 Do not be surprised, my dear brothers and sisters, if the world hates you. 14 We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers and sisters. Anyone who does not love remains in death. 15 Anyone who hates a brother or sister is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life residing in him.*

*16 This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. 17 If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? 18 Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.*

*19 This is how we know that we belong to the truth and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence: 20 If our hearts condemn us, we know that God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. 21 Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before*

*God 22 and receive from him anything we ask, because we keep his commands and do what pleases him. 23 And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us. 24 The one who keeps God's commands lives in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: by the Spirit he gave us.*

### 3. Discussion (15, 18 minutes)

#### Oral Reading (2, 3 minutes)

**Selecting Readers:** Ask for volunteers and choose confident readers for the most challenging verses. Let students pass if they prefer not to read aloud.

**Reader 1:** Verses 11-15 (The contrast between Cain's hatred and Christ's love) **Reader 2:** Verses 16-18 (How we know what love is and how to show it) **Reader 3:** Verses 19-24 (Living with confidence before God through obedient love)

Listen for the progression John makes, from ultimate sacrifice to practical generosity to the principle that action proves love more than words.

#### Small Group Question Generation (3, 4 minutes)

**Setup:** Form groups of 3-4 students. Give exactly 3 minutes to come up with 1-2 genuine questions about what they just read. Walk between groups and help stuck groups with prompts like "What surprised you most about how John defines love?"

Get into groups of 3 or 4 and come up with one or two real questions about what you just read. Not questions you think you're supposed to ask, but things you're actually curious about or confused by or maybe disagree with. For example, you might wonder why John connects dying for others with sharing money, or what he means by "God's love" living in someone. You've got exactly three minutes. Go.

#### Facilitated Discussion (12, 14 minutes)

**Remember:** Students drive with their questions, you facilitate and probe deeper. Guide discovery rather than lecture. Help them wrestle with John's challenging claims.

**Collecting Questions:** Let's hear your questions. I'll write them on the board and we'll tackle the ones that most of you are curious about.

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### **Probing Questions (to go deeper)**

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- "John says we can know we've 'passed from death to life' because we love. What kind of evidence would convince you that someone's love is real?"
  - "Why do you think John jumps from 'laying down our lives' to 'sharing material possessions'? What's the connection?"
  - "How would you respond to John's question in verse 17, 'how can the love of God be in that person'?"
  - "What's the difference between loving 'with words or speech' versus 'with actions and in truth'?"
  - "John seems to be talking specifically about 'brothers and sisters', fellow believers. Does that change how we apply this?"
  - "When you see someone in genuine need, what goes through your mind before you decide whether or how to help?"
  - "Is John being fair here, or is he creating impossible expectations about sacrifice?"
  - "How do you tell the difference between wisdom about how to help and selfishness about not wanting to help?"
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### **Revealing the Pattern**

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Do you notice what's happening here? John isn't giving us a rule about giving money or even about dying for people. He's showing us that Christ's cross defines what love actually looks like, it's costly, it moves beyond feelings to action, and it shows up in our willingness to sacrifice something real when we see genuine need. The pattern is always the same: real love costs something.

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### **4. Application (3, 4 minutes)**

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Let's get real about your lives for a minute. Where do you see this tension between loving with words versus loving with actions? Think about school, family, friendships, social media, even global issues you care about. Where do you find it easy to feel or express love but harder to let that love cost you something?

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## Real Issues This Connects To

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- Seeing classmates who can't afford lunch, clothes, school supplies, or social activities but hesitating to share what you have
  - Family members going through financial stress while you spend freely on things you want
  - Friends dealing with real problems who need your time or attention, but you're too busy with your own life
  - Posting about social justice issues online but not engaging with actual need in your community
  - Church friends or youth group members struggling with real needs while you focus on your own comfort
  - Feeling moved by stories of poverty or injustice but choosing entertainment or convenience over responding
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**Facilitation:** Let students share examples without rushing to answers. Some situations require different responses. Help them think through discernment rather than giving blanket advice about when and how to help.

## Discussion Prompts

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- "When have you seen someone demonstrate the kind of love John describes, love that cost them something real?"
  - "What would help you move from feeling concerned about someone's need to actually responding in some way?"
  - "How do you decide between 'I should be wise about this' and 'I'm just being selfish'?"
  - "What's the difference between sacrificial love and being taken advantage of?"
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## 5. Closing (2 minutes)

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Here's what I want you to take with you. John isn't trying to make you feel guilty about not giving enough or sacrificing enough. He's trying to help you examine whether God's love actually lives in your heart or whether you're deceiving yourself with religious feelings and words. The cross shows us what love really looks like, and our willingness to let love cost us something reveals whether we understand

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what we're talking about when we say we love others.

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This week, pay attention to the moments when you see someone with genuine need and notice what happens in your heart. Do you feel moved? Do you look away? Do you make excuses? Do you act? There's no shame in being honest about what you discover. John's questions are designed to help us see ourselves clearly so we can grow into the kind of love that actually mirrors Christ's heart.

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You asked really thoughtful questions today and wrestled honestly with challenging material. Keep asking those questions. Keep letting John's words examine your heart. That's exactly what he wrote them for.

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## Grades 4, 6

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Ages 9, 11 • 30 Minutes • Interactive Storytelling + Activity

### Your Main Job Today

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Help kids understand that real love shows up in what we do, especially when someone needs help and we can do something about it.

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### If Kids Ask "What if I don't have enough to share?"

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Say: "God doesn't ask you to give what you don't have. But when you do have something someone needs, love means being willing to share it."

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### 1. Opening (5 minutes)

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Raise your hand if you've ever told someone you care about them or love them. Keep it up if you've ever written a really nice note to someone or sent them an encouraging text message. Good! Now keep your hand up if you've ever helped someone when they really needed it, maybe gave them something you had, or spent your own time helping them with something important.

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Now here's a harder question. Think about a time when you saw someone who really needed help, maybe they didn't have lunch money, or their bike was broken, or they were being picked on, or their family was going through something tough. You probably felt sorry for them. You might have even said

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you wished you could help. But what if you actually could have helped? What if you had extra lunch money, or could have stood up for them, or invited them over when their family was fighting?

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Here's the tricky part: sometimes we really do feel love and care for people, but we don't actually help when we could. And sometimes when that happens, we tell ourselves we showed love just by feeling bad for them or just by saying nice things. But is that really love? If someone is hungry and you feel sorry for them but don't share your food when you totally could, did you really love them?

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This is exactly like what happens in the movie Moana when she sees her island dying but keeps making excuses for not sailing across the ocean to help. She loves her people and talks about wanting to save them, but until she actually gets in that boat and faces the scary journey, her love is just words and feelings.

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The tricky part is figuring out when love means we need to actually do something hard or costly, not just feel something or say something. When does real love require real action?

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Today we're going to hear about someone who said that the difference between real love and fake love is whether it shows up when someone actually needs help. He pointed to Jesus as the perfect example of love that costs something real, and then asked a question that might make us uncomfortable about our own lives.

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**What to Expect:** Kids may share examples of times they helped or didn't help. Acknowledge them briefly:

"Those are exactly the kinds of situations we're going to talk about."

## 2. Bible Story Time (10 minutes)

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Picture a group of Christians in the early church, maybe meeting in someone's house after a long day of work. They're facing some confusing times. Some people in their community talk a lot about loving God and loving others, but when someone in the church runs out of food or can't pay rent, these same people don't seem to care very much.

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An older man named John, one of Jesus's best friends when Jesus lived on earth, is writing them a letter to help them figure out the difference between people who really love and people who just say they love. John has seen real love up close. He watched Jesus love people with actions, not just words.

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John knew they were confused about what love actually looks like, so he decided to tell them about the most extreme example possible. He wanted them to understand that love isn't just a feeling you have or nice words you say.

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Imagine getting a letter that starts like this: "Do you want to know what real love looks like? Do you want to know how to tell the difference between someone who really loves and someone who's just pretending?" That would get your attention, right?

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John starts by reminding them about Cain and Abel, two brothers from way back in the beginning. Abel loved God and showed it by how he lived. But Cain was jealous and angry, and instead of dealing with his own problems, he murdered his brother. John says, "Don't be like Cain, who let hatred take over his heart."

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Then John says something that might surprise you: "Here's how you can know if you're spiritually alive, if God's Spirit really lives in you. It's whether you actually love other Christians. Anyone who doesn't love is still spiritually dead inside."

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But then he gets to the main point. He says, "Do you want to know what love actually is?"

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Think about what that would be like, getting a letter from someone who lived with Jesus, asking if you really understand what love means.

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### **1 John 3:16 (NIV)**

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*16 This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters.*

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John says, "Here's what love looks like: Jesus didn't just feel sorry for us or say nice things about us. He gave up His life to save us. He died on the cross because He loved us. That's how we know what love actually is." For John, love isn't mainly about feelings, it's about what Jesus did when we needed saving.

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But then John says something even more challenging. He says that since Jesus showed us what love looks like, we should be willing to show that same kind of love to each other. We should be willing to "lay down our lives" for our Christian brothers and sisters.

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Now, some of the people reading this letter might have been thinking, "Well, nobody's asking me to die for anyone right now, so I guess I'm good." But John wasn't going to let them off that easy.

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**1 John 3:17 (NIV)**

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*17 If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person?*

John asks a question that gets right to the heart: "If you have stuff, money, food, clothes, things you don't really need, and you see another Christian who's struggling, who doesn't have enough, but you don't feel moved to help them, how can God's love really be living in your heart?"

This wasn't about being perfect or giving away everything. John was asking about what happens in your heart when you see someone in real need and you could actually help. Do you feel moved to do something? Or do you just feel sorry for them but keep your stuff to yourself?

John is saying that the same love that made Jesus willing to die for us should make us willing to share what we have with people who need help. If we're not willing to sacrifice something small when someone needs help, how can we say we'd be willing to sacrifice something big? It's the same heart.

And then John gets to his main point about words versus actions. He says, "Let's be honest here. Love isn't about what you say. It's about what you do."

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**1 John 3:18 (NIV)**

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*18 Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.*

John calls them "dear children" because he cares about them and wants them to understand something important: you can tell if love is real by whether it shows up when someone needs help. Anyone can say "I love you." Anyone can feel sorry for people who are struggling. But real love moves you to actually help when you can.

The Christians who received this letter had to think about their own lives. Were they people who talked about love but didn't help when they saw real need? Were they keeping their money and possessions to themselves while other Christians struggled? John was asking them to look at their actions, not just their words or feelings.

Sometimes in our lives, we see friends at school who don't have lunch money, or we know families who are going through hard times, or we see kids who don't have nice clothes or supplies or can't afford to do

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fun things with everyone else. John would ask us: when you see situations like that, what happens in your heart? Do you feel moved to help? Do you actually do something? Or do you just feel sorry and then go back to thinking about your own life?

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What we learn from John's letter is that Jesus shows us what love really looks like, love that costs something, love that sacrifices for others, love that helps when help is needed. And if God's love really lives in us, it will show up the same way: in actions, not just words.

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Real love doesn't just say "I care about you." Real love says "I care about you" and then proves it by sharing what we have when someone needs help.

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**Pause here.** Let the story sink in for 5 seconds before moving on.

### 3. Discussion (5 minutes)

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#### Question 1: The Hard Choice

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Imagine you bring a really good lunch to school, your favorite sandwich, chips, cookies, everything you love. At lunchtime you see a kid who doesn't have lunch at all. They're just sitting there with nothing. You could share half your lunch, but then you'd still be hungry later. What thoughts would go through your head before you decided what to do?

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**Listen For:** "I'd be hungry," "What if they don't like my food," "Maybe someone else will help", affirm: "Those thoughts make sense. It's hard when helping someone else costs us something."

#### Question 2: The Difference

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What do you think is the difference between someone who feels sorry for a person in need but doesn't help, and someone who feels sorry and does help? Is it just that one person is nicer, or is there something else different about their hearts?

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**If They Say:** "One person is more generous", respond "What do you think makes someone more willing to be generous? Where does that come from?"

#### Question 3: Jesus's Example

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John says Jesus shows us what love really looks like because He gave up His life to save us. How is sharing your lunch money or helping someone with their homework similar to what Jesus did? What's the same about those two things?

**Connect:** "Both cost something. Both put someone else's needs ahead of your own comfort. This is exactly what made Jesus's love so real."

#### Question 4: The Test

John asks a tough question: if you have stuff and see someone in need but don't feel moved to help, how can God's love really be in your heart? Do you think that's fair? Is it possible to really love God but not want to help people who need help?

**If They Say:** "That seems mean", honor their honesty: "John's question does feel challenging. He's trying to help us see our own hearts clearly, not to be mean but to help us grow."

You guys are thinking about this really well. John wasn't trying to make people feel guilty, he was trying to help them understand that real love always shows up in actions when someone needs help and we can do something about it.

#### 4. Activity: The Sharing Circle (8 minutes)

**Zero Props Required** , This activity uses only kids' bodies and empty space.

##### Purpose

This activity reinforces the pattern of sacrificial love by having kids physically experience the difference between holding onto what they have versus sharing what they have when others are in need. Success looks like kids discovering that everyone ends up better when they share, but it requires someone to be willing to give first.

##### Instructions to Class(3 minutes)

We're going to do something called The Sharing Circle. Everyone stand up and form a big circle. I'm going to give each of you an imaginary possession, some of you will have extra food, some extra toys,

some extra money, some extra time.

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Here's the challenge: I'll also assign some of you real needs, maybe you have no food, no toys, no money, no time. Your job is to figure out as a group how everyone can get what they need. But here's the catch: you can only use what people in the circle have. No imaginary stores or parents or outside help.

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The twist is this: if people with extra stuff decide to keep it all to themselves, some people will go without. But if people are willing to share, everyone can have what they need. We're doing this because it's exactly like the situation John wrote about, some people have material possessions and others have real needs.

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### **During the Activity(4 minutes)**

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First phase: I'll assign roles and let everyone figure out their situation. Let them see the gap between what some people have and what others need. Watch as some kids naturally want to help and others instinctively want to protect what they have.

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The struggle: As they realize some people will go without, pay attention to who starts suggesting sharing and who resists. Let them wrestle with the tension between keeping their "stuff" and helping others in need.

---

Coaching phrases: "I notice some people have extra food while others are hungry. I wonder if there's a way for everyone to be fed?" "What would happen if people with extra decided to share?" Don't solve it for them, let them discover it.

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The breakthrough: When someone decides to share their extra, celebrate it immediately: "Look what just happened! Sarah had extra but chose to share it so Michael could have what he needed!"

---

Completion: Once they've figured out how to share so everyone's needs are met, have them notice how different the circle feels now compared to when some people had everything and others had nothing.

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**Watch For:** The moment when someone chooses to give up some of their "extra" to help someone in need, this is the physical representation of John's point about love showing up in action.

### **Debrief(1 minute)**

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What did you notice about how it felt when some people had extra but others went without? How did that compare to when people started sharing? That's exactly what John was talking about, love isn't real if it stays in our hearts when we see people in need. Real love moves us to share what we have so everyone can be taken care of.

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## **5. Closing (2 minutes)**

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Here's what we learned today. John taught us that real love isn't just about feelings or nice words, it shows up in what we do when someone needs help and we can do something about it. Jesus showed us what love looks like by giving His life to save us. That same kind of love should make us willing to share what we have when we see friends or family in need.

---

This doesn't mean you have to give away everything you own or feel guilty when you can't help everyone. John isn't trying to make us feel bad. But it does mean that if God's love really lives in our hearts, we'll feel moved to help when we see real need and we have something we could share.

---

The amazing result is what we saw in our activity, when people are willing to share what they have, everyone ends up taken care of. That's how God's love works in the world, through people who are willing to let love cost them something real.

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### **This Week's Challenge**

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This week, pay attention to moments when you see someone who needs help, maybe at school, at home, in your neighborhood. Notice what happens in your heart. Do you feel moved to help? If you have something you could share or some way you could help, ask God to help you be brave enough to show love through actions, not just words.

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### **Closing Prayer (Optional)**

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*Dear God, thank You for showing us what real love looks like through Jesus, who gave His life to save us. Help us to have hearts that feel moved when we see people in need. When we have something we could share, help us to be brave and generous like Jesus. Help our love show up in what we do, not just what we say. In Jesus's name, Amen.*

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## **Grades 1, 3**

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## Your Main Job Today

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Help kids understand that Jesus shows us love by giving everything for us, and we show love by sharing what we have.

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## Movement & Formation Plan

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- **Opening Song:** Standing in a circle
  - **Bible Story:** Sitting in a horseshoe shape facing the teacher
  - **Small Group Q&A:** Standing in pairs facing each other
  - **Closing Song:** Standing in straight lines
  - **Prayer:** Sitting cross-legged in rows
- 

## If Kids Don't Understand

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Compare loving with actions to helping when someone falls down, you don't just say "I'm sorry," you help them up.

---

### 1. Opening Song (2, 3 minutes)

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**Formation:** Standing in a circle

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Select a song about God's love or helping others. Suggestions: "Jesus Loves Me," "Love One Another," or "We Are the Church." Use movements: arms spread wide during "Jesus loves me," hands reaching out during "love one another," arms around shoulders during "we are the church."

---

Great singing! Now sit down in a horseshoe shape on the floor so everyone can see me. Today we're going to hear about someone who learned something very important about showing love to others.

---

### 2. Bible Story Time (5, 7 minutes)

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**Formation:** Kids sitting in a horseshoe shape on the floor facing you. Move around inside the horseshoe as you tell the story.

**Animated Delivery:** Use big gestures, change your voice for different characters, move around the space. Sound confused when talking about the problem, sound warm when talking about God's love, sound excited when talking about sharing.

Today we're going to meet a man named John who was one of Jesus's very best friends.

*[Walk to one side of the horseshoe]*

John knew some people who had a big problem. They said they loved each other, but they weren't very good at helping when someone needed help.

*[Look confused and a little sad]*

Some people had plenty of food and clothes and money. Other people didn't have enough. But the people with extra stuff just said, "Oh, we love you! We feel sorry for you!" But they didn't share anything.

