

SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

October 8, 2023

Following King Jesus
“Loving Deeply”
1 Peter 4:7-9
Rev. Mike Fordham

A young rabbi found a serious problem in his new congregation. During the Friday service, half the congregation stood for the prayers and half remained seated, and each side shouted at the other, insisting that theirs was the true tradition. Nothing the rabbi said or did helped solve the impasse. Finally, in desperation, the young rabbi sought out the synagogue's 99-year-old founder. He met the old rabbi in the nursing home and poured out his troubles. “So tell me,” he pleaded, “was it the tradition for the congregation to stand during the prayers?” The old rabbi answered, “No!” The young rabbi said, “Ah, then it was the tradition to sit during the prayers.” “No,” answered the old rabbi. The young rabbi responded, “Well, what we have is complete chaos! Half the people stand and shout and the other half sit and scream.” “Ah,” said the old rabbi, “that was the tradition.”

I wish relationships were easy, but we all know even the best of relationships can be trying at times. Since the beginning of time, conflict in relationships is the norm not the exception. Even Jesus, who was the perfect leader, had a small group of twelve disciples who didn't always get along with each other as they wrestled with power struggles, betrayal, and who knows how their personalities must have clashed. With all the time they spent together, some of which was pretty stressful, they must have gotten onto each other's nerves. What a struggle it must have been for Jesus to love and put up with this dysfunctional small group.

One of the greatest threats to the health of the church is, and has always been, our struggle to just get along with each other. As we strive to follow Jesus closely, one of the most challenging aspects of growing up to be more like Jesus is to love other Christians just like Jesus loved the disciples. Being in community with other Christians is essential to become a fully devoted follower of Jesus. Therefore, it is of the utmost importance we all work together to create the community God wants us to have and that happens first and foremost through loving each other deeply.

1 Peter 4:7-9

The end of the world is coming soon. Therefore, be earnest and disciplined in your prayers. ⁸ Most important of all, continue to show deep love for each other, for love covers a multitude of sins. ⁹ Cheerfully share your home with those who need a meal or a place to stay.

THE WORLD IS COMING TO AN END

Peter gives his readers a very serious wakeup call when he says ***THE WORLD IS COMING TO AN END***. When Jesus died and rose again, He made it clear to the disciples that one day He would come back for them and take them home to heaven with Him. Just as Jesus surprised the disciples by rising from the dead, so also the disciples knew Jesus would, once again, come back for them at any time. They then lived their lives with the daily expectation that at any moment Jesus would show up. When the Bible says Jesus is coming soon, it meant we don't know when Jesus will return, only that He could return at any time. The important point Peter drives home is we are to live our lives every day as if we are getting ready for Jesus' return, being who Jesus called us to be, and doing what Jesus would want to find us doing when He returns.

Some years ago, NPR reported about a unique watch called Tikker. What makes it so unique is that Tikker is designed to count down the remaining time you have left to live. The watch has a dot-matrix screen which displays the seconds you have left on earth as they disappear down a black hole. Your estimated time of death is, of course, just that—an estimate. Tikker uses an algorithm like the one used by the federal government to figure a person's life expectancy and then converts that into a countdown of the years, months, weeks, days, hours, minutes, and seconds you have left on this earth. The effect is sobering, a sort of incessant grim reaper reminding you that time is running out. Tikker's inventor is a Swedish gentleman named Fredrik Colting. He says he invented the gadget not as a morbid novelty item, but as an earnest attempt to change his own thinking. Colting, a former gravedigger, said, "The occurrence of death is no surprise to anyone, but in our modern society, we rarely talk about it. I think that if we were more aware of our own expiration I'm sure we'd make better choices while we are alive." That's why he calls Tikker "the happiness watch." It's his belief that watching your life slip away will remind you to savor life while you have it. Tikker's motto is "***Don't let the seconds slip away. Make every moment count.***" Peter is not wanting to send a morbid message about the end of the world but remind us to live our lives in such a manner that we make the most of every moment of getting ready for Jesus' return.

