

Learning to Love

OTHERS

Book Three

The Learning to Love Series

Small Group Bible Study on
Living the Christian Faith

by Richard Peace

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To Judith,
of course,
once again

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The LEARNING TO LOVE series:

Book One: Learning to Love God

Book Two: Learning to Love Ourselves

Book Three: Learning to Love Others

The aim of any Bible study ought to be to bring the reader into contact with Scripture in such a way that his or her life will be changed. This is my aim in *LEARNING TO LOVE*. The focus, therefore, is not on learning doctrine but on learning how to live like a Christian. Doctrine is present, of course, but always in relationship to life.

These studies were written originally in the 1960s to serve as follow-up literature in evangelistic missions conducted by African Enterprise, a group which I helped start while a student at Fuller Theological Seminary and with which I served for eight years in Africa. In their original form, they were published by two presses: Zondervan Publishing House and InterVarsity Press. They went through over twenty editions and were translated into Chinese, Spanish, Portuguese, and Korean. Certain parts of the series were translated into Zulu and Sotho.

But the original *LEARNING TO LOVE* has been out of print for many years. However, I kept getting requests for the books since it seems that nothing quite replaced them. The need remained to assist new Christians in beginning their lives as followers of Jesus. So it seemed appropriate to revise and update *LEARNING TO LOVE* as the inaugural volumes for our new publishing house: Pilgrimage Publishing.

When I first conceived of this project, what I had in mind was a modest updating of the original books coupled with translation from individual studies into a small group format. Of course, as I started working on the project it soon became evident that what was demanded was a thorough-going revision. The result is that only a small part of the original material remains. Most of the original topics are still addressed, generally using the same passages from the Bible, however in different ways. In addition, six new Bible studies have been written (expanding the series from fifteen to twenty-one studies). The result is, I hope, a highly usable series for a new generation of Christians.

The first set of *LEARNING TO LOVE* books was written in South Africa. It is appropriate that the new series was also written in South Africa during my sabbatical from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. I am grateful to the many people who assisted me in completing this new series, both directly and indirectly, especially all the folk on Morningside Farm in Winterton, Natal, South Africa, where I lived while writing. Specifically, I want to thank:

- ◆ Joan Reeve, who opened her farm to my family, giving us a wonderful place to live, and her father Cyril Gemmel, who always had a ready story or comment;
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- ◆ the young people living and working there: David, Jolyn, and Katelyn Reeve; Bass; Rob Mark; Joel Howe; Jenny and Jonathan Peace; and
- ◆ the unforgettable kids: Daisy and the three musketeers—Sbusiso, Thabani, and Phumleni; as well as the other kids: Sindi, Thokozani, Zanele, and Freedom.

I appreciate the generosity of the Trustees of Gordon-Conwell in giving me the time to write through the sabbatical program. And, of course, my biggest thanks

go to my wife Judy, who has supported me through yet another writing project. "Keep it simple. Keep it useful," she kept saying. I hope I did.

Grateful acknowledgment is made to the following publishers for permission to reprint copyright material:

- ◆ *The Art of Loving* by Erich Fromm (New York: Harper & Row, 1962).
- ◆ *God's New Society: The Message of Ephesians* by John R. W. Stott (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1979).
- ◆ *The Letter to the Romans (The Daily Study Bible)*, translated and interpreted by William Barclay (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1958).
- ◆ *You Can Witness With Confidence* by Rosalind Rinker (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1962, 1969).
- ◆ *Know Why You Believe* by Paul E. Little (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1969).
- ◆ *The Letters of James and Peter (The Daily Study Bible)*, translated and interpreted by William Barclay (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1958, 1960).
- ◆ *The Company of the Committed* by Elton Trueblood (New York: Harper & Row, 1961).

BIBLE VERSIONS

- ◆ *The New International Version:*
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Richard V. Peace

An Introduction to the Series

Becoming a Christian is an awesome step to take. In deciding to follow Jesus we are turning our backs on many of the attitudes, actions, and ideas that once guided our lives. We are turning toward the way of life shown us by Jesus. We turn to Christ because we discover that the “old way” was the way of death; Jesus offers the way of life.

In coming to Christ, we are often thrown off balance. It is like living in a fog and having a new and powerful light burst through to show us a completely new path to follow. This can be a disconcerting experience. We no longer know what to make of our old lives; we only barely grasp what this new life holds.

This brings us to the point of this series: its aim is to illuminate the new way of Jesus while helping us to reflect on our old life.

We will examine the key ideas of Christ’s way: he gives us a new way of viewing the world around us—a way filled with hope and purpose. We will reflect on the new attitudes that characterize the new way, since Christ helps us to form a new affection. This changes how we view others and what we give ourselves to. Finally, we will examine the kind of lifestyle Jesus wants us to have: what we do matters, and (at times) Christ calls us to stand against the stream of culture.

We will do all this together with others—with some people who have been “on the way” for a while, and others who are just starting on the way. The Christian way was never meant to be a solitary path. The church is intended to be the joyous community of pilgrims aiding and supporting one another “on the way.”

