

repenting of  
**Religion**

## INTRO

Here's a simple question to start you off—**what is the opposite of love?**

Think about it.

If you said hate or indifference, you'd be wrong. These words sound accurate, but ultimately they fall short. Hate in most cases is simply love that has been wronged and allowed to become bitter and vengeful. Indifference, on the other hand, is simply affection that has grown apathetic. Neither of these truly stands in opposition to love.

So what is the opposite of love, the thing that opposes it and has no traces of love in it?

Judgment.

Our tendency, ability, and desire to judge is what ultimately destroys love in our lives and in the world around us.

Religion is based on judgment. Relationship is based on love.

Whether we realize it or not, most of us have bought into the lie of religion—the lie of judgment—missing the whole love-giving relationship that Jesus had portrayed for us to live.

It's time that we leave judging behind.

This six-week study is based on the book, "Repenting of Religion," by Greg Boyd. Reading the book in conjunction with this study is recommended, though purchasing the book is not required.

# ALL YOU NEED IS LOVE

## WEEK 1

It seems that John Lennon had it right all along when he said, “All you need is love.” But even though he was pretty insightful at times (excluding assessments of Yoko’s musical ability), it is pretty unlikely that John knew the true significance of what he was singing. Those five words are the foundation of all life.

While that sounds nice and Jesus-like, the word love can be kind of vague. When we use the same word to describe our feelings about our family as we do a good hot dog, the meaning can become pretty watered down and confusing.

Time for a quick vocab lesson—the Bible actually uses four different words that all translate as our English word “love.” There is one that refers to affection for something (“I love Skyline”), one for friendship (“I love you, man!”), one for romance (wink wink, nudge nudge), and finally one that refers to selfless, sacrificial love. It is the last one that we’re considering this week.

### Read 1 John 4:16.

When John states that God is love, he’s referring to selfless, sacrificial love. Don’t miss the significance of this—this is John’s description of the person and character of God. It is not that He is loving, or he acts in love, but he is love. He embodies, personifies and demonstrates in Jesus’ physical form what love looks like. If we claim to believe what the Bible has to say, this must be the foundation of our picture of God and must be our definition of what love actually looks like.

Now go back one chapter, and **read 1 John 3:16**. John is basically saying to his readers that if you want to know what love looks like, consider that Jesus sacrificed himself for all of us, even though we don’t deserve it. That’s what real love looks like.

Let’s break this down for a minute. By definition, God must be the most valuable thing there is; if he wasn’t the most valuable, then he wouldn’t be God. So when we consider that Jesus (who is God) sacrificed himself for our sake, we must see it as God’s statement of our worth in his eyes. God’s love means that he is willing to sacrifice the most valuable thing there is (himself) for our sake. In the eyes of God, we are infinitely valuable.

Pastor/author Greg Boyd describes it like this: “Love is unconditionally ascribing worth to another at cost to yourself.”<sup>1</sup> God’s expression of his personality and character resulted in two things—the death of his son (a very great cost) and an unchangeable expression of our value.

What does this mean for us? When God spoke about the creation of man, he said that we are created “in his likeness.” We were created to be like Him—to inhabit, draw life from, and express this kind of selfless love. So this desire to show the same kind of value to others that God has shown to us has to take priority over any other concern in our lives. Love is more important than being safe, making a profit or even being right. The idea that we are designed for love and that the world was built on love is not just a nice sounding phrase saying that we should treat each other better. It is a foundational expression of reality as God designed it.

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<sup>1</sup>Greg Boyd, *Repenting of Religion* (2004), 25.

## FOR DISCUSSION

Love can be defined in a variety of ways, all of which factor into our understanding of God's love. **Share your general definition of love.**

**How do you feel about the idea that God thinks and acts as if you have infinite value? How might that alter your perception of God or yourself?**

If God is love and we have been created to be like him, then we should connect with this idea of showing value to others at cost to ourselves.

**Have you ever been on the receiving end of this kind of love?** How did it make you feel? Have you ever given this kind of love? How did that make you feel?

