

# Christian Essentials

## "If You Miss Everything Else, Don't Miss These"

### Part 1 - Love God

#### Introduction for Leaders

Imagine that today God tells you to leave your present small group or youth ministry and start over somewhere else. So tonight at your last meeting you ask them, "From all that I've given you guys over the past months, what would you say is the main thing about living the Christian life? If you had to narrow it down to a couple of essentials, what would you say?" I have to wonder what my youth would say. I've taught on a lot of great topics, but did they really internalize the main truths of the Christian life? That's what this series is all about.

Jesus ripped into the Pharisees, who did some things well (bible memorization, going to the synagogue) but somehow missed the critical teachings of compassion, etc. The Colossians started with Jesus but got infatuated with special knowledge. The Galatians were running so well, but then got tripped up in legalism (Gal. 5:7; 1ff.)

The point? It's easy to stray away from or altogether miss the central things of the Christian life. Part of our duty as ministers is to recognize when we and our kids are either straying from the truth or getting infatuated with peripheral matters, and put everyone's focus back on the main things.

Before you look at my list of essentials, think through your own list. What truths are singled out in the bible to be of primary importance?

So far, I've just got two lessons here. They are based on the Great Commandment. When Jesus was asked, "What is the great commandment of the law," He gave them an answer. Not all commands are equal. If we miss this one, we've missed it all. Also, think of areas where you fear your youth may be going astray and need to be brought back to the center.

Other lessons you could cover to add to this series might include: "The Essential Book" (the Bible), "The Essential Person" (Jesus), "The Essential Beliefs" (grace, faith, etc.), "The Essential Challenge" (Matt. 28:18-20), "The Essential Activity" (Worship).

**Purpose: By the end of this session, my students will be motivated to love God and know some practical ways to express their love to Him.**

**IDEAS!** 1) Save your praise and worship time till after this message, so that your kids can put into practice what they learn. 2) Look to the end of this message for an idea on making this lesson into two weeks, the second week being a more experiential application of the message.

# Christian Essentials:

## Part One: Love God

## Grab Their Attention!

**Opening Discussion: Who can tell us what an "essentials" CD is? Do you have any "Essentials" CD's? Which ones?** (Try to get some response.) An "essentials" CD includes all the classic songs by a performer. In other words, if you're into electric guitars, you might own "Eric Clapton Essentials," "Jimi Hendrix Essentials," or "Van Halen essentials." Don't tell me you know Eric Clapton if you've never heard his song "Layla." It's got one of the best known guitar introductions of all time.

**Tell me some of your favorite bands. Now, tell me what are a couple of essential songs that you'd want to play for someone else to introduce them to each band. Tell me your favorite sport. What are the essentials for mastering that sport** (regular practice, keep in shape, etc.)?

In the same way, according to Jesus, there are "Christian Essentials." Sure, there's all kinds of stuff about the Christian life - reading the bible, going to retreats, coming to church, trying to live right -- and all that stuff's important. But sometimes I get so busy that it's hard to do everything. Sometimes I just need to know, **if I miss out on everything else, what are the essentials about the Christian life that I need to concentrate on? In other words, if someone were to write a small book entitled "Christian Living For Idiots," what would it say? Any ideas?**

## Dive Into The Word

Well, fortunately Jesus was once asked about this very question. Who will read it for us? It's in Matthew 22:34-40.

***But when the Pharisees heard that He had put the Sadducees to silence, they gathered themselves together. And one of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him, "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?"***

Before we go any further, if you know this passage, act for a moment like it's the first time you've ever read it. The Pharisee asking the question isn't a sincere seeker. He's trying to trip Jesus up. **How would you expect Jesus to answer this question?** I'd expect Jesus to say something like,

*"All commands are equally important, because to disobey any command is to disobey My Father who gave them."*

Or, He might turn their question back on them by saying,

*"You Pharisees tell me the least important command and I'll tell you the greatest!"*

But it's amazing to me that he answered. There *is* one commandment that's greater than the rest. There's something so essential that if we miss everything else about the Christian life, we can't afford to miss this. Here's what he said:

***And He said to him, "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.***

***This is the great and foremost commandment.***

***And a second is like it, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."***

***On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets."***

This isn't hard to understand. It's so simple that it can be reduced to 4 words: "Love God, Love People."

**Discussion: Why do you think loving God and loving people is the most important command?** (Possible answers: 1) If God's big purpose in this world is to develop people that He can have a relationship with, then the most important thing is for us to love Him. 2) If we love God and love people, then we'll automatically do the other things in the Christian life, like obeying Him in everyday life, going to church in order to worship Him, reading His Word in order to get to know him.)