ABOVE ALL ELSE LOVE DEEPLY

Peter then says that there are two very important ways to be ready for Jesus' return. The first is we are to stay alert through the discipline of prayer. Then he says the way that we are especially to get ready for Jesus' return is ***ABOVE ALL ELSE LOVE DEEPLY***. Peter uses the words "*above all*" or "*most important of all*" we are to love. Jesus spoke often about love, and that love is first and foremost the most important aspect of following Jesus. Jesus gave us what we call the Great Commandment, which calls on us to love God, ourselves, and each other with all that we have. Jesus also said in *John 13:34-35*, "³⁴ So now I am giving you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, you should love each other. ³⁵ Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples." Not only is loving others most important of all but Peter goes on to say that we are to "*love deeply*". The Greek word translated as

“deeply” is also used to describe the effort exerted by an athlete striving, stretching his or her muscles to their limit to win a race. Peter envisions us giving maximum effort to loving as Jesus loved.

John Stott, illustrating how important it is for Christians to give our best in loving like Jesus, uses a fish as an example. He says that God created fish to live and thrive in water, whether salt or fresh. Gills are adapted to absorb oxygen from water, so water is the element in which a fish finds its identity. It finds itself in the element for which it was created: water. It's limited to water, but in that limitation is liberty. Suppose you had a little tropical fish in one of those old-fashioned, spherical goldfish bowls. Suppose the little fish swam around and around his blessed bowl until its frustration became unbearable. The fish decided to make a bid for freedom and leap out of the bowl. If it landed in a pond in your backyard, it would increase its freedom because there would be more water to swim in. But if it landed on the concrete or on the carpet, then its bid for freedom would spell death. If fish were meant for water, what are human beings made for? It would be interesting if we had time to sit down alongside one another and share our answers to that question. What is the element in which human beings find themselves, as water is the element in which a fish finds itself? Stott said he doesn't hesitate to say that, according to Scripture, the answer is love. Human beings are made for love because God is love. When He created us in His own image, He gave us the capacity to love and to be loved. So human beings find their destiny in loving God and in loving their neighbors. For Christians, love is just as important as the air we breathe, it is how God made us to first and foremost love deeply.

How Do We Love More Deeply?

On the website, “*Got Questions*,” it offers four steps to, above all else, love deeply. The first is to:

1) Accept God's love. As *1 John 4:10* says, “*This is real love—not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins.*” Before we can love God, ourselves, and others, we must first accept and experience God's love for us, a love that heals and transforms our entire lives. After we have experienced God's love we then secondly:

2) Walk in the Spirit. We cannot love as Jesus did in our own human effort. We need God to not only love us, forgive us, and heal us, but to come and make His home in our lives through the Holy Spirit who will then empower us to love as Jesus loved. Walking in the Spirit happens when we adopt a daily lifestyle of turning our lives over to the influence of the Holy Spirit, giving God control of every detail of our lives. When we do so, in time, we will begin to produce the fruit of the Spirit which especially shows itself in how we love others. When we have the fruit of the Spirit in our lives, we are able above all else to love others deeply with “*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control*”. That is what Jesus' love looked like in action and that kind of love can be produced in us when the Holy Spirit takes over control of our lives.

The third step to first and foremost love deeply as Jesus did is to:

3) Forgive Faults. When we deeply love others, we recognize no human being is perfect, and we then accept people with all their faults just the way they are with no-strings-attached. That doesn't mean we overlook when someone has done something wrong to us, but we deal with the offense done with honesty and gentleness, kindness, and patience, showing them God's grace. *Colossians 3:12-14* puts it this way, ¹² *Since God chose you to be the holy people he loves, you must clothe yourselves with tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience.* ¹³ **Make allowance for each other's faults, and forgive anyone who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others.** ¹⁴ *Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds us all together in perfect harmony.* We do not expect our spouse, our friends, our family, our co-workers, our fellow students, our fellow church members to be perfect. We put up with one another's faults just as they hopefully will put up with ours. We expect people to be imperfect and so we are ready to offer God's grace through forgiveness. When we truly love someone, we are willing to overlook their faults and mistakes. Henry Fehren is quoted in *Christianity Today* as saying, "God does not make clones; each person is different, a tribute to God's creativity. If we are to love our neighbors as ourselves, we must accept people as they are." Loving people the way they are includes all their faults. This is what Peter means when he says that if we love in this way, we then cover a multitude of sins in others. The fourth step of first and foremost loving each other deeply is to:

