

Love . . . Pt 2

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Before I get into my message today I want to just touch on something that I said in the first week when I launched our new series and show you how an acknowledgement of love as being the preeminent virtue we are to pursue in life, enables us to interpret much of the bible that would otherwise be hidden.

The underlying scripture that this series is built on is

1 John 4:16

God is love, and all who live in love live in God, and God lives in them.

In my intro I said that God could have described himself as Power, or all knowing or Holy and in various parts of the Bible those words are used to describe him but He added into the narrative about Himself, the one thing guaranteed to make everything else safe for you and I. HE IS LOVE. And then to that He added that anyone who lived in love lived in Him and He in them.

I then went on and said, there's your life goal. The measure of your expressed love toward others is the measure of your experience and closeness to God. Love is the greatest thing you can pursue in life.

Sounds good so far. But what about Paul's statement about HIS ultimate goal in life? It doesn't look like he mentions love at all in the initial reading of it?

Philippians 3:10, 11

I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

You can't argue against knowing Jesus as a worthy life goal, and experiencing the power of his resurrection is something we all would agree sounds good, but what did Paul mean by "and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death"?

Obviously Paul wasn't advocating that we should all seek to be whipped and ultimately crucified like Jesus. So the question needs to be asked, what was it that caused Jesus' suffering? What placed Him in the situation where he ended up suffering horribly. If we want to participate in his suffering then we need to know the cause of it. And before you say sin, stop and think about it a little more deeply.

The cause of Jesus' suffering, the reason that Jesus ended up in the court of Pontius Pilate, was His love for you and I. He loved us enough to lay down his life for us. Participating in Jesus' suffering means to live a life of love for others. Paul said I want to know him so I can become just like him and the pathway to becoming like Jesus is to participate in his suffering brought about by His love for you and I, which in Jesus' case, meant the ultimate sacrifice, laying his very life down for us.

To love the way Jesus loves will cause you to suffer. Because it means you deny self and live for the betterment of others. Paul told us that Jesus didn't come to be served (to be loved) but to serve (to love) and lay his life down as a sacrifice for others.

Agape, God's love, always involves sacrifice. It also brings with it great joy and peace but don't ever lose sight of the cost part of the equation or else you'll become discouraged and give up. If love cost Jesus his very life, don't be surprised when serving Him costs you more than you expected.

Fortunately it hasn't cost any of you your lives yet but take heart, you're in the most wonderful of company.

Jesus, Paul, John, Peter, Stephen, William Booth, William Carey, Martin Luther King Jnr, Mother Theresa, Heather Stevens, Anthony Denman, Guy Cameron, Tammy Long, Anna Brett . . . the list goes on.

When you approach the bible knowing the underlying motive of the narrative, which is the revealing of God's love for humankind, you'll begin to understand it more fully and even more importantly, you'll begin to understand just how much God values you and what's expected of you in regard to your relationship with Him and others.

Today I want to talk about God's love FOR you. I want to try and convey to you just how much God loves you and what that actually means for you.

When talking about a topic such as this we all bring our own baggage along which impacts on how we personally interpret what it means to be loved by God. There are far too many christians who constantly struggle because they've never really seen or understood just how much God loves them. Their view of love is often transactional - if I act a certain way then I will be loved and accepted by those around me. They then bring their perspective on love with them when they interact with God.

It's why Paul in his letter to the Ephesians prayed that they would experience how huge God's love was for them despite the fact that they wouldn't be able to fully comprehend it. Paul realised how important it was for followers of Jesus to get this as this revelation underpinned everything and was the one thing that made sense of all that the bible had been building toward over 1000's of years, culminating in the death and subsequent resurrection of Jesus.

Ephesians 3:14-19

When I think of all this, I fall to my knees and pray to the Father, the Creator of everything in heaven and on earth. I pray that from his glorious, unlimited resources he will empower you with inner strength through his Spirit. Then Christ will make his home in your hearts as you trust in him. Your roots will grow down into God's love and keep you strong. And may you have the power to understand, as all God's people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love is. May you experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully. ***Then you will be made complete with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God.***

Isn't it interesting that so many people struggle to love others the way God does because they think they're lacking something and need to find it before they can love others unconditionally. They hold off giving their acceptance until the other person's behaviour warrants it, until they get what they want first. Unconsciously they realise that only love will set them free and complete them.

To experience the love and acceptance of Jesus personally is a life changing event.

Zacchaeus, the ostracised tax collector with a chip on his shoulder and avarice in his heart completely changed when he came in contact with Jesus and experienced for himself the acceptance that Jesus' love offered him. He went from trying to make a buck from everyone he met to giving away half of everything he owned, in just one afternoon.

The prostitute who washed Jesus' feet with her tears, dried them with her hair and then poured out her dowry in the form of perfume on his feet had her devotion honoured by Jesus publicly as he noted that those who had been forgiven much, loved much. He then went on and said that wherever his gospel was preached the story of the woman would be shared.

After denying Jesus at the worst possible moment and turning his back on him as he was sentenced to be executed, Peter was a broken man. And yet his subsequent forgiveness and his experience of Jesus' love and acceptance of him, after he had failed so catastrophically, was enough to propel him down a path of great significance in God's plan for the early church that most of us would have assumed he was no longer qualified to participate in.

When you realise the extent of God's love and acceptance given freely to you, it changes everything.

We make a big deal about God's unconditional love in Christendom and rightly so, but how many of us really believe it to be true? Or do we cling to a worldly view of love and acceptance that's dependent on our performance?