We said earlier that if love is the priority for God, then it must be the priority for us as well. **In what ways or with what people do you have difficulty making love the priority?**

## CHALLENGE

Pick someone in your life that is a little difficult to love. Maybe you often find yourself in conflict with them, maybe they treat you poorly, or maybe you just flat out don't enjoy their company. For the next week, find ways to show them value and worth—to communicate to them the infinite value that God places on them. It can be as simple as giving them a compliment, baking them some cookies or just spending some quality time with them. Come back next week prepared to talk about what happens.

"...If we take seriously the biblical teaching that the love command is the greatest command, that we must put it above all other considerations, that we must clothe ourselves with and even live in love, then there can be no thought of balancing love with any other concern. Nothing can qualify a command that is "above all" other commands. If the command is to love everyone as Christ loves us, there is simply no situation in which the command does not apply."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Greg Boyd, *Repenting of Religion* (2004), 58.

# DON'T TOUCH THAT

## WEEK 2

It's pretty obvious that there is something wrong with the world. Whether you watch the news or just take a walk through your local Wal-Mart, it just feels like some essential piece of the world is broken, and as a result, life simply doesn't work the way it should.

To understand why, we need to go back to the beginning. **Read Genesis 2:15-16.** God lays down the basic rule for life in the garden—don't touch the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Sounds simple enough.

Yet, Adam and Eve screwed up. There was only one wrong choice to be made, and they made it. As a result, all of humanity has been paying the price ever since. But what was so bad about them eating from this tree? Knowing the difference between right and wrong doesn't seem like such a horrible crime.

God wasn't making up some arbitrary rule so that he would have an excuse to punish people. The key distinction is between the two trees that He put in the middle of the garden. On the one hand, you have the "Tree of Life"—God's eternal provision and care in tangible form. On the other hand, you have the "Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil"—God's "prohibition against humans overstepping their proper domain."<sup>3</sup>

For most of us, making judgments between good and evil is such a part of normal daily life that we don't give it a second thought. Yet each of us has probably experienced the pain and frustrations of poor judgment, either because you falsely judged a person or a situation before you knew all the facts, or perhaps someone else misjudged you.

Such pain and frustration hints at the truth—we were never made to judge between good and evil. To judge any situation with complete accuracy requires that we have complete knowledge of all the factors involved.

And as each of us knows all too well, we don't know it all.

God never intended for people to be the judges between good and evil—he reserved that duty for himself, as he is the only one capable of doing it. God's intent for man was that we would define good and evil based on how they line up with his will, not our judgments. He desired for us to be God-like (or like him) in our ability to love, but we have chosen instead to try to be God-like in our ability to judge. As a result, we end up failing at both.

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<sup>3</sup>Greg Boyd, *Repenting of Religion* (2004), 67.

## FOR DISCUSSION

Take a few minutes to recap last week's challenge. Go around the circle and share what happened as you showed someone in your life the value that God places on him or her.

Consider the idea that there might have been something inherently bad for us about the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, thus God's reason for forbidding it. What do you think?

In order to make an accurate judgment about something, you have to have complete knowledge of the situation. **How have you seen this play out in your own life?**

The tendency to judge can cost us—whether it's the loss of a job, a financial loss, or even the loss of a relationship. **How has judging cost you? In what ways has your judgment (or desire to be judge) impacted your relationship with God?**

Last week we talked about how we are all designed to live in and express the love of God. **How could our desire to judge interfere with our call to love? How have you experienced this?**

## CHALLENGE

Last week you picked someone in your life that is a challenge for you, and found ways to show them the love and value that God places on them. For most of us, the frustrations that we have with others often stem from judgments that we have made about them. We determine them (or things about them) to be good or evil, and then base their value on those judgments. So this week, spend some time thinking about the person that you've picked and the ways you judge (or have judged) them. How does your judgment of them affect how you see and value them? Look for opportunities to reverse the judgment you've made, and continue to express the value that God has for them. Come back next week and be ready to talk about what happens.

