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**R**obin was born with defective kidneys. He had two kidney transplants as a child and a third as a young adult. In his late thirties he needed a fourth transplant. Unfortunately, the waiting list for a kidney from a deceased donor was six years. Realistically, then, someone who loved him needed to give him a kidney.

Six of Robin's friends each offered a kidney. The doctors picked their top three choices among the six, and those three worked out among themselves that his friend Amy would be the one to save Robin's life.

Loving one another often costs time. Effort. Even money. But what can one say about friends who are willing to give the organs of their bodies for one another? Your friendships may never need to go that far, but as you consider Jesus' words about love in this session, ask yourself how far you would go for a friend.



### CONNECTING WITH GOD'S FAMILY

20 min.

There's something about sharing personal stories that deepens your connections with each other. That's why each session in this guide begins with an opportunity to hear one another's experiences.

1. Take sixty seconds to respond briefly to one of the following:
  - Think of a time when someone loved you. It could be a current experience or one long past. What did that person do that was loving?
  - Describe a time when you experienced God's love.
2. Whether your group is brand new or ongoing, it's always important to reflect on and review your values together. On pages 80–81 is a sample agreement with the values we've found most useful in sustaining healthy, balanced groups. We recommend that you choose one or two values—ones you haven't previously focused on or have room to grow in—to emphasize



during this study. Choose ones that will take your group to the next stage of intimacy and spiritual health.

- For new groups:** You may want to focus on building a safe environment. If a group isn't a safe place for people to share themselves, nothing else happens.
- For existing groups:** We recommend that you rotate host homes on a regular basis and let the hosts lead the meeting. We've come to realize that healthy groups rotate leadership. This helps to develop every member's ability to shepherd a few people in a safe environment. Even Jesus gave others the opportunity to serve alongside him (Mark 6:30–44). Session 3 will explain how to set up a rotating schedule.



## GROWING TO BE LIKE CHRIST

40 min.

John 15:9–17 is part of the final teaching Jesus gave his followers—his disciples or students—right before he was crucified. Everything he had trained them to be culminated here. Love was an essential mark of Jesus' students. In fact, it was *the* sign by which outsiders would recognize those who belonged to Jesus (John 13:35). It was also the glue that bonded them first to him and then to one another. Without a deep commitment to love each other, they would never have changed the world as they did.

Love is the ultimate test of whether you have Christ in you or not. Jesus' kind of love is difficult—it's nearly impossible to sustain if his life isn't welling up from within you. Jesus' kind of love puts your desires on the back burner and focuses on another person. It sets aside personal gain. It gives; it builds up the other. This is not the “love” sentimentalized in greeting cards and pop songs. It's something much more costly.

3. Read John 15:9–17. Exactly what does Jesus tell his followers to do in this passage? Note especially the instructions he repeats more than once.

4. Why does he repeat himself, even to these disciples who know him well?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
5. Jesus defines the word “love” by pointing at himself—paying the ultimate price (verses 12–13). How would you describe this kind of love (for example, affectionate, romantic, etc.)?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
6. What is the connection between loving others and remaining (abiding, dwelling) in Christ’s love for us?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
7. The quality of our love for others reflects the degree to which we are gripped by Jesus’ love for us. What do you think helps a person become more motivated by Christ’s love?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
8. Turn to 1 John 3:16–18. What is one way we can lay down our lives for each other?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
9. What other ways of laying down our lives for each other can you think of?

10. Has anyone other than Jesus ever laid down his or her life for you? If so, briefly describe what that person did.

11. Whom in your life is God reminding you to love?

12. The more you “remain” or “abide” in Jesus’ love for you, the more you’ll love others. Likewise, the more you love others, the more you’ll abide in his love (John 15:9–10). Abiding in his love is a moment-by-moment awareness that Jesus is present, now, loving you.

Immersing yourself in the Bible and prayer will help you cultivate that moment-by-moment awareness. Here are several options for doing this for the next six weeks. Which one will you commit to pursue?

- Prayer.** Identify someone whom you have trouble loving. Commit to praying for that person throughout this study, both with your group and on your own. Ask God to show you his attitude toward the person. Ask him to help you to love the person the way Jesus would. You may find it helpful to write your prayers on the Reflections page included at the end of every session.
- Gospel Reading.** Read through the gospel of Luke. On pages 93–94 is a reading plan. As you read, we recommend that you jot down your thoughts on the Reflections page or in a journal.
- Meditation.** If you’ve read Luke before, try meditation as a way of internalizing God’s Word more deeply. Copy a portion of each week’s Bible study passage onto a card, and tape it somewhere in your line of sight, such as your car’s dashboard or the kitchen table. Think about it when you sit at red lights, or while you’re eating a meal. What

is God saying to you, here and now, through these words? Several alternative passages for meditation are suggested on the Reflections page in each session. You may use that page to write your responses to your meditation verses.