*[Walk to other side of horseshoe, change tone to sound helpful]*

John wanted to teach them about real love. So he told them about Jesus and what Jesus did for us.

*[Move to center, speak with warmth]*

John said, "Do you want to know what love really looks like? Look at Jesus! Jesus loved us so much that He gave everything, even His life, to save us."

*[Spread arms wide like on a cross]*

Jesus didn't just say "I love you." Jesus showed His love by giving His life for us on the cross. That's how much He loves us!

**1 John 3:16 (NIV)**

*16 This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us.*

*[Pause and look around at each child]*

---

Do you think Jesus really loves us? Yes! We know because He didn't just say it, He showed it by giving everything for us!

---

*[Move to center, speak with gentle challenge]*

---

But then John said something else. He said, "If Jesus loved us by giving everything, then we should love others by sharing what we have."

---

*[Walk slowly around the horseshoe, using hand gestures for sharing]*

---

John said, "If you have food and you see someone who's hungry, love means sharing your food. If you have toys and you see someone who doesn't have any, love means letting them play with yours."

---

*[Stop walking and face the children directly]*

---

John asked a big question: "If you have stuff you could share but you see someone who needs help and you don't help them, how can God's love really be in your heart?"

---

*[Speak with excitement but gently]*

---

That might sound hard, but John wasn't trying to be mean. He just wanted people to understand that love isn't just words, love is something you do!

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*[Pause dramatically]*

---

Then John said the most important thing: "Let's not love with just words. Let's love by doing things that help people!"

---

*[Speak directly to the children with warmth]*

---

Sometimes in our lives, we see friends who need help. Maybe someone doesn't have lunch money. Maybe someone's toy is broken. Maybe someone is sad. When we see people who need help, we can show God's love by helping them!

---

*[Move closer to the children]*

---

When someone needs help and you have something you could share, you can say, "I want to help you!" and then really do it. That's how we love like Jesus loves!

---

*[Speak warmly and encouragingly]*

---

God loves you so much, and He wants to help you be someone who shows love by sharing and helping others. You can do it!

---

### **3. Discussion (5 minutes)**

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**Formation:** Have kids stand up and find a partner. Pairs scatter around the room with space to talk.

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Stand up and find a partner! I'm going to give each pair one question to talk about. There are no wrong answers. You'll have about one minute to share with your partner.

---

**Teacher Circulation:** Walk around to each pair. Listen to their discussions. If a pair is stuck, ask "What do you think?" or rephrase the question more simply. Give them time to think, some kids need extra processing time.

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### **Discussion Questions**

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*Select one question per pair based on class size. Save unused questions for next time.*

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1. How do you think Jesus felt when He decided to save us?
  2. What's something you have that you could share with a friend?
  3. How would you feel if you were hungry and someone shared their snack with you?
  4. What would you do if you saw someone who didn't have a toy to play with?
  5. What's different between saying "I love you" and showing someone you love them?
  6. When has someone helped you when you needed help?
  7. Why do you think John wanted people to share what they have?
  8. What's something nice you could do for someone at school?
  9. What's something nice you could do for someone at home?
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10. How do you know when someone really loves you?

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11. Why did Jesus give His life for us?

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12. What happens when everyone shares instead of keeping everything?

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13. How does God help us love other people?

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14. What makes it hard sometimes to share what you have?

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15. How do you feel when you help someone who needs help?

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16. What did we learn about real love today?

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17. Who is someone you want to help this week?

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18. How can we pray for each other about sharing and helping?

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19. What would happen if nobody ever shared anything?

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20. How can we be like Jesus in the way we love people?

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Great discussions! Let's come back together in our circle. Who wants to share what they talked about?

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#### **4. Closing Song (2, 3 minutes)**

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**Formation:** Standing in straight lines facing forward

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Select a song about helping or sharing. Suggestions: "Love Is Something You Do," "Share the Love of Jesus," or "Helping Hands." Movements: hands on heart during "love," reaching out during "share," hands helping motions during "helping hands."

---

Beautiful singing! Now let's sit down for prayer. Sit cross-legged and fold your hands.

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#### **5. Closing Prayer (1, 2 minutes)**

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**Formation:** Sitting cross-legged in rows, heads bowed, hands folded

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*Dear God, thank You for showing us love by sending Jesus to save us.*

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*[Pause]*

---

*Help us to show love to others by sharing what we have and helping when someone needs help.*

---

*[Pause]*

---

*Help us remember that real love does things to help people, not just nice words.*

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*[Pause]*

---

*Thank You for loving us so much. Help us love others the same way. In Jesus's name, Amen.*

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**Alternative, Popcorn Prayer:** If your class is comfortable with it, invite kids to offer short one-sentence prayers about helping others. Examples: "God, help me share my toys" or "Thank You for Jesus loving us."

Remember, Jesus shows us what love looks like, and we can show love by helping others! Have a great week, and look for ways to help people who need it!

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# Freedom to Serve

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*True Liberty Through Love, Does service make you free or enslaved?*

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**Galatians 5:1-26**

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## Instructor Preparation

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Read this section before teaching any age group. It provides the theological foundation and shows how the lesson adapts across developmental stages.

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## The Passage

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**Galatians 5:1-26 (NIV)**

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*1 It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.*

*2 Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you. 3 Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. 4 You who are trying to be justified by the law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. 5 For through the Spirit we eagerly await by faith the righteousness for which we hope. 6 For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.*

*7 You were running a good race. Who cut in on you to keep you from obeying the truth? 8 That kind of persuasion does not come from the one who calls you. 9 "A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough." 10 I am confident in the Lord that you will take no other view. The one who is throwing you into confusion, whoever that may be, will have to pay the penalty. 11 Brothers and sisters, if I am still preaching circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been abolished. 12 As for those agitators, I wish they would go*

*the whole way and emasculate themselves!*

**13** You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. **14** For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." **15** If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.

**16** So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. **17** For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. **18** But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

**19** The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; **20** idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions **21** and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

**22** But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, **23** gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. **24** Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. **25** Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. **26** Let us not become conceited, provoke each other or be envious of each other.

## Context

Paul writes to Galatian churches facing pressure to adopt Jewish law requirements, particularly circumcision, as necessary for salvation. False teachers argued that faith in Christ alone was insufficient, Christians needed to follow Torah regulations to be truly righteous. This threatened the very heart of the gospel message Paul had proclaimed. The Galatians were being told their freedom in Christ was incomplete without additional religious obligations.

Chapter 5 represents Paul's climactic response to this crisis. Having argued theologically for justification by faith alone, he now addresses the practical question: if we're free from law, what guides Christian behavior? Paul must simultaneously defend freedom from legalistic bondage while preventing license and moral chaos. The tension is acute, how can freedom from law increase rather than decrease moral obligation?

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## The Big Idea

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**Christian freedom finds its purpose not in self-indulgence but in love-motivated service to others.**

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This paradox defies human logic, true liberty expresses itself through voluntary servitude. Paul rejects both legalism (salvation through rule-keeping) and libertinism (freedom as license for selfishness). Instead, he presents a third way: freedom that fulfills the law's deepest intention through neighbor-love, creating greater moral obligation than legal coercion ever could.

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## Theological Core

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- **Freedom's Purpose.** Christ's liberation from legal bondage exists not for self-gratification but to enable authentic love-service that was impossible under law.
  - **Fulfilled Law.** The entire Torah finds its completion in neighbor-love, not through external compliance but through Spirit-empowered care for others' wellbeing.
  - **Humble Service.** Christian liberty expresses itself through voluntary self-giving that serves others' needs before our own desires or rights.
  - **Love as Standard.** The neighbor-love command becomes the measure of Christian freedom, liberty that doesn't increase love has become license.
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## Age Group Overview

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### What Each Age Group Learns

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**Grades 7, 8 / Adult**

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- Christian freedom creates greater moral obligation than law ever could, liberty serves love, not license
- The tension between freedom and service is resolved through voluntary choice motivated by neighbor-love
- Authentic Christianity rejects both legalism (salvation through rules) and libertinism (freedom as selfishness)
- Spiritual maturity discerns when freedom should be exercised and when it should be limited for others' good

### Grades 4, 6

- True freedom means we get to choose to help others, not just do whatever we want for ourselves
- When we love someone, we want to serve them even when no one makes us, that's real freedom
- Our choices affect other people, so freedom comes with the responsibility to choose love
- Sometimes doing the loving thing feels hard, but we can choose it anyway because God helps us

### Grades 1, 3

- God gives us the freedom to be helpers and show love to others
- God loves us so much that we want to love others too
- We can choose to be kind and helpful because that makes God happy

## Common Pitfalls to Avoid

- **Moralizing Freedom.** Don't present freedom as merely another form of rule-keeping. Paul's point is that Spirit-led love naturally fulfills what law demanded externally, this is liberation, not legalism with different rules.
- **Ignoring Historical Context.** The passage specifically addresses freedom from Torah observance, not political or social liberation. While applications may extend broadly, the original

context is salvation by faith versus works of law.

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- **Romanticizing Service.** Avoid suggesting that all service is automatically humble or loving. Paul specifies service "in love", service can be manipulative, guilt-driven, or self-aggrandizing rather than genuinely caring.
  - **Conflating Servility and Service.** Distinguish between humble service (voluntary love-motivated care) and servility (degrading subservience). Christian freedom enables authentic service by removing compulsion and fear.
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## Handling Hard Questions

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### **"Doesn't this teaching just create guilt about using freedom for yourself?"**

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Paul isn't creating guilt but revealing freedom's true nature. The Spirit naturally produces love, so freedom exercised through selfishness actually contradicts our new nature in Christ. This isn't external pressure but internal authenticity. When we understand that we were liberated to love, self-serving choices feel restrictive rather than freeing. The question becomes: what kind of freedom do you really want, the freedom to be selfish or the freedom to love genuinely?

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### **"How is serving others different from just following another set of rules?"**

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The difference lies in motivation and source. Law-keeping operates through external compulsion and fear of punishment. Love-service flows from internal transformation and gratitude. Paul says the Spirit produces this love naturally, it's not imposed from outside but grows from within. You can tell the difference by asking: am I doing this because I have to or because I want to? Christian freedom means our wants align with God's heart.

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### **"What if someone takes advantage of my service, am I supposed to be a doormat?"**

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Paul calls for humble service "in love," not naive submission to exploitation. Love sometimes says no, sets boundaries, or refuses to enable destructive behavior. The key is motive, are you serving the person's genuine wellbeing or just avoiding conflict? Sometimes love confronts, protects others from harm, or refuses to participate in someone's self-destruction. Humble service seeks what's truly best for others, not what's easiest for us.

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## The One Thing to Remember

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True freedom serves love, not self, and this paradox makes us more free, not less.

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## Grades 7, 8 / Adult

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Ages 12, 14+ • 30 Minutes • Student-Centered Discussion

### Your Main Job Today

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Guide students to discover that Christian freedom creates greater moral obligation than law ever could, and that this paradox actually liberates us to love authentically rather than restricting our choices.

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### The Tension to Frame

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If Christianity sets us free from rules, why does Paul immediately tell us to serve others? Does true freedom increase our obligations or decrease them?

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### Discussion Facilitation Tips

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- Validate their experiences of feeling restricted by others' expectations while honoring their desire for authentic relationships
  - Acknowledge the genuine tension between personal liberty and social responsibility without rushing to easy answers
  - Let them wrestle with the paradox rather than explaining it away, the tension itself teaches the lesson
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### 1. Opening Frame (2, 3 minutes)

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Imagine you just turned eighteen. Legally, you're an adult, no curfew, no parental permission needed, no rules about who you can date or what you can watch. Complete freedom. Your parents say, "We trust you to make your own choices now." How does that feel? Pretty amazing, right? You can finally do whatever you want.

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But then you start thinking about your family. Your mom works two jobs and comes home exhausted. Your little sister struggles with math homework. Your grandparents live alone and rarely get visitors. Suddenly all that freedom feels different, not like a chance to party or ignore everyone, but like an opportunity to actually help the people you care about.

---

This is exactly the situation Paul addresses in Galatians. The early Christians had just been set free from hundreds of religious rules, no more tracking kosher laws, ritual washings, or ceremonial requirements. They were completely liberated from legalistic religion. But then Paul says something surprising: use your freedom to serve others.

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As we read today, pay attention to the tension between liberty and responsibility. Notice how Paul defines what freedom is actually for. And think about whether serving others makes you more free or less free, because Paul's answer might surprise you.

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Let's open to Galatians 5 and start reading verses 13-14 silently. Think about whether this sounds like freedom or just another form of obligation.

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## 2. Silent Reading (5 minutes)

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**Managing Silent Reading:** Walk quietly around the room. Watch for students who seem confused by Paul's logic or who finish early and look restless. Help with difficult words like "indulge the flesh" or "fulfill." Let them sit with the apparent contradiction between freedom and service.

### As You Read, Think About:

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- What kind of freedom is Paul talking about, freedom from what?
  - Why does Paul immediately limit the freedom he just celebrated?
  - How does serving others "fulfill the entire law"?
  - What would "indulging the flesh" look like in your life versus serving others?
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### Galatians 5:13-14 (NIV)

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*13 You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. 14 For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping*

*this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself."*

### 3. Discussion (15, 18 minutes)

#### Oral Reading (2, 3 minutes)

**Selecting Readers:** Choose confident readers who can handle Paul's complex logic. Ask them to read with emphasis on the contrast between "indulge" and "serve." Let the tension in Paul's argument come through.

**Reader 1:** Verses 13-14 (Paul's central paradox) **Reader 2:** Verses 1, 7-8 (Context of freedom under attack) **Reader 3:** Verses 22-26 (Spirit-led freedom in action)

Listen for the tension in Paul's voice, he's passionate about protecting their freedom while redirecting how they use it. This isn't abstract theology; it's a relationship crisis.

#### Small Group Question Generation (3, 4 minutes)

**Setup:** Form groups of 3-4 students. Give exactly 3 minutes to generate 1-2 genuine questions. Walk between groups to listen for their natural curiosity. If a group is stuck, ask "What confused you most?" or "What surprised you?"

Get into groups of three or four. Your job is to come up with one or two questions that you're genuinely curious about from what we just read. Not questions you think you should ask, but things you actually wonder about. For example, you might ask, "Why does Paul think freedom should make us serve others?" or "How is this different from just following rules?" You have three minutes. Go.

#### Facilitated Discussion (12, 14 minutes)

**Remember:** Students lead with their questions, you guide deeper exploration. Resist the urge to lecture. Help them discover Paul's logic rather than explaining it to them.

**Collecting Questions:** Write student questions on board. Look for themes around freedom, obligation, and motivation. Start with questions most students can relate to.

## Probing Questions (to go deeper)

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- "What evidence do you see that the Galatians were actually free, what had changed for them?"
  - "How does Paul define what freedom is FOR versus what it's NOT for?"
  - "What's the difference between serving others because you have to versus because you choose to?"
  - "Why might 'indulging the flesh' actually make someone less free rather than more free?"
  - "How can serving others 'fulfill the entire law' when following rules couldn't?"
  - "What does this look like in your actual relationships, family, friends, dating, social media?"
  - "What would have happened if Paul had said, 'You're free, do whatever you want'?"
  - "Why does love create stronger motivation than fear of punishment ever could?"
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## Revealing the Pattern

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Do you notice what's happening here? Paul isn't taking away their freedom, he's showing them what freedom is actually for. When you're truly free, you're free to love authentically rather than just following rules or rebelling against them. The paradox is that serving love makes you more free, not less, because it aligns your choices with your deepest values rather than your surface impulses.

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## 4. Application (3, 4 minutes)

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Let's get real about your lives. You have more freedom than any previous generation, choices about entertainment, relationships, social media, how you spend time, who you listen to. The question is: how do you use that freedom? Does it increase your ability to love others, or does it mainly serve your own desires?

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## Real Issues This Connects To

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- Social media freedom: posting whatever gets likes versus considering how your content affects followers
  - Relationship choices: dating for personal gratification versus caring for the other person's wellbeing
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- Family dynamics: using independence to avoid responsibility versus choosing to help because you care
- Academic freedom: choosing easy classes or skipping assignments versus developing skills to serve others
- Economic privilege: spending money on personal wants versus considering need around you
- Future planning: career decisions based only on personal success versus how you can contribute to society

**Facilitation:** Let students share examples without judging their current choices. Some situations are genuinely complex. Help them think through the principle of love-motivated decision-making rather than giving specific behavioral rules.

### Discussion Prompts

- "When have you seen someone use their freedom to genuinely serve others' good?"
- "What would help you recognize the difference between loving service and people-pleasing?"
- "How do you discern when personal freedom and love for others are in tension?"
- "What's the difference between choosing to serve and being guilted into serving?"

## 5. Closing (2 minutes)

Here's what I want you to take with you: Christian freedom isn't freedom from moral obligation, it's freedom to love authentically rather than act from fear, guilt, or social pressure. Paul's paradox is that when you're truly free, you choose to serve others not because you have to but because you want to. That's more liberating than license ever could be.

This week, pay attention to how you use your freedoms. Notice when your choices increase your ability to love others versus when they serve mainly your own immediate desires. Experiment with choosing love even when no one's making you, and see if that feels more like freedom or less like freedom.

You wrestled with hard questions today and didn't settle for easy answers. That's exactly the kind of thinking that leads to authentic faith. Keep questioning, keep wondering, and keep discovering what it

means to be truly free.

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## Grades 4, 6

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Ages 9, 11 • 30 Minutes • Interactive Storytelling + Activity

### Your Main Job Today

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Help students understand that real freedom means we get to choose to help others, not just do whatever we want, and that choosing love makes us happier than choosing selfishness.

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### If Kids Ask "Why should I serve others if I'm free?"

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Say: "Because when you really love someone, serving them doesn't feel like work, it feels like joy. God gives us freedom so we can choose love instead of being forced to follow rules."

