



A Life of Love

“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:35)

To follow Christ is to live a life of love. In his teachings, in his attitudes and actions, in the shape of his entire life, Jesus was the perfect expression of God’s love. Jesus’ willingness to become a servant, to give up his own divine privileges, to lay down his life for all humanity is the highest example of this love. To pattern our lives on the love of God, we must follow the way of love that we see in Jesus. It is God who defines love and it is Jesus who reveals God’s love in flesh, and we rightly understand love when we follow the example of Jesus.

The Greatest Command

Read Matthew 22:34-40; Mark 12:28-31; Luke 6:27-37, 10:27; John 13:33-35, 15:9-13

Jesus didn’t ask us to love or hope that we would love; rather Jesus *commanded us to love* because our joy and fulfillment depend on it. We learn the meaning of love in a life of discipleship with Jesus. Jesus summarized everything he was about in the single commandment to love (Matt 22:37-39; Mark 12:29-31; Luke 10:27). The love command of Jesus concerns not only our immediate peers but also, and indeed especially, socially marginalized people, including foreigners and even one’s enemies (Matt 5:43-48; Luke 6:27-36). Whereas sinners and the wicked love those who love them, the followers of Jesus should go well beyond this and practice unconditional love for their neighbors.

The love of Christ is to come into the world through his followers, so what does it mean to love as Jesus does? Consider what Jesus said at the Last Supper in his farewell address to his disciples. Previously he already said that we must love God wholeheartedly and love our neighbors as we love ourselves, but on the night before he died, Jesus told his disciples, “I give you a new commandment.” The disciples were to love each other in the

same way that Jesus had loved them (John 13:34). In other words, the love of Jesus is the measure and standard of mutual love, and his self-surrender and sacrifice on the cross would be the highest expression of his love for the disciples (John 15:13; 1 John 3:16).

To love like Christ is to love even when it is not deserved or expected. It is a radical love that calls us to love our enemies. During his earthly ministry, the world's hatred was focused not on the disciples but rather on Jesus (John 7:7). After Jesus departed, the hatred for Jesus led to hatred for the community of believers (John 15:18-25). But Jesus says this community must not react in kind—to return hatred with hate only continues the cycle of violence. Instead, Jesus calls his disciples to love and continue his mission.

Just as God sent Jesus into the world, Jesus sends his disciples into the world (John 17:18; 20:21). And the world will gain saving knowledge of Jesus and his mission by the love and unity of the believers who mirror Jesus' love (John 13:35; 14:31; 17:21-23). The plan, purpose, and goal for our lives is love — to experience the self-sacrificial love of God through Christ, and because of that love, to freely and similarly give it to others. A life of love is never wasted. It's freely given.

The Extravagant Love of the Father

The way of life envisioned by love is not easily achieved. The hurt, betrayal, and disappointment we suffer and inflict teach us to love cautiously and guardedly; they teach us to narrow the circle of love, not extend it. We learn not to trust, not to befriend, but also not to risk and, therefore, not to grow. Loving one another as God loves us can open us to further hurt and disappointment because of what it will ask of us, but what is the cost of not taking that risk?

A life of love is not a safe and cautious one. Paul Wadell observes that it is “a challenging way of life because it commits us to fashion our lives according to the love of God that we see embodied in Jesus. But it is also a joyous and hopeful way of life because it is guided neither by the hurts of the past nor the shortcomings of the present, but by a vision of coming the kingdom of God, that community of perfect and eternal mutual love.” This love begins with God the Father. Jesus illustrates the essence of our Father's extravagant love for his children in the well-known parable of the prodigal son.

Read Luke 15:11-32. The word *prodigal* refers to actions or persons who are unsparingly extravagant or even wasteful to the point of giving of their last resources. Typically, we call this well-known parable “The Prodigal Son,” but that title is actually a bit misleading. The point of the parable is not the younger (prodigal) son's recklessly extravagant living. Instead it's about God's generous, extravagant love.

In the parable we learn that the younger son requests his inheritance, which is the equivalent of wishing the father were dead (according to Jewish custom, a younger son received 1/3 of the inheritance which was usually received at the father's death but which had been divided earlier. See 1 Kings 1-2). The shocking part is that the wealthy father grants the request.

