
LEARN TO DISAGREE,
RESOLVE THE CONFLICTS
YOU'VE BEEN AVOIDING,
AND **CREATE REAL CHANGE**

LOVE

IS THE RESISTANCE

ASHLEY ABERCROMBIE



“Ashley has done it again! This book is filled from beginning to end with powerful truth packed in practical wisdom. In an age of extremism, division, and echo chambers of narcissistic social platforms, this book cuts through the noise, confronts the fear, and takes on the central issues of our time, showing us how to be better humans together. Thank you, Ashley, for being so honest, courageous, and helpful!”

Danielle Strickland, author of *Better Together* and founder of Women Speakers Collective

“Ashley Abercrombie doesn’t simply talk the talk. She walks the walk. She is committed to justice because she is committed to God, and that commitment shines through on every page of this book. If your soul is jarred by the not-rightness of this world, and you are searching for the courage to respond without compromising, you will not find a louder cheerleader than Ashley!”

Sharon Hodde Miller, author of *Nice: Why We Love to Be Liked and How God Calls Us to More*

“Ashley Abercrombie is someone I listen to because she is wise and her life backs up her words—which makes her credible in a world and church too often found to be incredible. *Love Is the Resistance* is written in Abercrombie’s inimitable way: a colorful, textured, interesting, and wisdom-laden tapestry that demonstrates how to live the reality we Christians proclaim. We can only live that reality of truly loving and forgiving Christians, others, and our enemies if we tell the truth about who we are as individuals and as the church. You’ll find humor, joy, wisdom, lament, and straight-talk in these pages. There’s no posturing. How refreshing! Take and read.”

Marlena Graves, author of *The Way Up Is Down*, speaker, and justice seeker

“It’s safe to say that most of us are dealing with the tension caused by differing opinions and the sharing of those opinions,

both online and in person. It can be terrifying, ugly, and sad to experience the results that come from clashing with fellow humans these days. It's anything but civil most of the time. Ashley is such a light in this space! She offers perspective shifts that are extremely needed, strategies for loving communication, and so much hope for how things can shift if we come from a place of love. No matter your religious stance or whether you are of faith, you need to read this book."

Allie Casazza, host of *The Purpose Show* podcast and author of *Declutter Like a Mother*

"*Love Is the Resistance* is the kind of sharp, insightful book that will get under your skin and confront your comfort zones. You might get a little defensive—or a lot. Ashley does not hold back in naming conflicts and issues many Christians and churches choose to ignore or minimize. She knows we cannot heal the things we refuse to name. Still, this book doesn't stop at naming; it models a practical way forward. You see, Ashley's discovered what the power of God's love can do, the way it can break every chain and transform us from the inside out. Now she won't settle for anything less—not for you, the church, or the world around us. As we face the challenges of our world today—societies marked by injustice, a deeply divided church, fractured relationships—Ashley offers you an invitation: join the resistance."

Jo Saxton, speaker, leadership coach, and author of *Ready to Rise*

"We find every reason to separate ourselves from others. There is no shortage of disagreement in our digital spaces, dinner tables, and faith communities. In *Love Is the Resistance*, Ashley identifies the reasons we fight and offers practical help to resolve our disagreements while celebrating our differences. You will be blessed by this book!"

Daniel Hill, pastor of River City Community Church and author of *White Awake* and *White Lies*

“I think it’s safe to assume that with all our country has been through recently, you have probably had many moments of tension with loved ones, whether face-to-face, on a Zoom call, or in the comments of a Facebook post. With so much disagreement, hatred, and pride pulsing through our country, Ashley Abercrombie’s book *Love Is the Resistance* is both timely and necessary for each and every one of us. For the years I’ve known Ashley, I have deeply respected her passion for Jesus. In this book, she beautifully reminds us how the Bible instructs us to love everyone and gives us practical steps to put into place when division tries to rob us of our love and peace. I can truly say that every person living in our world right now would benefit from reading this book—whether you’re struggling to love others or are feeling unloved yourself, Ashley points to the One who can restore you in all of it.”

