

LOVE HAS A *Name*

Learning to Love
the Different,
the Difficult &
Everyone Else

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Details in some anecdotes and stories have been changed to protect the identities of the persons involved.

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*Hudson, Wilson, Grayson, and Anderson,
thank you for showing me who love is, every single day.
My greatest goal in life is to show you the same.
Love you so much.
—Dad*

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In honor of my dear friend Jarrid Wilson

1988–2019

You are loved.

*Your legacy of love lives on through Juli, Finch,
Denham, and every person you crossed paths with.*

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Introduction

Love is hard.

Loving others used to come so easily.

As kids, we're naturally quick to trust.

Quick to forgive.

Quick to love others.

Strangers almost immediately become friends.

It's why we have to tell kids not to climb into shady-looking vans¹ and accept candy from people they don't know—they trust and love everyone immediately. Kids are more innocent, but they're also more ignorant, and sometimes ignorance truly is bliss. Shorter memories, fewer insecurities—what's not to like about being a kid?

But with each year that passes, it seems like loving people gets a little harder. At some point, our hearts become jaded, cynical, and skeptical.

We become slow to trust.

Slow to forgive.

Slow to love others.

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We look for ways to keep our neighbors at a distance. Our relationships now seem to come with scorecards that we use to keep track of how well the other person is loving us. Kids' soccer games and birthday parties are easy to forget, but the mistakes of certain family members never leave our heads.

Friends slowly become strangers.

The older we get, the more difficult love becomes as our relationships (and our lives) get more complicated. If I'm honest, most days I struggle to love anyone. I've never struggled to love people more than I have the past couple of years.

But love is everywhere. Love is something we hear about, post about on social media,² and sing about. It's a word we wear on our shirts and even get tattooed on our bodies. For many of us, when the word *love* leaves our lips, it sounds fluffy and beautiful—like sunshine, fairy tales, and unicorns. Who wouldn't want to love others when love is so great? If you're a decent human being with a soul, love is a banner you should carry.

Yet now more than any other time (at least it feels this way to me!), love seems absent from our attitudes, words, and actions. We say we love others, but we really don't. Instead, we're quick to shake our fists at drivers, judge the stranger who looks strange, and trash the person online who thinks differently than we do. We gossip behind the backs of our coworkers and daydream about body-slammings certain family members. Instead of loving people, we hurt, belittle, and overlook them.

Here's the deal, though: Do you remember when your kindergarten teacher wrote the rules of your classroom in the upper right-hand corner of the chalkboard? Can you picture it?

Rule 1: Raise your hand.

Rule 2: Respect your classmates.

And that's all there was! Pretty easy, right? Well, Jesus does the same thing with us when it comes to love.

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Rule 1: Love God.

Rule 2: Love others.

Rule 3: There is no Rule 3. That's it. Just do those first two over and over.³

According to Jesus, these two “loves” are the two most important things. Simple, right? Maybe. But even with Jesus in our hearts, loving people is much easier said than done. Whether you've been following Jesus for decades or you're still on the fence about God, loving people can be painful, uncomfortable, exhausting, and even grueling at times. Love can hurt.

And Jesus didn't just talk about love *generally*—teaching about love from a stage to an adoring crowd. Instead, Jesus loved people *personally*. He got face to face with people. He didn't just talk about love. He loved specific people.

Sick people. Bad people.

Normal people. Broken people.

Religious people. Judgmental people.

Awkward people. Overlooked people.

Contagious people. Ugly people.

Different people, who were different in every possible way.

Difficult people, who were so incredibly hard to love.

Jesus knew their stories. Who they were. Their names. Their status—or lack thereof. And he loved them anyway.

Jesus shows us that knowing people's stories is the path to fully loving them. The pathway to love always begins with a story. Not *our* stories, but *their* stories. We can't love people if we can't truly see them, and we can't really see and know people without knowing their stories.

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That brings us to the journey this book is going to take us on. This isn't a book on "three steps to loving better." This book tells the stories of twenty-seven people (and one school), who opened my heart to loving more fully.

Each of these people has taught me something about loving others. I showed love to some of these people, but in every case I was on the receiving end of love. In many ways, *they* ended up showing *me* what love is all about.

Some of these people are close friends; others are strangers I crossed paths with for only a short time. None of them are famous. None of them have huge platforms or special talents. Maybe you can relate? On the surface, these people might appear to be quite normal, but they're anything but. The truth is, no one is normal. We all have our own unique stories.

The stories here aren't always polished or pretty. In fact, some of them don't have happy endings—or any ending at all yet. But these stories and these people have taught me how to love better, how to love more fully, and how to love as Jesus does, more than any textbook or how-to guide ever could. My hope is that they will do the same for you too.