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### 1. Opening (5 minutes)

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Raise your hand if you've ever been told, "You can do whatever you want today!" Maybe it was a weekend morning, or your parents said you could choose the family activity, or you had a free day at school. How did that feel? Pretty awesome, right?

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Now here's a harder question. Imagine you have that total freedom on a day when your little brother is sick, your mom is super stressed about work, and your friend just had a fight with their parents and is really sad. Part of you thinks, "Finally, I can play video games all day and not worry about anyone else!" But another part thinks, "Maybe I should help out or spend time with my friend."

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That feeling is totally normal. Freedom can be confusing when the people you care about need help. It's like your heart wants to help them, but your brain wants to just have fun. Both feelings make sense, and it's actually kind of hard to know what to do.

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This reminds me of kids in movies like Moana or Frozen. Moana could have stayed safe on her island and done whatever she wanted, but she chose to sail across the ocean to help her people. Elsa could have hidden away with her powers, but she chose to use them to serve Arendelle. Their freedom became more meaningful when they used it to help others.

---

The tricky part is figuring out when you should use your freedom just for yourself and when you should use it to help others. Sometimes it feels like if you're always helping, you're not really free at all, you're just following different rules.

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Today we're going to hear about what the apostle Paul told some Christians who were confused about this exact same thing. They had just been set free from tons of religious rules, but then Paul gave them surprising advice about how to use their new freedom. Let's find out what happened.

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**What to Expect:** Kids will relate to the freedom scenario and may share examples. Acknowledge briefly ("That sounds like real freedom!") but keep momentum moving toward the story.

## 2. Bible Story Time (10 minutes)

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Picture a group of Christians living about two thousand years ago in a place called Galatia. These people had grown up following hundreds and hundreds of religious rules about what to eat, when to wash their hands, which prayers to say, and how to dress.

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Then they met Paul and heard the good news about Jesus. Paul told them, "You don't have to follow all those rules to be close to God! Jesus did everything necessary. You're completely free!" Can you imagine how that felt after years of trying to remember every single rule?

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For the first time in their lives, they could make choices based on what they thought was right instead of just checking a list of dos and don'ts. They could eat meals without worrying about breaking food rules. They could pray with their own words instead of memorizing specific phrases.

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Imagine finally being allowed to choose your own clothes after years of wearing a uniform. Or being able to pick your own snacks after someone else always decided for you. That's the kind of relief and excitement these Christians felt when they realized they were free.

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But then something happened. Other teachers came to their churches and said, "Wait a minute! Paul didn't tell you the whole truth. You still need to follow the old rules if you want God to really accept you. This 'freedom' thing is dangerous."

---

The Galatian Christians were confused. They had loved their newfound freedom, but now they worried, what if Paul was wrong? What if they needed those rules after all? Some of them started going back to rule-following because they were scared.

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When Paul heard about this, he was upset, not angry at the Christians, but heartbroken that someone was trying to steal their freedom. He sat down and wrote them a letter. In that letter, he wanted to remind them about their freedom but also help them understand how to use it.

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This is the most important part of Paul's letter. He wanted them to remember that they were completely free, but he also wanted to show them what freedom is really for.

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**Galatians 5:13 (NIV)**

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*13 You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love.*

Now, this might have surprised the Galatians. Paul just reminded them that they were called to be free, completely free from all those religious rules. But then he said something that seemed like another rule: serve others in love.

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But actually, Paul wasn't giving them a new rule to follow. He was explaining what real freedom looks like. He was saying, "You're not free so you can ignore everyone else and just think about yourself. You're free so you can choose to love others without being forced to."

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Think about it this way: when someone makes you share your toys, that's not love, that's just following rules. But when you choose to share your toys because you care about your friend's feelings, that's love. The difference is choice.

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**Galatians 5:14 (NIV)**

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*14 For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself."*

Then Paul explained something amazing. He told them that all those hundreds of rules they used to follow were actually trying to teach them one thing: love your neighbor as much as you love yourself.

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When you love your neighbor like you love yourself, you naturally want to help them when they're in trouble. You want to share good things with them. You want to be kind to them when they're sad. You want to include them when they're left out.

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The Christians didn't need hundreds of rules telling them exactly what to do in every situation. If they just asked, "What would love do?" they would know the right choice. And the amazing thing was, they got to choose it, nobody was forcing them.

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Paul was showing them that serving others out of love is completely different from following rules out of fear. When you serve someone because you love them, it doesn't feel like work, it feels good. It makes you happy to make them happy.

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The Galatian Christians realized that Paul was right. They didn't have to go back to following all those old rules. But they also didn't want to use their freedom just to be selfish. They wanted to use their freedom to show love to each other and to their neighbors.

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From that day on, when they had choices to make, they would ask themselves: "How can I use my freedom to show love?" Sometimes that meant helping someone who was sick. Sometimes it meant sharing food with someone who was hungry. Sometimes it meant comforting someone who was sad.

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And the most amazing thing happened: the more they used their freedom to serve others in love, the more free they felt. It wasn't like following rules at all, it was like becoming the people they really wanted to be.

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Sometimes in our lives, we have the same choice the Galatian Christians had. We can use our freedom just to make ourselves happy, or we can use our freedom to show love to others. And just like those early Christians discovered, choosing love doesn't make us less free, it makes us more free.

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What we learn from Paul's letter is that God gives us freedom not so we can ignore everyone else, but so we can choose to love others because we want to, not because someone makes us.

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The amazing truth is that when we use our freedom to serve others in love, we become the kind of people God created us to be, people who are free to care, free to help, and free to love.

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**Pause here.** Let the story sink in for 5 seconds before moving on.

### 3. Discussion (5 minutes)

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#### Question 1: The Freedom Feeling

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Think about a time when you had the freedom to do whatever you wanted, but you noticed that someone around you, maybe a family member or friend, really needed help. How did that feel? Did part of you want to just enjoy your freedom, while another part wanted to help them?

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**Listen For:** "I felt torn," "I wanted both things", affirm: "That makes perfect sense. Your heart was telling you two different things, and both feelings were real."

### Question 2: The Choice Difference

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What's the difference between being forced to help someone and choosing to help them because you care? Think about how it feels when someone makes you apologize versus when you genuinely want to make things right with a friend.

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**If They Say:** "It feels fake when you're forced", respond: "Exactly! When you choose it, it comes from your heart. That's what Paul means by serving in love."

### Question 3: The Love Question

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Paul said that when you love your neighbor as yourself, you naturally know what to do. Can you think of a situation where asking "What would love do?" would actually help you make a better choice?

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**Connect:** "This is exactly what the Galatian Christians learned, love becomes like a guide that helps you use your freedom well."

### Question 4: The Freedom Result

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Why do you think serving others in love might make you feel more free rather than less free? What's the difference between being someone who only thinks about yourself and being someone who cares about others?

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**If They Say:** "It feels good to help people", respond: "Yes! When you know you're the kind of person who chooses love, you feel good about who you are."

You've been thinking deeply about what it means to use freedom to love others. Now let's do an activity that will help you experience what Paul was talking about.

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## 4. Activity: Freedom Bridge (8 minutes)

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**Zero Props Required** , This activity uses only kids' bodies and empty space.

### Purpose

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This activity physically demonstrates how freedom becomes more meaningful when used to help others reach their goals. Students will discover that individual freedom plus cooperation creates better outcomes than individual freedom alone. Success looks like kids realizing that choosing to work together makes everyone more successful.

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### Instructions to Class(3 minutes)

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We're going to play Freedom Bridge. I need you to divide into three groups. Each group will start on one side of the room and needs to get to the opposite side. But here's the catch, the middle of the room is a "river" that you can't step into.

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Each group has complete freedom to figure out how to cross the river. You can jump, you can try to stretch across, you can go around the edges, whatever you can think of. The goal is for your entire group to get to the other side safely.

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But here's the twist: once you start trying, you'll discover that some people can't make it across on their own. They need help. You have the freedom to help other groups or just focus on your own group. Your choice.

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We're doing this because it's exactly like what Paul told the Galatians: you have freedom to choose how to use your abilities, for just yourself or to serve others in love.

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### During the Activity(4 minutes)

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Let groups start by trying to solve their own river-crossing problem. Some kids will be able to jump across easily, others will struggle. Watch for groups that finish quickly versus groups that have members who can't make it.

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As some kids realize they can cross easily while others can't, they'll face the choice: help just their own group or help everyone. Let them struggle with this choice for a couple minutes without intervening.

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When you see someone start to help another group, celebrate it: "I notice you're choosing to use your abilities to help others!" If no one helps, guide them: "I wonder if the groups who are finished could help the groups who are still trying."

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The breakthrough moment comes when kids realize that everyone succeeds when those with abilities help those who need assistance. This is the physical picture of freedom serving love.

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Once everyone has crossed with help from others, have them notice the difference between the feeling of individual success and the feeling of everyone succeeding together.

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**Watch For:** The moment when someone chooses to help another group instead of just celebrating their own success, this is the physical representation of freedom choosing to serve love.

### **Debrief(1 minute)**

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What did you notice about how it felt when you used your freedom just for yourself versus when you used it to help others? The people who could jump across easily had a choice, celebrate their own success or help everyone succeed. Which felt better in the end? This is exactly what Paul meant: freedom becomes more meaningful when we use it to serve others in love.

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## **5. Closing (2 minutes)**

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Here's what we learned today: God gives us freedom so we can choose to love others, not just do whatever we want for ourselves. Real freedom means we get to decide to be helpers, to be kind, and to care about others, and nobody has to force us.

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This doesn't mean you have to help everyone all the time or that you can't enjoy things for yourself. It means that when you use your freedom to show love to others, you become the kind of person you really want to be, someone who makes life better for people around you.

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The amazing result is that when you choose love, you feel good about yourself and your relationships get stronger. Love makes freedom even better than selfishness ever could.

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### **This Week's Challenge**

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This week, look for one moment each day when you have the freedom to choose between doing something just for yourself or doing something that would help someone else. Try asking yourself,

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"What would love do?" and then choose that, not because you have to, but because you want to see what happens.

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### **Closing Prayer (Optional)**

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*Dear God, thank you for giving us the freedom to choose love instead of making us follow a bunch of rules. Help us remember that when we use our freedom to serve others, we become the kind of people you created us to be. Give us hearts that want to help others and the courage to choose love even when it's not easy. In Jesus's name, Amen.*

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## **Grades 1, 3**

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Ages 6, 8 • 15, 20 Minutes • Animated Storytelling + Songs

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### **Your Main Job Today**

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Help children understand that God gives us the freedom to be helpers and show love to others because God loves us.

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### **Movement & Formation Plan**

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- **Opening Song:** Standing in a circle
  - **Bible Story:** Sitting in a horseshoe shape facing the teacher
  - **Small Group Q&A:** Standing in pairs facing each other
  - **Closing Song:** Standing in straight lines
  - **Prayer:** Sitting cross-legged in rows
- 

### **If Kids Don't Understand**

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Compare God's love to a parent letting you choose to help your little brother, you get to be a helper because someone loves you and trusts you.

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## 1. Opening Song (2, 3 minutes)

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**Formation:** Standing in a circle

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Select a song about love and kindness. Suggestions: "Love is Something," "God's Love is So Wonderful," or "Jesus Loves Me." Use movements: point to your heart during "love," hug yourself during "wonderful," and reach out to friends during "others."

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Great singing! You sang about love, and that's exactly what our Bible story is about today. Everyone sit down in our story horseshoe so we can hear about someone who learned how to show love!

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## 2. Bible Story Time (5, 7 minutes)

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**Formation:** Kids sitting in a horseshoe shape on the floor facing you. Move around inside the horseshoe as you tell the story.

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**Animated Delivery:** Use big gestures, change your voice for different characters, move around the space. Keep energy high! Sound excited when talking about freedom, sound caring when talking about love, sound warm when talking about helping others.

---

Today we're going to meet a man named Paul who had something very important to tell his friends about love!

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*[Walk to one side of the horseshoe]*

---

Paul had friends who lived far away. These friends had learned about Jesus, and they were so happy! But they were also confused about something important.

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*[Look confused and scratch your head]*

---

Paul's friends thought they had to follow lots and lots of rules to make God happy. They thought they had to do everything perfectly or God wouldn't love them.

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*[Walk to other side of horseshoe, speak with joy]*

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But Paul had wonderful news for them! He wanted to tell them that God loved them no matter what. They didn't have to follow all those rules to earn God's love!

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*[Move to center, speak like you're writing a letter]*

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So Paul sat down and wrote them a letter. In his letter, he told them they were free! Free to make good choices because God loved them!

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*[Speak with excitement, gesture big]*

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Paul's friends were so excited! They could make choices with their hearts instead of just following rules because they were scared!

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**Galatians 5:13 (NIV)**

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*13 You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free... serve one another humbly in love.*

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*[Pause and look around at each child]*

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But then Paul told them something really important. He said, "You're free to make choices! But use your freedom to love others!"

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*[Move to center, speak with warmth and love]*

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Paul wanted them to understand that God gave them freedom so they could choose to be helpers. They could choose to be kind. They could choose to care about other people!

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*[Walk slowly around the horseshoe, speaking gently]*

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He told them that when you love someone, you want to help them. When your friend is sad, you want to make them feel better. When someone needs help, you want to help them!

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*[Stop walking and face the children directly]*

---

Paul's friends learned that God gives us choices not so we can be mean or selfish, but so we can choose to love others!

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*[Speak with excitement]*

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And you know what happened? When Paul's friends started choosing to love and help others, they felt really, really good! They were happy because they were being the kind of people God made them to be!

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*[Pause dramatically]*

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God gives us freedom too! We can choose to be helpers. We can choose to be kind. We can choose to love others just like Paul's friends did!

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*[Speak directly to the children, warmly]*

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Sometimes at school, you can choose to help a friend who dropped their crayons. Sometimes at home, you can choose to help your family without being asked. Sometimes when someone is crying, you can choose to give them a hug!

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*[Move closer to the children]*

---

When you choose to love others, you're using your freedom the way God wants you to. You're being a helper just like Paul taught his friends to be!

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*[Speak warmly and encouragingly]*

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God loves you so much that He lets you choose to love others. And when you choose love, it makes God happy and it makes you happy too!

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### **3. Discussion (5 minutes)**

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**Formation:** Have kids stand up and find a partner. Pairs scatter around the room with space to talk.

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Find a partner and stand facing each other. I'm going to give each pair one question to talk about. There are no wrong answers, and you'll have about one minute to share your ideas!

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**Teacher Circulation:** Walk around to each pair. Listen to their discussions. If a pair is stuck, ask "What do you think?" or rephrase the question more simply. Give them time to think, some kids need extra processing time.

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### **Discussion Questions**

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*Select one question per pair based on class size. Save unused questions for next time.*

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1. How did Paul's friends feel when they learned they were free?
  2. What's something you like to choose for yourself?
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3. How do you feel when someone helps you?

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4. What would you do if you saw someone who was sad?

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5. Why do you think helping others makes us feel good?

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6. How can you be a helper at home?

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7. What does it mean to choose to love someone?

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8. How can you be a helper at school?

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9. When has someone chosen to help you?

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10. What's the difference between being forced to help and choosing to help?

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11. Why did Paul want his friends to love others?

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12. How do you know when someone loves you?

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13. What does God want us to do with our freedom?

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14. How does it feel when you choose to be kind?

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15. What's one way you can help someone this week?

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16. How can you show love to your family?

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17. What would happen if everyone chose to help others?

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18. How do you feel when you make someone smile?

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19. What would you tell Paul's friends about choosing love?

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20. How does God feel when we choose to love others?

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Great discussions! Let's come back together in our lines for our closing song. Who wants to share what they talked about with their partner?

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#### **4. Closing Song (2, 3 minutes)**

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**Formation:** Standing in straight lines facing forward

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Choose songs about helping and kindness. Suggestions: "Love One Another," "If You're Happy and You Know It" (modified with helping actions), or "This Little Light of Mine." Include movements: reach out to others during "love," pretend to help during "serve," and point up during "God."

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Beautiful singing about love and helping! Now let's sit down for prayer and thank God for giving us the freedom to choose love.

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## 5. Closing Prayer (1, 2 minutes)

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**Formation:** Sitting cross-legged in rows, heads bowed, hands folded

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*Dear God, thank you for loving us so much that you give us freedom to choose...*

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*[Pause]*

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*Help us remember that we can choose to be helpers and show love to others because that makes you happy and makes us happy too...*

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*[Pause]*

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*Thank you for being a God who loves us and trusts us to make good choices. Help us choose love every day. In Jesus's name, Amen.*

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**Alternative, Popcorn Prayer:** If your class is comfortable with it, invite kids to offer short one-sentence prayers about choosing to love others. Examples: "God, help me be a helper" or "Thank you for letting me choose kindness."

Remember that God gives you the freedom to choose love every day! Have a wonderful week being helpers and showing kindness to others!

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# Greater Love

*Ultimate Sacrifice, When friendship and love collide with the deepest calling*

**John 15:9-17**

## Instructor Preparation

Read this section before teaching any age group. It provides the theological foundation and shows how the lesson adapts across developmental stages.

## The Passage

**John 15:9-17 (NIV)**

*9 "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. 10 If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love. 11 I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.*

*12 My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. 13 Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. 14 You are my friends if you do what I command. 15 I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. 16 You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. 17 This is my command: Love each other.*

## Context

Jesus speaks these words during his final evening with the disciples before his crucifixion. This comes directly after the vine and branches teaching, where Jesus established the necessity of remaining connected to him. The disciples are confused and anxious about his repeated references to leaving them,

and Jesus is preparing them for both his death and their mission after his resurrection.

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Within hours of speaking these words about dying for friends, Jesus will experience abandonment by these very friends, Peter's denial, Judas's betrayal, and the others fleeing in fear. Yet Jesus speaks of them as friends and declares his willingness to die for them even knowing their coming failure. This creates profound tension between Jesus's unconditional commitment and human frailty.