Chris Durso, pastor of Saints Church and author
of *The Heist* and *Misfit*

“In the connected age, many of us are malnourished and hungry for whole, reciprocal relationships but struggle to humanize those who do not agree with us. In *Love Is the Resistance*, Ashley Abercrombie gives us a vision of what we, as people of substance and faith, can be and do to build bridges where connection has been lost. With a pastoral and prophetic tone, she welcomes all God’s children to see themselves as necessary, valuable, and worthy of connection and love. Love is the way forward, and Abercrombie invites us all on the journey.”

Tiffany Bluhm, author of *Prey Tell: Why We Silence Women Who Tell the Truth and How Everyone Can Speak Up*,
cohost of the *Why Tho* podcast, and speaker

“Our differences in race, gender, political views, socioeconomic status, religion, and then some sadly continue to divide our communities and even our families. It is refreshing to read a book that is biblically sound and relevant while inspiring us

toward solutions that build bridges. Ashley Abercrombie masterfully communicates how leaning into our own humanity and brokenness and that of others with empathy and a desire to seek understanding, whether we agree or not, is an art and skill that must be learned and practiced until it is permanent. *Love Is the Resistance* provokes us to take an honest look into ourselves and take the brave journey of learning to resolve conflict and to disagree without having to cancel relationships. I am thankful for books like this that inspire us toward unity, peace, connection, and learning to love like Jesus loves!”

Irene Rollins, lead pastor of i5 City

“Ashley Abercrombie is a cultural leader worthy of following into battle. In a world where it’s so easy to hide, retreat, and build walls to keep others out, Ashley shows us the way through to real connection with her courage, vulnerability, and, most importantly, love for God and God’s people. This work isn’t for those who long to stay wading in the shallow end of relationship. But with Ashley as a trustworthy guide, should we choose to go deeper, we’ll find our way to real and lasting change that lies on the other side.”

Ashlee Eiland, formation and preaching pastor at Mars Hill Bible Church and author of *Human(Kind): How Reclaiming Human Worth and Embracing Radical Kindness Will Bring Us Back Together*

“Ashley Abercrombie’s *Love Is the Resistance* brings a healing word to a world writhing in the throes of transition. Her prose will make you howl with laughter one minute and weep the next. With the wit of a master storyteller and the care of a pastor, Abercrombie guides readers through a transformational journey they will never forget.”

Lisa Sharon Harper, author of *The Very Good Gospel* and *Fortune: How Race Broke My Family and the World—And How to Repair It All*

LOVE IS THE RESISTANCE

LOVE

IS THE RESISTANCE

LEARN TO DISAGREE,
RESOLVE THE CONFLICTS
YOU'VE BEEN AVOIDING,
AND CREATE REAL CHANGE

ASHLEY ABERCROMBIE



BakerBooks

a division of Baker Publishing Group
www.BakerBooks.com

© 2021 by Ashley Abercrombie

Published by Baker Books
a division of Baker Publishing Group
PO Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.bakerbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Abercrombie, Ashley, 1981– author.

Title: Love is the resistance : learn to disagree, resolve the conflicts you've been avoiding, and create real change / Ashley Abercrombie.

Description: Grand Rapids, MI : Baker Books, a division of Baker Publishing Group, [2021] | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021009289 | ISBN 9780801094392 (paperback) | ISBN 9781540901699 (casebound) | ISBN 9781493430222 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Conflict management—Religious aspects—Christianity. | Interpersonal relations—Religious aspects—Christianity. | Love—Religious aspects—Christianity. | Christianity and culture.

