

First Love  
*Overflow*  
August 18, 2019

We all know that the word “Love” is probably one of the most often used words in the English language yet the least applied. Just like Forrest Gump, most of us would say, “we may not be very smart, but we know what love is.”

But as the video just said, there’s a huge chasm between knowing what love is and applying the love of Jesus in our daily life.

When we study the Bible, we discover that there are several Greek words that are used for the English word “love.” And the Greek word that’s most often

used to describe Christ's love for us is the word "Agape". In John 21, Jesus uses this word "agape" along with another Greek word for love, "phileo", in a conversation he had with the apostle Peter. Listen to what he says in John 21,

*"When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love (agape) me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love (phileo) you." He said to him, "Feed my lambs." He said to him a second time, "Simon, son of John, do you love (agape) me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love (phileo) you." He said to him, "Tend my sheep."*

*He said to him the third time, “Simon, son of John, do you love (phileo) me?” Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, “Do you love (phileo) me?” and he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love (phileo) you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep.” John 21:15-17*

On the surface, this exchange between Jesus and Peter seems a bit repetitive, and somewhat hard to understand. But when you look closely at the actual Greek words used in the passage, you start to see the main point of the conversation.

When Jesus asked Peter, “Do you love me?” in his first two statements of this passage, he used the Greek word agape,

which refers to unconditional or sacrificial love. Both times, Peter responded with “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you,” but Peter uses the Greek word *phileo*, which refers to a brotherly or friendship type of love.

It seems as if Jesus is trying to get Peter to understand that he must love Jesus sacrificially in order to be the leader God is calling him to be, but Peter doesn't get it. The third time Jesus asks, “Do you love me?” in John 21:17, He uses the other word for love, *phileo*, and Peter responds, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you,” yet again using *phileo*.

The point in this dialog seems to be that Jesus was challenging Peter to grasp the

importance of living by a higher version of love instead of simply loving Jesus like a brother.

I believe God wants the same for us. God wants to stretch our understanding of love and move us beyond just a phileo or a brotherly kind of love to an agape or self-sacrificing kind of love in all our relationships.

But what exactly does it take to move people to love in an agape sort of way? What is the secret to loving people sacrificially like Jesus did? And what does real agape love look like in action? Those are just a few of the questions we are going to try and answer as we continue in our series, “First Love”.

## **Review**

If you have been here the last several weeks, you know that Rick has been teaching us the meaning and application of the greatest commandment. Over the past several weeks he's looked at several aspects of making God our first love. We learned:

- why God expects those of us who are Christians to love Him with all of our being
- that sometimes God –especially as He appears in the Old Testament – doesn't seem all that lovable even though He is if we examined his character more closely.
- how we relate to our God who you cannot physically see, hear or touch

- And, last week Rick discussed how to love God by relationally engaging with Him.

All these messages are available on our church app and website and I encourage you to listen to them if you weren't here the last few weeks.

But today we are going to switch gears and talk about the other side of the coin. Today we are going to talk about the second greatest commandment that flows naturally from the first. Listen as Jesus describes the two greatest commandments in Mark 12:

***“The most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this: ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love***

*the Lord your God with all your heart  
and with all your soul and with all  
your mind and with all your strength.’  
The second is this: ‘Love your  
neighbor as yourself’ There is no  
commandment greater than these.”  
Mark 12:29-31*

Jesus said the second great commandment is to love our neighbor as ourselves. Or to put it another way, “agape” your neighbor in an unconditional, self-sacrificing way, just as Jesus did. When you combine the second greatest commandment together with the first, you realize that Jesus boiled the entire bible down into two basic commands: love God, love people. Amazing!



But as simple as those two commands sound, they are much harder to apply. I want to focus on how the second great commandment to love people naturally flows from Jesus's first commandment to love God.

### **The Problem of our Inadequacy**

I want to begin by asking ourselves the same question Jesus asked Peter in the passage I read earlier. Do you love me Ladell? Do you love me North Heartland? No, I mean do you really agape me? Do you love me in a self-sacrificing way? Are you committed to loving others for their benefit, not just your own?

All week long I have been pondering the implications of these questions for my own life.