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## The Big Idea

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**Jesus establishes life-laying-down as the maximum standard of love, demonstrated through his willingness to die for disciples who will soon abandon him.**

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This creates complexity: Jesus calls them friends while knowing they will fail him, and uses friendship language while his love extends beyond friendship to enemies. The standard appears impossible, yet Jesus provides both the model and the empowerment through his Spirit.

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## Theological Core

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- **Ultimate Sacrifice Defines Greatest Love.** Jesus establishes a hierarchy of love with literal death for others at the peak, creating an objective standard for measuring love's authenticity.
  - **Life-Laying-Down Models Divine Love.** Jesus demonstrates this standard through his own impending death, showing that God's love operates by this ultimate sacrifice principle.
  - **Friendship Love Creates Special Intimacy.** Jesus elevates the disciples from servants to friends, indicating a deeper relationship involving shared knowledge, mutual choosing, and intimate connection.
  - **Maximum Standard Enables Transformation.** By establishing the highest possible standard, Jesus provides a goal that transforms ordinary relationships into opportunities for extraordinary love and self-sacrifice.
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## Age Group Overview

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## What Each Age Group Learns

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## Grades 7, 8 / Adult

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- Ultimate love is measured by willingness to sacrifice life for others, creating an objective standard for authentic love
  - Jesus maintained love for disciples who would abandon him, showing that love transcends others' failures
  - The friendship language doesn't limit love only to friends but establishes a model for the deepest possible relationships
  - Discerning how to apply life-laying-down love in practical situations requires wisdom about when and how to sacrifice
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## Grades 4, 6

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- True love means being willing to give up things that matter to us to help others
  - Even when people let us down or aren't perfect friends, we can still choose to love them
  - Our choices to love others have real consequences and can make a big difference in their lives
  - Sometimes loving others feels hard or unfair, but it's still the right thing to do
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## Grades 1, 3

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- Jesus loves us so much that he gave his life to save us
  - God wants us to love other people the way Jesus loves us
  - We can show love by being kind, helping others, and sharing what we have
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## Common Pitfalls to Avoid

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- **Limiting Love to Literal Death.** While Jesus uses death as the maximum standard, life-laying-down applies to daily self-sacrifice, giving up preferences, time, comfort, and resources for others' benefit.
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- **Creating Friendship-Only Love.** Jesus uses friendship language while demonstrating love for enemies. The point is intimate, chosen love rather than restricting love only to those who reciprocate.
- **Ignoring the Abandonment Context.** Jesus speaks these words knowing the disciples will fail him within hours. This reveals that love operates independently of others' worthiness or consistency.
- **Making it Impossible Standard.** While challenging, Jesus provides both the model and empowerment through his Spirit. The standard is transformative precisely because it's achievable through divine help.

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## Handling Hard Questions

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### **"Does this mean we should only love our friends and not our enemies?"**

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Jesus is using friendship as an example of the deepest love, not limiting who we should love. Remember, he's about to die for these disciples even though they'll abandon him, showing love for people who act like enemies. The friendship language shows us what intimate, chosen love looks like, but Jesus demonstrates that this love extends even to those who hurt us.

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### **"How can Jesus call them friends when he knows they're going to betray him?"**

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This is actually the most amazing part, Jesus chooses to love and call them friends despite knowing their future failures. It shows that his love isn't based on their performance but on his character. This means we can love people even when they disappoint us, and we can trust that Jesus loves us even when we fail him.

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### **"Are we really supposed to die for other people? That seems impossible and scary."**

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Jesus is setting the maximum standard to show how deep love can go. Most of us won't literally die for others, but we can practice "life-laying-down" in smaller ways, giving up our comfort, time, preferences, or resources to help others. It starts with small sacrifices and grows from there. The goal is a heart willing to give everything if needed.

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## The One Thing to Remember

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Jesus defines greatest love as willingness to sacrifice everything for others, demonstrated by his death for disciples who would abandon him, showing that authentic love operates independently of others' worthiness.

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## Grades 7, 8 / Adult

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Ages 12, 14+ • 30 Minutes • Student-Centered Discussion

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### Your Main Job Today

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Guide students to wrestle with the tension between Jesus's friendship language and his universal love, helping them discover how life-laying-down love applies when people fail us. Focus on facilitating discovery rather than providing answers.

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### The Tension to Frame

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If greatest love means dying for friends, how does this work when friends abandon you? Does friendship create limits or reveal the deepest possibilities of love?

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### Discussion Facilitation Tips

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- Validate their experiences of friendship betrayal and disappointment, these are universal experiences that connect to Jesus's situation
  - Honor the complexity that love sometimes requires sacrifice for unworthy recipients, this tension is real and requires wisdom
  - Let them wrestle with how to apply impossible-sounding standards rather than dismissing them as unrealistic
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### 1. Opening Frame (2, 3 minutes)

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Imagine you have a close friend who you'd trust with anything. You've shared secrets, supported each other through tough times, made sacrifices to help them succeed. You'd honestly say you'd do almost

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anything for this person, even put yourself at risk if they needed you.

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Now imagine finding out that this friend has been talking about you behind your back, sharing your secrets, maybe even actively working against something important to you. The betrayal feels especially sharp because you had given them so much trust and investment. Your first instinct might be to cut them off completely, they proved they weren't worthy of your friendship.

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Here's what makes this scenario particularly challenging: What if you knew in advance that this betrayal was coming? What if you could see into the future and know that your investment in this friendship would lead to abandonment and pain? Would you still choose to love them? Would you still call them friend?

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Today we're looking at Jesus in exactly this situation. He's speaking to his closest friends about the greatest possible love, literally dying for others. But here's what makes it shocking: he knows that within hours, these very friends will abandon him when he needs them most. Yet he still calls them friends. He still chooses to die for them.

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Open your Bibles to John 15:9-17. As we read, pay attention to the tension between Jesus's incredible standard for love and the reality that he's speaking to people who are about to fail him completely.

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## 2. Silent Reading (5 minutes)

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**Managing Silent Reading:** Walk quietly around the room. Help with difficult words like "appointed" or "remain." Watch for students who finish early, let them re-read and think deeply about Jesus's emotional state during these words.

### As You Read, Think About:

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- What does Jesus reveal about his relationship with these disciples?
  - What motivates Jesus to establish this "greater love" standard?
  - What's surprising about Jesus calling them "friends" rather than servants?
  - How would you feel if you were one of the disciples hearing this?
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**John 15:9-17 (NIV)**

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*9 "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. 10 If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love. 11 I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.*

*12 My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. 13 Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. 14 You are my friends if you do what I command. 15 I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. 16 You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. 17 This is my command: Love each other.*

### 3. Discussion (15, 18 minutes)

#### Oral Reading (2, 3 minutes)

**Selecting Readers:** Ask for volunteers who can read with expression. Let students pass if uncomfortable. Choose confident readers for the emotional weight of verses 12-13.

**Reader 1:** Verses 9-11 (Jesus's love foundation) **Reader 2:** Verses 12-14 (The greatest love command)  
**Reader 3:** Verses 15-17 (Friends, not servants)

Listen for the emotion in Jesus's voice. He's not giving a lecture, he's having an intimate conversation with people he cares deeply about, knowing it's their last evening together.

#### Small Group Question Generation (3, 4 minutes)

**Setup:** Form groups of 3-4. Give exactly 3 minutes to come up with 1-2 genuine questions about the passage. Walk between groups to listen and help stuck groups with "What confused you?" or "What surprised you most?"

Get into groups of 3-4 people. Your job is to come up with 1-2 questions that you're genuinely curious about from this passage. Not questions you think I want to hear, but things you're actually wondering about. Good questions might start with "Why does Jesus..." or "What does it mean when..." or "How

can someone..." You have three minutes to discuss and come up with your best questions.

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### Facilitated Discussion (12, 14 minutes)

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**Remember:** Students drive with THEIR questions. You facilitate and probe deeper. Guide discovery rather than lecture. Let them wrestle with the tensions.

**Collecting Questions:** Write student questions on board. Look for themes like friendship, sacrifice, betrayal, standards. Start with questions most students will relate to.

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### Probing Questions (to go deeper)

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- "What evidence do you see that Jesus knows his disciples well? How intimate is this relationship?"
  - "Why do you think Jesus chooses death as his example of greatest love? Why not other forms of sacrifice?"
  - "What's the difference between dying for friends and dying for strangers or enemies?"
  - "How can Jesus call them friends when he knows they're about to abandon him?"
  - "Is Jesus creating an impossible standard or revealing what love actually looks like?"
  - "How would this conversation feel different if the disciples knew they were about to betray him?"
  - "What if Jesus had said this after the resurrection instead of before the crucifixion?"
  - "Why does friendship matter more than just commanding servants to love?"
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### Revealing the Pattern

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Do you notice what's happening here? Jesus establishes the maximum possible standard for love, literally dying for others, while speaking to people who will fail to meet even basic loyalty standards within hours. This reveals that greatest love operates independently of whether others deserve it. It's not conditional love based on worthiness, but chosen love based on the lover's character. This changes everything about how we approach difficult relationships.

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## 4. Application (3, 4 minutes)

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Let's get real about your lives. Where do you experience the tension between loving people and being disappointed by them? Think about family members who let you down, friends who break trust, teammates who don't pull their weight, or even broader situations where people fail to live up to expectations.

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### Real Issues This Connects To

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- Friends who share your secrets or exclude you from plans after you've supported them
  - Family members who criticize you after you've tried to help them
  - Teammates or group project partners who don't contribute but still benefit from your work
  - Online relationships where people present false versions of themselves
  - Social justice situations where you care about issues that others ignore or actively oppose
  - Dating relationships where someone leads you on then chooses someone else
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**Facilitation:** Let students share examples without rushing to answers. Some situations call for boundaries, others for continued love. Help them think through discernment rather than giving blanket advice about always sacrificing.

### Discussion Prompts

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- "When have you seen someone love another person despite being treated poorly?"
  - "What would help you love someone who has disappointed or hurt you?"
  - "How do you decide when to keep investing in someone versus protecting yourself?"
  - "What's the difference between wise love and foolish martyrdom?"
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## 5. Closing (2 minutes)

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Here's what I want you to take with you: Jesus defines greatest love as willingness to sacrifice everything for others, even those who will fail us. This isn't naive love that ignores reality, Jesus knows exactly who these disciples are and what they'll do. It's chosen love that operates based on the character

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of the lover, not the worthiness of the recipient. This is incredibly challenging because it means our love can't be conditional on others' performance.

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This week, pay attention to moments when you have opportunities to choose sacrificial love, especially in situations where someone has disappointed you or doesn't seem to deserve it. Notice the tension, but experiment with small acts of life-laying-down love. See what happens when you love based on your character rather than others' worthiness.

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Your thinking today was excellent. You wrestled with real complexity and didn't settle for easy answers. Keep asking these hard questions about love, friendship, and sacrifice. The world needs people who understand that greatest love transcends others' failures and operates by a higher standard.

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## Grades 4, 6

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Ages 9, 11 • 30 Minutes • Interactive Storytelling + Activity

### Your Main Job Today

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Help kids understand that loving others means being willing to sacrifice for them, even when it costs us something important or when people don't seem to deserve it.

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### If Kids Ask "Why should we love people who are mean to us?"

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Say: "That's exactly what made Jesus's love so amazing, he loved people even when they weren't perfect. It doesn't mean we let people hurt us, but we can still choose to be kind and good to them."

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### 1. Opening (5 minutes)

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Raise your hand if you've ever had a really good friend, someone you trusted, someone you shared things with, someone who you thought would always be on your side. Now keep your hand up if that friend ever disappointed you or let you down in some way. Yeah, that's most of us, isn't it?

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Here's a harder question: Imagine you have a best friend who you really care about. You've helped them with homework, shared your lunch when they forgot theirs, stuck up for them when other kids were mean. But then you find out they've been saying not-nice things about you behind your back. Part of

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you feels really hurt and wants to stop being their friend. But another part of you still cares about them and remembers all the good times you had together.

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That's a really confusing feeling, isn't it? It's hard to know what to do when someone you love disappoints you. Your feelings are completely normal, it makes sense to feel hurt when friends let us down. Sometimes we want to protect ourselves by staying away from people who might hurt us again.

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This reminds me of the movie Toy Story, when Woody discovers that Andy might not want him anymore. Woody has to decide whether to keep loving Andy even though Andy seems to be moving on to other toys. The tricky part is figuring out whether to keep caring about someone even when they don't seem to care about you the same way.

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The tricky part is figuring out how to love people even when they're not perfect, even when they make mistakes, even when they hurt our feelings. It's one of the hardest things about relationships, loving someone when they don't always love you back the way you want them to.

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Today we're going to hear about Jesus talking to his closest friends about the greatest kind of love possible. But here's what makes this story really interesting: Jesus knew that these friends were about to make some really big mistakes. Let's find out what Jesus said about love when he knew his friends might let him down.

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**What to Expect:** Kids will relate to friendship disappointment. Acknowledge their experiences briefly: "That sounds really hard" or "I can understand why that hurt." Keep momentum moving toward the story.

## 2. Bible Story Time (10 minutes)

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It was Jesus's last evening with his twelve closest friends, the disciples. They had been together for three years, traveling, eating, learning, sharing everything together. These weren't just followers; they were his best friends.

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Jesus knew something the disciples didn't know yet: this would be their last normal evening together. By tomorrow night, everything would change. He would be arrested, put on trial, and crucified. And he knew that when things got scary, these friends would run away and leave him alone.

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Can you imagine knowing that your best friends were about to abandon you when you needed them most? How would that feel? Probably pretty sad and lonely, right? You might feel angry or

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disappointed. You might wonder if they were really your friends at all.

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But Jesus did something amazing in that moment. Instead of being angry or pulling away from them, he decided to talk to them about the greatest kind of love possible. It's like he wanted to show them what real friendship looks like, even though he knew they were about to fail him.

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Jesus looked around at Peter, James, John, and all the others. These were people he had shared meals with, taught important things to, and cared for when they were sick or scared. His heart was full of love for them, even knowing what was coming.

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"I love you the same way my Father loves me," Jesus told them. "I want you to stay connected to that love. I want you to be filled with joy." He could see they were confused and worried about the future, and he wanted to give them something strong to hold onto.

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Then Jesus said something that would change how they thought about love forever. He said, "My command is this: Love each other the way I have loved you." But then he explained what that kind of love looks like.

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Jesus's voice became very serious. He looked each of them in the eyes. "Greater love has no one than this," he said slowly. "To lay down one's life for one's friends." He was telling them that the biggest, strongest, most amazing kind of love is when someone is willing to give up their own life to save someone else.

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Now this wasn't just a nice idea Jesus was sharing. This was exactly what he was about to do. In less than twenty-four hours, Jesus would be hanging on a cross, dying to save not just these twelve friends, but everyone in the whole world.

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#### **John 15:12-13 (NIV)**

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*12 My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. 13 Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends.*

But here's what makes this even more incredible: Jesus called them "friends," not just "followers" or "students." "You are my friends," he said warmly. Even though he knew Peter would say he didn't know Jesus when things got scary. Even though he knew Judas would betray him for thirty pieces of silver. Even though he knew the others would run away when soldiers came to arrest him.

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Jesus explained why friendship was so important to him. "I don't call you servants anymore," he said. "Servants don't know what their master is really thinking or planning. But I call you friends because I've shared everything with you. I've told you about my Father's love, about God's plan, about why I came to earth."

Can you imagine how the disciples felt hearing this? Jesus, the Son of God, was calling them his friends! But with that friendship came a responsibility.

**John 15:17 (NIV)**

*17 This is my command: Love each other.*

"Love each other," Jesus repeated. But now they understood what that meant. It didn't just mean being nice or sharing toys. It meant being willing to sacrifice, to give up things that mattered to them, to help each other.

And you know what? Even though the disciples did run away when Jesus was arrested, even though they did fail him when he needed them most, Jesus still loved them. After he rose from the dead, the first thing he did was find his friends and forgive them. He showed them that real love doesn't depend on the other person being perfect.

Jesus's love was so strong that it didn't change based on how his friends acted. When they were brave, he loved them. When they were scared, he loved them. When they made mistakes, he loved them. When they disappointed him, he still loved them.

This is exactly like what happens in our lives sometimes. We have friends who disappoint us, family members who let us down, classmates who aren't always kind to us. But Jesus shows us that we can choose to love them anyway, not because they deserve it, but because that's what real love does.

Real love means being willing to give up something important to help someone else. It might mean sharing your favorite snack with someone who forgot their lunch. It might mean standing up for someone even when it's not popular. It might mean forgiving someone even when they hurt your feelings.

What we learn from Jesus is that the greatest kind of love is willing to sacrifice for others, even when they're not perfect, even when they might not deserve it, even when they might let us down. That's the

kind of love that changes the world.

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And here's the amazing truth: when we love others the way Jesus loved his friends, something beautiful happens. People start to understand what God's love is like. They see that real love is stronger than mistakes, bigger than disappointment, and more powerful than fear.

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**Pause here.** Let the story sink in for 5 seconds before moving on.

### 3. Discussion (5 minutes)

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#### Question 1: The Hard Choice

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Imagine you found out that your best friend was going to do something that would really hurt your feelings tomorrow, maybe not invite you to their birthday party, or choose someone else as their partner for a big project you wanted to do together. But you could still choose to be kind to them today. What would you think about? What would make that choice hard?

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**Listen For:** "I'd be mad," "I wouldn't want to be nice," "It wouldn't be fair", affirm: "Those feelings make complete sense. It would be really hard to be kind when you know someone's about to hurt you."

#### Question 2: The Sacrifice

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Jesus said the greatest love is being willing to give up your life for your friends. Most of us won't ever need to do that, but what are some smaller ways kids your age could "lay down" or sacrifice something important for someone else? What would be hard to give up?

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**If They Say:** "Give away my favorite toy" or "Help with chores", respond "What would make that a real sacrifice? When would it cost you something you really care about?"

#### Question 3: The Friendship

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Why do you think Jesus called them "friends" instead of just "followers" or "students"? What's different about being someone's friend compared to just obeying them? How does that change the way love works?