"In God's plan, God alone would know good and evil. As creator, God alone has the right and the ability to define good and evil. Things are good or evil insofar as they align with or oppose God's will, not our wills...The essence of sin is that we play God."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup>Greg Boyd, *Repenting of Religion* (2004), 67-68.

# BELIEVING A LIE

## WEEK 3

To start us off this week, let's take a minute to take stock of things and see where we stand. In week one, we talked about how we were created to inhabit and express the selfless love of God. Then last week, we talked about how our desire and tendency to judge breaks down relationships, and keeps us from enjoying and displaying the love God designed us for.

So why in the world did we trade love for judgment in the first place? What could possibly have motivated Adam and Eve to give up perfect, life-giving love for anything else, let alone a stupid piece of fruit?

The short answer is that Adam and Eve (along with every person that has followed them) believed a lie.

**Read Genesis 3:1-7.** In case you needed more reason not to trust a snake that talks, the serpent convinces Adam and Eve to break the one rule that they had been given. It does this by getting them to believe a lie about God and a lie about themselves.

First, the snake got Eve wondering if God was holding out on her. He starts off by suggesting that God was lying when he said that the fruit would kill her; this gets her wondering about whether or not God can be trusted at all. He follows it up by suggesting that God is simply trying to protect his position by keeping them from knowing good and evil.

Unfortunately, Eve is not the last one to buy into this lie. Many of us might have felt at one time or another that God was holding out on us, or that he could not be trusted. This lie can leave us with a distorted picture of God himself, to the point where we can't even imagine God showing us love or mercy at all.

But the snake didn't stop there—he also sold Eve a lie about herself. In verse five, he says that when she eats the fruit, then she will be “like God.” In other words, he is telling her that there is something lacking in her current existence—that she isn't fully alive. He convinced her that there was something more out there to be had. Greg Boyd describes it like this:

“The craftiness of the serpent is found in his cunning ability to make Eve think she *had to become what she in fact already was*. How else could he tempt a person who already had all she would ever need? The serpent convinced Eve that her life had to be found in *doing* rather than simply *being*.”<sup>5</sup>

By getting Adam and Eve to believe that God couldn't be trusted and that there was more to life than what they were experiencing, the serpent managed to make them trade the only thing they really wanted for something they were never meant to have.

And that's how we traded love for judgment.

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<sup>5</sup>Greg Boyd, *Repenting of Religion* (2004), 146.

## FOR DISCUSSION

Before the fall, we know that Adam and Eve enjoyed a perfect, loving relationship with each other and with God. This also meant that the concepts of “good” and “evil” had no meaning for them—everything was based on their understanding of God’s heart. **What do you think that kind of life would have been like? How would your way of approaching daily life be different?**

As we mentioned earlier, the serpent managed to convince Adam and Eve that God was untrustworthy. **Discuss a time in your life where you doubted God or felt like you couldn’t trust him.**

The serpent also managed to convince Adam and Eve that they were not fully alive—that there were aspects of life that they were missing. Put simply, he convinced them that their value was based on what they did rather than who they were. **How does this lie affect you?**

We have spent today talking about the decisions of Adam and Eve, and it might be easy for us to disconnect ourselves from the conversation. **In what ways do you find yourself more likely to find value in judgment (your decisions and comparisons about others) than in the love that God offers?** When you think of giving up judgment—just stopping completely—what arguments come to mind? What are you holding on to? Be honest. No one will judge you.

## CHALLENGE

As we wrap up today, your challenge this week is a bit more personal and introspective. We mentioned earlier that the serpent successfully convinced Eve that she needed to “become what she already was”—and the same applies to us. Each of us has bought into the lie that we have to do something (whatever it might be) to prove our worth. So at some point in the next week, take about 15–20 minutes and get alone. Go for a walk, a drive, do whatever you have to do, but get alone. Once you’re alone, clear your brain and ask God this question: “In what ways do I try to find value other than in you?” Take note of how you feel like He might be answering you, and then ask him to help you let those things go. Come back next week, and we’ll talk about what you discovered.