I've had to wrestle with this idea that if I really love Jesus in an agape kind of way, then the overflow of my love for him should motivate me to love others as much as I love myself.

That's basically what the apostle Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5,

***For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that One died for all, therefore all died. And He died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died for them and was raised again.  
2 Corinthians 5: 14,15***

Paul is basically saying that our love for Christ and what he has done for us should compel us to love others in an agape, self-sacrificing sort of way.

But the question for us today is: Do I? Do you? Or maybe a better question is, “Can I?” Is it even possible for a sinner like me to love people like that?

## **The Resource of our Love: The Holy Spirit**

Sometimes when we run into a seeming impossible command like this, we have to admit that we have met our match.

Sometimes we just have to say, “God, I can’t do what you are asking me to do. It’s too hard. It’s too difficult. It’s too far beyond me.”

That's exactly how I feel when I'm confronted with the challenge of loving people the way Jesus loved. Ironically, whenever we bump up against a command like this in the Scripture and feel helpless to obey, we are exactly where God wants us to be. God wants us to admit that we are helpless and inadequate to do what He's asking us to do. The Apostle Paul echoes this idea in 2 Corinthians 5:

*Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as if it were coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God. 2 Corinthians 3:5*

You see, what the Apostle Paul is saying is that when we admit that we

are inadequate or can't do what God is asking us to do, that's when we are in the best position for God to work in and through us.

I know it sounds counter-intuitive, but when you and I admit that “we can't live the Christian life the way it was intended to be lived”, that's when God says to us. “You are right. I never intended for you to live out the life of Christ in your own strength. You can't. But I can. If you let me, I can love others through you. I will be your love if you let me.”

That's right. I can't but God can. And that's what God reminded me as I was contemplating the enormity of this command to love others sacrificially.

God whispered in my mind that He is more than adequate to supply all the resources I need. In fact, he has already empowered every believer in Christ with the resources to live the Christian life through the person of the Holy Spirit. Through the Holy Spirit's presence in the life of a believer, we have the power to love people the way God wants us to love them. But in order for that to happen, something ELSE must happen first.

### **The Most Loving Thing to Do**

The first thing that must happen in order for the Holy Spirit to love others through us is that we must rearrange the priority of our love. Rick's been talking about this for the past several weeks,

but I'm going to say it again in a slightly different way.

Deep inside, every Christ follower wants to love others in an agape kind of way because God has placed his love in us. But

**The most loving thing we can do for others is to love God more than we love them.**

**For if we love God most, we will love others best. (repeat)**

I know this sounds crazy, especially to those of us in this room who aren't Christians. How can you love someone best by loving someone else most? It makes no sense logically but those who

are followers of Jesus understand how this works.

We know that a sincere love for others will overflow from us when we are filled with love for God. But we also know how comparatively shallow and narrow our love for others is when our affection for God is waning.

There's a reason why Jesus quoted the second greatest commandment after the first. He knew that if we love God with all our heart, we will love our neighbor as ourselves. It functions like faith and works; if we truly have the first, the second naturally follows. But if God is not the love of our life, if we don't love God most, there is no way that we will



truly love our neighbor best. Instead, we will love ourselves supremely.

## **The Horrible Result of Not Loving God Most**

Let's pause and think about the implications of what I just said. When we (or anything else for that matter) becomes our supreme love instead of God, our love becomes distorted and warped. Our love ends up devolving into whatever we wish for it to mean.

This is a greater evil than we often realize. This is exactly the world as we see it today: everyone loves in a way that is right in their own eyes. Which also means that everyone hates in a way that is right in their own eyes. As the bible says in 2 Timothy, when people

become supreme lovers of self, they also become

***“...lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy.” (2 Timothy 3:2)***

It is not hard to understand why there is so much confusion and conflict and heartbreak and violence in the world. We live in an anarchy of love resulting in all the crazy things we hear on the news, like the mass shootings that have happened in Ohio and Texas. When we ourselves become the focus of love, we stop loving God and our love for people disappears as well.