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**Connect:** "This is exactly what made Jesus's love so powerful, it was chosen love between friends, not just commands from a boss."

#### Question 4: The Result

What do you think would happen in our school, our families, or our neighborhood if more people loved the way Jesus described, being willing to sacrifice for others even when they're not perfect? How might things be different?

**If They Say:** "People would be nicer", probe deeper: "What would that actually look like? Give me a specific example of how someone might act differently."

Your thinking is really good! You understand that this kind of love is challenging because it requires giving up things we want and loving people even when they disappoint us. That's exactly what made Jesus's love so amazing and so powerful.

#### 4. Activity: The Bridge Builders (8 minutes)

**Zero Props Required** , This activity uses only kids' bodies and empty space.

##### Purpose

This activity reinforces sacrificial love by having kids physically experience what it means to "lay down" themselves to help others reach their goals. Success looks like kids discovering that helping others succeed sometimes requires giving up our own comfort or position.

##### Instructions to Class(3 minutes)

We're going to play "Bridge Builders." I'm dividing you into teams of 4-5. Each team has a goal: everyone on your team needs to get from this side of the room to that wall without touching the floor. You can only step on "safe spots."

Here's the challenge: there are only enough safe spots for half your team at any time. The spots are your bodies, you can lie down, kneel, or crouch to become a safe stepping stone for your teammates. But if you're being a safe spot, you can't move toward the goal yourself.

The twist is this: everyone has to make it across, but you'll have to take turns being the bridge for others. Some of you will have to sacrifice your position to help your teammates, then trust them to come back and help you. We're doing this because it's exactly like what Jesus described, laying down yourself so others can succeed.

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### **During the Activity(4 minutes)**

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Let them try to figure it out for the first minute. You'll see some kids want to rush ahead while others hang back. Some teams will realize quickly that they need to sacrifice for each other, others will struggle with the concept.

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Watch for the moment of realization, when someone chooses to lie down as a bridge even though it means they can't move forward themselves. This is when the sacrificial love concept becomes physical.

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Coach with phrases like: "I notice your team needs people to get across... I wonder if anyone would be willing to help them even if it means staying behind for now..." Guide them toward the breakthrough without giving the answer away.

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Celebrate loudly when someone makes the sacrifice: "Look! [Name] just chose to be a bridge for their team! They're laying down their chance to move forward so others can succeed!" Help everyone see the connection.

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Once they've all succeeded, have them notice how it felt different when people were willing to sacrifice for the team versus when everyone was just trying to get ahead on their own.

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**Watch For:** The moment when someone chooses to become a bridge for others, this is the physical representation of laying down your life for friends.

### **Debrief(1 minute)**

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What did you notice about how it felt when people were just trying to get across by themselves versus when people were willing to sacrifice their position to help others? That feeling of trusting someone to come back for you, and choosing to help others even when it costs you something, that's exactly what Jesus was talking about when he described the greatest love.

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## **5. Closing (2 minutes)**

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Here's what we learned today: Jesus taught us that the greatest kind of love is being willing to sacrifice something important to help someone else, even when that person might not be perfect or might even disappoint us. He showed us this love by dying on the cross for his friends who abandoned him.

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This doesn't mean we have to let people hurt us or that we should ignore it when someone is mean to us. But it does mean we can choose to be kind, helpful, and loving even to people who aren't always kind back to us.

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The amazing result is that when we love this way, people start to see what God's love is really like. They learn that love is stronger than mistakes and bigger than disappointment.

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### **This Week's Challenge**

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Look for one opportunity this week to sacrifice something you want to help someone else, maybe your favorite seat, some of your free time, or something you were looking forward to. Notice how it feels to choose love over your own comfort, especially if it's for someone who hasn't always been perfectly kind to you.

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### **Closing Prayer (Optional)**

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*Dear Jesus, thank you for loving us so much that you gave your life for us. Help us learn to love others the way you love us, by being willing to sacrifice for them even when it's hard. Show us how to be kind to people even when they're not perfect, just like you are kind to us. In Jesus's name, Amen.*

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## **Grades 1, 3**

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Ages 6, 8 • 15, 20 Minutes • Animated Storytelling + Songs

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### **Your Main Job Today**

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Help children understand that Jesus loves us so much he gave his life for us, and we can love others by being kind and helping them.

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### **Movement & Formation Plan**

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- **Opening Song:** Standing in a circle
- **Bible Story:** Sitting in a horseshoe shape facing the teacher
- **Small Group Q&A:** Standing in pairs facing each other
- **Closing Song:** Standing in straight lines
- **Prayer:** Sitting cross-legged in rows

## If Kids Don't Understand

Compare Jesus's love to a parent who would do anything to protect their child, then ask "How can we show that kind of love to our friends?"

### 1. Opening Song (2, 3 minutes)

**Formation:** Standing in a circle

Select a song about God's love or Jesus's sacrifice. Suggestions: "Jesus Loves Me," "God's Love is So Wonderful," or "Jesus Loves the Little Children." Use movements: arms wide for "so wonderful," point to self for "loves me," hug yourself for "love."

Great singing! I heard voices that were full of joy. Now let's sit down in our special story shape so we can learn about the biggest love of all. Come sit in a horseshoe on the floor facing me.

### 2. Bible Story Time (5, 7 minutes)

**Formation:** Kids sitting in a horseshoe shape on the floor facing you. Move around inside the horseshoe as you tell the story.

**Animated Delivery:** Use big gestures, change your voice for different characters, move around the space. Keep energy high! Sound warm and loving when you're Jesus, sound excited when talking about God's love.

Today we're going to meet Jesus and his very best friends! Jesus had twelve special friends called disciples.

*[Walk to one side of the horseshoe]*

Jesus and his friends had been together for a long, long time. They ate meals together, they traveled together, they learned together. Jesus loved his friends so much!

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*[Use warm, gentle voice]*

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One evening, Jesus was sitting with all his friends. He looked around at each one of them with so much love in his eyes. He wanted to tell them something very important.

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*[Walk to other side of horseshoe, speak clearly]*

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Jesus said, "I want you to love each other the same way I love you." His friends listened carefully because Jesus always said important things.

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*[Move to center, speak with gentle authority]*

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Then Jesus said something amazing. He said, "The biggest love, the very best love, is when someone loves their friends so much they would give up their whole life to save them."

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*[Pause and look around at the children with wonder]*

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Can you imagine loving someone that much? Jesus was talking about loving someone so much that you would do anything to help them, even if it was really hard for you.

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**John 15:13 (NIV)**

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*13 Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends.*

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*[Pause and look around at each child]*

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Do you know why Jesus said this? Because Jesus was about to show them exactly what this kind of love looks like! Jesus loved his friends so much, and he loved all of us so much, that he was willing to give up his life to save us.

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*[Move to center, speak with warmth]*

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Jesus didn't just talk about big love. He showed big love! The very next day, Jesus died on the cross to save everyone in the whole world. That's how much Jesus loves us!

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*[Walk slowly around the horseshoe]*

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But here's the wonderful part: Jesus didn't stay dead! God brought him back to life because God's love is stronger than anything! Jesus is alive right now, and he still loves us just as much.

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*[Stop walking and face the children directly]*

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Jesus told his friends, "I want you to love each other the same way I love you." That means we can show big love too! We can be kind, we can help, we can share, we can care about others.

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*[Speak with excitement]*

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When we love others the way Jesus loves us, something wonderful happens! People feel happy and safe. They learn that God loves them too. Our love shows them what God's love is like!

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*[Pause dramatically]*

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Jesus loves us with the biggest, strongest, most amazing love ever! He gave up everything to show us how much we matter to him. And now we get to share that love with everyone around us.

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*[Speak directly to the children]*

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Sometimes at school, someone might be sad. Sometimes at home, your brother or sister might need help. Sometimes on the playground, someone might feel left out. Those are times when we can show Jesus's love!

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*[Move closer to the children]*

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We can share our snacks, we can play with someone who's alone, we can help clean up even when it's not our mess, we can say kind words when someone feels sad. These are all ways to love like Jesus!

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*[Speak warmly and encouragingly]*

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Jesus gives us his love so we can give love to others. When we love like Jesus, we make the world brighter and happier. That's how powerful love can be!

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### **3. Discussion (5 minutes)**

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**Formation:** Have kids stand up and find a partner. Pairs scatter around the room with space to talk.

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Stand up and find a partner! I'm going to give each pair one question to talk about. There are no wrong answers, just share what you think! You'll have about one minute to talk together.

**Teacher Circulation:** Walk around to each pair. Listen to their discussions. If a pair is stuck, ask "What do you think?" or rephrase the question more simply. Give them time to think, some kids need extra processing time.

## Discussion Questions

*Select one question per pair based on class size. Save unused questions for next time.*

1. How do you think Jesus felt when he talked to his friends about love?
2. What does it mean that Jesus gave his life for us?
3. When has someone been really kind to you?
4. How can you show love to someone in your family?
5. What's one way to be kind to a friend at school?
6. Why do you think Jesus wants us to love each other?
7. How does it feel when someone is really nice to you?
8. What can you share with someone who needs help?
9. When is it hard to be kind to someone?
10. How can you help someone who feels sad?
11. What makes you feel loved?
12. How can you show love to someone at church?
13. What would happen if everyone loved like Jesus?
14. How can you be kind to someone who's different from you?
15. What does God's love feel like?

16. How can you help someone at home?

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17. When can you say kind words to someone?

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18. What can you do when someone feels left out?

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19. How can you show love even when you don't feel like it?

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20. What's the most important thing about Jesus's love?

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Great discussions! Let's come back together in our lines. Who wants to share what they talked about with their partner?

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#### **4. Closing Song (2, 3 minutes)**

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**Formation:** Standing in straight lines facing forward

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Choose songs about loving others or God's love. Suggestions: "Love One Another," "I Will Love You," or "This Little Light of Mine." Include movements: point to others for "love one another," hug yourself for "God loves me," raise hands high for "light."

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Beautiful singing! You sang about love with such happy hearts. Now let's sit down for prayer time. Find a spot on the floor and sit criss-cross with quiet hands and hearts.

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#### **5. Closing Prayer (1, 2 minutes)**

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**Formation:** Sitting cross-legged in rows, heads bowed, hands folded

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*Dear Jesus, thank you for loving us so much that you gave your life for us.*

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*[Pause]*

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*Help us to love other people the way you love us. Help us be kind to our friends, our family, and everyone we meet.*

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*[Pause]*

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*Thank you that your love is bigger than anything and that you will always take care of us. In Jesus's name, Amen.*

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**Alternative, Popcorn Prayer:** If your class is comfortable with it, invite kids to offer short one-sentence prayers about love. Examples: "Thank you Jesus for loving me" or "Help me be kind to my sister."

Remember, Jesus loves you with the biggest love ever, and you can share that love with everyone you meet this week. Have a wonderful week showing Jesus's love to others!

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# Others Before Self

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*Humility in Action, Can you really put everyone else first?*

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**Philippians 2:3-11**

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## Instructor Preparation

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Read this section before teaching any age group. It provides the theological foundation and shows how the lesson adapts across developmental stages.

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## The Passage

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**Philippians 2:1-11 (NIV)**

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*1 Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, 2 then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind.*

*3 Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, 4 not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.*

*5 In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: 6 Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; 7 rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. 8 And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross!*

*9 Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, 10 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the*

*earth, 11 and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

## Context

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Paul writes to the church in Philippi from prison, addressing division and competition that threatens their unity. The community faces external pressure from Roman culture that values personal advancement and honor-seeking, while internal conflicts arise from competing personalities and agendas. This letter responds to reports that church members are choosing self-promotion over community harmony.

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The immediate context follows Paul's encouragement about their partnership in the gospel and precedes specific instructions about working out their salvation. Paul has just urged them toward unity and is now providing the practical foundation: a complete reorientation away from self-interest toward others' welfare. The stakes are high, their witness and survival as a Christian community depend on this counter-cultural approach.

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## The Big Idea

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**True humility operates by inverting our natural priority system, placing others' interests consistently ahead of our own in every decision and interaction.**

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This isn't occasional generosity or politeness, but a comprehensive reorientation that touches every choice. Paul uses absolute language, "do nothing" from selfish ambition, "value others above yourselves", indicating this should become our new default operating system. Yet this radical others-first approach must somehow coexist with legitimate self-care and personal responsibility, creating ongoing tension about how to live this out practically.

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## Theological Core

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- **Humility as practical behavior.** Humility isn't primarily an internal attitude but shows up in specific actions, how we allocate attention, make decisions, and prioritize resources.
  - **Interest inversion.** The Christian life involves fundamentally reordering our priorities, moving from self-interest as default to others' interests as primary consideration.
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- **Comprehensive scope.** This others-first orientation applies to all decisions ("do nothing" from selfish ambition), not just obvious moral choices or convenient moments.
  - **Anti-competition mindset.** Rather than viewing others as competitors for limited resources or recognition, we're called to actively seek their welfare even when it costs us.
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## Age Group Overview

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### What Each Age Group Learns

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#### Grades 7, 8 / Adult

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- Humility means actively prioritizing others' interests in concrete situations, even when it conflicts with personal goals
  - The tension between legitimate self-care and others-first orientation requires ongoing discernment rather than simple rules
  - This radical reorientation applies to competitive environments like school, sports, and social media where self-promotion feels necessary
  - Learning to recognize the automatic self-protective patterns that view others as threats or competitors
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#### Grades 4, 6

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- Choosing to help others even when it means giving up something we want
  - Our actions show what we really care about, ourselves or others
  - Sometimes doing the right thing feels hard, but it leads to better relationships and communities
  - It's okay to feel disappointed when we choose others first, but we can still make the good choice
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#### Grades 1, 3

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- God wants us to think about others, not just ourselves
  - God helps us be kind when it's hard
  - We can share and help others even when we don't feel like it
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## Common Pitfalls to Avoid

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- **Dismissing self-care entirely.** The text calls for prioritizing others' interests but doesn't eliminate having personal interests. Help students discern the difference between legitimate self-care and selfish ambition.
  - **Creating guilt about normal human needs.** Everyone has needs for rest, affection, achievement, and security. The passage redirects our default priority, not our humanity.
  - **Reducing this to occasional nice gestures.** Paul uses comprehensive language, this is about a fundamental reorientation of how we approach all decisions, not just obvious moral moments.
  - **Ignoring the community context.** This passage addresses how to live in Christian community, not a universal ethic for all relationships. Help students think about appropriate boundaries in different contexts.
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## Handling Hard Questions

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### **"What if I put others first and they take advantage of me?"**

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This is a real concern that shows wisdom about human nature. Paul is writing about how to live within a Christian community where others are also committed to this way of life. In other relationships, we need boundaries and discernment. The goal isn't to be a doormat but to have our default setting be "How can I help?" rather than "What's in it for me?" Wisdom helps us know when and how to apply this principle.

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### **"Doesn't this conflict with taking care of myself and my responsibilities?"**

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Paul doesn't say we can't have interests or meet our own needs, he says don't make them primary. Think of it like being bilingual: you can speak both languages, but others-first becomes your native tongue.

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Taking care of your health, doing your job well, and pursuing growth can all serve others better. The question becomes: "Am I doing this primarily for myself or because it helps me serve others better?"

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**"This seems impossible to actually live out consistently."**

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You're right, it is humanly impossible, which is why Paul grounds this in Christ's example. Notice that Jesus was exalted after his self-sacrifice, not punished for it. This isn't about perfection but about direction. We're learning a new way to live, and it takes practice. The Holy Spirit helps us notice when we're defaulting to self-protection and gives us power to choose differently.

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## **The One Thing to Remember**

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**Humility means making others' interests your default priority, even though this creates ongoing tension with legitimate self-care that requires wisdom to navigate.**

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## **Grades 7, 8 / Adult**

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Ages 12, 14+ • 30 Minutes • Student-Centered Discussion

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### **Your Main Job Today**

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Guide students to wrestle honestly with the practical tension between self-care and others-first living. Help them discover what this radical reorientation might look like in their actual competitive environments.

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### **The Tension to Frame**

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How do you consistently put others first without losing yourself, and is this even psychologically sustainable in a competitive world?

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### **Discussion Facilitation Tips**

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- Validate their concerns about self-preservation, this is genuinely challenging
  - Honor the complexity of knowing when self-care becomes selfish ambition
  - Let them wrestle with the tension rather than offering easy answers
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## 1. Opening Frame (2, 3 minutes)

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You're scrolling through Instagram and see someone from school just got the opportunity you've been working toward for months, the internship, the part in the play, the scholarship, the relationship. Your first thought isn't "I'm so happy for them." Your stomach drops, and you immediately start thinking about how unfair it is, how you deserved it more, or how to position yourself better next time.

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That reaction makes complete sense. We're wired to protect ourselves and advance our interests, especially when resources feel limited. Every psychology course will tell you that self-advocacy and healthy boundaries are essential for emotional wellbeing. The adults in your life probably coach you to "put yourself out there" and "don't let people walk all over you."

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But today we're looking at teaching that completely flips this script. Paul writes to a community struggling with competition and self-promotion, and his solution is radical: stop making self-interest your default. Instead, make others' interests your primary consideration. Not just occasionally, but in everything.

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As we read, notice how comprehensive his language is. Also notice that this comes with a promise, that this isn't just good ethics but actually leads somewhere meaningful. Pay attention to what might make this difficult and what might make it worth it.

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Open your Bibles to Philippians chapter 2, starting with verse 1. We're going to read verses 1 through 11, but focus especially on verses 3 and 4. Take about 4 minutes to read this silently.

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## 2. Silent Reading (5 minutes)

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**Managing Silent Reading:** Walk quietly around the room. Some students will finish early, let them reread or reflect. Watch for students struggling with vocabulary like "vain conceit" or "exalted", offer quiet help. Let them feel the weight of the radical nature of this teaching.

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### As You Read, Think About:

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- What specific behaviors is Paul telling them to stop and start?
  - What reasons does he give for this way of living?
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- What parts of this feel hardest or most unrealistic?
- How does Jesus's example connect to the practical instructions?

