

Greater Than Everything

Aim High

October 31, 2021

Good morning everyone!

I glad you're with us here on campus or watching online as we continue in our series *Greater Than Everything* which I began last Sunday by asking the question:

What one thing – if you could actually do it

...

... and not only *do* it ... but *keep* doing it over and over ...

... and not only *keep* doing it over and over ...

... but increasingly do *more and more* of it ...

What one thing – if you could actually do it ...

... would for sure change almost everything

about your life in a positive way?

What one thing if you could do it ... and keep doing it ... and do more and more of it would change for the better ...

- Your marriage
- Your friendships
- Your family
- Your work environment
- Your outlook on life – the way you perceive your situation
- Your attitude – the way you *react* to your situation
- And maybe even your physical health

So, that's how we started out this series – with

that question.

And the answer that I gave – which actually didn't come from *me* because I'm just not that smart and it's totally not natural to me – I'm not wired this way ...

The answer, according to *Jesus of Nazareth* and reiterated again and again by those who followed him and eventually became the leaders of his movement ...

The one thing that will absolutely change almost everything about your life for the better ...

... if you can do it ... and keep on doing it ... and do it more and more ...

... is to love other people.

- People who are like you
- As well as people who are *unlike* you.

- People who like you
- As well as people who *don't* like you.

If you can grow in your ability to love others – meaning “everyone around you” – almost everything about your life (and maybe even theirs) will change for the better.

So, part of what I want to do in this series is to *help you (and me) grow* in our ability to love ... which is what we're going to focus on very specifically next Sunday and the two Sundays after that.

But, today, before we get to all of that, I think it would be valuable to talk about *why* becoming a “better lover” of people actually would change almost everything about your life for the better.

I mean, even though Jesus and his earliest followers *claimed* that love was greater than

everything else – and we looked at that in last week’s message ...

... so, if you weren’t here, you should definitely watch, listen to, or read it in the media section of our app and website ...

Even though Jesus said that – and, if you’re a Christian, you know that we take seriously what Jesus *said* not because “it’s in the Bible” but because of what He *did* in his life and death and resurrection ...

Even if love is greater than everything, it’s a pretty bold claim to say that “loving others will change your life for the better.”

Because it’s a claim that could actually be made about *lots* of things.

I mean ...

- If you grew your bank account

- Or increased your level of education
- Or got promoted to a better job
- Or moved to a nicer neighborhood

... many would say that almost everything about your life would change for the better.

And that would be true in a lot of cases.

But here's the thing.

- You can't ultimately *control* whether or not your bank account grows.

I mean, you can (and should) work towards that end, but you can't prevent a debilitating illness or a wayward child or some other financial disaster from draining it down faster than you can build it up.

- And even if you increase your education and work really hard, you can't *make* someone promote you.

I mean, it's possible you will *never* reach the level you've earned and deserve. For some of you, that's exactly your experience.

- And even if you could afford a house in a nicer neighborhood, there might not be one available. Trust me, I know.

My point is ... there are so many things in this life that actually could improve your life if you were able to obtain them.

The problem is *you do not have enough control* to ...

a) ensure that you get them and

b) that they actually produce the outcome you desire.

However, what you *do* have control over ... is whether or not you become a more loving person.

Regardless of your situation ... regardless of ...

- How much money you have in the bank or in your investment portfolio ...
- What kind of job you have ...
- Where you live ...

You *can* be better at loving ...

- People who are like you
- As well as people who are *unlike* you.
- And people who like you

- As well as people who *don't* like you.

You have the ultimate control over this because no one can *make you* love less.

As a friend of mine likes to say, “you are *ridiculously in charge of your own life*” especially in this area.

You can become a better lover of people.

And not only *can* you ... you *should*, because almost everything about your life will be better if you do.

Another Question

Now, here's why I say that – and this is my pitch; this is my challenge to you to make growing in your ability to love your top goal, greater than everything else.

In fact, if what I'm going to say right now doesn't move you or motivate you, you have my permission to take the rest of this service and the next three weeks off ...

... because what I'm going to say today, and in the weeks to follow, will not help you. It really won't.

So, here's a question to think about.