Classification: LCC BV4597.53.C58 A24 2021 | DDC 241—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2021009289>

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from THE HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®, NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Scripture quotations labeled AMP are from the Amplified® Bible (AMP), copyright © 2015 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. www.Lockman.org

Scripture quotations labeled CEV are from the Contemporary English Version © 1991, 1992, 1995 by American Bible Society. Used by permission.

Scripture quotations labeled ESV are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. ESV Text Edition: 2016

Scripture quotations labeled KJV are from the King James Version of the Bible.

Scripture quotations labeled Message are from *THE MESSAGE*, copyright © 1993, 2002, 2018 by Eugene H. Peterson. Used by permission of NavPress. All rights reserved. Represented by Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

Scripture quotations labeled NKJV are from the New King James Version®. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations labeled NLT are from the *Holy Bible*, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996, 2004, 2007, 2013, 2015 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

The author is represented by The Christopher Ferebee Agency, www.christopherferebee.com.

21 22 23 24 25 26 27 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

In keeping with biblical principles of creation stewardship, Baker Publishing Group advocates the responsible use of our natural resources. As a member of the Green Press Initiative, our company uses recycled paper when possible. The text paper of this book is composed in part of post-consumer waste.



*To the beloved community of Christ,
full of people I love
and people who drive me to the brink of insanity.
Thank you for making me more like Jesus.*

CONTENTS

An Introduction Not to Be Skipped	13
1. Learning Love	21
2. Cancel Culture	33
3. Language Matters	47
4. Love Thy Neighbor	61
5. Love Is the Resistance	71
6. When Class, Gender, and Race Collide	85
7. Autonomy from Our Camp	101
8. For Lack of Justice There Is Waste	117
9. When Conflict Calls	133
10. Woe to the Offender	151
11. I'll Love You till the Cows Come Home	163
Conclusion: Stubborn Hope	175
Discussion Guide	177
Acknowledgments	187
Notes	191

AN INTRODUCTION NOT TO BE SKIPPED

In a recurring dream, which has been bothering me since 2015, I run down the aisle of a church, a stunning cathedral, slide across the floor on my knees, and tear the burlap sack I'm wearing. My hair looks like it hasn't been washed in six months, wild, burly—I look like a cave woman had a baby with John the Baptist. Then I scream a primal, lengthy, guttural holler that tears through me as I beat my chest, right before I wake up.

I'm not a big dreamer, but every now and then one hits home. Spiritually, I think many of us are this desperate and hungry, returning to our gut instincts. If we're even a little self-aware of the grip pride has on the people of God, we're probably on our knees, begging (maybe even screaming) for change. If you're anything like me, you are sick to death of politics destroying relationships and dividing communities. You might also be tired of the abuses of power across multiple sectors of society, especially in the church. From government to academia to business

to clergy leaders, corruption and scandals once hidden are now being revealed. Personally, I'd also like for Christians to actually be Christians.

We've gone through some things the last few years, dear reader. We're reckoning with all the "isms." Racism, sexism, classism, cynicism, everyone-in-the-comments-section-is-annoying-ism. In the public space, Christians are not known for our love, or the fruit of the Holy Spirit, or for uniting together to care for the common good. It's time for change. To put it old school: *repent*.

Repentance presses us to give an honest account of who and where we are. Hope always deals in reality. We cannot cover up all the ugly with useless optimism, nor can we surrender to dystopian terror and hopelessness. The latter tempts me greatly, by the way. I read and watch dystopian fiction like it's my full-time job. But we do not grieve like a people who have no hope. We are able to press in and perceive that God, as per usual, is making something beautiful out of our mess.

*My own struggle to live out love in the world we share
inspired me to write this book, and my hunch is
you might struggle sometimes too.
Love is like oxygen. We need it to live.*

I want you to love well. More importantly, I want you to be loved well. To understand that you are worthy of respect, honor, and admiration. To know, without a shadow of a doubt, that your life and your presence matter to God. They matter to others. They matter to us. I want you to deeply internalize your need and desire for relationships. It's okay to need others, to want to give and receive love. But sometimes the humans make this difficult. (Psst! We are the humans.)