### Philippians 2:1-11 (NIV)

*1 Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, 2 then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind.*

*3 Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, 4 not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.*

*5 In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: 6 Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; 7 rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. 8 And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross!*

*9 Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, 10 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

### 3. Discussion (15, 18 minutes)

#### Oral Reading (2, 3 minutes)

**Selecting Readers:** Ask for volunteers for each section. Let students pass if they're not comfortable. Choose confident readers for the Christ hymn section, it's poetic and requires good pacing.

**Reader 1:** Verses 1, 4 (Paul's practical instructions) **Reader 2:** Verses 5, 8 (Christ's example of descent) **Reader 3:** Verses 9, 11 (Christ's exaltation)

Listen for the emotional tone in each section, Paul's urgency in the first part, the dramatic movement from glory to death to glory in the Christ hymn.

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### Small Group Question Generation (3, 4 minutes)

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**Setup:** Form groups of 3-4. Give exactly 3 minutes. Walk between groups to listen and encourage. If a group is stuck, suggest they start with "What surprised you most?" or "What felt hardest to accept?"

Get into groups of 3 or 4. Your job is to come up with 1-2 genuine questions about what you just read, things you're actually curious about or find confusing or challenging. Good questions usually start with "How..." "Why..." or "What if..." They're not questions with obvious answers, but things you'd really like to explore. You have 3 minutes. Go.

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### Facilitated Discussion (12, 14 minutes)

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**Remember:** Students drive with their questions. Write questions on the board and look for themes. Start with questions most students will connect to before diving into complex theological issues.

**Collecting Questions:** Let's hear your questions. I'm going to write them on the board, and we'll explore several together.

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### Probing Questions (to go deeper)

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- "What evidence do you see that Paul means this to be comprehensive, not just occasional?"
  - "How do you tell the difference between healthy self-care and selfish ambition?"
  - "What would it look like to value others above yourself in a competitive situation like college applications?"
  - "Why does Paul use Jesus as the ultimate example rather than just giving moral commands?"
  - "Is this sustainable psychologically, or does it set people up to be taken advantage of?"
  - "How does this apply when others aren't living this way, do you still put them first?"
  - "What would change in your school if everyone actually lived this way?"
  - "What's the connection between humbling yourself and being exalted?"
-

## Revealing the Pattern

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Do you notice what's happening here? Paul is calling for a complete inversion of normal human priorities. Instead of self-interest being our default with occasional generosity, he wants others' interests to be our default. It's not about eliminating your own needs but about fundamentally reordering how you approach decisions. And he grounds this in the story of Jesus, who literally gave up divine privilege to serve others, and was ultimately honored for it.

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### 4. Application (3, 4 minutes)

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Let's get real about your lives. Where do you see this same tension between self-interest and others' welfare playing out every day? Think about school dynamics, social media, family situations, friend groups, even current events. Where would this others-first approach be most challenging to actually live out?

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### Real Issues This Connects To

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- Group projects where you could get a better grade by working alone
  - Social media algorithms that reward self-promotion over celebrating others
  - Family dynamics when chores or privileges are distributed
  - Friend groups where someone always dominates conversations or plans
  - College and scholarship applications in competitive environments
  - Dating relationships where you want to protect yourself from getting hurt
- 

**Facilitation:** Let students share examples without rushing to solve them. Acknowledge that some situations are genuinely complex and don't have simple answers. Help them think about what discernment looks like rather than giving rules.

### Discussion Prompts

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- "When have you seen someone genuinely put others first, and what was the result?"
  - "What would help you recognize when you're defaulting to self-protection?"
  - "How do you decide when self-care is necessary versus when it's an excuse?"
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- "What's the difference between wisdom about boundaries and selfishness?"
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## 5. Closing (2 minutes)

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Here's what I want you to take with you: humility isn't primarily a feeling, it's a practice of consistently putting others' interests first. This is genuinely difficult because it goes against our natural self-protective instincts, and it requires ongoing wisdom to know how to apply it without losing yourself in the process.

---

This week, pay attention to your default reactions when someone else gets something you wanted, when you have to choose between your convenience and someone else's need, or when you could promote yourself or celebrate someone else. Notice the automatic self-interest response, and experiment with pausing to ask, "What would serve their interests here?"

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You wrestled with hard questions today and didn't settle for easy answers. That kind of thinking is exactly what this passage calls for, the wisdom to discern how to live others-first in a complex world. Keep wrestling with these questions; they're worth it.

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## Grades 4, 6

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Ages 9, 11 • 30 Minutes • Interactive Storytelling + Activity

### Your Main Job Today

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Help kids recognize that choosing to help others even when it costs us something shows humility in action.

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### If Kids Ask "What if I always put others first and never get what I want?"

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Say: "God doesn't want you to never have anything good. He wants your first thought to be helping others, and then he promises to take care of you too."

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## 1. Opening (5 minutes)

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Raise your hand if you've ever really, really wanted something and found out your brother or sister or friend got it instead. Keep your hands up. Now keep your hand up if your first feeling was excitement for them. Anyone still have their hand up? That's what I thought.

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Now here's a harder question: imagine you've been practicing for weeks to try out for the school play, and you really want the lead role. You get to tryouts and discover your best friend is also trying out for the same part, and they're really good. Part of you wants to do your absolute best and win that role. But another part of you knows that if you don't get it, you want your friend to.

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Those mixed-up feelings are totally normal. It makes sense to want good things for yourself and feel disappointed when you don't get them. It's also natural to feel competitive when someone else might get something you want. These feelings don't make you a bad person, they make you human.

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This is just like in the movie "Coco" when Miguel has to choose between his dream of becoming a musician and what his family needs. Or like in "Toy Story" when Woody has to decide between staying Andy's favorite toy and helping Buzz find his way. The characters struggle because both things matter.

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The tricky part is figuring out what to do when what you want conflicts with what someone else needs. How do you choose between your own interests and someone else's?

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Today we're going to hear about what the apostle Paul told a group of Christians who were struggling with exactly this problem. They were competing with each other instead of helping each other, and it was causing big problems. Let's find out what Paul told them to do.

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**What to Expect:** Kids will relate to sibling rivalry and friendship competition. Acknowledge their honest responses about not feeling excited for others. Keep momentum moving toward hope.

## 2. Bible Story Time (10 minutes)

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Picture a church community about 2,000 years ago in a city called Philippi. These Christians loved Jesus, but they had a problem.

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Some people in the church thought they were more important than others. Maybe they had more money, or were better speakers, or had been Christians longer. They started competing with each other instead of working together.

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When someone had a good idea in their church meeting, others would try to come up with a better idea to impress everyone. When someone needed help, people were too busy promoting themselves to notice.

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Imagine being in a group project where everyone wanted to be the leader and no one wanted to do the boring work. Or picture a family dinner where everyone talked about themselves and no one listened to anyone else.

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Paul, who had started this church, was in prison when he heard about these problems. He was worried because he knew this competition and selfishness would destroy everything good they were trying to build together.

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So Paul wrote them a letter. And the first thing he told them might surprise you. He didn't say, "Stop being mean to each other." He didn't say, "Be nicer." He said something much more radical.

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Paul told them to completely flip their priorities. Instead of thinking about themselves first and others second, he wanted them to think about others first and themselves second, in everything.

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Not just when it was easy or convenient. Not just when they felt like it. In every decision, every conversation, every opportunity.

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"Do nothing out of selfish ambition," Paul wrote. That means don't make decisions based on what makes you look good or get ahead. "Value others above yourselves," he continued.

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Think about what that would mean. In their church meetings, instead of trying to sound smart, they would listen carefully to what others needed.

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### **Philippians 2:3-4 (NIV)**

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*3 Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, 4 not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.*

Paul wasn't just giving them rules to follow. He was explaining what humility actually looks like in real life. It's not just feeling humble, it's making choices that put others' needs first.

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But Paul knew this was really hard to do. So he gave them the ultimate example, Jesus himself.

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Jesus was God, Paul reminded them. He had every right to demand that everyone serve him, worship him, and put him first. He could have lived in the most beautiful palace, demanded the best food, and made everyone else do whatever he wanted.

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But that's not what Jesus did.

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**Philippians 2:6-7 (NIV)**

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*6 Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; 7 rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.*

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Jesus chose to give up his privileges and rights. He chose to be born as a human baby, to grow up in a poor family, to spend his life serving others instead of being served.

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And it got even more costly than that. Jesus chose to die on a cross to save us, even though he had done nothing wrong and could have avoided it.

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But here's the amazing part: because Jesus chose to humble himself and put others first, God honored him in the most incredible way possible.

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God gave Jesus the highest place of honor in the universe. Every person who ever lived will one day acknowledge that Jesus is Lord.

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Jesus's choice to put others first didn't diminish him, it led to the greatest honor imaginable.

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Paul was telling the Philippian Christians: this is how God's kingdom works. When you choose to value others above yourself, when you look out for their interests instead of just your own, you're following Jesus's example.

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Sometimes it might feel like you're missing out or sacrificing too much. But God sees your choices, and he promises that humility leads to honor, just like it did with Jesus.

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This doesn't mean you'll never get good things or that your needs don't matter. It means that when you have a choice between helping yourself and helping someone else, you choose to help others first.

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And here's what's amazing: when everyone in a community chooses to live this way, everyone gets cared for. Instead of fighting over limited resources, people create an environment where everyone's needs are met.

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**Pause here.** Let the story sink in for 5 seconds before moving on.

### 3. Discussion (5 minutes)

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#### Question 1: The Hard Choice

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Think about a time when you had to choose between getting something you really wanted and helping someone else get what they needed. Maybe it was the last piece of pizza and your little brother was still hungry, or choosing between watching your favorite show and helping your friend with homework. What made that choice difficult?

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**Listen For:** "I didn't want to give it up," "It wasn't fair", affirm: "Of course you didn't want to give it up! That's what made your choice so meaningful."

#### Question 2: The Feeling

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When someone gets something you really wanted, like a better grade, or the toy you were hoping for, or the chance to do something special, what does your body feel like? And what thoughts go through your head?

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**If They Say:** "Angry" or "jealous", respond: "Those feelings are normal. The question is what you do with them. You can't control the feeling, but you can control what you do next."

#### Question 3: The Jesus Connection

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Jesus gave up being served and chose to serve others instead, even though it cost him everything. Can you think of an adult in your life who does that, who regularly chooses to help others even when it's inconvenient for them? What do you notice about that person?

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**Connect:** "This is exactly what Jesus modeled, putting others first even when it's costly. And look at the kind of person it creates."

#### Question 4: The Result

Paul promised that when we choose humility like Jesus did, God will honor us. What do you think it means to be honored by God? And what would your classroom or family look like if everyone chose to put others first?

**If They Say:** "Everyone would be happy", respond: "What would that look like day by day? How would people treat each other differently?"

These are exactly the kinds of choices Jesus made every day. He consistently chose others' good over his own comfort, and it changed the whole world. Now let's experience what this looks like when we work together.

#### 4. Activity: The Bridge Builder (8 minutes)

**Zero Props Required** , This activity uses only kids' bodies and empty space.

##### Purpose

This activity reinforces the others-first principle by having kids physically experience moving from individual competition to collaborative success. Success looks like kids discovering that they accomplish more when they prioritize others' needs alongside their own goals.

##### Instructions to Class(3 minutes)

We're going to build human bridges to help people cross an imaginary river. I need half of you to be "travelers" and half to be "bridge builders." Travelers, your goal is to get across the river safely.

Bridge builders, your goal is to create bridges using your bodies, but here's the challenge: you can only use one arm and one leg to touch the ground, and you have to connect to make a stable pathway.

Here's the twist: every 30 seconds, I'll call "switch," and travelers become bridge builders while bridge builders become travelers. Everyone gets a turn at both jobs.

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We're doing this because it's exactly like Paul's teaching. Sometimes you need to sacrifice your comfort to help others succeed, and sometimes others sacrifice to help you succeed.

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### **During the Activity(4 minutes)**

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Round one: Bridge builders, start creating your pathway. Travelers, begin crossing carefully. Notice how much effort the bridge builders are putting in to help you succeed.

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As they work, watch for the moment when bridge builders realize they need to coordinate with each other, not just focus on their own position. This is the breakthrough moment.

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Keep encouraging: "Bridge builders, what do you notice about what you need from each other? Travelers, how can you help the bridge builders succeed while they're helping you?"

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After each switch, celebrate: "Look at that! Everyone willing to take the harder job so others can succeed. That's exactly what Paul was teaching about."

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Final round: "Now you know what both jobs feel like. Notice how it feels to receive help and to give help. Notice how everyone's success depends on everyone's willingness to serve."

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**Watch For:** The moment when kids start helping bridge builders get into position or travelers start waiting patiently, this is the physical representation of valuing others above yourself.

### **Debrief(1 minute)**

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What did you notice about how it felt when you were working hard to help others cross versus when others were working hard to help you? Which was more satisfying? This is exactly what Paul meant, when we choose to value others above ourselves, we create a community where everyone gets help when they need it and everyone gets to contribute when they can.

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## **5. Closing (2 minutes)**

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Here's what we learned today: humility means choosing to put others' needs first, even when it costs us something we want. It's not about never getting good things, it's about making our first thought "How

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can I help?" instead of "What's in it for me?"

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This doesn't mean you should let people be mean to you or never speak up for yourself. It means when you have a choice between your convenience and someone else's need, you choose to help them.

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And here's the amazing result: when you choose to live like Jesus did, serving others instead of demanding to be served, you become the kind of person others trust and love. You build relationships that last, and you get to be part of God's work in the world.

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### **This Week's Challenge**

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Look for one opportunity each day to choose someone else's good over your own convenience. It might be sharing something you want to keep, listening when you'd rather talk, or helping with a chore that isn't yours. Notice how it feels and what happens in your relationships.

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### **Closing Prayer (Optional)**

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*Dear God, thank you for Jesus, who showed us what it looks like to put others first. Help us to be like him this week. When we want to be selfish, help us choose to be helpful instead. Help us remember that you promise to take care of us when we take care of others. In Jesus's name, Amen.*

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## **Grades 1, 3**

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Ages 6, 8 • 15, 20 Minutes • Animated Storytelling + Songs

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### **Your Main Job Today**

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Help kids understand that God wants us to think about others and be kind, not just think about ourselves.

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### **Movement & Formation Plan**

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- **Opening Song:** Standing in a circle
  - **Bible Story:** Sitting in a horseshoe shape facing the teacher
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- **Small Group Q&A:** Standing in pairs facing each other
- **Closing Song:** Standing in straight lines
- **Prayer:** Sitting cross-legged in rows

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## If Kids Don't Understand

Compare being selfish to wanting all the toys for yourself, then ask "How would your friends feel if you never shared?"

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### 1. Opening Song (2, 3 minutes)

**Formation:** Standing in a circle

Select a song about helping others or kindness. Suggestions: "Love One Another," "Be Kind to One Another," or "Jesus Loves Me." Use movements: point to others during verses about loving others, make helping gestures during verses about kindness, and clap together during choruses.

Great singing! You know what I heard in that song? I heard voices that know how to work together. Now let's sit in our story shape and hear about some people who needed to learn how to work together and be kind to each other.

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### 2. Bible Story Time (5, 7 minutes)

**Formation:** Kids sitting in a horseshoe shape on the floor facing you. Move around inside the horseshoe as you tell the story.

**Animated Delivery:** Use big gestures, change your voice for different characters, move around the space. Keep energy high! Sound concerned when describing the problems, sound excited when describing Jesus, and sound warm when talking about helping others.

Today we're going to meet some people who forgot how to be kind to each other.

*[Walk to one side of the horseshoe]*

There was a church, a group of people who loved Jesus, but they had a big problem. They started caring more about themselves than about anyone else.

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*[Make a grumpy face and cross arms]*

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When someone had a good idea, others would say, "Well, MY idea is better!" When someone needed help, people were too busy thinking about themselves to notice.

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*[Walk to other side of horseshoe, look sad]*

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It was like if everyone in our class wanted to be first in line all the time, or if everyone wanted the best crayon and no one wanted to share.

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*[Move to center, speak with concern]*

---

Paul, their friend who taught them about Jesus, heard about this problem. He was very sad because he knew that when people only think about themselves, no one is happy.

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*[Stand tall, speak with authority]*

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So Paul wrote them a letter. He said, "Stop thinking only about yourselves! Think about other people first!"

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**Philippians 2:3-4 (NIV)**

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*3 Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, 4 not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.*

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*[Pause and look around at each child]*

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That means instead of asking "What do I want?" first, ask "What does my friend need?" first. Do you think that would be hard? Yes! It is hard!

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*[Move to center, speak with excitement]*

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But then Paul told them about someone who did exactly that, Jesus! Jesus could have demanded that everyone serve him and give him the best of everything.

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*[Walk slowly around the horseshoe]*

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But Jesus chose to serve others instead. He chose to help people instead of making people help him. He shared his food with hungry people. He healed sick people. He loved everyone.

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*[Stop walking and face the children directly]*

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Even when it was really hard, even when people were mean to him, Jesus kept choosing to help others instead of just helping himself.

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*[Speak with excitement]*

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And you know what happened? God said, "Jesus, because you chose to help others, I'm going to give you the most special place in heaven! Everyone will know how wonderful you are!"

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*[Pause dramatically]*

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God loves it when we think about others instead of just ourselves. When we share our toys, when we help our friends, when we listen to someone who is sad, that makes God happy!

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*[Speak directly to the children]*

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Sometimes at school or at home, you might want something that someone else has. Sometimes you might not want to share your snacks or take turns with a game.

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*[Move closer to the children]*

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But Jesus showed us a better way. When we choose to be kind, when we choose to share, when we choose to help, that's what Jesus did!

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*[Speak warmly and encouragingly]*

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And God promises to help you be kind and loving, just like Jesus was. God will help you remember to think about others and not just yourself.

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### **3. Discussion (5 minutes)**

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**Formation:** Have kids stand up and find a partner. Pairs scatter around the room with space to talk.