On pages 24–25 is a Personal Health Plan, a chart for keeping track of your spiritual progress. In the box that says, “WHAT is your next step for growth?” write the step you chose in question 12.

## **FOR DEEPER STUDY**

Read 1 John 4:7–21. Why does John think love is so essential for us to practice?

Look at Jesus’ example of love for his disciples in John 13:1–17, 34–35. Why is love (rather than something else) the mark of a true disciple? What would it look like to wash each other’s feet in today’s society?

Read Isaiah 53:1–9 and Philippians 2:1–11. What did Jesus’ kind of love involve? What in these passages motivates you to love? How are we supposed to follow Jesus’ example?

Read Romans 5:6–8. Here Paul emphasizes that Jesus’ love was unusual. How, then, can we take his example as one we should follow?



## SHARING YOUR LIFE MISSION EVERY DAY

10 min.

13. Many groups find they're having such a good time with each other that they don't want to open their circle to new people. Why "start over" with a stranger when you already have enough friends? But when you were a stranger to God, and he already had all the love he needed, he widened the circle of his love to include you. Opening your group from time to time is a way of laying down your group life for others.

The following "Circles of Life" diagram will help you think of the various people you come in contact with on a regular basis. Prayerfully write down at least three or four names in the circles.

### CIRCLES OF LIFE

A diagram consisting of five overlapping circles arranged in a pentagonal pattern. Each circle is labeled with a category of people and contains several horizontal lines for writing names. The categories are: Family (immediate or extended), Acquaintances (neighbors, kids' sports teams, school, and so forth), Friends, Fun (gym, hobbies, hangouts), and Work.

**Family**  
(immediate or extended)

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\_\_\_\_\_

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**Acquaintances**  
(neighbors, kids' sports teams,  
school, and so forth)

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**Friends**

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**Fun**  
(gym, hobbies, hangouts)

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**Work**

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Which of these people can you invite to join this group for your next meeting? Ask the group to pray for you in this, as well as for the people you're inviting.



## SURRENDERING YOUR LIFE FOR GOD'S PLEASURE 15–30 min.

14. How can the group pray for you this week? Write people's prayer requests in the Prayer and Praise Report on page 21.
15. Listen to people's prayer requests. How can you help out someone in your group?
16. When we truly see Jesus as the One who laid down his life for us, worship naturally follows. Take some time to respond to Jesus' love for you.

Read Psalm 136 aloud together. This psalm has a repeated refrain that makes it ideal for reading aloud. Have one person read the first line of each verse (“Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good”), and let the whole group read the refrain (“His love endures forever”). When you finish the last verse, allow some silence in which group members can add their own one-sentence thanksgivings (for example, “He offered his life for our sins” or “He is healing John's sister”). After each thanksgiving, the group can respond with the same refrain (“His love endures forever”).

You can use this same sentence-and-response structure to pray for the requests you listed in question 14, or you can have some open time for people to pray as they wish.

## STUDY NOTES

**Love[d] (John 15:9, 10, 12, 13, 17).** The Greek verb “to love” (*agapaō*) and the related noun (*agapē*) that Jesus uses in this passage weren't the most commonly used words for love in Classical Greek. But when the Jews translated the Old Testament into Greek, they chose this word group to render Hebrew words that described God's love for humans. Thus, to define what Jesus meant by *agapē*, scholars don't turn to Greek dictionaries. They look at the behavior of God in the Old Testament and the behavior of Christ in the New Testament. “Love” means “what God does.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>W. Günther and H. G. Link, “Love,” *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, CD-ROM version (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999).

To love someone is to will (desire, choose, intend, pursue) good for him. It involves good intention and action. It cost God what he valued most (his Son's life) to love us. So we can expect love to be costly in time, effort, and even suffering.

***Remain in my love (John 15:9).*** Jesus uses the word “remain” (or “abide”) seven times in John 15:1–10. The word means to last a long time, to endure, or to stay. Christ's love endures. It withstands the test of time and trouble. To remain in him is to stay with him, go where he goes, maintain constant awareness of his presence and his love—and thereby to love as he loves.