Before we meet them, though, let's talk about what love is. Actually, let's talk about *who* love is.

You see, love has a name.

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Jesus

Love knows you by name.

A few years back, I went to pick up my daughter from a birthday party. She was at one of those gymnastics places where the kids have free rein to jump into foam pits, swing on monkey bars, and do somersaults. To enter the gym area, you have to take off your shoes, so I came in, found a bench, and started to take my shoes off.

As I was untying my laces, I looked over and saw a little kid from the church I pastor.¹ He smiled ear to ear, his eyes wide open, filled with excitement to see me. The kid started tapping his mom's leg to get her attention. At first she didn't look, so he kept tapping. When she finally looked up, he pointed at me and said, "Look, Mom! It's Jesus!"² Ha, I have clearly failed as a pastor if a little kid is mistaking me for Jesus!

But he did get one thing right: Jesus is everywhere!

His name. His image. Or at least a *version* of his name and image: Wavy brown hair that would make most ladies (and me) jealous. Deep blue eyes. Always wearing a white bathrobe and sandals like he's ready for a walk on the beach.

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Jesus—who appears to be the loving side of a God who’s angry at times. His name is the choice word when you stub your toe or hit yet another stoplight when you’re already late for work. He’s our “home-boy.”³ Our buddy. The dude in the picture frame on your grandma’s wall. In art. In songs. Tattoos. On T-shirts. Bumper stickers. Even a piece of toast.⁴

We hear Jesus’s name sprinkled throughout conversations between people who haven’t been to church in years. Sometimes his name is mentioned at the center of a deep conversation, but more often than not, it’s dropped in without much thought.

Even *Newsweek* and the Discovery Channel regularly ask who Jesus is. But who is Jesus, really? The quick answer: A carpenter from a town called Nazareth. The son of Mary and Joseph. That about covers it, right?

Sure, almost.

Oh, and a bunch of us also believe he’s God. He was born from his mother, just as we all are born from our mothers, but he was conceived by the Holy Spirit. Know anyone else who was conceived by God? Me neither!

And we believe that he’s God with good reason. He gave sight to the blind. Made a dead person come back to life. Walked on water. Fed a few thousand people with a small lunch pail of food. He did and can do all kinds of things.

And he’s also perfect, so there’s that!

But more than Jesus’s ability to turn water into wine or do any other mind-bending miracle, the way he *loves* people is what truly sets him apart. It’s the way Jesus loves that makes him so different—at least, so different from me.

He Knows Our Name

There’s something special about a person’s name. When someone knows and remembers your name, it communicates worth. It helps

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you feel noticed. Important. Seen. When someone uses your name, it gives you value. Each of us has a longing inside to be known. To be loved. Remembering a name is the first step to knowing someone—to *loving* someone.

Me? I'm terrible at remembering names.⁵ I rarely forget a face, but I even struggle to remember my own kids' names sometimes. I use the classic "Hey, man, how's it going?" a lot of times when I can't remember a person's name.⁶ Wouldn't it be so much easier if everyone wore a name tag at all times?⁷

Jesus knew people's names, before even meeting them. Not just the names everyone else knew. Not just the names of the public figures verified on Instagram,⁸ the religious elite, the well-off. Instead, Jesus used the names of *everyone*, including those society said had no worth—prostitutes, thieves, lepers.

One of my favorite stories ever is about the day Jesus came through the city of Jericho.⁹ There was a man there who collected taxes for a living. Basically, he overtaxed and stole money from his own people. To put it nicely: the man wasn't very well liked. And he wasn't just a tax collector, but we're told he was a *chief* tax collector. Not just a jerk, the *chief* jerk!

So, he's not well liked, but he has money. And somehow this man knew about Jesus coming to town, and he wants to see him. Maybe it was the large crowd that intrigued him. Maybe he heard about Jesus's wild teaching and parables. Maybe he knew about the miracles. Maybe he had been told about the blind man who had just been healed outside the city earlier that day.

Whatever the reason was, the man wanted to see Jesus. But there was a problem: he was short. *Very* short. He's a "wee little man."¹⁰ He couldn't see over the crowd to spot Jesus coming into town. But he had an idea. We're told "he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree" to see him. Problem solved!

Each time I hear this story, it makes me wonder: What inside this man brought him up that tree? Was something missing in his life? He had made his money; wasn't it enough?

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When Jesus reached the man's chosen perch, he looked up at the weirdo among the leaves and said, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today."

Jesus knows his name!

Zacchaeus.

What? He does? Why?

My favorite part is how we're told that "Zacchaeus quickly climbed down and took Jesus to his house in great excitement and joy."

I'm guessing there were times when Zacchaeus didn't want his name to be known—probably by the people whose money he had taken—but he was elated that Jesus knew his name.