*Someone said that the main thing about living the Christian life is keeping the main thing the main thing. Jesus just told us the main thing. What is it?* (Love God, love people.) Write it on a card. Laminate it. Put it in your wallet so that when you open it you see why you're here on earth. Write it on a paper, surround it with some artistic flair, and put it on your mirror or your bedroom wall; because if we miss this, we've missed everything.

Even for us who have been Christians for a long time, we get distracted from the main thing. We get the idea that the really great Christians are the ones who do everything right, make straight A's in school, come to church every time the doors are open, give all their money to charity and witness to everything that moves. But you can do all those things and still miss the main thing. The Pharisees did all that stuff, but Jesus condemned them. According to I

**Notes on Matthew 22:34-40** 1) "the Scribes distinguished 613 commands in the Old Testament law." Since in principle every command was equally binding, "an incautious reply by Jesus could suggest that he repudiated some of these commandments, and thus lay him open to a charge of 'annulling the law.'" (French) 2) Jesus draws these commands from Deuteronomy 6:4-9 and Leviticus 19:17,18. 3) We can't make clear distinctions between "heart," "soul," and "mind." While "mind" "perhaps indicates more our intellectual commitment," it's also contained in the biblical word "heart." In our times "heart" tends to be identified exclusively with our emotions. In biblical times, it's broader, more like "the true person as he really is, not just as he appears outwardly." (French, see also on Matt. 15:18) The bottom line? "God is to be loved unreservedly with every faculty of your being." (Tasker) "supreme, devoted love to God," "to the utmost degree," "all that is within." (Expositor's Greek Testament) 4) How is the second command related to the first? "though formally subordinate to the first, really the first in another form." (EGT) "similar," "in content and importance" (McNeile). 5) What does it mean that all the law and prophets "hang on" these? "All the religious and moral demands in Scripture are valid because they can be ultimately traced to these two." (McNeile) "The two precepts which contain its sum and substance." (Alexander) It has been translated variously as "hang all," "in these two commandments all the law is contained," "depend," "is summed up in." (NT in 26 Trans) "The two great commandments do not dispense with all the rest (such an answer *would* have been a dangerous response to the 'test'), but the rest *depend* on them (literally 'hang', a technical term for laws which are derivable from others). They remain commandments of God, but they find their coherence in the overriding principle of the double commandment to love." (French) Thus, Jesus is not teaching situation ethics, which holds that whatever appears to be the most loving thing to do in any given situation is the right thing to do, no matter what other commands may be violated. Rather, God's other laws are to be obeyed since they are derived from or made coherent by from the law of love.

Corinthians 13, if we have incredible gifts and give away all our possessions, but don't have love, we are nothing.

So...let's look closely at this commandment to make sure we haven't veered off from the main thing. Next week we'll concentrate on "Love People." Today, let's just think about the first half of it: "love God."

**Prayer:** (Ask for a volunteer to pray that God will use you and that students will be eager to share and learn practical ideas of how to love God.)

## Learn To Live It

Loving God is kind of a vague concept to most people. I can understand how to love my dog. I feed him, pet him and don't beat him when I'm mad. But how do I love a God whom I can't see? In some ways it's a lot like loving a wife or husband, boyfriend or girlfriend. Let's go with that analogy.

**If you want to really love God, you've got to...**

### 1. Believe the Best.

If you want to see the romance in a relationship really fizzle, always believe the worst about the motives of the other person. You catch her talking to another guy, so you assume she's cheating on you. She can't go out with you this weekend, so you assume you're not important to her. After awhile, you build up this big list of grievances, before even hearing her side of things. Anger replaces your love. Why? Because you assumed the worst. But hey, maybe she had perfectly good explanations that had nothing to do with her thoughts toward you.

**Discussion: How do you think this applies to our relationship with God?** (You may have to lead them into this one.) Some people have a hard time getting excited about God because they've asked Him for some things in prayer and He didn't come through. They tried to follow God, but He seemed to "reward" them with a messed up family and hard times at school. So, they *assume* that God doesn't love them and they have no desire to love Him back. **How would you counsel this person?**

Listen, God never said He'd answer every prayer or make your life easy. In fact, He warned his faithful followers, His disciples:

***"In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."***  
(John 16:33).

**Note on John 16:33:**  
Tribulation "denotes great and pressing affliction, not some mild malady." (Morris)

He allows us to go through hard times to strengthen us and to help us identify with others who go through hard times. (II Corinthians 1:3ff) We know that He loves us because He became a man, lived a hard but perfect life, died a cruel death on the cross, all for us. As Paul wrote,

***"But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."*** (Romans 5:8).

So, I have a good reason to believe the best about God when things don't go my way.

