



Loving Jesus

by

Mark Allan Powell

Small Group Study Guide

This is a guide not an assignment.

It is meant to guide you in conversation.

If conversation stays on a certain topic for a while...GREAT!

If it is fruitful and good, let the conversation stay there, even if you only get through a small section of the guide.

Leaders, I encourage you to read ahead for upcoming discussions.

I've placed in *random ideas* that might require you to be prepared should you choose to incorporate illustrations.

Loving Jesus
Discussion #1
Read Chapters 1-3

If you were present at worship on September 11th when Dr. Mark Allan Powell spoke, share some of your reflections from what he had to say.

What resonated with you?
Did anything challenge you?
How did his words make you consider your own faith journey?

Powell mentions Paul Ricoeur's term "a second naivete'" as a time when, for some, they rediscover a love for Jesus. He then talks about his own faith development saying,

"I realized that my adolescent infatuation with Jesus was something that I was supposed to outgrow. But do you know what? It never went away. It just got shoved underneath, buried under everything else. I became a closet Jesus freak, in that I knew how to act like someone who was theologically sophisticated, but in reality I still loved Jesus in what seemed to be a most unsophisticated way. So now I'm out of the closet. I got tired of pretending. I don't just believe in Jesus: I love Jesus, and I guess I sometimes exhibit that love in ways that test the conventions of polite society." (pg. 10)

What are your thoughts about a "second naivete'" and about Powell's own experience?

Has there been a time when you focused more on Jesus from the head than from the heart or visa versa?

Compare how you view and love Jesus now compared to when you first remember loving Jesus. How has it changed?

"For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." – 1 Corinthians 1:18

As you reflect on Paul's words above share with one another if you've ever looked foolish to others for loving Jesus.

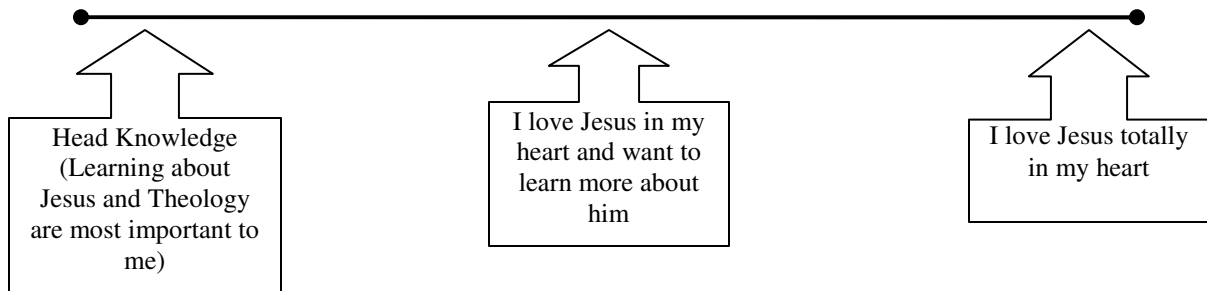
The point...

"The point is not simply that loving Jesus motivates Christians to do good deeds or helps them to develop appealing personalities. There is more to it than that. Loving Jesus is presented as a worthy goal in and of itself. It is not a means to an end: it is the end. It is the essence of spirituality, the defining characteristic of a person who is in a relationship with the God made known to us through Jesus." (pgs. 15-16)

Consider loving Jesus simply for the sake of loving Jesus.
How often do we love Jesus for other reasons?
We want him to make our life better.
We want our kids to grow up knowing about Jesus.
Church is just what we do.

Think of all the reasons we love Jesus.
Do you love your spouse, kids, parents because they do things for you?
Chances are your love is based on more than what they offer to you.
You love them because it's what's in your heart.
Discuss your thoughts on this with one another.

Where are you in terms of your relationship with Jesus right now?



"In his book Mere Christianity, C.S. Lewis tells of an encounter with a man who feels no need for theology. He says, "I know God because I've felt him." Lewis says this is a bit like a sailor saying he has no need for maps or charts because he loves the ocean and has personally experienced its power and glory. Anyone can experience the ocean by taking a walk on a beach, but "a map is going to be of more use than walking on the beach if you want to get to America." Of course, this is correct. Still, I would pity the ship captain who possesses admirable navigational skills but feels no thrill at the smell of salt air or the sound of crashing waves." (pg 21)

How do the heart and the head go together in terms of loving Jesus? How can the two compliment each other? Is this part of the struggle with science and religion?