A word about how this course has been organized. The three books of this series are structured around the Great Commandment given by Jesus: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.... Love your neighbor as yourself.”

In Book One, we will look at what it means to learn to love God. God is alive and personal, as present as our next breath. Yet God is also Spirit. Therefore, having a relationship with God is different from having a relationship with another person. We need to consider how one grows and nurtures a relationship with the living God.

In Book Two, we shift the topic from God to ourselves. We ask the question: What does it mean to love ourselves? This is a concept fraught with difficulties. Improper self-love translates into a lifestyle that is hedonistic, selfish, and self-destructive. But we dare not avoid the subject, because failing to love ourselves properly is also self-destructive. With low (or no) self-esteem, people become doormats for others, fail to use their Christ-given gifts, and have difficulty loving others. Jesus calls us to walk the narrow road between selfishness and selflessness. This involves a proper self-understanding, a larger dose of humility, and a healthy sense of who we are.

In the final book, we look at our relationship with other people. Christ’s call is, at its root, a call to love others. Yet this is so often difficult. For one thing, others are not always very lovable; for another, loving them sometimes gets in the way of our self-interest. But we cannot avoid the issue. To follow Christ is to live a certain way. Behavior counts; lifestyle matters. But it’s not all sacrifice and pain.

Our greatest joys come from others. To be in a loving relationship with other people is to be alive and joyful.

A word to those who are not beginners on the way of Jesus:

So far, it would appear that these studies were written solely for the benefit of those who are new in the faith. In fact, they were written primarily for that purpose. But it's also true that those who have been on the way for some time need to be reminded of the fundamentals of the faith. Martin Luther stressed this to the clergy. He warned them against thinking that once they mastered the catechism (the statement of the fundamentals of the faith), they could then move beyond it. Instead, he urged them to recite the catechism daily as a spiritual discipline. He wrote:

“As for myself, let me say that I, too, am a doctor and a preacher—yes, and as learned and experienced as any of those who act so high and mighty. Yet I do as a child who is being taught the Catechism.... I must still read and study the Catechism daily, yet I cannot master it as I wish, but must remain a child and pupil of the Catechism, and I do it gladly.”¹

There is something very powerful about remembering what lies at the heart of the faith. As Luther indicates, we can never master even the most fundamental facts. We need to be brought back to them constantly. In a real sense, we never get beyond the ABC's of the faith—nor should we. Thus, this series will be of value to the experienced Christian.

It is useful to have a study group that consists of both new and experienced Christians. Both benefit from the presence of the other. Both need each other in considering what it means to “learn to love.” The older Christian brings experience and knowledge—years of seeking to know and live the faith, and this enriches new Christians. On the other hand, the new Christian brings freshness and wonder to this task—new eyes to see old facts in fresh ways, and so those who are older in the faith are reminded why they started on this journey in the first place.

Blessings on you as you seek to walk faithfully on the path to new life in Christ.

¹ Theodore G. Tappert, ed. and trans., *The Book of Concord* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), page 359, quoted in Robin Maas and Gabriel O'Donnell, *Spiritual Traditions for the Contemporary Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), pages 167–168.

A Three-Part Program

There are three main sections to each chapter. Each section has a special function in the process of learning how to follow Jesus. Knowing the intention of each section will help you use that section to its full advantage:

- ◆ **Group Study:** contains materials for a 60- to 90-minute small group Bible study.
- ◆ **Study Resources:** contains notes and comments used in both group and personal study.
- ◆ **Personal Study:** contains a series of reflection questions for use by group members on their own during the week.

In turn, each of these three sections has various parts, which are discussed below.

Group Study

Small group Bible study is at the heart of this material. This is where you will learn, share, pray, laugh, cry, reflect, and grow—together with a small group of friends and fellow pilgrims. The Christian way was never meant to be a solitary way. It has always been a matter of community. The early Christian groups were not much larger than your small group. They met in homes, studying and worshipping together. It was not until the third century that special buildings were used for the gathering of Christians. So, in forming this small group, you are returning to the original way in which men and women learned to be disciples of Jesus.

Your small group study has several components:

- **Overview:** The first page of each chapter has a brief description of the topic to be studied and the materials that are presented in each of the three sections. This will give you a clear idea of what to expect and how to proceed. You will also know what results to strive for as a small group and in your personal study.
- **Beginning:** Each small group study will begin with a sharing exercise that puts you in touch with the issue that will be studied. This is a good way to begin a small group because it gets everyone talking. It helps to move you from what you were thinking about (or worried about) when you arrived at the meeting to what the text deals with. It also puts you in touch with the topic in an experiential way, so that your discussion is not just sharing ideas, but sharing your life. Most importantly, it allows you to share your stories with one another. The questions in this section always focus on life experiences, and they are generally fun to answer.
- **The Text:** The aim of the entire small group experience is to understand and apply a passage from the Bible to your life. You will study material from various parts of the Bible. Different translations will be used, so that you will become acquainted with the excellent variety of English language Bibles available today. Since the New Testament was written to be read aloud, you will begin your study by reading the text aloud. Words in bold type are explained in the *Bible Study Notes* section.