I know that this may sound pretty simplistic to those who are really bitter toward God. Lots of people have been there. If this thing of loving God is so important, I urge you to talk it through with some of the adult leaders. It's hard to love Someone that you're bitter with.

**Secondly, if you really want to love God...**

## **2. Learn His Love Languages**

Often great romances go sour because they don't understand each other's love languages. Who can tell us what a "love language" is? (How a person receives love.) So, you've got a girl who feels loved when her boyfriend communicates with her on the phone or personally. But the guy thinks the best way to show love to her is by training all the time to be the best at every sport in the school in order to impress her. Problem is, that doesn't leave much time for communication. So, she doesn't feel loved, no matter how hard he tries.

Some guys feel loved when their girlfriends speak highly of them or respect them. If the girl thinks it's more important to get her nails looking just right for him, and leaves him sitting in the den with her father for an hour while she perfects her nails, they've got a problem. She's trying to show love to him in a way that he doesn't receive love.

Have you ever thought that it might be the same way with God? Could some people be trying to show love for God in ways that aren't really His love language?

**Discussion: What would you guess are some of God's love languages - the ways He wants to be loved? (Let them share.)**

### **a. Spend Quality Time Together**

Couples who keep the love in their relationship spend lots of quality time together. They talk on the phone, go places together, take walks together and just hang out together.

**How does that relate to our love life with God? What are some ways we can spend quality time with God? Do you think that "quality personal time" is one of God's love languages? (See Matthew 14:23, Mark 6:46, Lk. 6:12, 59:16, 88:13)**

- **Have a regular "date" with Him.** Many people call it a "quiet time." But it doesn't have to be quiet. You could have some Christian music playing in the background. Read a portion from the Bible to let God talk to you. Then talk to God, either out loud or silently. Ask Him to help you with things that worry you. But if all you talked to your girlfriend about was things you needed, you wouldn't have much of a relationship. Share with Him your dreams. Thank

Him for everything He's given you. Tell Him you're sorry for the times you've let Him down.

- **Be creative!** Go with a walk with God in the woods or in a park. Sit in a tree and talk to Him. Write Him a song or a poem. Sing Him a song. Play Him a song with an instrument. Write out a prayer to Him in a journal. Try using a devotional book. **Discussion: What are some of the things that you do to keep your personal times with God alive? What works for you that might work for others?**

### 3. Keep in Touch With Him During the Day

- Talk to him about everything.

*"...pray continually..."* (I Thessalonians 5:17)

- Meditate continually on His Word.

*"Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful."* (Joshua 1:8, Psalm 1:1,2)

### 4. Praise Him With Others

If you love someone, you just can't help but tell your friends how great he or she is. That's what worshiping God with a group is all about. Yet, some people don't get it. They say things like, "I think that religion is a personal thing. I can worship him better sitting in a deer stand or fishing or in my bedroom than in a church."

**Discussion: How would you answer this person?**

God likes to be worshiped by Christians gathered together. I don't know why. But it doesn't have to make sense to me. It's simply a part of His love language. If you don't like worshipping with your church, then either find another church or get over it!

If church isn't important, then...

- Why is the word "church" used 111 times in the New Testament (NIV)?
- Why does the Bible give us so many instructions on how the church should operate - qualifications for pastors, deacons, (I Tim. 3, Titus 1, Acts) what to do and not do in a church service? (I Cor. 12-14)
- Why are we commanded to "not give up meeting together...."? (Hebrews 10:25) **Who will read this verse out loud to us?**

*"Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another - and all the more as you see the Day approaching."*

Usually people who don't like to worship in church either aren't in a strong, biblical, relevant church, or just don't know how to get the most out of it. They sit in a church service, but don't get what's going on.

**Joke:** They're like the blonde (Not that I'm prejudiced against blondes! This lady just happened to be blonde.) who went to see a ventriloquist perform. Have you ever seen a ventriloquist? He has a toy girl or boy, called a "dummy," who sits on his knee, which he moves around with his hand. He talks to the dummy and then manipulates the dummy's mouth while he talks for the dummy. Since the ventriloquist has perfected the art of speaking without moving his own lips, he creates the illusion that the dummy is talking.

So, with his dummy on his knee, the ventriloquist is going through his usual dumb blonde jokes when the blonde on the 4th row stands on her chair and starts shouting: "I've heard enough of your stupid blonde jokes. What makes you think you can stereotype women that way? What does the color of a person's hair have to do with her worth as a human being? It's guys like you who keep women like me from being respected at work and in the community and from reaching our full potential as people... because you and your kind continue to perpetuate discrimination against, not only blondes, but women in general...and all in the name of humor!"

