

→ FOR STARTERS

What does it mean for you to love God?

How is loving God the foundation of your ministry to teenagers?

IN THE TRENCHES

Someone I admire in our youth ministry is Ellie. She works full time; she's a wife, a mom, and a grandma; and she leads an eighth-grade girls' small group. With all of the roles Ellie juggles, you'd think she would be constantly frazzled, if not completely out of her mind. But she isn't! She's a loving, gracious, wise woman who knows God deeply. Her spiritual depth radiates. When you're with her, you sense God's presence; her love for God is very evident—in her words, her smile, and her actions.

This depth benefits our youth ministry because it overflows into the eighth-grade girls and sets a standard for other youth leaders. Ellie puts God first in her life, and everyone she encounters feels it. She has enough time to fulfill all of her roles because God rules her schedule and her heart.

TRAINING on the GO

Most people believe that a good youth worker must, above all, *love* teenagers. However, as important as that is, it's not the main element in a strong ministry to teenagers. Your primary love should be for God.

Maybe this seems obvious and simple, but I'm not referring to any ordinary love here. I'm suggesting a passion-filled love for God that is evident and leaks into the lives of those around you—a genuine love for God that is so strong that students see, sense, and experience him whenever they are around you.

It's not about your perfection. It's about presence—God's presence in your life. In order for the foundation of your youth ministry to be strong, it must be built on the leaders' spiritual passion and love for God. That means you; you play a significant part in the health of that foundation.

When you're intimately connected to God regularly, that connection will become apparent in your actions, body language, attitudes, and genuine concern for people. Students are intelligent; they can discern between someone who has a textbook knowledge of God's love and someone who has an ongoing, daily personal experience with God.

A stable, long-lasting ministry requires leaders who put their spiritual development before their ministry development. This idea isn't new. Jesus clearly explained the importance of loving God: “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: “Love your neighbor as yourself” ’ ’ (Matthew 22:36-39).

Note the distinction between these two commandments. Loving the Lord your God is the greatest, and loving others as yourself is the second greatest. Reversing this order can have devastating effects on your spiritual life. Serving in ministry and loving others can even become an excuse for not falling more deeply in love with God.

Failure to see the difference between loving God (focusing on him) and loving others (doing ministry) can result in a ministry-focused life rather than a God-focused life. Please, slow down and reread that last sentence. Does the distinction make sense to you? Your service in youth ministry should never come at the expense of your personal passion and depth for God.

Many volunteers start off with a passion for God and a genuine love for students but then allow the busyness and the pace of the ministry to rob them of their spiritual depth. If you work hard to do great ministry to teenagers instead of nurturing your love for God, you'll end up in the wrong place. There's nothing wrong with hard work in ministry; it's probably motivated by a genuine concern. However, it's nowhere near as important as genuinely wanting to follow Jesus, love him, and reveal that love by loving others.

CONNECT to God's Word

“He answered: ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind’; and, “Love your neighbor as yourself.”” —Luke 10:27

- How are you currently living out what's most important?
- How are you not?
- In what ways does your ministry to teenagers reflect your love for God?

Write a response and prayer to God here...

TO THE POINT

- Loving God is more important than loving your ministry.
- Rely on God's power instead of your own.
- Don't allow ministry busyness to distract you from deepening your relationship with God.
- Allow God's love to leak into every area of your ministry.

TRY IT

Grab a piece of paper and write a letter, expressing your love to God. There are no rules for writing this letter; no one will be checking your grammar or spelling. It's just you and God and an opportunity to express your love for him.

Remove distractions...Forget about your ministry tasks...Don't think about anything but God—who loves you. You are his child, his creation. Just take a moment and love him through your written words. Take a deep breath and remember that you belong to him. It doesn't matter what you write; you can write words of praise or just write the words “I love you” over and over—it's up to you.

MAKE IT PERSONAL