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Time to find a partner! I'm going to give each pair a question to talk about. There are no wrong answers, just share what you think!

**Teacher Circulation:** Walk around to each pair. Listen to their discussions. If a pair is stuck, ask "What do you think?" or rephrase the question more simply. Give them time to think, some kids need extra processing time.

## Discussion Questions

*Select one question per pair based on class size. Save unused questions for next time.*

1. How do you feel when someone takes a toy you want?
2. What does it look like when someone is being selfish?
3. How do you feel when someone shares with you?
4. What would you do if your friend was sad?
5. Why do you think Jesus chose to help people?
6. What's something nice you could do for your family?
7. How do you think God feels when we help others?
8. What's hard about sharing your favorite things?
9. Who helps you when you need help?
10. What makes you happy to do for other people?
11. What did Jesus do when people were mean to him?
12. How can you be like Jesus at school?
13. What happens when everyone in a family helps each other?
14. Why do you think God wants us to be kind?
15. What's something kind someone did for you this week?

16. How do you think Jesus felt when he helped people?

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17. What would happen if everyone only thought about themselves?

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18. How can you pray for help to be kind?

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19. What would your class be like if everyone shared and helped?

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20. How do you want others to treat you?

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Great discussions! Let's come back together in our song lines. Who wants to share one thing they talked about with their partner?

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#### **4. Closing Song (2, 3 minutes)**

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**Formation:** Standing in straight lines facing forward

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Select songs about helping and kindness with movements. Suggestions: "If You're Happy and You Know It" with helping actions (clap for friends, stomp to help, etc.), "This Little Light of Mine" with sharing gestures, or "Love Like Jesus" with hand-holding and hugging motions during appropriate verses.

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Beautiful singing! I can see Jesus's love in your voices and your hearts. Now let's sit quietly for prayer and ask God to help us be kind like Jesus.

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#### **5. Closing Prayer (1, 2 minutes)**

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**Formation:** Sitting cross-legged in rows, heads bowed, hands folded

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*Dear God, thank you for Jesus who showed us how to be kind...*

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*[Pause]*

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*Please help us remember to think about other people and not just ourselves. When we want to be selfish, help us choose to be helpful instead...*

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*[Pause]*

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*Help us to share our toys and food and be kind to our friends and family. Help us to be like Jesus every day...*

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*[Pause]*

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*Thank you that you love us and help us be good. Thank you for taking care of us when we take care of others. In Jesus's name, Amen.*

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**Alternative, Popcorn Prayer:** If your class is comfortable with it, invite kids to offer short one-sentence prayers about being kind. Examples: "Help me share my snacks" or "Thank you for my family."

Remember this week to think about others and be kind, just like Jesus! God will help you make good choices. Have a wonderful week showing Jesus's love to everyone you meet!

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# Different Practices, Same Faith

*Unity Across Disagreement, How do we stay together when we disagree?*

**Romans 14:1-23**

## Instructor Preparation

Read this section before teaching any age group. It provides the theological foundation and shows how the lesson adapts across developmental stages.

## The Passage

**Romans 14:1-23 (NIV)**

*1 Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters. 2 One person's faith allows them to eat anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. 3 The one who eats everything must not treat with contempt the one who does not, and the one who does not eat everything must not judge the one who does, for God has accepted them. 4 Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To their own master, servants stand or fall. And they will stand, for the Lord is able to make them stand.*

*5 One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind. 6 Whoever regards one day as special does so to the Lord. Whoever eats meat does so to the Lord, for they give thanks to God; and whoever abstains does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God. 7 For none of us lives for ourselves alone, and none of us dies for ourselves alone. 8 If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord.*

*9 For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living. 10 You, then, why do you judge your brother or sister? Or why do you treat*

*them with contempt? We will all stand before God's judgment seat. 11 It is written: "'As surely as I live,' says the Lord, 'every knee will bow before me; every tongue will acknowledge God.'" 12 So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God.*

*13 Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister. 14 I am convinced, being fully persuaded in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for that person it is unclean. 15 If your brother or sister is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy someone for whom Christ died.*

*16 Therefore do not let what you know is good be spoken of as evil. 17 For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. 18 Because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and receives human approval. 19 Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. 20 Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a person to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. 21 It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother or sister to fall. 22 So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who does not condemn himself by what he approves. 23 But whoever has doubts is condemned if they eat, because their eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin.*

## **Context**

Paul writes to the Roman church where Jewish and Gentile Christians are struggling to worship together. Jewish believers often maintained kosher dietary laws and observed special holy days, while Gentile converts felt free from these restrictions. These practical differences were creating division, with each group questioning the other's faithfulness. The "weak" and "strong" labels refer not to spiritual maturity but to differing convictions about what Christian freedom allows.

This teaching comes near the end of Romans, after Paul has established the theological foundations of salvation by grace. Having secured the gospel's core, he now addresses how Christians with different practices can maintain unity. The immediate trigger appears to be mutual judgment, those with

restrictions criticizing the free, and those with freedom showing contempt for the restricted. Paul sees both responses as threats to Christian community.

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## The Big Idea

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**God's acceptance of both sides creates the foundation for our acceptance of each other, even when we disagree about disputable matters.**

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This isn't a call to agree about everything or to treat all issues as equally unimportant. Paul assumes some matters are non-negotiable while others allow diversity. The challenge lies in discerning which category our disagreements fall into, and then choosing relationship-preserving responses over our natural tendencies toward contempt and judgment.

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## Theological Core

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- **Divine Acceptance as Foundation.** God has accepted both those with restrictions and those with freedom, this divine verdict establishes the basis for human acceptance across difference.
  - **Bidirectional Command.** Both sides receive specific instructions against their natural temptations: the free must not show contempt, the restricted must not judge.
  - **Disputable Versus Essential.** Some matters allow Christian diversity while others do not, wisdom lies in properly categorizing our disagreements.
  - **Love as the Higher Law.** When practices that are permissible in themselves cause harm to others, love calls us to voluntary limitation for the sake of relationship.
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## Age Group Overview

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### What Each Age Group Learns

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#### Grades 7, 8 / Adult

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- How to distinguish between disputable matters (where Christians can disagree) and essential issues (where unity is required)
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- Why both contempt and judgment are equally destructive to Christian community, though they feel different
- How God's acceptance of all believers creates the foundation for our acceptance of others across difference
- When voluntary limitation of our freedoms serves love and builds stronger community

### Grades 4, 6

- Different ways of following God don't automatically mean someone is wrong
- Criticism and dismissiveness both hurt relationships and dishonor God
- Looking down on others or judging them creates division instead of unity
- Sometimes being right isn't as important as being kind and keeping relationships strong

### Grades 1, 3

- God loves people who do things differently from us
- We can be friends with people who make different choices
- God wants us to be kind, not mean, when others do things differently

## Common Pitfalls to Avoid

- **Relativizing Everything.** Paul doesn't teach that all issues are disputable, he assumes some matters are essential to faith. The challenge is discernment, not abandoning all boundaries.
- **Missing the Bidirectional Command.** Both sides receive specific instructions against their natural temptations. This isn't just about one group accepting another, but mutual restraint from destructive patterns.
- **Ignoring the Contemporary Application.** While Paul addresses food and calendar issues, the principle applies to any area where genuine Christians disagree about practice while sharing core faith.

- **Avoiding the Complexity.** Determining what counts as "disputable" versus "essential" remains genuinely difficult, acknowledge this tension rather than pretending it's simple to navigate.
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## Handling Hard Questions

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### **"How do we know which issues are 'disputable' and which ones actually matter?"**

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This is the right question to wrestle with, and Paul doesn't give us an easy formula. Look for issues where faithful Christians who love Scripture disagree versus issues that touch the gospel's core truths. Consider whether the disagreement is about application of shared principles or about the principles themselves. When in doubt, err on the side of humility, we might be wrong about what category our disagreement belongs to. The goal isn't perfect categorization but faithful response to whatever category we're in.

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### **"What about when someone's different practice is actually harmful or dangerous?"**

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Paul's teaching applies to genuinely disputable matters, not to situations involving harm or clear biblical prohibition. If someone's practice endangers others or contradicts explicit biblical teaching, that moves beyond the scope of this passage. The challenge is honestly assessing whether we're dealing with actual harm or just discomfort with difference. Ask: "Is this dangerous, or just different from what I prefer?"

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### **"Doesn't accepting everyone's different practices lead to compromising our beliefs?"**

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Paul maintains his own convictions clearly, he believes "nothing is unclean in itself." But he also recognizes that others, operating in good faith, reach different conclusions. Accepting someone doesn't mean agreeing with them or changing your own beliefs. It means acknowledging that God accepts them while they hold different practices, and therefore you can too. The unity is in shared faith in Christ, not identical practices.

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## The One Thing to Remember

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**God's acceptance of all believers, regardless of their different practices, creates the foundation for our acceptance of each other, even when we strongly disagree.**

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# Grades 7, 8 / Adult

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Ages 12, 14+ • 30 Minutes • Student-Centered Discussion

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## Your Main Job Today

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Guide students to wrestle with how to maintain relationships across genuine disagreements while still having convictions. Help them discover that both contempt and judgment destroy community, and that God's acceptance provides the foundation for our acceptance of others.

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## The Tension to Frame

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How do we stay unified with people whose Christian practices we think are wrong, without compromising our own convictions or pretending differences don't matter?

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## Discussion Facilitation Tips

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- Validate their experience of strong disagreement, it's normal to feel that others are clearly wrong
  - Honor the genuine complexity of determining what's disputable versus essential
  - Let them wrestle with real examples rather than solving everything through lecture
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## 1. Opening Frame (2, 3 minutes)

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Think about the last time you saw someone at school or online doing something you thought was completely wrong, maybe cheating, lying to parents, treating someone badly, or just making a choice that seemed obviously stupid. You probably felt a mix of judgment, frustration, maybe even anger. Part of you wanted to call them out or at least mentally dismiss them as someone who clearly doesn't get it.

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Now imagine it's not a random person, but someone you actually like and respect. Maybe it's a friend, a family member, or someone you look up to. Suddenly the situation gets more complicated. You still think they're wrong, but you also care about them. You don't want to lose the relationship, but you also can't pretend you agree with what they're doing.

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Today we're looking at Paul addressing a situation exactly like this, except the stakes are even higher. It's not just friends disagreeing, it's Christians who share the same faith but have completely different ideas about how to live it out. Some think certain foods are off-limits; others think that's legalistic nonsense. Some observe special holy days; others see that as unnecessary tradition.

What makes this fascinating is that Paul doesn't resolve the disagreement by telling everyone who's right. Instead, he gives instructions for how to stay unified while still disagreeing. Pay attention to what he says to both sides, they each get different challenges based on their different temptations.

Open your Bibles to Romans 14 and start reading silently from verse 1. As you read, notice what Paul is more concerned about than the actual practices themselves.

## 2. Silent Reading (5 minutes)

**Managing Silent Reading:** Walk quietly around the room. This passage is dense with concepts, so some students may need help with vocabulary. Watch for early finishers and have them reread, looking for Paul's tone and emotion.

### As You Read, Think About:

- What are the two groups disagreeing about, and how does Paul characterize each side?
- What specific instructions does Paul give to each group, and why are they different?
- What surprises you about Paul's approach to solving this conflict?
- Where do you see similar disagreements in your world today?

### Romans 14:1-23 (NIV)

*1 Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters. 2 One person's faith allows them to eat anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. 3 The one who eats everything must not treat with contempt the one who does not, and the one who does not eat everything must not judge the one who does, for God has accepted them. 4 Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To their own master, servants stand or fall. And they will stand, for the Lord is able to make them stand.*

**5** One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind. **6** Whoever regards one day as special does so to the Lord. Whoever eats meat does so to the Lord, for they give thanks to God; and whoever abstains does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God. **7** For none of us lives for ourselves alone, and none of us dies for ourselves alone. **8** If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord.

**9** For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living. **10** You, then, why do you judge your brother or sister? Or why do you treat them with contempt? We will all stand before God's judgment seat. **11** It is written: "'As surely as I live,' says the Lord, 'every knee will bow before me; every tongue will acknowledge God.'" **12** So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God.

**13** Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister. **14** I am convinced, being fully persuaded in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for that person it is unclean. **15** If your brother or sister is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy someone for whom Christ died.

**16** Therefore do not let what you know is good be spoken of as evil. **17** For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. **18** Because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and receives human approval. **19** Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. **20** Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a person to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. **21** It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother or sister to fall. **22** So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who does not condemn himself by what he approves. **23** But whoever has doubts is condemned if they eat, because their eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin. Romans 14:1-23 (NIV)

### 3. Discussion (15, 18 minutes)

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#### Oral Reading (2, 3 minutes)

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**Selecting Readers:** Ask for volunteers willing to read with expression. Let students pass if they're uncomfortable. Choose confident readers for the longer sections.

**Reader 1:** Verses 1, 4 (Setting up the problem and Paul's first solution) **Reader 2:** Verses 5, 12 (Expanding the principle and grounding it in our relationship to Christ) **Reader 3:** Verses 13, 23 (Practical applications and the higher call of love)

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Listen for the emotion in Paul's voice, he's not giving abstract theology but addressing real conflict between people he cares about.

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#### Small Group Question Generation (3, 4 minutes)

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**Setup:** Form groups of 3-4 students. Give exactly 3 minutes to generate 1-2 genuine questions about what they just read. Walk between groups to listen and help stuck groups with "What surprised you most about Paul's approach?"

Get into groups of 3 or 4 and come up with 1 or 2 genuine questions about what you just read, things you're actually curious about or confused by. Don't aim for questions you think I want to hear; ask about what genuinely struck you as interesting, surprising, or hard to understand. Good questions might start with "Why does Paul..." or "How is this different from..." or "What would happen if..." You have exactly 3 minutes.

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#### Facilitated Discussion (12, 14 minutes)

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**Remember:** Let students drive with THEIR questions. You're facilitating their discovery, not lecturing. Guide them toward insights rather than providing answers.

**Collecting Questions:** Write their questions on the board or flip chart. Look for themes and start with questions that most students can relate to from their own experience.

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#### Probing Questions (to go deeper)

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- "What evidence do you see that both groups thought they were right about their practices?"

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- "Why does Paul give different instructions to each side instead of just saying 'be nice to everyone'?"

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- "What's the difference between 'judging' and 'treating with contempt' that Paul mentions?"

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- "How does Paul determine what counts as a 'disputable matter' versus something that actually matters?"

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- "Where do you see this same pattern playing out in Christian communities today?"

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- "What makes someone willing to limit their freedom for the sake of others, as Paul suggests in verses 20-21?"

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- "What would have happened if Paul had just told everyone who was right about the food issue?"

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- "Why does the fact that 'God has accepted them' change how we should treat people we disagree with?"

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### **Revealing the Pattern**

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Do you notice what's happening here? Paul sees that difference in practice creates automatic judgment patterns, the restricted judge the free as careless, and the free look down on the restricted as legalistic. But instead of solving the disagreement, he attacks the judgment patterns themselves. He says God's acceptance of both sides creates the foundation for our acceptance of each other. The unity isn't in identical practice but in shared submission to the same Lord.

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### **4. Application (3, 4 minutes)**

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Let's get real about your lives for a minute. Where do you see this same dynamic playing out? Think about different Christian communities, different families, different friend groups, even different approaches to school or social media. Where do people who share core values end up judging each other over different practices?

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### **Real Issues This Connects To**

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- Different Christian families' rules about movies, music, dating, or social media

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- Students who are serious about academics versus those who prioritize social life

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- Different approaches to political engagement or social justice
- Worship styles, contemporary music versus traditional, casual versus formal dress
- Different convictions about spending money, entertainment choices, or time use
- How to engage with non-Christian friends, more protective versus more open approaches

**Facilitation:** Let students share examples without rushing to solutions. Help them distinguish between disputable matters and genuine harm. Some situations may call for different responses than Paul's framework.

### Discussion Prompts

- "When have you seen Christians maintain relationship despite disagreeing about practice?"
- "What would help you avoid either contempt or judgment when you strongly disagree with someone?"
- "How do you discern when something is worth dividing over versus when it's worth accepting difference?"
- "What's the difference between having convictions and being judgmental about them?"

### 5. Closing (2 minutes)

Here's what I want you to take with you: God's acceptance of other believers, even when their practices seem wrong to you, creates the foundation for your acceptance of them too. This doesn't mean you have to agree with everyone or change your convictions. It means recognizing that the same God who accepts you also accepts them, and that should change how you treat them.

This week, pay attention to your internal responses when you encounter Christians whose practices differ from yours. Notice whether you lean toward contempt ("they're being ridiculous") or judgment ("they're clearly wrong"). Try asking instead: "How might God see this person?" You might discover that maintaining relationship across difference requires more humility and strength than you expected.

You wrestled with some genuinely difficult questions today, and that's exactly what Paul would want. These issues don't have simple answers, but they do have faithful responses. Trust that God can use your thoughtful engagement with these tensions to build stronger community and deeper faith.

# Grades 4, 6

Ages 9, 11 • 30 Minutes • Interactive Storytelling + Activity

## Your Main Job Today

Help kids understand that different practices don't mean wrong faith, and teach them to choose kindness over criticism when they encounter Christians who do things differently than their family does.

## If Kids Ask "What if someone's way of being Christian is actually wrong?"

Say: "That's a great question! Paul is talking about things where good Christians can disagree, like what foods to eat or which days are special. If someone is being mean or hurting others, that's different, we should still be kind, but we might need to ask for adult help too."

### 1. Opening (5 minutes)

Raise your hand if your family has rules about what movies you can watch, what music you can listen to, or how you're supposed to behave at church. Keep it up if your family's rules are different from some of your friends' families' rules. Look around, almost everyone's hand is up, right?

Now here's a harder question: Raise your hand if you've ever thought another family's rules were too strict, too relaxed, or just weird. Maybe their parents let them do things your parents don't allow, or maybe they're not allowed to do things that seem totally fine to you. Have you ever found yourself thinking, "Their parents are being ridiculous" or "They should know better than that"?