The Force...

On pages 28-29 Powell remembers the famous Star Wars theme, "use the force Luke." We often use that imagery comparing it to the work of the Holy Spirit, Christ's presence in the world. But he raises an interesting thought. In Star Wars the force is something one used, not something one loved. He asks, "*Is it possible to love an anonymous life*

force that has no personal presence, no distinctive demeanor, no recognizable traits or evident qualities?” (pg 29)

“what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands...we declare to you” (1 John 1:1-3)

What is the difference between the concept of “the force” and our experience with Jesus?
Discuss with each other.

Closing Prayer

Thank God for the love shown to us in Jesus. Lift up needs and confessions of the group.
Thank God that no matter what, Jesus shows us an unending love...no matter what!

Loving Jesus
Discussion #2
Read Chapters 4-5

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always to the end of the age.” – Matthew 28:19-20

“What I’m about to say now is a fact. It doesn’t prejudge what we should or shouldn’t do; it is simply a fact that ought to be acknowledged: no one in the Bible ever invites Jesus into his or her life to be his or her personal Lord and Savior – nor does Jesus ever indicate that he would come into anybody’s life and be his or her personal Lord and Savior even if they were to ask him. The language itself is nonscriptural. That doesn’t mean it’s wrong. It just means that it’s not in the Bible.” (Loving Jesus, pg 35)

Christians often make claims that emphasize one particular way that people can obtain a relationship with Jesus Christ.

Share your own understandings of how to have a relationship with Jesus.

Has your understanding changed over time?

Discuss Dr. Powell’s comments (above from pg 35). Does it challenge your own understanding of a “personal relationship with Jesus Christ”?

Consider the difference between our modern concept of “inviting Jesus to be a part of my life” and the Bible’s concept of “Jesus invites me to become part of his life.”

Discuss how those invitations are different?

“Rather than come into your heart and become part of your body, Jesus wants to draw you to his heart and make you part of his body.” (Loving Jesus, pg 45)

What does Jesus’ body look like? How can we be a part of it?

“Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”
-Matthew 18:20

This verse is often used by pastors who are embarrassed by lack of attendance at worship or at a meeting. But this verse, according to Dr. Powell, is meant more to show how many are needed to feel Christ’s presence, not how few.

“It takes at least two or three, which is to say more than one. The presence of our risen Lord Jesus Christ is not realized in any one individual but, definitively, in

the fellowship or interaction that takes place between individuals.” (Loving Jesus, pgs 32-33)

The story of Jesus and for that matter, the entire story of God throughout the Scriptures isn't a story about individuals finding a personal relationship with God, it's about people being invited to and discovering what it looks like to be in a community of God. It's about how God moves within God's community.

Discuss how is that similar or different from a modern American understanding of faith?

How does this apply to your small group?

What makes your small group different from other types of groups (i.e. – Rotary, parent groups, support groups, etc)?

How can your group be more of what God might be calling it to be?

Closing Prayer:

Pray for members in the group (things going on in your lives), and for the ongoing presence of God within your group.

Loving Jesus
Discussion #3
Chapters 6-7

“When Christians say they believe that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead, they don’t just mean that he was miraculously raised from the dead after being crucified. They mean that Jesus Christ is still alive and active today.” (Loving Jesus, pg 53)

“We don’t just admire Jesus: we claim that he is still alive and that we are in an ongoing living relationship with him.” (Loving Jesus, pg 53)

“For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me.” – Matthew 26:11

We talk a lot about the ongoing presence of Christ (Matthew 28:20) but when is the last time you considered his absence?

During communion we remind ourselves of Jesus ongoing presence and we remember him, but we also talk of anticipation of when he will return. What does it mean to have Jesus with us, but not like he was, or like he will be?

Have you ever been away from someone you love for a period of time?

What did that feel like?

Was there an ache?