What ultimately destroys happiness even for people who have the most money, the best job, and the nicest house in the nicest neighborhood?

I mean, you know people like this, don't you?

You know people who "have it all."

Some of *you* are "those people."

Heck, *I'm* one of those people!

I'm so far ahead in those categories of where I expected to be when I was younger that I'm blown away at how much God has blessed me – even though I don't deserve it.

So, again, as you look around and maybe even at your own life ...

For people who “have it all” – or at least have attained what they believed would make their lives better in every way ...

What is it that can (and, in so many cases, does) destroy their happiness?

Well, from what I've observed over the years of being a pastor – and not only observed but have personally experienced in my own life ...

What destroys happiness even for people who have the otherwise “perfect life” is ...

Damaged and broken relationships.

What destroys happiness even for people who have the otherwise “perfect life” is relational trauma, relational carnage, relational death.

- It’s what keeps “news organizations” like *TMZ* and *The Enquirer* in business.
- It’s the reason why Twitter goes crazy over every scandal among “the elite.”
- It’s why “reality TV” is so addictive.

We’re all fascinated to see people at the supposed “top” have it all come crashing down because of relational meltdowns – something they did to someone else or something someone else did to them.

But it’s not just “them.” When I look at my own life (and I bet when you look at yours) ...

- The greatest amounts of grief I’ve suffered

(and, in some respects, still suffer)

- The greatest emotional gut punches I've experienced

... are the result of damaged and broken relationships, some of which (maybe *most* of which) was my fault, and some of which was the fault of others.

But regardless of where the fault lies, for me personally, there's nothing more draining and demoralizing and grief-inducing than experiencing trauma, carnage, and even death in my relationships ...

... which is really ironic because, by personality, I'm not a relational person. I'm a task-oriented person. And I'm more of an introvert than an extrovert.

But *even for me*, happiness is so much more tied to what's going on in my relationships with ...

- My wife
- My kids and grandkids
- My dad and my sisters
- My co-workers here at NHCC
- My small group
- Friends that I play ball with and golf with
...
- And even my enemies!

My happiness is so much more tied to how it is between them and me than it is in what I'm doing and what I have ...

... which is why, when I read what the Apostle Paul wrote – and we looked at this last week ...

When Paul writes ...

If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.

1 Corinthians 13:2 (ESV)

I have to say “amen” to that because I have 64 years of personal experience that proves he’s right!

And you do, too. Well maybe not 64 years.

But the point is ... what destroys happiness even for people who have the otherwise “perfect life” – and more importantly, what destroys happiness for *you and me* – is damaged and broken relationships.

Therefore ... the wisest thing we can do to ensure that our relationships *don’t get* damaged and broken is to become better at loving other people.

Or, as one of Jesus' friends once put it:

*Above all, love each other deeply,
because love covers over a
multitude of sins.*

1 Peter 4:8 (NIV)

And because we're human, our relationships are going to be constantly stressed by a multitude of sins that need covering.

Love Is

But there's a problem ... and isn't there always when it comes to this kind of thing; of trying to do what would make our lives so much better?

Actually, there are *two* problems – two ideas, two assumptions, two thoughts that stand in the way of any of us becoming better at loving others.

Idea #1. “Love is a *feeling*. And you either feel it or you don’t.”

And it is true that many times love has an emotional aspect to it, especially when someone we love (or want to love) loves us back.

But if they *don’t* love us back, or if they do love us but don’t treat us very lovingly, the only feeling most of us have at that point is pain and then anger. We don’t “feel” loving in the moment.

And if we don’t *feel* loving ...

- We assume we *can’t* love ...
- And our relationships begin to suffer ...

... which is why this idea is a problem.

Idea #2. “Love is *natural*. It just kind of happens.”

“It’s just part of being human – there’s an inborn ability to love, so you don’t really need to think about it or learn anything or develop any skills. Love is natural.”

I don’t know about you, but what’s natural to me when people hurt me or fail me in some way is *not* loving them in spite of that.

What’s *natural* is to run away emotionally or to respond in kind ...

- Which damages and eventually destroys relationships ...
- Which is why this idea, too, is a problem.