The father in the story essentially had to tear his life apart in order to honor the request of early inheritance from the younger son. A.J. Levine explains, “The father's community would have observed what was happening (selling of land and livestock) and thought he should be ashamed of this son. In Hebrew culture, this action by the son is equivalent to disowning his family. This would bring a great deal of shame and separation. The culture even had a ritual for cases like this where the father would break a pot on the ground upon an estranged child's return home as a sign of what he has been broken cannot be put back together. This is what the younger son would have expected, even while he's putting together his apology and request to be back in the family.”

As the son rehearses a speech and heads home, he is fairly certain he will be harshly treated by the father. But this is where the prodigal nature of the father is revealed in the story. The father runs to meet his son before the son can even voice his confession, and the father's response is far more receptive than the son had dared to imagine. As the son is embraced by the arms of his father, we can assume he felt afraid. We can tell by how he immediately speaks of his unworthiness: "I am no longer worthy to be called your son." But there is no better place to be. This gracious, loving father in Jesus' parable is given to us as a picture of our heavenly Father. When the prodigal son fell into the hands of his father, forgiveness, healing, and restoration began. When we fall into the hands of our heavenly Father, we are in the hands of a loving God.

We should remember that the father not only had two sons but loved two sons, went out to two sons, and was generous to two sons. The joy at the return of the younger son in no way means that the elder son was less loved or favored. The father does not compare the two sons. He loves them both with a complete love and expresses that love according to their own journeys. The father goes out to the elder son just as he did to the younger, urges him to come in, and says, "My son, you are with me always, and all I have is yours."

Becoming Like Our Father

The parable's model of love insists that no matter what the prodigal son has done, he is still the father's son. When no one else would even give the son something to eat, the father runs to him and accepts him back. The joyful celebration begins as soon as the father recognized the son on the horizon. The father runs to meet his son even before the son can voice his confession, and the father's response is far more receptive than the son had dared even to imagine. The father's celebration conveys the joy in heaven. The picture is one of sheer love and grace. It is enough that the son has come home.

On the other end of the spectrum, the older brother represents all of us who think we can make it on our own. The parable shows that those who would live by merit can never know the joy of grace. We can't share in the Father's love if we demand that he deal with us according to what we deserve. Sharing in God's grace requires that we join the celebration when others are recipients of that love also. Part of following Christ is loving, receiving, and rejoicing with others who do not deserve our forgiveness or God's grace. Each person is of such value to God that none is excluded from God's love and mercy. Neither should we withhold our own.

Ultimately, our vision and commitment should be to become like the father. To experience this love forms us into a people whose lives are committed to becoming like our heavenly Father, just as Jesus was, extending that same love to the world. Becoming like our heavenly Father is not just one aspect of Jesus' teaching, it's the very heart of his message. Jesus taught us what God is like through his words, his actions, and his very being, making it clear that "God is love" (1 John 4:8,16). God is the father who watches and waits for his children, runs out to meet them, and embraces them with arms of love.

To become like our heavenly Father, we must prepare our hearts to love and forgive, just as we have been loved and forgiven. If our actions and behaviors are to be "the imitation of God," we should start by observing what God is doing all the time and everywhere, and then do the same thing.

As Paul writes in Ephesians 5:1-2, "Imitate God, therefore, in everything you do, because you are his dear children. Live a life filled with love, following the example of Christ. He loved us and offered himself as a sacrifice for us, a pleasing aroma to God." What does God do? God does what God is: Love. And we are called to do the same, in everything we do.

Our Commitments To A Life of Love¹

As Jesus illustrates in the parable, God does not love us *if and when we change*. God loves us unconditionally and by that love we are transformed. That's what we do for one another as loving people—offer safe relationships in which we can be transformed. This kind of love is far from sentimental; it has real power and it requires real commitment. What would the world look like if every aspect of our lives was a manifestation of God's love? To meet this challenge, let us commit ourselves to practice four key elements of love in our own lives.

Element 1: A Commitment to Steadfastness, Patience, and Faithfulness

A life of love is both a covenant and a commitment — not primarily emotion or affection. Commitment does not deny emotions, it reorders emotions. Love is often hard work. In the absence of hard work, love remains superficial and conditional. Like God's love, our love should be steadfast, patient, and faithful.