Have you found it as difficult to engage with others as I have? Has staying true to your convictions while speaking frankly and freely come at a high cost? Do you dread talking to family members and friends because the political divide between you is now unmanageable? Do you struggle to keep your peace, hold your boundaries, and connect meaningfully with others? Are you grieving the loss of your faith community? Have you begun to hate people, communities, and institutions you once loved and respected? Do you feel pummeled by transitions, grief, and the roller coaster of life? Goodness, I'm right there with you, for many of these.

Life shaped us to be who we are. A great amount of the choices we make and the reactions we have to people and circumstances are the result of that shaping. The good news? We can change. We can grow. We can accept our past—the coping mechanisms and learned behaviors—and trust that despite our relational history, we can learn new skills.

You can learn how to communicate and better understand the why behind the conflicts and tensions in your life. You can have difficult conversations, weather the unexpected, and begin to enjoy honest, reciprocal relationships.

I want this book to compel you to lean into love but also equip you to actually do it, so at the end of each chapter, I'm offering you four tools to help you grow: an attitude to adopt, a personal affirmation, a reflection question, and a technique for engaging in conflict and communication with others. I've also included a discussion guide to help you create conversations for change in your book clubs and small groups. (Please message me about your gatherings, so I can pray for you and cheer you on.)

Through my journey in recovery—at the time of this writing, I am seventeen years sober from drugs, bulimia, perfectionism,

and dysfunctional relationships—I’ve learned to manage my triggers, to extend grace, and seek understanding. Why do I do what I do? Why do other people do what they do? This context is critical to connection, relational health, and wholeness. Far from perfection (thank God, because it is a merciless master), I’ve learned to accept my own brokenness and to be comfortable with others in theirs. In my relationships now there is mutual respect, generosity, and integrity. Still, no matter how far we come in our connections with others, there is no conflict- or pain-free path on this side of heaven. Conflict is normal.

However, resolving conflicts without engaging in screaming matches or manipulative behavior or passively aggressively communicating what we want, think, need, and feel is possible. We struggle to be honest, direct, assertive, kind, and clear. The undertone of so much of our arguing is the fight to be right rather than to connect to a differing viewpoint and see if there is anything to learn. Love is the resistance we need in order to change. Love is wild. It cannot be contained. Radical, unyielding, never-ending, mysterious, and unfailing love. We’ve tried to control the things of God, the people of God, and God himself for ages. There is a better way.

In these pages, I wanted to be sweet, I really did. I wanted to encourage you how to live and move and breathe in this world, just like Jesus did. I will do my best to do that—but the truth is, I’m not sweet. There’s no time for that. The days are urgent, the church in America is a cesspool of sin and hypocrisy, and there is a reckoning running along the same fault line of awakening.



There is a deeper movement of the Spirit inside of and around us. Reformation begins from within. Health and holi-

ness in communities begin with each of us collectively deciding to do the beautiful and brutal work of knowing, trusting, and becoming like Jesus. The “isms,” culture, media, pulpits, and platforms do not decide who we are and what we become.

I’ve realized that within the body of Christ are different ideas of who God is, and therefore, what love is. I think we’ve made little gods that agree with us out of the infinite God of grace. The more we shrink God, the more we shrink love.

Now is the time to do better.

With confidence, I know that I am getting some of this wrong, but to the best of my ability, I’m not going down clinging to my pride, refusing to change, hating the “other.” And while I value bridge building, truth telling, and compassionate living, I will no longer cater to Christian communities that value their status and safety, their pride and greed, their rights and politics more than they value Jesus.

We need to honestly own that the American church has lost control of the narrative; our witness is neither wanted nor respected. This ownership is the best thing that could ever happen to us. I learned while at rock bottom in my sorrow and shame that humility is the starting point of a new beginning. Or as Proverbs 9 puts it, “Fear of the LORD is the foundation of wisdom. Knowledge of the Holy One results in good judgment” (v. 10 NLT).