So, let me ask you – just as kind of a dipstick here – how much of your thinking and understanding of what love is tied to those two thoughts?

As you look at your relational history – your

relational track record – how much of it was (and is) based on the assumptions that ...

- Love is a feeling?
- Love just naturally “happens”?

And I don't ask that to make you or anyone else feel bad.

I just want to point out the weaknesses and dangers of those assumptions ... AND ... to challenge you to aim a lot higher in your definition of love.

I want to challenge you to embrace a definition and a standard of love that goes beyond people who are like you and who like you; one that also includes people who *aren't* like you and who *don't* like you.

See, the problem we have with both of those sets

of people is that we aim far too low – and we expect far too little of ourselves and of others.

So let me give you a high definition of love.

And let me just warn you in advance, your first response to this is probably going to be negative.

You're going to think, "I'm in church so I'd better smile and nod my head in agreement, but no way that's going to happen my life."

So, try not to go there.

Try to suspend judgment for just a few minutes and listen not to me, but to what the Apostle Paul wrote right after he wrote "without love I am nothing."ⁱ

He starts with this: Love is patient ...

... which is kind of ironic because everything we

know about Paul is that he was not a very patient man ...

... which, for me, is one of the reasons I trust that he's relaying the word of God to us.

Patience says "I'm going to adjust my speed to your speed. I'm going to adjust my pace to your pace instead of expecting you to adjust your pace to mine."

For some of you, just this one concept would totally transform your marriage because the stress you face every day in your marriage is ...

- I want to do this more than she wants to do it.
- I want to spend more than he wants to spend.
- I want more time with family than she

wants.

But patience says – love says – “I’ll go at your pace in this area instead of mine.”

This is what love is. Love is patient. When you are patient, you are doing love.

And it’s transformational in relationships.

Love is kind.

Kindness is the decision to loan you my strength in a way that doesn’t underscore or remind you of your weakness.

Kindness is when you’ve messed up again, I figure out a way to come in and support you without bringing that to your attention improperly or at the wrong time or in front of other people.

Love is kind.

It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.

Love celebrates the accomplishments and qualities of other people without bringing up our own accomplishments and qualities.

Love is able to sit and talk about the accomplishments and qualities of another person and drag it out even longer than they want to drag it out, even though it's their accomplishment.

Love asks questions. Love is curious. Love is not envious.

I mean I had a *wave* of envy. I mean every one of us has a wave of envy, right?

But love says, "I feel envious, but I'm going to conquer that feeling because I *choose* to; because I am ridiculously in charge of my own

life – including my emotions.”

Love is not envious, boastful or proud.

This next thing Paul writes ... if you think love is soft and mushy and “whatever you want it to be” (which is what our culture says about love) ... check this out.

It does not dishonor others; it is not self-seeking.

Love doesn't degrade people verbally. It doesn't say “you're just an F-ing whatever.”

And love doesn't go where it shouldn't sexually.

- If it's dishonoring to her, it's a sin.
- If it's dishonoring to him, it's a sin.
- If it's dishonoring to her husband, it's a sin.

- If it's dishonoring to his children, it's a sin.
- If it's a dishonoring to her family, it's a sin.

Love says "I am not going to push for what I want - in any area, not just sexual - if it dishonors another person" because dishonoring is the opposite of love.

And if you're a Christian, you are an incredibly fortunate and honored person because God in heaven sent his son to honor you even though you can be (and have been) a most dishonorable, despicable person!

And if God chose to honor you, then who are you - who am I - to ever, ever, ever dishonor another person in any way?

This isn't soft.

This isn't permissive.

This isn't mushy.

This kind of love is demanding. It raises the bar on our behavior instead of lowering it.

It is not easily angered, Paul continues. And it keeps no record of wrongs.

When I became a Christian as a teenager, I was taught that when you asked God to forgive you, he forgets your sins.

But that was bad theology because God doesn't *forget* your sin. He knows everything and he can't *stop* knowing.

The beauty of God – the grace of God – is that He remembers your sin, but He chooses to love you anyway.

And He says, “now that's what I want you to do for each other.”

So even though you can't erase your memory bank, and you can't forget what they did ...