4) Honor others. While modern culture encourages us to put ourselves first, God calls us to do what *Romans 12:9-10* says, ⁹ *Don't just pretend to love others. Really love them. Hate what is wrong. Hold tightly to what is good.* ¹⁰ *Love each other with genuine affection, and take delight in honoring each other.* To honor is to show value and respect, treating each other as significant and valuable. We honor others when we look for the good in each other and celebrate that good. We also honor others by never talking behind their backs, gossiping about them, but when we have a problem with them, we do what *Matthew 18:15-20* says and go to them and them only and speak the truth in love about the problem we have with them and then seek to be reconciled with them. Jay Kesler put it well when he said, "Jesus-style love is the opposite of the world's power-based, accomplishment-equals-importance viewpoint. Christian love means putting the other person first, seeking the other person's well-being regardless of what it costs." We also honor people when we just give them our time and our undivided attention to look at them and listen to them. Richard Foster says that "One of the greatest expressions of love is simply to notice people and to pay attention to them."

SHOWING HOSPITALITY

Peter concludes by saying an example of loving others deeply first and foremost is through **SHOWING HOSPITALITY**. Author, speaker, and pastor, Peter Greig says the Greek word Peter uses for hospitality literally means "*friendship to strangers*". It's about kindness to people who are... "strange," or in other words, those we don't know. Those

who might not be our friends for whatever reason. This is where we get the words like “hospital” and “hostel” that are places where we take care of those who are hurting and welcome those we don’t personally know or who might even be unwelcomed elsewhere. Peter Greig points out Henri Nouwen, the great Dutch priest who lived the last ten years of his life in community with those with profound Learning Disabilities, said “the highest form of hospitality” is a particular kind of listening. “Listening not to change people,” he said, “but offering them space where change can take place.” When we are being hospitable to others, we accept everyone just as they are, even those who have been estranged, welcoming them into the safe place of our lives with the hope that through us they will experience God’s accepting, healing love.

Jesus invites us to follow Him in first and foremost loving God, ourselves, and each other deeply. We cannot do that on our own but need God’s grace to enable us to do so through the power of the Holy Spirit within us.

SUGGESTED RESOURCES: (Books marked with * are available to be checked-out in the Asbury Discipleship Resource Center)

- The Holy Bible
- *Everybody, Always*, Bob Goff *
- *Called to Community: The Life Jesus Wants for His People*, Plough Publishing House
- *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*, Richard Foster *
- *Dirty Glory*, Pete Greig
- *Ministry and Spirituality; Creative Ministry, The Wounded Healer, Reaching Out*, Henri Nouwen
- *Good Works: Hospitality and Faithful Discipleship*, Christine D. Pohl, and Keith Wasserman
- *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, Christine D. Pohl
- *Present Over Perfect*, Shauna Niequist *

Icebreaker I – If you could get one, would you want a Tikker watch for yourself? Your loved ones?

Icebreaker II – If fish were meant for water, what are human beings made for? What is the element in which human beings find themselves, as water is the element in which a fish finds itself?

1. What does the verse, “The end of the world is coming soon.” bring to your mind?
2. Verse 7 in the NLT Version of the Bible says “... be earnest and disciplined in your prayers.”? The NIV Bible says, “... be clear minded and self-controlled so that you can pray.” Why is this important?
3. If you were to rate yourself on the “love meter” from 1 (shallow) to 10 (deep), how have you been doing at showing love to others lately?
4. In what ways do you like to practice hospitality?

5. Can you think of a time when a stranger cared for you? Rescued you?
6. Is there a time you were able to be a helpful stranger to someone else?
7. How does your lifestyle differ from that of your non-Christian friends?
8. What are some priorities that a Christian should have in their life?
9. What does it look like in your life to, "... live our lives every day as if we are getting ready for Jesus' return, being who Jesus called us to be, and doing what Jesus would want to find us doing when He returns."?
10. How is it with your soul?
11. What are your struggles and successes?
12. How might the Holy Spirit and Scriptures be speaking in your life?
13. Do you have any sin that you want to confess?
14. Are there any secrets or hidden things you would like to share?
15. How can this group pray for you this week?