May the worst of our passions and pursuits shrivel up and die so that the God of all creation can resurrect, renew, and restore us into the people and communities we were created to be. My prayer is that we do not miss the opportunity to change, that we will not double down on our intellect, comfort, security, and certainty but rather will mature in the great love and justice of God.

I’m living proof that mistakes, failures, disappointments, and abuses from the past do not have to dictate the future. My

community is rich and radical evidence that real love is alive on the earth, that God is good when we are not. Your life is a faithful witness.

Grow in grace, beloved. Repent.

In this with you,

Ashley



Forget the former things;
do not dwell on the past.
See, I am doing a new thing!
Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?
I am making a way in the wilderness
and streams in the wasteland.

Isaiah 43:18-19



CHAPTER 1

Learning Love

Love is resistance. It is a push and a pull, forcing us out of our comfort zones, stretching our borders and beliefs, calling us higher, helping us migrate toward something new. Love is a taste, a melody, a memory. It is a people, a place, a vision, a hope. Love is a fight, a prayer, a counter to cynicism, bitterness, and rejection. It is sorrow and grief, leaving and staying, joy and gentleness, humility and horror.

It is the reason I ache and the reason I live. Words do love no justice. In our desire to discover the reason we are here, to resolve the difficult circumstances and conversations many of us find ourselves in, we must learn to know love. To know what it is and what it isn't. To apply and relieve pressure in order to understand who we are and how our existence alone makes an impact.

Love, like justice, is often theoretical in our minds. It is somewhere out there, otherworldly, idealistic, rather than the quiet, ordinary, daily resolve to love right where we are. Whether we like our life or not. Love is pesky and bothersome because it is not supposed to be irritable and demands that we give up

our hurry. Real love deflates our sense of self-importance and presses us to reimagine our time in order to be present and patient. To pay attention. To ask, in the situation I find myself, What is actually happening here? What is required of me? What will produce a great deal of good? Why does this moment feel insignificant and taxing? What (who) am I missing here, in my desire to be somewhere else, in my wishing for something better, something more, in my attempt to control the narrative or the outcome?

Love is a miracle. It is here now. Commanding us to rise from slumber, reviving us to life, testifying to a necessary urgency. *You have one life. It is passing you by. Wake up. Live fully awake and alive.* Do not miss the moment to live, really live, in a time where presence is needed. Patience is lacking, kindness is waning, and we are thirsty for real love. Love that makes us remember who we are, that reminds us we belong to God and to each other.

The apostle Paul, a complicated biblical character and a gifted leader in the early church after the death of Christ, wrote letters to pastors and people to encourage them in the faith. His significant offering of instruction, encouragement, and warning to believers about how to live together in the turmoil of the world is still profoundly valuable to us today. His words help us to love well while we're in the process of becoming like Christ.

When I look across the spectrum of newsworthy Christianity, as well as the YouTube sermons, Instagram microblogs, self-described prophets, millions of resources, and perilous comments sections, my heart aches for words of wisdom, for truth that is bound by love. In spite of my gratitude for the easy access we have to clergy leadership, I believe we are longing for a deeper well. People are searching for voices of peace and justice who live with integrity, deal in reality, and instill hope

when we are hard-pressed to find it. We need more people who will honestly say these are perilous times, everything is not okay, and while the future is uncertain, we are here together and the merciful Christ is with us.

Paul, often absent in body, remained present to his people through prayer, persecution, and the written word. In one of his letters to Timothy, whom he considered a son in the faith, his words feel like a prophecy fulfilled today.

But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away!
(2 Tim. 3:1–5 NKJV)

Why does this resonate so deeply as *truth*? Worse, why does it seem to accurately describe the very public witness of Christianity in the West? Unloving, unforgiving, slanderers . . . brutal . . . headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God . . . Good gracious, doesn't that just feel like humanity's baseline?

