

# CHRISTIAN

## It's Not What You Think

### Session 2 - Quitters

Anne Rice, one of today's most successful writers, first won fame with her Vampire Chronicles in the 1970s. About a decade ago, she spoke of "a new spiritual beginning" as she re-embraced the Christian faith of her childhood and began writing a series of books about the life of Christ. She told the story of her spiritual journey in a book entitled *Called Out of Darkness*. But in 2010 she announced her decision to "quit being a Christian" and spoke of Christians as being "quarrelsome, hostile, disputatious, and deservedly infamous." She reaffirmed her commitment to Christ, but added, "Following Christ does not mean following his followers. Christ is infinitely more important than Christianity and always will be, no matter what Christianity is, has been, or might become."

Many of us have felt that way. We've experienced being fed up with Christianity. In the midst of life's disappointments, perhaps we've sensed that God hasn't done what we were led to expect him to do. We're torn; we don't want to give up Jesus, but we're unsure we want to continue being associated with anything "Christian."

The apostle John points us to a better way, the way of a disciple.

#### DISCUSSION STARTER

Have you ever felt tired of Christianity and of trying to live a Christian life? If so, what factors led to that feeling?

Perhaps there are others close to you who have completely turned away from Christianity. What reasons did they express for doing this? How much of it had to do with their views of Jesus himself?

#### VIDEO OVERVIEW

For Session 2 of the Video

In his old age, the apostle John wrote a letter to followers of Jesus who had been dispersed throughout the Roman Empire. With the perspective of his long, hard, eventful life, he reiterated the point Jesus had made in John 13: "Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God" (1 John 4:7).

John emphasized that God, in his essence, is love, and that love was proven to us in Jesus: "Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: he sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins" (4:8–10).

John could never doubt this love because he had seen it in Jesus, as an eyewitness.

God's love is for everyone. Every single person we encounter is someone God loves—and for that individual, God has sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice. John had personally seen Jesus offered on the cross as this sacrifice. And now, decades later, he was as convinced as ever that Jesus was the Son of God who came to be the sacrifice for our sin.

Because of that, John says, we have an obligation: "Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another" (4:11). The little Greek word translated here as "ought" is a financial term about indebtedness. There's a debt-debtor relationship in the gospel that we need to understand. It's there between us and every single person we ever meet, and it's there also between God and us. Since God so loved us, we owe it to others to love them. More specifically, since God loves others, we owe it to God to love others.

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When others are unlovable, we can remember that we're called to love them because God chose first to love us.

There's a sense in which we're indebted to God because of his overwhelming love for us, for which he doesn't even want us to pay him back. He is saying, "In return, all I ask is that you love other people." We're to love others in such a remarkable way that outsiders will notice.

Our problem is that for too long we've settled for the brand "Christianity" and we've given up our leverage in our culture. We gave it up when we opted for something other than love.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What common characteristics of Christians do you find disturbing? How do they compare with the way Jesus comes across in the New Testament?
2. How convinced are you that God truly loves everyone? Do you see any differences in how he loves people?
3. In your own spiritual journey, how have you grown in experiencing and understanding more of God's love?
4. In what ways have you felt overwhelmed by God's love for you?
5. Who is a person you find difficult to love? Why is loving this person so difficult?
6. What would change most in your community if those who follow Jesus truly loved one another?

### MILEPOSTS

- The New Testament further reinforces the point Jesus taught in John 13:34–35—that the main characteristic and defining mark of his followers is how we love.
- God, in his essence, is love, and his love is for everyone.
- Since God so loved us, we owe it to others to love them. We're in a sense indebted to God for his love for us, and in response he asks us to love others.

### MOVING FORWARD

How much attention have you given lately to the love God has shown you, especially through what Jesus has done for you? Are you keeping this in the forefront of your mind and heart? Does your reflection on the life and death of Jesus fill you with an ever-increasing awareness of how great God's love really is? And does it fill you with an ever-increasing awareness of your privilege and obligation to love others? At this moment in your life, let your genuine experience of God's love take you forward into a genuine expansion of your love for others.

### CHANGING YOUR MIND

In this session's key passage, the apostle John reinforces the teaching Jesus gave about the supremacy of love. Let these words fuel your own lifelong pursuit of love:

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. 1 John 4:7–8

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#### PREPARATION FOR SESSION 3

To help you prepare for Session 3, use these suggested devotions during the week leading up to your small group meeting.

#### Day One

Look over the statements and commands Jesus expressed to his disciples in Matthew 28:16–20. How can this passage help us understand the meaning of the word “disciple”?

#### Day Two

In 1 Corinthians 9:19–23, think about how Paul related to people who weren't already followers of Jesus. What encouragement do you find here for your relationships with people who don't follow Jesus?

#### Day Three

Return to Paul's example in 1 Corinthians 9:19–23. In your own words, describe Paul's main goal or purpose in his relationships with outsiders.

#### Day Four

Once again, look over 1 Corinthians 9:19–23. Think about the way Paul uses the word “win.” How would you define what he means by this term and what it involves?

#### Day Five

Read 1 Corinthians 5. The particular details of this situation may seem obscure, but what are the main principles that Paul appears to be trying to get across here as it relates to our relationships with people who are not followers of Jesus (see especially verses 12 and 13)?

#### Last Session

The key difference between “Christian” and “disciple” is simply this: “Christian” is often about what a person merely believes; “disciple” is all about what a person actually does. Because God, in his essence, is love—and he loves everyone—we too are called to love others profoundly and unconditionally and indiscriminately. In this way we display a sense of indebtedness to God, who has loved us so completely and overwhelmingly.