How did you get ready for their return?

The band U2 wrote a song called, “I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For.”

*I believe in the kingdom come
Then all the colors will bleed into one
Bleed into one
Well yes I’m still running*

*You broke the bonds and you
Loosed the chains
Carried the cross
Of my shame
Of my shame
You know I believed it*

*But I still haven’t found what I’m looking for
But I still haven’t found what I’m looking for
But I still haven’t found what I’m looking for
But I still haven’t found what I’m looking for...
(U2, I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For, The Joshua Tree, 1987)*

Consider watching this clip together and reflecting on lyrics.
<http://youtu.be/r07tUdgzCbk>

How does this song depict our longing as people who love Jesus?

How does Jesus' presence lead us into the hope of Christ's return?

Christians often joke about the wafers and tiny sip of wine used during communion. Little tasteless crackers and a shot glass of bad wine that are meant to represent a meal. Dr. Powell states that he looks at communion now with the attitude, "*Enough with the appetizers! I want the feast!*" (*Loving Jesus*, pg 58)

Discuss how communion is both Jesus' presence and absence proclaimed. What does this thought stir up in you?

Closing Prayer:

Thank God for places where you've seen Jesus present. Lift up places where Christ's presence is needed.

Loving Jesus
Discussion #4
Chapters 8-10

“So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice and no one will take your joy from you.” – John 16:22

“I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God.” –Romans 8:18-19

*“I see all kinds of suffering and trials in this world that don’t seem to accomplish any good for anyone at all. If it’s all part of some great divine plan, then I must be out of the loop, and I’m left with a lot of unanswered questions. It doesn’t help – at least, it doesn’t help me – to be told that ‘everything happens for a reason.’”
(Loving Jesus, pg 71)*

How does the phrase “everything happens for a reason” oversimplify faith?

Consider this quote from Holocaust survivor Corrie ten Boom as depicted in the movie *The Hiding Place*:

“If God wants to help us, but can’t, then God is not powerful. And if God can help us, but won’t, then God does not care.” (Loving Jesus, pg 72)

ten Boom and many other prisoners however, did survive the concentration camps with their faith in God intact. Why? Discuss.

We all know that there is a lot of messed up things in the world. Why doesn’t God fix them? Why not now?

What does the phrase, “Already and Not Yet” mean?

It’s easy to envision the “Kingdom of God” as a place where God lives and where we hopefully go when we die. What does it mean to realize that the word *Kingdom* (basileia in Greek) is a noun that expresses action?

In the Lord’s Prayer when we pray, “*thy kingdom come, thy will be done*” what are we hoping for?

Instead of waiting for the kingdom, how can you experience it?

Closing Prayer
The Lord’s Prayer

Loving Jesus
Discussion #5
Chapters 11-13

“Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear?” – Mark 8:17-18

The Gospel of Mark in particular paints a picture of the disciples as losers. They were often weak, disappointing, and clueless. Jesus is frequently annoyed with them.

Discuss why you think Mark describes the disciples this way?

Rabbis usually chose the smartest, brightest, and most promising disciples. Who did Jesus choose?

Compare yourself to the disciples. Where might Jesus say to you/your group, *“Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear?”*

“Loving Jesus means loving someone who might sometimes get very annoyed with us, exasperated by our stupidity and appalled at our incompetence.” (Loving Jesus, pg 103)

In Mark do Jesus disciples ever “get it”? (Mark 8:17-20; 8:33; 9:18-19; 9:34; 10:35-37; 14:10-11, 44-45; 14:29-31; 14:66-72)

Does Jesus ever give up on them?

“You can be closer to God, but it has everything to do with Jesus and nothing to do with you. You can be in a relationship with Jesus, but on his terms not yours. The relationship is based entirely on his faithfulness to you and not at all on your faithfulness to him.” (Loving Jesus, pg 107)

What does it mean to know that Jesus never gives up on you?

Discuss experiences in your lives where you had someone who never gave up on you.

What did that do for your understanding of yourself?

Compare that to Jesus, who never gives up on you.

“Grace does not mean Jesus chooses us even though we are such losers. It means he chooses us because we are such losers – even the best of us.” (Loving Jesus, pg 107)

Jesus is for losers! Discuss why that’s difficult for us to understand.