But why? What leads us toward selfishness? At what point does our generosity and vulnerability, our innocence and laughter, rust into stinginess and impenetrability, offensiveness and cynicism?

Perhaps we lack love. Culturally, it feels like an unbearable emptiness, a desperate need for significance, is perpetually driving us. We feel unable to rid ourselves of loneliness, no matter who surrounds us. Isolation is not reserved for single people or those who live alone. It belongs to those who cannot bond

or attach due to past and familial trauma, to those who are perpetually trapped in toxic, dysfunctional relationships, to those whose addictions and anxieties keep them from fully engaging in the healthy practices of love, to those who long for a life other than the one they are living, to those whose majority connection is digital in nature.

Certainly, many people struggle to overcome pain related to love, which hinders us from both giving and receiving. And to be perfectly honest, genuine love is a holy horror show. To lay ourselves bare, to withhold nothing, to stand naked before another and quietly ask, “Do you still love me?” is a wonderful terror indeed. The places we are most resistant to love are the places we are invited to let love teach us, heal us, and help us see.



Life is constantly shaping us. We cannot control what we are born into. We do not choose the foundation of love, lack, or hatred we receive. Rarely is our situation all good or all bad but rather a grey matter of peace, pain, joy, dysfunction, connection, and grief. These established rhythms and routines, however chaotic, monotonous, or absent they are, shape our identity and teach us how we are to live with and relate to ourselves, God, and others. Before we are an adult, this is established at home, at school, and in our communities. We learn as we participate in these places with the people we spend the most time with, starting from birth and continuing throughout our lives. To better establish ourselves in relationships, it is imperative for us to understand where we come from so we can better understand where we are.

Think for a second about the best encouragement you ever received. Who offered it? What did it mean to you in the moment? How does it feel now to remember it? Did it shape who you are and your confidence in yourself and your abilities? Encourage-

ment is powerful. My husband, Cody, talks about encouragement as an opportunity to “put courage in.” I’ve found that the places and spaces we’re raised, the people who shape our minds and hearts, either encourage or discourage us from becoming our truest selves.

As people, we tend to gravitate toward the bad stuff. It seals itself in our memory like a bad tape we can’t cut off. We play it over and over until it melts into the foundation of who we are. While that can be overcome—God wired our brains to change, to regenerate, to renew—we spend too much of our life and our time rehearsing those words and nursing old wounds. This deeply impacts how we connect and relate to each other, and it hinders or helps our ability to love and be loved. Our conflict and communication styles are informed by our upbringing. I love what Mike Foster, author and founder of People of the Second Chance, says: “We learn love from people who do not love us.” How true! Our patterns of relating and bonding with others are too often determined by those who love us the least.

Whether we grow up with two parents, a single parent, foster or adoptive parents, stepparents, other family members, or another kind of caretaker, the years we spend preparing to be an adult shape us tremendously. Peggy O’Mara, author of *Natural Family Living*, writes, “The way we talk to our children becomes their inner voice.”¹ We internalize the voices we grow up with and carry them with us wherever we go. Absence is also a voice. When children are left to fend for themselves, rarely asked questions, and suffer from little engagement with a parent, as adults they might operate in the world as though they are a burden to others and struggle to share their dreams and desires and to ask for help in their struggles. If abuse is in the home, children may go on to be adults who perpetuate or put up with abuse, or become some of the almost twenty-one million Americans who wrestle with an addiction.² Many adults do not have a fallback

plan in the form of family. There is no person who can support them emotionally, spiritually, or financially. Even in homes where there is love, hospitality, generosity, and generational wealth/help, children will still experience some form of dysfunction, because no caretaker, parent, or child is perfect. Home is the first place we learn love and where our ability or struggle to be ourselves and trust and connect to others in meaningful, reciprocal ways begins.