“Now, instead of ascribing unsurpassable worth to others out of a fullness of unsurpassable worth we receive from God, we strive to derive worth from other people, other things, and our own performance in a futile attempt to fill a vacuum

created by God’s absence in our lives...In this fallen state, we cannot love as God is love. We can only ascribe unsurpassable worth to others when we no longer need to use others to acquire worth for ourselves.”<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup>Greg Boyd, *Repenting of Religion* (2004), 149.

# LIVING A LIE

## WEEK 4

**Read Genesis 2:15-17.** At face value, this just looks like God giving Adam a command not to touch one of the trees—but we shouldn't miss what's truly happening here. You see, this is ultimately the deciding point for where man is going to get life. God is telling Adam that he has provided the Tree of Life to sustain and care for him, and that this is the only place that he will find life. He tells him not to touch the other tree, not because he was holding out on him, but because he wouldn't find life there. It would only destroy him in the end.

This is what lies beneath our desire to judge and our tendency to compare ourselves to others. It stems from an attempt to get life from an illegitimate source. God told us that we would only find death if we chose to go down the judgment route, but that hasn't stopped us from trying.

Greg Boyd describes the process like this: "In this fallen way of life, people and things have worth only to the extent that they fill us...Our judgment cuts us off from our true sources of life, and the person we judge becomes a source of life for us. Our condemnation of that person whether it be about a major lifestyle issue or a minor matter of appearance, gives us a momentary feeling of worth, of superiority, of fullness—of deity."

When we judge, we are literally putting ourselves in the place of God. We shift the dividing line of good and evil from God's criteria to ours; then set ourselves up as the beneficiaries of the new structure we've created. By putting ourselves at the center of the universe, we cut ourselves off from the source of life and true center of the universe. No wonder Jesus speaks so harshly against judging, saying that in the same way we shove God aside and judge everything for our own gain, he will use that same standard on us. (Matthew 7:1)

It was this very act that got Jesus so fired up toward the religious leaders of his day. Although they said all the right words and did all the right things according to the laws, it didn't change the fact that inside was nothing but death—nothing more than their attempt to get life from judgment. (See Matthew 23:27-28)

And if we're being honest, this is the essence of any religion—it is the attempt to draw life from judgment, from a place where God has already told us, "You won't find anything there but death."

It seems we have quite a mess on our hands.

## FOR DISCUSSION

We mentioned earlier that our judgments of others give us a momentary sense of worth and life, but that it never lasts. **How have you experienced this? Why do you think it is so hard to stop judging others?**

Discuss a time when another's judgment of you affected your relationship. **Can you think of a time when your judgments may have scarred someone else?**

Back in week one, we said that oftentimes the church makes the mistake of thinking that its primary job is to judge between good and evil. **How have you experienced this? How can followers of Jesus live a righteous life without resorting to judgment? Is it ever okay to judge, and if so, when?**

## CHALLENGE

Your challenge for this week is to try to go for a week without judging people. This means everybody—the guy that cuts you off in traffic (@#\$#!), the lady in front of you at the checkout line (she's not an idiot), and definitely that infuriating family member (God loves them as much as he loves you.) Ask God to let you see people through his eyes. Live for a week without judging; don't worry if you fall off the wagon, just keep trying.

But if you have a more task-oriented personality, try this. When something or someone cause you to judge, take note of this, pray for forgiveness and for God's vision, then counteract the judgment with an impromptu act of love. Keep these acts of love in mind and continually create new ideas.

"The judgment Jesus prohibits is not about ascribing worth to others by helping them be free from things in their lives that suppress their worth. It's about trying to experience worth *for oneself* by *detracting* it from others."

<sup>6</sup>Greg Boyd, *Repenting of Religion* (2004), 149.

# BAD REPUTATION

## WEEK 5

The last few weeks, we've been talking about loving others rather than judging them. But Jesus says that we are to look different than the world around us. How are we supposed to do that if we don't tell people about the kind of lifestyle that they need to live? Don't we have a responsibility to the world to tell them the truth about their lives?