The ventriloquist is embarrassed and begins to apologize, when the blonde yells, "You stay out of this, mister! I'm talking to that little jerk on your knee!"

She obviously didn't get it. But aren't so many people in church just like that blonde? They sit in the service, hear the sermon, hear the music, but have no clue what's going on - especially the worship that she's supposed to be caught up in.

**Discussion:** Imagine that this same blonde lady comes to your youth group worship service. How would you explain to her (very simply!) how to really worship God during a service?

**Ideas:**

- **Listen.** God wants to communicate with you. Ready yourself by praying that God will tell you something through the music, the message or through another person.

***"Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path." (Psalm 119:105)***

- **Sing From Your Heart.** True worship is active, not passive. Church isn't a concert, where the people up front perform and you're the audience. Actually, God's the audience and we're the performers - the ones singing to Him. Try to forget impressing everyone around you and concentrate on singing the words to God from your heart. Remember, we're to love Him by more than hanging out in a church service. God wants us to engage our hearts, souls and minds.

***"You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. (Matthew 22:37)***

- **Love on People.** Whatever we do "for the least of these," we do for Jesus.

***"The king will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'" (Matthew 25:40)***

We love Him by loving the people He created. Maybe this is why Jesus said that the second command ("**Love your neighbor as yourself.**") was "like" the first one about loving God. Don't tell me about how much you love God if you can't love the people He created.

So don't come to church just to receive. Come to give. Look for someone sitting alone that needs a friend. Do you know how weird it feels sometimes to sit alone? Gather a few friends, introduce yourselves, and sit with her. Ask several people how they are doing...and wait for a response. Catch someone doing something right and compliment him for it. Encourage someone who looks down. Remember that prayer request from last week and ask how it turned out.

## Wrapping It Up

Why am I so big on this stuff? Because according to God's Word loving God is no side show. It's the main thing. I don't want to get to the end of my life and realize that I've missed the main thing.

**Illustration:** *Have you ever been doing an in class assignment in Math and completed your work, only to look around and realize that nobody else is finished yet. For me, that was always a bad sign. Sure enough, you look at the person on your left and notice she's on a different page. So is the person on your right. Totally embarrassed, you go up to the teacher's desk and show him that you were accidentally working on the wrong page during the entire class time.*

I think that embarrassed feeling, only many times worse, is what many people will feel when they die, reach heaven, and realize that most of their lives they were on the wrong page. They went to school, attended church, got a job, raised kids, but never developed an authentic love relationship with God.

We started out talking about essentials -- Essentials CD's, Essentials for Sports. We said there are essentials in our spiritual lives, those things that, if we don't get anything else right, we can't afford to miss. If someone were to put together a Steve Miller (put some of your kids' names here) Essentials CD, what would it be about? What do you wake up dreaming of? What do you go to bed thinking about? What are your passions? The "Julie (name off kids in your youth group) Essentials CD," the "Kevin Essentials CD." Would they match up with the essentials of loving God and loving people? If not, here's a time for you to come before God and talk to Him about it.

Silent Prayer

## Idea For Leaders: Add a Practical Session Next Week

Instead of moving on to the next lesson on loving people, why not take another week to continue the topic of loving God? This would keep you from having to cover all the above material in one week, plus you could make next week more experiential - an opportunity to love God. Here are some thoughts:

A. Assign students at the end of this session to 1) try to apply these "Loving God" ideas to your personal times with God and your group worship today. Think of what works for



you and **bring back your ideas next week so that we can share.** 2) Talk to a godly person about what works in his or her life to keep the love relationship with God alive.

**Bring back your ideas to share with us.**

B. Call some key students during the week to make sure they're thinking about this and will have something to share next week. They might bring some of their favorite Christian CD's that turn their hearts toward God. Here are some ideas for the youth service:

- Have students share ideas for making worship through song meaningful. Then, do several worship songs to try to put the ideas in practice.
- Play some of the favorite Christian CD's that people brought and let the students talk about how these songs help them reflect on God and love Him.
- Do some creative prayer, like praying through a Psalm together. 1) In small groups, take Psalm 145 and let a person at a time say a verse to God and tell God if it brings some special praise item to mind. 2) In large group, start going through the alphabet, letting students say aloud any quality of God or something He's done for us that comes to mind that starts with that letter. (Examples: A - Awesome. B - Bible. He gave us the Bible.)
- In small groups, give them a passage to have a group Quiet Time. They could 1) Pray that God will speak to them. 2) Read together a passage of Scripture (something practical like Philippians 4:4-9). 3) Discuss how it applies to their lives. 4) Pray concerning what God taught them. 5) Pray for each other's needs.