That feeling you just had? It's completely normal, and every kid experiences it. The tricky part is when those families are also Christians who love God just like your family does. Suddenly you're thinking, "Wait, if we both follow Jesus, why do we have such different rules? Someone must be doing Christianity wrong."

This happens to adults too, not just kids. In fact, it happened so much in the early church that Paul had to write a letter about it. Some Christian families thought certain foods were off-limits as part of following God. Other Christian families thought that was unnecessary and outdated. Both groups loved Jesus, but they had completely different practices.

The really interesting part isn't who was right about the food. It's how Paul told them to treat each other while they disagreed. He noticed that each group had a different temptation, one group looked down on the other as being too uptight, while the other group judged the first as being careless about God's commands.

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Today we're going to hear about what Paul told them to do instead, and how his advice helps us when we encounter Christians whose families do things very differently from ours. Let's find out what happened when good people had strong disagreements about how to follow God.

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**What to Expect:** Kids may immediately want to share examples of different family rules. Acknowledge them briefly ("Yes, that's exactly what I mean!") but keep momentum moving toward the story.

## 2. Bible Story Time (10 minutes)

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Picture a church in Rome about 2,000 years ago. It's not a building like we have, it's people meeting in someone's house, sitting on the floor, sharing a meal together. But there's tension in the room that you can almost feel.

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On one side sit the Jewish Christians. They've been following God's laws their whole lives, including rules about what foods are clean and unclean. They don't eat pork or shellfish, and they're very careful about how their food is prepared. To them, this isn't just tradition, it's part of honoring God with their whole lives.

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On the other side sit the Gentile Christians, people who weren't raised Jewish. They became Christians later in life, and they believe Jesus set them free from food restrictions. They eat whatever they want, whenever they want, and they thank God for it all. To them, focusing on food rules seems like missing the point of God's grace.

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Imagine the awkwardness at church potluck dinners. The Jewish Christians bring vegetables and carefully prepared dishes. They watch the Gentile Christians eating everything and think, "Don't they care about honoring God? This seems so careless and disrespectful." Meanwhile, the Gentile Christians see the restricted diets and think, "Don't they understand that Jesus freed us from all these rules? This seems so uptight and legalistic."

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Both groups love Jesus. Both groups are trying to follow God faithfully. But their practices are completely different, and each group is starting to question whether the other group is even doing

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Christianity right. You can see how this would create problems.

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Paul hears about this conflict and realizes it could destroy the church. But instead of settling the disagreement by telling everyone who's right about food, he does something surprising. Listen to what he writes to them:

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**Romans 14:1-3 (NIV)**

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*1 Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters. 2 One person's faith allows them to eat anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. 3 The one who eats everything must not treat with contempt the one who does not, and the one who does not eat everything must not judge the one who does, for God has accepted them.*

Wait, did you catch that? Paul doesn't say, "Here's who's right and who's wrong." Instead, he says both groups are doing something that damages their relationships. The people with freedom are treating the restricted people with contempt, basically looking down on them as silly and backward. The people with restrictions are judging the free people as careless and unfaithful.

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Paul points out that both attitudes are destructive. Contempt and judgment both push people away and create division. But then he gives them something amazing to think about: God has accepted both groups. Even though they disagree about practice, God sees both groups as his beloved children.

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He doesn't stop there. Paul continues with this incredible insight:

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**Romans 14:4 (NIV)**

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*4 Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To their own master, servants stand or fall. And they will stand, for the Lord is able to make them stand.*

In other words, "You don't get to evaluate other people's faithfulness to God, that's God's job, not yours. And guess what? God is powerful enough to help them stand strong in their faith, even if their practices look different from yours."

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Paul realizes that the real problem isn't the disagreement about food, it's the way the disagreement is making people treat each other. When we encounter Christians whose practices differ from ours, our natural response is either to dismiss them or to criticize them. But both responses damage relationships

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and dishonor God.

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So what does Paul suggest instead? He basically says, "Focus on your own relationship with God, and trust God to handle everyone else's relationship with him." Both groups can keep their convictions, but they need to stop letting those convictions turn them against each other.

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The most amazing part comes when Paul explains why this matters so much. He says that Christ died for all of these people, the ones with restrictions and the ones with freedom. If Jesus loves them enough to die for them, shouldn't we love them enough to accept them even when they do things differently?

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Paul's solution doesn't eliminate the differences. The Jewish Christians probably kept following their food laws, and the Gentile Christians probably kept eating everything. But they learned to see those differences as acceptable variations within the same faith, rather than evidence that someone was doing Christianity wrong.

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The result was a stronger church where people with different practices could worship together, eat together, and encourage each other in following Jesus. They discovered that unity doesn't require uniformity, they could be different and still be united in what mattered most.

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Sometimes in our lives, we encounter Christian families or churches that do things very differently from how we do them. When that happens, we have the same choices Paul's readers had: we can look down on them, judge them, or accept them as fellow Christians whom God loves. Paul's lesson shows us that the third option builds stronger relationships and honors God more than the first two.

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What we learn is that different practices don't automatically mean wrong faith. When Christians disagree about things that aren't essential to following Jesus, our job is to maintain relationship and trust God to work in everyone's hearts. The unity comes not from doing everything the same way, but from serving the same Lord with love and humility.

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**Pause here.** Let the story sink in for 5 seconds before moving on.

### 3. Discussion (5 minutes)

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#### Question 1: The Feelings

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Think about a time when you met a Christian family whose rules were really different from your family's rules, maybe they were much stricter about something, or much more relaxed about something else. What did you think or feel when you first realized how different they were? Be honest, there are no wrong feelings here, just human ones.

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**Listen For:** "That's weird," "Their parents are too strict," "They get to do whatever they want", affirm: "Those reactions make perfect sense. When things are different from what we're used to, our brain tries to figure out what's 'normal.'"

### Question 2: The Temptations

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Paul noticed that people with more freedom tend to look down on people with more restrictions, and people with more restrictions tend to judge people with more freedom. Why do you think each group is tempted in that particular direction? What makes it easy to slide into either contempt or judgment?

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**If They Say:** "Because they think their way is right", respond: "Yes! And when we're convinced our way is right, what happens to our attitude toward people who do it differently?"

### Question 3: The God Perspective

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Paul says God has accepted both groups, even though they disagree about practices. What do you think that means for how God sees different Christian families today? If God accepts families who follow Jesus but have different rules, how should that change our attitude toward them?

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**Connect:** "This is exactly what made Paul's solution so powerful, he helped people see others through God's eyes instead of just their own perspective."

### Question 4: The Unity

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Paul helped the Roman Christians discover that they could be different and still be united. What do you think would happen in our churches today if we got better at accepting Christians who have different practices than we do? What would be better about our communities?

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**If They Say:** "Everyone would get along better", ask: "What makes that hard to do? What gets in the way of accepting people who do things differently?"

You've identified something really important, the challenge isn't usually figuring out what's right, but learning to treat people with kindness even when we think their approach is wrong. Now we're going to do an activity that helps us practice this in a fun way.

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#### **4. Activity: Bridge Building (8 minutes)**

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**Zero Props Required** , This activity uses only kids' bodies and empty space.

##### **Purpose**

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This activity reinforces Paul's teaching by having kids physically experience how different approaches can accomplish the same goal, and how judging others' methods creates division while accepting them builds connection. Success looks like kids discovering that multiple "right" ways can coexist and that maintaining relationship across difference requires intentional effort.

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##### **Instructions to Class(3 minutes)**

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We're going to play Bridge Building. I need you to divide into two groups and stand on opposite sides of the room. Your challenge is to build a human bridge that connects your two sides, so people could theoretically walk from one group to the other across your bridge.

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Here's the twist: Group A can only use people lying down as bridge pieces, and Group B can only use people standing up as bridge pieces. You have to figure out how to connect your different building styles into one bridge that works. Each group is convinced their method is clearly the best way to build bridges.

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But here's what makes it interesting: you need each other to succeed. Your bridge isn't complete unless both methods are represented and connected. You'll need to figure out how to make your different approaches work together instead of competing.

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We're doing this because it's exactly like the Romans situation, two groups with different methods, each convinced their way is right, needing to find a way to work together instead of judging each other's approach.

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##### **During the Activity(4 minutes)**

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Watch as they initially focus on their own side's method and probably criticize the other side's approach. Let them struggle with the disconnect between their different building styles for about a minute before offering any guidance.

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As they encounter the challenge of connecting their different methods, listen for judgmental comments like "Their way is dumb" or "This would be easier if they just did it our way." These are exactly the attitudes Paul addressed in Romans.

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Coach with phrases like: "I notice you need the other group to complete your bridge... I wonder how you could honor their method while still using yours... What would it look like to build something together rather than separately?" Don't solve it for them.

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Celebrate the breakthrough moment when someone figures out how to connect the different methods, maybe a standing person holds hands with a lying-down person, or they create a transition zone. This represents Paul's vision of unity across difference.

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Once they've succeeded, have them notice the change from beginning to end, from two separate groups with conflicting methods to one connected bridge that incorporates both approaches.

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**Watch For:** The moment when someone chooses to adapt their method to connect with the other group instead of insisting on their own approach, this is the physical representation of Paul's teaching about mutual acceptance.

### **Debrief(1 minute)**

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What did you notice about how it felt when you were focused on proving your method was better versus when you focused on connecting with the other group? At the beginning, you had two separate, incomplete structures. But when you found ways to honor each other's different methods, you created something stronger than either group could build alone. That's exactly what Paul wanted the Roman Christians to experience, unity that includes difference rather than requiring sameness.

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### **5. Closing (2 minutes)**

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Here's what we learned today: Different practices don't automatically mean wrong faith. When Christians disagree about things that aren't essential to following Jesus, our job is to choose kindness over criticism and trust God to work in everyone's hearts. Paul showed us that God accepts Christians with different practices, and that should change how we treat them.

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This doesn't mean all differences are okay or that we should never have convictions. It means recognizing that some disagreements are about how to follow Jesus, not whether to follow Jesus. When we encounter those kinds of differences, contempt and judgment damage relationships and dishonor God.

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The amazing result is that when we learn to accept Christians who do things differently, we often discover that our differences make us stronger rather than weaker. We learn from each other, and we build communities where people feel loved for who they are, not just when they do things exactly like we do.

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### **This Week's Challenge**

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This week, when you encounter a Christian family or friend whose rules or practices are different from yours, try asking yourself: "How might God see this family?" Instead of immediately thinking "that's wrong" or "that's weird," practice thinking "that's different, and God loves them too." Notice how that changes your attitude toward them.

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### **Closing Prayer (Optional)**

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*God, thank you for loving all kinds of Christian families, even when we disagree about how to follow you. Help us choose kindness when we encounter people who do things differently than we do. Give us wisdom to know when differences matter and when they don't, and help us build relationships that honor you. In Jesus's name, Amen.*

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## **Grades 1, 3**

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Ages 6, 8 • 15, 20 Minutes • Animated Storytelling + Songs

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### **Your Main Job Today**

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Help kids understand that God loves people who do things differently, and we can be friends with people even when we disagree about some things.

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### **Movement & Formation Plan**

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- **Opening Song:** Standing in a circle

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- **Bible Story:** Sitting in a horseshoe shape facing the teacher

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- **Small Group Q&A:** Standing in pairs facing each other

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- **Closing Song:** Standing in straight lines

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- **Prayer:** Sitting cross-legged in rows

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## If Kids Don't Understand

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Compare different Christian families to different flavors of ice cream, they're all ice cream (Christians), just with different flavors (different ways of doing things), and God loves all the flavors.

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### 1. Opening Song (2, 3 minutes)

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**Formation:** Standing in a circle

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Select a song about God's love for everyone. Suggestions: "Jesus Loves the Little Children," "Every Move I Make," or "God's Love is So Wonderful." Use movements: spread arms wide during "everyone/all," point to different children during verses about different people, hug yourself during words about love.

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Great singing, everyone! Now let's sit in our horseshoe shape for story time. We're going to hear about some people who were friends with Jesus but did things very differently from each other. Get ready to hear how God wants us to treat people who are different from us!

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### 2. Bible Story Time (5, 7 minutes)

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**Formation:** Kids sitting in a horseshoe shape on the floor facing you. Move around inside the horseshoe as you tell the story.

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**Animated Delivery:** Use big gestures, change your voice for different characters, move around the space. Keep energy high! Sound confused when you're talking about the problem, sound wise and loving when you're talking about Paul's solution.

Today we're going to meet some people who loved Jesus very much, but they did things very differently from each other.

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*[Walk to one side of the horseshoe]*

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On this side, we have some Christians who were very careful about what food they ate. They said, "We only eat vegetables and special foods that God says are okay." They prayed before every meal and were very thankful.

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*[Use a careful, thoughtful voice]*

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They loved God so much that they wanted to make sure everything they did was exactly right. To them, being careful about food was a way to show God they loved him.

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*[Walk to other side of horseshoe, change tone to be more relaxed]*

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On this side, we have other Christians who said, "Jesus made us free! We can eat any food and just say thank you to God." They ate meat, they ate fish, they ate everything!

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*[Move to center, look concerned]*

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But here's what started happening. The people who were careful about food looked at the people who ate everything and said, "They're not being good Christians! Look how careless they are!"

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*[Move to side, sound dismissive]*

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And the people who ate everything looked at the people who were careful and said, "They're being silly! Don't they know Jesus made us free? They're doing Christianity wrong!"

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**Romans 14:3 (NIV)**

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*3 The one who eats everything must not treat with contempt the one who does not, and the one who does not eat everything must not judge the one who does, for God has accepted them.*

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*[Pause and look around at each child]*

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Do you think both groups loved Jesus? Yes! But they were starting to be mean to each other because they did things differently. That made God sad.

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*[Move to center, speak with authority and warmth]*

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So God used Paul to send them a message. Paul said, "Stop being mean to each other! God loves both groups, even though they do things differently."

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*[Walk slowly around the horseshoe]*

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Paul explained that being mean to people who do things differently is not what God wants. God wants us to be kind to everyone who loves Jesus, even when they do things we think are strange.

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*[Stop walking and face the children directly]*

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The people who were careful about food could keep being careful. The people who ate everything could keep eating everything. But they both had to stop being mean to each other!

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*[Speak with excitement]*

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And you know what happened? They learned to be friends again! They could eat dinner together and pray together and help each other, even though they ate different foods.

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*[Pause dramatically]*

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God showed them that different ways of doing things doesn't mean someone is wrong. God loves people who do things differently!

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*[Speak directly to the children]*

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Sometimes you might meet kids whose families have different rules than your family. Maybe they can watch movies you can't watch, or maybe they can't do things that are okay in your family.

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*[Move closer to the children]*

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When that happens, you can remember what Paul taught: God loves all Christian families, even when they have different rules. You can be kind instead of thinking they're weird or wrong.

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*[Speak warmly and encouragingly]*

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God wants us to be friends with people who love Jesus, even when they do things differently than we do. That's how we show God's love to everyone!

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### 3. Discussion (5 minutes)

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**Formation:** Have kids stand up and find a partner. Pairs scatter around the room with space to talk.

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Find a partner and I'll give each pair one question to talk about. You'll have about one minute to share your ideas with each other. There are no wrong answers, just tell each other what you think!

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**Teacher Circulation:** Walk around to each pair. Listen to their discussions. If a pair is stuck, ask "What do you think?" or rephrase the question more simply. Give them time to think, some kids need extra processing time.

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#### Discussion Questions

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*Select one question per pair based on class size. Save unused questions for next time.*

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1. How do you think the food-careful people felt when others ate everything?
  2. How do you think the eat-everything people felt when others were so careful?
  3. What would you feel if someone called your family's way of doing things wrong?
  4. What would you do if you met a Christian family with very different rules?
  5. Why did being mean to each other make God sad?
  6. How did God feel about both groups of people?
  7. What changed when people stopped being mean to each other?
  8. How could you be kind to someone whose family does things differently?
  9. What's the difference between your family having rules and thinking other families are wrong?
  10. Why does God love people who do things differently?
  11. What would happen if all Christian families had exactly the same rules?
  12. How can people be friends when they disagree about some things?
  13. What does it mean that God accepted both groups?
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14. How can you show love to people who are different from you?

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15. What's something you could learn from a family that does things differently?

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16. Why is it important to have Christian friends who might be different from you?

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17. What would you tell someone who was being mean to a different Christian family?

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18. How does knowing God loves everyone help you treat people?

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19. What would happen if everyone was kind to people who were different?

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20. What's one way you can practice being kind to people who are different this week?

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Great discussions! Let's come back together in our lines for our closing song. Who wants to share what they talked about with their partner?

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#### **4. Closing Song (2, 3 minutes)**

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**Formation:** Standing in straight lines facing forward

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Select songs about kindness or unity. Suggestions: "Love One Another," "Be Kind to One Another," or "We Are One in the Spirit." Include movements: hug yourself during "love," reach out to neighbors during "one another," point up during references to God.

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Beautiful singing! Now let's sit down quietly for prayer time. Remember what we learned about God loving people who do things differently.

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#### **5. Closing Prayer (1, 2 minutes)**

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**Formation:** Sitting cross-legged in rows, heads bowed, hands folded

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*Dear God, thank you for loving all kinds of people who follow Jesus...*

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*[Pause]*

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*Help us be kind to people whose families do things differently than our family does. Help us remember that different doesn't mean wrong...*

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*[Pause]*

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*Help us be good friends with people who love you, even when they do some things differently than we do...*

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*[Pause]*

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*Thank you for loving everyone and for teaching us to love everyone too. Help us show your kindness to all our friends. In Jesus's name, Amen.*

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**Alternative, Popcorn Prayer:** If your class is comfortable with it, invite kids to offer short one-sentence prayers about being kind to different people. Examples: "Help me be nice to kids who are different" or "Thank you that you love everyone."

Remember this week that God loves people who do things differently than you do, and you can be kind and friendly to them too. Have a wonderful week showing God's love to everyone!

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