If this thought has crossed your mind, you're not alone. After all, if we have connected with God, then we must have at least a little bit better idea of truth than those who are not connected to God at all. And if we indeed have truth, then we must have a responsibility to share it with the world around us.

It's a logical, well-reasoned conclusion. And it's also wrong.

Each of us is operating from a biased perspective that makes allowances for our own sin, but immediately passes sentence on that of others. We understand that in our own lives, our ongoing experience of the love of God pushes us to ongoing life change in ways that rules and judgment never could.

Yet when we look at the lives of others, that patience is glaringly absent.

For example, the church in our society has made a significant moral stand on the issue of gay marriage, depicting it as immoral, harmful to society and in direct opposition to the desire and intent of God. Without getting into a debate on that issue (it isn't the point here), have you ever noticed that no such moral stand has been made on the issue of gluttony? Yet 60% of Americans are overweight (with 20% being fully obese), and the Bible has far more to say about gluttony as a sin than it does homosexuality.

True though it may be, a book titled "Fat Is Sin" is never going to make the bestseller list at Family Christian Bookstore.

You see, the judgment structures we set up are always skewed in our favor. Our sin is never as big a deal as their sin.

Greg Boyd states the situation this way: "When we assume that people won't change unless we fix them—as if we don't ourselves need fixing—we show that our ultimate trust is in ourselves, not God...When we don't simply trust God to change others, we effectively claim that our ability to shame, intimidate, or otherwise manipulate people into change is greater than God's transforming spirit."

Regardless of how well-intentioned our judgments may be, our primary (and only) means of interaction with the world around us should be love. **Read John 8:1-11.** Jesus himself—despite the fact that he had both the authority and the ability to pass judgment on people—chose not to judge. He understood that the unconditional love of God could change a person's heart in a way that judgment never could. He knew that the human soul was originally designed for such love, and that it could not experience the love of God and remain unchanged. Jesus never judged the "sinners" around him—he simply loved them, and allowed the transforming power of God's love to change lives.

## FOR DISCUSSION

Take some time to talk about what happened with the challenge from last week. Go around the circle and share your experiences with life outside of judgment. **In what ways were you successful? In what ways was it difficult? Did you notice any differences in your outlook?**

We mentioned earlier that the judgment structures we set up are always skewed in our favor—other people’s sin is always a much bigger deal than our sin. **How have you seen this tendency in your own thoughts?**

We have a natural tendency to rely on judgment for life change rather than love—why do you think this is? **What in your own life causes you to believe that love won’t change someone’s life?**

**If we unconditionally love people, what’s to keep them from simply staying as they are?**

**How does your small group do when it comes to this subject?** Are you at a place where you have invited each other into your life that loving accountability and truth can take place? Do you ever feel judged or fearful of being vulnerable because you worry you might be judged? What could change in your group to fix that? Have a conversation now as a group to discuss how you feel with one another.

## CHALLENGE

If you have entered into relationship with Jesus, then you have come face to face with unconditional love. Chances are that the most significant personal changes you have made were not because of rules, but because of the loving relational influence of others in your life. One of the easiest ways to ensure that we always act in love and grace toward others is to be continually aware of the love and grace we’ve received. So this week, your challenge is to take 10 minutes every day to reflect on the change and restoration that God has made in your life. Each day, try to identify some way that God has shown love and mercy toward you. Come back next week, and we’ll talk about what you discover.

“The central mark of a maturing Christian is that they increasingly love others as Christ loved them.”<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup>Greg Boyd, *Repenting of Religion* (2004), 149.