You *can* choose not to hold it against them in your relationship with them, just like your Father in Heaven doesn't hold it against you in his relationship with you.

"I don't know Rick, that's really hard."

Of course it's hard. But do you know what?

It's what you want people to do for you, isn't it?
To not hold your sins against you?

Love is not easily angered, keeps no record of wrongs.

Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.

This one is actually a little more obtuse, but

most commentators think Paul means that love treats the revelation of another person's sin with gentleness and is glad when they are restored.

In other words, when you fail, I fail. And when you fall, I fall. And when you go down, I go down.

And I'm grieved by what's happened to you instead of making it an occasion to make myself look better than you: "I would never do *that*."

Love always protects.

Love says, "When people speak ill of you or try to do evil to you, I'm coming to your defense. You're not perfect, but you're valuable and I'm not standing by while anyone devalues you."

- I'm going to protect your reputation.
- I'm going to protect your integrity.

- I'm going to have your back.

Love says, "some things are too dangerous for you to do on your own, so I'm jumping in to help you."

Love always trusts.

Wow, this one would be transformational to our entire culture, wouldn't it?

Trust says that when there's a gap between what you *said* you would do and what you actually *did*, and I don't know the reason ...

Trust says "I'm going to create a generous explanation until I know more. Instead of assuming the worst, I'm going to assume the best and choose to believe it."

"Oh, man, that's so naïve!"

Yeah, but sometimes love *is* naïve.

“That just seems very foolish, Rick.”

Maybe, but you know what?

Sometimes it’s OK to be foolish for a little while and see what happens.

Because you know what happens when somebody continuously gives you a generous explanation for the gaps?

If you are at all healthy, you will begin to live up to their love and their expectations of you not because you *have* to ... but because you *want* to.

Love always trusts.

And it always hopes, always perseveres.

Love never sizes people up and then writes them off because they’re too far gone.

Instead, love says “no one is *ever* beyond the reach of the grace of God.”

“And even though *I* may not be the one called to pull you out of the pit” (and we’re going to talk about this in a few weeks because sometimes we’re not) ...

... “I refuse to believe the lie that you are beyond redemption. And I will pray for you. And believe in you and for you.”

Because love never fails.

So, there you go.

A high-bar standard of love that isn’t based on feelings and doesn’t come naturally but would make all the difference in the world if we actually lived that way.

What If?

Just think about that for a minute.

What if this kind of love became a fundamental and foundational characteristic of who you are?

What if you became less like who you are today and more like what we just read?

What would it be like if ...

- People who are like you ...
- As well as people who are *unlike* you.
- And people who like you ...
- As well as people who *don't* like you ...

What if they all described *you* in the way Paul just described love?

What if they could put your name everywhere Paul writes “love”?

In fact, if you want to know what it would be like, literally do that sometime.

And then try to imagine ...

“What if people could say about me ...”

Rick is patient, Rick is kind.

Rick does not envy, Rick does not boast, Rick is not proud.

Rick does not dishonor others, Rick is not self-seeking.

Rick is not easily angered, Rick keeps no record of wrongs.

Rick does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.

Rick always protects, always trusts,

Rick always hopes, always

perseveres.

Rick never fails.

It takes my breath away to read that and to imagine *me* being that kind of a person.

And it breaks my heart because, far too often, I am not that kind of a person.

But what I know about me, and what I know about you, is that if I could be and you could be that kind of a person ...

... almost everything about our lives would change for the better.

- Regardless of how much money we have.
- Regardless of what level of education we have.
- Regardless of the job we have.

- Regardless of where we live.

And not only would things “out there” (with other people) change for the better, we’d also feel better “in here,” wouldn’t we?

We’d feel better about ourselves. We’d feel like we’re more of who we’re meant to be ... because this *is* who we’re meant to be.

You and I – all human beings – have been created in the image (literally, “in the likeness”) of God.

That just means that God intends for us to reflect His character.

And the primary aspect of God’s character is love.

In fact, the Bible says that God *is* love ...

... which means we could put God's name in that passage, too.

God is patient with us, God is kind to us.

God does not envy, God does not boast, God is not proud.

God does not dishonor us (though we are so often dishonorable)

God is not self-seeking (which is why He took on human flesh in the person of Jesus).