Another critical pathway for our wiring around love and care is our education story. On average, children are in school six hours a day, 180 days per year, for thirteen years straight. That does not include after-school programs, sports, or time at the local library, recreation centers, YMCAs, or houses of worship, which can tack on another two to three hours per day. With commute times added in, this means that most children and teens spend their waking hours with other adults and children who will instill values, teach curriculum, and model community care. For many of us, education is a healthy combination of positive and negative experiences; others experience a long string of good or bad, depending on how authority figures established patterns of relating and potentially hierarchies based on intelligence, appearance, or socioeconomic status.

I mention houses of worship because many of us have a faith story. We had a youth group, faith community, Bible study, or other place we began to learn about God. Or perhaps we learned peripherally, if our only encounters were with people who claimed to follow God. We learned who God is, what he approves of, who he loves, and how we're supposed to behave in order to please him or find his favor. For some of us, that meant discovering we are loved by a good God; that we have a Savior who loves us, a Holy Spirit who is our advocate and guide, and a community of people committed to walking alongside us in solidarity. For others, that might have meant learning God is a

harsh, unforgiving father who cares more about our behavior than our connection with him, who sets us in community so we can learn the rules of faith—who is in and who is out—and how we can perform for God rather than be loved by him. The way we see God, as well as our worldview, is informed by our experiences with religion as we mature in age and stage.

Inside these spaces—our homes, schools, and religious gatherings—we develop our internal dialogue and establish well-worn patterns of relating to others and staying safe (or at least comfortable in our role, even if not safe) inside relationships. We are shaped by our familial and cultural upbringing, and that is a determining factor in how we see the world, ourselves, and other people as well as how we contribute positively or negatively to society. The internal dialogue we establish as a foundation in our lives dictates our direction. Or, as Alice Walker said,

Truly the suffering is great, here on earth. We blunder along, shredded by our mistakes, bludgeoned by our faults. Not having a clue where the dark path leads us. But on the whole, we stumble along bravely, don't you think?³

Why do we do what we do? What led us to the person we are, and do we like the person we are becoming? We are blundering along, as Alice Walker says, “not having a clue where the dark path leads us.” Miraculously, when we fall we get up again, clinging to some thread of grace we've found that makes life worth living. There are times we struggle to face that darkness, when we find it difficult to deal with the conflicts and tensions in our lives. But confrontation is necessary for change. If we are to internalize the best of our upbringing and let go of the worst, we must honestly inspect and confront what, from our past and present, is shaping our responses to people and circumstances.

From the people who loved me, I learned ridiculous generosity—how to keep my hand and heart open, no matter my circumstances. We are a people who turn up with a casserole when there has been a death. We are people who can sit in pain and trauma and offer our presence so others are not alone in their suffering. We are people who shout and cheer and scream for each other, celebrating accomplishments and championing dreams. We are those who give money when we have it to help with adoptions, nonprofits, groceries, therapy appointments. From this love, I learned that I am welcome, that I can bring my whole self to the table, that I am enough, that I am not too much, that my ambition is holy. They taught me to love is to show up, to give myself to service, to push past barriers, to be a safe harbor, and to be inconvenienced.

But if we indeed also learn about love from people who do not love us, then I've also learned other confusing and sometimes similar messages. That love is silent, that love pretends, that love is *always* hard work and personal sacrifice—and because I'd been told to do it so many times, love is sitting still, looking pretty, and shutting up. To be loved, to survive, I found it necessary to contort my painful, confusing emotions into a smile, to twist the truth of my private life into a glowing public review, to ache with longing for space to be myself.

When I moved from my home of origin, I challenged, though did not overcome, the idea that love's most important quality is staying stuck, remaining loyal, keeping quiet, and isolating unattended. The lie that to be at peace is to live in denial was crushing to me, and the more I denied, the more I repeated unhealthy ways of expressing pain. Growing up, and in my young adult years, love felt like constant tension to me. Depending on the person I was with or the place I was in, giving and receiving love felt marked either by fear, anxiety, and control or by a sense of home, connection, and rest.