### FEEDBACK

- Offered with personal understanding and empathetic appreciation
- Speaks from humility
- Is helpful in bringing a person to a fuller life and is motivated by love
- Is given in the context of a close relationship where speaker has been invited into a place of permission to speak truth

### JUDGMENT

- Places speaker’s self in a position of authority or hierarchy over another
- Is spoken out of permission and relationship
- Speaks from a place of assuming it is their job and not the Spirit’s to bring to repentance

# OUTRAGEOUS LOVE

## WEEK 6

If you were to step back and take stock of what we've talked about over the last five weeks, you might end up a little confused. After all, we've talked about love, about judgment, and even a bit about the lengths that God went to in order to free us from the decisions that we made. But this study is called "Repenting of Religion," and we haven't really talked about religion. Or have we?

Religion is a system of rules and beliefs about how to connect with and please a god. Rules...that's what I've gotta do. Beliefs...those are judgments about good and evil, about who's in and who's out. You see, we've been talking about religion all along. Religion is nothing more than judgment dressed up in its Sunday best. Respectable judgment. Proper judgment. Maybe even righteous judgment. But still judgment.

God never meant for us to judge. God never meant us for religion. He meant us for relationship. He meant us for love.

**Read John 17:20-23.** Keep in mind that these are the last few hours before Jesus is going to die. In the last moments before death, everything becomes laser focused—only the most important things matter. What mattered most to Jesus was what he prayed for—that we would be one. One with Him, and one with each other.

Throughout history, followers of Jesus have constantly been distracted by all kinds of other concerns, both good and bad. We have felt the need to fight all kinds of battles, physical and philosophical. We have been sidetracked by political concerns, ethical debates, and every kind of materialism and temptation you can imagine.

But Jesus' desire was that we would be one—that we would be unified and fully immersed into the eternal love that is his heart. His desire was never that we would become ethical experts or moral police.

His desire is that we would be one—that we would be deeply, inseparably connected with one another in relationship. But as we all know, getting involved in other people's lives is messy. It involves difficult conversations, answering the phone when you'd rather not, helping people move couches, helping pay bills and babysitting colicky infants. It involves going to graduations, weddings, funerals, choir concerts, t-ball games and garage sales. It is being there for the long haul, through the good and the bad, working through the disagreements and hard times. It is allowing yourself to become interconnected with a small group of other people to the point where whatever happens to them happens to you, too.

And honestly, it's a lot easier just to follow a set of rules. But that wasn't the path Jesus took, and it's not the one God calls us to.

The fundamental question for us to answer is not what rules to follow or how we should apply them. The fundamental question is how can we live in and express the love of God regardless of what we are doing?

Good and evil were never supposed to be our concern. Just love. "All you need is love..."

## FOR DISCUSSION

To start us off, let's take some time to talk about what happened with the challenge from last week. Take a few minutes to go around the circle and share your experiences with reflecting on what God has done in your life.

The key distinction that we have made is that religion is based on judgment, but relationship is based on love. **Which of the two do you tend to lean toward in your relationship with God? Your relationship with others?**

As we mentioned last week, there are times when God calls us to hold each other accountable for things that we are doing wrong. There is a certain degree of "judgment" involved in this kind of activity—how do we make sure that it is driven and characterized by love? **How do we lovingly handle differences of opinion?**

As any of us can agree, being committed to a relationship with somebody else is tough. Yet there are few things in life more satisfying and "life-giving" than those deep relationships that we have fought for. **To which relationships in your life would you say you are deeply committed? What can you do to deepen your current relationships or build new ones?**

## CHALLENGE

Throughout the life of Jesus, we consistently see Him displaying outrageous love to the kind of people many of us would judge very harshly. Prostitutes, drunks, IRS agents—all of them were welcomed with deep love and compassion by Jesus. As we wrap things up this week, our challenge is to demonstrate that same kind of love. Think through your typical week, and notice the people you meet that seem least "deserving" of this kind of outrageous love. Share them with the group, and help each other find ways to show the outrageous love of Jesus to them without judging them.

"We who are the body of Christ need to repent, *being religious*. We have striven to be religious individually and collectively. We need to ask forgiveness from God, and from the world, *when we were called to be loving.*"<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup>Greg Boyd, *Repenting of Religion* (2004), 149.