Here's an easy test to work out which side of the line you fall.

I want you to imagine you've slept in and started the day off way behind. You jump out of bed and there's no time to pray or read your bible, in fact you

don't even think about God for a second, it's just frantic activity and a constant internal monologue berating yourself for staying up late again, watching that new Netflix series.

You're racing round the house trying to get your gear together and one of your housemates has left a mess in the kitchen . . . again. You have a friend coming home from work with you that day so your thoughts and the words that come out of your mouth about your housemate aren't the type that you'd want seen or heard by any of your church friends.

You head out to your car and discover you have a flat tyre and you swear out loud. You change the tyre and get out onto the road only to hit a traffic jam caused by council workers starting work early on the road you need to take to work. Why on earth are they starting before 9am? To make matters worse the person in front of you has white hair and obviously can't see very well because they continue to drive at 40 kms an hour even after you pass the roadworks. The speed limit is 70. You have a conversation with them that in hindsight, you're glad they can't hear.

When you finally arrive at work you're 20 minutes late and your boss is in a bad mood. To make matters worse when you grab a coffee to try and get your head into gear you spill it down the front of your white shirt. You haven't had a good morning.

A co-worker who's a Christian, slips into your office and asks you if you could pray for them as they've been to the doctor and heard some bad news. You think back over your morning and feel that you can't really ask God for anything given the way you've been acting so you fob them off with a promise to pray for them later. Can anyone relate?

At that moment your relationship with God is in transactional mode not love mode. You're thinking that God's response toward you will be tempered by your less than sterling behaviour that morning.

Now obviously God wants the best for you and He's made it clear over and over again that your behaviour impacts on your experience of life but that never means His love for you is any less. How could it be when he's already died for you and knew how you were going to perform that morning?

Romans 5:8

But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners.

God has provided forgiveness for all the sin you will ever commit, both prior to coming to Him and after you're born again. If he hadn't no-one would be saved.

We're told throughout the Bible that God's love never changes or wavers.

Psalm 36:7

How precious is your **unfailing love**, O God!

All humanity finds shelter

in the shadow of your wings.

Psalm 136:26

Give thanks to the God of heaven.

His **faithful love endures forever**.

Psalm 86:5

O Lord, you are so good, so ready to forgive,
so **full of unfailing love** for all who ask for your help.

Zephaniah 3:17

For the Lord your God is living among you.

He is a mighty saviour.

He will take delight in you with gladness.

With his love, he will calm all your fears.

He will rejoice over you with joyful songs.”

John 3:16

“For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.

Romans 8:37-39

No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us.

And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God’s love.

Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God’s love. No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Galatians 2:20

My old self has been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. So I live in this earthly body by trusting in the Son of God, **who loved me and gave himself for me.**

Ephesians 2:4-5

But God is so rich in mercy, and **he loved us so much**, that even though we were dead because of our sins, he gave us life when he raised Christ from the dead. (It is only by God's grace that you have been saved!)

Are you starting to see a picture here? God's love is eternal because He is eternal and because He is love His nature and posture toward you never changes. Remember Corinthians 13? God never stops loving. We as humans can get disappointed and turn our backs on others but God's love is eternally new every morning.

Have you ever come across someone who is really kind and compassionate? Who's always nice to everyone?

Now if you've had a bit of a rough upbringing it might be easy to think that they're a bit naive, a bit soft, someone who you could easily pull the wool over their eyes and trick them if you decided to.

Now I want you to imagine that person and add to them the highest IQ possible. I then want you to add to them a back story that has them experiencing the very worst type of upbringing where they were exposed to the vilest treatment by the underbelly of society and yet they managed to stay pure and wholesome in spite of everything they've been through. I want you to add to that person black belts in karate, jujitsu, judo, an MMA heavyweight world championship title and world records in weightlifting, the 100 meters and every length and stroke of swimming in the pool.

Would you still consider them naive, soft, uneducated, easy to trick just because they're really kind and compassionate and believe the best of you? Of course you wouldn't. But they're really kind and compassionate. They

genuinely like being with you and are committed to your wellbeing and future success. They believe in you and constantly try to get you to see your potential. It doesn't matter how many times you fail they're going to be there each and every time with their arms open wide, willing to give you another shot. Because that's the type of person they are. Now you can ignore their help and maybe at times you do because you don't think you deserve it. But they already know the worst that humankind can come up with and still they believe in you and are willing to do whatever it takes to help you.

You see, that's what Jesus has already done for all of us and continues to do over and over again. He did what it took to help you and I get out of the inescapable prison we were trapped in. It took his death on a cross to secure our release. There was nothing else that Jesus could do to prove the depth of his love for every man, woman, boy or girl ever to be born on planet earth. So if he paid the greatest price possible then as long as you stay connected to him you'll be okay. His love for you will make it so.

1 John 2:2

He himself is the sacrifice that atones for our sins—and not only our sins but the sins of all the world.

So if you've had a bad day or week, or month, or year or life up until this point, it hasn't taken Jesus by surprise - He knows the very worst that humankind has to offer and still died for each and everyone of us. Paul said his love for us is too great for us to fully understand. If that isn't one of the most hope filled statements in the Bible I don't know what is. So take your idea of the most accepting, warm, encouraging love you can possibly imagine and then multiply it. How safe would you feel if there was a person standing in front of you right now who was that loving, that smart and that powerful, who believed in you so much he was willing to step aside and let

you take centre stage? That's who God is. That's what the bible, through all its ups and downs and weirdness at times, is trying to reveal to each and every one of us.

God is love and He never stops loving.

The End