

TRANSCRIPT

We begin our time together with one of the most basic and foundational, yet deeply misunderstood elements of the Christian faith: LOVE. “Love” is one of the most misused and over-used words in our culture. Most uses of the word “love” in everyday language are inappropriate, ill-defined or just plain absurd. Let’s read the statement of faith first, and then we will discover what it means to love one another as God loves us. The statement of faith says this:

“We believe that love one for another as Jesus loves the believer manifests our discipleship, proves our love for God and symbolizes our authority as New Testament churches. Love is therefore the great commandment of the LORD Jesus Christ upon which all others are dependent.”

WHAT IS LOVE? We should begin by understanding the definition of the major word in this statement: “LOVE.” It quickly becomes obvious how confused our culture is when it comes to love by simply looking in the dictionary and finding no less than 9 different definitions for one simple word. The word “love” is used to describe anything from physical attraction to mild affection; from enthusiasm to objects of devotion; from general concern for someone to the physical act of loving devotion (“I love ice cream, I love my phone, I love my car, I love my wife...”).

The kind of love we refer to in this first doctrine is qualified biblically as the same kind of love that Jesus has for the believer. That sharpens our understanding of love, and I think the definition from the Holman Bible Dictionary sums it up best: Love is the “unselfish, loyal, and benevolent concern for the well-being of another.”

WHAT IS THE BASIS FOR LOVE? Where does love come from? How do we come to know and understand an unselfish and benevolent concern for someone else’s well-being? Certainly there are natural affections and emotions with which we were all born, but it doesn’t come natural to sacrificially love someone we don’t know very well, does it?

John, the apostle, spent years at Jesus’ side; he ate and drank with Christ, he listened to and learned from Christ; he stood at the foot of the cross as Jesus was crucified and, along with Peter, witnessed the empty tomb on the first Easter morning. As the beloved disciple of Jesus, he was well qualified to instruct the followers of Jesus on what it means to love others as God loves us. John said:

“We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him: Whoever loves God must also love his brother.” (1 John 4:19-21, ESV)

John reiterates the teachings of Jesus, who taught the first and greatest commandment is to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” (Matthew 22:35-40) You see, THIS is the basis for our love for one another, namely, the love of God. Unless we receive the love of God in faith, we will never know what true love is, much less be able to express our love to others. What kind of love does God have for us? It was displayed for us in the death of Jesus Christ on the cross: While we were sinning, Jesus died on the cross for our sins, satisfying the wrath of God. That’s how much He loves us.

TDP Number 1 The Doctrine of Love

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In fact, I want to pause right here and ask you this very important question: Have you embraced the love of God for you by expressing your faith in His son Jesus Christ who died for you? You can be sure that NOTHING in life will make sense to you and EVERY relationship you have on earth will end in frustration and futility if you have not FIRST received God's love for you by faith and responded with love for Him in return. We only know what true love is because of how God has demonstrated it for us, which brings us to the next question:

WHY SHOULD WE LOVE ONE ANOTHER? Why is it so important that I show an “unselfish, loyal, and benevolent concern for the well-being” of others? I mean, I have my own problems that I can barely handle myself; why does God command me to sacrifice my own comfort and well-being for the sake of others? Well, if it isn't enough that God COMMANDED us to love one another, there are other, significant reasons why we must show love to one another:

1. Loving each other “manifests our discipleship.” Every one of us is on a spiritual journey the bible calls “sanctification.” Sanctification is the progressive work of God on us whereby God conforms us – shapes us – into the image of Christ. That means that, as we follow Christ every day, practicing the spiritual disciplines such as prayer, Bible study, worship, and service, we look more and more like Him as each day goes by. But how will the people around us know we are disciples of Christ? Many people call themselves Christians – followers of Christ – but interact with others in the same manner as those who do not believe in Christ. Love for others is the manifestation – the DISPLAY – of GOD IN US. Love shows to others that we are INDEED following Christ in our private disciplines. Brotherly love is the way our devotion to Christ is worked out from our hearts to our hands. In fact, in John 13:36, Jesus told His church: “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

2. Loving each other “proves our love for God.” When we express “unselfish, loyal, and benevolent concern for the well-being” of others, in a very real sense, we are expressing our loving devotion to God. In fact, Jesus told His followers that showing sacrificial love for others was the same as showing sacrificial love to Him. In Matthew 25, Jesus told His followers that if they possessed true faith it would work itself out in genuine compassion for others, proving to the world that they indeed loved God. He said at the end of time, everyone will be judged by how their love for God defined and motivated their love for others. Jesus said that He would stand at the end of time and say “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’ (Matthew 25:35-40, ESV) Our benevolent and sacrificial concern for others proves that we love God. He is the one who compels us to love each other.