Jesus keeps his disciples.

In Mark 16:7, a messenger at the tomb tells Mary Magdalene and Mary, Mother of James, and Salome to, “*Go tell his disciples and Peter that Jesus is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.*”

Discuss: The disciples had deserted Jesus.

They hid from the crowds, betrayed Jesus, and denied knowing him. Yet the messengers words are “Go tell the disciples!”

What is the invitation?

How will you respond?

Closing Prayer

Thank God for never leaving us, even when we leave God. Ask God to give your group and it's members the courage to go tell the good news that Jesus keeps us, no matter what.

Loving Jesus
Discussion #6
Chapters 14

“To worship God is to adore God. So much else goes on in what we call a “worship service” that it is easy to forget this, or to fail to realize it in the first place. Worship is the corporate expression of the church’s love for God. When we worship God, we love God, as a community, together. We can love God as individuals, but worship is something more. Worship is corporate love.”
(Loving Jesus, pg 128)

What’s the number one reason, according to Diane Jacobson, as to why Christianity is unattractive to people in their teens and twenties? (Hint, see pg 128-129)

Read the Mark Powell’s story of an encounter with another Christian rock fan in Austin, Texas out loud (bottom of page 129 to middle of page 130).

Discuss everyone’s reaction to this story.

Dr. Powell on page 131 uses the image of going to his son’s Eagle Scout badge ceremony for Boy Scouts. He remarks that afterward nobody left saying, “I didn’t get anything out of that” or “Nobody paid attention to my needs.” Why? Because the ceremony wasn’t about them.

It’s only in the past century in America, that the concept of “getting something” out of church has entered our minds.

“Sunday is the Lord’s day. We gather to honor our Lord. Do we measure the quality of a worship service by how much it blesses us? Think again! Six days a week God blesses us, my mother would say. Is it too much to ask that one day – one hour – we set aside to say “Thank you?” But, no. We want to get blessed during that hour too! And if we don’t, well then, we just won’t come anymore.”
(Loving Jesus, pg 131)

“This hour is for adoring God, for praising Jesus Christ, for giving thanks to our Lord who is so good to us. That is why we are here. This is what we have come to do. If you get blessed, it’s a bonus, a by-product. It’s nice when that happens. We hope it happens a lot--but it’s not why we’re here. This is the Lord’s day, and we have come to worship the Lord.” (Loving Jesus, pg 132)

Discuss the two above statements from Dr. Powell. The second is what he would say to his people if he were currently a pastor of a congregation.

Do you find his words challenging or reaffirming?

Do you understand church as for you or for God?

How can you/your small group open yourselves up to honest worship of God?

Closing Prayer

Share with God that you/your group realizes that God is God and we aren't.

Ask God to forgive us for always making it about us.

Thank God for loving us even when we get it backward.

Loving Jesus
Conversation #7
Chapters 15-17

MONEY (A subject we all love to talk about in church)

Discuss: Your reaction when you come to church and find out it's a Sunday focusing on stewardship. Why do we feel that way?

"Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" – Matthew 6:21

According to Dr. Powell, most people translate this verse as, *"Where your heart is, there your treasure will be."* (pg 139) How are those two different?

"According to Jesus, there is a way for us to alter our spiritual affections. We can decide what we want to care about, and then we can do something that will change us inside until we really do care about those things." (Loving Jesus, pg 139)

"There may be no more sure recipe for spiritual growth than giving away your money. There is probably no more biblical recipe for spiritual growth than that." (Loving Jesus, pg 140)

As Westerners we get uncomfortable with the church meddling with our money. For us, it's very personal. Yet Jesus spends an incredible amount of time discussing money. Read Matthew 6:21 (above) again. Dr. Powell points out that this statement from Jesus is a promise. It's not a commandment but a promise.

So if we want to find our heart in the things of God what can we do to steer in that direction?

Does it shift your thought to understand that Jesus sees the act of giving your treasure away as happening before discovering that your heart will follow?

What is one thing that Westerners value even more than our money?

Dr. Powell's answer...