Did you also receive confusing messages about love? Where did you feel most at home? Who made you feel free to be wholly yourself? Where did you feel unease and find yourself performing for approval? Who made you feel like you had to be perfect in order to be loved? Part of maturing as a person is acknowledging the voices living inside our heads, untangling the web of labels and names we've been given as well as the expectations and roles we've played that are not true to who we are.



Learning love means unlearning fear, not so that we will never be afraid—an honest life is terrifying because it is high risk and high yield—but so that we can better understand why we do what we do and make decisions rooted in integrity that build the life we want to live. Not a life riddled with approvals and permissions but a life of freedom and service. Embracing the good and the bad, coming out of denial and accepting reality, and making peace with our past are how we overcome.

Why does Jesus say, “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:34–35)? And why is it a command? The Greek word here means an injunction or order, from the root word *entellomai*: to “command, emphasizing the end-objective, i.e., reaching the purpose (consummation, end result) of an order—i.e., as envisioning how or where it ends up.”⁴

The prophetic nature of Jesus's words places all the emphasis on his strategic purpose: on the end goal that, by our love, *everyone* will know that we are his disciples *if* we love one another. Jesus's command to love, and during the entirety of his conversation at that Last Supper, which is over five chapters in the book of John, is him engineering for us how and where love ends up.

There was really no reason for the disciples to gather together other than their love for Jesus, aside from a few who were brothers. Isn't this true of us today? But we do not get a seat at the table only with the people we love; we sit at the table with the people God loves.

This is why love is resistance.

It is urgent Christians recapture the essence of this order to reestablish our standing with God and with each other. We are not known for our love. People do not look at our communal witness and see Jesus. For many, their interpretation of God comes from us, the believers who are seated at the table with Jesus.

The late Rachel Held Evans wrote in her book *Searching for Sunday: Loving, Leaving and Finding the Church*, “This is what God’s kingdom is like: a bunch of outcasts and oddballs gathered at a table, not because they are rich or worthy or good, but because they are hungry, because they said yes. And there’s always room for more.”⁵ It is time for us to recognize that we are not too good for “those people” because we’re all “those people.” A bunch of weirdos and ragamuffins. We are not in the Moral Purity Olympics. What is our self-righteous piety and indignation in light of Christ? Nothing special, I assure you. We are here together in our love for Christ, even if nothing else binds us but his blood. And it is time for us to get our act together.

Just like love, communication is a skill we learn. To help us love ourselves and others well at the table with Christ, in the context of our daily lives, we'll end each chapter with four opportunities for personal growth. Take your time here. Reflection and meditation are helpful for healing and connection. I'm offering an attitude to adopt, an affirmation to speak, a question for reflection, and a technique to connect

with God or communicate with others (all the others, even the really annoying, “wish you weren’t at the table—but Jesus” others).

As much as I love thoughtful cultural insights, unique takes on Scripture, and stories that help us see ourselves and understand people, knowledge does not become wisdom until it is applied. I pray this practice will serve as resistance to the things in culture that hurry us, hurt us, and bully us into unsustainable, unloving lifestyles and patterns of relating. May we grow together from these pages and let the fruit of our labor—love—be evident to all.

ATTITUDE: I am curious about life, about myself, God, and others.

AFFIRMATION: I am able to thoughtfully examine the voices and circumstances that shaped me, and I am courageous enough to ask God to search me, to see if there is any offensive way in me, and to lead me in the path of everlasting life.

REFLECTION: Why do I do what I do?

TECHNIQUE: Create space for critical thinking and reflection. Try setting a timer for ten minutes every day to sit in silence before God, without distraction or any other influence. Is there anything you want to give God? Is there anything he wants to give you?