3. Loving each other “symbolizes our authority as New Testament churches.” A church is a group of baptized believers who have joined together in covenant relationship to fulfill God's command to make disciples of all nations. The people who make up the church can do many things in order to reach people with the Good News of Jesus, but if they do not love the people around them, the church is in danger of losing the blessing and even the powerful presence and authority of God. When Jesus spoke to the church at Ephesus in Revelation 2, he com-

TDP Number 1 The Doctrine of Love

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mended the church for their strong stance on His truth and applauded them for their patient endurance through suffering. But quickly, the Lord's pleasure with them turned to a strong word of disappointment and warning: He said, "I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first." Then the warning came: "If not, I will come to you and remove your lamp stand from its place, unless you repent." (Revelation 2:4-5, ESV) This means that God's people can and WILL get it wrong in many ways, but we are NOT allowed to withhold genuine compassion from others without SEVERE consequences, namely, that God would remove the presence and blessing of His Spirit from our congregations and we would lose the power and authority with which the congregation seeks to obey the Great Commission. You see, it doesn't matter what your church does for your city or community; if your labor is LACKING a genuine "unselfish, loyal, and benevolent concern for the well-being" of others, your labor will be fruitless, absent of the presence and power of the Spirit of Christ. The old saying will prove true: "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care."

HOW DO WE LOVE EACH OTHER? We've understood WHY we should love each other, but I want to spend the rest of our time learning HOW we can love each other sacrificially. Unselfish benevolent concern for the well-being of others does not come naturally to us, and is COUNTER-CULTURAL in our world. How do we make OTHERS our concern when EVERYTHING about the secular culture tells us that it's ALL ABOUT ME? Nearly everything we see, read, hear or perceive tells us that the most important person in the entire world is ME and the most important value in the entire world is MY COMFORT. From food to vehicles, music to magazines, businesses to even some churches, the most important thing is to cater to the consumer's needs. SO, it is vitally important for believers to understand how to resist the urge to make the world revolve about US and to sustain a healthy concern for the well-being of others.

We realize from scripture that, after we have received the unconditional love from God by faith in Christ, MAINTAINING a spirit of sacrificial compassion for others is ALL ABOUT our ATTITUDE and mind set. We must not just VALUE showing love toward others, but we must VALUE OTHERS. Showing sacrificial love toward others sometimes makes us feel good on the inside, but there are times when doing the right thing will NOT be accompanied by warm and fuzzy feelings. We must actually LOVE OTHERS, not just love SERVING others. How do we do that? What are the keys to ensuring that we obey the new commandment of Christ to love one another as He loves us?

1. The first key is FAITH. We must live by faith and not by sight. If we look at others with only our physical eyes, we may NEVER find someone who we think is worthy of our sacrificial benevolence. But it's VERY DANGEROUS to live by sight. We must look more deeply and see the spiritual potential in every human being to bring glory to God. We must see every person as an eternal soul and trust that God has the power to use us to bring about life transformation in their lives. Do you have the faith in God to love others willingly and sacrificially? Can you trust that God will honor and reward the sacrifice of your time, energy and money for His glory and the well-being of others? Jesus encouraged his followers to "give, and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap." (Luke 6:38 ESV) We have to trust God that He rewards those who seek Him and will give us abundant life through our expressions of love toward others.

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2. The second key is HUMILITY. We must see everyone – including ourselves – as EQUAL RECIPIENTS of the grace and mercy of God. At the foot of the cross of Christ we are ALL EQUAL. That means EVERY PERSON we see is a person for whom Christ died. While humility is a deeply spiritual character trait, practically, it is also a choice we must make – an attitude we must consciously enact. The apostle Paul encouraged the church members in Philippi to do just that when he said “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” (Philippians 2:3-8, ESV) Our ultimate example of humility and sacrificial love is Jesus, who was willing to let go of the glories of heaven, empty himself – pour himself out into human flesh – and lay His life down on the cross, spilling His blood for the sins of the world. He came to earth not to be served, but to serve mankind, giving His life as the ransom for many. THAT is sacrificial love and the key is humility: Counting OTHERS as more significant than yourself.

3. The third key is PATIENCE. Remember we are ALL broken people – we ALL bring our own issues and weaknesses to the table, and we are ALL recovering from sin – and when we rub elbows with one another and seek restoration, there WILL be tension and, after a matter of time, offenses. Paul encouraged the church members in Rome to be patient with each other when he wrote, “We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, ‘The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me.’” (Romans 15:1-3, ESV) Then, in his letter to the churches in Galatia, he said, “Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness.” (Galatians 6:1) That takes PATIENCE! If there is one thing we ALL have in common, it’s our ability to let each other down from time to time. Be patient with each other.

WHAT IS ACCOMPLISHED BY LOVE? What does loving God and loving others accomplish? Does it help make the world a better place? Well, yes, sometimes it does. Does it give me a sense of accomplishment? Yes, sometimes it does, sometimes it doesn’t. Does it show others what God is like? Yes, sometimes it does. But there is a greater accomplishment we must consider when we obey God’s command to love: Love fulfills EVERYTHING God wants to do in us and through us in the world. The very last sentence of today’s doctrine says “Love is therefore the great commandment of the LORD Jesus Christ upon which all others are dependent.”

That means we CANNOT satisfy God’s will for us in ANYTHING we do unless it is motivated by genuine sacrificial compassion for Him and others. The apostle Paul summarized the importance of love like this:

“If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.” (1 Corinthians 13:1-3, ESV)

In everything we do, we begin with LOVE, because WHY we do WHAT we do matters to God more than simply what we do. He knows our hearts. He knows our motives. May our hearts break for what breaks His.