Our Time

"(Jesus) was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray..." – Luke 11:1

"I have so much to do that I must spend many hours in prayer before I am able to do it." – John Wesley (Loving Jesus, pg 142)

Discuss: Your own prayer lives.

What does a disciplined life of prayer look like to you?

What does your own prayer life look like?

What keeps you from a more disciplined life of prayer?

Consider the question asked by Jesus disciple, “*Lord, teach us to pray.*” Obviously the disciples struggled with how to pray.

Consider the **A-C-T-S** pattern for prayer (Loving Jesus, pgs 160-164):

A – Adoration – recognizing God and realizing whom we are addressing.

Example: “*Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name*”. Try making a list of God’s attributes (powerful, loving, faithful, merciful, kind, etc.).

C – Confession – recognizing who we are.

“*To pray is to walk in the full light of God, and to say simply, without holding back, ‘I am human and you are God.’*” – Henri Nouwen

“*You can’t pray a lie – I found that out.*” – Huckleberry Finn

“*Confession reminds us that we are in relationship with a God who loves us with true love exactly the way we are.*” (Loving Jesus, pg 163)

T – Thanksgiving – What are the things in your life that are good? What are you grateful to God for?

S – Supplication – Asking for stuff. Example: “*give us this day our daily bread, forgive us our trespasses.*”

Example of ACTS Prayer:

A – Jesus, I love you

C – I’m sorry I became annoyed with Peggy Today

T – Thank you for forgiving me,

S – And help me to be more patient with her tomorrow

Practice

In order to take this model from conceptual to practical, we need put it to practice. If your group is comfortable doing so take 5 minutes and have each member of the group write a prayer using this model. Share your prayers with one another as a closing prayer.

Loving Jesus
Conversation #8
Chapters 18-20

“People who enjoy God seem to be people who enjoy life, and people who find delight and pleasure in God seem to be people who take delight and pleasure in the world that God has made.” (Loving Jesus, pg 182)

Discuss: Read Dr. Powell’s statement above. Share with one another your response.

Jesus loved God and loved being human.

Jesus made more wine.

When the Pharisees got on people for not following difficult cleanliness laws, Jesus rebuked them.

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is always eating – loves celebrating the presence of others through food.

His critics describe him as a “glutton” which refers to one who eats and drinks a lot.

Dr. Powell points out that when he needs an image for the kingdom of heaven Jesus choose a big party where the “fatted calf” is eaten and where there is loud music and dancing.

Is this how you see Jesus?

What does it mean to understand Jesus as one who loves God and loves being human?

Discuss how we can:

1. Enjoy the world as Jesus enjoyed it.
2. Live in the world as Jesus lived in it.
3. Care for the world as Jesus cared for it.
4. Suffer for the world as Jesus suffered for it.

Knowing We Are Loved by God

“Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.” – John 13:1

“Loving Jesus is our way of coming closer to this God, of adoring the God who adores us, of taking delight in the God who delights in us, or loving the God who loves us first.” (Loving Jesus, pg 195)

“We are not loved because we are lovely, but we are lovely because we are loved.” – Martin Luther (Loving Jesus, pg 193)

What are your thoughts about the way God feels about you?

The Bible is filled with examples of God’s love for all of humanity (Jeremiah 31:3; Romans 8:35-39; 1 John 4:16; Jude 21)

“and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” – Luke 3:6

Does it change your understanding of God to know the biblical truth that *“God loves us, not in spite of what we are but because of what we are, because we are essentially and ultimately the lovely and lovable people whom God in grace made us to be.”* (Loving Jesus, pg 194)

Discuss:

Do you live with awareness of the truth that God loves, adores, and takes delight in you?

Do you know that God thinks you are beautiful and is proud to have you?

Does understanding God’s love for us change the way we live in this world?

How has this book helped you to love Jesus?

Closing Prayer

Choose 3 people in your group to take turns reading the following verse out loud. In between readings leave 1 minute or so for silence. As it is read each time, listen for which word resonates with you. During the silence ask God why this word, at this time, in this place sticks out. After it has been read three times and a time of silence is offered, share with one another which word stuck out.

“I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:35-39)