***Material possessions (1 John 3:17).*** John lived in a society where most people had just enough food, clothing, and shelter to survive, and no money saved for emergencies. In such a society, people knew they could at any time become dependent upon others for survival. The few affluent people in a given church would have been far outnumbered by the many who were barely getting by. John was asking a lot for these people to lay down their lives (and possessions) for their fellow Christians.

In our society, it is possible to go to a Christian group and not rub shoulders with people who are surviving paycheck to paycheck. Affluence breeds independence and a desire for self-sufficiency. If a person is doing pretty well financially, he may not want help from a fellow Christian, and he may not want to help others either. He's self-sufficient; why shouldn't they be?

Time is a commodity in our culture too. A person may want never to need someone else's time, and she may not want others to need her time either. Again, she places a high value on independence and self-sufficiency. For such a person, following Jesus will require a new way of thinking.

## PRAYER AND PRAISE REPORT

Briefly share your prayer requests with the large group, making notations below. Then gather in smaller groups of two to four to pray for each other.

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

### Prayer Requests

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### Praise Report

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## PERSONAL HEALTH PLAN

This worksheet could become your single most important feature in this study. On it you can record your personal priorities before the Father. It will help you live a healthy spiritual life, balancing all five of God's purposes.

PURPOSE	PLAN
<b>CONNECT</b> 	WHO are you connecting with spiritually?
<b>GROW</b> 	WHAT is your next step for growth?
<b>DEVELOP</b> 	WHERE are you serving?
<b>SHARE</b> 	WHEN are you shepherding another in Christ?
<b>SURRENDER</b> 	HOW are you surrendering your heart?

If you have more than one partner, another Personal Health Plan can be found in the Appendix or downloaded in a larger format at [www.lifetogether.com/healthplan](http://www.lifetogether.com/healthplan). A Sample Health Plan is also in the Appendix.

<b>DATE</b>	<b>MY PROGRESS</b>	<b>PARTNER'S PROGRESS</b>

# INTRODUCTION

If your group is new, or even if you haven't been together for a few weeks, we recommend that you plan a kick-off meeting where you will pray, hand out study guides, spend some time getting to know each other, and discuss each person's expectations for the group. A meeting like this is a great way to start a group or step up people's commitments.

Most groups, if reconvened after a short break, will be renewed in seeing each other and open to increasing their commitment as much as 25 percent. We have seen some naturally move to a weekly format, begin doing homework, and commit to daily devotions simply because the leader shared his or her heart. What do you sense God wants from you and your group?

However, if your group is brand new, a simple meal, potluck, or even good desserts make a kick-off meeting more fun. After dessert, have everyone respond to an icebreaker question, such as, "How did you hear of this church, and what's one thing you love about it?" Or, "Tell us three things about your life growing up that most people here don't know."

Then ask everyone to tell what he or she hopes to get out of this study. You might want to review the LIFE TOGETHER Agreement (see pages 80–81) and talk about each person's expectations and priorities. You could discuss whether you want to do Bible study homework before each meeting—homework covering the questions under the Growing and/or the For Deeper Study sections. Review the Small Group Calendar on page 82 and talk about who else is willing to open their home or facilitate a meeting.

Finally, cast the vision, as Jesus did, to be inclusive not exclusive. Ask everyone to think of people who would enjoy or benefit from a group like this. The beginning of a new study is a great time to welcome a few people into your circle. Have each person share a name or two and either make phone calls the coming week or handwrite invitations or postcards that very night. This will make it fun and also make it happen. At [www.lifetogether.com](http://www.lifetogether.com) we have a free email invitation you may send to every potential member. Don't worry about ending up with too many people—you can always have one discussion circle in the living room and another in the dining room.

SESSION ONE:  
AS I HAVE LOVED YOU

As a leader, your most important job is to create an atmosphere where people are willing to talk honestly about what Christ's words and actions have to do with them. Especially if your group is new, be available before people arrive so you can greet them at the door. People are naturally nervous at a new group, so a hug or handshake can help put them at ease.

If your group is new and you aren't able to hold a kick-off meeting before you launch into session 1, consider starting this first meeting half an hour early to give people time to socialize without shortchanging your study time. For example, you can have social time from 7:00 to 7:30, and by 7:40 you'll gather the group with a prayer. Even if only a few people are seated in the living room by 7:40, ask them to join you in praying for those who are coming and for God to be present among you as you meet. Others will notice you praying and will sit down.