But as I mentioned a minute ago, the contrary is also true. If we love God

most, then we will love others best. Or to put it another way,

**How we love others, particularly other Christians, will reveal how much we love God.**

The apostle John puts it bluntly: “He who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. 1 John 4:20

Our love for each other is an indicator of the place God is holding in our hearts. This means it is impossible for us to fake real love for God because our love for God is plainly visible by our love (or lack of love) for others.

## **Loving Others Best**

So perhaps the best thing we can do today is take an honest, long look at the way we can love others best and ask God to empower us to make it so. In order to do that, I want to take a minute to describe what it looks like to love others best, from a biblical standpoint.

As I said earlier, Jesus desires all of us to live life in an “agape” or self-sacrificing way towards others. But we also know that we don’t learn how to do this immediately. We tend to pass through progressive levels of love on our way to loving others for their benefit and not merely our own. So today, I want to describe three different levels of love that I see illustrated in the

Scriptures. As I do, simply ask yourself, “where do I need to grow in love?”

## **Level One Love**

Level One Love is what I call the simplest, most basic kind of love we can express. This kind of love is conditional at its core because it’s mutually beneficial, quid pro quo, “something for something,” or “this for that.” It’s an “I love you because you help me and I help you” kind of love. With this kind of love, I love you because we both benefit.

Level One Love is the kind of love we express within our “inner circle”, such as our immediate family, or our blood relatives and close friends. This kind of love is also evident among followers of

a sports team, like the Chiefs or Royals (scratch that last one) or in the case of philanthropy, it is the love we express towards those who share our humanity.

When my kids were younger, I expressed Level One Love when I coached my three son's baseball teams and my daughter Abby's softball team. (Abby's team went 0-11 with me as her coach so she probably didn't think that was very loving.) Regardless, I showed Level One Love for them by coaching their teams or watching them participate in sporting events and I received back from them joy and satisfaction whenever they would get a base hit, or win a long distance race, or score points in a basketball game. We mutually

benefited from the love we expressed for one another.

That's what Level One Love looks like. It is characterized by actions that provide us with some sort of mutual benefit from the people we love or serve.

## **Level Two Love**

Let's move on to the Level Two Love. We know from even a casual reading of the Bible that Jesus never intended our love to be limited only to the people in our inner circle or only to the people from whom we experience a mutual benefit. In fact, He was adamant that our love should extend to others even when we derive nothing from them. In Luke 6 he says,

***“If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do the same.” Luke 6:32***

If we are going to grow in love, we must expand our love from a Level One Love, or conditional type of love (which benefits us) to a Level Two, or unconditional type of love (which is strictly for the benefit of others). Level Two Love is more difficult to express because we typically don't receive anything in return for the love we give.

We demonstrate Level Two Love whenever we help someone at church



who we don't know very well, or when we serve at a soup kitchen in the inner city or when we choose to love and honor a close friend or spouse who no longer meets our wants and needs from the relationship.

The main question we must wrestle with at Level Two is: "Are we still willing to love anyway - even when we don't get something back?"

Rarely do we get a "thank you" or anything in return when we practice Level Two Love. The thank you we receive is simply the knowledge that we are honoring God by doing something unconditional for others in response to the amazing and unconditional love He has shown us.

I have been on a journey for the past couple of years to move from Level One to a more consistent Level Two expression of love. A couple years ago I took an inventory of my life and I realized that I was basically a Level One, quid pro quo Christian. I only extended real, practical love to those people whom I benefited from.

For example, I rarely helped people in need that I didn't know well. I rarely served others who weren't in my "inner circle". I often made excuses for why I didn't get involved helping others who weren't my close friends. I'd say to myself, "It's not my gift. I'm a bible teacher. I don't move boxes."

In hindsight, I now know how ridiculous and selfish that sounds especially when Jesus commanded us to be a servant of all. I'm ashamed as I look back on all the years I was so self-centered with my time. Today, I credit people like Todd Van Pelt, Joseph and Mica St. George and Ron Paulick for being great role models for me and regularly demonstrating for me what Level Two Love looks. As a result, God has been changing me little by little and I'm learning to how to practice more of this kind of unconditional love toward others. So that's Level Two Love. You extend it to people in or outside in your inner circle, who for one reason or another, can't give back what you want or need.