God is not easily angered, God keeps no record of wrongs.

(He remembers but He doesn't hold it against us – and not because of who we are and what we've done to atone for our sins, but because of who Jesus is and what He did to atone for our sins)

God does not delight in evil (He's not happy when we mess up our lives)

But rejoices in the truth (when we see our reality and turn back to Him).

God always protects, always trusts.

(He continually chooses to be positively biased towards us).

God always hopes, always perseveres.

(He doesn't give up on us. We're not "lost causes" to Him).

God never fails (because God is love).

At the Root

... which is why I said last week ...

... and why we say it all the time around here ...

... and why I'm going to say it each week in this series ...

If you want to be better at loving others, you need to be rooted in the love God has for you.

Your ability to love other people (especially those who are *not* like you and/or *don't* like you) comes out of – it's the overflow of – the ongoing experience that you personally have of God's love in your own life.

Listen ... it's *well*-loved people who love, not *unloved* people because you cannot give to others what you do not already have.

That's why Jesus' when Jesus gave his inner circle the one commandment to replace all commandments, he didn't say, "now, y'all work really hard and love one another better."

Instead, he said to them:

*“As I have loved you, so you must love one another.” John 13:34
(NIV)*

Do you see the sequence? First, you are loved, then you love.

So, while I have challenged you today to “aim high” – to raise the bar on how you think of and define love.

In fact, I think it would be a good idea if you took that little section from 1 Corinthians 13 and wrote it out with your name where it says “love” and put it somewhere that you can see it every day.

And while in the next three messages in this series, we’re going to look at specific applications and situations where it is very difficult to love other people.

... what I want to leave you with today is just a little more detail on how to put your roots down into the soil of God's love.

In fact, at some point, I need to do a whole message on this because we say it so much and because it's so foundational to basic Christianity.

In Christianity, God never expects us to do something for which He does not also empower us. Again, it's "as I have loved you – because you have and are experiencing this ... now you love each other."

It's yet another radical difference between Christianity and every other major world religion.

So how do you do it?

1. First of all, it begins by accepting Jesus

and what He has done for you on the cross not because you deserve it but because of God's love for you.

That's the foundation. You have to have that moment in time where it becomes clear to you, and you say "yes."

And at that point, the Holy Spirit of God dwells with your spirit enabling you to know Him and to experience Him.

And the second thing is actually very much like the first.

Simply put, the idea is to ...

2. Do whatever it takes to be constantly reminded that you are undeserving of God's love and yet He loves you anyway.

"Whatever it takes" looks different from person to person but almost always includes regular, intentional times of ...

- Self-reflection – where I get alone and honestly assess my life
- Confession of sin – to just admit (specifically) where I’m falling short – and not because I want God to forgive me. He already has. Jesus already took care of it.

Confession just reminds me of where I am and why I need God.

- Worship – that thanks God and honors God for his grace and mercy towards us
- Fellowship with other believers – to encourage us especially when we’ve fallen or when we’re discouraged.
- And then the teaching of the Gospel where a spiritually gifted communicator takes us to the scripture and reminds us of the truth.

Some of these things, by the way, are part of belonging to the community known as “church” – which is why, quite frankly, so many Christians have no sense of God’s love in their everyday life ... because we’re too busy or too lazy to be involved.

And we get disconnected from one of the major pipes through which God’s love flows to us.

So ...

1. Begin by accepting Jesus as your savior.
2. Do whatever it takes to be constantly reminded that you are undeserving of God’s love and yet He loves you anyway.

And as we close out this service today, our band is going to lead us in a song that invites the Holy Spirit to come and speak to us in this way.

It's kind of a prayer song.

So, I'm going to ask you right now to stand and sing along with them if you feel comfortable doing so.

And Holy Spirit, we do ask you to speak to us now of your love for us because we want to love better. We want to love others as Jesus has loved us.

And we ask this in His name.

Amen.

Let's sing.

Endnotes

ⁱ Note that much of the exposition that follows is from a talk I heard Andy Stanley give in the closing session of the 2019 Drive Conference. I have personalized it and clarified it but the basic framework is his.