God's love never stops and God's love never fails, even if it means being so intimately involved in our lives that love brings suffering and loss to God, a fact that the death of Jesus vividly attests. We can refuse to love God, but that doesn't keep God from loving us. We can be unfaithful to God, but that doesn't weaken God's faithful, persevering love for us. God's love lasts, and our love should too. But the only way love can last is if we are willing to be patient, steadfast, and faithful, to one another.

Element 2: A Commitment to Consistent Presence

A life of love is incarnational. The incarnation of Christ revealed God with us and taught us that love cannot be love without consistent presence. To live a life of love means that we utilize all the dimensions of presence (care, commitment, trust, integrity, responsibility) in our everyday lives. We succeed in doing this only by cultivating awareness. Being aware enables us to recognize others and examine our actions to see what is needed.

Throughout the Gospels, the best thing to happen to a human being was to be brought into the presence of Jesus. There they found all that was needed for an abundant life. We are called to be such a people in the world today, which requires a commitment to presence. Love is a commitment to be “with” another no matter what. We know we are happiest not when our lives are guided by excessive self-concern, but when we part of relationships and communities where people care for one another, watch out for one another, support one another, and are faithful to one another.

Element 3: A Commitment to Recognizing and Affirming the Goodness of Others

A life of love is “for” the other. God's love is creative and affirming. In the most general sense, to love something is to find it good, which is what God declared about everything God created. A love modeled on God strives to continue what God's love began. If to be loved by God is to be creatively willed and affirmed into existence, to love another person is to delight in their existence and to devote our energy and attention to making them be. Indeed, the only way truly to affirm another's existence is to do what we can to bring them more fully to life. Our love is like God's love anytime we affirm and uphold the goodness of another's existence.

“Love believes all things.” In every circumstance of life, there is a way of perceiving that leads to cynicism and division, and there is a way that leads to higher faith and love, to a higher and more fruitful outcome. To “believe all things” means always to orient ourselves toward the highest possible outcome in any situation or relationship and to work towards making it a reality. We consistently see redemptive outcomes within the relationships that Jesus forms with the sinners and outcasts of his day. They are testimonies to the transformative power that comes from authentic, unconditional love that affirms the goodness of others.

¹ The four elements of love are adapted from Earl Lavender's Wednesday night series “Living the Way of Jesus in a World of Complex Issues”

Element 4: A Commitment to Seeking the True Well-Being of Others

Finally, love wants what is best for another, as God does. Jesus consistently sought the good of all who came to him in need. To love is to want others to flourish and to prosper; it is to wish the greatest goodness and excellence that is possible for them. It is easy enough to avow love, but much harder to sustain it in practical, insightful, and steady ways. That is why love is best understood not just as an attitude or disposition, but as a heartfelt commitment to seek, work for, and be faithfully involved in promoting what is best for another.

“Love bears all things.” There are two meanings of the word *bear*, and they both apply. The first means “to hold up, to sustain” — like a bearing wall, which carries the weight of the house. To bear also means “to give birth, to be fruitful.” So love is that which in any situation is the most life-giving and fruitful to the well-being of another. If we want to make a difference in someone’s life we will love them well, meet them where they are, see and receive them as one who is made in the image of God commit to seeking their best interest, and empty ourselves for their sake.

In all of these things, Jesus calls us to a life of love, to be a people who demonstrate the steadfast love of God that was revealed to us in his own life. If we are known for anything as a community of believers at Brentwood Hills, let it be this: that we are a people of inexhaustible, unconditional, steadfast love.

Discussion

1. How did you define or describe love when you were in college? How has your understanding changed or evolved since then? Is there a specific person or a life event that helped your understanding of love grow?
2. What makes the father the most remarkable character in the parable of Luke 15:11-32? What does this story tell us about the character of God and nature of God’s love? In what ways would you like to become more like the father in this story?
3. Which of the four commitments to love (listed above) come most naturally to you? Which ones require a deeper commitment in order for you to live them out? What are some practical ways that you can live out these commitments in your life this week?