**Question 1.** We've designed this study for both seekers and believers. Believers may want to talk about God's love, but this question includes an option for those who would prefer to talk about human love. You should be the first to answer this question while others are thinking about how to respond. Be sure to give everyone a chance to respond to this question, because it's a chance for the group to get to know each other. It's not necessary to go around the circle in order.

**Introduction to the Series.** If this is your first LIFE TOGETHER study, take a moment after question 1 to orient the group to one principle that undergirds this series: *A healthy small group balances the purposes of the church.* Most small groups emphasize Bible study, fellowship, and prayer. But God has called us to reach out to others as well. He wants us to *do* what Jesus teaches, not just *learn about* it. You may spend less time in this series studying the Bible than some group members are used to. That's because you'll spend more time doing things the Bible says believers should do.

However, those who like more Bible study can find plenty of it in this series. If your group likes to do deeper Bible study, consider having members answer next week's Growing section questions ahead of time as homework. They can even study next week's For Deeper Study passages for homework

too. Then, during the Growing portion of your meeting, you can share the high points of what you've learned.

If the five biblical purposes are new to your group, be sure to review them together on pages 8–10 of the Read Me First section.

**Question 2.** An agreement helps you clarify your group's priorities and cast new vision for what the group can be. Members can imagine what your group could be like if they lived these values. So turn to pages 80–81 and choose one value that you want to emphasize in this study. We've suggested some options. If you choose "rotating leaders," you don't need to invest a lot of time in it now. In session 3 you'll have a chance to plan who will lead each meeting.

**Question 3.** Have someone read the Bible passage aloud. It's a good idea to ask someone ahead of time, because not everyone is comfortable reading aloud in public. When the passage has been read, ask question 3. *It is not necessary that everyone answer every question in the Bible study.* In fact, a group can become boring if you simply go around the circle and give answers. Your goal is to create a discussion—which means that perhaps only a few people respond to each question and an engaging dialogue gets going.

Jesus repeats several interrelated instructions: Remain in my love. Remain in my love by obeying my commands. Obey my command to love one another. Thus, remaining (abiding, dwelling) in Jesus' love can't be separated from loving one another.

**Question 5.** Some possibilities are sacrificial, costly, committed, practical, and generous.

**Question 6.** In verses 9–10, Jesus says that obeying his commands helps us dwell in his love. Verse 12 makes clear that his command to love is primary. So the more we love others, the more we rest and dwell in Christ's love for us. And the more aware we are of Christ's love for us, the more our love for others should naturally follow.

**Question 8.** Love involves noticing people's needs and responding to them. It is intensely practical.

**Question 12.** We've offered several options for personal time with God. Don't press seekers to do this, but every believer should have a plan for personal time with God. There's a Reflections page at the end of every session of this study for them to write down what they discover.

Those who prefer topical Bible study might want to answer the For Deeper Study questions each week. If your group is accustomed to doing Bible study homework before each meeting, this is a great choice.

For those who have done a lot of Bible study, we encourage the meditation option. Living with one short passage each week can help them move biblical truth from their heads into their hearts and actions.

It's perfectly fine if one person chooses one option and someone else chooses another. One principle of life together is to champion each other's dreams and goals.

**Question 13.** The "Circles of Life" diagram is a vivid symbol of one of the values of the LIFE TOGETHER Agreement: "welcome for newcomers." Some groups fear that newcomers will interrupt the intimacy that members have built over time. However, groups generally gain strength with the infusion of new blood. It's like a river of living water flowing into a stagnant pond. Some groups remain permanently open, while others open periodically, such as at the beginning and ending of a study. Love grows by giving itself away. If your circle becomes too large for easy face-to-face conversations, you can simply form a second discussion circle in another room in your home.

Give everyone a few moments in which to write down names before each shares. You might pray for these names later in the session. Encourage people not to be afraid to ask someone. Almost no one is annoyed to be invited to something! Most people are honored to be asked, even if they can't make it.

We encourage an outward focus for your group because groups that become too inwardly focused tend to become unhealthy over time. People naturally gravitate to feeding themselves through Bible study, prayer, and social time, so it's usually up to the leader to push them to consider how this inward nourishment can overflow into outward concern for others.

**Question 14.** Never pressure a person to pray aloud. That's a sure way to scare someone away from your group. Instead of praying in a circle (which makes it obvious when someone stays silent), allow open time when anyone can pray who wishes to do so. Have someone write down everyone's prayer requests on the Prayer and Praise Report (page 21). If your time is short, consider having people share requests and pray with just one or two other people.