The crowd, on the other hand, was ticked. They grumbled and complained that Jesus not only knew Zacchaeus's name but was going to his house, the house of a notorious sinner, to eat. *He's going to go to the house of the jerk who's stealing everyone's money? Shorty's house? How could he?*

If Jesus knows the name of a guy like Zacchaeus, I'm guessing he knows the names of the people in our lives too.

Our ex.

Our friends who hurt us.

Our high-maintenance coworkers.

Our hard-to-love in-laws.

Our frustrating spouses.

The spam callers trying to sell us who-knows-what.

The strange religious people who knock on our front door.

The know-it-alls on Twitter.

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Jesus knows their names. Do we? Do we even want to? When we put names with faces, they're no longer just faces in the crowd—they're humans. No matter how much we don't want to admit it, they have value. They have worth. We must remember that God made them, that God loves them, and that we're commanded to love them too.

A name gives a person value. It's hard to believe some people have value, isn't it? But here's a life-changing statement for us: *their lives have the same value as ours*. That's hard to believe sometimes. But it's true. The world might say otherwise and the crowds might shout something different, but Jesus doesn't. He knows each of their names and often walks past crowds of people to go have a meal at the house of the one person we struggle to love the most. He walks past the well-known people to get to the person who appears to be worthless.

Are you starting to understand why the crowds were grumbling that day in Jericho when Jesus went to visit Zacchaeus? I wouldn't have just grumbled; I would have been angry! I would have shouted my outrage because of the one Jesus picked out of the crowd.

But Jesus? He knew *Zacchaeus's* name.

He knows our names too. *My* name.

And yours.

He Knows Our Stories

Jesus not only knows your name and my name and the names of every other human being on the planet (which would make him a great candidate for president of the universe!), but he takes it a step further and knows our *stories* as well.

Jesus knows where we've been and what we've walked through.

Our hardships.

Our losses.

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Our regrets.

Our pasts, good and bad.

Our parents.

Our successes.

Our failures.

The things we've never told anyone.

The things we've tried to forget.

He knows it all.

He knows our stories completely—how and why we are the people we are. He knows our stories even better than we do. We see Jesus, on numerous occasions, meeting someone for the first time, and before that person even speaks a word, Jesus makes it clear: he knows their name and their story.

One of these moments is when a guy named Nathanael walked up to Jesus.¹¹ Nathanael had heard that Jesus is God, but he's fairly doubtful that this word on the street was true. *Jesus the carpenter guy? He's God? Sure, and my name is LeBron*, Nathanael thought.¹²

But Nathanael was curious enough to listen to his friend Philip, who had just met Jesus for the first time. Nathanael followed Philip back to Jesus, but before he even met Jesus, Jesus shouted, "Now here is a genuine son of Israel—a man of complete integrity."

Struggling to find the right words, Nathanael responded, "How do you know about me?" Immediately his defenses fell. Jesus knows him. On a level Nathanael couldn't fully grasp. Jesus knows his story.

Time and time again this happened: A person finds out that Jesus knows his story, and his heart opens up. He immediately feels loved and drawn to Jesus. It's clear Jesus isn't making a snap judgment. He's not labeling him as others have: "sinner," "tax collector," "adulterer." Jesus sees him for who he really is: a person made in his image.

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What if one of the best steps to loving the rough-around-the-edges people in our lives starts with knowing their stories? Getting to know them—their names and their past hurts, dreams, passions—so that we can begin to love them? At least for me, this helps. The loud, arrogant coworker is so much easier to love when you find out he didn't have a dad growing up. The person who's known for being easy to sleep with is much harder to judge when you find out she was abused in a previous relationship. The grumpy neighbor is easier to be patient with when you find out he's battling an addiction to alcohol on a day-to-day basis.¹³

Even with the hardest-to-love people, when you start to know their stories, you can't help but have compassion, kindness, and love begin to well up within you. Instead of snapping back, you give them the benefit of the doubt. Instead of gossiping, you pray for them. Instead of avoiding them, you invite them in. Even when it's really hard to see, you begin to notice bits and pieces of the good and the image of God inside of them.

And when you do, even the hardest-hearted person begins to open up her soul and let her defenses drop. We find ourselves changing, too, as loving others leads us into a better life. Love is something we're all longing for.

Grace and Truth

Jesus knows our names and stories, and he offers us grace and truth.

Life and relationships are messy, and so is love. Often when we talk about love, we think about a sappy movie or Taylor Swift's latest song. But love is anything but light and fluffy.

True love isn't easy. True love is hard. At times, it involves grace. Forgiving someone. Seeing the best in people who don't have much good in them. And other times, it involves speaking the truth.

"I love you enough to say something you don't want to hear."

"No, this is not okay."

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"I love you, but we need some boundaries."