## **Level Three Love**

Let's move to the final level, Level 3 Love. It would be very easy for us to stop at Level Two and just call it good because most of us live our everyday lives in Level One, so even a challenge to live at Level Two feels like a stretch for us. But just as we might expect, Jesus won't let us settle for Level Two.

Why? Because his love went "beyond" what was mutually beneficial to him and even beyond a gracious kind of love. He practiced true "agape" love...the kind of love that's sacrificial in every way; always loving for the benefit of others, not for himself. His love was a stratospheric or "out of this world" kind of love. His love extended to even his worst enemies.

Listen as he describes Level Three Love in Matthew 5:

*But I say to you, love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be like your Father in heaven, since he causes the sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous... So then, be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*

*Matthew 5:44 - 45, 48*

If you are like me, you look at a passage like this and say, “Love your enemies? Come on. No one does that.” And just for clarification, Jesus wasn’t just talking about the inconsiderate jerk who occasionally pops up in our life. He

wasn't just talking about the guy at work who keeps stealing your lunch, or the lady who cuts you off on the highway and then gives you the finger.

No. He was also talking about the “I hate you with every ounce of my guts” kind of enemies. He was talking about murderers, terrorists, antagonists, ex-spouses, estranged family members, abusers who ruined our lives, the people who have destroyed our reputation, the people we hate or who hates us.

Whether we like it or not, we don't get a “pass” on loving these types of people. The bible makes it very clear that we owe a debt of love to every human being on this earth, regardless of

what they have done to us or to other people.

Now don't get me wrong, I'm not letting these people off the hook. In fact, no evil person will escape the judgment of God in the afterlife. They will have to give an account for all of the evil deeds they did while on this earth. But we can't forget that ours is not the role of judge and jury in this life...ours is the role of love and sacrifice.

And there is no way that we can stop at a Level Two kind of love when we know our Lord Jesus demonstrated Level Three Love on the cross. He demonstrated Level Three Love when he looked at his worst enemies and said,

“Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.” And he demonstrates Level Three Love for us in that while we were still sinners, He died for us. In Christ, we find the ultimate and truest expression of agape love. No one has ever practice such unconditional, self-sacrificing, other worldly kind of love like Jesus did.

And yet... he calls us to live out this same kind of Level Three Love toward others. This is far and away the greatest challenge of the Christian life. This is the kind of love that separates us from the rest of the world. This is truly “supernatural love” because love like this only comes from God.



When I think back over my life, I can think of several times when I've had to humble myself and offer love to my worst enemies. It has not been easy, but it's also not impossible either.

How can we demonstrate Level Three Love to our worst enemies. Here are some ways:

- If you have hate in your heart for somebody, maybe it starts with **telling God, "I hate that person, but I don't want to."**
- **Pray for your enemies.** I'm not talking about "please give that person what they have coming to them" prayers. But I also don't mean that you need to spend an hour each night asking God to pour blessings upon them. We can pray

both for justice and for the hearts of those committing injustices.

- **Forgive your enemies.** When relatives of the victims in recent mass shootings offer forgiveness to the person who murdered their loved ones, is there any doubt that they were seeking to take Jesus' words and example seriously? Loving your enemy does not mean you have to add them to your Christmas list, or make them your best friend. It doesn't mean you excuse their actions. It just means that you forgive them, with the knowledge that God has forgiven you and I as well.

So there you have it...the three levels of love. Each level progressively more

selfless, more unconditional, more sacrificial. Exactly the kind of love we see modeled in the life of Jesus.

## **Conclusion**

So let's go back to where we started. I want to leave each one of us with the same questions Jesus asked Peter. Do you love me? Do you really agape me? Are you willing to love in a self-sacrificing way? Are you committed to loving others for their benefit, not just your own?

If your answer is like mine, you will most likely say, "No Lord. The truth is I don't love like that and I don't even know if I can." If that's your answer, then you are right where God wants you to be. God agrees with your inadequacy.

But here's the hope we have today. Even though we can't love like this, God can. As we learn to love God first and foremost, He will love others through us through the power of the Holy Spirit in us. He wants to be our agape love. All He is waiting for are the words, "Yes Lord, let it be so in me." Let's pray.