"I love you enough to say you need help, and I'm willing to walk alongside you."

Love is a lot like a coin. It has two sides—grace and truth. When you flip it, it can land on heads or tails, but you need both sides in order to flip it.

Most of our coins are weighted, though. For some of us, our coins always land on grace, while others always land on truth. When we lean toward grace, everyone knows they can push us around. We become the people everyone seeks out when they want to feel better about themselves. There are certain things we should say and need to say, but we never do.

The rest of us are truth tellers. We speak our minds too often. We live by the law and pretty much see it as our duty to call people out when they cross the line. We're like hall monitors, except not for the hallways of an elementary school but for life.

Thankfully, Jesus is both grace *and* truth! And because he's both, he's not a pushover or a hall monitor. He's someone so different and otherworldly that we're drawn to him.

John, a guy who knew Jesus personally, once said Jesus was "full of grace and truth."¹⁴ John meant that Jesus has complete grace and complete truth. Not fifty-fifty, but one hundred percent grace and one hundred percent truth. Jesus is both!

Everyone wanted to be as close to Jesus as they could get. Drawn to his loving grace, they knew they were accepted and not condemned. Drawn to his loving truth, they wanted to know his ways and the path that led to life, even if it contradicted the ways they were living.

Get this: when our words, actions, and lives have both grace and truth, people will be irresistibly drawn to God's love flowing and spilling out of our lives. People won't be drawn to us but to Jesus in us.

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One Last Thing

There's one last thing to know before we jump into the rest of the book, and it's important: Jesus doesn't *just* love people.

You and I *attempt* to love people. Jesus does more than that.

John hung out, walked around, and lived with Jesus, and he also said something shocking. It may not be shocking to you, particularly if you grew up in the church, but during the time Jesus lived, it would have been crazy talk. During Jesus's time, God was someone you were supposed to fear. His holiness was emphasized. God had all kinds of commandments and laws you needed to make sure you followed. Because it was impossible to follow all the laws, each year you had to bring an animal to the temple so it could be killed, and you would then be forgiven of all the ways you'd screwed up in the last year.¹⁵

Again, back in Jesus's day, you would have clearly known that God is just and holy and not at all like you. But John said something crazy. Wait for it . . .

"God is love."¹⁶

Yep, God is love. Yes, he is holy, but he is also love.

Don't miss it: He doesn't just love. Love isn't just something he does. It's *who* he is!

What does that mean? How does that look? Thankfully, John responds and tells us more: "I'm so glad you asked. This is how we know what real love is—Jesus gave up his life for us."¹⁷

Don't understand what love looks like? Don't truly understand God's love and how to love others? Thankfully, love has a name!

• • •

Love has a name: *Jesus*.

Jesus! He is who love is.

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And Jesus says that loving God is the most important thing.

Hear this: people will know our love for God by the way we *love others*.

Not by our church attendance. Not by how many Bible verses we have memorized. Not by all the good religious things we do. Not even by our theology.

All of these things are important and good. But according to John,

If anyone says, I love God, and hates a brother or sister, he is a liar, because the person who doesn't love a brother or sister who can be seen can't love God, who can't be seen. This commandment we have from him: Those who claim to love God ought to love their brother and sister also.¹⁸

People will know our love for God by *the way we love* them and others and ourselves. That's it. Plain and simple.¹⁹ But it's not so simple at all. Loving people sounds easy until we get to the "loving people" part.

• • •

Now, we're barely scratching the surface here, but thankfully Jesus is going to be with us throughout this book. In each chapter, we'll learn a bit about how to love others by the way Jesus loved specific people—by getting to know their names, their stories, and then meeting them with his grace and truth. (Oh, and don't forget to read all the field notes in the back!)²⁰

This book is about looking to Jesus (not me) and learning how to love based on the way he loves others. I'm clearly a work in progress in this area, so let's learn together.

I can't wait to introduce you to some of the people who have helped me learn love's name.

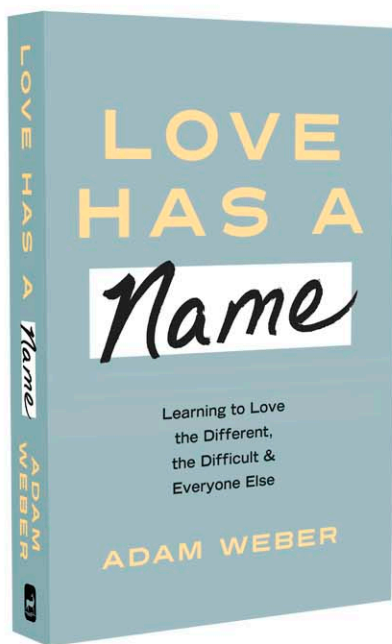
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